

Voyages of the Mara

Chapter 2: First Job

Five days passed since the crew of the Mara's Hope had returned home to the Mara Colony. After a meeting between the five they had decided to take one of the jobs Gustav had found aboard Denver XII, and departed on the fifth day, after making sure the ship was stocked and ready to go.

Gustav and Felix were loading the last of their supplies on board when Zack, Jessica and Amber arrived. Felix greeted the three as they reached the ship. "You guys ready for our next voyage?" He asked.

"Definitely!" Zack exclaimed. "I've been wanting to get back up there ever since we got back! I mean, home's nice and all but come on, we get to go into space, guys!"

"I share the sentiment Zack, but there's work for us to do," Amber reminded him.

"Do you *have* to be such a freaking buzzkill?!" Zack exclaimed.

"She's a workaholic, what do you expect?" Gustav asked.

"Hey! I am not a workaholic, I'm just responsible!" Amber retorted.

"Is there a difference?" Zack asked.

"Not really," replied Gustav.

"Oh fuck both of you!"

"We love you too," returned Gustav, nudging Amber teasingly, before he and Zack fled onto the ship as she chased them furiously, threatening to hurt them if she caught them.

"I thought Gustav was supposed to be the oldest and most mature one here?" Jessica asked Felix.

"Even he has to cut loose now and then," replied Felix.

"If you ever start doing shenanigans like that I might just faint," she returned as the two walked onto the ship.

"If I ever start doing shenanigans like that, put me in a strait-jacket," remarked Felix.

"I'm not *that* kind of doctor."

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The ship was off, leaving the orbit of Trident IV after a short flight, and aligning itself with Denver XII. When the ship was in warp drive, and rapidly travelling across outer space, Felix gathered the crew in the lounge area to discuss their upcoming job in full detail, and to lay out his plan to them. Everyone, with a drink in hand and seated on the barely-stable or comfortable furniture, gathered around the central table with the datapad containing the list of jobs –compliments of Gustav from their last venture- hooked up to it, and from the center, a hologram of the job details was projected for all to see.

“Alright guys,” began Felix. “I’ve decided on this job first; a small shipment of items to the privately-owned orbital station, Icarus-III, which is located over the rim world, Ithica-VII, at the far end of the White Star Sector.”

“That’s the opposite end of the sector from where we are; can the Hope get that far?” Amber asked.

“No, not in one jump it can’t,” replied Felix. “We’ll have to make two stops along the way and use the sectors’ acceleration gates to reach it; first, we set our course from Denver XII,” he changed the image to a star map of the White Star Sector, and trailed over his planned route with his finger, “and set a course for Gate XV, which will take us outside the Dory II Space Station in the next system, where we’ll have to stop to cool down the engines.

“From Dory-II, after we spend a cycle there, we jump to Sarissa-III, a space station on the opposite side of the system, which is also next to Gate XXI; that’s the one that’ll take us to Ithica-VII’s system, but we’ll have to cool down at Sarissa-III again before we can go through, since it’ll still be another couple of hours jump from the next gate to the planet All in all, a voyage of about six days; three days there, drop off the supplies, and three back, leaving us with three additional days to relax, and then pick up the salt shipment from Trident IV, head back to Denver XII again, and make the delivery, right on time.”

“Excellent plan, Felix,” said Zack.

“You sure we won’t hit any bumps along the way that might cost us time?” Amber asked.

“We shouldn’t,” replied Felix. “I’ve done all the calculations, and Zack and I thoroughly checked the ship before we departed; it should be fast enough to make the trip.”

“What’s the pay?” Gustav asked.

“Sixty thousand credits. And due to an arrangement I made with my mom, seventy percent of that goes to us, the other thirty to the colony to begin paying back the debts to the colonists,” said Felix. “With that, we can maintain the ship, and take more jobs between our deliveries to Erwin’s.”

“Sounds like everything is planned out,” said Jessica.

“It takes a good team to get a good plan to work,” said Felix, tapping a button on the side of the table; the hologram disappeared, and Felix leaned onto the table. “Which brings me to another concern I’ve had recently; I have heard whispers around the colony. Some people want to use this ship themselves in order to leave Trident IV. Everyone we lose, the colony will suffer, especially if any of the five in this room were to leave. We’re irreplaceable to Mara, but unlike everyone else, any of us can leave it behind.”

He adopted a more serious tone. “Mara may not be a high-class colony, but it’s my home. I’m staying. Can I count on all of you to do the same; can you all promise that no matter how many Gelks attack, or how many storms ravage our homes... that you’ll stand by me, and in turn, stand by the Mara Colony?”

A short silence fell over the group at Felix’s words; apparently the sudden seriousness in what he was asking them had caught them off guard, but it was a question he had to put forward. Felix had been spoken to by numerous people across the colony, asking about the ship’s reliability and how many people it could carry. To him, that was a sign that they wanted

to leave, and would seek passage on the ship or even try to hijack it to leave. That was actually another reason he wanted to keep the group so busy, so that there would not be very many opportunities for anyone to steal the ship. Even if only Felix knew how to fly it and only Zack had the access codes to the landing pad, those things would not stop people from trying.

But at this point, it wasn't just the ship he was concerned about. It was the people who helped him operate it.

Amber was the first to break the silence. "My grandfather loved that colony, enough that he gathered people to put their lives on the line to protect it from Gelks and Raiders. I wasn't born on Mara but I've put my life on the line for it enough times to make a scrap book of it. Sure, I may have lost it to some sexist sleeze-ball but it is still my home. I'm here until the day it ends... hopefully later than sooner."

"I may not have any family left on Mara," Gustav added. "Since my mom passed away six years ago, I've been alone. The rest of the colonists have become my family; I leave them, I'm alone again. I'm there until the end."

"Same here! Mara may not be the best place to live but it keeps things interesting!" Zack added, with his usual enthusiasm. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Mara is not where I want to be," Jessica admitted. "But, until it moves itself to a new location, that is where I *will* be. I want to see it prosper."

Felix smiled broadly at the group. "Then, it's good to see where we all stand," he said, and reached for his cup on the table. "To the colony."

"To our home," Gustav corrected as he and the others raised their glasses, and tapped them together.

"Now... Let's make our people proud," said Felix before he took a long drink of his glass of water, feeling satisfied that he had a good team at his side.

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Meanwhile, on Denver XII...

"I can't believe this..." The gray wolf ran both hands over his face as he finished reading the report. "Here... now? Why did they have to choose now of all times?"

"Is there *ever* a good time for the Grunikan Empire to show up?" The human seated across the desk from him pointed out. The human was wearing the uniform of a Station Minister. This was Minister Kormin, the seat of governance for the Denver XII station and the surrounding systems, as well as a right-hand figure for the Sector's Councilman, handling his affairs in areas where he couldn't always be.

"Of course there isn't. I just wish it had been after that colony at least got some defenses so they had some warning... casualties would have been far less," the wolf stood up and walked over to the window, peering out into space. "Those damn Dracomorphs are back. It's bad enough they destroyed the Galactic Union and forced the Blue Star Republic to join the Red Nebulan Confederacy just in order to survive, now they're coming into Confederacy space again!" He shook his head. "Are we ready to fight the largest Interstellar faction in the galaxy? Honestly, I don't think we are."

“Let the military minds of the Admiralty worry about that,” the human returned. “As for you, Captain, I have new orders from the Four Sectors’ Council; a fleet has already driven the Grunikans away from Ithica-VII, but they want you to coordinate a relief effort to send to the planet.”

“I do not have enough ships to bring supplies to the entire planet, Minister Kormin,” Captain Noir reminded. “Furthermore, none of my ships are freighters; the amount of supplies they could carry is severely limited. Why not ask Colonel Vanderson? He’s got more than double the ships I do.”

“Vanderson has been sent to the Rock Belt Sector; the Grunikans have more than one fleet you know, and the Council fears they may try to cripple us by aiming for our primary mining worlds,” Minister Kormin returned. “You have the fastest fleet in the whole sector, and the only one with more than a half-dozen supply carriers. You’re the planet’s best chance.”

“Then let me enlist local shipping groups,” requested Noir. “If I can hire some light freighters, they could get to the planet faster than even I could and cover the smaller areas of the planet, while I handle the larger populations such as...”

“Do you have any idea how much that would cost us?” Demanded Kormin, standing up from his chair. “The relief effort alone will cost tens of thousands; this has not been a good year for the White Star Sector’s economy, and I am not about to make it worse.”

“Then you leave half that planet to die?” Noir returned. “All of their suppliers will have stopped making shipments if they know the Grunikans are there and their own ships will be grounded for fear of losses! I have nine supply carriers, each one barely large enough to carry enough supplies for one city; what about all the lesser colonies across the planet?”

“They are in the least danger and are a second priority,” returned Kormin. “The larger populace should be our focus.”

“The *entire* populace should be our focus!” Noir retorted. “If you think I’m going to focus only on the areas you choose, forget it! The whole planet needs us, not just parts of it, but to do that we need more freighters!”

“Then you can hire them with your own money,” retorted Kormin. “You have your orders; get relief out to Ithica-VII, and not a single unauthorized ship is to head that way either! I’ve already given orders to the acceleration gate at Sarissa-III to forbid any ships access to the gate without clearance; the rest is your problem.” With that, Minister Kormin stormed out of the office, shutting the door behind him.

“Damn blasted bureaucratic mother...!” Noir stopped himself, and took in a deep breath to try and relax his nerves, sitting back down in his chair as he let his anger simmer until he was certain he was calm enough for his next decision. He reached for a button on the side of his desk, talking into the speaker above it as he pressed it. “This is Noir; inform the department’s financial manager I wish to speak with him.”

“Right away, Captain,” a female voice replied through the speaker.

He waited a half hour, before the cone-shaped object on his desk began beeping repeatedly. He tapped the side of the cone, which opened up, and out of the inside, a holographic image was projected, revealing the face of a dark-skinned human, transparent but identifiable, in the image.

"You sent for me, Captain?" He asked.

"Thanks for responding so soon, Riley," said Noir. "Have you heard that we've been asked to coordinate a relief effort for Ithica-VII?"

"The planet that was attacked? I hadn't heard about a relief effort, but okay. Why, something wrong?"

"Yes; we don't have enough ships for the whole planet," replied Noir.

"Oh... it's that bad, is it?"

Noir nodded to the human. "I'm afraid so," he replied. "So, I need you to check something for me; is there anything non-priority on our budget we could put aside for the next month or two?"

"I'm not sure; I could probably dig up a couple of things. Why, are we buying more ships?" Riley inquired.

"Hell no; just one carrier is worth half the year's budget even without our maintenance costs," replied Noir. "I want to see about hiring some independent freighter pilots, to help handle the smaller communities of the planet, while our own freighters handle the cities."

"That's a tall order, captain; a lot of the freight companies out there don't come cheap," Riley pointed out. "Are you sure?"

"We have no other choice," replied Noir. "If we want to bring relief to that planet, we need help to do so; there's just not enough of us to do it all ourselves."

"Alright, I'll see what I can do," replied Riley. "I can probably find some things we can leave aside, but the largest budget I can promise is maybe a half-million credits, enough for maybe six or seven contract pilots."

"That's all?" Noir asked.

"That's the highest I can guarantee, unless you want to go with the lower grade guys, but most of those little outfits barely have ships for local voyages, let alone regions more than twenty million light-years away. They'd need to make eight rest-stops on the way and that'd cost time and more creds."

