

Voyages of the Mara

Chapter 4: Desertion

The Mara's Hope met the Odysseus in orbit above Ithica VII. The planet had been successfully defended; the Grunikan fleet had been destroyed down to their terrifying Dreadnaught, which had fled the battle before it was eliminated, allowing other ships to send more marines down to the planets' surface to help clear out the remaining pocket groups of the Grunikan Marine corps on the surface. Thanks to the relief supplies Felix and his company had brought, he was told, countless injured workers and Colonial Militia received proper care at Ares Colony; even some refugees from Colony's that had been unable to hold on had gone to them and pulled through.

The whole ship was filled with feelings of satisfaction. Felix's ship landed aboard the surviving supercarrier of Captain Noir's fleet, and there he met the wolf star captain surrounded by grateful soldiers; many of his men, he reminded, had family on Ithica VII, and the aid for the planet had been greatly appreciated.

Noir shook hands with Felix when they met up. "My boy, job well done," he said. "You completed your task with flying colours, and then some; you saved an entire colony, the crew of a ship—including its commanding officer, and whether or not you know it, your actions were a significant contribution to protecting this planet. You even took down some of their pilots yourself; small contributions like that, in my experience, are worth more than some people may claim."

Felix flushed at the compliments. "Come on, Captain; it was hardly worth THAT much praise."

"Regardless, you have done your job and surpassed all expectations. I'm proud to present you with this," he said as he produced a Credrive from his pocket and passed it to Felix. "Your promised reward, along with several bonuses contributed by Lieutenant Van Barron, and a family at the Atlanta Colony who wanted to thank you for returning their daughter to them; they contacted me just before you left the planet, and asked I give you the reward on their behalf."

Felix nodded and accepted the Credrive, producing Amber's portable terminal; he'd borrowed it from her in advance so that he could check the Credrive before leaving, just in case. It wasn't that he didn't trust Captain Noir, but it never hurt to be too careful. Inserting the Credrive into an open slot on the terminal, a sequence of numbers appeared on the screen for him to read.

One-hundred and seven thousand, seven hundred and sixty-two credits...

Felix gawked at the number; it was much higher than the promised reward he had been offered when Captain Noir had hired him, and he felt his heart flutter with glee. With this, he'd be able to give his mother enough money for her to pay back the entire colony, and still have enough left over to give the ship some imminent maintenance it would soon need after so

much travelling; even on brand-new parts, travelling into another star system entirely could be quite taxing on the components of a ship. An example being, reactor coolant was recommended to be changed every two-hundred million kilometers of travel or so, and the Mara's hope had almost passed that number already; by the time they got to Sarissa III on their way back, by his calculations, it would need that coolant change.

With this much money though, the colony could even start rebuilding.

Felix looked at Captain Noir. "You have no idea how much this will mean to my colony back on Trident IV," he said.

"It is money well-earned, my boy," assured Noir. "You're a hero to many colonists down there on Ithica VII, and just as much of one to Van Barron and his men. You should be proud of yourself for what you've achieved here today."

At those words, the soldier escort that had accompanied Captain Noir stood at attention and respectfully saluted Felix, making the dolphin flush with embarrassment. Shaking hands with Noir one more time –and nearly jumping as a photograph was snapped by a wartime reporter that had been watching their conversation, Felix returned to the Mara's Hope, gears turning in his head as he contemplated how best to use the money; most it, nearly all of it, was going to the colony of course, but he had promised his crew he would start paying them when he could. The opportunity had presented itself now...

Felix stepped back aboard the ship, taking the time to launch from the supercarrier they were on and turning the ship for the acceleration gate, wanting to get them on their way before he announced the news to the others. Once through the gate, Felix set the ship on auto-pilot, the navigational computer set to take them to Sarissa III once they were there; the nav was locked onto Trident IV of course, but it was programmed to stop them at Sarissa III for cooldown, coolant change, and then they'd be on their way home.

Once the ship was through the acceleration gate, Felix got up, and headed over to the lounge, knowing that's where his friends were. He opened the door and stepped inside, seeing everyone over at the bar counter, sharing a platter of potato fries and smoked fish speared on long, thin, plastic sticks and sipping on choice drinks, all of them smiling proudly to one another. Gustav was behind the counter, serving the food and drinks, but every way part of the conversation just as they were.

Felix approached them, and politely got their attention. "I have an announcement to make," he said. "We've been paid extra, lots of extra, for everything we did down on the planets' surface," he explained. "Our good samaritan act gained us another twenty thousand credits, plus the money we got from Jody, and bonuses thrown in by grateful citizens, including Lieutenant Van Barron and his crew as well. To celebrate this, I'm making good on the promise I made to you all; I'm giving all of you your own paychecks, to spend as you like when we get back to Denver XII, going to use some more to get the ship whatever else it still needs, and the rest is going right to the colony; everyone will get their life savings back, and better yet, they too will be able to start being paid for their work again!"

"For real?!" Zack demanded, his ears shooting upright with excitement. "We made *that* much?!"

"I can barely believe it," said Amber, but not with negativity; her voice was filled only with joy. "We barely started our voyages a month ago, yet on one good job, we're about to fix everything! The colony will prosper again!"

"Not everything," said Felix. "There's still more we have to do. Remember, the Mara Colony is in disrepair; I'm certain my mother will have more work for us to do when we get back, but now we have the resources to finally bring a fresh start for the colony; with a little more work we'll be able to add more Salt Separators to what the colony already has, and be able to start selling it at other stations entirely, bringing more revenue into the Mara Colony, and giving everyone steady jobs again."

"It's a whole new start," said Jessica, beaming with happiness. "We did it... we've saved the Mara Colony."

Felix smiled. "I couldn't have done it with all of you. That's why, on a total budget of ten thousand credits, I'm giving all five of us, myself including, an equal share, using another ten to give the ship some much-needed touching up, the odd numbers to start a company budget for all of us, I'm going to use twenty at Denver XII –less if I can talk 'em down- for a new communications tower for the colony, while all the rest, I give to my mother, to pay back the colonists who lent us the money and made all of this possible."

"Sounds like a plan to me, and a good use of money," stated Gustav.

"Here, here," agreed Amber, lifting her glass in cheers, which she tapped against Gustav's.

"Alright; for once I can't wait to get home and see the look on everyone's faces when we get back with all that cash!" Zack exclaimed.

"Agreed," said Felix. "But it's a long trip before we get back; let's enjoy the free time."

"That sounds like an invitation to party!" Zack barked. "Who's got the snacks; suddenly I feel like dancing!"

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*One week later...*

Antoni Zambrano suddenly burst in through the door of the office, nearly making Brunhilda jump out of her chair as the human forced the door open and charged inside. She glared up at him as he entered. "Does 'knocking' mean anything to you, Mr. Zambrano?"

"Sorry Ms. Kaufmann but we've got a problem!" Zambrano exclaimed. "Motion sensors around the island are going off; the Gelks are coming up to the surface again!"

Brunhilda shot to her feet, eyes wide open with a mixture of shock and fear. "The Gelks? How far away?"

"One kilometer below the surface is where the motion sensors started sounding off; they'll be up here any moment," returned Zambrano. "I've already ordered my men to begin directing people back into their homes and then take position at the walls."

"Good," returned Brunhilda. "Keep me informed, Commander, and do whatever it takes to keep those Gelks away from the walls; they must not get inside the colony!"

“I’m on it!” Antoni returned, and rushed back outside, running out of the office once more.

When Antoni Zambrano was gone, Brunhilda slid back from her desk, reaching into the pocket of her skirt and producing a metal key; she knelt down, unlocking a drawer and pulling it open, revealing a small energy pistol inside. It was an older model pistol, a weapon she’d had for a long time but never really used, with a triangular-prism design to its battery, and a long barrel extending from it, but what she liked about the weapon was how the grip fit her hand perfectly, although she’d only ever fired it four times in her life.

She switched on the gun, disengaging the safety and looking at the energy bar on the side; it was sitting at ninety seven percent, more than enough for a firefight. She placed it upon the desk before her, returning to her chair and folding her hands in front of her as she waited, silently praying to the stars that her colony would be safe. Especially with nightfall rapidly approaching; the Gelks hated bright light, and with the sun going down, the risk was going to be greater still.

Absent-mindedly, her gaze drifted to the ceiling. “Felix...” she whispered. “Where are you, my son?” She prayed that the colony would still be standing when her son came home, and that the last attack by the Gelks had not been the last they would survive.

Outside on the wall, the militia had formed rows, kneeling down so that most of their bodies were concealed safely behind the Quadrarium enforced aluminum walls. There were only a few militia, however; Gelk attacks had slowly trimmed down their numbers to a few, and more than a quarter of them were recruits, another quarter consisting of old veterans closing in on retirement, one of whom was half-blind; his vision had faded in the last several years, and it affected his accuracy, but given the numbers Gelks often attacked in, accuracy was not often required to score kills.

