

Voyages of the Mara

Chapter 3: First Rush

It had been a short hour since the crew of the Mara's Hope had left the space station, Dory II, and were currently in warp, travelling towards the next acceleration gate that would take them to their destination, the planet Ithica VII, a sizeable cache of supplies waiting in their cargo hold for their delivery to the endangered planet.

The humming of the ships' engines was barely audible, even to Zack, who sat at his desk in the engine room, eyes watching the screen while also nodding his head to music coming out of a Soundbox next to him; a collapsible, portable device shaped like a cube most of the time, but it would open up to play music, resembling a classic, old-world boom box stereo that were often depicted being carried on people's shoulders.

Gustav and Jessica were both in the dining area with the unexpected passenger, Jody Ford, who had bought passage aboard the hope at the station before they'd left, and was now enjoying a pleasant conversation with the crew. She had taken a liking to the two rather quickly, as they were by far the friendliest people on the ship, although she liked Zack for his hyperactive nature and sunny disposition; she even made a comment that watching paint dry with him probably wouldn't have been boring.

However, in another part of the ship, tension was brewing. Felix had called Amber to the bridge, to discuss her recent behavior 'in detail' as he described it. Amber arrived for that meeting with her usual expression –completely toneless- and would reserve facial expressions for when they were needed. When the sound of her boots filled Felix's barely-visible cetacean ears, he turned his chair about to face her, arms crossed.

"So," she began. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"About this attitude you've had lately," began Felix. "The one that seems to show up every time we're about to do something."

"What attitude would that be?"

"You know what I mean, Amber," stated Felix. "Every time Gustav, Zack or even I have come up with something, you haven't really been supportive. When Gustav found safe, good paying jobs to do, you argued with him, and tried to put us on jobs as Bounty Hunters."

Amber shrugged. "They paid double what any of the jobs he picked did," she said.

"But the only one on this entire ship with combat training is you," reminded Felix. "I can handle a blaster, just don't like to, and I can handle myself in a brawl too; so can Gustav, but neither of us are trained to hunt down armed criminals with rap sheets as long as my arm. Now, imagine we're transporting our target, he gets loose and shoots you in the back; there goes our only defense against a murderous psychopath, not to mention losing a member of our already *small* team."

"I could have trained you guys within a week."

"As if we have that kind of time lately?" Felix asked. "We have responsibilities, Amber."

“Don’t talk to *me* about responsibility, Felix,” Amber stated coldly, glaring at the dolphin. “While you and Zack were working on your little science project here,” she waved at the walls of the ship. “I was shooting Gelks that would have torn down your door while you were sleeping and eaten you from the legs up.”

“I know you’re responsible; that’s why I was glad you wanted to join up with us,” said Felix. “I thought I was hiring someone with a cool head; you’ve proven you’re calm under pressure but when something goes awry or doesn’t go your way, you become so negative, it depresses the others.”

“Gustav is way too laid back, and Zack is immature,” retorted Amber. “They don’t take anything seriously; I actually dread having that ‘kid’ watching our engines all the time. I’m half-expecting to find out they’re overheating because he isn’t watching them.”

Felix’s brow creased. “That ‘kid’ is the only reason this crate was able to fly at all, Amber,” reminded the dolphin. “I was mostly an extra set of hands, but he’s the one who got this ship working and helped us get this far. As for Gustav being laid back, you should know by now he’s a pacifist; the guy couldn’t swat a fly without hesitating.”

“Yet he’s built like a mountain,” muttered Amber.

“And then, when we brought Jody on board,” began Felix. “I pick us up an extra contract, a simple and insultingly easy transporting job for a single passenger, paying two thousand credits –enough money for us to buy a new comm relay for the ship if ours were to break down, and the first thing you do is call me crazy, and acting like all of Ithica VII would hate us if she got hurt.”

“They would,” retorted Amber. “I know better than anyone, Felix; when people need something to blame, the people who were ‘supposed’ to be helping them are the first ones they go for. Even when we drop her off, if she gets hit by falling debris or something, they’ll blame us for her injury or death, saying we should never have brought her back to the planet. That’s what people are like; they blame others for something completely out of their control.”

“Just as you were, seconds ago, blaming Zack for something he hasn’t even done yet?” Felix shot back, standing up to look Amber right in the eye.

“He doesn’t take *anything* seriously,” returned Amber. “And Gustav chiming in on his shenanigans is only encouraging him; the only ones around here who take their jobs seriously are you and me.”

“What about Jessica?”

“What about her?”

“Are you saying she doesn’t take her job seriously?” Felix asked.

“No; she’s already proven she does,” returned Amber.

Felix grimaced. “So, tell me, Amber... what the hell is your problem?”

“I don’t *have* a problem!” Amber retorted defensively. “I just wish everyone else were more responsible; I meet too many people who don’t take their work seriously, and Zack and Gustav are the worst of them!”

“You have one job aboard this ship; Gustav has *three*,” reminded Felix. “He doesn’t complain, he doesn’t ask for a bigger pay cut, and he has always done his work efficiently; tell me if you’ve seen a single stain in one of the toilets since you got on board, and I’ll rephrase

that statement. As for Zack, he's happy because he loves being on a ship, and he loves the work that he does; what about that makes him irresponsible?"

"If he's responsible, he should act it; makes him look professional."

"And what, to you, is 'acting' responsible?" Felix asked, an expectant look on his face. "Acting like you; negative and never wanting to do a job that isn't part of a pretend schedule none of us have made, and chiding every time those things come up?"

"I...!" She hesitated to give an answer, suddenly unable to come up with one.

"I thought so," stated Felix. "You know, if I'd made ten credits for every excuse you made throughout this conversation, I could pay back the rest of the colony. Up until I hit you with that last question, you had an answer for everything, and all of them were based entirely on how *you* think we should be doing things."

"I do not!"

"You do! The moment anybody does something that isn't how you would do it, you practically have a conniption about it! I.E, disagreeing with my mother on trading salt despite us having no other resources to trade with, your argument Gustav wanting to take safer jobs that guarantee us living longer, and Zacks' sunny personality; you disapproved of all, and therefore that means they're wrong?"

"Hey, I agreed to Gustav's choice in the end, didn't I?" Amber reminded.

"After a long speech of persuasion from me," added Felix.

The shark growled angrily. "Dammit, what the hell do you want from me?!" She nearly screamed at him, the strain evident in her voice.

"To know why the hell you hate everyone!" Felix replied.

"I don't!"

"Then why do you try to make them feel as miserable as you are every chance you get? Tell me that, if nothing else!"

"How have I been trying to..." She paused mid-sentence, remembering everything Felix laid out before immediately. Not wanting him to repeat them all, she carried on with a different set of words. "I just don't like immature people, alright? Is it so wrong to want to see people act their age?"

"Zack is still legally a kid," Felix reminded. "And Gustav does act his age, but unlike you he takes a positive outlook on everything around him." A thought dawned on Felix as he spoke, and allowed him to continue. "And thinking back, when I was talking with Jessica, she mentioned that you became rather defensive on the subject of killing others, and acted as if she was implying you had no conscience, yet in no way did she word it like that."

"I..."

"And, I didn't even bring this up before, but it wasn't enough to voice your opposition of us taking Jody onto the ship just with me, but you had to storm up to her in the middle of a motel hallway and intimidate her right where others may have been watching? Is that also something you interpret as professional?"

"Felix, I'm just..." Amber choked on her own words, unable to say anything more.

“Just what?” Felix asked. “If you really want to be part of this team, Amber, you have to try and be a little more positive; everything you do affects all of us, just as everything any of us do affects all of us; that’s what keeps us responsible and focused on our work.”

Amber scowled at Felix as the muscles in her arms tightened, and he could see in her eyes that he’d struck a nerve somewhere. “What do you expect me to say, that I’m just an angry bitch who doesn’t play well with others? Or that I hate the universe and want everyone to hate it as much as I do?”

“Are you, do you?”

“NO!”

“Then why are you always so unhappy?” Felix asked. “We’re doing good work, for the colony, for the Ares Colony we’re taking those crates of supplies to, and for Jody by reuniting her with her family; you should be proud of what you’re doing, so why the hell are you always so angry? Is something happening back home that’s affecting your job performance; is your dad sick, your mom suffering from something, or is somebody hounding you in the streets?”

“Hounding, I could handle; my dad or mom being sick, I could handle,” returned Amber. “But...” She paused again, unable to find the words she wanted to explain herself, her gaze falling away from the dolphin.

Felix watched her silently for a moment, waiting for an answer whenever she glanced back at him for a second; his stare made her uncomfortable, evident by her tail twitching behind her. “Is it about the militia?”

She leered at him. “I don’t want to talk about that,” she said firmly.

“Well I do,” said Felix, “because I think that’s the source of all this negativity coming from you; I know how much you hate Commander Zambrano, but isn’t that why you left the militia and came with us, to get away from him and help make a difference for the colony?”

“No, I came be... well, that last part is true; I *do* want to help the colony, but...” She growled, baring her large teeth. “I’m just so... *ashamed* that the militia is being run by some single-minded sexist bastard who lives in a way of thinking that died centuries ago. I have six months seniority over him and I’m a proven leader, yet he kisses every ass and sweet-talks every ear to get himself to the Commander position, only to...!” She paused, and looked at Felix again.

“So it is related to the militia,” he said.

Amber drew back her hand and swung it at his face, open-palmed, suddenly enraged that the dolphin had managed to make her talk about such a sensitive subject, but the dolphin saw it coming; he put up his hand without even blinking and blocked her own hand, preventing her from slapping him. “Or did you get kicked out because you slapped your boss there too?” Felix asked.

