

The Voyages of the Mara

Prologue **First Flight**

“Hey Zack!” Felix called out as he walked towards the landing pad of the abandoned Ingrid colony, approaching from the shore of the island. “How’s that rust bucket looking?”

Before him was a large metal spaceship, a model 102 Light Freighter, produced by Galaxy Gliders Corporation of the Red Nebula. Approximately one hundred and twenty five meters in length, with an outward-expansion along the left side that made up the cargo hold, but otherwise the ship had a very rectangular shape with the rest of its frame. The ship was a fairly old one; even though the model itself was still produced by Galaxy Gliders, this one had been in service for quite a while, only to be left behind by the Red Nebulan Confederacy that governed the entire sector.

From the door to the cargo bay, a grey rabbit stuck his head out and addressed the dolphin. “About as good as we can make it considering we improvised most of this thing,” the young rabbit replied before hopping out of the ship and landing feet first next to Felix. “But hey, I’d say we’re ready to give ‘er a whirl!”

Felix chuckled; the optimism of the rabbit never ceased to put a smile on his face. He nodded in agreement and glanced at the ship. “I guess that’s my cue, then,” he said. “Mind taking the skimmer back to Mara?”

“What, I don’t get to be on board to see how my baby fares?” Zachary asked, a sarcastic, whiny tone in his voice.

Felix chuckled a second time. “You’ll get your chance, but you’ll only get to see it once if we leave my mom’s boat here,” the dolphin pointed out. “If the Gelks drag it down, there’ll be no more flights for either of us.”

“Like I said, I’ll take the boat back!” Zachary exclaimed. “Just don’t scratch it on the way over.”

“I’m only flying six miles and over open ocean, not to Denver XII,” returned Felix. “Well, at least we’re not going there yet.”

“Right,” agreed Zachary. “I’ll see you back at Mara then.”

“Don’t run the boat aground,” Felix warned as he climbed aboard the freighter.

“Hey! I may be five years younger than you, but I’m just as good a driver!” Zachary retorted to the dolphin before he began to make his way across the abandoned Ingrid Colony island, heading towards the beach.

With that, Felix made his way across the cargo hold to a control panel on the wall, where he spoke to the monitor. “Close cargo bay doors,” he stated, and the reply came in the sound of metal sliding against metal, and internal machinery pushing the doors closed. He looked over his shoulder at the doors, watching them as they slid shut, before turning back to the computer. “Confirm air-tight seal around bay doors.”

The computer terminal beeped repeatedly, the word 'Testing' appearing on the monitor before the sound of pressurized, escaping air filled the room, making Felix jump slightly from the unexpected loud hiss that announced the oxygen tanks adding some additional air to the cargo hold, and testing for any leaks. Moments later, a new line of text appeared on the monitor; 'Seals confirmed; cargo bay properly sealed and adequately pressurized'.

Felix smiled in satisfaction. "Thank you, Amber," he remarked. "You sure know how to use a welding torch."

With that, he approached the door that led out to the corridor, which slid open with a mild hiss as it sensed his footsteps, and closed again behind him after he made sure his tail was out of the way; the last thing he wanted was to get his tail pinched in a door.

Once out in the corridor, he took a good look at the inside. The room he had entered was fairly open, with a metal grate floor and several doors in sight, as well as a cylindrical compartment in the very middle of the room with a chair placed inside of it; this was the gunner's turret, the source of defense for the ship in the event of a pirate attack. When the gunner seated themselves in the chair, it would elevate up into the turret, and once the guns were online, they could be fired. In the event the turret was destroyed and the roof of the ship compromised, the seat would even lower back down automatically, and a metal door would slide to fill the tube leading up to the gun, and seal the cabin again, saving both the gunner and the passengers from suffocation.

To his immediate left were the airlock doors; if the ship was out in space, crewmen could exit through there in order to make repairs to the outside without de-pressurizing the entire ship or that of the cargo hold. On the right were a row of doors leading to different rooms; some of them were crew quarters, but the rest led to a storage room, an unused medical bay, the lounge/dining area and hygiene chambers. Down a hallway that ran past those said rooms led to a spare, empty room, the escape pod bay and last of all, the engine room.

Despite all of the facilities the ship had, none of them were in operating condition. The ship still needed plenty of work; the hygiene pods didn't even work, the lounge furniture was in ruins, and the beds in the living quarters were flat and uncomfortable, the foam insulation of them having worn away from years of use, and even more years of neglect. It wasn't like Felix expected the ship to be luxury, though; that could come another time.

Right now, all that mattered was what he needed the ship to do.

He walked straight ahead to the last door of the cabin; the large, sliding door ahead of him, leading onto the bridge where the controls were located. He seated himself at the foremost chair where the control panel for the whole ship was located. "Computer, run full diagnostic of ship," he said to the terminal.