The rest of the militia were regulars, some young adults, a few in their primes. They had seen enough battles with the Gelks that Antoni trusted them to handle themselves, and not be intimidated by the amphibious, marauding deep-sea dwellers that would be rising up from the ocean at any moment now...

As the human watched, he squinted as he saw ripples beginning to form on the surface. A few at first, but that few soon became dozens, and dozens became a hundred. He switched on his rifle, the battery and inner workings humming to lift as he aimed down the sights of the gun. He heard a rattling sound, and glanced at his gun with concern, thinking it was coming from his weapon as a result of some maintenance he may have neglected, but the rattling was coming from something next to him.

He turned; it was one of the other militia soldiers, one of the new ones; a man in his prime, by the name of Albert McCain, who had been drafted into the militia recently, on account of not having a career that was helpful to the colony –a store clerk wasn’t really something Mara Colony had use of, since all supplies were shared evenly among the residents, regardless of wealth; being a rich person in a colony with no outside connections was rather fruitless, considering that there was not a soul who would come to purchase their wares, and they would not be able to use the money to leave.

“Dammit, this is not what I should be doing this is not what I should be doing with my life!” He said this so quickly it was almost impossible to interpret what he was saying.

Antoni scoffed and grabbed him by the shoulder, shaking him roughly. “Keep it together you!” He hissed. “Don’t go losing your head before the fight even starts!”

“Why the hell am I even fighting?!” He demanded. “I should’ve been on the ship crew; I’m a trader, dammit!” He was frantic, and his screaming was sure to draw the attention of the Gelks when they surfaced. “Why the hell should I be risking my neck? I’m a businessman!”

Antoni took a hand away from his rifle and used it to punch Albert in the jaw so hard he was sent reeling to the ground, almost falling into the men behind him as he dropped. “I said pull yourself together!” The human barked. “You need a clear head; the whole colony is depending on you to protect them!”

“And why should I?!” Albert barked. “They should’ve put me on that ship, not the manager’s brat! I could be making us some *real* money!”

“If you can’t even shoot a half-witted Gelk you’d be crumbling to your knees at the sight of a pirate!” Antoni barked. “And they sent the ‘manager’s brat’ as you called him because he’s a pilot, and you’re not!” He grabbed McCain by his armour and hauled him to his feet. “There’s no place for shopkeepers on Trident IV, not anymore; there’s no money here, only survival! Everyone contributes, and since you’re not a technician, fisherman, an engineer or maintenance, that leaves only militia!” He turned and pointed towards the sea. “Now man up, turn your weapon in that direction, and when you see the black of their eyes, you shoot! Do you understand me?”

Albert couldn’t come up with a response; he was frozen, completely stunned by the forcefulness of Commander Zambrano. The human looked at his other troops. “Do you all here agree with me, or with this whiner?” He asked. “Are you ready to defend your home, or go hide in your houses and wait for the Gelks to climb the walls and attack?!”

“No, sir!” They returned.

“Exactly! Because either way, if those Gelks get over this wall, you’ll be fighting for your lives regardless!” Antoni carried on. “Better to fight them here, guns in hand, on this wall, and keep the bastards out! That is what we’re here to do and that is what we’re going to do no matter how much they outnumber us!” He turned his gaze towards the shore. “And it starts now, because I can see those little mongrels coming!” He picked up his rifle and aimed it over the wall, towards the water. “Get ready, men; the time’s now!”

The militia turned and aimed their rifles towards the water as shapes began to form from the surface. Even Albert aimed his gun this time, albeit very hesitantly, as the Gelks emerged from the depths of their ocean. They reared their heads and groaned as their gills left the water, teal-coloured heads with swollen frontal lobes, with flat rear to the cranium above the neck. From below the swollen foreheads, two beady black eyes peered ahead, and long, wide mouths opened, spewing water as rows of unpleasant fangs appeared behind their bumpy, uneven lips.

They were small creatures, barely taller than a pre-teen child but with very lithe figures, the skin of their bodies matching those of their heads in hue. Their feet were webbed, as were their hands, which held strange, rifle-like weapons with long barrels, no stocks like those of

the rifles the colonists used, and no visible firing mechanisms, except for a wheel-shaped component where the back-hand gripped the weapon, possibly where the firing mechanism was located, but too far to see for the men on the wall. They walked with half-bent legs, dragging themselves up from the surf as they approached the colony from the far shoreline.

“Looks like a full raiding party, commander,” one of the militia remarked.

“Two of you, go stand by the spotlights and be ready to switch them on if these ugly bastards get too close,” Antoni remarked. “The rest of you...”

“Spotlights?” Albert asked incredulously. “What about the automated defenses? Turn those on the fucking Gelks!”

Antoni glanced around. “Anyone want to explain to the rookie how we do things?”

“They don’t work, moron,” one of the other militia stated, directing his insult at Albert. “Do you really think we didn’t think of that?”

“Why don’t they work?!”

“Because we’ve been using them to fight the Gelks for ten years; they burned out, and we ran out of power cells for them. These rifles and the spotlights are all we have,” replied another.

“And what do the spotlights do, scare them?”

“Gelks are deep-water dwellers; they hate light,” replied Antoni. “That’s why they never attack during the day; they can’t handle the sunlight in their eyes; we use the spotlights to blind them, as well as give us visual on them in the dark.” He looked at Albert. “We know how to protect ourselves, Mr. McCain, and we make do with what we have.”

Albert shook his head in disgust. “Next you’ll be telling me there’s a way to beat them with sticks and stones.”

“There’s an old saying around that, actually,” remarked Antoni, before aiming his rifle out towards the approaching Gelks. “But we’ll discuss that later; everyone get ready, here they come.”

The Gelks were in firing range of the wall and began to aim their weapons forward. The first Gelk, in lead of the rest, fired his –or her; impossible to tell from atop the wall- weapon at the wall, a sickly green ball of energy erupting from the barrel to splash and scatter against the wall as if it were made of water, yet sizzled and crackled against the metal wall like energy, spreading over a wide diameter. The afflicted areas were left slightly blackened, but not really damaged. The Gelk kept shooting, though, and the others were soon joining in, firing repeatedly at the wall and searing its surface –paint, mostly, but not doing any real damage to the wall itself.

Albert looked at Antoni. “Why’re they shooting the wall?” He asked.

“Out of the water, they’re near-sighted; they can’t see us up here so they shoot at whatever big and foreign-looking thing they can see,” replied the commander, taking a shot at the Gelk that had blasted the wall, the red beam of energy erupting from his rifle and burning a hole through the swollen cranium of the amphibious alien. “That’s why we shine the spotlights twenty feet out; it’s around there some of them start spotting us, so by blinding them at that distance they can’t shoot us.”

Antoni could see a small shred of confidence appear on Alberts' face, and knew the trader was finally getting the message to how the colonial militia had fought off the Gelks for years, despite the fact that the automated defenses, more than a match for such savage life forms as the Gelks, no longer worked. He took aim with his rifle, hesitating only slightly before he too pulled the trigger of his weapon.

Red beams lanced through the air, shooting down at the Gelks that approached the wall and carving a swath through their ranks. They kept shooting the wall, their poor eyesight preventing them from seeing where the beams were actually coming from; their sight only worsened when the spotlights came on, flooding the ground outside of the colony with light and blinding the row of Gelks nearest to the wall, as well as giving the colonists even greater illumination of their targets, making them easy targets for the militia.

The Gelks, unintimidated by the foreigners, continued to swarm the island, eliciting guttural croaking sounds as they advanced, the noise they generated from said croaking nearly intolerable; if not for the sounds of the colonists' guns helping to drown them out, the noise would frustrate the militia and throw off their aim, but the well-trained soldiers of Antoni Zambrano were unhindered.

Unfortunately, the Gelks were tenacious; some managed to battle their way through the lights, and the first row to do so looked up, spotting the militia above and angling their weapons towards them. Several men ducked as the shots soared towards them, ducking behind the wall as the explosive energy of the Gelk weapons splashed against the wall or arched over their heads to fall into the colony below. Luckily, the people had already hidden inside their homes; if someone had actually been hit by that blast, thought Antoni, they'd be doomed.

As if to emphasize, one of the militia was stricken directly in the face of his helmet by the Gelk weapon before it splattered out. The man's faceplate and most of his face were vaporized instantly by the impact, while the rest of his upper body, including his armour, blackened with burns. Albert looked over and watched as the man dropped his rifle and clawed at his face, screaming in agony as he fell onto his back, trying to suppress the burning with his hands, only succeeding in intensifying his pain.

Immediately, all confidence was gone from the labrador as he imagined his own face being deformed in such a way, or worse yet his entire body being subject to such agony! He threw his rifle over the wall at the Gelks in frustration. "Fuck this; I'm out of here!" He screamed before he turned from the wall parapets and sprang over the back ledge, not even bothering to go for the ladders, and plummeted to the ground, landing awkwardly and limping on one leg as he scurried away from the wall.

"Get back here!" Antoni barked at Albert. "Return to your post; that's an order!"