Noir sighed, rubbing his eyes in frustration. "I hate those Grunikans... Last time the invaded the Confederacy we lost eight fleets to them, and they took four systems from us, including the peaceful people on Nocturnia. Now, they're back again." He leaned back in his chair. "And the only reason we can't stop them is because unlike us, they don't have to worry so much about money."

Riley nodded. "I'll do everything I can Captain. Riley out." And with that, his image disappeared, the projected light being drawn back into the cone it had come out of before the device closed with a silent click.

Noir stood up from his seat and approached the window again, staring out at the stars beyond the station, to all the planets and solar systems each one indicated, and wishing that the Confederacy were all the way out there instead of on the war path of the Grunikan Empire again. The Grunikans were a highly notorious nation, spanning hundreds of sectors across the 'western' side of the galaxy –for lack of real compass points out in space. The territory they controlled was immense, and always they kept expanding, intent on conquering the entire galaxy.

Years ago, two mighty factions had opposed them. The Galactic Union, a Communist faction that had spanned much of what the Grunikans now controlled, who like the Confederacy itself, had no dominant species governing it, nor did the Blue Star Republic that had been their greatest adversary after the fall of the Union, but even the Republic was unable to stop them, and after losing half of their territory, appealed to the three sectors of the Red Nebula, who each sent aid to the Blue Star Republic and helped them drive back the fleets of the Grunikan Empire, but were unable to help them reclaim their lost territory, among those planets a peaceful world of technological innovators known as the Nocturnians, a bat-like species with an intolerance to daylight, but creators of revolutionary technology.

After the Republic's fall, its remaining worlds became part of the Red Nebulan Confederacy, formed in the aftermath of the war. This had been almost a hundred years ago now, but the fall of the Republic and the Union at the hands of the Empire was fresh in the minds of all, for it was a prime topic in history classes at schools. Although it was unknown if any pockets of the Galactic Union remained, the Blue Star Republic was now the Blue Star Sector, primary provider of military strength for the whole Confederacy; nearly all ships the Confederacy used in battle were made by the Blue Stars.

Each sector played its own roles in the Confederacy; the White Star sector was the head of finance in the Confederacy, the Rock Belt sector was the industrial core, controlling millions of mining operations on planets and in asteroid belts, and the smallest sector called the Red Tail, the seat of government for the Confederacy, and its epicentre of politics, scientific research, weapons manufacturing and, most surprising of all, interstellar trade, for the Red Tail was also called the Red Road, as those who lived in the Red Tail knew a secret path through the nebula that even uninsulated ships could travel.

Every sector had something to contribute. Unfortunately, the White Star sector was full of pinchpennies always looking to save money on activities that were expensive in the first place; their wealth was the highest of all four sectors and they wanted to keep it that way. Minister Kormin's definition of a 'bad year' for the sector's economy was a loss of four million credits in tax income due to a shortage of supply in several areas of the Rock Belt sector, when their average income was over ninety *billion* credits a year; barely even a pinprick in the budgets they could provide to thousands of operations.

It drove Noir crazy how such wealthy people had more money they could ever hope to use, yet clung to it harder than anyone with barely a fraction of their income did. But he was just a Star Captain, after all. 'What do I know about economics?' He asked in his mind, brimming with sarcasm.

But then, something outside the station caught his eye; a ship coming out of warp speed, and slowly approaching the space station. "What have we here?" He asked as he recognized the model of the ship. "That's a G.G.L.F-Model 102; that's one of the fastest freighters in the whole Confederacy..." He rubbed his chin. "I wonder if they're looking for work."

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“What do you mean the job’s been cancelled?” Amber asked the avian behind the desk in front of him.

“Exactly what I said, miss,” the green-feathered avian, an anthro parrot by the looks of it, replied. “The system where Ithica-VII is located has been quarantined by the military, due to an attack by the Grunikan Empire. Nobody comes or goes from that system without military or government clearance.”

“The Grunikans; they’re back?” Gustav asked.

“Well, that’s off our list then,” said Felix with a sigh. “Do you have any other jobs for us?”

“Do I look like Employment Assistance? I’m just the manager,” the avian retorted, clearly irritated. “No, I have nothing else I could give you. Now, please go; I’ve got a lost contract to explain to my boss. Don’t be surprised if my wings are gone and my ears are bleeding if we meet again.”

“Whoa... his boss sounds like a wild animal,” whispered Gustav as the three stepped back from the desk and began to make their way out of the company offices.

Amber groaned. “This is just great; we came all the way here for nothing,” she complained. “Zack is going to be whining about this all night.”

“Like you are now?” Gustav teased, earning an elbow in the gut from the shark – although, comparing her strength to his, he barely felt it, but still elicited a grunt to satisfy her. “So... I guess we’re back to looking for work; should we check the ones we copied again?”

“I suppose so,” replied Felix. “Though none of the other jobs I looked at that we could do with our limited time span paid nearly as much as this one. We’re going to have to settle for something fairly low-pay.”

Gustav sighed. “Every little bit helps, I guess?” Even he was no longer feeling very optimistic with their sudden setback...

There was a long silence as they walked through the Denver XII station, barely paying attention to where they were going except for other people on the walkways. On the way back, Felix eyed a concession stand selling drinks. Thinking it might help everyone cheer up – especially Zack and Jessica once they heard the news too, he made a detour towards the stand and looked at the selection.

“Thirsty, Felix?” Amber asked.

“Nah... just think we could all use some kind of pick-me-up after that disappointment,” he replied. “I have some spare creds left over we can use for ‘em. So, take your pick, guys; I’ll see if I can find something for Zack or Jess too.”

Amber and Gustav exchanged brief looks, before shrugging and agreeing a cold drink might help. After a short look over the menu they made their selections, as did Felix, picking two extra ones for their crew members back at the ship, and getting a biodegradable drink tray to carry the three beverages with before paying the avian running the concession stand, and with that, the three were on their way again, discussing the other jobs they had taken notices for and seeing which one they could take to substitute for the one they had just lost.

After boarding a tram, and then a shuttle back to the sub-station where the Mara's Hope was docked, they returned to the Hangar, but as they approached the ship, they spotted Zack and Jessica standing outside talking with an anthro wolf none of the group recognized.

"Now who could that be?" Amber asked.

"Let's find out," replied Felix, resuming walking towards the ship.

"I hope it's not another gangster," remarked Gustav.

As they drew closer to the scene, Amber looked at Gustav. "Don't think so; that looks like an Enforcement uniform he's in," she said.

"...Somehow that feels less reassuring," muttered Gustav.

Amber nodded in agreement.

As they neared, they caught part of the conversation. "That's really something to discuss with our captain," Zack said to the wolf.

"Is he aboard?"

"He's right there," returned Zack, pointing towards Felix.

The wolf turned; a gray wolf anthro with dark blue eyes, matched by his uniform consisting of a button-down, long-sleeve shirt and dress pants, faced Felix. He stood roughly the same height as the dolphin, but was much more athletically inclined, and carried an energy pistol in a holster on his belt. A badge on his chest proved he was indeed a member of the Confederate Enforcement Fleet; a paramilitary navy and marine corp. that upheld the Confederate laws, protected the borders of the territories and served as first-response to invading enemy fleets.

"I'm Felix Kaufmann, helmsman of the Mara's Hope," Felix introduced himself. "Is there something I can help you with, officer...?"

"Captain," corrected the wolf, offering his paw for a handshake. "Captain William Noir, of the CEF Seventh Fleet."

Felix respectfully accepted the handshake. "A pleasure," he returned. "How can we be of help to you, Captain?"

"Well, I was just noticing your ship here," he began, turning to look at the Mara's Hope. "It's a GGLF-102, isn't it?"

"Sure is," replied Felix. "It's a little old, but recently we gave her quite a tune-up."

"All brand-new parts!" Zack exclaimed.

"Excellent," Noir returned.

"It's not for sale, if that's what you're here to ask," Felix pointed out.

Noir laughed. "On my salary I'd have to go without groceries for two months if I bought this ship," he remarked. "No, actually, I was wondering if this ship and her crew were looking for work."

Felix frowned. "We *were*, but the job we came to do was cancelled, due to some trouble out in the Ithica VII system," replied Felix.

"The job was cancelled?" Jessica asked.

"I am partially to blame for that," admitted Captain Noir. "You see, the planet has been attacked, by the Grunikan Empire. Because of the unprovoked attack, that region has been



declared a warzone, but some of the planet's surface was hit hard in the attack, and they need relief. I do not have enough ships to cover that whole area of the planet, however."

"And that's why you're here?" Felix asked.

Noir nodded. "Yes. I need to hire some additional pilots for the relief mission, and your ship caught my attention," he explained. "Model 102's are among the fastest ships Galaxy Glider's produces, and some areas of the planet need relief ASAP; your vessel may be the best chance they have."

"That sounds serious," said Jessica.

"It sounds lengthy," stated Amber. "We have a previous contract, don't forget."

"I thought the job you came here for was cancelled?" Noir asked.

"It was, but it's not the only one we're on," explained Felix. "At the first of every month we make deliveries to Erwin's Grocery, here on Denver XII. We're due for the next one in less than two weeks and space travel can be time-consuming."

"And you think that is more important than helping the people of Ithica VII?" Noir asked.

"I didn't say that," returned Felix. "But you see, our ship is called the Mara's Hope for a reason, captain; it's because we're not just providing for ourselves, we're providing for an entire colony on Trident IV. If they lose us... they lose everything."

"Trident IV?" Noir repeated. "That planet was deserted almost twenty years ago; its natural resources were depleted."

"Our colony got left behind because it didn't have its own ship at the time," replied Gustav. "This ship," he jerked his thumb towards the Mara's Hope, "was salvaged from one of the abandoned colonies, and right now it's the only thing bringing money and food to the colony."

"Hasn't the colonial manager called for an evac?" Noir asked.

"Yes she did," replied Felix. "They said they'd send a moving crew within a few months. That was ten years ago. We've tried contacting them again but the Gelks on that planet tore down our communication tower not long after."

Noir tilted his head curiously. "Gelks?" He asked.

"A race of deep-water dwelling amphibians," replied Amber. "Savage, bloodthirsty and highly territorial; they consider off-world presences on their planet, even on the landmasses where they don't live, a trespass."

"The point is, sir," stated Felix. "My heart goes out to the people of Ithica VII, but our home relies on this ship to stay active until we can make the most of what we've been left, and right now Erwin's Grocery is our primary contract. If he were to drop our contract, the colony would have no income at all."

Noir brought a hand to his chin, stroking it for a moment before he looked at the Hope's crew once more. "What if I have a word with Erwin?" He offered. "Maybe I can explain to him that if you're late for your next delivery, it's my fault?"

Felix considered the offer, and turned to his crew mates, silently asking for their input. Amber didn't reply, but Zack, Jessica and Gustav all shrugged in a 'worth a shot' manner. With that, Felix turned back to Captain Noir. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to try," he said. "You must really need us."

"I need whoever I can get," corrected the captain, pulling a holographic notepad from his pocket, and a holo-pen from the same one. "The faster the ship, the better the chances for the people of Ithica VII. Now, what's the transmission code on your comm-relay, so I can contact you?"

"Three one eight, nine six nine six, decimal forty seven," replied Felix.

The captain wrote down the number on the notepad before putting it back into his pocket. "Excellent," he said. "I'll contact you after I speak to Erwin. After that, perhaps we can further discuss the business in my office?"

"I'll think about it," returned Felix.

"Please do," insisted Noir. "Lives may depend on it." And with that, he turned and began to make his way out of the hangar, leaving the Hope crew to consider the offer.

