

## Flash-Fight: Adventure One of the Crypto Star-Chaser

I finally had something of a rag-tag crew together, for the first voyage of the Crypto Star-Chaser, so named because I'd bought the beauty with the proceeds of my cryptocurrency. I'm Leslie – and I brought on board with me people who I believed wouldn't drive me crazy in the confines of space - my roommate, Laura, our married friends Brandon and Alisha, and the guy I'd been flirting with at work, Max. Somewhere in the depths of my brown leather knapsack, I'd brought a pet along for the ride as well – my hybrid-existing snake, who'd passed on from his earthly life, and was brought back through the magic of technology. His snake brain existed, and the internal organs were there, but they were encased in a body of metal rings that allowed for movement while giving him strength. When he was alive, he'd been a morph corn snake, pink in color and named Eros, accordingly.

That name – Eros – once referred to the god of love. Many folks still honored the deathless gods of various cultures, for America was that melting pot of worldly interaction. While Eros (hopefully) blessed our endeavors aboard the Crypto, Ares, god of war, surely blessed others.

As for my snake, Eros, some people liked to call these beings androids, but I preferred to call him a robosnake – a word of my own invention. In addition to giving him another life, of

sorts, I added a few chips into that snake armor suit that I hoped would enable him to be an asset on the ship, as these allowed him to plug into the computer system and eat pesky viruses, instead of mice. But for all of this preparation, none of us had been aboard the Crypto Star-Chaser, yet. Today, we were finally to be given the grand tour, to look around and see what needed to be altered before we'd take off for good, inspect our living quarters, and test the fluffiness of the chairs, that sort of thing. I walked up to the lead mechanic, who held out a shiny, oversized golden key. It looked like the ceremonial Key to the City that people sometimes got. I snatched it up, giddily.

“This is the biggest wind-up toy I’ve ever seen,” I said, marveling at the sheer size of the Star-Chaser, in its metallic blue, with flames racing down the side. But secretly, I loved old-tech, and intended never to tell the crew a word about this guilty pleasure of mine. I already had the typewriter installed in a hidden compartment in my quarters. It didn’t need ribbons, running on a never-ending supply of ink created by the ship’s central processor, and you could delete on it. The thought of it brought tears to my eyes already. There were rumors that an ancestor of mine invented the typewriter. And here I was, voyaging into space, to send cryptic messages in bottles to advanced races, to confuse and mesmerize them. *Beautiful.*

“Yeah, go check it out. It’s yours,” said the mechanic. My friends had gathered that morning for coffee, outside the ship. They looked up at it in wonder.

“Is there going to be an exercise room on-board?” my roommate asked. Honestly, I hadn’t thought about that. My concerns were about the vehicle itself – speed, efficiency, safety. Exercise rooms were the merest of trifles to me. But that’s why I’d decided to bring Laura on-board and to make her a commanding officer. She had a brain for things like that. I was more into daydreaming, and troubleshooting, and checking Max out without him noticing. We all have

our priorities. But Max was there for a reason, too – I told myself. As the Admiral on board, it was his duty to prepare the ship for war. But hopefully there would be no combat – and I didn't expect Max to take his title seriously.

“I didn't request an exercise room specifically. We'll have to set that up the old-fashioned way and find a room that'll work for that. Anyway, does anyone have ideas for what else we need?”

“Coffee Bar!”

“Library!”

“Adequate shields,” said Max. That halted my thinking for a moment. I nodded, absently.

Well, the coffee bar was already figured out, and the library. “We already have a multimedia viewing room with digital library capability. As for the coffee bar, there IS a Beverage Automated Replicator (BAR) on-board that can create coffee, with or without cream and sugar, air-stirring included. As for the gym, let's find a suitable room after I've shown you all to your living quarters.”

“This ship is ill-prepared for combat,” said Max. He was starting to get annoying.

“Okay,” I replied. “Let's discuss that later. For now, let's take a look at the ship.”

So far, things were going smoothly. We all lined up in single file and walked up the ramp, into the...I'd just call it the “lobby” of the ship, which looked like just a big, empty room with video screens, air-seal doors and decontaminant capabilities.