But he was ignored.

With a scoff of disgust, Antoni turned his weapon back out to the battle below, prioritizing the problem at hand before he worried about the deserter. There was much more fighting to be done yet, because the Gelks were still coming...

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When the Mara's Hope entered the atmosphere and descended towards the Mara Colony island, it was only in the small hours of the morning. The planets' orbit had taken the Mara Colony almost halfway to the opposite side of the planet from the direction Felix and his crew made entry, so after switching to planetary engines, the Mara's Hope flew over the ocean with the rising sun at its back, just an hour away from Mara Colony with their current travelling speed, with dawn and the lightest hint of the White Star on the horizon.

Felix was still recovering from a mild hangover due to the crew having a second party after scoring a deal on a new communications tower for the colony; it didn't come pre-assembled, but it was exactly the kind the colony needed, and in his excitement to get home and show the colony their gift, he had convinced them all to party when they stayed at the motel on Denver XII that night, while the ship was given some TLC. Normally, with even a slight headache, flying would be discouraged, but Jessica had given him some painkillers to numb it, and he flew the ship just as well as he usually did

Felix hadn't stopped smiling since coming out of warp drive above Denver XII, having never been so eager to get home before. He couldn't wait to see his mother, and tell her about their adventure, about the colony they had helped, the marines they had saved, and about Jody... how he hoped to be able to meet her again someday.

When they had been flying through an active warzone, between the Confederacy and the Grunikan Empire, she had been calm; like a true professional she had retained her composure and done her job, just as Felix and Amber had while entering. Of course everyone had done their part at Ithica VII; Zack had helped the Ares Colony fix their communications, Gusta had helped organize their stockpile, and when they had picked up the stranded Marines, Jessica had diligently treated the wounded.

Jody was gone now, back home at the Atlanta Colony on Ithica VII, but Felix still found himself beaming with happiness as he thought of her; she had fit in so well with the crew, he wished he could have asked her to stay on with them, but that would have been overstepping his bounds. She had a good career of her own as a reputable shuttle-pilot, and even if she was far away, with a new comm tower at Mara, Felix could send her long range transmissions to keep in touch with her. After all, she'd given him her number.

Multiple footsteps coming up behind him caught his attention; he saw the reflections of his crew in the blast shield window, not even needing to look back at them to confirm who it was. He saw Amber out of the corner of his eye as she leaned forward and placed a hand on the console for balance as she gazed out through the window.

"How much further?" She inquired.

"Shouldn't be much longer," replied Felix. "Few minutes, at least, but we're almost home."

Gustav stood next to Amber, crossing his arms as he stared out across the vast Trident IV oceans, studying the light reflecting off of the surface of the water from the rising sun.

"Nothing like the ocean at dawn, hey guys?"

"Nothing like it," agreed Jessica.

Zack poked his head out from beside Felix, on his left. "Can't we get there any faster, bud? I'm spinning my wheels here!"

"I'm going as fast as this ship can go on its planetary engines," replied Felix. "Have a little patience, buddy; we're almost home."

Zack fidgeted impatiently and tapped his fingers against the front of the console, the others rolling their eyes at him; they were all just as eager as him of course, but the rabbit couldn't suppress his emotions any better than a child could resist the temptation to sneak out to the kitchen for a cookie when he thought his mother wasn't watching.

The crew watched as the island of the Mara Colony finally came in sight, seeing their home on the horizon and rapidly getting closer. But as they neared, something struck them as odd; they could see the spotlights at the front wall were on, and as they came closer still, the unmistakable flashes of laser fire became increasingly apparent; red beams of concentrated heat, against sickly green balls of plasma that scattered as it struck a hard surface like the colony wall.

The colony was under attack by Gelks!

"Amber!" Felix exclaimed.

"Way ahead of you!" She returned, spinning on her heel and dashing off of the bridge, over to the gun turret where she seated herself, strapped in, and elevated her chair up into the turret.

"Zack, come on!" Gustav barked to the rabbit, urging him to follow him out; he did, and the two stopped at the foot of the turret. "Where are the rifles?" The orca asked.

"In my locker!" She called down as she swivelled the turret around to face towards the Gelks on the shore of the Mara Colony, waiting until they were in optimal range.

Felix angled the ship's approach to come up on the right of the Gelk raiding party, with the sunlight directly at the back of the ship, which would make it a hard target for the light-sensitive amphibians as the glare of the sun intensified into the dawn. He slowed the vessel to a gentle crawl as they came in range of the colony, and switched on the repulsion system before shutting off the engines, letting the ship hover in place as he got up from his chair, and ran off of the bridge.

He met Gustav and Zack as they came out of Ambers' room; the Orca carried two rifles, Zack carried one; Gustav passed one of the rifles to Felix, and the three ran into the cargo bay, hitting the switch to open the bay door. Wind rushed into the ship, greeting the crew with fresh, ocean air as the door slid open. The three stepped up to the door as Amber began shooting at the Gelks below from the turret; every shot she fired was more than eight times larger than the beams of a rifle. Well-placed shots made by the shark vaporized up to three Gelks simultaneously, turning their bodies into piles of glowing ash.

Zack was the first to the door, activating his rifle and aiming it down at the Gelks before he bellowed out at the top of his lungs, "*get offa my properteh!*" He barked, imitating a county-bumpkin accent before firing wildly from his hip down at the Gelks.

Out of ten shots he only hit two Gelks.

"Why don't you try *aiming*, Zack?" Gustav suggested sarcastically. "And get your powder-puffed tail down before they start shooting back!"

“What, they can’t see us up here...” He was interrupted by a green sphere of energy splashing against the underside of the ship, instantly alerting him to his miscalculation. “I stand corrected! Ah!” He yelled before dropping to a prone position, like what Felix and Gustav were already in, and aimed over the side, all three timing their shots carefully.

Gustav was the last one to shoot, hesitant to pull the trigger until he reminded himself that Gelks could not be negotiated with; he didn’t want to kill him, but time had already shown they would not show the same feelings when it came to intruders on their world. They would stop at nothing to chase off the Mara Colonists, and he knew it; that resolve eventually allowed him to pull the trigger.

Unlike when he had killed Slash, however, Felix did not share Gustav’s hesitation in resorting to violence, at least not against the Gelks. They had threatened his home for years, and the dolphin was already used to shooting them; he’d had to more than once when out salvaging at the abandoned colonies of the region. Sometimes Gelks, drawn by the sound of his skimmer, would follow him to the islands and try to attack him there, and so far he had survived; killing Gelks was something he had no problem doing.

Caught in a crossfire and vastly outgunned with the timely appearance of the Mara’s Hope, not to mention their eyes starting to become filled with the hateful light of the planets’ first sun, the White Star for which the sector was named, now beaming into their eyes, the Gelks were falling rapidly. As natives of this world the Gelks knew the smaller, but no-less brighter star of the solar system would soon follow, and so, fleeing from the battle they dove in scores back into the ocean, swimming back to the watery depths they called home. A few stragglers gathered their dead before fleeing back into the ocean, carrying as many of their fallen kin as possible before they too fled into the ocean, leaving the few remaining bodies to the mercy of the elements.

Felix and the others watched vigilantly until they were positive the Gelks were gone. Felix passed his rifle to Zack and returned to the bridge, igniting the engines once more on low thrust and turning it about to face the landing pad at the shore, around which the Gelks had surfaced; thousands of new footprints were visible in the sand of the beach. He brought the ship around and hovered over the landing pad, slowly drawing power from the repulsors after extending the landing gear, until the vessel descended down to the landing pad; feeling the jolt of the legs as they touched down, he cut power to the engines and repulsion system.

The crew gathered together, Jessica carrying her doctor’s bag in her hand, ready to treat any wounded up at the colony, and disembarked from the ship, spotting the colonial militia coming down to greet them, led by, to Amber’s disgust, Antoni Zambrano. The Commander looked to Felix as the two groups reached one another, and nodded to him. “The timing of you and your crews’ arrival was impeccable, Mr. Kaufmann,” he said, gratefully. “Was starting to wonder if we’d make it until morning.”

“Glad we could help,” returned Felix. “Is everyone alright?”

“Two of my men got cooked pretty badly; got some others taking them to the clinic now,” returned Antoni.

“I better get up the clinic; the doctor might need me,” said Jessica.

“Good idea,” returned Felix, nodding to her and watching for a second as the doe sprinted towards the colony gate, and turned his attention back to Zambrano. “When did they attack?”

“Last night, approximately six hours ago; we’ve been trading shots with them since then,” replied Antoni. “One of my men deserted us too in the middle of the fight; going to be giving that one the business end of my boot right into his ass when I find him.”

“Who was it?” Gustav asked.

“Albert McCain.”

Amber and Zack facepalmed dramatically, Gustav rolled his eyes and Felix groaned.

“You actually drafted that guy?” Amber asked, incredulously.