Gustav turned to Felix. "Sounds pretty desperate; what do you think?"

"What do the rest of you think?" Felix inquired.

"Going into an area that could come under attack by the Grunikan Empire at any time is risky," replied Amber. "But, a job that dangerous could pay double what we were looking at before."

"Those people need help," Jessica stated. "We shouldn't just turn away from this; sure the colony needs our help but if we can do right by others as well, isn't it worth it?"

"Still, like Amber said, it's pretty dangerous," added Gustav. "Even if we did make it to the planet, if another attack were to hit, we might get caught in the crossfire."

"I'd love to see another planet," said Zack. "And, if we get paid going there, what's to lose?"

"The Mara's Hope," Amber returned coldly. "Didn't you hear what Gustav and I said? The Grunikan Empire's out there; I trust you at least studied *some* history and know what they did to the Confederacy the *last* time they attacked?"

Zack waved it off. "C'mon; the Confederacy probably has a hundred ships out there by now. We won't be in any danger."

"Do you take anything seriously?" Amber asked.

"Well, Zack is partially right," admitted Felix. "We won't be going in defenseless; the Confederate fleet will have blockaded the planet by now; the Grunikans may be violent, but they won't fire on a civilian vessel when military ones are right in their faces."

"I guess that's true," returned Amber.

"Well, I think we could do it," said Gustav. "The Hope is pretty fast, and its cargo capacity is enough to feed a medium-sized colony. She's the perfect ship for a job like this."

Felix glanced at each member of his team once more, before turning his gaze towards the ship again. "I guess we're going to be busy after all," he said, before turning to Gustav. "See about getting the water stocks refilled and check our groceries," and after a nod from the Orca, he turned to Zack. "Make sure everything in the engine room is in working order and prepare them for a long trip."

"Right away boss," returned the rabbit, following Gustav back aboard the ship.

Felix turned to the girls next. "Jessica, double-check our medical supplies to make sure we have enough for treating injuries, and Amber," he glanced at the shark girl. "Take a few creds and make sure we have sufficient energy batteries for your guns."

"The way you instruct us, it sounds like you expect a fight," Amber pointed out.

"You can never be too careful," returned Felix. "Especially when an army of conquering Draco-Morphs might be right next door."

Amber grinned at the dolphin. "Now you're thinking like me."

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Felix stood waiting in the cockpit of the Mara's Hope when the call came through on the communications array. He approached the console and flicked the receiver switch; a light switched on above the toggle, notifying Felix that he was linked. "Kaufmann here," he said.

"Huh. You don't have holographic imaging on your comm-system?" The voice of Captain Noir asked.

"It's on order," returned Felix. "But when you're providing for a whole colony, luxuries like holo-comm isn't really a priority."

"Of course," returned Noir. *"Now, I spoke to Erwin, filled him in on the job I have for you. He wasn't too displeased about it; he said he still has plenty of the stock you sent him before, as business hasn't quite picked up yet, so he can wait an extra week."*

"Perfect. Now I just have to go back to my colony and let them know what's going on."

"How long will that take?"

"Three hours there, three back, but my crew's going to want to tell their families. I can promise to be back in eight hours."

"Alright; I'll have the current docking bay you're parked in held for you and move all the supplies into there; I already downloaded some specs on the Model 102, so I know its capacity limit. I should also have your clearance codes by then as well," replied Captain Noir. *"I can't thank you enough for accepting this job, Mr. Kaufmann."*

"We need the money, and if we can do our part for the Confederacy in the process, who am I to argue?" Felix asked. "Now, how much does this job pay?"

"You have no previous shipping records, so you'll understand I have a limit on how much I can offer you," Noir replied. *"I have eighty-thousand credits set aside I can give you."*

"Sounds fair," agreed Felix, and he was about to end the call when something else crossed his mind. "Say, Captain; I don't suppose you know how much it'd cost to get a new comm tower at my colony, would you?"

"Cheapest ones available range around twenty-thousand credits," replied Noir. *"They can't penetrate electrical interference as easily as the new models can do but their range can cover half the White Star sector. Why?"*

"Just curious," replied Felix. "Keep in touch, captain." And with that, he ended the call, and proceeded to the intercom to inform the others.

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The detour took about as long as Felix said it would; he flew the ship back to the Mara Colony, where Felix spoke to his mother and the others, except Gustav, spoke to their families, letting them know that they'd be away for a while. Within ninety minutes, the group was boarding the Mara's Hope again, and was on its way back to the Denver XII space station. They returned to the same sub-station docking bay they had used before, which had been reserved for them just as Captain Noir had promised.

Felix pulled into the docking bay, and on the opposite end of the hangar, he saw stacks of crates and canisters waiting for pickup. He slowed the ships' thrust to one percent and activated the reverse thrusters on the front to slow the ship down, using a short burst so that he wouldn't go in reverse out of the hangar. With that done, he brought the ship up to where the boxes waited, the repulsion system keeping the ship afloat as he lowered the landing gear and slowly descended to the floor, expertly landing as close to the boxes as possible, in close proximity to the port-side of the ship where the cargo bay doors waited.

Once touched down, Gustav and Zack opened the bay doors, and helped the crewmen at the boxes begin loading them onto the Mara's Hope, while Felix left the cockpit and disembarked from the ship. He saw Captain Noir approaching, hands tucked neatly behind his back until he reached Felix, and the two shook hands. "Glad you made it, and with time to spare."

"I may be new, but I've always been punctual," returned Felix, turning to look at the cargo. "Is this all of it?"

"Yes," replied Noir. "Your objective is the Ares Colony on Ithica VII; they're a small outfit that harvests silicon used for advanced electronics. They got hit pretty badly when the planet was attacked, so they need these supplies as quickly as possible." He reached into his pocket and passed Felix a small holopad. "On here are the clearance codes, the first for your passage through the acceleration gates, and the second is the one you'll need to access the planet; keep your comm-system on open frequency when you approach, and make sure you give them those codes within sixty seconds or they will fire upon you. Don't lose it."

Felix irked his eyebrows. "You guys take your security very seriously," he stated, pocketing the pad in the inside pocket of his vest, which he zipped up, securing the pad inside.

"It's our job," returned Noir, smiling slightly. "Of course, they've often told me I'm *too* thorough."

"You and Amber would get along nicely," remarked Felix. "She thinks just like you do, and more than once she's been called 'over-prepared'."

"No such thing," returned Noir.

"Her exact words too."

Noir chuckled. "She ought to join the CEF; we're always looking for capable soldiers who can think ahead."

"Not trying to take my workers from me, are you Captain?" Felix asked sarcastically.

"Good help is hard to find these day," returned the wolf, and the two of them shared a laugh.

When Felix stopped laughing he turned to see the cargo again. "Alright, I better help them load up," he said.

"Good luck out there, Mr. Kaufmann," bade Noir. "As grateful as I am for you taking this job, I take no pleasure sending you into this danger."

Felix winked at the wolf. "Don't worry about us," he said. "Mara Colonists are survivors. Have to be on a world like ours; we'll be fine, and the Aresian colonists will get their supplies in time, that I promise."

Noir looked expectantly at Felix for a moment before he nodded to him, and with that, the wolf began to make his way out of the hangar, while Felix joined his crew and the workers in loading the cargo onto the Mara's Hope.

The process was long; there was a lot of cargo to load, and much of it had to be secured for warp space flight; the crates contained food and medicine, while the canisters held water – marked with blue tags, while ones marked with gray tags contained oxygen and other gases for putting people to sleep during surgical procedures. Gustav made certain the canisters were especially secured, using steel clamps to keep the pallets tight to the floor and high-tension straps to tie them tightly together until they could no longer be budged an inch, while Jessica retrieved a checklist from one of the workers, containing a list of all of the supplies and their quantities, which she gave to Gustav before she went to help Zack with some canisters.

In a couple of hours, the supplies were loaded, secured and ready for transport. The workers thanked the Hopes' crew for their help and bid them a safe journey. Gustav made one last check of all the items before he shut the cargo bay doors, and let Felix know they were ready for takeoff.

With Gustav's word, Felix started up the ship's engines; the repulsors raised it up from the floor, and he eased the ship out of the exit door directly ahead, turning the ship away from the space station ahead and steering away from the sub-stations until it was in the open. With that, he turned over to the navigational computer, and began to input the coordinates for Ithica VII; the computer automatically plotted the star-flight path, directing him to the appropriate acceleration gates that would take him to other star systems and eventually to Ithica VII itself.

During the automated process, however, Felix felt his eyelids beginning to close against his will; he shook his head and forced them back open, blinking away the sudden drowsiness. "Dammit," he cursed, rubbing his eyes.

He hadn't told his crew about it –and so far had been very good at hiding it, even while he was helping load the ship, but the dolphin had not been sleeping well over the last few days and nights. So far, a cup of coffee and a little exercise had allowed him to survive sleeping only a few hours each day. But it would seem the added days had finally caught up to him and were now leaving him drowsy and unable to focus. He knew the reason for his lack of sleep... but he didn't want to tell anyone about it.

Once the computer had finished plotting the course, he returned to the helm, and wheeled the ship about to face the proper direction before he used the intercom to warn the rest of the crew they were about to jump. As the ship accelerated to warp speed, the stars rushed past, and the ship was off faster than light.

Felix yawned widely and rubbed his eyes again. "I think I need more coffee," he muttered to himself. Reaching across the console he flicked the toggle-switch for the auto-pilot and stood up from his chair, walking off the bridge to head for the kitchen.

Crossing the hall, he passed Amber and Jessica, carrying towels and bottles of shampoo and body-wash under their arms before they headed into the hygiene room. Felix went on to the dining and lounge room, approaching the counter. He could hear Gustav in the kitchen, and when he sat down at the bar counter, the Orca stuck his head out, curious to see who had come into the hall.

"Oh, hey Felix," he said, happily. "What can I get for you?"

"Cup of coffee, strong," replied Felix. "Could use a boost."

Gustav eyed Felix with a considerate look, studying his face carefully. "Damn, son, you look like you haven't had a good sleep in a couple of days."

"I guess I'm fighting a bit of insomnia lately," lied the dolphin. "I've put the ship on auto pilot; once we go through the first accel gate to the Dory-II system, I'll dock us at the station so the ship can cool down for a few hours, and get some sleep then."

"It'll take us at least five hours to get to the accel gate and even with its boost we'll still be in warp drive another half-hour before we get to Dory-II; why not take a nap until then?" Gustav suggested.

"I can't; got to make sure the ship stays on course," replied Felix. In truth, he didn't want to go to sleep, no matter how much his body wanted him to, he had to fight it... it was too painful.

"Well, if you say so," replied Gustav, not entirely convinced; he may not have been a pilot, but he knew modern-day auto pilots were quite reliable, and the one installed in the Mara's Hope was brand new. He chose not to press the issue, respecting Felix's decision and ducking back into the kitchen to prepare the coffee.

The 'coffee' as it was called was a low-grade, non-perishable sludge in a tin packaging. It was meant to last voyages that could carry on for years at a time, and tasted terrible, but it gave the person who drank it –or ate it, some would say, since even when it was heated it still had the consistency of yogurt- the boost they needed, and the stuff was cheap and easy to get in bulk; perfect for a crew on a budget.

Assuming they could ingest the stuff without gagging.

After opening the package he squeezed the contents into the coffee pot, adding a tablespoon of water as the instructions said, and turned on the pot, letting it heat up. "So, Felix," he called out to the counter. "This planet we're heading to, Ithica VII; what's it like?"