“I told you I didn’t want to talk about the militia!”

“Yet there you were, finally talking about your problems,” said Felix. “But you want to keep those to yourself so badly you’ve been keeping them contained and letting the frustration from it keep building up.”

“So suddenly you’re a psychologist?” Amber asked, spitefully.

“I make a point to know my team,” returned Felix.

"You don't know me!"

"I know you love the Mara Colony," stated Felix. "I know you wanted to take your grandfather's place as the commander of the militia and make him proud by keeping it safe until the time came for you to pass the torch as well, and I know you were a lieutenant before you left, so you were used to things being done your way, which, I know you're also a very by-the-book type of person, preferring to follow procedure, but you always treated your officers with equal respect, something Zambrano doesn't. And, as I said before, I know you joined this crew because you wanted to help the colony in any way you could, but knew you couldn't from on the planet's surface." She stared at him with a bewildered expression, astonished by just how well he knew her. "Well? Am I wrong so far?"

Her hand slid down his arm, falling limp at her side. "How... did you know all that?"

"Like I said," replied Felix. "I make a point to know my team." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Which is why this negativity of yours bothers me; I've known you long enough to know you're a proud, dutiful person, not a chiding and brooding one; that proud person is the one I wanted on my team, and that dutiful soul is the one I wanted watching my back when things got hairy, but so far she seems to be absent, and I kind of want her back."

Amber couldn't hide a slight smile at the way Felix was speaking; even with her standing right there, he was talking as if she wasn't there, and it made her realize she really wasn't being herself lately... she had been letting troubles of her past drag her down, and had tried to pull everyone down with her without even realizing it... her frustration turned to guilt, for how she behaved around the others, as if it had always been who she was... but it wasn't.

She let out a long sigh and gave Felix an apologetic look. "You're right," she said. "I haven't been myself since I got on this ship... and it's not because of you guys; I'm simply not allowing myself to move on from what I was doing before... much as I hate Zambrano he's not a problem for me anymore no matter how much he tries to be, like that day we first launched. But I'm above his animosity now," she smiled. "Thanks for reminding me of that."

"It's my job as your boss to ensure a comfortable work environment for the whole crew," said Felix. "But as your friend, it's also my job to help you with your problems. Anytime at all you need someone to speak to, any one of us will be there to do so, especially Jessica, Gustav and, hell, Zack may not seem it but he's actually a really good listener when you need one."

Amber gave him an incredulous look. "That, I'll have to witness myself first; I just can't imagine it."

"Is kind of hard to believe, I grant you," admitted Felix. "But still, the offer stands."

Amber smiled again and rubbed the back of her head nervously. "Thanks again, Felix... I... I'm sorry for how I've been acting."

"I knew something was up, and I'm glad I was able to help you with it," said Felix. "But you should probably also talk to the others when you can; clear the air with them as well."

Amber nodded in agreement. "You're right, I should," she replied. "I... guess I'll start with Zack; I think I owe him the largest apology of all."

Felix nodded. "Just take it slow and choose your words carefully," he advised. "Zack grows on you after a while; you just have to get used to his sunny disposition. Heck, that's one of his best qualities if you ask me."

"Alright; I'll go do that," said Amber, turning and starting to leave. "Just hope he doesn't throw a wrench at me or anything..."

"Nah, he'll more likely throw a whole toolbox," Felix called after her; she looked back over her shoulder, and scowled when she saw the smug grin Felix flashed her, but turned her head as another smile of her own began to creep onto her face.

Felix let out a sigh of relief once she was gone. "Glad that's cleared up," he said. *'Hard to believe Zambrano can still bother her so much even when he's millions of lightyears away... I guess that's just how aggravating he is. I may have to speak to mom about that when I get back; he may be entitled to make his own rules, but that doesn't mean he can't still be criticized for his methods.'*

Moments later, as he was re-checking the navigation, he heard rapid footsteps coming up the corridor, prompting him to peer over his shoulder just in time to see Zack poke his head into the room. "Dude, you're not going to believe that just happened!"

"What?" Felix asked.

"Amber just came by the engine room and apologized to me," he said, honest bafflement on his face. "What the heck did you say to her to make her suddenly... so... nice?!"

"She's always been nice, Zack," assured Felix. "Strict, yes, but not a bad person. She's just under a lot of stress; I helped her blow off some steam."

"Blow off some... you didn't uh... you know...?"

Felix gave Zack a quizzical look. "No, I didn't. And even if I had, that's none of your business. Besides," he turned back to the computer again. "You know I prefer women more in my age area; Amber's five years older than me."

"Well, if you say so... but still man, she apologized! To me! I just can't..."

"Get back to work, Zack, before you have a seizure," instructed Felix, laughing as the rabbit left and could be heard running up the corridor, as if his life depended on getting his mind off of Amber's sudden change of heart.

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The next few hours of flight were uneventful, as was their night stay at the Sarissa III space station while they let the ship cool down its engines. Thanks to the money paid in advance from Jody, they were able to afford to stay at the motel there, rather than sleep aboard the ship. Expensive as it was, the beds they had on the ship were far too worn for a good rest.

Felix spent part of the night in the swimming pool, as he had back at Dory II; after a few laps he decided to relax in the hot tub for a while. But, he was barely in there a minute before the doors to the pool opened; he glanced over to see Zack walking in, peering about the swimming area. "Felix?" He called.

"Over here," the dolphin called back, letting Zack know where he was.

The rabbit turned to him, and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "There was just a page for you from the front desk; they say someone back at Denver XII is calling you."

Felix tilted his head curiously, before he climbed out of the hot tub. "Only guy I could think of that'd want to call us from there is Captain Noir; did they say who it was?"

"No, but that was my guess too," the rabbit replied as he waited for the dolphin to approach, passing him a towel so that he could dry off and not trail water out to the lobby. "What do you suppose he wants?"

"Not sure," replied Felix. "Probably some update on the job."

"I hope he's not calling to cancel it."

"Same here; it'd be damn inconvenient if we had to turn back now."

"Not only that, another job we don't get paid for," added Zack. "In the infinity of space, you'd think there'd be no shortage of work!"

"There is no shortage, Zack," assured Felix. "We just had a rocky start, that's all; careers like this always start out with some unexpected meteor showers."

Zack sighed. "Yeah... but I'm still looking forward to when we get to really expand our horizons, going all across Confederate space, seeing entire new interstellar nations and such!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Zack," urged Felix. "We're only using a Light Freighter, not a Cruiser; travelling across Confederate territory is way beyond a ship like ours. Let's just stick to the little stuff for now; maybe one day we can buy a bigger ship, expand our crew, and maybe start a full-time shipping company, but stuff like that isn't going to happen any time soon. It's going to be a few years and a lot of turbulence, but perhaps someday we'll get there, long as we stick to what we do, and make sure we do well at it."

Zack nodded. "I'm there every step of the way, Felix 'ol buddy."

Felix chuckled. "I know you will be, Zack. Now, let's go see who's waiting for us on the comline."

The two left the pool area; Felix draped his towel around his torso for a makeshift poncho, so as not to appear indecent and walked with Zack out to the lobby. The dolphin noticed a few looks were cast his way by some of the younger women he passed in the halls, but he pretended not to; he liked to meet women just as much as the next man, but he was one of business before pleasure. He was on a Cetacean-dominant station, and he knew he was at least mildly handsome in the eyes of others, so he expected to get some glances.

Zack eyed a couple of the girls himself, and snickered as he nudged Felix with his elbow. "I wouldn't mind takin' one of those if you're up for sharing."

"Zack, you're underaged," returned Felix.

"So?" He asked. Felix scowled at him. "Oh come on; always so serious. I mean, they're hot; what harm is it?"

"There'd be a lot of harm in them if anyone found out," reminded Felix. "Look for someone more your age."

"Ah, but older women have experience," replied Zack, crossing his arms and frowning.

"As if *you* do?"

"I learn fast," he replied with a big grin.

Felix rolled his eyes and shook his head as they entered the lobby and approached the front desk. He met the clerk at the counter, putting his hands on the edge as he waited for them to finish what they were doing before he spoke. The clerk was another cetacean woman like himself -another dolphin, roughly his age, who smiled at him as she saw him. "Hello; how can I help you?"

"I believe there's a call for me?" He asked. "Felix Kaufmann?"

"Right over here, sir," returned the dolphin girl, standing up from her chair and leading him to the other side of the counter where she picked up a phone –not like old-fashioned telephones, which ran along phone lines or radio towers, but an interstellar phone meant for communicating across entire systems. They weren't common aboard ships, but public calling methods still used them, so that callers could have their privacy.

Felix accepted the phone and held it to his ear. "Hello?"

*"Felix; glad I found you. I was worried you had already made the jump to Ithica VII,"* the voice of Captain Noir replied through the phone, clear as day.

"Not yet; we're letting the engines cool off and will be setting out first thing tomorrow," said Felix.

*"I guessed as much,"* returned Captain Noir. *"Listen, Felix... there's been a complication, and..."*

"Captain, I really hope you're not calling to tell me to turn back," stated Felix. "We need the money from this job, and we're only three hours away now."

*"I'm not calling to ask you to come back; the planet needs those supplies more than ever now,"* assured Noir. *"What I'm calling you about, is to warn you; the Grunikans have broken the Confederate blockade that was over the planet; I arrived in time to keep them from scattering the rest, but they already control a good portion of the planets' western hemisphere. The colony I was sending you to is very close to that region and you have to be careful how you approach the planet –you may have to approach the planet from a different angle. And be ready to use that gun emplacement of yours; the Grunikans have ground forces advancing to take more territory on the surface."*

"So we should expect a fight," said Felix.