The monitor before him displayed the text 'running diagnostic', and he sat waiting as the computer ran the check of all systems. Soon, the display changed, listing the following:

Diagnostic completed:

Oxygen Recycling Tanks: Functional

Ventilation Systems: No blockages detected

Navigational Systems: Functional
Galaxy Map: Information outdated; updates required
Power Core: Functional
Power Capacitor: 70% Capacity; unable to charge further. Recommend maintenance
Water Storage: 35% capacity; clean and consumable
Hygiene Pods: Non-Functional; water lines ruptured
Toiletries: No blockages detected
Communication Systems: Inactive
Landing Gear: Operational
Weapon Systems: Functional, inactive
Repulsion System: Operational
Shielding: Non-Operational

The last two however are what concerned Felix, however...

Engines: Operational; 88% thrust capacity
Hyperspace Engines: 75% thrust capacity
Warp Drive System: Maintenance recommended

The computer could not even determine if the warp drive even worked, and even if it did, with the ships' engines not even able to function at three-quarters their capacity, it would take almost twice as long for it to reach the proper speed to even activate it assuming the engines didn't give out before they could reach it. He ran a hand down his face and sighed in exasperation. "I guess I shouldn't have expected everything to be perfect... we did rebuild this ship out of spare parts after all," he muttered, frustrated.

He had hoped that, if absolutely nothing else, the engines would be more certain; they were the most vital component, after all. "Well," he said. "I suppose all I can do is test it out."

With that, the dolphin got to work, cracking his knuckles and reaching for the ignition lever; upon pulling back the stick, the ship vibrated and hummed to life, lights on the control panel flickering and the engines began to warm up. The next step, once they were at the proper energy level, he flicked the four switches for the repulsion system that allowed the ship to elevate itself from the landing pad. He felt the ship rumble violently for a moment, before it began to sway left and right as it left the ground.

Peering ahead, he found that the shutters for the windows were still closed. Twisting a knob on the control panel labelled 'shutters' with a very faded but still decipherable label, and with that the durable steel shutters folded away from the bridge windows, which although were clear as glass, were made of a durable, synthetic material that felt like aluminum but was as hard as Quadrinium Plating; the standard, multi-metal alloy used as armour plating for most modern starships, in order to protect the cockpit of ships from being destroyed in battle, in or outside the cockpit.

With the shutters gone, the outside was revealed. Water, as far as the eye could see, filled his sights. To his left was but more ocean, but to the right, was land; the remains of a

large colony, with abandoned, decaying aluminum structures. However, he could see nothing else of the landing pad; according to the elevation meter he was already thirty-one meters off of the ground, and the engines still hummed with life, without any random decrease in thrust or power surges.

Felix started chuckling again, but this soon escalated into laughter as he felt the ship elevate higher still. "Yes!" He barked before laughing again." He looked out the window on his right towards the decayed buildings, and saluted them. "Ingrid Colony, you have my thanks," he said. "Even after being abandoned for ten years, you're still very kind to us at the Mara Colony." He let out a sigh as he put his hand on the throttle. "Wherever you guys are... I do truly hope you're having better luck than we are..." He glanced ahead again. "Of course... you guys didn't get stranded here on this oversized aquarium like we did."

Shaking his head to clear it, the dolphin turned his attention back to the control console. "Alright then," he said. "Time for the practical stuff," he looked at the throttle handle that his right hand was gripping, while his left hand gripped the tiller on the control column. Wanting to be cautious and not push the engine too hard –especially when it was lucky the thing was working at all- he decided to start small. "Let's begin with just ten percent thrust, shall we?" He asked nobody in particular, and slowly began to push the throttle handle forward.

Nothing.

"Hey, what gives?" He asked, and slowly pulled the handle back again, peeking beneath the console, finding everything was still properly hooked up. "Well come on then," he said, grasping the throttle handle again and easing it forward, although in his urgency he pushed it forward a little too fast this time, and accidentally hit the twenty percent thrust, and the ship jolted forward, making him almost slam back into his seat.

"WHOA!" He barked, quickly pulling it back again and pulling back the tiller to activate the air brakes and slow the ship down. "Heheh... a little patience, Felix," he scolded himself before he eased the throttle up one last time, stopping at the ten percent mark as he originally intended, and so the ship slowly began to accelerate. With that success he began to laugh again. "Hell yes; now we're talking!"

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Zachary, steering the skimmer across the ocean waters towards the Mara Colony, felt his ears flick at the sound of a very large, powerful engine. He turned his head back and peered behind him, in time to see the great, flying iron behemoth soaring across the air in his direction.

A big toothy grin crossed the rabbit's features as the ship soared over his head, and he thrust his fist up in the air, whooping gleefully. "Oh yeah!" He bellowed. "She lives again!"

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Quite a crowd gathered as the ship touched down on the landing pad, watching from the great white walls of the colony as the large freighter touched down onto ground. When

Felix disembarked from the ship and marched up towards the walls of the colony, he saw the faces filled with wonderment all across the wall; the militia, farmers, fishermen and other tradesmen of all kinds staring towards the freighter. As he watched the bedraggled bunch, he was certain he also saw hope crossing their faces as well, a look he had not seen in ten years.