"From what I've read, it's kind of like Trident IV; it's a mostly ocean planet," replied Felix. "Although unlike Trident, which is ninety percent ocean, Ithica is only seventy two percent; much more suitable for larger colonies and apparently has a lot of natural resources."

"Sounds like a good place," said Gustav, grabbing a mug from the cupboard for the coffee.

"Yeah; from what I read, the landmass on the planet consists of two large continents and thousands of tiny islands," Felix went on. "One of the continents consists mostly of mountains and supports hundreds of mining operations, while the other is much flatter and

used for mostly agriculture. Or at least, that's the plan for it; most of the colonies on that world are still fairly young, not even as old as the Mara Colony."

"Wow, so it's still a pretty fresh and untainted planet," said Gustav. "Suppose they have Gelks there too?"

"I hope not; one planet populated by those slimy bastards is enough," returned Felix. "Although it's pretty unlikely anyway; the Gelks barely have projectile weapons, so the chances of them populating a second planet are doubtful."

"Good," stated Gustav.

The stand for the coffee pot let out a beep; Gustav lifted the pot off of the element and poured its contents into the mug, thick, soupy and steaming hot. He dropped a sugar cube into the mug and stirred it until the cube dissolved into the sludgy coffee. With that, he picked up the mug again and carried it out to Felix.

"Coffee time, partner," he said.

After leaving the kitchen, Gustav found Felix sitting with his head down on the counter. He approached the dolphin quietly, leaning over to peer at his face. His eyes were closed, and he was snoring slightly. Gustav held back a chuckle; the dolphin had fallen asleep faster than anyone else Gustav had even met before. He set down the coffee mug a few inches from Felix and walked back into the kitchen to clean up.

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Jessica and Amber both stood contently in the hygiene pod as the water ran over their bodies, dampening the doe's fur to lay flat against her skin and freshly hydrating the shark-womans' own leathery flesh, giving it nice glossy appearance. Both of them sighed blissfully as their sore muscles were soothed and the steam of the hot water eased their tension. This was the first time either of them had tried out the showers aboard the Mara's Hope; so far, they were quite satisfied.

Jessica reached over to her bottle of shampoo, picking it off of the shelf and popping open the top, before she proceeded to pour some of it onto her head and around her collar. It gurgled before she could finish, though; she tried to squeeze more out of it, but all she got were a few more splotches. "Ah, damn," she whispered, before she looked over her shoulder towards Amber. "Hey, Amber, can I borrow some of your shampoo? Mine ran out."

"Hm?" The shark looked over, and then saw the empty bottle in Jessica's hands. "Oh, sure," she replied to the request before grabbing her own bottle of shampoo from the shelf and passing it over to Jessica. "You sure go through that stuff fast."

"I have fur; I need to use more of it," replied Jessica.

Amber cocked her head and shrugged slightly in acknowledgement. "Good point," she agreed. "So uh... how're your teachings going back at Mara?"

"Quite well," replied Jessica. "The doctor tells me I'm getting very good at the practical stuff; I have good, steady hands, and a keen eye for anatomy on all species."

Amber nodded. "That's good; I'm glad you're doing well."

Jessica's ears flicked suspiciously at that comment, and she looked over her shoulder at Amber again; it was the first time the shark had ever really sparked up a conversation with Jessica, and the doe found it somewhat surprising that she was choosing to do so while they were in the shower. But, she decided to play along with it. "How about you; had any luck fixing the turrets at the colony?"

"Managed to get one operational but it's only a matter of time before it breaks down again," replied Amber, sighing in exasperation. "I didn't want to bring it up with Felix because I know we need the credits for other, more important things but I need some components if those things are going to keep working. Unfortunately the parts we need aren't cheap."

"Those turrets chase off the Gelks at night and are our first line of defense against pirate attacks –assuming any were to happen," Jessica pointed out. "They're very important; you should mention it to him."

Amber silently admitted to herself that Jessica was right, and nodded. "Alright... I'll mention it if it comes up," she said. "But I overheard him talking to Captain Noir via comms on the bridge earlier; he was asking about a new communication tower for the colony. That's going to set us back a little." She suddenly chuckled and looked over at Jessica. "You surprise me a little bit, Jess; I never imagined I'd hear you saying we should keep weapons aimed at enemies."

"Just because I'm trying to become a career doctor doesn't mean I want patients on my table all the time," returned Jessica, giggling.

"Touché."

The two women finished washing themselves, and after a short rinse, they shut off the showers and grabbed their towels as the water drained out to be treated and stored back into the tank as clean, fresh water again. This process reduced the rate of which water was depleted aboard the ship; anything that couldn't be purified was kept in a separate tank, and drained out of the ship when next it came out of warp speed.

Grabbing a set of towels the two women proceeded to dry themselves off, removing any dripping water left on them. Jessica stood in front of the wall-mounted blow-drier to dry her fur, so as not to dampen her clothes when she put them back on. As they both got dressed, Jessica spoke again. "Hey Amber... have you noticed anything strange about Felix recently?"

"Besides the fact he's moving slower than usual?" Amber returned.

"So you did notice," replied Jessica.

"Yeah... he looks exhausted lately," said Amber. "I didn't want to bring it up with him since it was none of my business but I don't think he's sleeping too well."

"He's the ship's helmsman; you don't think his rest is any of our business when he might fall asleep at the console?" Jessica pointed out.

Amber froze at that question, casting a glance towards Jessica before going back to toweling her hair. "You have a point there."

"Yes, I do. And I think I better bring it up with him," stated Jessica "I can't imagine how he could be losing sleep, though; for five days, we weren't all that busy."

Amber pulled her shirt over her head, pushing through to the opening at slipping her arms through the sleeves. "I think I might," she said. "Remember when those gangsters attacked the ship?"

"Yes?"

"Felix had to shoot that big guy they called Slash," the shark-woman went on. "He did mention it was the first time he had to take another person's life; first-timers who aren't mentally prepared for such a thing, it often leaves some bad memories that follow them into their dreams."

"You think that could be the cause?" Jessica asked.

"It's a start, if nothing else," returned Amber as she pulled her pants on, buckling her belt. "If Felix is anything like me, the first and second kills will always be the hardest. He may need counselling for it."

"You had difficulty with it as well?"

Amber looked at Jessica sternly. "Having a conscience is what proves we're not evil," she stated. "If I had felt nothing when I first took a life, it would mean I'm no better than the scum I've fought. If Felix is feeling that way now, it's only because he's a person, and not a monster."

Jessica was taken aback by Amber's sudden change of attitude, but she acknowledged what the shark said with a nod, and finished getting dressed. With that, the two of them stepped out of the hygiene room, and were shocked to find Gustav outside, carrying someone in his arms; the low-hanging tail draped over the side of his arms immediately told them who it was.

"Felix?" Amber asked, looking at the unconscious form in Gustav's arms.

"What happened to him; is he okay?" Jessica asked, concerned.

"Poor guy came for a cup of coffee," explained Gustav. "Passed out before I even brought it to him; he's exhausted."

"C'mon, this way," said Amber, leading the other two up the corridor until they came to the last bedroom on the right before the bridge. She opened the door and stepped aside so Gustav could carry Felix into the room, and over the dolphin's bed, where he gently set him down on the covers. Jessica appeared a second later and draped a blanket over Felix before adjusting his pillow, making sure he was comfortable.

"How long has he been out?" Jessica asked.

"Wasn't really watching, but his coffee was cold by the time I went out to check if he had drank any of it or not –which he hadn't," replied Gustav. "Probably about three quarters of an hour."

"Let him sleep," said Amber. "I'll go keep an eye on the navigation until we get to the accel gate, then I'll wake him up."

"I'll go see if Zack needs a hand with anything in the meantime," said Gustav.

"I think I'll stay here a while," offered Jessica. "Felix has been losing sleep; I want to find out why, and see if maybe I can help him through it."

"We leave it in your hands, girl," said Gustav.

With no further reason to stay, the shark and orca left the room to get back to work. Amber headed to the bridge and sat down in the pilots' chair, peering at the navigational

computer to check the estimated time of arrival to the acceleration gate they were inbound too. The screen read the ETA to be three and a half hours; it would still be a while before they arrived.

"Plenty of time for Felix to catch up on sleep," she muttered, making herself comfortable in the chair and waiting.

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"Stay back!" Felix barked, his shotgun aimed directly at the large wolf advancing on him.

"Or what, you'll shoot me?" Slash taunted. "You think I can't see you trembling at the other end of that barrel? You don't have the guts to kill me."

"I did it once before; I can do it again!" Felix retorted.

"Can you? Did you?" Slash mocked him further. "If you killed me before, why am I standing right in front of you?"

"You're not real," returned Felix. "This is just a nightmare; it's not real!"

"Oh yeah? If I wasn't real..." Slash backhanded Felix's gun out of his hand, before grabbing him by the shoulders. "Could I do this?!" He asked before pulling Felix towards him, grabbing him by the neck and the belt and lifting him up over his head with incredible strength. He walked a few steps before he hurled Felix through the air, and the dolphin began to fall down a pit he hadn't noticed before, constantly falling, unable to stop and with no end in sight; suddenly he could no longer breathe, and was hearing his name being shouted from all around...

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"Felix!"

A sharp slap followed the sudden screaming of his voice, and the dolphin's eyes shot open; he realized he still couldn't breathe, and he couldn't see anything but darkness. Immediately he shot upright, twirling around with blinding speed and grabbed the arm of whoever had slapped him. The person froze, and as Felix's vision cleared, he saw Jessica's terrified face staring back at him.

"Jessica?" He asked, panting. Immediately he let go of her arm, taking in a deep breath and putting a hand over his eyes in shame. "My god, I'm sorry..."

"It's okay, Felix," returned Jessica, her soft hand resting on his shoulder. "You sounded like you were having quite a nightmare, and you almost smothered yourself in your pillow."

"Mom always said I rolled around in my sleep, especially when I was having a bad dream," remarked Felix.

"You ever tried sleeping without a pillow?" Jessica asked.

"I don't have nightmares often," returned Felix, "at least, not until recently."

Jessica put her hand under his chin to elevate his gaze so that his eyes met hers. "Why don't you try telling me about them?"

"I... I can't," he replied. "It's stupid, anyway."

"Felix, anything that is affecting your health is not stupid," Jessica said sternly. "You're the ship's pilot, and a natural-born businessman; you can't do jobs like that if you're losing sleep. Now drop the stubborn male thing and just talk to me." Her voice was stern and highly insistent, showing that she wouldn't give an inch until Felix spoke to her.

And Felix could do little more than cave to her; he let out a sigh of exasperation, before he turned over so he could sit properly, taking a few deep breathes to try and keep himself calm until he found the nerve to begin explaining why he was having such troubling dreams. All the while, Jessica watched him, waiting for him to finish preparing herself, and kept both ears trained on his voice as he began to speak.

"It's that guy I killed before... Slash," began Felix. "Ever since I shot him, I keep seeing him in my mind, especially whenever I look at the shotgun I used to do it. Every night, I dream about that day again; it's never the same scenario twice, either. There's a scenario where I shoot him once, but he's not dead, and I keep shooting him in the most painful, non-lethal areas again and again until he's finally dead and I can hear myself laughing about it.

"There's another where he's taken one of you hostage; I'm looking down the barrel with him using one of my friends as a shield and is backing up towards the airlock. If I fire, they both die, but if I don't he gets away, and the last is the one I just had; where I don't shoot him at all, and he kills me..." Felix rubbed his temples in frustration. "I just can't get it out of my head; it's driving me mad and I can't stop it."