“Dude, Albert doesn’t care about anything except when he makes his next cred!” Zack added. “You might as well have been handing the rifle to a statue, because it would’ve done about as well as he would.”

Antoni ran a hand down his face. “You think I don’t know that?” He asked. “Of a colony of a few hundred residents, McCain is the last person I wanted to enlist. But I’ve been charged with keeping this colony safe; I need every possible hand that can hold a gun! If I had the luxury of picking who those hands belonged to, the militia corps would be triple its current number, but most of those guys work in the other trades.”

Felix noticed Amber’s lip curling, and knew immediately she was about to say something snide; he nudged her with his elbow, drawing her attention and shook his head, a stern expression on his face. She scowled at him, but said nothing, and turned her attention back to the other militia.

“What about the other colonists; anyone hit by stray fire?” Felix asked, looking back at Antoni.

“Not to my knowledge; far as I know, everyone got into their homes before the attack hit, so casualties should be miniscule at worst,” replied Antoni. “Luckily, our trick with the spotlights still works wonders; stars help us all if the Gelks could actually learn from their past defeats.”

Felix nodded again. “Alright, well... would one of you be so kind as to fetch some hover dollies?” Felix asked, grinning as he motioned for Gustav to go open the cargo bay door; the orca sprinted back aboard the ship at the request.

“Oh? Bring back a souvenir, did you?” Antoni asked.

“Something like that,” replied Felix, turning as the cargo bay doors began to slide open once again, and revealed a pair of long, metal, cylindrical objects lying on its side in the cargo bay, secured to the floor to prevent rolling; one of them was flat at both ends but the other narrowed as it came closer to the tip, before coming to a seed-shaped tip with several wires hooked up into its base.

Antoni pulled back the visor on his helmet to see it more clearly, studying it for a moment before he turned back to Felix with a look of astonishment. “Is that a new communications tower?”

“Sure is,” replied Felix. “Figured it was about time we put up a new one.”

“Some assembly required!” Zack chimed in.

“Yeah; unfortunately, pre-assembled ones were too tall to fit on the ship,” Gustav called from the cargo bay.

Antoni gave a dismissive wave. “A minor detail,” he said. “But Mr. Kaufmann, this is an excellent surprise; we’ve been out of touch for so long and now we may have a chance to finally start contacting other worlds again.” He beamed at the dolphin. “The manager is going to be one proud parent, my boy.”

“Thank you Commander,” returned Felix. “Is she in her office right now?”

Antoni nodded. “She should be, yes,” he replied. “Why don’t you keep that in there for now? The colonists won’t be coming out of their homes for hours yet until they manage to steady themselves; that attack was pretty sudden and is bound to have them rattled.”

Felix nodded in agreement. “Sounds good,” he said, and looked up to Gustav, who jerked up his thumb in affirmation and returned to the control panel to shut the door. “Just be sure to let us know when someone is coming down; I’ve heard disturbing rumors a few people want to steal my ship so I’d rather stay near it.”

“Will do,” agreed Antoni, and looked to his soldiers. “Alright men; let’s start the cleanup and get those Gelk carcasses out of here.”

“Yes sir,” some of the militia returned, albeit half-heartedly, not looking forward to the cleanup.

Felix didn’t blame them; Gelks smelled terrible when they were alive and even worse when they were dead –having a gas mask on was necessary just to keep from passing out at the smell, which could overload ones’ senses drastically, especially sensitive ones like canine or feline mammalian species.

He began to walk with Amber and Zack back to the colony; Gustav caught up to them after activating the landing pad security field, to protect it in case the Gelks came back. The four took in the sights of their home, reminded briefly of Ithica VII, which was quite similar to Trident IV, albeit the landmasses of Ithica were much larger in size but fewer in number. The smell was unique in its own way too; stronger and thicker.

Felix glanced at Amber as they walked, noticing her eyes were still on Commander Zambrano. “Are you okay?”

She paused mid-step for a few seconds, but resumed walking as she exhaled a long sigh. “Sorry... Zambrano still frustrates the hell out of me,” she said. “I respect him as a soldier; he trains his men well and affords them due respect, and he definitely does his own share of the fighting. But that’s partially it; he trains his *men* well and clearly doesn’t want women fighting in the militia; he allows it, but he’ll never give them officer positions and treats them more harshly than the males on the force. He took mine away from me when he was appointed the commander, demoting me to Sergeant; would’ve taken me all the way back to Private if he’d found a good reason.”

“Why was he made the Commander and not you, Amber?” Gustav asked.

“Hell, I don’t know,” she returned. “Like I said he’s a good soldier but he’s narrow-minded; a good leader should be more open.” She looked at Felix. “Leaders like your mom.”

"But what is it you think helped him earn the position over you?" Felix continued Gustav's question. "Remember, the founder of the militia was your grandpa, and it was him who appointed Zambrano instead of you."

"Your point?"

"You knew your grandpa better than any of us here did; why do you think he chose Zambrano?" Felix continued, wanting an answer from Amber.

She sighed again. "I guess I laid it out earlier," she admitted. "Narrow-minded or not, he knows what he's doing; the colony is safe under him... much as I hate to admit it, he may be better at it than me. Urk!" She made a fake gagging noise, which brought a chuckle from the others at her jest.

"Amber Giles really does have a sense of humour," remarked Zack.

"Don't expect it to last, Zack," she said, her usual tone returning.

"Oh, still a *total* buzzkill!" The rabbit barked out, loud enough likely half the colony heard him as they entered the gate. "I swear, I'll be hit by a meteorite before this girl ever cracks a good joke."

"Be careful what you wish for, Zack," remarked Gustav.

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Brunhilda was almost squealing with delight when Felix walked through the door of her office; her hand had gone to her pistol first, as if expecting a Gelk to come in, but at the sight of her son she forsook the pistol and her desk entirely, ran across the room and hugged him tightly, not caring that Gustav, Amber and Zack were at the door, watching her very sudden abandonment of professionalism. Not that anyone would say anything about it even if they minded; she had every right to act like a mother when she had been so worried about her son.

"Thank the stars you made it," she said, almost on the verge of crying.

"Told you we'd be fine," returned Felix, returning his mothers' embrace. "Those Grunikans never touched us."

"Eh? Didn't one of them grab you by the tail and try to dice you like a tomato?" Zack remarked.

THUD!

"Eee-ouch! Ow ow, ow!!"

"Blabbermouth," scolded Amber, rubbing her knuckles. "And hard-headed, too."

"That was *totally* uncalled for!" Zack whined.

Brunhilda snickered at the behavior of the Hope crew. "I see a run-in with the Grunikan Empire didn't dampen your spirits," she said, finally releasing the embrace on her son. "Come in, all of you; sit while I make some coffee. I want to hear all about the trip."

A cup of fresh, actual coffee –not the sludge the Hope crew had been drinking aboard the ship for the last several days, was all the motivation they needed to stay, although Zack was refused a cup; Brunhilda claimed he was too hyper already without it, and given a carbonated beverage instead, taken from the miniature refrigerator behind Brunhilda's desk. He accepted it without a complaint, pointing out he didn't like the taste of coffee anyway.

When everyone had their drinks, Felix began to explain to his mother the details of their trip, starting from when they left Trident IV, to meeting Jody at Dory II, and her joining them temporarily as they continued their voyage. He left out some of the more gruesome details of the battle they had warped into, such as the destruction of one of the Confederates' carriers, but did mention they had to fight their way down to the surface to bring the supplies they were transporting to Ares Colony.

After that, he recapped for her the rescue mission they had been sent on, evacuating endangered Confederate Marines from a crash site, and their first encounter with the Grunikans. Brunhilda visibly shuddered as Felix described the dragon morphs. "As horrible as I've heard," she muttered.

"After that, we got back on board..." Felix began.

"And that's when Felix got grabbed by the tail," remarked Zack, before side-stepping to the left just as Amber's fist fell towards him again, pivoting back to face her after he was out of its trajectory. "Ha HA!" He barked at her. "You don't fool me twice, Amber!"

She glowered at him, but when Felix cleared his throat, the two quieted down, and allowed him to continue. "Sadly, yes; had a bit of a close call; one of the Grunikans grabbed me and tried to drag me off the ship, readying this laser blade to slice me up too. But Gustav came charging down the ramp like a ticked-off bovine and punched him out with one clean hit; I scrambled aboard the ship and we got out of there."

Brunhilda eyed Gustav, who was seated in the chair next to Felix. "I'd always heard you were a pacifist," she remarked.

"I am," he returned. "But not when the situation demands a change; that was one of those situations, and I acted."

"I thank you for that," said Brunhilda, truthfully, and turned back to Felix. "What happened after?"

"Well, we took them to the nearest colony, which was Atlanta, where Jody was from as well," replied Felix. "Dropped them off, dropped her off, and..."

"She gave him her number," Zack remarked, eyeing Amber warily in case she tried to hit him again, but she didn't even glance his way; she was grinning at Felix.

"Zack... how did you know that?" Felix asked.