“Cool!” I said. “Welcome to the Crypto Star-Chaser. This is your captain speaking.” I used my best faux video-host voice. Alisha laughed, and I appreciated the gesture.

“All right everyone,” I said, clapping my hands together. “Let’s go explore the ship for a bit, maybe meet back at one o’ clock and let me know what you find.”

Of course, I already knew what they’d find. I’d seen the designs over and over again, for with every little change or tweak, I was always in the loop, which was awfully thoughtful of the manufacturing company, but I soon grew extremely tired of these well-meaning but tedious text message updates.

And so we dispersed, but instead of splitting up, we all traveled together down the same hall. The corridor lay empty except for a series of digital photo frames with no images. “Weird,” I said, tracing the edge of the frame with my finger. “Down there are the living quarters, I think.” I pointed down the hall.

“Are there any that are connected?” Brandon and Alisha asked.

“I dunno. We’ll have to check.”

The rooms looked identical, but spacious, except for two larger ones. “You two can take that one. The other one is mine.” I didn’t want to have to pull rank, but I’d paid a hell of a lot of money for all this. The least I could get out of it would be a larger room. And from here on out, I’d be doing my best, to get us off this cursed planet. I saw my problems melting away behind me already.

Brandon shrugged. “Works for me.”

I walked into my room. The bed looked comfy enough. I set my knapsack down on it, and let Eros slither out. At first, I’d had my doubts, about turning him into a robosnake. But then, I’d already had my own bodily alterations – tonsils removed, along with my wisdom teeth, and

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then the LASIK surgery. And if I could modify myself, and be no less human, than I felt all right about modifying Eros and him being no less of a snake. He flicked his silver tongue out, and looked around.

I smiled. *We're finally going to be leaving Earth.* Earth had brought with it no end of my misery. Unable to clear my file with the state, and having been bullied out of state service altogether, where I'd worked for eight years, I'd been forced to go through a Dept. of Justice investigation by my former employer. They found nothing, but the record of it was still there, in my personnel file as well, and no employer would hire someone with that kind of background. So the state itself had already declared me an outlaw, with no crime having been committed. I'd tried everything, relying so much on my own efforts. That was perhaps my largest strength—reliance and faith in myself, and only myself.

Yet Max reminded me that this could be a weakness. I'd relied on my own intuition in the ship's creation, and designed it for pleasure and comfort, and certainly not for battle.

*I wonder where that typewriter hatch is?* I visually scanned the walls, and then looked back, at the door. It was closed and locked. Good. Then I started running my hands over the walls, feeling for imperfections, knocking lightly to test for hollowness. A small desk stood in the corner. I bet it's above that. *It would make too much sense.* I tapped on the wall, and sure enough, a hidden hatch lowered, revealing the typewriter.

Then I heard a knock on the door. "Just a second!" I scrambled, trying to get the typewriter to budge, and go back into place, but it wouldn't. Another knock came. *I'd better just go an answer it. They probably won't see the typewriter, anyway.*

But when I answered the door, my whole little crew was there. Alisha had a bright smile plastered onto her face, and she held up a uniform of metallic green fabric. I'd wanted to stand out a bit from those other starship captains. "UPS came and delivered this!" she said, nearly shrieking with delight. "Go and put it on!" I accepted the uniform, and then shut the door to my room, feeling a bit sheepish as I knew the rest of my crew was still out there, on the other side. It was form-fitting, and I reflected on how I ought to work out more. That on-board gym was a good idea. I walked out.

"I dunno," I admitted. "Don't I look a bit silly in this thing – like I'm coated in dragon skin or something?"

"Oh," Alisha replied. "You. You look great."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Communications Officer Alisha," I said playfully. Then I turned to Max. "You, on the other hand..."

He smiled. Objective achieved.

"All right crew, well, we were going to meet back up at one o'clock and it's almost that. Let's all get our new uniforms on and have a New Ship Party. Then tonight we'll go back to our own residences, gather up whatever else we want to take, last-minute, and meet back up here at nine a.m. sharp for takeoff!"