*"I'm afraid so. I won't blame you for whatever you do, but you must be cautious. Ares Colony needs those supplies, but if you get shot down, nobody wins."*

Felix hesitated to give an answer, feeling very nervous all of a sudden. But, despite it, he managed to bring the words he needed to his lips. "I'll find a way," he promised. "Ares Colony will get its supplies."

*"You're a brave young man, Felix,"* complimented Noir. *"I wish you the best of luck. Look for my flagship, The Odysseus, when you arrive; contact me immediately, and I'll send fighters to escort you to the planets' surface."*

"The Odysseus; what model is it?"

*"It's a War Flyers' Model-700,"* replied Noir.

"Got it," assured Felix. "We'll see you there, Captain." With that, he took the phone away from his ear, and handed it back to the desk clerk, who returned it to its cradle.



She looked at Felix, studying him for a moment before giving him a smile. "You know, tomorrow's my day off; if you're free that night, maybe we could go out to dinner?"

Felix politely refused. "I'd love to, but it looks like my job just became urgent."

"Aw... well if you're ever in the neighborhood, look me up," she said, winking at him. "Name's Cathy."

"Thank you, Cathy," returned Felix, before he turned and headed back towards the pool.

Zack looked at Cathy and leaned closer to her. "He totally wants to," he whispered.

"Zack," Felix called back, sternly.

"Right; coming!"

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Gustav walked onto the bridge moments after the Mara's Hope went through the acceleration gate, warping off to the system where Ithica VII waited. He sat down in the chair intended to the co-pilot, watching the rushing colours and the static-y warp bubble all around the ship, carrying them across the galaxy at impossible speeds. But the look on his face was one of trouble, and he turned to Felix to address it.

"I don't like this, Felix," he said.

"I know," replied the dolphin. "Violence has never been something you've been fond of, has it?"

"Absolutely not," replied the orca. "I may be big, and I may be strong, but I don't like fighting; I don't like hurting people."

"Hey, the Confederacy probably has hundreds of Marine battalions going planetside even as we speak," assured Felix. "But, as the carriers, it's also our job to protect the cargo, and that's why I asked Amber to teach you, Jessica and Zack to use them as well."

"I know how to shoot," returned the orca, scoffing. "Just hoped I'd never have to, aside from a Gelk or two."

"I imagine Jessica is as averse to it as you are," stated Felix.

"It took her ten minutes just to muster up the courage to even hold the pistol Amber offered her," replied Gustav. "Jessica's a doctor, not a soldier; she wants to help people, not kill them."

"It's better she knows how to use it so she can defend herself, if nothing else," said Felix. "I just hope it doesn't come to that, and I hope Zack doesn't treat it like a game."

"Don't worry about that part; she's making sure he takes it seriously," returned Gustav. "Right back to being the hardcore woman she always has been, only not as depressing. You did quite a number on her, Felix; how'd you convince her to lighten up?"

"Same way Jessica helped me with the insomnia I've had lately," replied Felix. "I helped her come to terms with the things bothering her."

"Her? Bothered by something?" Gustav asked, incredulously. "What could bother someone like Amber?"

"It's not my place to say," replied Felix. "But hey, everybody always has something they're disturbed by. For you, it's violence."

Gustav couldn't hold back the chuckle that rose to his throat at how Felix had just turned his own words against him; many people back at the Mara Colony knew Gustav was a gentle giant type, but there were always rumors floating around that, underneath that pacifist exterior was a born brawler waiting to be set loose. He paid that no mind, and avoided conflict as much as possible, abhorring the idea of inflicting harm on others unless necessary. He'd had to sort out some drunken brawls before, but always managed to do so without throwing any punches, except for a man who, in drunken rage, threatened his own girlfriend with a knife.

The man's jaw was broken that night, by a powerful left hook from the orca. Gustav would fight if he had to, and when he did, stars protect whoever was in his way.

Felix glanced at the console as it began to emit a beeping sound, a blue light flashing on the navigation screen. Gustav followed where he was looking and irked an eyebrow. "What is that?" He asked.

"The two-minute warning before the warp bubble collapses," replied Felix. "We're about to come out of warp space; better buckle up." He tapped the intercom, issuing the same warning to the others, and put his hands on the tiller as he waited, counting down the minutes in his head and bracing himself.

Then came the end of the warp travel; the bubble around them began to dissipate, and the ship rapidly slowed down until they could see clearly beyond the veil of warp space and appearing within eyesight of another acceleration gate, one that would send them back to the previous system when they were ready to do so.

But that was not what caught their immediate attention.

Up ahead, they could see the gigantic round form of a planet; the navigation confirmed that the Mara's Hope had entered the vicinity of Ithica VII, a planet roughly seventy-five percent ocean with only two , enormous continents and a few small islands, unlike the ninety-five percent ocean of Trident IV, which had no continents at all.

But what really caught their attention were the flashes of red and blue arcing through space, colliding with enormous hunks of metal that hung in a low orbit over the planet. The space battle over Ithica VII was still raging, but Felix could not tell whether the Confederacy or the Grunikan Empire were winning; he'd never actually seen a real battle before, but it was not as spectacular as many school-age enthusiasts made it sound like. The lights of laser fire were dazzling to watch, but once you saw what happened to those on the receiving end of such weapons, the intrigue would quickly be replaced with horror as you imagine yourself in place of the intended target.

"Ah crap," growled Felix. "I was hoping the fighting had at least lightened up before we got here."

"Now what?" Gustav asked.

Felix didn't answer him immediately, drawing out a short silence before he finally gave an answer. "Now, we do as Noir instructed me to," he said before turning to Gustav. "This is going to get really rough."

The orca frowned at the thought.

Felix tapped the intercom. "Amber, Jody; need you both up here, quickly," he said into the receiver. "Zack, Jessica, you both better hang on. This ride could get very, very bumpy."

With that, he turned to Gustav. "You should go back with Jessica; she's not used to what we're about to get into."

"Neither are you," Gustav pointed out. "What does it matter where on the ship I am? After all, I'm only the cook."

Felix grimaced at the orca, and then peered over his shoulder as he heard footsteps, seeing Amber and Jody arrive as he'd asked. "Good response time," he said, but then looked past them, and saw Zack and Jessica with them as well. "Hey... what're you two doing up here; shouldn't you be strapping in at your stations?"

"This is our first battle, buddy," said Zack. "We ought to all be where we can see each other. Besides, I feel better being able to see what's happening out there."

Felix sighed, and then pointed over to the corner. "Huddle down over there, and hang on tight."

They nodded, and headed to where Felix designated. Gustav got up from his seat and joined them, letting both of them sit up against him where they felt safer, especially when he put his arms over them securely.

The dolphin turned back to the girls. "Amber, better get into the gun turret just in case we need to defend ourselves, but don't draw attention to us; shoot only what looks to be coming our way."

"Right," agreed the shark, turning around and approaching the gunners' seat, just a few steps from the bridge. She sat down in the chair and fastened the belt that would keep her secure to the chair in the event of a hull breach. After buckling up and tapping a button on the side, the seat began to elevate up the tube until she was at the controls for the turret; all that could still be seen of her were her feet, resting on a metal bar that stretched out from the bottom of the chair.

"Jody," Felix looked at their passenger. "I know you hired us to bring you home, but we're going to need your help. I need someone on the communications terminal; nobody else here knows how to operate it except me, but I need to be focused on flying."

Jody nodded. "Understood," she replied, seating herself at the designated station alongside Felix. "Hmm... this is pretty low-grade equipment; not like I'm used to."

"Use what you can get," Felix remarked. "It doesn't have to be high-class, just needs to work."

"Give me a second just to familiarize myself with it," Jody requested. "Who do you want me to contact?"

Felix reached into his vest pocket and passed to her the datapad given to him by Captain Noir when they met on Denver XII. "Set the communication terminal to Confederate frequencies, and hail the ship called the *Odysseus*; give them the clearance code, marked two on that pad."

"Ten-four," returned Jody, keeping her hands by the keypad and transmission controls for the terminal, waiting for her moment.

"Alright guys... here comes our first rush!" Felix announced before he pushed the throttle forward to full speed.

As they raced towards the planet, the battle ahead became easier to see. Lizard-like vessels clashed with Confederate warships, space-fighters racing about, trading shots in a tremendous dogfight around the larger vessels. Amidst the reptilian vessels was a gargantuan ship the likeness of a feral dragon, with two bright green 'eyes' glowing in its head. Several Confederate Frigates were assailing it from both sides, but the guns they were equipped with were too small to damage a ship of such magnitude; they were little more than insects attacking a large mammal, able to hurt it, but not cause any permanent harm.

Gustav, Zack and Jessica stared at the ship in horror as they saw it through the frontal viewport. "Felix, man," said Zack. "What... the hell... is that?"

"It's a Grunikan Dreadnaught," replied Jody. "They're the backbone of every fleet the Empire has, and each one has enough firepower to take chunks out of a planet with their superlasers; that's what those eyes you see really are. Their ultimate weapons of war."

"By all the stars around us... that thing is horrible," said Felix. "I really don't want to go near something like that..." Suddenly, something else caught his eye; a pair of massive red spheres that struck the hull of the Dreadnaught, which he trailed the path of until he saw another large ship, not quite as big as the Grunikan Dreadnaught, but still quit.

From their angle, they saw the ship from underneath; it looked slim and had a distinctive 'Y' shape to it from below, but a rectangular shape from the side, the front rounded like a half-circle. On either side of the ship were two massive gun emplacements, which fired the red spheres of plasma Felix had seen before, and all across its hull were several other, smaller blaster turrets.