Just before Felix could walk through the gate, he suddenly felt something slam into him and grab him in a death grip, scaring the poor dolphin almost to death, until he heard uncontrollable laughter behind him, and saw gray-furred paws hugging him tightly. "We did it, Felix, we got that old rust bucket flying! We can finally get off this rock and help the colony!"

"Now come on; slow down there, turbo charger," returned Felix as he shook the rabbit off of himself. "We know it can fly, but whether or not it's space-faring remains to be seen."

"Oh come on; our luck's held on so far, right?" Zachary asked. "What says it won't stay when we take off?"

"Fortune hasn't exactly been on this colony's side for a while now," a stern, yet feminine voice said, drawing the attention of the two technicians. There they saw a female shark-morph approaching them, one with short, white scalp hair and pale grey skin and blue eyes. The shark woman was dressed in rather boyish clothing, including a black tank top and dark green cargo pants, and was leaning against the side of the gate.

"Hey, Amber; was hoping to see you," said Felix. "Great job with the welding you did on the ship; it's air-tight."

"I do my best," returned the shark, stepping up to the two boys. "I suppose you really are going through with this crazy plan of yours to fly to the nearest space station, in that rickety old tub?"

"Do you see any other ships around here?" Felix inquired. "This is the last hope the entire Mara Colony has, Amber. And we're the only ones who the colony can live without for a while; we're the best choice to go get supplies."

"That may be a one-time trip, Felix," stated Amber. "I don't want to sound negative, honestly, but we have to be realistic too."

"Does that mean you've changed your mind about coming with us?" Zachary asked.

"I never said that," she returned. "Neither of you know how to operate a gun turret, and a ship without defense is pirate bait after all."

"Well we're still happy to have you aboard," said Felix. "But sure the militia won't miss you?"

Amber's face contorted into a scowl at the mention of her job, annoyed to even think of it. "Probably not, considering I already left them."

"Wait, what?" Zachary asked. "Duty-bound Amber Giles left the militia her own grandpa founded? But why?"

"Never mind," retorted Amber, scoffing at the rabbit. "I'll always protect the colony when it needs me; that much will never change. But I... I just can't work with them anymore." She shook her head. "It's just not worth it."

"Not wor..." Zack began, only for Felix to clamp a hand on his shoulder and silence him.

“Leave it be, Zack,” stated the dolphin. “It’s her decision to make, not ours.” He lowered his voice as he continued. “And she doesn’t look like she wants to discuss it, so I’d definitely just leave alone, alright?”

Zachary let out a sigh of exasperation before shrugging. “Okay, whatever,” he said.

“Besides, what does it matter?” Felix asked. “Her wanting to come with us makes me feel safer. After all, she’s one of the best shots in the entire Colony; can you think of anyone better to take along?”

“How about a chef?”

With the unexpected new voice, the three turned and saw a very large male figure approaching them. The figure was an orca-morph, taller than any of them, and built like a professional body-builder; a whole figure of thick muscles with perfect definition and black skin with a white undertone running from the underside of his muzzle and down his neck into his shirt, but what stood out even more about him were the bright, ice blue eyes he bore. He wore a white tanktop shirt and armbands around his wrists, and a pair of beige pants and brown boots.

Everyone knew this orca well; he was famous amongst the colony for being able to make delicious food out of regular, everyday colony rations; he was the colony’s master chef, and well-loved by everybody, as anyone wanting a good meal would simply bring their rations to him and he’d make them the best meal possible; dried bread, smoked fish, canned goods, anything at all, he could turn it into a masterpiece with just a kitchen and a few utensils.

“Gustav,” said Felix. “Didn’t see you coming.”

“Surprising, considering I’m the biggest man in the entire colony,” he returned with a friendly chuckle. “So, Felix, I heard you and Zach finally got that ship working.”

“See for yourself,” said Felix, turning and gesturing towards the landing pad at the shore of the island, where the ship was currently waiting for its next mission.

“Well, now, she’s a thing of beauty, isn’t she?” Gustav asked, nodding in approval at the freighter. “Felix, Zachary, you two should be proud of yourselves; nearly everyone in this colony doubted you would ever get it in working condition.”

“The same guys who doubted anyone younger than twenty-five could be a mechanical genius?” Zachary asked.

“The same folks who assumed that just because I was the manager’s kid, I’d be afraid to get my hands dirty?” Felix added.

“Yes, and yes,” returned Gustav, chuckling warmly. “Anyway, boys, I wasn’t kidding about what I said before. You think you guys might need a chef for your upcoming voyages?”

“Like I said to Zack before, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Felix. “We don’t know how far this thing will actually go, so let’s not plan for any big trips just yet.”

“What about an inventory manager, or even a custodian?” Gustav asked, flashing them his friendly smile. “And surely you could use some muscle for those heavy shipments you’ll be bringing back, right?”