"I think we should delay takeoff and make some alterations," said Max.

"Okay, we'll discuss it after I inspect the bridge."

I had my uniform on already, so I picked up Eros and put him into his tank, which was fitted into the wall and was luxuriously huge. The tank wasn't strictly necessary – Eros was well-

mannered, and by now, wouldn't roam on his own. For now, he seemed happy enough in his plexiglass tank in my quarters.

I walked down the hall toward the bridge, knowing that I'd find a replicator there. This replicator technology amazed me. With the press of a button, you could literally create anything edible or drinkable, out of thin air. So what drink did I want to have? *Something strong*. I looked upon the bridge, with all of its advanced technology, and marveled, clasping my hands together, imagining all of the adventures yet to come. And yet there was a dark stain on the history of mankind's space flights. That dark shadow, whispered like a secret, was called Challenger.

I was born in the year 1983, and the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster occurred in 1986. So I'd have been around three years old at the time of the disaster, and thus, remembered nothing of newscasts about it, or anything of the sort. To me, Challenger was a legend – it might as well have been Icarus and his wings falling apart as he fell into the ocean. The Challenger took off, breaking apart seventy-three seconds into its flight, exploding, killing all seven crew members. This was 2018, and I wanted to believe that all possible dangers would be mitigated, it now being the Digital Age. But there was no way of knowing these things for sure. Fortunately, Max somehow had an idea of what we'd be up against, it sounded like. But there was time for practical considerations, later.

I keyed in a whiskey on the rocks, and watched in amazement as the replicator called forth matter from the air, creating it for me. A beep sounded, telling me that it was done replicating what I wanted. I seized the glass, and took a sip. Then I held it aloft, in a silent cheers, as my roommate walked into the bridge. How strange, this all was. We weren't roommates anymore, and yet we were. We all were, now. "What's up, roomie?" I said.

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“Oh, not much. This is nice,” she replied. “But I don’t know that it complies with OSHA standards.”

“Ah. Well if you could make a list for me, I’ll make sure all the issues are taken care of before take-off. Anyway, feel free to grab something to drink. The machine makes non-alcoholic drinks, too.”

My roommate didn’t drink. And I wasn’t one to push her to. To each, their own. She put an order into the replicator, and it began creating her soda.

“You look good in your uniform, roomie.” I smiled.

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We’d need to strap ourselves in for lift-off. I looked around at my crew as I clutched the armrests of my chair. The one thing I hated about flying was the take-off, and this one would be sure to be a doozy. The others all sat in the bridge, in the chairs that had been created for them, strapped in, and the count-down to lift-off began. This would be the first adventure of the Crypto Star-Chaser. I gritted my teeth as the ship’s engine flared into life.

“Here we go!” I screamed as we took off, rapidly approaching escape velocity and taking off for the stars.

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My mind drifted to the pre-flight conversation I’d had with Max.

“Even if you’re not ready for war – which is good – we shouldn’t be, necessarily – an excess of artillery can make us a giant floating target – we still need a basic on-board defense system. This is because there are space pirates everywhere. They’re called Corsairs, and they fire

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a ‘spider’ that latches onto an enemy ship, where it then connects to the ship’s mainframe and disables it.”

These Corsairs were surely disciples of Ares, the god of war, who so inflamed the minds of mortals.

“That sounds horrifying. How can we protect ourselves from these Corsairs? Should I train Eros to eat spiders?”

Max chuckled. “That’s not a bad idea, actually. And there are both offensive and defensive measures we can take. For defense, the ship is well prepared for a flash-fight.”

“What’s a flash-fight?” I hastily added, “And why can’t we get ion cannons?” I finally thought of what it was – being a writer, I did have some familiarity with the conventions of science fiction. Max slapped a hand to his forehead.

“Ion cannons are not real. They only exist in books and movies.”

“Oh,” I replied. “Right.”

“Anyway, a flash-fight is a last-resort move used to ward off incoming Corsairs before they can take over a ship. The word is taken from a rather crude hand-to-hand method of fighting with lit torches like they were swords.”