The Confederacy called it a Titan-Class Battlecruiser. But Felix knew it by brand name.

"That's a Model-700 from Warflyers," said Felix. "That might be The Odysseus!"

"I'll try contacting them now," said Jody. "What was your ship's name again?"

"The Mara's Hope."

"Got it." Jody turned back to the console, setting the broadcast to all Confederate frequencies, hoping that the Empire wouldn't hear them. "This is the Mara's Hope calling The Odysseus; we are approaching Ithica VII with valuable cargo, requesting clearance and fighter escort to planets' surface."

A short pause later, and there was a response. *"This is The Odysseus. Mara's Hope, you are currently flying in a warzone; transmit clearance codes immediately or turn back, repeat, transmit codes or turn back; this is a warzone."*

"Transmitting now," replied Jody, uploading the codes to the terminal and sending them to the Odysseus, waiting for a response while Felix flew onward towards the planet.

"Codes received; clearance verified," the officer on the other end of the call informed. *"Proceed behind the firing line; stay far away from the battlefield! Squad 12 Yellow Jackets provide escort to Light Freighter approaching planet, bearing seven-nine-six-twelve."*

"Affirmative, command ship; Yellow Jackets, moving to escort freighter—all wings, form up on the freighter, formation six dash one-E. We've got to get them to the planet."

There was a lot more communication traffic after that, but before long, eight small ships flew towards the Mara's Hope, disappearing from sight for a moment before two of them emerged alongside the ship, just in view of the front window.

"Mara's Hope; we'll maintain course with you and follow your lead, but do not go towards the Grunikans, I repeat, don't go towards the enemy fleet."

"Like they need to point that out!" Zack barked.

"Switch your communications to six-seven-nine; private channel."

"Affirmative Yellow Jackets," Jody replied as she adjusted the setting on the terminal, "maintaining course." She looked at Felix. "It's all up to you now, helmsman."

Felix grunted. "No pressure or anything," he said, sarcastically. "Okay, here goes!" And pushed the throttle to full, pulling ahead of the fighters slightly, but with a boost of their own engines, they were back in place, approaching the planet at maximum velocity.

"Hey Felix!" Amber called from the gun turret. "We've got incoming off to the left; Grunikan fighters, moving fast!"

Jody turned to the terminal. "Yellow Jackets; our gunner has spotted Grunikan fighters coming in from the left."

"Affirmative, Mara's Hope; we see them. Y.J two and three, maintain fighter escort with the freighter. Everyone else is with me; let's keep these guys off of them!"

"Why are the Grunikans coming at us?" Jessica asked. "We haven't attacked them."

"They probably think we're reinforcements for the Marines on the ground," replied Felix, keeping as calm as possible. "Or, maybe they're just trigger-happy; who knows?"

"Grunikans love killing races they think are less than themselves," stated Jody, scornfully. "Anything that's not a draco-morph or some other reptilian species, they consider them trash to be disposed of."

"Even if it involves attacking vessels that are barely even armed?" Zack asked.

"Even then; they'll shoot at anything that isn't one of their own. Even if there was such a person in the line of fire I have doubts it'd stop them from shooting anyway," Jody stated, her voice filled with venom.

Felix scowled at such a thought; everything he'd heard about the Grunikans, he always thought was propaganda the Confederacy used to motivate volunteers for the Marines. But hearing it from Jody, and seeing it first-hand, he was starting to suspect that just maybe, the propaganda may have been accurate.

There was a lot of communication traffic shortly after, coming from the Yellow Jacket Squadron. *"Watch it, seven; bogey right behind you!"*

"I see him!"

"Hang on, seven; I'll be right there!"

"Hurry up; this guy's a crack shot!"

"Hey, hey, that one's going for the freighter!"

"This is five; I'm on him... dammit! He's lined up; I can't risk the shot!"

"Tell him to get clear!" Felix ordered Jody before he looked over his shoulder. "Amber; can you get that one coming up behind us?"

"Oh yes I can," she called back.

Jody spoke into the transmitter. "Yellow Jacket Five; get clear! Our gunner has the target in her sights!"

"Copy that; make it count before he locks onto you!"

"Get him now!" Felix called back to Amber.

In the turret, Amber swerved the gun around and lined up the sights with the enemy fighter, using the turrets' tiller to control the direction the gun until she had her shot. Then, with a press of the buttons her thumbs were placed over, the red sphere of pure energy erupted from the gun barrel of the turret, soaring over the hull of the Maras' Hope until it struck the Grunikan fighter. She fired several more times, every shot landing, until the fighter exploded in a shower of sparks that vanished into the vacuum of space seconds later, with no sign of the pilot.

"Holy blasteroni that guy is a good shot!"

"I think they said their gunner was a woman, nine."

"Woman? She single; I want to ask her to dinner!"

"Stay focused, nine! There are more fighters coming! Maras' Hope; ETA to planetary entry?"

"Approximately seven minutes," Felix replied, which Jody relayed.

"Y.J's two and three, maintain escort formation; make sure they get down there. Everybody else, intercept and destroy those fighters! They are not stopping this ship!"

"Y.J. Five, on your wing, One."

"Y.J Ten, on your wing."

"Let's go get these scale-ridden bastards, for what they did to the Phalanx!"

"The Phalanx?" Zachary asked.

"Must've been one of the ships that were orbiting the planet before the attack came," remarked Felix.

"You think anyone survived?" Jessica asked.

Felix hesitated to answer for a few seconds. "I hope so," he replied. "But we..."

He was interrupted by a sudden flash of light that blinded him, followed shortly by an explosion off to the left. The dolphin and his crew turned their gaze in time to see a supercarrier, a ship designed for carrying up to a hundred one-man ships, was lanced by a pair of gigantic, green beams that shot just over the Mara's Hope, nowhere close enough to cause any harm, but enough to startle him and his crew.

"Oh my galaxies, they just blew up the Lioness!"

"Where the hell did that blast come from?!"

"From that void-damned Dreadnaught of theirs; they just killed over forty pilots! Damn those Grunikans and their void-damned superlasers!"

"Don't lose your head, eleven! Stay focused!"

"By the stars," Jessica breathed, covering her muzzle with both hands.

"That... that was shot by the Grunikans?" Gustav asked in disbelief.

"That would have been so freaking awesome, if I hadn't just seen that laser blow up one of the biggest ships the confederacy has in *one freaking shot!*" Zachary exclaimed, clearly suppressing the urge to panic.

"Oh, all those people," Jessica said in a slight whimper, putting her hands over her eyes.

"Keep it together, Jessica," urged Felix. "We'll be through this soon, and everything will be fine."

The dolphin helmsman turned his gaze forward once more, hoping he'd be able to keep that promise he just made to the doe. His eyes fixed on the planet as he prepared to make entry to the atmosphere.

Several times, heard the gun turret firing, knowing Amber was hard at work to keep the Grunikan fighters that chased them from inflicting any damage to the ship. Along the way, he felt the ship shake slightly, indicating that it had taken a hit, but the hull was fairly sturdy, and held against the blaster weapons of the Grunikan fighters, one of which flew across the field of vision of the bridge, only for their two fighter escorts to shoot it down.

"We're about to make entry to the planets' atmosphere!" Felix informed the others, as he began to slow the ship down and prepared to tune the engines for planetary flight. "Everybody hang on; we're in for some turbulence!"

Their speed was at a safe level for atmospheric entry but was still dangerously high; if they went even a few kilometers faster the ship would start to burn. But the gunshots from Ambers' turret told Felix that Grunikan fighters were still chasing them, and it took all of his focus not to begin imagining worst-case scenarios and turn around to try and flee.

No... He was ready for this; he'd complete this job, and he'd do it right. He would not run away. He had the team and the training he needed to see this through, and he wasn't going to let the Dracomorphs stop him from bringing the aid to the innocent people of the Ares colony.

Into the planet they went, passing through atmosphere and into cloud, where his visage became filled with white; he was used to flying through clouds of course, as Trident IV had storms on a regular basis. Thankfully these clouds weren't such storm clouds, else they risked being struck by lightning –the ship was insulated, of course, but a lightning bolt could still cause some damage to the hull.

Their flight through the clouds was brief, and the shots from Grunikan fighters became less; they couldn't see in the clouds any better than Felix could, and when he broke through the barrier of white, they emerged much further away than they had been before, putting some distance between them and the Maras' Hope.

"This is Yellow Jacket Three to the Maras' Hope; do you think you guys can handle yourselves from here?"

Felix nodded to Jody, who turned back to the terminal and sent a response. "Affirmative, Y.J.3; we can find our way from here. Go rejoin your squadron."

"Yes ma'am. We'll try and get those fighters back there off your trail first, then return to the battle. Good luck to you all, Hope crew; you're doing a great thing for the people of that colony."

"Thank you Y.J.3; good luck to you as well," returned Jody.

With that, the two ships veered off, vanishing from sight. A few moments later, Felix could see on the sensor array screen that the Grunikan fighters were still coming after them, four in total. But not long after he detected the, two friendly signatures emerged from the edge of the scanner, and some distant laser blasts were heard, followed by one of the hostile marks vanishing; two of them broke off to engage the Confederate pilots, but the other continued to chase the Maras' Hope across the Ithican sky.

“One of them is still following us!” Felix called back to Amber.

“I can’t see him!” Amber called back. “He must still be in the clouds or he’s gone below us!”

If they were in space, Felix could turn the ship over to look for the hostile pilot, but now that they were on a planet the artificial gravity generator would have shut off automatically to reduce strain on the capacitor; if he were to turn the ship over, his crew would literally fall towards the ceiling. Comical as that might appear in ones’ mind, it was a lot more painful than anyone might expect, especially when the ceiling was almost ten feet up.