Felix and Zachary exchange a glance with one another, both curious to the orca’s insistence to join them aboard the ship. Eventually, they turned back to him, and Felix

addressed the Orca's eagerness. "You really just want to get off this fishbowl, don't you Gustav?" The dolphin asked.

"I want to help the colony however I can, and right now distributing rations and serving people dinner made from preserved food isn't exactly helping this place prosper," he replied.

"Oh come on buddy," returned Zachary. "You're the only one who can make anything good out of that dry meat, green sludge and crusty... stuff, taste any good. What the hell are those crusty patties anyway?"

Amber irked an eyebrow at Zachary. "They're rice cakes, Zack," she stated.

"Most tasteless cake I ever ate," returned the rabbit.

Amber glanced at Felix in disbelief, pointing at her head and making a 'shoot me' motion at the dolphin, making Felix laugh. "You'll get used to him," he whispered.

"Which reminds me," said Gustav. "I'm not just down here to offer my services to the ship. In fact, the manager asked me to come and get you two. She wants to see you."

"About the shipment?" Felix asked.

"That, and I think she wants to give her blessing," replied Gustav. "This could be the start of something new for the colony."

"If it works," Amber stated. "Remember, we have to be realistic; there's still a chance the ship might not work."

"It'll work" stated Zachary, nodding with his trademark smile. "It'll work."

Felix put up his hands to stop the conversation there. "Okay guys, break it up," he said. "Let's not keep the manager waiting."

With that, the four friends began their walk through the colony streets, passing the numerous white aluminum buildings that filled the inside of the wall. Nearly all the structures, with the exception of a few, looked identical, and were all the homes of the colonists; a community of almost two-hundred people, left behind ten years ago by the Red Nebulan Confederacy, White Star sector, when a mining operation they had started there suddenly stopped turning up resources when the mineral veins had run out. After all, the planet of Trident-IV was 88% ocean, riddled with tiny islands and a few small continents, and the Mara Colony was among those small island colonies.

Ten years ago it had been a titanium mining source, but when mines all across the planet suddenly ran out of resources, the Confederates abandoned the planet, finding no more profit in it. Those colonists who had ships left the planet, those who didn't were left behind, and the Mara Colony had been one; any others had either migrated to the colony, or had fallen victim to the attacks of the territorial Gelks that lived beneath the ocean, hell-bent on wiping out the foreigners that had come to the planet where they had been the dominant species.

Left to fend for themselves, the Mara Colony had survived on supplies scavenged from other abandoned colonies across the planet, but finding work to occupy themselves had been very tedious; many had become engineers, fishermen, a few nurses or doctor's, or continued working in the mine hoping to find another vein, anything to bring the Confederacy back to the planet and take the Colonists away from this drowning death trap. But they had never succeeded in finding one, and almost all hope had diminished from the colony, until they saw the repaired ship.

Along the way, they passed the clinic; one of the few buildings that looked different from the rest of the colony due to being larger and having a sign by the door reading 'Medical Clinic' welded to the wall, where a light-brown doe in light blue clothes was stepping out, heading towards the main gate; no doubt to check out the ship herself as well. Felix knew this doe as well; her name was Jessica Diaz, and she was a nurse at the colony clinic and a doctor in-training. He hadn't spoken to her in quite a while, though; their respective work hadn't left them much time to interact over the last couple of years.

Felix and his group kept going, and soon reached a second building that stood out from the others; it was smaller than the housing units, and had larger windows on the front on either side of the door, which had an attached sign reading 'Manager's Office' on the front.

"Here goes," whispered Felix, approaching the door and knocking.

"Come in," a voice called from the inside.

Felix pressed a button on the panel next to the door, and it slid open with a mild hiss, allowing the four to step inside. The office within was quite simple to behold; to the right by the window was a couch, and on the wall next to it was a bookshelf filled with all kinds of novels and manuscripts of various genre's. Meanwhile, directly across from the door was an aluminum desk, equipped with its own terminal and burdened with a stack of virtual datapads.

Seated in the office chair behind the desk was another anthro dolphin, a female, who looked very similar to Felix, having the same colour of eyes but with slightly paler skin than himself, not to mention more aged features on her face, such as the faint sign of wrinkles on her face. She wore a blue business suit that complimented her light gray skin quite well, but her eyes bore dark bags below them, evident that she had not been resting very well lately.

This drew concern from Felix as he approached the desk. "Mom... are you okay?" He asked. "You look like you haven't slept in days."

"I haven't slept properly in years, my son," returned the manager, Brunhilda Kaufmann, who was also the single mother of Felix, "tearing my brain apart trying to find ways to save this colony from a slow, painful fate."

"But you did," returned Felix. "It was your idea to fix the saltwater separators in order for us to produce sea salt to trade."

"We still don't know how much that salt will even be worth," reminded Brunhilda. "If it will even bring any revenue for the colony; even if it does, that ship will not fly forever with improvised parts."

"What're you saying then, mom?" Felix asked.

"I'm saying," she reached into one of the drawers of her desk and lifted an object from the sliding compartment, and showed to them a bronze-coloured, card-shaped object. "You need to fix the ship, with actual ship parts."