"I was watching," he replied.

"Little peeping tom," muttered Felix.

"Think I even saw a little lip action going on too," Zack remarked, which made Felix jolt up and flush with embarrassment, eliciting a surprised 'eep' through his nostrils.

"Oh really?" Amber asked, grinning at Felix.

Gustav laughed heartily. "Well the hero does usually get the girl after all."

"Hero? But I'm not..." Felix paused as the others started laughing at his embarrassment. He let out a long sigh of exasperation. "Okay... yeah, she kissed me, just on the cheek; nothing but an expression of gratitude."

"But giving you her contact information means she's interested in you, son," Brunhilda pointed out as she and the others stopped laughing. "Perhaps you should return the gesture."

Felix grimaced at that. "But she lives so far away... and we're both pilots; not a lot of free time in a career like that."

"Well, perhaps if you talk with her more, she might be interested in joining up with us," Gustav remarked. "Or, when this colony is back on its feet and has some proper trade routes and deliveries, we can join her."

"Maybe. I thought about asking her that but, I thought it'd be too invasive," admitted Felix, shrugging. "I guess we'll just have to see how it goes."

Gustav nodded to Felix, smiling warmly at him.

"So, what're your next plans, my son?" Brunhilda inquired.

"Well, I wager the next salt delivery will be ready by now?" Felix asked; Brunhilda nodded to him. "Good. I'd like to take tonight to rest; I imagine you guys do as well?" He looked at his crew.

"Well, I am pretty beat, and it'll be nice to sleep in my own bed again," replied Amber. "I'd also like to take the time to compile a list of materials so I can finally repair the auto-turrets; I think, now that we'll have some steady income, we should get this place back into proper running order."

"And I'd like to take stock over at the rations house; check to see if we need to make any more grocery runs," agreed Gustav.

"I thought I might help the techies get the tower up before we next set out," added Zack, scratching his left ear in thought. "But frankly, they can probably manage without me so, I'd say I'd be ready to go again anytime."

Gustav tilted his head in thought. "Thinking of it, if we get the delivery out of the way we could probably take a few days off," he suggested. "I'm not saying we should do it right this second, but the sooner, the more time we could take to just relax here until the next job."

Amber and Zachary both nodded, agreeing to Gustav's suggestion.

Felix nodded as well. "Alright; we'll load up the delivery this afternoon and set off tonight," he stated. "For now, we should all go get a little sleep; take a breather."

"What about Jessica?" Amber inquired.

"I'll go see her on my way home, tell her the plan and find out what she wants to do from there," said Felix. "We don't really need her for the delivery; the clinic might need her more with the people injured in the Gelk attack."

Brunhilda finished her mug of coffee before she stood up from her desk. "That sounds like a plan, then," she said. "I should be off too; I have to go receive the full report from Commander Zambrano regarding the attack. All of you, rest well; there's still a lot of work for us all to do."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Felix as he stood up; he reached into the pocket of his vest, and produced a Credrive, which he handed to his mother. "Make sure that is used to return the money the colonists lent us."

Brunhilda's eyes widened with shock as the meaning of Felix's words set in; slowly, she took the Credrive and stared at it. "You mean you already got enough money to pay them all back?"

Felix flashed a grin. "I guess we do good work," he remarked.

Brunhilda beamed at her son, a tear of happiness and gratitude forming in one of her eyes. "Felix... all of you," she said, looking at the other members of the Hope crew. "This colony owes you many thanks, and I imagine many people on Ithica VII do as well."

Felix waved it off. "Ithica expressed its gratitude," he assured her. "And this colony is our home; we're just doing our part."

"Everyone contributes, after all," added Gustav.

Brunhilda smiled all the wider. "We're all blessed by the stars to have you all, including Jessica," she said. "I'll print the money on this into more credrives and return them to everyone who lent money to fix the ship."

"Then our work is done," said Felix. "At least for today," he added slightly.

With no more words to exchange, Felix, Amber, Gustav and Zachary stepped out of the office, and, saying goodbye to one another, headed their separate ways. Zack walked with Amber for a bit, since they were heading the same direction –the colony wall, for Amber to check on the gun turrets and compile that list of components she needed; Zack was simply coming because his house was in the same direction.

Amber looked at Zack as they walked, and took in a deep breath. "You know, Zack," she said. "Despite how much of a headache you can be sometimes, you did well on our last voyage; you really played your part on the crew, much more than I cared to admit you could at first..."

"Yeah, you think so?" The rabbit asked, smiling confidently.

Amber nodded. "Yes," she stated. "And while I'm at it, I..."

The shark girl was interrupted as someone stepped out in front of them, coming out from behind a house; a black-furred canine mammalian, a labrador to be exact, who blocked their path, looking squarely at both of them. Amber halted in her tracks when she saw him, while Zack, who had not noticed him right away as his eyes were still on Amber, walked directly into the canine, who was also wearing militia armour, causing the rabbit to bump his head on the coltan plating.

"Ow; had enough bonks on the head today, thank you," Zachary remarked, before he looked at the canine, stepping back to get a better look at his face.

Amber scowled. "Albert McCain," she said, scornfully. Commander Zambrano had mentioned the labrador bailing out on the defense of the colony, and now to see him here, she was tempted to scold him herself, but she was no longer part of the militia; it was not her place to discipline its members anymore.

"Ms. Giles," he said, respectfully, and looked at Zachary. "And..." He hesitated. "What was your name again?"

"How can you not know who I am?" Zack asked, insulted. "I'm Zack; Zachary Doyle, the mechanic who got the Mara's Hope flying in the first place? Does that ring any bells?"

The canine blinked at him before shrugging. "I guess not," he replied.

"Great; no recognition," muttered the rabbit.

"What do you want, McCain?" Amber asked sternly, crossing her arms.

"Have I offended?" Albert inquired, shrugging helplessly.

"Among other things," returned Amber. "Now, what do you want?"

“Just came to ask a question,” replied Albert. “And, possibly a favor; when is your ship next due to depart from here, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Well, we were planning on making our next delivery tonight,” replied Zack; Amber nudged him with her foot, and motioned for him to be quiet. He would have retorted, if not for the serious look on her face as she looked back at Albert.

“What interest is it to you?” Amber asked.

He gave her a courteous smile. “I was simply wondering if it’s possible I could apply for a position aboard,” he said. “You do a lot of business, yes? Business is something of a specialty of mine. I thought perhaps you could use someone who’s good at making deals, to save a little extra money.”

Amber eyed him for a moment, her gaze never faltering as she watched him, studying his face. “Thanks, but Felix is pretty good at making such deals himself, so we’re covered there. And we’ve already got a cook, custodian, inventory manager, mechanic,” she gestured at Zack, who grinned in response, “an onboard medic and, lastly, a gunner,” she pointed at herself. “Only thing we’re missing is a co-pilot; you know how to fly, operate a navigational computer or operate a communication terminal?”

“I... well, no, but...”

“Then we don’t need you,” returned Amber. “Now if you’ll excuse us, some of us have jobs we can’t walk out on.”

Albert’s expression contorted into a frown at Amber’s words. “...So you heard.”

“Damn right we did,” returned Amber. “You ran off in the middle of the fight; we had to pick up your slack when we got back to the colony.”

“I was scared!” Albert barked defensively.

“It doesn’t matter!” Amber retorted. “The colony depends on the militia; to run out on a battle, you could sacrifice the lives of others just to save your own hide!”

“This coming from the same woman who left the militia because she didn’t like the Commander?” Albert shot back. “Sounds to me like you left for selfish reasons just like I did on the battle last night!”

Amber scowled warningly at him. “That was different; I didn’t bow out in the middle of a battle, I gave Zambrano time to find someone to replace me. You scurried off like a scared rodentian –sorry Zack- in the middle of a fight, depriving the militia of a gun and a pair of hands. Yes, I left for personal reasons, but I did my part until Zambrano found a replacement.” She stepped forward and shoved past him. “I’m done talking to you.”

“Wait,” Albert stated, causing Amber to pause. “What if I bought passage? For me and my family? I know my kids want to see the stars, and...”

“And you want to get aboard the ship so that you don’t have to face the disciplinary action reserved for deserters,” interjected Amber.

“What makes you think I haven’t already been disciplined?”

“You wouldn’t be walking straight or even standing here if you had,” replied Amber. “Punishment for desertion is five lashes, and two nights of incarceration, no food, often followed by a demotion if you’re ranked. If not you’ll be transferred to a different job;

Sanitation Duty, scraping barnacles off of the outside wall. Keyword *outside*, right where the Gelks can reach you.”

“Whoa, harsh,” muttered Zack.

Albert was becoming increasingly frustrated with Amber’s refusal. “I said I’m willing to pay so how much do you want; a thousand per passenger? I’ll pay you double that!”

“Get lost,” returned Amber, before she began to walk away again.

Albert charged forward and grabbed Amber by the shoulder. “Damn it, woman; I will not take no for an answer! I *have* to get on that ship; I’ll pay any price, but you must let me on board!”