There was one thing he could try though. “Everybody, get down on your stomachs,” he called over to Gustav and the others. “Jody, make sure you’re strapped in and brace yourself for a bit of whiplash. I’m about to do something that may be a little drastic.”

She nodded to him. “I trust you,” she assured Felix.

He felt a slight warmness in his chest as he heard those words; she barely knew him, but she had confessed she trusted him. It brought a slight smile to his face as he looked at her, but dropped as he felt the ship shape again from another laser shot that he felt through his feet as it hit the ship; Amber had been right, the Grunikan pilot had flown under the Maras’ Hope, where it had no gun emplacements to defend itself.

Felix angled the ship downward slightly, and saw water below. He increased the ships’ speed to eight percent thrust capacity –approximately six hundred kilometers per hour with the planetary engines, and raced forward with a slight downward angle. It was risky, exposing the underside of the ship like this, but angling upward would have been even more dangerous, especially to Amber, as the Grunikan fighter pilot could take a shot at her before she could.

He confirmed Gustav, Jessica and Zack were lying on their stomachs before levelling out. He heard the electronic ‘FZZAT!’ of the turret taking a shot at something, but the hostile marker on the radar was still chasing them. He continued to fly onward, keeping safely above the waves below, before he pulled back the thrust and engaged the airbrakes, the ship immediately slowing down almost a third of its previous speed.

Pain jolted up Felix’s neck when his head snapped forward and back, hitting the headrest of his seat and almost making him bite his tongue. The whine of another ships’ engines were heard, and in a second, something flew awkwardly into his field of view, the pilot having narrowly dodged the slowed-down ship and soared past, right into view of the gun turret.

Amber, spotting the ship, swung the gun around, and fired toward, one of the shots tearing off the ships’ wing, the other striking directly into the cockpit, and the fighter, smoking and spiralling out of control, fell towards the ocean.

Felix let out a sigh of relief as he saw the fighter plunge away, and saw no more hostile signatures on the sensor array. He looked over his shoulder to the gun turret. “Amber, you okay up there?”

“I wish you’d warned me you were going to do that little stunt, but yeah, I’m okay,” she called back.

“Sorry,” he said, and then looked at Jody, who was rubbing her neck and groaning slightly, but she gave him a reassuring nod. With that, he turned his attention to his crew,

seeing that they has slid forward on the floor somewhat, but seemed fine otherwise. "You guys okay?" He asked.

"We're good," assured Gustav.

Zachary was chuckling. "Let's do that again," he said.

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It reminded him so much of home.

The Ares Colony was made of the same pre-fabricated structures that the Mara Colony back on Trident IV was made from. Although this colony was inland, unlike the Mara which was an island colony in opposition, and wasn't quite as large. Situated alongside a large river, the colony sat atop a hill, surrounded by open plains; the climate of the planet, or at least this region of it, was temperate, the land was rugged and booming with hills as far as the eye could see and smell of the ocean was ever-present, as the river was supplied directly by the ocean in the west, filled to its brim with salt water.

The Ares Colony was a mining operation. On another hill to the north-west, their foundry could be seen; a monorail, situated on rails high above the ground, linked the colony and the foundry together. Felix asked Jody why the monorail needed to be so high off of the ground, and why the colonists didn't simply use repulsor cars or hover bikes to travel from place to place, as the Monorail had to be expensive to maintain.

"Floods happen regularly on this part of the continent," explained Jody. "Sometimes, for days on end, the area below that monorail is under water, making ground travel, even with repulsor craft, impossible, so to make sure work could continue even during those times, the monorail and the stockpile for the ore they mine, were built up at the foundry. When the floods happen and shipments from the mine are forced to stop, foundry workers can continue uninterrupted with whatever ore they've already got in the stockpile, since the miners work around-the-clock, and nobody loses work time."

"How do the miners get home if the roads or paths are flooded?" Felix asked.

"They can't, so Whitestone, the company that runs the mining corporation that built the colony, set up a small camp near the mining site, where, during the floods, the workers stay until they can get home."

Felix nodded, intrigued by the preparedness of the Ares Colonists. "What do they mine here?"

"Iron, mostly," replied Jody. "There is a site that mines copper as well, but besides that, they mostly deal in iron, and refine at the foundry for packaging and shipping."

"Speaking of shipping, do they want us to land at the Foundry or at the Colony?" Zachary asked.

"Probably the colony," replied Felix. "Jody, see if you can get ahold of their control tower, find out if I'm clear to land."

Jody tuned the communicator multiple times, trying to contact the Ares Colony. "This is the Maras' Hope calling Ares Colony; anybody there? Please respond." But no response came. "Nobody's answering."

"I think I know why, too," Zack remarked, standing up on his tiptoes and leaning on the terminal –keeping his hands away from the buttons and switches, of course- and peered out the window. "Look over there, towards the back of the colony; I think that jagged, broken white spire back there used to be a comm tower. They've got a crane over near it, too."

Felix stood up from his chair, following where Zach was pointing. Sure enough, he spotted a white pillar rising up from the middle of the colony, but something had broken the pillar –or rather, comm tower- in half; the upper portion of it was lying on the ground, but a construction crane was poised over it, and they could see some workers attaching cables to the broken tower piece. Meanwhile, down on the landing platforms jutting out from the hillside, Felix could see some people watching the Maras' Hope as it hovered above.

"No wonder they're not responding; they can't hear us," Jody. "Is there any other way to signal them?"

"I think I know a way," replied Felix. "Jody, can you take the controls for a moment?"

"Sure," replied the porpoise, standing up from her chair and walking over, letting Felix slowly get out of the helmsman seat before she sat down in his place. "What now?"

"Just keep us aloft for a bit and watch the landing pad; I'm going to try something a little old-fashioned, but it might be our only means of contacting them," said Felix. "Zack, can you show me where the manual controls for the exterior lights are?"

"No problem; follow me," replied Zack, turning and leading the way off the bridge, exiting after Felix told Jody he'd be back shortly.

The dolphin and rabbit sprinted through the ship, following the corridor to the engine room, where Zack led Felix over to a panel in the wall, and pulled it open. "Here they are," he said, revealing a set of a dozen toggle switches, each one marked with a number, and below them a diagram that showed which switch connected to what light, and where it was on the ship.

"Perfect," said Felix. "Like I said, this is going to be old fashioned. I just hope someone down there knows how to read it." He turned to the wall-mounted intercom, stepping over to it and pressing the transmit button for the bridge. "Jody, can you angle the ship so the port-side faces the people on the landing pad?"

"*One moment,*" replied Jody. Then, Felix felt the ship moving, almost losing his balance as he was caught off guard by the sudden motion. Usually, when the ship moved, he was at the helm, seated in the pilots' chair; he wasn't used to being the one on his feet when the ship was active. "*Okay, done; what're you planning to do?*"

"I'm going to try using old morse code to tell them what we're here for," Felix replied.

"*Morse... what?*"

"What, you weren't taught it in basic piloting?" Felix asked.

"*I guess I missed that day... but who in the nebula would even understand it?*"

"Another pilot, I'm hoping," he replied. "Hold her steady." With that, he turned back to the controls for the lights, and reviewed the processes in his head, before he shutting off the automatic controls with the press of a button above the switches, and began flicking different switches on and off to match the sequence of letters he wanted to use to spell out his message. "C-A-R-R-Y... I-N-G..."

"Felix, you sure that moon scout bull is gonna work?" Zachary asked incredulously.

"It's either that or we risk their turrets taking shots at us for unauthorized landing," replied Felix.

"...Keep going."

"Thought so," replied Felix, before he resumed. "P-R-E-C-I-O-U-S... C-A-R-G-O..."

He muttered out the rest of his message as he used the light controls to spell it out, stopping briefly to ask Jody if anything happened down at the landing pad, before he resumed the process again, starting from the beginning. He probably repeated the process six times, his fingers sore by the time he heard the call from Jody; *"something's happening down there,"* she informed. *"The lights on the landing pad just came on, and two of the colonists are flashing a light at us."*

"Be right there," Felix said, before he switched the lights back to their off-positions and turned the auto-control back on, and with that, he and Zack left the engine room, and sprinted back to the bridge.

Upon arriving back at the bridge, Felix peered out through the window, spotting the light Jody had been referring to. As he'd hoped, it was blinking in morse code; he was able to spell out some things, but not a complete message, so he waited for them to start again. "Clear... to... land... at... illuminated... landing pad." He nodded, and looked to Jody. "We're clear; can you land the ship or, do you want me to take over?"

She eyed him with mild irritation, but the frown on her face turned to defeat, and she stepped out of the seat, letting him return to it. "Better you do it; I'm not used to this ship yet. Its control and handling are... well, just not as new as the shuttle I fly.

"Really? What's it like?" Zack asked as Felix took control of the ship once more, and steered it down towards the landing pad of the Ares Colony.

"I fly a Galaxy Glider ship, like this one, but instead of a freight I pilot a model 112 passenger shuttle, an interplanetary transport line that goes to planets all across the sector, with a separate drive engine for acceleration gate travel, and a high-grade cooling system, so that its warp engines can be reused immediately after coming out of a Warp Bubble. It carries up to six hundred passengers, fully-staffed."

"Whoa, wait... you mean you're the pilot of a luxury liner?" Zack asked.

"Oh, no no no," replied Jody. "I fly a shuttle, not a cruise ship. Cruise liners require full bridge crews with helmsmen, engineers and technicians that can repair the ship even while it's still on voyage; mine only needs me and my co-pilot to fly and gets checked over wherever we make port. The staff I'm referring to are the attendants; waitresses, basically, and, as was ordered by the Government as of ten years ago, at least two or three Security Officers."