"Is that a Credrive?" Zachary asked; Credrive being short for 'Credit Hard drive' that could be used to carry any amount of Red Nebula credits, the source of currency for Confederate space.

"Yes," replied Brunhilda. "And on it is every last credit that all of the colonists have."

Felix, Amber, Gustav and Zachary all gawked at the manager when those words left her mouth. "They're everyone's life savings?!" Gustav demanded.

"Including ours?" Amber asked.

"No," she replied. "Everybody gave the money voluntarily; I did not take it, which is why none of you knew about this until now. Almost the entire colony contributed their money to this because they know that ship is their last hope to bring revenue and work back to the Mara Colony; to make it known again, and to bring hope to everyone here."

"Why can't we just use the ship and leave?" Amber asked. "Why do to all this trouble to maintain this camp when we can simply find ourselves a new home?"

"That ship isn't big enough for everyone," Zachary stated.

"And even if we could get half of the colonists on board they're not going to leave without their personal belongings," added Gustav. "Not to mention all the food and water we'd need for the voyage; a little freighter like that simply isn't enough for us to leave."

"We'd need a heavy freighter to do it, and a brand new one of those costs a good sixty-million credits," added Zachary.

Felix glanced over his shoulder at the others as they spoke; in truth a small part of him hoped that maybe he could use the ship to evacuate the colony so they could find somewhere they could make a fresh start. But with everything Zachary and Gustav were saying that was a dream that was still very far from becoming a reality.

"So what?" Amber asked. "We're going to make shipments of salt until we can save up enough money for a bigger ship?" She shook her head. "That will take years!"

"Do you have a better plan, Amber?" Brunhilda asked, matter-of-factly. "It is all we have to try at this time; it is the only resource left on this planet."

Before anymore could be said, Felix stepped in again. "Let's not escalate this into an argument," he said. "You're right, both of you; sea salt is all we can trade for now, but it will not be enough for us to save up for a bigger ship." He looked at everyone in the room. "But if we can find some other way, we will. For now, I say we should focus on the ship first, because right now it's the colony's only hope; it's everyone's last hope, including ours." He walked over to the window, peering across the colony towards the coast beyond the colony's protective wall, his eyes on the landing pad where the ship was currently laying waiting on the landing pad. "Maybe we'll be poor and struggling for a while, but we all have to start somewhere."

At that moment, Brunhilda's face brightened, and a small smile crept across her face. "The last hope of the Mara Colony," she said. "That's a fine title."

Felix glanced at his mother for a moment, studying her expression, until he seemed to catch onto just what she was thinking, and was soon sharing her smile as he stared back at the ship once more. "Yes," he said. "The Mara's Hope... it's the perfect name."

"Yeah, that's a great name!" Zachary agreed.

"The Mara's Hope," Amber repeated, nodding her approval. "It suits it."

Gustav smiled and patted Felix on the shoulder. "Only right that her upcoming captain should be the one to name it."

A star captain... him... Felix could barely believe that at such a young age he was going to become the first star captain of the Mara Colony in over a decade; he was the only person who had studied and trained in piloting, having found a left-behind Flight Tutor program at one of the many other colonies on the nearby islands, and then he and Zachary had found the

ship left desolate on the Ingrid Colony with several parts missing, but replaceable, using other salvaged parts they found at other colonies or improvised using pieces found the same way. Now, the ship was ready to fly.

And so was he.

So entranced by the thought, Felix didn't hear his mother ask the others to leave for a moment so that she could talk to him privately. When he saw them walking out the door he turned around to see her walking up to him. Her face had changed, from her professional, thoughtful expression to that of concern and love, all of which was directed towards Felix.

Seeing her worry, Felix opened his arms in invitation, and he and his mother embraced lovingly. "Still worried about me, huh?" He asked.

"Well of course I am; it's a mother's job to worry," she returned, her voice a little shaky. "Space travel is dangerous; some never return from it. And yet, I am forced to put the needs of the whole colony above all else, and I have to put my son's life on the line to do it..." She hugged him tighter. "You're all I have left, my son... I don't want to lose you."

"You won't, mom," he returned as he pulled back from her slowly and met her eyes. "I'll make you proud, and I'll save this colony, by any means necessary."

She rested one hand on his face, a tear sliding down her cheek as she stroked his with her fingers. "Just promise me you'll be careful," she pleaded.

He rested one of his hands on the one on his cheek, stroking his mother's loving hand in reassurance. "I will," he promised.

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The scene as the group started to leave the following day surprised them. The whole colony had gathered, forming rows on either side of the street as the four walked towards the main gate. The colonists, even the militia, had come to see them off, and were even applauding them as they departed, wishing them luck on their voyage. Several had donated their rations of the day to the Mara's Hope crew, to give them a better chance. A few of the other engineers even helped Zachary do a last-minute check of the ship while Gustav loaded their supplies, and Amber brought a set of weapons onto the ship.