Amber had been right, thought Jessica. Felix was suffering from post-traumatic stress from the action of taking another humanoid life; she had seen him kill Gelks before in self-defence, but never another person. It was perfectly normal, of course, but it was affecting his job and putting his health at risk. How she wished she could have spoken to the doctor back at the Mara Colony about issuing prescription medication to people; it was one of several fields she hadn't yet covered in medicine.

She let out a sigh. "Well, Felix, all I can tell you is that it's normal for you to feel this way," she began. "I can't say I know what you're going through but, if you ever need someone to talk to..." She smiled at him.

Felix smiled back at Jessica. "I know," he returned. "Thanks for looking out for me."

"Hey, it's my job," she said, rubbing his shoulder as she stood up. "And, my duty as your friend as well."

As she began to leave, Felix perked up and stared after her. "Hang on," he said. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"About four hours," replied Jessica. "Amber's been watching the navigation to monitor our progress; we're still a ways out from the acceleration gate."

Felix nodded. "Can you... do me a favour?"

"Sure; what is it?"

"Think you could ask Gustav to make me another cup of coffee?" He asked. "And don't worry; I'll stay awake for this one."

Jessica giggled at his remark, and nodded. "I'll even bring it to you."

Felix nodded back. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

With that, Jessica left the room, making a left out of the door and heading up the corridor. Felix stood up from his bed and stretched his muscles, doing a quick job in place to loosen himself up before he stepped out of the room, and made his way over to the bridge, where he found Amber sitting in the pilot's chair, although her hands were not near the controls or the console.

"Thanks for keeping an eye on things," Felix said, making Amber jump slightly as she didn't hear him coming.

The shark looked over her shoulder at him. "It's not very nice, sneaking up on someone like that," she stated.

"I wasn't exactly trying to be quiet," remarked Felix. "I guess you were a little focused on the window, hm?"

Amber chuckled. "I'm sure I'm not that predictable."

Felix returned the chuckle, and peered out the window. "The stars can be quite entrancing, can't they? Even rushing past them faster than the speed of light, seeing them this close is like a dream isn't it?"

Amber let out a sigh of defeat, and turned her gaze outside as well, admiring the view with him. "Yeah... all those nights as a child, I spent wishing I could soar among them, and now we are. Now I see why you wanted to be the helmsman; our bedrooms don't even have windows, let alone anything like this."

"Unfortunately, no; the Model 102's weren't designed with them," admitted Felix. "Up until the Model 114, there weren't any see-through materials designed that could withstand a laser blast, so for safety there was only the one window for the pilot."

"You're saying that this viewport couldn't take a laser hit?" Amber asked.

"Not a direct hit, no," replied Felix. "It's a small target so it's not a large concern, but if we ever go up against a pirate vessel, we should avoid going head-to-head with them. The same with the gunnery turret, but that one is triple-layered and angled, so it has excellent deflection; it'll take a few strikes, but it is also a small target, so there's a one in a thousand chance it would even be hit."

"Well that's somewhat reassuring," remarked Amber, sarcastically. With a brief shake of her head she stood up from the chair. "Well I'll let you have your seat back; I think I'll go check the turret."

Felix nodded. "Thanks for keeping an eye on things, Amber."

"You already said that."

"Well, I said it again."

"It bears repeating, eh?"

"If I were to sleep through our approach to the Acceleration gate, we could very well crash into it," remarked Felix, taking a seat in his chair. "Doesn't do anyone any favors."

"Good call," agreed Amber. "Alright then; see you later."

"Later."

Moments after Amber left, and while Felix was checking the navigation system once again for an ETA to the acceleration gate, he heard the familiar clicking and thumping of delicate, light-stepping hooved feet. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see Jessica

walking onto the bridge, a travel mug in her hands. She approached Felix and stood at the side of his seat, before passing him the mug tenderly.

"Thanks, Jess," he said.

"You're welcome," she returned. "So, how much longer?"

"We'll be hitting the acceleration gate in five minutes," replied Felix, tapping the nav-computer's screen. "Once we go through there, we'll be at Dory II; everything else should pretty much go as what our last job had planned."

Jessica nodded. "Sounds like it'll be smooth sailing then."

"That's what I'm hoping," returned Felix, nodding.

"Say uh... can I watch the ship when it comes out of warp and goes through the gate?" Jessica asked.

Felix looked up at her, and smiled. "Of course. But you better strap in; this ship doesn't have a very good diffuser system so it'll jerk rather suddenly when it slows down."

"What would happen if I were standing when it did?"

"You'd fly into the wall and possibly suffer serious injuries, including but not limited to a shattered skeleton."

Jessica blinked, and immediately sat down in the seat next to him. "Seriously?" She asked as she strapped herself in.

Felix chuckled. "No, not quite that bad," replied the dolphin. "It does have a diffuser; all ships do. It's just a small one, but enough to limit the transfer of force as the ship slows down. At worst you'd just fall over or stumble into the wall but not splatter."

He felt a sharp pain in the side of his face and the sound of skin meeting skin filled the room. "Ouch," he said, before looking at Jessica, quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Jerk," she scoffed, glaring at him.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist," he replied, laughing gently.

"Well next time, try to!"

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When the warp drive disengaged, the ship rapidly slowed down until the rushing stars and planets became clear and visible. Straight ahead of them was an unusual looking structure, free-floating in open space, angling off towards the neighboring system. All systems in the White Star Sector were near the gigantic sun, but each solar system had its own, smaller star providing warmth and energy to its worlds. As a result, from each planet, there would appear to be two suns, but each system only relied on one.

But the design of the acceleration gate was rather peculiar to Felix and Jessica, as they were seeing it for the first time. It closely resembled the ribcage of a person, with a long 'spine' stretching from one end to the other, and numerous pillars arcing inwards, nearly meeting at the centre of the building, their tips only inches apart. Along the length of the spine, a light pulsed, coursing from the base to the tip repeatedly to illuminate its massive size for approaching ships in the darkness of space.

"Is that the gate?" Jessica asked.

"That's it," replied Felix. "I admit, I didn't expect it to look like that either."

"Looks like something you'd find after digging up a grave."

"That's... a little cryptic."

"Sorry," returned Jessica. "So, how do we use that to go somewhere hundreds of light years away?"

"You see that pulsing green light?" Felix asked, pointing towards the spine of the gate. "Running there, along that spine-looking thing? That's called the rail. As we approach and transmit our clearance codes to the control tower..."

"What control tower?" Jessica asked, failing to see anything that resembled a tower on the structure.

"It's at the base, where we're heading," replied Felix. "Looks more like a nob on door than a real tower; see it?" He pointed to the 'tower', which was indicated by a circle of blinking red lights that made it visible to approaching ships, so that they didn't fly into it. "Anyway, once they receive our codes, the gates will start powering up. We proceed to the bottom of the rail where that pulsing light begins, and begin travelling along it, where we'll be encased in a warp bubble and projected at double regular warp speed to a second acceleration gate in the neighboring system."

"That's amazing," said Jessica. "Warp technology is like something out of fiction."

"Up until four hundred years ago it was only fiction," Felix pointed out. "But, someone made it a reality, and space travel has never been the same since."

"I seem to recall hearing that larger ships don't need to use these acceleration gates," Jessica remarked.

"That's true, yes; large-scale ships such as battlecruisers or heavy freighters have multiple warp engines that let them travel from system to system," explained Felix. "They..."

"*Attention, approaching vessel,*" a static-y voice spoke through the communication system. "*This is A. Gate XV control tower; Please identify yourself and transmit your clearance codes, over.*"

"Hold that thought," said Felix, turning to the comm-terminal next to him and tuned it to open-frequency. "This is Felix Kaufmann of the Mara's Hope; transmitting clearance codes now; confirm, over." He reached into the pocket of his vest and produced the pad given to him by Captain Noir, and activated it. Remembering the captain's instructions, he inserted the datapad into the terminal and selected the first code before he transmitted them to the tower.

"*Receiving codes,*" the control tower staff informed him. Seconds later, they spoke again. "*Codes received and verified. Proceed to the acceleration gate, and prepare for launch, over.*"

"Ten-Four control tower; thank you."

"*Safe travels, Captain Kaufmann, over and out.*"

"Roger." And with that, he returned to the control module, and chuckled lightly at the idea of being called 'Captain' before he turned his attention back to the control panel, his following words directed at Jessica. "Now, what was I saying?"

"You were mentioning the warp engines of larger ships?"

“Ah right,” began Felix. “Now, bigger ships have multiple engines that let them travel across entire systems without fear of overheating. They require a lot more maintenance than a ship our size and are too big to use the acceleration gates, but they can get to places ours can’t in a shorter time.”

“But a ship like ours couldn’t?”

“Warp engine would melt interall three-quarters of the way if we tried to jump to the next system ourselves,” replied Felix. “This little ship can’t make jumps like that, and then we’d be left adrift in space without engines.”

“That’s... a scary thought.”

“Very,” replied Felix.

Throughout the course of their conversation, Felix piloted the Mara’s Hope to the base of the warp gate, angling it to alignment with the rail. Red lights shone from the pillars, and he cut the engines, waiting for the prompt. He tapped the intercom, warning the rest of the crew to prepare for another warp jump, before turning his gaze back to the rail ahead. The lights began to flash green, and so he eased the throttle forward, slowly bringing the ship up to maximum speed, following the rail as accurately as possible, holding the ship steady while keeping his eyes forward.

Bolts of electricity began to surge all along the curving towers; Jessica jumped as the first one flashed across them, and looked around with mild fear in her eyes. “F-Felix, what’s... what’s happening? Is the warp not working?”

“It’s generating the warp bubble,” replied Felix. “That’s what’ll carry us into the next system. Don’t worry, everything’s working fine; just make sure your belt is tight and hold on; this could get a little fierce.”

“Okay,” she said. “Oh god, I feel like I’m going to have a heart attack. Steady breaths, Jessica, steady breaths. Relax.”

“We’re going to be okay, alright?” Felix assured her as he continued to pilot the ship along the rail. “Thousands of ships go through these gates every week and they come out just fine. We’re going to be okay.”

“Alright... I’ll hold you to that.”

“Here goes,” said Felix.

“Have you actually done this before?”

“Only in a simulator.”

“Oh, swell.”

The surges of electricity outside began to intensify, and as the ship glided along the rail, a gossamer shape began to form around it, creating what appeared to be a protective shield around the hull, thickening until it appeared to be almost completely solid, taking on the colour of a peach and crackling with white lightning from front to rear.

The ship reached the end of the rail, and with a final flash of white, it raced off into the darkness of space and was gone from sight in a flash instant.

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Captain Maxwell stood at the centre of the room, addressing the four fleet lieutenants standing before him, each one –himself included- representing the fleet and its five divisions that were currently flying high orbit above Ithica-VII, safeguarding the planet from possible invasion by the Grunikan Empire. The lieutenants stood at attention, three males, one female; the three males consisted of a caucasian human, a gold-furred leopard, and a gray reptilian, while the female was an avian; a crow-morph with jet black feathers. They all wore the red colors of the confederacy, with the number '4' emblazoned on the upper arms of their uniforms, marking them as the Confederate Fourth Fleet, and for the lieutenants, there was a second number alongside the first, marking which division of the fleet they were part of, which echoed in their ranks as well.