“Ooh, bad move, dawg,” Zack stated.

Amber leered at Albert over her shoulder, staring daggers at him with her fierce, sapphire-blue eyes, a look that made Albert suddenly feel very nervous as her eye glared into his. “Remove your hand... or I will do it for you, *permanently*,” she warned him.

Without hesitation, Albert lifted his hand from Amber’s shoulder, stepping back from her as she turned to face him fully. She stepped up to him, standing almost nose-to-nose with the canine and speaking in a serious tone as she addressed him. “You’re not coming onto the ship,” she stated, firmly. “And that’s the last I’m going to say of it. Now, go own up to your cowardice with the militia, and find a way to make yourself useful around here. We don’t need layabouts here at Mara Colony, and we most definitely don’t need them aboard the Mara’s Hope.” She turned from him again and stormed away, her tail curling angrily as she walked.

Zack stepped around Albert. “Sorry man, but she’s right; you have a debt to pay to the militia. Flying with us wouldn’t change that, ‘cuz soon as we came back, they’d seize you and give it to you any who.”

With that, the rabbit followed Amber up the street, leaving the glowering canine alone on the footpath as he considered what to do next, turning his gaze in the direction of the colony storehouses where the salt shipment was kept.

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Felix switched on the lights as the door shut behind him, seeing the familiar interior of his little pre-fabricated home, the sight of it bringing a smile to his face. However small and cramped it was, he was glad to be home again. He walked over to his couch and plopped down onto it, staying like that only a minute before sliding over and laying down on the cushions, putting his hands behind his head as he relaxed. He had been sitting in his pilots’ chair for so long now he had almost forgotten what actual furniture felt like –not that his pilot seat was uncomfortable or anything, but nothing could come close to the plushness of his sofa.

Refusing to get off of it, Felix absent-mindedly reached for one of the decorative cushions and stuck it under his head, rolling onto his side and shutting his eyes, drifting off into a peaceful slumber. He lay there, his sleep dreamless but still very restful, and awoke that afternoon feeling rejuvenated. He checked the time, noting he still had about an hour before he was to meet Gustav and the others for their next delivery.

Felix stood up from the couch and stretched his arms high over his head before he proceeded over to the kitchen to find something to eat from his weekly rations. He took out a package of smoked fish, peeling back the plastic covering before he reached into one of his drawers for a fork, using it to spear one of the chunks of fish, dipping it in the little pocket in the side filled with a white-yellow sauce, and putting it into his mouth, tasting the creamy sauce that coated the cold fish, giving it a citrusy flavor.

He could tell Gustav had made this sauce; he had been using plenty of citrus fruits – lemons, limes, oranges, the like- to create new sauces for food before packaging them, even customizing the containers to incorporate them, since before they had set out on the first flight, and everyone agreed that his lemon sauce for fish was especially delicious. Felix savored every taste of it he could get, until he cleared out the entire container of the smoked fish, only a paltry sum of the sauce remaining.

Tossing the container into the garbage, Felix grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and took a long swig to wash down his lunch and rehydrate himself –he poured a little more over his head and arms as well, letting his skin absorb the moisture of the water bottle. He shivered somewhat from how cool it was, but felt his skin loosen as it absorbed the water, hydrating his limbs and head nicely. Downing the rest of the bottle's contents, he tossed it into the cycling bin, headed into the washroom where he used a dental laser to clean his teeth –a low powered, hand-held device with a concentrated, wide-spread beam tuned to purge plaque and stains from teeth, but not hot enough to burn the gums unless the user held it too close or over one spot for too long.

When he was satisfied his teeth were clean, he shut off the laser and headed for the door, putting on his boots first before activating his security lock and grabbing his vest off the coat hanger before heading outside, putting on the vest as he stepped into... water.

It was raining. Not a severe storm like a few weeks back, but a steady downpour of precipitation fell from the sky, bathing the town and all of its buildings in clean sky water.

Felix grimaced. "Good thing that salt is sealed in waterproof packaging," he muttered to himself, and walked off to the storehouse where the salt was being kept.

He fully expected to find Gustav already there, and sure enough the Orca was already loading the hover-dolly with crate after crate of the precious salt, almost with three others – not the Hope crew, though; probably the storehouse workers. As Gustav placed another box on the dolly, he saw Felix approaching and waved to him; Felix waved back, and increased his pace a little, joining Gustav at the dolly.

"Though you'd still be asleep," the orca said, raising his voice a little to be heard over the rain.

"You know me; business before pleasure," Felix returned as he found a crate of salt and picked it up; it took some effort for the dolphin to lift on his own, being nowhere near as big as Gustav, but one of the storehouse workers helped him, and he got the crate onto the dolly.

"How about you; you sleep well?" Felix asked.

"Like a rock," returned Gustav.

"Where are Amber and Zack at?"

“Zack’s already down at the ship, prepping it; said he’d leave the bay door open for us when we got down there. Amber, I haven’t seen her yet.”

“Odd; usually she prefers to be the one to arrive early,” said Felix. “Ah, but she’s probably coming; I imagine we’ll see her any moment now.”

Gustav nodded to Felix, and the two both went back to loading up the dollies. It soon became clear they would have to make a second trip for the rest of the salt; the dollies were almost overladen with the crate and they had barely loaded half of the shipment. Gustav stopped them when the second was a couple of hundred pounds from its weight limit, motioning for them to climb onto the dollies. Felix did so as well, jumping onto the front one while Gustav held the hover-dollies by their chains and dragged them –for lack of a better term- off towards the landing pad where the ship waited.

They met Amber halfway; she apologized for being late, and proceeded to hop onto the front dolly with Felix. “You seen Albert McCain this morning?” She asked.

“No, why?” Felix asked.

“Zambrano’s looking for him; apparently he didn’t show up for his ‘disciplinary action’ this afternoon,” explained the shark.

“Probably hiding,” replied Felix. “He’s far too much of a coward to wander out of the colony; they’ll find him.”

Amber grimaced, and turned her attention ahead as the dollies were led out of the gate. Once through, they continued down the path to the landing pad; the rain was so thick that the ship was barely visible through it, forcing them to rely on the regularly-used footpath that led down to the shoreline. The ship came in sight after a short walk, and the crews jumped off of the dollies, and began to unload the crates into the open cargo bay doors, which had been left open by Zack.

They unloaded the crates, making their second trip back into the colony and collected the rest, which they brought down to the ship and unloaded with the first batch, securing them to the floorspace inside of the cargo bay, making sure they were tied down and neatly stacked before shutting the doors. The storehouse workers took the dollies back up to the colony, while Felix, Amber and Gustav remained on the ship, tracking water through the cargo bay as they walked.

“Good thing we didn’t bother unpacking our clothes,” remarked Felix, chuckling. He may not have minded getting caught in the rain but fabric sure wasn’t fond of it.

Amber glanced down to the medical room, noticing the light was off. “Hey, where’s Jessica; she not coming?”

“No; not this time. Dr. Hanson still needs her at the clinic,” explained Felix. “She also wants to catch up on some of her training too.”

Amber nodded, satisfied with the answer, before proceeding into her room to change her outfit.

After changing clothes in their rooms, Felix proceeded to the engine room of the ship to check on Zack. The rabbit sprang into alertness as Felix opened the door to the engine room, and turned to face him as he stepped in. “Ah, there you are,” he said.

“How’s it looking back here?” Felix asked.

"I've tuned up the thrust modulators; should give us a little more giddy-up while we're flying," he explained, looking around the engine room proudly. "Water tank's full, ion shielding is functioning properly and all electronic systems are working perfectly. All in all, we should be good to go anytime."

"Excellent," said Felix. "I'll just make a call to my mother and..." He turned as he spoke, and noticed a poster hanging up on the wall of the engine room; a poster of a scantily clad female rabbit posing artfully on a heart-shaped bed. She was dressed in little more than undergarments and stockings, with a flower-clad ribbon worn around her neck like a collar. At the top of the poster, the words 'Rodentian Showgirls', in suggestive, curvaceous letters, was written, a tiny pink heart placed above the 'I' in both Rodentian and Showgirls.

Felix looked at Zachary incredulously. "What... is that?" He asked with a stern tone, pointing at the poster.

Zack turned back to Felix, and looked where he was pointing. "Oh! Uhm... just a little personalization for my workspace," he said innocently, running over to the poster in standing in front of it, an innocent grin on his face; Felix almost imagined seeing a halo above his head, but was too focused on the fact he had actually caught Zack with such a thing.

"That is what you went and purchased while we were on Denver XII; a Showgirls poster?" Felix asked him. "...How did you even get it? You have to be eighteen to get in to those stores."

"I told them I turn eighteen tomorrow," replied Zack, shrugging. "Or... today, as it were; they sold it to me, calling it an 'early birthday present', as I lived so far away –threw that in there as part of the story."

"Your birthday isn't for three months!" Felix exclaimed.