"Passenger ships need Security?"

"Mine serves alcohol to passengers," explained Jody. "Sometimes, a passenger might have more than his share and cause some problems. Security Officers are there to deter that. There's usually two or three to cover the full process of a day, although the other one or ones are always on call, in case the first needs help with a passenger. If he gets too out of control there are two solitary quarters where they put them until they sober up or the ship reaches port, where the authorities take over for them."

“Anyone ever smuggled weapons aboard?” Zachary asked.

“Never once; as is required by Confederate law, if they insist on bringing weapons with them, those things must be stored in the cargo bay. Anyone caught carrying one, even if they’re licensed for it, will have it confiscated and will immediately be arrested. Just in case though, the Officers carry stun pistols to incapacitate would-be violators,” she patted her hip. “And, so do the pilots, although I’m required to leave mine on the ship when I disembark, so no, I don’t have it.”

“Nice,” said Zachary, stumbling a little as the ship touched down on the landing pad; during the course of his conversation with Jody, Felix had landed the ship, port-side facing towards the colony walls. “What does it feel like to get shot with a stun pistol?”

“Why would you even *want* to know that?” Jody asked quizzically.

Zack shrugged. “I’m a curious bunny,” he replied, flashing a grin.

For a few seconds, Jody didn’t answer; when the ship was powering down, the two noticed Felix getting up from his seat and leaving the bridge, and proceeded to accompany him towards the cargo bay entrance.

“They feel like you’re being electrocuted, and your whole body goes limp as a corpse,” the porpoise said to Zack.

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The crew was put to work immediately after opening the cargo bay doors. They assisted the workmen who met them at the landing pad with unloading the cargo onto hover-dollies, which, once they were loaded, would be taken up to the colony for wherever they were intended. Gustav had organized each type of supplies aboard the ship according to what they were for –food, medicine, water, electrical parts- in separate stacks, to make it easier to sort through which dolly would be carrying what.

During the unloading process Gustav eyed a few amateur workmen who seemed to have trouble securing the boxes of food and water supplies they were taking. He hopped down from the ship and helped them rearrange the items until they were neatly stacked and easily secured. Thanking him, they shipped the supplies off.

Jordan McFain, the colony manager and a black-feathered avian who greeted them when they landed, was talking with Felix on the edge of the landing pad. “I’m glad these supplies made it, although I fear they may not be able to help us,” he said.

“Why not?” Felix asked. “You’ve got a good stock of everything you need here.”

“Yes, but not of people who know how to use ‘em,” replied McFain. “Most of our doctors and engineers are at the minin’ camp or the foundry; the Grunikans have a squad of soldiers nearby, we know because they already attacked us just hours before you got here and one of the casualties of the raid was our communication tower, as you no doubt noticed. The monorail crews don’t want to risk crossing over to the foundry, or the Grunikans may try to destroy the rail lines while people are on them. So, that’s our predicament; we got maybe two doctors left, and some rookie technicians who were on time off trying to repair the towers. We

were lucky, really; we weren't hit by the bombardments, but their ground forces have still made an ass of themselves."

"Maybe my crew can help?" Felix offered.

"Would you?" The manager asked, hopeful.

Felix nodded. "I need something from you, though," he said. "Aboard my ship is a young woman from the Atlanta Colony; her family is there, and she needs a way home. Do you have anyone who may be able to give her transport there?"

"That I do; I could ask any of our regular drivers to take her there," replied McFain. "Of course, they can't leave until they know the roadways are safe. Atlanta is across the river, and the bridge to get there is under the control of the Grunikans right now."

Felix tilted his head in question to McFain's words. "Haven't the Marines tried to secure the bridge?"

"If they have, we ain't been able to check," McFain replied, once more gesturing to the downed communication tower. "And I ain't about to send one of my people out there where they could run into the Grunikans."

"I don't blame you for that," agreed Felix. He turned his gaze over to the ship as the last of the boxes were being loaded out onto the hover dollies. He called out to Zack and Jessica, who placed the large box they were carrying together onto the assigned dolly before running over to see what Felix needed. "Jessica; the doctors here are short-handed and could use some help. Think you could go give them an assist?"

"Sure thing," replied Jessica. "Where can I find them?"

"Head up the ramp to the colony grounds," McFain directed. "Keep following the path straight until you get to where the remains of the comm tower are and turn right; once you go onto the block towards residential district A, look for a building with a red cross; should be the third one on the right. If you hit the ration house, you've gone too far."

Jessica nodded, and turned to head for the ramps, while Felix gave a job to Zachary. "Zack, I want you to see if you can help fix the communication tower," he directed. "They need their comms back online here or nobody will be able to warn them if an attack comes. That could also mean us getting caught in the crossfire, so you better hustle."

"Aye, aye captain!" Zack barked, mocking a salute before he strode off for the ramp where Jessica had gone.

"...He knows you're supposed to salute with your right hand, not the left, doesn't he?" McFain asked.

"Nope," replied Felix. "Now, do you..."

"Felix!" Gustav suddenly called out, catching the dolphins' attention. Felix turned towards the ship, and observed Gustav coming out from underneath it, his shirt dampened somehow. "We've got a rupture in the hull; the water tank got a hole punched into it."

"Uh oh..." Felix muttered, before excusing himself and leaving McFain to get back to his own duties.

Felix strode over to the ship, and followed Gustav underneath, until he noticed a puddle of water forming beneath the freighter, precious water pouring out and covering the landing

pad. Felix smelled it, confirming that it was water and not the coolant for the engines, and let out a groan of frustration.

"Just our luck," he complained, before looked at Gustav. "Do me a favor; see if any of the workmen here have a welding torch they can lend us."

"On it," said Gustav.

"Oh, have you seen Amber anywhere too? I'll need her to help me weld this thing."

"I think she's on the roof; she mentioned something about turrets' discharge being the wrong energy level or something," replied the Orca.

"Alright; I'll go look for her up there," said Felix.

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They had to let the water drain out before they could begin welding, meaning they would have to refill before they went back out to space again, but thankfully water on Ithica VII was plentiful and wouldn't cost them any extra credits. Once the water was drained out, Felix and Amber went to work on patching up the hole; the maintenance crews for the colony had an extra plate of Quadrantium alloy, the same metal the ships' hull was made from, that they sold to Felix at a discount, thanks in no small part to his bartering skills.

He helped Amber straighten out the hole in the ship, borrowing some additional power tools from maintenance that reshaped the metal and allowed Amber to weld them back together with the plasma welder Gustav had found for them. Once the hole was sealed, she welded the plate Felix had purchased to add an extra layer to it, fusing it to the hull until it looked like it was part of the frame.

Quadrantium, or its superior sister-alloy, Quintanium, was sturdy, but not impenetrable, least of all against high-powered, ship mounted weapons. Against handheld weapons it was nigh indestructible, and could only be welded with a plasma torch. Felix thanked good fortune that Amber was just as good with a welding torch as she was with firearms.

When Amber confirmed the hole was sealed, she shut off the welder. "That should do it; all fixed," she said. "Now I just have to get inside the water tank itself and seal up the hole in there too. Where's the access hatch?"

"Should be at the back of the store room," replied Felix. "I'll go into town and see about getting someone down here to refill it for us."

Amber nodded. "Good call," she said, before she seemed to remember something and looked at Felix. "Any luck on finding someone to take Jody home, by the way?"

"Possibly, but nobody's going anywhere until the patrol of Grunikan soldiers in the area is dealt with," replied Felix. "Jody may have to wait a little while."

"You might want to go speak with her; she seemed worried," Amber informed.

"Worried? About what?"

"I didn't ask; doubt she'd want to speak with me after..." She paused. "After my... less than satisfactory first impression back on Dory II."

Felix reached over and held her shoulder firmly. "Don't beat yourself up over it," he assured her. "I'm sure Jody will forgive you for it, once she knows the real you. But anyway, I'll go check on her; thanks for telling me."

"No problem; see you later," Amber replied.

Felix made his way over to the airlock ramp and climbed back aboard the ship, crossing the corridor until he came to Jody's room; the door was closed, and it was quiet inside. Felix approached the door and gently knocked, waiting a moment for a response. There was none, though; he knocked a second time. "Jody? Are you in there?" He called.

"Come in..." Jody's voice called through the door.

Felix opened the door, and saw Jody seated on her bed, tapping her foot impatiently on the metal floor. She looked up at the dolphin as he entered. "Something wrong?" She asked.

"That's what I'm here to ask you," Felix asked. "Are you alright?"

"Not really," she replied, without any hesitation. "I can't get in contact with anyone at Atlanta colony..."

"Well, maybe their communications are down, like the Ares Colony," suggested Felix. "I'm sure they're fine; they're away from the danger zone, aren't they?"

"Still, I wish I could at least check in with them," she returned. "If the Grunikans have already made it across the river it's only a matter of time before they reach Atlanta Colony and overwhelm the Aresians as well."

"Don't go thinking like that," scolded Felix. "You have to try and stay positive, Jody, or you're going to tear yourself apart from the inside out."

She gave no response to his words, sitting silently on her bed for a moment, before looked up at Felix. "So," she said. "Why are you guys hanging around here? You've done your job; shouldn't you be leaving to go get paid?"

"Normally yes, but with all that chaos going on up there in orbit, I think we can all agree it's not safe to leave yet," replied Felix. "I spoke to the manager of this place, McFain; he's got some people willing to take you home, but he doesn't want to risk it until he's sure it's safe to send people out."