"First Lieutenant Kelvin," Maxwell said to the leopard, "your Division is on defense of the Icarus-III station; your ships maintain minimum covering distance from the station. Second Lieutenant Callahan," he glanced at the Avian, "you're to maintain orbit over the Eastern Hemisphere of the planet. Third Lieutenant Edison and Fourth Lieutenant Van Barron, South and Northern hemispheres," he addressed the human and reptilian respectively. "I will maintain a constant orbit around the planet in the Centurion; if any of you need any assistance, inform me immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain Maxwell!" The four lieutenants returned to the black-feathered avian with red-tipped tail feathers and wings.

"Excellent; man your posts!" He barked, and at his leave, the four lieutenants marched out of the bridge and returned to their own ships.

Turning his attention back to the ship's technical crew operating the various terminals below, the Captain gave his next order. "After the lieutenants disembark, begin consistent orbit around the planet; order the Frigates and the Cruisers to maintain standard formation around the Centurion."

"Yes, captain," they returned.

A few minutes later, the ship was in motion. The Centurion, a Titan-class Battleship of the Confederate fleet, began its orbit around the oceanic planet of Ithica-VII, accompanied by twelve Gladius-class Cruisers, and twenty Pilum-class Frigates, and four Aphrodite-class carriers, which were loaded with Xiphos space fighters and Hoplon bombers; counting all the fighters, the Division had almost eighty-two ships total, and each division had the same number of vessels, totalling more than four-hundred vessels in one fleet.

"Any news from Outpost Twenty-Nine X?" He called down to the communications officer, seated off to his right.

"None sir; previous report came in approximately one hour ago, and they reported all clear," the officer replied.

"Excellent," returned Maxwell. "If we know the Grunikans are coming, we may be able to chase them off with fewer casualties this time; most of Sixth Fleet sustained heavy losses. We must not let that happen to anymore fleets, and we must especially ensure neither the Icarus-III station or the Ithica-VII surface suffer any more damage either. Send out an inquiry to the outpost; confirm that the report is still accurate."

"Aye-aye, captain," returned the young officer, before he began to carry out Maxwell's instructions, tuning the long-range communications relay to contact the aforementioned outpost. "Fourth Fleet Prime command ship, Centurion, contacting Outpost Twenty-Nine X, performing check-call; please respond, Outpost Twenty-Nine X." There was a long moment of silence and no response from the other end of the transmission. "Outpost Twenty-Nine X, this is Fourth Fleet Prime command ship, Centurion checking in. Please respond immediately."

There was still no answer.

Captain Maxwell glanced over. "Are they not responding?" He asked.

"Seems not, sir," he replied. "There's no comm-traffic of any kind to cause interference in the transmission; they should be receiving, but they're not responding."

Maxwell put a hand to his chin and stroked the underside of his beak for a moment as he considered the options. "You're certain it isn't interference?"

"Positive, sir."

"Then we must assume a threat; order all ships to Alert-level Two, weapons armed," he commanded. "If the Grunikans have attacked the Outpost, heading from there it'll take ninety minutes for them to arrive; they could already be on their way. Send the flight crews to their fighters; order them on standby. We must expect the worst until we know otherwise. Send one of the Pugio scout-fighters out to the outpost to confirm its status."

"Sending the orders now, Captain."

For the next several moments, activity went as normal; the comm-officer sent out Maxwell's orders as requested. Down below, the gunnery crew activated the laser weapons and loaded the missile tubes, while the electrical technicians checked the shield generators to ensure they were fully charged and operating at maximum capacity. Back on the Bridge, Maxwell received confirmations from all hands that the ship was fit for battle; the Centurion was not about to be caught a sitting duck.

"Sir!" Someone barked from down below, catching Maxwell's attention immediately. "Multiple warp signatures detected, heading 2-7-1 off port!"

"Friendlies?" The Captain asked.

"Nothing scheduled sir; none of the fleets are supposed to be within fifty billion AU from here."

"Assume hostile," commanded Maxwell. "Angle all weapons towards the signatures; cancel the scout dispatch, advise all ships to Alert-Level Three."

"Yes, captain."

"Helmsman!" Maxwell called. "Bring us around to face those approaching signatures at once; I'm not getting blind-sided by those bat-winged bastards."

"Aye-aye, captain!"

"Ships emerging; visual contact in three... two... one!"

And out of the darkness of space, numerous, massive forms appeared. Hundreds of smaller ships, shaped similarly to flat eggs bearing wings and the gun emplacements consistent with space fighters, soaring in between massive ships bearing the shape of horned reptiles, wings extending from their backs and 'legs' curled up against their underbellies, closely resembling the dragons of ancient myth. The two-legged dragons, the mid-size of the

fleet, flew at the lead, wing-tipped omni-directional guns angling to face the Confederate fleet, while body-mounted plasma weapon charged visibly with blue light preparing to fire, while the larger vessels –battleships and command vessels, resembled a four-legged dragon, formed the bulk of the primary fleet, each one boasting countless large turrets and very likely hundreds of missile launchers to wage war.

But the worst of all appeared last, bringing up the rear of the Grunikan fleet.

The appearance of the large vessel was terrifying; like the other capital ships it resembled a four-legged dragon, the ‘head’ of the dragonic vessel bore two eyes that glowed brightly, and anyone who stared out at the ship felt as if the eyes were staring back, despite being completely inorganic and not born by a living creature. The black metal of the hull made it very difficult to see in the inky black of space, adding to the fear factor of the eyes by making it appear as if a great leviathan were emerging from the void. Even Maxwell himself, despite having seen such a vessel before, felt an uncomfortable chill creeping up his back...

“Sir... they have a Dreadnought,” one of the crewmen, in his nervousness, shakily stated the obvious.

Grunikan dreadnoughts... the most feared vessels in the known galaxy. Virtually immune to regular weaponry, and boasting firepower no other spacefaring warship did; mounted into the ‘head’ of the dreadnought was a highly destructive superlaser weapon capable of taking chunks off of planets or splitting small moons in half. The Confederacy had long coveted to learn the secret of the dreadnoughts and their onboard superweapons, but they had never successfully uncovered the secret; the Grunikans protected the designs of their weapons technology like a mother would protect her children from anything that might do them harm.

“Men...” began Maxwell. “Prepare for battle. Send word to the other fleets; we’re going to need assistance if we’re going to win here,” despite his even tone, his own fear emerged through his words; many of the crew knew Maxwell was a competent and tenacious commander, only ever requesting aid if he already knew it was hopeless. “Contact the other four divisions, get them over here immediately. We’re going to need every ship.”

The great battle for Ithica-VII was about to begin...

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The ride through the acceleration bubble was surprisingly short. The Mara’s Hope emerged from warp space and into the vicinity of the Dory-II Space Station, a medium-sized space station, half the size of Denver XII, designed by Cetacean-dominated citizens, giving it the appearance of a large, upward-facing whale without a tail, with four gravitational arms extending in a four-compass-point direction, and a powerful retro-thruster on the bottom, meant to help it evade incoming asteroids.

They docked the ship with the station for the day, letting the engines cool, replenishing its water supply, and letting the maintenance crews examine the ship. Felix even splurged some extra money so that the group could sleep in the station motel, where they could enjoy some comfortable beds instead of the worn-out bunks aboard the Mara’s Hope. The motel

came with everything they could ask for; Felix spent most of the night in the swimming pool, enjoying the cool swim in the water.

Despite the pool barely being a raindrop by comparison, he could not help but imagine himself back home at Trident VI, swimming in the ocean on a hot day. More than one he ended up fleeing from Gelks that spotted him, but despite being amphibious, not even they could outswim him in the water. After all, his species was just aquatic as they were, and bred to be fast.

Breaststroke, sidestroke and backstroke from one end to another, he blissfully swam the night away, stopping only to catch his breath once or twice before he began again. Best of all, since it wasn't the vacation season for any world, he had the pool to himself for most of the evening, aside from the occasional one or two that came in, including Amber and Gustav for a couple of hours, but they came just to enjoy the hot tub before heading back to their rooms, while Felix remained. For the most part he ignored the rest, enjoying the time to himself.

Then, when he stopped to rest once more, he heard a voice outside, and glanced over curiously as the door opened, and he saw a figure step through. It took him only a second to recognize a female porpoise stepping into the pool area, clad only in a cover-up that concealed the swimsuit she wore underneath, but left her sleek legs completely visible; normally Felix wasn't the type to stare at women, as he was raised to be polite, but for a moment he lost his composure and watched her, until he heard her speaking.

She sounded upset; was she yelling at him? No; she wasn't looking in his direction. She had an arm bent back, leading up to one ear, and when she turned he noticed she was holding a satellite phone in her hand.

"My family is still there, Dan; you have to tell them to let me come back!" She barked into the phone. "I don't care what the military says; I have to get back to Ithica VII and get them off-world before the Grunikans attack again... what?! Dammit, Dan, there has to be something you can do!" The porpoise woman pulled the phone away from her ear as the person on the other line yelled something at her loud enough Felix could almost make out what they said.

After it quieted down, she pulled the phone back to her ear. "No, no, please... I'm sorry... I'm just scared for my parents and my brother, okay...? I understand... Let me know if you hear anything... bye..." She hung up the phone, and walked half-heartedly over to one of the poolside lounge chairs, which she dropped into, placing the phone roughly onto the side table and putting a hand over her eyes, sniffing somewhat.

Felix felt a pang of sadness for the woman, watching her as she fought hard not to cry. Even though he hadn't heard the whole conversation he could tell something was happening out at Ithica VII at that very moment, and this woman seemed to be someone from there, unable to head back because of the military quarantine.

Feeling like he should help her, somehow, he swam over to the pools' edge closest to her, and cleared his throat to get her attention. The porpoise removed her hand from her eyes and looked at him, and suddenly flushed with embarrassment as she realized there was someone else in the swimming area with her.

"Uh..." she began. "How... how long have you been here?"

"Since before you walked in," he returned, honestly.

"Oh shit..." she put both hands over her face this time. "I'm sorry you had to listen to all of that... however much you heard."

"I heard enough to figure out some things," said Felix. "You're from Ithica VII, right?"

She pulled her hands away from her face and looked towards him again, nodding to the male dolphin. "Yes... I am, from the Ajax Colony."

"How did you end up out here?" Felix asked.

"Business," replied the girl, not wanting to disclose more than that with a stranger. "I was out here for work, but found out only a few days after I left the planet was under attack by the Grunikan Empire. My family is still there; my parents and my little brother."

"Was the colony hit in the attack?" Felix asked.

The girl shook her head. "No, they were just outside of the bombardment radius," she replied. "Some debris fell on them, but they were safe... until now."

"What's happening?"

"The Grunikan fleet is back," she replied. "They're already attacking again, and this time my family might not be so fortunate."

Felix frowned, giving her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry to hear that... I hope they'll be safe."

"They would be if I could go back," returned the woman. "I could just jump back in my ship, fly back, slip past the fleet, land at Atlanta and fly away with them. It'd be just as simple as that."

"And you know that for certain?" Felix asked.

She leered at him. "Well of course I do; why wouldn't it be?" She demanded.

"Well, think of it this way; if the Grunikan fleet is there, chances are the Confederate fleet sent to defend the planet is fighting them above the atmosphere, correct?" She nodded. "Well to get to the planet's surface, you'd have to through them first, and doing so could result in fighters chasing you or getting caught in crossfire, right? You wouldn't really be helping anyone planet side if you were shot down, and if the Confederate military had to fear hitting one of their own, then the Grunikans would turn that hesitation against them."

The woman froze at that, and rubbed the back of her head in embarrassment, ruffling her short, silvery hair. "I... guess I didn't think of that."

Felix nodded. "The fleet quarantines the system for a reason; if they had to worry about civilians vessels coming in to try and rescue friends or family, civilian casualties could increase even further."