Although there was one person that wasn't so happy about the guns; he came storming down from the colony—a human with tan, mildly saggy skin, brown hair and mustache, and built with the body of an athlete and wearing standard-issue Militia security armour, with a sidearm holstered at his hip; the colony militia used laser weapons with single or burst-fire capabilities, launching projectile beams towards targets instead of long concentrated laser beams. The human was the current Militia Commander, Antoni Zambrano.

"Ms. Giles, what do you think you're doing?" He demanded.

"It looks like I'm going on a space voyage," she returned, not even looking at him.

Felix was just coming down the boarding ramp from the airlock, and saw the heated conversation between Commander Zambrano and Amber; something told him it could get ugly if he didn't step in quickly, and so he began to approach.

"You took those weapons from the armory, didn't you?" Antoni demanded with a very accusatory tone in his voice. "You left the militia two weeks ago; those weapons are off-limits to civilians!"

"First of all, the manager never approved that rule," Amber stated. "And I know because I just asked her two hours ago; everything in the armory is still publically accessible in an emergency or, in this case, a voyage into the unknown. Secondly, we don't have enough people in the entire colony who know how to use these guns in the first place, so taking some from the armory will do no harm whatsoever, and third, these guns are *not* from the armory; these are from my personal collection."

"Don't you mean the former commander's collection?" Antoni retorted.

She glared at him. "He died six months ago, Antoni, and he left everything, including his collection, to me," she stated. "Therefore these are *my* guns, and you have absolutely no right to tell me I can't take them. You lost the right to give orders to me when you demoted me for no reason and I left the militia." She turned to him, leaning against the ship with her back. "Any other untrue accusations you want to fling my way before I say, 'kiss my ass' and get on board?"

Antoni scoffed at her. "Such arrogance," he growled. "You think just because you're the granddaughter of the Mara Colony's first commander you're some sort of soldier?"

"Well let's see," she said. "I'm a better shot than those two monkey's walking with you," she gestured at the two other militia troops who had followed Antoni out of the colony. "I know every weapon in that entire armory and how they work, I know how the defense turrets operate, and I know every colonial law regarding the Mara Colony right off the top of my head. I'd say I'm about the closest thing to a soldier you can find."

"No, you're not," he retorted. "You're nothing more than a woman that should be working at the ration house."

Amber glowered at him, her eyes showing that this conversation was stepping on a nerve Antoni really should not have been crossing. "Excuse me?"

"I have never thought women should be allowed to fight," he said. "But at the manager's insistence, I keep some on the force either way, but they certainly do not have the capacity to be leaders either; they lack the conviction to be fighters."

"Perhaps you'd like to remove that armour and test that theory," she challenged him, although quickly corrected what she said. "No, on second thought, leave it on; only a real man can take a hit from me."

"Why you miserable...!" Before the conflict could progress any further, Felix quickly stepped in, stopping the fight before it could start.

"Commander," stated Felix. "I would appreciate it if you would not start a fight with my crew members."

"I'm simply putting her in her place, Captain," returned the commander.

"Her place is with me and the rest of the crew aboard the Mara's Hope," retorted Felix. "Your old way of the thinking died out 700 years ago; women and men stand as equals now, and I expect her to be treated as one."

"You have no authority over me, Mr. Kaufmann; you may be the manager's son but I do not answer to you," the commander retorted right back.

"And as of now, you have no authority over us," stated Felix. "With full authorization from the manager, the Mara's Hope and her crew are their own, self-governed association that answers only to the Mara Colony manager just like the militia do, but the Militia Commander does not have any sort of authority over my crew, and therefore harassing them is overstepping your authority." His gaze was firm. "Which is grounds for dismissal if you continue to offend."

"The Manager is giving you independent leadership?" Antoni asked.

"Precisely," returned Felix. "And therefore, Amber is now beyond your authority as long as she obeys the colony laws." He crossed his arms. "Now if you would be so kind, Commander, we have work to do."

Antoni glared at Felix for a moment before he turned his back to the dolphin and stormed away, never looking back at them as he returned to the colony walls. Amber glanced at Felix, looking a little sour. "While I appreciate you standing up for me, I was looking forward to giving that pig what was coming to him."

"I know, and he'd have deserved it," agreed Felix. "However, you'd simply be doing what he wanted; by starting a fight with him he'd have the right to place you under house arrest and your reputation as a responsible colonial citizen would be damaged."

Amber growled in anger. "Damn it; what is his problem with me?!" She demanded. "Why does he always think lesser of me?"

"Because he's from a very old way of thinking," replied Felix. "Even seven centuries of equality isn't long enough to change the way of thinking from where he came from; they still believe women are a lesser race." He looked at Amber. "But I won't allow him to treat you that way while I'm around; you're one of my crew now, and you're a member of the crew. That makes you stand on even ground with everyone else on board."

Amber nodded. "I appreciate that," she said, sighing. "When Zambrano became the new commander, it was the worst thing that happened to the militia. I don't doubt his leadership; he's proven several times that he's a very competent fighter and can handle pressure better than others, but he's so narrow-minded."

