

Voyages of the Mara

Arc 2: Edge of the Law

Chapter 3: Casualties

Argo II. One of the newest discovered planets claimed by the Confederacy, was a world equally divided between ocean and a Pangea continent. From orbit, the planet nearly resembled a toy ball, with half of the planet covered in a vast blue sea, and the other half consisting of the large continent, its outer regions covered in greenery visible even from orbit, but in the middle, forming the vast majority of the continent, was a vast expanse of yellow identified as desert; the Argo Wasteland, it was officially named, a region near inhospitable due to constant sandstorms.

Despite the treachery of this wasteland, apparently several colonies had already been formed there, due to initial prospecting via probes deployed by the exploration ship that had discovered the world finding massive veins of valuable metals all across the desert, deep below the planet's crust. Several corporations had been quick to take advantage of this discovery, and had already begun staking claims to land near these valuable deposits, air-dropping pre-fabricated buildings and mining vehicles, some of which were so new that the colonial residents had not even migrated to the planet yet prior to the attack by the Grunikan Armada, which had left craters in the planet visible from the atmosphere.

Meanwhile, near the moon of Argo II, the aftermath of the battle between Confederate and Grunikan fleets lay afloat in space, held by the moon's gravity to prevent it all from drifting away in the infinite abyss. The majority of the destroyed ships, however, were of the Confederate fleet, with only a few Grunikan ships to be found. Clearly, the attack had failed, and the Confederacy had lost this battle with the Empire, despite the confidence of the heroic marine, Justin Marlow, on the news.

Much of the damage was fresh, and with no Confederate bases within several hours' flight of Argo II, the rescue teams searching both among the wrecks and along the surface of the planet having already departed, the Mara's Hope wandered into the debris field with the crew ready to seek its next haul of salvage, taking their time as they picked their first wreck to salvage. This time, the crew was not rushed; there was no need to rush, for they were at very little risk of being detected.

Finally, they stopped alongside a Confederate Battlecruiser; a WarFlyer's model 400 'Amazon'. A large ship sporting plenty of firepower, equipped with several missile batteries. The payload of this ship was enough to turn cities into rubble from orbit but despite all of that power, it had been split in half by an unknown weapon, the rims of the break blackened from extreme heat, evidence that something massive and powerful had been the end of this ship. The crew agreed it was likely a Grunikan Dreadnaught; only the super lasers those bringers of destruction were equipped with could cause such damage...

"Alright guys, same deal as before," Felix said as he put on his S.C.E helmet, testing the radio before looking at the others. "*Everyone ready?*"

"Ready," bother Amber and Gustav replied.

"I'll be standing by," Zack returned as he hit the switch to open the cargo bay doors.

The metal barrier slid open with a hiss, releasing what little air was left in the bay after the cabin depressurized. Slowly, they exited the ship with tow lines securing them to the Hope as they kicked away from it and floated over to the Amazon; finding a point of entry on this ship was no hassle, thanks to being in two pieces. They simply entered through the destroyed portion and slipped into the forward half of the ship, beginning their search.

"Now, based on schematics of most WarFlyer's models the ship's armory should be..." Amber started, looking around only to frown through her visor. *"... Right where we are now."*

"It must've been destroyed when the ship was hit," Felix stated.

"No guns today, Amber. Let's focus on looking for other things this time," stated Gustav.

"Guns are just so easy to sell... but I guess it can't be helped," the shark-woman surrendered. *"So what else do we look for in this part of the ship?"*

"Let's start at the bridge and extract the electronics from the computers. We can sell those for a tidy profit. But make sure to give the hard drives to Zack so he can erase them; we don't want the Confederacy to trace them back to the Dirt Palace, or to us."

"Roger that, Felix," Amber and Gustav confirmed.

Steering their propulsion gears through the wreck, the team began to navigate their way through the shipwreck, making their way through the gloomy, lifeless corridors of the Amazon model ship as they sought out the bridge. The ship's size made it difficult to navigate, and a few times they wondered if their safety lines would run out before they even found it, until they finally reached the door aptly marked 'Bridge' with large, painted letters. After prying open the door they steered their Propulsion Gears into the room.

Much to their surprise, and maybe relief, the bridge was deserted. The crew had successfully abandoned ship prior to its destruction, leaving the bridge free of free-floating corpses. This brought some comfort to them as they floated into the bridge, each one of them picking a computer terminal, and proceeding to dismantle them to retrieve the electronic devices within...

They spent hours on the bridge, dismantling every terminal to extract the hard drives and store them into the compartments on their propulsion gears. With nothing else to be found in this room, they made their way back into the ship, seeking out the medical bay –only to find that, like the armory, it too had been blown away with the ship. The mess hall had little by way of food left, no because of the ship's damage, but it had clearly not been restocked recently. In the hall, they found various types of military-issue rations, none of which were of any value –military rations did not even *taste* good, let alone sell well. Instead they just helped themselves to the coffee stores –save them a few credits when the time came to restock the Mara's Hope –and carried on.