She nodded in understanding. "Still... if I could just get over there and know they're alright, I'd feel better."

"Believe me, I can understand that," said Felix.

She looked at Felix, tilting her head curiously. "Are you from Ithica as well?"

Felix shook his head. "No; I'm from Trident VI; a planet similar to Ithica VII but, less landmass, and in much more central space than Ithica. However, it's not exactly a friendly planet; the native, dominant species there, called Gelks, tend to not like trespassers. Always, my home is threatened by them, so I worry about my mother who lives there."

"Something we have in common then," she said.

"Seems we do. My name's Felix, by the way; Felix Kaufmann," he listed himself out of the water and sat on the edge of the pool.

"My name's Jody," returned the porpoise. "Jody Ford."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Ford," returned Felix politely.

"You as well. But please, you can call me Jody."

Felix nodded. "Noted."

"Felix... I kind of like that name," remarked Jody. "Anyway... so if you're from Trident VI, what're you out here for?"

"Same as you, basically; business," replied Felix. "Incidentally, I'm heading for Ithica VII."

"I suppose you got held up here because of the quarantine?"

Felix chuckled. "Funny you should ask, actually," he returned. "No, I'm merely letting my ship cool down. I have clearance past the quarantine, you see; I'm a freighter pilot, and I'm working for the Confederate Fleets, delivering relief supplies to the planet."

Jody's eyes shot wide open. "You mean... you can get past the quarantine?!" She demanded.

"Yes I can, but..."

Immediately, Jody was out of her chair and launched herself at Felix, grabbing him by the shoulders and nearly pushing them both into the water. "You have to take me, please!" She barked.

"Wait, what?" Felix returned, blushing somewhat.

Jody quickly caught onto what she had just said and shook her head abruptly. "No, I mean, you have to take me with you to Ithica! Please; I have to see my family!"

"Now hold on, Jody; just slow down a minute," Felix returned. "I know you want to help your family but you'll be no safer from the Grunikans even with me. Plus, I'm not heading for the Atlanta Colony; I've been assigned to the Ares Colony."

"I don't care; I can get transport from Ares to Atlanta!" She urged. "For the love of the stars, Felix, you have to let me come with you! If I don't go to my family and make sure they're safe, I'm going to lose my mind!" She shook him by the shoulders. "Don't you see; I *have* to go with you!"

Felix's head was tossed about as Jody roughly shook him, making him dizzy, and suddenly he lost his balance and began falling back, waving his arms as he tried to regain his balance. Jody failed to let go in time before she was pulled with him, and the two both went into the pool with a splash, almost gulping the chlorine water as they fell in. Promptly correcting themselves, they turned to an upright position and planted their feet on the floor of the pool, standing up to stick their heads above the water.

Felix glanced at Jody with a look of disbelief. "Cooled off yet?" He asked.

"The water helped," she returned, and looked down at her cover-up, groaning at how it had gotten drenched. "Dammit... I may as well have not even brought this with me."

Felix chuckled. "Well, anyway... I was going to say, I *could* take you with me," he began. "But, it's not a decision I'll decide on my own; I have a crew, and even though I'm the captain I don't do anything without making sure they're comfortable with it as well, alright? I'll speak

with them, see what they say. If they're alright with it, maybe I can arrange to take you with us to Ithica."

Jody let out a sigh. "I'm... sorry for making this so awkward for you," she said, guiltily.

"Let's... just not speak of it again."

"Right; never happened."

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"You're crazy," stated Amber.

Felix had called a meeting in his room with the crew of the Mara's Hope, and told them about Jody and her request, telling them that she wanted a lift to Ithica VII. But their reactions had not been as forthcoming as he expected, least of all Ambers'... Now, still in his own swimsuit, seated on a chair in his motel room while Zack and Jessica sat on his bed and Gustav stood leaning against the wall by the door, with Amber just in front of him, their meeting carried on.

"You haven't even met her yet," returned Felix.

"You just met her ten minutes ago," Jessica pointed out.

Felix sighed "Look, I know it seems like a bad idea, but..."

"It *is* a very bad idea!" Amber interjected. "Bringing a civilian with us when we're heading right into a warzone?"

"Technically, Amber, all five of us are civilians as well," Gustav pointed out.

"That's not the point!" She exploded. "We can't be held responsible for some complete strangers' safety!"

"Hey she just wants a lift," said Zack. "And it's not like we don't have room on the ship."

Amber glared at Zack, who immediately hid behind a pillow, hiding his face from her sight, before she turned back to Felix again. "Tell her to wait," she returned. "Wait until the quarantine is lifted and wait until the danger's passed, but we *can't* take her with us; we're not going on some joyride or making some every day delivery."

Felix looked Amber straight in the eye. "Her family is on Ithica," he stated. "If the Grunikans were attacking Trident, wouldn't you be trying to find a way to go back to check on your folks?"

Amber visibly hesitated with that question, but eventually managed to force out an answer. "No, I'd let the military do their job."

"Bullshit," Felix returned, sharply.

The sharks' eyes flared. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," he replied. "I know you, Amber; you joined the militia originally because you wanted to protect the colony and your family, not just because it was the family business; if Trident VI were under attack, you'd be trying to go back, and don't dare tell me otherwise."

"You don't know me *that* well, Felix," she returned. "I'm a soldier at heart and I follow protocol; if Trident were under attack, I'd let the military handle it. It's all we can do in that situation."

"Well right now, we have the opportunity to help someone," said Felix. "Look, she isn't asking us to help her evacuate her whole colony and she hasn't said anything about not trusting the military, she just wants to be there with her family."

"You sure you don't just want to help her because she was a cute girl in a bathing suit?" Jessica added.

Felix rolled his eyes. "She was wearing a cover up," he pointed out. "I never even saw her bathing suit."

"Must've had some mean legs on her," Zack chimed in.

Felix slapped his forehead with his hand in frustration. "Guys, it's not like that; for crying out loud, it's not like we're going to bring a whole fiesta of people with us; it's just one guest seeking passage, and she's promised to pay as well to make it worth our while, or if she can't, then she can contribute to earn her keep."

"Doing what, exactly?" Amber asked.

"She mentioned she has her own ship; I'm guessing she's a pilot," returned Felix. "Or at the very least, a navigator; I didn't pry, since I didn't make any promises about bringing her. As always, I wanted to clear it up with you guys first, but instead of giving a yes, no or a maybe an answer," he looked at Amber, "you call me crazy," then to Jessica and Zack, "or accuse me of only doing this because she's a nice-looking woman."

"So you admit it then; she's cute?" Zack asked, grinning smugly.

"Zack... I am going to kill you," growled Felix through grit teeth.

"Come on; I'm too loveable to die!"

"*He* says," grumbled Amber.

"I heard that!"

Gustav looked at Felix. "So you just want to help her out of the goodness of your heart, or to make an extra buck?"

"Come on, not you too!" Felix shot back at the orca. "It's the former, okay? Nobody should have to be terrified for their family and not be able to be there for them. We can give her that chance; it's not like it's out of our way, since we're already heading there. We drop her off when we get to Ares and she seeks passage to Atlanta from there; contract terminated, and that'll be the end of it. Probably never see her again after that."

Amber put both hands on her hips and shook her head, huffing with annoyance before she looked at Felix again. "Just a drop-off; that's all?"

"That's all," replied Felix. "She didn't ask for evac, for supplies or anything; just a ride to Ithica so she can rejoin her family."

The four crewmates exchanged glances; Amber still looked the most reluctant of them, while Zack and Jessica seemed fine, and Gustav bore a neutral expression. A silent meeting of eyes later, they turned back to Felix. "Okay," said Amber. "I'm okay with it."

"Same," agreed Zack. "Especially since she's paying."

"And I can't really deny someone a chance to find their family," added Jessica.

"Ditto," chimed Gustav. "Besides, I'm altruistic; refusing to help her simply because I don't want responsibility for her would be selfish. That's just not in my vocabulary."

Felix nodded. "So... you're all okay with it then?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'd have all agreed to it," said Zack. "But poking fun at you was just much more hilarious."

"Speak for yourself," said Amber. "I still think it's a bad idea."

"Why are you so against helping others?" Jessica asked.

"I'm not. But our own colony and its concerns should come first," replied Amber. "We can't go crusading across the galaxy righting every wrong that falls on innocent people; I'm only agreeing to this now because it's not out of our way to drop her off, but if she gets hurt or lost, everybody on that planet will blame us for it."

"Don't you think you're going a little far with that?" Felix asked. "I hardly think a whole planet would blame us."

"People always look for scapegoats when something goes wrong," stated Amber. "None of us want to be that, trust me."

With that, Amber left the room and returned to her own motel room, leaving Felix and the others standing wordlessly in his room for several moments, unsure of what to say about Amber's statement. As always though, Zack didn't let the silence linger for very long, and tried to rouse the conversation again.

"One long, awkward silence later," he said. "Anybody else notice how Amber seems to have mixed opinions about everything?"

"I'd have to agree," said Gustav.

"True, but she's pretty experienced," said Jessica. "She may not be the most cheerful woman but she's definitely the most cautious of us, and she knows more about the guns we have than anyone."

"What's to know? You pick it up, flick off the safety and you shoot," said Zack.

"*That* kind of naiveté is why the militia are trained to use them and not just handed them," Jessica returned, giving Zack a scornful look.

"Amber's a valuable member of this team, just like all of us are," said Felix. "No one else here can operate the gun turret or are trained in the use of firearms, plus she's calm under pressure, just like Jessica, and efficient at what she does, just like Zack. We should be glad to have her."

Gustav shrugged. "I guess so... just wish she had a more positive outlook; every time she opens her razor-toothed mouth, she seems intent on dragging down our moods, and she's so... *sensitive* sometimes."

"Sensitive how?" Felix asked.

"We do anything she doesn't want to and she acts like it's a crime," explained Gustav. "Zack and I poke fun at her, she takes it like an insult. I wanted us to do safe, steady jobs, she wanted us to be bounty hunters, claiming we'd also be doing some good for others while putting our lives at risk, yet the moment we're offering a young lady a lift home, she's against it even though it's a good deed; she just can't seem to be satisfied."

"Well, she does have a point about one thing," admitted Jessica. "It's dangerous where we're going."

“Space travel is always dangerous, Jess,” returned Gustav. “Into a battle zone or into a meteor shower; it’s not all cushions and caviar.” He shook his head. “Great, now I’m in a bad mood; I’m usually the optimistic one...well, aside from Zack.”

“Just because it’s dangerous doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have a little fun with it too,” added Zack. “Yet at the concept of ‘fun’, Amber just scoffs and complains.”

“Let’s all just relax and quit ganging up on one of our own behind her back,” Felix interjected sternly. “We’re going to be helping out a lot of people in need, not just Jody, but also a whole colony at Ithica VII; let’s stay focused on our job, and make sure we do it right.”

The three nodded to him, and the meeting ended. Felix left to go find Jody to tell them of his team’s decision. She’d agreed to wait for him at the swimming pool, which he’d planned to return to after the meeting anyway. Travelling downstairs to the ground floor he walked a short distance before arriving at the swimming pool area, pushing open the door and stepping inside. There, he glanced around, and spotted a familiar figure swimming in the pool, which he promptly recognized, was Jody.

She saw him soon after and swam over to him, placing her hands on the pool’s edge and lifting herself out enough that she could clearly see and hear him. “Welcome back,” she said in greeting. “So uh... what’d your team say?”