*What a cool idea. I’m going to have to use that in a story at some point.*

Max’s grey-blue eyes had a soothing effect on me as he spoke. “Currently, the rear deflector shields of the ship are stronger than those in the front. That’s a good thing. Also, the rear-side has been outfitted with debris-clearing blaster cannons that fire in a spray pattern simultaneously.”

I watched his lips as he spoke. *Don't get distracted*, I reminded myself.

“Awesome,” I replied. “Well it’s been a long day for me – for all of us, really. I’m going to retire for the night.”

“Very well, Captain.” I liked the sound of that, and yet something in my heart, paused at that word, falling like a shroud. *Oh Max, it's not like that*. I rose from my seat and headed for the door. As I entered my quarters, I instinctively looked over to the corner of the room, where Eros should be lounging in his tank, but he was gone – off to explore the ship and eat viruses. Here I am, alone again. My comfy bed sat in the back of the room, beckoning me on toward it. I walked over and stood with my back to it, spread my arms out to my sides, and fell back.

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Somehow I’d survived takeoff, and I awoke to sirens blaring.

“Leslie!” shouted Brandon, banging on the door. “Leslie, get up! We’re under attack!” I cursed loudly, leaping from the bed and opening the door. With a silent nod of assent, Brandon and I went racing down the corridor toward the bridge. My heart raced.

*I might have doomed us all*, I realized. I’d been so intent on getting to space and in running away from the problems of Earth, that I neglected to prepare for the dire perils beyond. Fortunately, when I reached the bridge, Max was already there.

“Corsairs,” he said. “Remember what we were talking about? We need to open up a negotiations channel, but chances are, talking won’t appease them. Prepare for them to send over a spider, once the talking is done.”

I nodded, and waved to the crew – “We’ll discuss it later.” I didn’t have time to address their worried looks right now.

“Brandon,” I said, “you’re up. As Alien Race Relations Liaison, it’s your job to negotiate with the Corsairs. Let me know when you’re ready.” Brandon walked over and stood before the window. I flipped the red switch on the communications console as he said, “Ready”. The Corsair captain’s ugly profile came into view. He looked like an orc or a troll, with parchment-looking tanned skin, a rather large beard, and warthog tusks protruding up from his mouth. Chains hung in his hair, which grew around a clear skull cap, showing his exposed, pulsating brain. He carried a battle axe and wore leather armor, a metal-studded bandolier wrapped across his chest. He spat, speaking in an unknown language.

“Glad we’re on this side of the screen. Computer, translate,” said Brandon.

The computer responded with: *Unknown language. Cannot translate.*

The crew members looked at each other uncomfortably.

“What am I, a linguist?!” said Brandon. “You knew when you brought me on to this ship, that I’m just here to have fun. I’m not a linguist!”

The alien continued to spit disgustedly and speak in an unknown language. Alien spit continued to coat the monitor.

“Eww...!” I exclaimed.

“Would it be rude to say, ‘Say it, don’t spray it?’” asked Brandon.

The screen blacked out. All of a sudden, the ship rocked violently. I was thrown off my feet, and onto the floor.

“We’re being attacked!”

“What for? We don’t even know what we did!”

“They’ve fired a spider. Prepare for the ship’s computers to go down. Initiating flash-fight launch sequence,” said Max, seating himself in front of the control panel.

I said a silent prayer. Thank god I brought him on board. The rest of the crew was freaking out, the lights on-board beginning to flicker, the ship rocked by violent blasts. But Max looked so natural. “Firing flash-flares.”

The lights went out.

I lay there on the floor in the darkness, pondering my options. I would rather die than be taken by the Corsair crew – there was the door. As soon as I heard we’d been boarded, I’d just fling myself out into space. For now, I listened to the sound of my own breath, and bade my heart rate to slow.

The lights came on.

“What’s going on?” asked Brandon.

“We’re saved,” replied Max. “A larger ship has frightened away the Corsairs.” The button for the communications channel flared red.

“What do they want?” I asked, which seemed like a very captain-like thing to say.

“We’re about to find out.”

Max hit the button for the screen to flare on.

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THE END