"Oh come on man, look at that body!" Zachary defended, stepping aside and gesturing at the poster. "They even have Nocturnians in this months' issue; how often do you get to see one of them?!"

"Zack, this is comple..." Felix paused. "Wait... Issue?" His eyes narrowed. "As in like a *magazine*?" He asked, his voice becoming stern again as he said 'magazine'.

"...Oops."

"...That's not a poster," Felix stated, suddenly noticing the tear lines along the left side of the paper. "You tore that out of a book."

Zachary chuckled nervously. "Uhm... maybe?"

"Zachary Doyle, you..."

"Oh, look at the time!" Zack interjected, pretending to look at an unseen wristwatch on his left hand –of which, there wasn't really one- and darted over to Felix. "We really should be going; don't want to keep Erwin waiting now, do we? Got a little more work to do so, need my space!" He pushed Felix repeatedly towards the door. "Off to the helm with you; out, out, out!"

Felix nearly tripped over his own tail as Zachary managed to push him out into the hallway and shut the door. He considered going back in to give Zack a lecture about professional workspace, but after a brief moment, he decided against it, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. "My best friend and only mechanic is a pervert," he muttered. Before he left, he

elbowed the door and spoke through it in a teasing voice. "I hope Amber and Jessica don't find that, and don't let them catch you with a cetacean or forest mammalian issue or they might kick your little ass all the way to the moons of Midgard VI."

"Catch him with what?"

Felix turned, spotting Amber coming up the hall towards the engine room; having heard her name mentioned, she eyed the dolphin curiously, a hand on one hip.

Felix snickered a little. "Maybe you ought to see for yourself," said Felix, jerking his thumb at the door and stifling all out laughter when he heard Zachary elicit an 'eep' through the door. "Zack has been doing a little... redecorating in the engine room?"

Amber rolled her eyes. "Oh for the love of... what does he have in there?!" She demanded, storming up to the door. Seconds before she opened it, the crashing and clamouring of objects being shuffled about caught their ears, making her pause briefly, before she aggressively hit the open button, and the door slid into the wall, allowing her access.

Zack was standing by his workbench, hands folded in front of his stomach and a big toothy grin on his face, not hiding the bead of sweat dampening his fur below one ear. His toolkit was in an unusual spot on the workbench; it was partially hanging over the side, and had been only half-locked.

Amber glanced around the room; Felix peeked in as well, noticing the torn magazine page was now absent from its previous spot. *Those are some deft hands*, thought Felix; Zachary had maybe three seconds before Amber had stepped into the room and he had managed to hide his 'dirty' little secret.

"Hey guys; what's up?" Zachary asked innocently.

Amber eyed him suspiciously for a moment before she scoffed and shook her head. "Still a pain in the neck," she uttered, before turning and heading back up the hallway, followed suite by Felix.

When the door slid shut, Zack collapsed to the floor, releasing a breath he didn't realize he was holding as he leaned against his workbench, his heart pounding at what he interpreted to be a near-death experience.

"Maybe I should just keep the decor in my room..."

Meanwhile, at the front of the ship, Felix seated himself in the pilot's chair, and was about to start readying the ship for launch when a message alert sounded from the communication terminal. He turned his chair to the terminal, reaching over and tapping a button to let the message through. "This is the Mara's Hope; Kaufmann here."

"*Felix? Ah, good; it's working then,*" the caller said, the voice of his mother quickly registering in the ears of the dolphin.

"Mom? How are you calling me; the techies got the new tower up already?"

"*Yeah; they were working on it before the rain fell,*" replied Brunhilda. "*Hardly took any time at all to put up; we've just been waiting for it to integrate with the power grid and finish setting itself; thought I'd test it by calling the ship, since I know you're about to head off.*"

Felix nodded. "Yep; we were just about to leave. Good to know the tower's in working order too."

“Good job finding this, Felix. Perhaps, if things don’t pick up for the colony in the coming months, I can try calling for that evacuation again and get us off this world,” said Brunhilda. *“But, honestly, I’m no longer hoping to do that; I think everyone here has become used to this world, and if we can make a life here, why leave? I’ll leave that decision to them, of course; if the opportunity arises, I’ll hold a town meeting and ask them about it; I won’t make such decisions without their consent.”*

Felix nodded, although knew his mother could not see him. “Sounds like a plan,” he said. “Alright mom; take care of the colony while we’re gone.”

Brunhilda laughed heartily. *“I always do.”*

The transmission ended. Felix turned back to the control panel, preparing the ship for takeoff after running a quick diagnostic. Satisfied by the readings the ship gave him, he hit the ignition, and the ship began to power up; the ship hummed to life, power flowing through the ships’ internals.

Felix reached for the intercom. “This is Felix; if everyone is ready, we’ll be lifting off in sixty seconds.”

There was a brief delay, and Amber’s voice spoke through the intercom, coming from the system in the lounge. *“We’re all set here, Felix; ready anytime.”*

Felix took his hand away from the intercom and switched on the repulsion system, the ship beginning to hover off of the ground. It vibrated and hummed more as he felt it tilt side to side somewhat, taking the controls and compensating for the added mass in the cargo bay by tilting more to the right. He reached for the throttle, waiting until they were up high enough before he eased the throttle forward and disengaged the repulsors, turning the ship upward towards the sky.

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Denver XII looked exactly the same as the last time the Mara’s Hope and her crew had been there; the large, avian-designed station, still had plenty of traffic consisting of shuttles, trade ships and even personal vessels from all across the sector, docking or departing from the station systematically. One thing that was different however was a small fleet of ships that flew in a protective orbit around the station; an Enforcement fleet, consisting mostly of frigates and cruisers, along with a Warflier’s Model-550 Battleship, which looked almost identical to its successor, the Model-700 Felix had seen over Ithica VII –the kind of ship Captain Noir had been flying aboard during the battle. The 550 model wasn’t as powerful as the 700, but it was still a force to be reckoned with, and was the ship of choice for Confederate lieutenants as the flag ships of their divisionary fleets.

“Looks like the Confederacy isn’t taking any chances with the Grunikans so nearby,” remarked Felix, speaking to no one in particular as he hailed the control tower for docking permission. Permission was granted, and Felix was directed to a docking bay on the substation nearest to the Mara’s Hope.

He followed the directions, and carefully flew his ship into the docking bay that was opened for him, slowing the ship almost to a crawl as he guided the ship into the hangar. Once

halfway to the end, he activated the repulsion system and shut down the thrusters, letting the ship hover for a moment before slowly reducing the repulsors' output as the landing gear lowered and touched it down on the hangar floor.

Felix tapped the intercom. "Alright everyone; we've made it! Let's get that salt unloaded and go make a delivery," he said.

Powering the ship down, he stood up from his chair and walked out into the corridor. As he stepped out from the bridge, he spied movement on his left, and saw Zachary running up to him, carrying something in his paw.

"Hey, Felix, good news!" He exclaimed, holding out a small, round, plastic device. "Look what I got working!"

Felix looked at the device quizzically, blinking twice and saying nothing as he studied the small, disk-shaped object. It looked rather plain, except for four buttons on the front. The upper two were marked –in clearly white paint or marker hastily scrawled, no doubt written by Zachary- 'AL H' with an 'O' and a 'C' engraved on the buttons themselves respectively. The bottom buttons were marked by the letters 'CB D', also marked with an O and C.

"...What exactly is this supposed to be?" Felix inquired, finally speaking when his mind failed to register just what Zachary was showing him.

"A remote, of course!"

"...Remote for what?" Felix asked.

"For the ship, dumbass! It's a remote to open the cargo bay and airlock doors from the outside," explained Zack.

CB... Cargo Bay...

AL H... Airlock Hatch.

Now it made sense; Felix let out a long drawn 'oh' as the realization set in. "Well, that should come in handy," said Felix.

"It means we don't have to leave the doors open when we leave the ship in order to get back in," said Zack.

"Wait, but we never leave the airlock open," said Felix. "And there was always someone here to let someone else back on."

"Not when we were here the first time; that's how that Slash guy got on board when we all left for a while," said Zack. "How do you think he got in, but by hacking the ship system?"

"Because we left the cargo door open," replied Felix. "I was counting on it being too high for anyone else besides Gustav reaching it; wasn't counting on meeting a wolf just as big as he is."

"Oh... well anyway, now we don't have to leave either open, and all of us can safely leave the ship to look around," Zachary went on. "So, the ship will be safe while we're out shopping or exploring!"

Felix shrugged one shoulder, admitting that could prove useful. "How do you know it works though?"

"Let's find out," replied Zack, turning his attention towards the airlock hatch, tapping the button marked 'O' with his finger.

The ship responded in kind with a series of clicks across the ceiling; the hatch began to descend, continuing to lower until the sound of the ramp clanging against the floor of the hangar. With that resounding clang, Zack jumped for joy, almost hitting the ceiling with his hands as he jeered with happiness.

“Damn I’m good!” He bellowed, making Felix cringe.