Felix stood silently for a moment as he thought of a way to respond. Soon after, he put a hand on her shoulder and nodded reassuringly. "He'll get what's coming to him someday," he said. "And in the meantime, you can keep proving him wrong time and time again as our gunner."

She nodded back to him. "I suppose we should get going then," she said.

"Agreed," said Felix. "Let's go."

Suddenly, another voice called out. "Wait, Felix; hold on!"

"Eh?" Felix asked, glancing over his shoulder, followed by Amber as well.

This time, the one approaching was someone they had seen yesterday; Jessica, the doe they had seen coming out of the clinic on their way to the manager's office, was approaching hurriedly. As she neared, she paused her spring and stood hunched over, panting for a moment before she looked at Felix.

"Jessica?" Felix asked, curiously.

"What're you doing here?" Amber asked, equally curious.

"Something the matter?" Felix asked, adding more to the inquiry.

The doe stood upright after she finished gathering her breath. "Sorry," she said, before glancing at the two. "I need a favor, Felix."

"Something you need me to look for?" Felix asked.

"No, something I need to look for" she replied. "I have to come with you."

"With us?" Felix repeated. "But Jessica, you're the assistant to the community doctor; you're one of the few people here who has medical expertise."

"I know," she returned. "But there's something I really need to do." She glanced over her shoulder, as if checking to see if anyone was watching before she looked back at Felix again. "Food is not all we are short on."

Felix did not take long to figure out what she meant; while it was true the colony was short on food at this time, there was something else it needed that never crossed his mind. "The supplies for the clinic," he said softly.

Jessica nodded. "Yes," she said. "The doctor didn't want anyone to know yet but we're down to our very last stocks. Worse yet, most of our stuff is outdated or expired; we can't use them anymore."

"Why didn't the doctor go to the manager?" Amber asked. "Medicine wasn't on our list of items to buy once we get to Denver XII; we might not be able to fit it in on our budget."

"We need to," pleaded Jessica. "Look, I know everything that we need to last a few months; it's not very much but if anyone starts getting sick we need to be ready for it and these supplies will make sure of it."

Amber glanced at Felix expectantly after hearing Jessica's explanation. "Well, captain, it's your call."

Felix studied Jessica's expression for a moment, seeing the concern in her emerald green eyes. Jessica was normally a very merry young woman, but she was also a very empathetic one as well; when someone needed her help she was always eager to give it, and as an apprentice physician, she had helped many in the colony; she was a well-liked person among the colonists, having treated several people herself when they were suffered from various illnesses, injuries or age-related afflictions.

Felix reached into the pocket of his pants and lifted out the Credrive given to him by his mother, and looked at Amber. "Don't suppose you have a portable terminal handy, do you?"

"As a matter of fact I do," she replied, reaching around behind her back, to an object on the back of her belt, which she plucked free and held out to Felix; a small, gray-ish device with a monitor screen on the front, three times as thick as the Credrive but still very compact.

Felix accepted the device from Amber and held it up to eye level, inserting the Credrive into the open slot in the bottom of the portable terminal, which lit up as it the device clicked into place. A row of numbers formed on the monitor as the terminal identified the device and its contents. "There's roughly seventy-two thousand credits on here," said Felix. "Depending on how much the repairs to the ship are we *might* be able to fit pharmaceuticals into the

budget.” He looked at Jessica. “I can’t promise anything, Jessica, but I can say I’ll do my best. If we can afford some medicine, then we’ll get what you need.”

Jessica smiled happily at Felix. “Then... can I come with you, to help you find them?”

Felix smiled back, and turned himself about, gesturing towards the boarding ramp for the ship. “Welcome aboard.”

Jessica’s smile widened and she jumped for joy before sprinting towards the boarding ramp as fast as she could, leaving the dolphin and shark to watch her cross the short distance to board the ship. When she was up the ramp and out of sight, Amber glanced at Felix with a look of disbelief. “Why do I get the feeling she’s just as happy to be going on this trip at all as she is about being able to help the colony?”

“Aren’t we all?” Felix asked, flashing a smile at the shark-morph.

Amber shrugged. “Just another job to me.”

“You can *not* tell me this trip doesn’t excite you just as much as it does me,” said Felix. “This is the first time any of us will get to leave this rock, and it’s the first voyage the colony will have since it was still run by the Confederacy. All of us grew up here, and we finally get to see the galaxy beyond.” He looked at the ship. “If you can tell me that doesn’t stir a little excitement in you, you’ve got a stone heart, Amber.” Of course, this last sentence he was speaking in jest.

Amber turned her gaze to the ship for a moment, before it slowly drifted skyward towards the great blue beyond above; Amber had lived on the colony since before Felix was even born, but she could not remember the day she was brought there, as she was only a small child at the time, barely four years of age when her parents had moved to Trident IV, so this world was all she had ever known, and it wasn’t exactly a happy place...

She gave in and looked at Felix with an expression of defeat. “Okay... yes, I’m pretty excited too,” she confessed.