After storing their first haul aboard the ship, they crossed the abyss to the other half of the Amazon, their sights set on the engine's power cells. If any were still in working condition they'd be worth a good lump sum. Even damaged ones could sell well to recyclers, as they could break down the components and turn them into something else. There could also have

been some tools left behind, which were also well sought-after –especially Nocturnian ones, although it was not likely to find those on a Confederate vessel.

“Checking in; everyone okay?” Jessica’s voice buzzed over the communications.

“All good Jess. How’re things back there?” Felix inquired.

“All clear out here so far; no signatures detected,” replied the doe.

The three continued on, and entered the rear of the ship, finding the main power core and the reactor, loaded on all sides with power cells. They were in luck, it seemed; the main power core had not been damaged; overloaded, likely from the shields being stretched to their limits, but other than a few ruptured ones, every power cell in the core was intact. The ruptured cells were useless, having melted internally, but those were few, and they proceeded to extract the rest, drawing them from the core and loading them onto the carrying cases of their propulsion gears.

“We’re getting paid well this week, boys,” Amber remarked.

“Did I actually just hear a glint of enthusiasm?” Gustav asked.

“Your ears are playing tricks on you,” returned Amber, back to her blunt tone.

“Alright; that’s it for this wreck,” said Felix. *“Let’s haul ‘em back.”*

“Roger.”

They steered back out of the engine room and followed their tow lines back to the ship; upon seeing them flying towards the cargo bay, Zack set the safety lines to retract, leaving it on a slow setting. The three were able to shut off their gears, letting the lines do the work, and Zack helped them unload the power cells from their cases; storing cells was not like storing weapons, food and medicine which could be packed in any kind of crate. The cells had to be secured in an insulated case, where if one turned out to be damaged, it could not do any harm to the ship or the other cells in the case with it. Fortunately, they had such a case in the cargo bay, each one with its own padded slot for the cylindrical objects.

“Ten intact cells; good find, guys,” Zack complimented.

“It was our lucky day,” Gustav remarked as he shut the cargo bay doors.

“Wish we didn’t have to shut the doors every time we needed to move; uses up a lot of time when we have to re-pressurize and depressurize so many times,” Amber said.

“Until we hire a co-pilot, sadly, that’s the only way to do this,” replied Felix. *“Then they could fly the ship while the rest of us are in here.”*

“I know the mechanics of this thing inside and out; why not teach me how to fly it?” Zack suggested.

“Because flying a ship isn’t as simple as just steering it,” replied Felix as the cargo bay began to re-pressurize, filling the room with life-giving oxygen and artificial gravity, allowing them to take off their helmets. *“It requires coordination, focus and perception. Not to say you’re not perceptive, Zack, but you have a difficult time focusing and you’re not that coordinated.”*

“Says who?” Zack asked.

“Do you know the exact diameter of this ship?” Amber asked, plainly.

“Uh...”

“Three-hundred and seventy-one long -extra three for the primary engine, ninety-eight wide at the thickest portion of the ship –which would be from the wall of the bay here to the escape pod room,” Felix replied, matter-of-factly. “Measurements are all in meters,” he added quickly.

Amber held up her hand, gesturing towards Felix. “There you go.”

“I knew that!” Zack retorted.

Felix stepped out of the cargo bay and headed up to the bridge of the ship, keeping his helmet tucked under his arm until he stepped through the door and headed for his seat, glancing at Jessica who was still by the scanning equipment. “Anything?”

“Nothing yet,” she replied. “Suppose we have time for one more?”

“Should be okay to, yeah; that last one only took us about an hour,” Felix replied as he seated himself, setting down his helmet by his chair and grasping the tiller with one hand while easing the throttle forward with the other. The ship began to slowly move forward, a low hum filling the interior as he began to pilot it through the debris field once more. “Let’s try a Grunikan ship this time; I think I see a Battlecruiser up ahead there.”

“Still hoping to collect the bounty on those Nocturnian tools and Grunikan officer tags?”

“Long as it’s still open, why not?”

A few moments of flying later, and the Mara’s Hope slowly floated alongside the wrecked Grunikan cruiser. This one had been destroyed by conventional means unlike the Confederate ship they had come from, covered in missile-impact dents and holes and plasma burns around sections of the hull where the powerful energy weapons of a Confederate ship – if not several- had crippled it.

Leaving the ship there and returning control of the bridge to Jessica, Felix headed back to the cargo bay, and once his helmet was on securely again, the process repeated; the cargo bay depressurized, and the three salvagers exited through the open door to the ship wreck, beginning their hunt through the ship for profitable items. Unlike in the previous vessel, the armory aboard this one was not damaged, and so Amber made a beeline straight for it to empty it of weapons.