“Volume, Zachary!” Felix pleaded.

“Here,” the rabbit said, passing the remote to Felix. “Makes sense the captain should have it, right?”

Felix eyed the device for a moment, before nodding in agreement and taking it in his hands. “Can you make another one?”

“I didn’t make that, Felix; I fixed it. Found it in the engine room since day one, and been trying to get it working but a few wires got melted so I had to be pretty much gut it and rebuild it,” explained the rabbit. “Still, maybe I can build something similar; I’ll see what I can do in my spare time.”

The dolphin nodded again. “Alright, now, let’s get into the cargo bay and…”

Thunk!

The two jumped slightly as they heard the dull noise echoing through the door of the cargo bay close to the airlock. The door slid open a second later and a figure neither Felix or Zack could recognize right away stumbled out, falling to the floor with a grunt. Amber appeared at the door a second later, jumping over to the dark furred intruder and hauling him to his feet, holding him up by the collar.

“What’re you doing on this ship?!” She demanded.

It was then Felix and Zack saw the face of the intruder, and gawked as they both recognized the black labrador Amber was holding.

“Albert McCain?!” They barked, echoing the surprise both men felt.

“What’re you doing on our ship?” Felix asked.

“Bigger question, how is he on it?” Zack asked.

“He was hiding in a crate,” replied Amber. “Gustav and I were lifting it up to move it closer to the door to unload, and we both noticed its weight was less than the salt bags so we dumped it. Sure enough, he dropped out of it; we’ve got a stowaway.”

“Fuck you, bitch!” Albert barked, shoving Amber off of him. “I had to get on board somehow when you refused to let me even when I offered to pay you!”

“I didn’t let you on because you had a crime to answer for back at Mara Colony!” Amber barked, baring her teeth at the canine.

“The hell with Mara Colony, the militia, and all of you!” Albert roared. “I am not going back there; I’ll die before I go back! I’m leaving, right now!”

“You stowed away aboard our ship just to run away from your punishment?” Felix asked, displeased with the cowardice of the canine.

“Punishment? You mean hell! That planet is a nightmare; those gelks, the miserable storms, no opportunities, no money to be made, living on low quality, rationed scraps every day of my life!” He shook his head. “The hell with all of that; I deserve far better than that garbage, and up here, I’ll get it!”

“Wait, let me get this straight,” Zack said. “You’re bailing on Mara Colony because it’s not spoiling you like some rich kid?”

“I *would* be rich if Brunhilda wasn’t so selfish!” Albert shot back.

Felix tensed at the insult towards his mother, but restrained himself from reacting.

“Selfish? What do you mean?”

“You really think she ever tried to have us evacuated?” Albert asked. “She’s been the manager for fifteen years, and claimed that she tried to have the Confederacy come and get us, but they never did! And you know why? Because she never called them at all; she *liked* having all of us to herself, as her busy little bees in a hive, working for their queen, giving her everything she needs while she lives a worry-free life!

“And when the comm tower went down, she had an even better way to keep up that farce! She shuts down all of our shops, and tells us ‘money is no longer a part of this colony’, she said; ‘from now on we all contribute, we all live as equals and we keep each other safe’.” He shook his head in disgust. “Bullshit; pure and simple! She always had all the power of the colony, and didn’t want to lose it; I know this! Especially when her son and his friend find a ship, a salvageable, space-flight capable ship, who fix it up to start trade for the colony! Not to evacuate us, not to go get help, but to start making money for herself!

“To top it off, she didn’t even send me! A merchant; a man who could make the colony copious amounts of money! No, she sends her bratty son, a high school dropout, a rookie doctor, a spineless whale and a shark with an itchy trigger finger to ‘open trade for the colony’. Don’t any of you get it?! She’s power tripping; she *is enslaving us!*”

Normally, Felix was a patient person; he could take insults straight to his face without reacting, until whoever was raging at him just calmed down and stopped yelling. But hearing his mother insulted and falsely accused in such a manner, it sparked something in him, and before he could stop himself, he leapt at Albert, striking him across the face with his fist so hard, it left the dolphins’ knucklebones aching as the realization he had just attacked someone set in –albeit not right away. He saw red, and was glaring at Albert, who lay sprawled out on the floor, rubbing his cheek where Felix had struck him.

“Don’t ever... say that about my mother again,” he warned. “Especially not in front of me; you have no idea whatsoever what my mother has sacrificed to keep the Mara Colony alive, how much she gave up to stay there where she was needed, when she had her chance to leave years before the place was deserted!”

Albert rubbed his cheek where Felix punched him, and glared at the dolphin. “Of course her child would defend her; you benefit as much from our suffering as she does. All you have to do is fly a ship, while the rest of us break our backs in hard labor or look death in the face everytime Gelks attack; you’re not doing anything for us, only for yourself!”

“That is not true!” Amber barked.

“The hell it isn’t! You could use this ship to evacuate Mara Colony; sure it’d take a few trips but it could be done!” Albert retorted.

“And where would they go, McCain?” Amber asked, crossly. “Where would three hundred people who were practically written off a decade ago possibly go? Here to Denver XII, or into the next sector?”

Albert shook his head. "I'm not hearing your excuses; you're all selfish; you, Zambrano, most especially Brunhilda, the hell with all of you! I've cut my losses and I'm going to start fresh here on Denver XII, and I'm going to get everything I should've had years ago!"

"So you're going to abandon your own family?" Felix demanded as Albert turned and began to head for the airlock. "You have a wife, a sister and two children back on Trident IV; you're just going to leave them there?!"

"I gave them the chance to come with me; they refused," Albert called, stopping mid-step. "The lies Brunhilda has been spreading set in with them too; they actually think the colony has a chance to become a respectable place!" He shook his head. "That mudhole is nothing but fish bait for the savages below the waves, and I'll be damned if I'm going to die a bum on a backwater ocean world!"

Without another word, the canine sprinted down the ramp, fleeing from the Mara's Hope and crossing the hangar towards the shuttle bay. Amber was about to give chase, but a hand caught her shoulder, and held her back. She looked over her shoulder, and saw Gustav had stepped out of the cargo bay and was stopping her.

"Forget it, Amber; let him go," he said.

"Are you kidding me?!" She screamed. "After everything he's said and done, you're letting him walk out?! He's running away from his responsibilities like a coward!"

"He made his choice," said Gustav. "We have no right to keep people on Mara; if we tried to we'd only prove him right. He's just too scared to see reason, or he's just looking for someone to lash out at, and the only one he can blame is Brunhilda."

"But it's all lies; there's no way..." She looked at Felix. "Your mother is nothing like that, is she?"

"Absolutely not," Felix returned, not even hesitating. "I know this for certain; I have my whole life, and I know because my mother had her chance to leave this colony long before it was abandoned."

"She did?" Zack asked.

Felix looked at Zack. "Who do you think my father was?" He asked, expectantly, and directed the question at Gustav and Amber as well. "Have any of you met any dolphins at the colony who even resemble me? Sure, there's plenty of them there, but all of the ones close to my mother in age are married and parents themselves; the rest eligible bachelors there are between Zack's age and Gustav's; far too young to be my father."

Amber considered the question, and tilted her head side to side. "Yeah, I guess that's true, but..." She paused. "Wait... the colony was abandoned only ten years ago, but you..."

Felix nodded. "I was eleven when the colony was abandoned. My father left before I was born; he didn't even know my mom was pregnant with me –she was too afraid to tell him, but she didn't leave with him, because when the colony's former owners went bankrupt, she stayed to do her part as the assistant manager; she chose the Mara Colony over him. She chose responsibility over love."

"When the colony was deserted eleven years later, the current manager left on his personal ship with his family, leaving only my mom to fill the position. She sacrificed the possibility of a good, happy life for both me and her, in order to give the colony a chance, by

giving it a leader when it was on the verge of collapse. I know this to be true, because most of the elders at the colony say the same thing about her; all of them witnessed it..."

"Including me," said Gustav. "I was old enough to remember too."

"I suppose I would've been but, I was a rather... distant teenager," admitted Amber. "Didn't pay much attention to anything."

Felix nodded. "Exactly. So you all know what my mother did, and now you know what she sacrificed to do it. So do any of you think Albert is correct?"

"Not a chance," returned Amber. "Anyone who has the guts to give up a lifetime of happiness in order to help hundreds has my respect."

"And the things Brunhilda did were the only things that stopped it from falling into chaos," agreed Gustav. "If money were still a factor there, there would've been greed, and with greed would've been desperation. With that, a higher crime rate; she had the right idea to keep the colony in order."

Felix nodded again. "Exactly; she did what it took to ensure the place would survive. I know this in my heart, and I'm certain Albert does too. He just wants someone to blame for not having what he thinks was his to claim; his fortune."

Amber scoffed. "Well, we'll never see him again, at least... I feel bad for his family though; he's left them all alone."

"I'll be sure my mom knows about it when I get home," said Felix. "Now... come on; let's start unloading. We've got a delivery to make."