“Some of them were reluctant, but they’ve agreed,” replied Felix. “I will have to charge you for passage, but besides that, we’ll take you back to Ithica VII so you can find your family.”

Jody nodded. “How much?”

“I looked up standard rate on my way to see them; we’ll just go with that,” replied Felix.

“I can do that,” agreed Jody. She smiled happily at Felix. “Thank you for this, Felix,” she said, hope in her eyes and voice. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Felix smiled back. “You’re welcome, Jody,” he said. “Anyway, we’ll be setting out in about ten hours. Just meet me at my room in the morning and I’ll show you where the ship is.”

“Which room are you in?”

“Second floor, room seven,” replied the dolphin.

“Got it.”

With that, Felix turned his attention back out to the pool. “Well, I think I’ll go a couple more laps before I go to bed for tonight. You don’t mind, do you?”

“It’s a public pool for guests; I don’t have any right to tell you that you can’t come in,” returned Jody, laughing lightly as she dropped back into the pool, doing a backstroke through the cool, refreshing water.

“I suppose not,” returned Felix, taking off his shirt and tossing it aside before diving into the water, hands first, and plunging below the surface with a surprisingly light splash.

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The following morning –at least as far as could be told in space- the crew of the Mara’s Hope were packing their belongings and getting ready to leave. Amber stepped out of her room first out of the five, and saw a younger woman standing outside of Felix’s room across

the hall from her own. Suspecting this was Jody, she approached the female cetacean, who looked up as she heard Amber's footsteps.

"Um... hello," said the woman.

"Hello," returned Amber. "Are you Jody Ford?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am."

"I'm Amber Giles, the gunner for the Mara's Hope," she replied.

"Oh, nice to meet you," returned Jody, offering a hand.

Amber didn't shake hands with her though. "Let's make one thing clear, Ms. Ford," she began. "I think bringing you along is a bad idea to begin with; we're simply taking you there and dropping you off, but don't think Felix's generosity means we'll help you evacuate your whole colony or anything. Far as I'm concerned, you're baggage, so don't get in our way."

Jody, taken aback by Ambers' manner, stepped away from the shark nervously. "But... but I..."

"But nothing," interjected Amber. "I know you're worried for your family, but next time, leave it to the military. We're freighter pilots, not..."

Felix's door suddenly flew open; the dolphin didn't even have his shirt on yet before he stuck his head out and glared at Amber, immediately silencing the shark. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Making sure she understands our position," returned Amber. "That we..."

"That we make *all* decisions as a team!" Felix interrupted. "And that we don't try to intimidate people who we're trying to help, right?" He pointed down the hall. "Get down to the ship and get your equipment ready; you and I will be having a discussion about this later."

Amber glared at Felix and Jody briefly before she turned and stormed back up the hall, hoisting her bag up to rest more comfortably at her side. Once she was gone, Felix immediately turned to Jody, an apologetic look on his face. "I'm so sorry about her," he said. "Amber's... dutiful but... honestly I don't know why she's so opposed to use helping you. I promise, though, she's not usually so bad."

Jody grimaced. "I hope not... I realize I'm being a little imposing, but... to be so hostile about it?"

"She's a very by-the-book woman; she used to be in our planetary militia," replied Felix. "Never likes to do anything that's not considered 'protocol', although we haven't really established any such system on our ship. She hates doing anything that isn't a benefit to our colony, even if it's just a simple good deed or side job. I'll talk to her, and see if I can get her to calm down."

Jody nodded. "Okay... I'll try not to get in the way at all while I'm on the ship."

"Nonsense; you're a guest, not baggage," assured Felix. "Let me finish getting dressed and I'll take you down to the ship, okay?"

"Okay."

With that, Felix shut his door, promptly getting a shirt, his favorite vest, and a pair of boots on before he finished packing his bag and hoisted it over his shoulder, doing one last check to make sure he had everything before he marched out of the room, and led Jody up the hall. Along the way they met Gustav and Jessica who were on their way down to the ship as

well, but when Felix was about to knock on the door to Zack's room, Gustav put up a hand to stop him.

"No need; he already headed down to the ship an hour ago," said the Orca.

"Already?" Felix asked. "Zack's usually the last one to get out of bed."

"He's barely sat still since we learned we were heading to a planet we'd never been to," said Jessica. "Which... honestly is all planets except our home, but yeah; he's excited."

"Must be if he's not still out cold," remarked Felix. "Let's drop off our keycards then and get to the ship."

On the way down to the front desk, Jessica turned to Jody. "Hi; you must be Jody," she said, greeting the porpoise warmly. "I'm Jessica; ship medic. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," returned Jody, warming up to Jessica fairly quickly, once she realized the doe was much nicer than Amber.

"And I'm Gustav; ship's cook, custodian and manager of inventory."

"The cook *and* the custodian?" Jody asked the orca. "You mean the guy who makes the food is also the one who scrubs the toilets?"

"I always wear fresh clean gloves and wash my hands; never forget," promised Gustav.

"He does," assured Felix and Jessica.

Jody shrugged. "Well, if you all say so," she said, and cleared her throat. "So... what about the other crew; how many of you are there?"

"Just the five of us," replied Felix. "Myself, Zack, Amber, Gustav and Jessica."

"Just five of you?" Jody asked, surprised. "And you run a freighter?"

"We're just starting out," explained Felix. "Only got our ship in the air about a week ago, but I think we're off to a good start. Already have a business contract back on Denver XII, and of course the one we're doing now that brought us here to Dory II, and on our way to Ithica."

"I see," said Jody.

"What about you?" Jessica asked. "What brought you out here?"

"I'm a shuttle pilot," replied Jody. "I fly people from one place to another for a living; I was bringing a load of people here to Dory II just before the Grunikan fleet launched their first attack, before the quarantine. Once that came down, I wasn't able to fly back without clearance, which, as a civilian pilot, I can't get." She looked at the three. "Unless of course I were hired by the military."

"Yeah, I'd say we lucked out with that one," admitted Gustav.

"I was lucky to meet you guys," she returned. "If I hadn't, I'd still be stuck here worrying myself to death as I waited for the quarantine to be lifted."

"Well, we're glad we can help," said Jessica.

Jody scowled. "One among you doesn't seem to be," she replied.

Jessica tilted her head curiously. "Who?"

Gustav glanced over. "I take it you met Amber?"

Jody nodded. "Yes, I did."

"Sorry about her," said Jessica. "She's used to doing thing her own way, and she used to be in the militia and was a very by-the-book type of person. Not to mention, she was a lieutenant, so she was pretty much the one in charge, with only one person ranking over her."

"I see," said Jody. "I hope I don't rouse her too much by coming along... I know what I'm doing is kind of imposing... oh, who am I kidding? I practically begged Felix to let me come along; I'm a mooch, plain and simple."

"Maybe, but we're still willing to help you out," returned Gustav. "Not for free, but if we can do something right by someone else it suits me fine."

Jody smiled at Gustav. "I appreciate that," she said. "Even if you are still billing me."

"We're good folk, but we're still business folk," said Gustav. His words brought a laugh out of everyone in the group as they reached the main lobby, checking out of their rooms and departing the motel, ready to continue their voyage...

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"All available power to weapons!" Lieutenant Van Barron commanded. "Do not let them through!"

The Fifth Division flagship of the, the Phalanx, focused all of its firepower at the oncoming Grunikan battlecruiser, its laser-sphere emitting turrets bombarding the hull of the dragon-shaped vessel as it drew nearer. The bombardment of energy projectiles successfully tore through the ship's shields and began to damage the hull. All the while, the Grunikan ship returned fire, laser beams firing from the turrets all across its surface, while fighters from either side swarmed around both vessels, dogfighting and bombing, resembling a swarm of mad insects to anyone aboard the larger ships who might observe.

Unfortunately, the Phalanx lacked the firepower to pierce the hull; even though it was the same class of the ship, the Grunikans used very dense alloy for the armour plating on their ships, strong enough to repel most of the weapons the Confederate Fleets had access to for a time.

"Lieutenant; six enemy dropships spotted on radar!" One of the bridge crew called. "They're going under us!"

"Order some of the fighters to intercept!" Van Barron commanded.

"None are responding; they're too engaged by enemy fighters!"

"Dammit! Ready lower port-side guns; we can't let those dropships make entry!"

"Aye, sir!"

More laser fire was traded between both sides of the battle; red spheres and green beams alike flew to and fro, striking hulls or soaring off into space until they burned out.

Suddenly, the entire Phalanx rocked violently, nearly throwing Van Barron off of his feet, but thanks to having his hands on the railing in front of him, he managed to keep his balance, and immediately looked down to the crew below. "Status report; what just hit us?"

"A missile sir, fired from another enemy ship; somehow our radar didn't detect it!"

"Engines one and two have been damaged; thrusters down to fifty percent capacity."

"Enemy laserfire is getting through our shields; we're about to take hull damage!"

Van Barron swore under his breath. "Alright; begin moving us away; divert available power to remaining engines and get us out of the line of fire!"

"Trying sir; capacitor is drained!"

“We can’t get away!”

“More missiles, incoming!” The radar officer bellowed, his voice drowning out the rest.

“Brace for impact!” Van Barron bellowed.

The missiles, unseen by the bridge crew, hit hard and suddenly, shaking the ship even more violently than the previous impact. Alarms began blaring, red lights flashing all over the bridge. Bridge crew reported hull breaches and loss of power to engines, and many yelled in surprise as the ship tipped ominously.

“What’s happening?” Van Barron demanded.

“We’re too close to the planet; we’re falling towards it!”

“Activate auxillary power and divert all to the engines; get us out of the gravity field!”

“Negative; engines won’t respond! We’re going down!”

Van Barron spun to a panel next to him and pressed a button labelled ‘transmit’ on the top. “Attention all hands; begin evacuation immediately! The Phalanx is going down, repeat, Phalanx is going down; evacuate at once!” He turned to the bridge crew. “All of you follow me; we must get to the E. Pod Bay! Move, move, move!”

The crew abandoned their stations and began to rush off the bridge, following the Lieutenant through the exit door, running down the corridor as the alarms continued to shriek. Many portions of the ship had automatically sealed themselves off due to hull breaches, maintaining interior pressure for as long as possible until the crew could reach the escape pod bay and abandon the ship to its unfortunate demise; the Phalanx was doomed, and nothing could save it now.

However, that wasn’t enough for the Grunikans. Despite the ship already falling to its destruction, they continued to fire upon it, even though its weapons had stopped discharging; lasers bombarded the already damaged hull, and parts of the corridor were ruptured, forcing emergency doors to close in order to continue preserving the interior pressure. And unfortunately, the bridge crew failed to pass one of those doors; it closed just as a sudden vacuum caught them, the shutting door immediately stopping them from being sucked out into open space, but also cutting them off from the escape pods.

Van Barron cursed as the other crew began hammering on the door, and hurriedly motioned for them to calm down. “This corridor can withstand impacts from two-hundred thousand feet; we can’t go any further, so everybody, get down low, grab onto something, anything, and hang onto one another. This is our only chance, now; let us all hope that fate is merciful.”

They nodded, and began crouching down, grabbing onto handrails, ventilation covers, small holes in the walls, anything their fingers could fit through; the Lieutenant sat down between a couple of younger officers who were trembling with fear, and put his hands on their shoulders. “Courage, soldiers; have courage,” he said, even though he was very afraid himself.

The ruined ship continued to fall, igniting in the atmosphere as it breached, heading side-first towards the oceanic planet below, but whether or not it would land in the water or on a landmass was impossible to tell. All the crew could do was wait and hope, while the battle in orbit above raged on...