Jody was about to respond when a thump caught their ears; Felix looked over his shoulder in time to see Zack coming up the ramp to the airlock and charging across the corridor to the dolphin. "Hey, Felix, Jody; I managed to help the Aresians get their communications back online and a transmission came through! You're going to want to hear this!" He barked before he spun on his heel and ran over to the bridge, urging them to hurry up and follow him.

Felix and Jody exchanged quizzical glances briefly before Jody stood up from her bed, walking with Felix out of her room and heading over to the bridge, where they saw Zack looking over the communication terminal, staring at it blankly. "Eh... how the heck do you operate one of these?" He asked.

"Here," said Felix, walking up to the terminal and tapping a button on the keyboard to switch the power on. "Now, what should we be listening for, exactly?"

"Set it on open channel," replied Zack.

Felix shrugged, and leaned over the terminal keypad, tapping a hotkey he'd designated for open channel communication. The instant the terminal re-tuned itself for open frequency, a static ridden transmission was heard from the speakers of the terminal; barely decipherable through all of the interference that was clouding it. The static was painful to the ear and made Felix cringe whenever he heard it; he tried lowering the volume and adjusted the receiver to increase its reception strength, until the message became clearer.

*"...lanx transmitting from five ki... west of Atlanta Colony; we've crash landed and are being hit hard by the Grunikan Ground Forces that chased us down! I repeat, this is a prio... one message to any available Confederate unit... from the Confederate Command... Phalanx!"*

"The Phalanx?" Felix asked. "Weren't the Yellow Jackets talking about a ship called the Phalanx being shot down as we came in?"

"Yeah, they did," replied Jody. "Sounds like they've survived, and they've landed near Atlanta Colony."

"Do you think the colonists will go and help them?" Zack asked.

"Hard to say," replied Jody. "Our Militia Captain is always willing to help out but we don't have many militia troops at all; we never needed that many since we're just an agricultural colony. Just enough to protect the colony itself and the farmland around it." Suddenly, her expression changed to a look of realization. "Oh no... the Grunikans are near my home; they *are* already across the river!"

Felix swallowed nervously... he'd promised to help Jody get home, but based on what they had heard, her home was already in the danger zone, not in the safe area like they had been led to believe, and there were people trapped out there at the mercy of the Grunikan Marines; something had to be done...

Felix turned to Zack. "Go get the others," he instructed. "We're taking off."

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"Tell me again why we are the ones heading into danger to help the Phalanx?" Amber asked. "I'm not saying it isn't the right thing to do, but, shouldn't we leave it to the Marines? These are Grunikan soldiers we're going up against."

"The Marines have their hands full around here," replied Felix as he steered the ship along, keeping low as they crossed the landscape to attract less attention. "We can get there faster than they can, and it'd be wrong to not try helping those people. We're just going there to pick them up, and then we'll take them over to Atlanta Colony, where they'll not only receive the care they need but they'll be able to help defend the colony as well."

Amber was about to speak again when the communication terminal beeped three times, alerting them that someone was trying to contact them on a private channel. Jody was not on the bridge at the moment, so Felix reached over to let the transmission through.

"Maras' Hope here; who is this?" Felix asked.

"Felix; it's Captain Noir," the caller replied.

"Good to hear from you, Captain; I see the Grunikans haven't gotten the better of you," remarked Felix.

"The Emperors' bootlickers keep trying, m'boy," he replied. "But this old soldier has some fight left in him yet. Have you made the delivery to the Ares Colony; are they secure?"

"Supplies have been delivered and the colony is still holding on, but I wouldn't say they're safe," replied Felix. "Grunikan ground forces are in the area, several of their people are still trapped at the mines and the foundry near their colony, and are afraid to try and get back."

"There's a squad of Marines near there who should be able to assist; I'll get a message to them," Noir promised. "But there's something else I needed to speak to you about; have you heard the emergency broadcast from the Phalanx?"

"Yes, we did."

"Good, then I have another job for you," Noir began. "I've been ordered to extract the Phalanx crew but one of my Carrier ships was destroyed in the battle along with all of my evacuation shuttles; I've got no ships I can send down to get them, and the Marines I sent to back them up have been stopped by the Grunikan firing line; they dug themselves in near the Phalanx and aren't letting anyone near it, or away from it."

"Why would the Grunikans be after the Phalanx?" Felix asked. "It's just a ship; what interest is it to them?"

"I don't know," Noir replied. "Battle thirst, or seeking prisoners; I'm not sure what interest they'd have in the Phalanx. It's just a Warflyers' Battlecruiser-class ship; nothing they haven't faced before when last we fought them."

"Well, regardless, we already got the distress call any we're enroute to their position now," reported Felix. "We'll get those men out of there and get them over to Atlanta Colony where they'll be safe for the time being."

"Also, I need to warn you," Noir urged. "I've been in contact with the commanding officer of the Phalanx; his name is Victor Van Barron, a Lieutenant for the Fourth Fleet, and he reports that the Grunikans, in standing pin-down procedure, set up an anti-aircraft turret and a signal jammer, which is why they took so long to send the distress call –they had to destroy the jammer first. Grunikan turrets are usually automated and will shot anything higher than two hundred feet in the air, but their portability comes at a cost; they're about as sturdy as bark off of a tree and a clean hit should be enough to destroy it, if your gunner can make the shot."

"Watch me," Amber said confidently.

"Who was that?" Noir asked.

"My gunner," Felix replied, with a chuckle. "Thanks for the warning captain; we'll be on our guard. Don't worry; I'll get your men out of there."

"Thank you, Felix," returned Noir. "I know I've said it before, but good luck. Noir out."

Felix shut off the receiver for the private channel, and looked over to Amber. "You're sure you can take out that turret before we take a hit?" Felix asked.

"Do Gelks have bad breath?" Amber asked, smiling confidently. "I'll get it; don't you worry. Just get us close enough for me to see it and I'll do the rest."

"Good, then mount up; we're almost there."

"Right away."

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The Mara's Hope swerved to the right and left as Felix steered it evasively to avoid the ground fire coming from the automated turret set up by the Grunikans. Blue beams of pure, concentrated electrical energy lanced past the ship on all sides; on the bridge, Felix could hear the sound of the lasers as they shot past, emitting a sound not unlike the buzzing of a winged insect, only much louder and more intimidating to hear.

The turret was almost in range, but the closer Felix got to it, the closer the shots were getting, until he felt the ship groan as one of the beams grazed along its port side. He grit his teeth and sped up, focused only on destroying that gun. "Now or never, Amber; nail it!" Felix shouted.

Almost as if on cue, the turret fired, and from above the viewport, a red sphere of energy and heat soared towards the ground turret, striking it clean where the joint of its quad-barreled cannons connected to its body; the resulting impact severed the weapon into two pieces, the area they were hit glowing red-hot from the burning power of the energized plasma projectile.

With the gunfire stopped, Felix boldly swept over the defensive lines of the Grunikan forces, eyeing the scattering, winged forms of the draco-morphs below. Fearing that the unknown pilot was trying to deliberately crash his ship, the dragon-like soldiers instinctively scattered, caught only by the draft of the ship racing over them. With that, Felix banked the ship right, circling around towards the wreck of the Phalanx near the Grunikan lines; the ship, resembling a shrunken-down version of the Odysseus, would never fly again, its hull lying in pieces all across the land around them, the largest of which, being where the survivors were.

Half of the destroyed ship jutted up from the ground, the drag trail behind it indicating a literal face-plant directly into the planets' surface, leaving behind pieces of itself for several kilometers. As they neared the battle line for the crews' survivors, he witnessed a makeshift wall had been set up in front of shallow entrenchment where the onboard marine crew had dug in to defend the ship, but with the interference of the Mara's Hope, all gunfire from both sides had stopped... at least for the moment.

"Amber, do what you can to keep the Grunikans from coming after us!" Felix called as he began the landing cycle, trying to put the ship down as close to the wreckage as possible. "Buy us time to get those men on board!"

"Roger that!" Amber called back, followed shortly after by more shots from the turret.

Felix sprang up from his seat, running out into the corridor, where he met Jody, who passed him an energy rifle. Felix hesitantly took it, fully aware that he'd have to use it, but hoping he wouldn't. He nodded to her as he slung it across his shoulders, and pointed to the cargo bay. "You and Gustav in the cargo bay; get the doors open and start loading those marines on, I've got the airlock!"

"Got it!" She replied, and dashed through the door to the airlock, while Felix turned and ducked into the airlock, keeping the door behind him open.

Felix turned to the control panel, punching in the command to lower the ramp and open the door; the exterior door opened with a hiss, and the ramp creaked as it lowered, extending

until it touched the dirt of the ground outside. To the dolphin it felt like the ramp took longer than it normally did, but that wasn't true; he was just rushed, the adrenaline of the imminent battle making his heart race and his shoulders shake with a mix of anticipation and fear.

Running out onto the ramp, he peered towards the wreckage of the Phalanx. He saw the Confederate Marines, identifiable by their matching body armour and energy weapons that made them difficult to determine racial differences except by the shape of their helmets or by their tails, which were also armoured with cleverly-articulated metal plates. Most of the marines carried rifles, but a few were only carrying pistols, possibly forced to switch to their sidearms due to running out of power for their primary weapons, or losing them in the crash.

The Marines were looking up at Felix; one who was missing their helmet eyed him incredulously, apparently not having expected an unmarked civilian vessel to be the one that came to their rescue, or perhaps the little spectacle that he had put on when he had arrived, destroying the turret and scaring the scales off of their enemies.