“Now was that so hard to admit?” Felix asked.

“Tell anyone about it, and I’ll deny it,” she returned.

Felix shook his head. “You’re hopeless.”

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With the rest of the supplies finally on board, the ship was ready to disembark. Felix announced their departure to the colony, and informed his mother they were ready to leave. Everyone gathered upon the wall to watch them disembark, waving goodbye to the Mara’s Hope and her crew as they made the final preparations.

The crew communicated through the ship’s intercom, placed strategically in every commonly-used facility on the ship. Felix was on the bridge, programming the navigational computer to guide him towards Denver XII. “I hope they haven’t changed location in the last ten years,” he stated as he found the correct coordinates in the ship’s memory core. “There, that ought to do it.” He turned in his seat, and after locating the intercom button, he pressed down on it and talked into the speaker above it. “This is Felix; status report, all hands.”

A few seconds passed before he received the first response from Gustav. "All supplies secure in the storage room, and the salt shipment is on board and secured as well."

Next was Zachary. "Engines are powering up nicely and warp drive is functional."

"Oxygen tanks are at maximum and all Recyclers are active," Amber reported.

"All systems go," said Felix. "Everyone strap yourself in; this could get a little bumpy."

With that, he flicked the ignition switch, starting up the ship as he had back at the Ingrid Colony, and listening to the engines power up and the circuits all across the vessel spark with life. Once the repulsors were powered and activated, the ship hovered off of the ground, and Felix slowly and carefully turned it about, letting it climb until it was at the minimum safe elevation of forty meters above ground.

Peering out the window towards the sky above, Felix put his hand on the throttle.

"Now," he said. "Let the Hope ascend."

With that, he eased the throttle forward, keeping his other hand on the tiller as the vessel began to creep ahead a little, and steadily began to climb into the sky, leaving the little islands of the ocean planet of Trident IV behind. As the ascent continued, Felix increased the ship's speed steadily until they were in the planet's stratosphere. "Alright, here goes," he said as he pushed the throttle to maximum, immediately reaching Atmosphere Breach velocity which allowed the ship to defy the planet's gravity.

The ship began to shake violently as the climb became higher; the lower spheres were easy but this one was where it became challenging, and where Felix could only pray the ship would hold together until they could exit the planet's orbit; with the engines unable to make their maximum capacity they could very well overheat before he could make the breach.

Overtime, the shaking increased steadily for a while, but eventually it began to soften, until the ship finally became almost absolutely still and flew onward.

Felix breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Made it," he whispered, running a hand down his face. "Now..." He pressed the intercom again. "Attempting atmospheric breach; engaging main rockets. Hang on everybody."

He pulled back the throttle to fifty percent thrust, and then gripped the second handle next to it that converted the engines from planetary flight to space flight. This was a process that had to be done quickly and precisely or the planet's gravity could pull the ship back down and possibly cause it to crash. Even if Felix managed to save the ship in that scenario, attempting a second breach could overload the engines; this had to be done right the first time.

Timing it as best as he could, he turned the handle and pushed the throttle forward again slowly; he felt the ship rumble as the space engines kicked in and the ship pushed forward into the vacuum of space. "Hold together old girl," he muttered as the ship began to shake again. Every passing moment he expected to hear something breaking away but beyond a relentless rattling noise that made his ears hurt, no such sounds were heard.

Finally, the ship reached full speed, and left Trident-IV's orbit completely, it became steady and comfortable. Felix kept his hand on the throttle a moment longer, before slowly pulling his hand back from it. Out of nowhere, he felt the overwhelming urge to cheer, and

leapt from his seat whooping in glee as the flippers of his tail slapped the floor loudly, the stinging pain reminding him he was still on a starship and the only one on the bridge.

“Right, priorities,” he said, returning to his seat and tapping the intercom. “Good news guys,” he said into the speaker. “We’re now clear of the planet’s orbit. Our takeoff is officially successful.”

“WHOO!”

Felix raised his head with a start and looked over his shoulder, expecting to see someone behind him but saw no one in the corridor. He knew that gleeful yell very well; it belonged to Zack, yet the rabbit was several rooms away and somehow Felix had just heard him all the way from the lounge. “That little guy has quite a voice,” he muttered, before tapping the intercom again. “Alright, keep yourselves strapped in people; it’s time for the real moment of truth. I’m aligning us towards Denver XII now.” He swallowed nervously. “Keep your fingers crossed, everyone.”

Somehow, Felix felt like he could sense the tension in the air, coming from his crew, or the tension he felt was only his own. Either way they had come too far to turn back now; he continued to turn the ship, still flying away from Trident IV until he was clear of the planet and checked the navigational computer for confirmation of alignment to the space station’s coordinates.

Once there, he began to accelerate again, and put his finger over the switch marked ‘Warp Drive’, waiting until the speed was right before he flicked the switch, and the stars all around seemed to zoom towards him as the ship entered warp speed and vanished from above the planet of Trident IV...

End of Prologue