Felix flashed a grin at them. "Didn't you guys call for an evacuation?" He called out to them. "Your ride's waiting so, come on!"

They didn't move for a moment, until one of them, one of the few not wearing a helmet, stepped forward. The marine was a gray reptilian with a more decorative suit of armour than the rest, bearing horizontal white stripes across the middle of the torso, the forearms and the upper arms, just under the large black '4-5' painted into the armour plating.

"You heard the man!" The reptilian bellowed. "Get on that ship, now!"

The cargo bay doors opened, revealing Gustav and Jody, both armed with rifles as well. As the marines approached, some jumped up to the cargo bay doors to haul themselves aboard; Gustav helped those closed to him, using his big, strong arms to hoist them up, surprising many of them with his strength. Without their armour, these men would be fit and fairly heavy, but the armour they wore added easily another fifty pounds, give or take, to their mass, yet Gustav was able to lift them just as easily as if they weren't wearing it at all.

His example motivated several other marines to also help their comrades aboard, along with unarmoured refugees Felix assumed were probably the bridge and engineering crew of the Phalanx. Over on the boarding ramp, Felix waved the men aboard, each of them climbing in single file to fit on the narrow ramp; they were making good time, moving with practiced organization, walking in each other's footsteps. Felix counted heads as the men got on board, for a moment concerned about floor space for the marines, and directed them into the cargo bay.

"Felix!" Amber called. "The Grunikans are flanking us; they're at the front and rear of the ship and I can't get them!"

"How many?" Felix asked.

"For the Empire!" a deep voice bellowed suddenly as one of the last few marines climbing the boarding ramp was suddenly lanced clean through the neck by a blue laser beam; the poor soul went down immediately, nearly taking some of his comrades in arms with him as he fell from the ramp and hit the ground below.

"Shit!" Felix cursed, spinning around and taking aim with his rifle.

For the first time in his life, he saw the Grunikans up close. Many of them wore a silvery-grey suit of armour over their bodies, but it only covered their torsos, lower legs, groins and forearms, while the rest was exposed flesh. Their helmets did not hide their faces, but encompassed the rest of their heads, and each one was custom designed for the soldier wearing it—many of the Grunikans had horns growing from their skulls, and each helmet had to be designed to fit their horns. Each one of them was large; their sizes varied but even the smallest one utterly dwarfed Felix in size, and they varied in colour, ranging from red to blue, or shades like black and gray.

Felix ducked under another shot aimed for him; it struck the hull of the ship just above his head. In retaliation, he fired back, a red beam erupting from the tip of his rifle and striking a Grunikan directly in the chestplate, successfully penetrating his armour and sending him falling to the ground, dead before he hit the dirt.

Immediately, Felix felt his stomach clench at the realization he has just killed another living person, but he fought against it, urging the Confederate Marines to get aboard and continued to shoot, hoping to lay down some suppressive fire and keep the draco-morphs at bay until the marines were safely on the ship. Gustav and Jody had finished helping their share into the cargo bay and had shut the doors.

Soon, Felix confirmed everyone was aboard and turned to get back inside himself.

White-hot pain shot through his back as he felt something grab his tail and pull harshly on it; he was yanked back before he could even cry out, losing his rifle in the process of grabbing onto the doorframe. It was all he could do to keep from being pulled off of the ship. He looked down between his legs, and saw a large, brown draco-morph had grabbed him by the tail, one he hadn't noticed before; the only explanation for this untimely appearance was that the Grunikan had snuck underneath the ship to get the drop on Felix, and now had him by his tail, trying to drag him out.

Felix defiantly kicked the Grunikan in the face, trying to make him let go of his tail, but he was stubborn, and refused to release his captive, no matter how many boots to the forehead he took. Felix was starting to lose his grip on the door, the strength of the big dragon vastly superior to that of the smaller cetacean. He watched in horror as the Grunikan raised his other arm, and with a clench of his fist, a golden-yellow light erupted from an open slot above his wrist, extending out to a length above as long as the average person's arm before stopping and forming a triangular blade that crackled and whirred ominously.

The dolphin knew he was doomed if he lost his grip now, and tried to reaffirm it, but still he felt his fingers starting to slip...

A black and white figure dashed across his field of vision, while a slim but strong pair of arms grabbed him around his middle; he saw Gustav darting down the ramp and punching the brown Grunikan across the face; even the orca wasn't stronger than the Grunikan, but he was just strong enough that a direct punch from him made the scaly creature release Felix. The figure that had grabbed him, Amber, hauled Felix into the ship before yelling at Gustav to get back on board.

Blue beams raced past the orca as he hurried up the ramp; the Grunikan he had punched out before was getting back to his feet, and was about to climb the ramp in pursuit,

until Amber popped out and shot him directly in the face with her pistol, ending him and sending him tumbling off of the ramp.

Felix scrambled to his feet, and slammed his fist on the 'close door' button for the airlock; the ramp retracted and the door fell shut outside, a hiss informing the crew that the seals had closed and the airlock was air-tight. With that, he ran out of the airlock, turned and strode over to the bridge, reaching his pilots' chair in just four steps before he dropped into it, and hurriedly switched the power back on; the ship hummed to life, and when it was warmed up enough, Felix activated the underside repulsors, elevating the ship up from the ground and retracting the landing gear.

Gunfire raged outside, and he knew the Grunikans were trying to shoot their way into the ship, but such an attempt was futile; no handheld weapon could damage a Quadrantium hull, not even one made by a civilization as warmongering as the Grunikan Empire. Still, Felix was in no hurry to wait to see if they had anything big enough to do so, and pushed the throttle forward.

The ship was off like a shot, leaving the Grunikans to roar at it in frustration as it fled, many of them still aimlessly firing their weapons at it as if they could stop it, but nothing could slow the Mara's Hope as it raced away from the battlefield...

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Felix touched the ship down at the Atlanta Colony a half hour later. During the flight, he had calmed his nerves, the adrenaline of the previous battle passing him by, and allowing him to properly land the ship without any problems. Atlanatan Militia rushed out to meet the at the landing pad, accompanied by paramedical teams carrying stretchers for anyone who may have been injured.

Thanking the crew of the Mara's Hope as they left, the Confederate Marines disembarked. The last to leave was the gray reptillian Felix had met before, who introduced himself; he was in fact Lieutenant Van Barron, the commanding officer of the Phalanx.

"You have done a fantastic service for the Confederacy, young man," he said, respectfully. "I won't lie to you, when we were trapped aboard the ship and unable to reach the escape pods, I was afraid we were finished."

"How many did you lose?" Felix asked.

"Those who did reach the pods are currently MIA, and we've confirmed that more than a quarter of the Phalanxes' crew were spaced when the ship was ruptured," the reptillian replied, shaking his head in sadness. "By Starlight, those poor souls, dying in the planets' atmosphere, the rest of us lucky to be alive after being left out in the open for the Grunikans to attack."

"Why did they come after you anyway?" Felix asked.

"Grunikans are not just conquerors, they're also slavers," replied Van Barron. "Prisoners of war become slaves in their factories, and civilians become servants in their households, or worse. A ship my size would've been a bountiful 'harvest' for them to take to their slave market."

“So that was it; they were just after you for slaves?” Felix asked in disgust.

“Every Grunikan who captures a slave is permitted to sell them for his own profit,” replied. “Or, if they so choose, keep them for their own house. Sometimes they launch attacks on asteroid mining camps or trade ships just to get the people who are working there, and leave behind the cargo or materials if it’s nothing they want. For them, living ‘cargo’ is much more valuable than precious metals or trade goods.”

“That is just sickening,” Felix scoffed, now not feeling so bad about the one he had killed before taking off.

“I could not agree more,” returned Van Barron, who glanced over his shoulder for a moment. “I’m the last then.” He turned back to Felix. “Thank you again for your help Felix. I’ll add my own share to the reward Captain Noir is paying you for a job well done.” He saluted Felix respectfully, and with that, he turned and walked over to the airlock, disappearing down the ramp.

“Looks like you’ve made a friend.” Felix turned and found Jody standing just outside of her room, smiling at him. “Those men owe you their lives.”

“I was just doing what was right,” replied Felix, honestly. “Paid or not I probably still would have done it.” He looked towards the airlock, and then back at Jody, noticing the bag hanging from her shoulder. “I... guess this is where you’ll be getting off, then?”

Jody nodded. “Yeah,” she replied, a hint of reluctance in her voice. “Though, I’m not going to forget this trip anytime soon. You have some good people working with you Felix; I know star captains who’d kill to have people like yours at their back.” The last sentence was clearly exaggerated.

Felix smiled at the compliment. “I know... and I’m glad to have them,” he said.

“If you’re ever in the neighborhood, don’t be strangers, okay?” Jody said as she walked past Felix; she touched his chest with her hand, and he felt something slip into the pocket of his vest. “Look me up if you’re ever visiting Atlanta Colony.”

With that, she leaned up and kissed his cheek; Felix’s face heated up as her soft cetacean lips touched his face, and he stood, somewhat stunned, as he watched her leave the ship, looking back at him only once to wave goodbye before she descended down the ramp and vanished from sight.

He touched his vest pocket, and reached inside, feeling something flat and hard at the bottom of the pocket, which he pulled out, finding an aluminum card clenched between his fingers, with a house number and civilian transmission code on the surface in bright, bronze, illuminated letters.

Felix blinked at the card blankly, and grimaced. “She gave me her number,” he muttered.

The grimace turned to a slight grin, and he pocketed the card before he went over to the airlock doors and punched in the code to close them on the control panel. Once it was securely shut, he made his way back over to the bridge, seating himself at the navigational computer and setting it for the coordinates back to Trident IV...