With a roll of their eyes, Felix and Gustav made for the engine room, and found, to their delight, that several fully-stocked Nocturnian tool kits had been left behind on the ship! Eagerly, they collected the tool kits, loading them into their carrying cases, and made their exit. They hit the other usual spots; the mess hall, the power core, the medical bay and finally the bridge. They found only two officers left behind on the ship, their bodies left afloat and deformed by the vacuum of space that had seeped into their vessel, but their tags remained worn around their necks; only two, but two was enough.

Trying not to be disgusted by the fact they were looting corpses, Gustav and Felix retrieved the tags from the two deceased Grunikans. As Gustav lifted his free from the corpse of the officer, he looked at their face, seeing the way their face had frozen as they were starved of breathable air, mouth wide to gasp for oxygen that was not there, wondering what their last thought had been prior to their death...

Shaking his head free of the rather cryptic thought, Gustav turned away from the corpse, and rejoined Felix, not daring to look back again.

"Alright, I think that's it for this ship," Felix stated. "Let's start..."

"Felix, I'm picking up something on the scanners," Jessica suddenly chimed in.

"What's wrong Jess?"

"I'm picking up warp signatures from the neighboring system, bearing... er... dammit how does that go? Ugh! They're coming from the unmarked system!"

"Unmarked?" Zack echoed. "Hold it, if they're coming from the direction of the unmarked territory, then that means..."

"Grunikans!" Amber exclaimed.

"Oh shit!" Zack said, nearly panicked.

Felix's heart skipped a beat. The Grunikans were already coming back to the planet! But why? They had already destroyed every colony on Argo II; what reason could they have to come back? He shook his head to clear it; he couldn't think about that now. *"Zack, reel us back in; pull back Amber first, she's closer! Gustav, you go first; we're getting out of here now!"*

"No Felix; you first! The ship can't leave without you..."

"Shut up and just move!" Felix snapped. "We've got two minutes before those psychotic dragons are on us!"

Avoiding further argument, Gustav returned to his propulsion gear, turning it around and steering it back out into the corridor, flying with less caution as he hit the throttle and sped down the corridor beyond, with Felix following behind him immediately after. They heard Amber let Zack know she was back on her propulsion gear. As they turned a corner, following their lines back to their point of entry, they were just in time to see the shark, racing through open space with her arms held above her head as if she were one of those superheroes in old, old stories flying across the sky, only in this case her arms were raised to hold on for dear life to her propulsion gear as it was reeled back to the ship like a fish on a line.

...Ironic thought.

"Felix, Gustav; you guys out?" Zack called over the communications.

"We're clear; pull us in!" Felix replied.

Felix felt his arms alight with pain as his gear suddenly jerked forward, almost losing his grip as he was violently pulled through space, racing through vast nothingness as he was hauled away from the ship. He cried out as wide hot pain suddenly lanced through his leg, looking down to see one of his crates had fallen free of his gear, his leg hitting it as he passed. He didn't worry about it, though, because suddenly he was in the cargo bay of the ship, and his gear jerked again, only this time to a very sudden halt.

If he had not been in zero gravity, the dolphin's ribs might have broken as he was hurled into the far wall of the cargo bay, slamming against it audibly and feeling his entire skeleton rattle from the impact. His bones held, however, and he flailed through the lack of atmosphere as he recovered from the impact, kicking off the wall and racing through the cargo bay to the door controls as Gustav came flying through the door as well, repeating Felix's earlier crash and hitting the wall with a thunderous bang, using his arms to protect his helmet as he struck the wall.

"Next time, Zack, not so fast!" Gustav exclaimed, shaking his head to clear it.

"Sorry; guess I panicked a bit," Zack returned sheepishly before turning to look at Felix. *"Whoa, hey Felix! You lost a crate!"*

"Forget it; we have to go!" Felix returned, hitting the emergency shut button to close the door rapidly. It slid shut swiftly, slamming closed with enough force to shear off an arm, and the bay began to re-pressurize once again.

"Felix, two signatures approaching; they're about to come out of warp speed!" Jessica informed.

"Come on, come on!" Felix growled inside his helmet as he felt his feet touch down as the cargo bay's gravity generator activated, waiting for oxygen to fill the room so he could open the doors; they wouldn't open until the interior pressure of the cargo bay matched the rest of the ship, a process that only took sixty seconds, but right now they were pressed for time, and every second that was wasted now put them closer to the very jaws of death.

The propulsion gears fell to the floor, two of the attached crates spilling open and sending the salvage within scattering about the floor, littering it with Sephilon crystals and a power cell, which cracked as it hit the floor. *"Ruptured cell!"* Gustav exclaimed.

"Get it away from those crystals before they explode!" Amber practically screamed, hurriedly dashing over and dropping to the floor, using her hand to brush the raw, unrefined Sephilon crystals away from the energy cell; if any static were to spill out and connect with the crystals, the chain reaction would have been enough to blow the entire cargo bay itself clear away from the ship.

Felix, forgetting about their being pressed for time, fell to his knees by the crystals, helping Amber scoop them up to return them to their container as Zach ran over to the wall to grab a magnet hook—a long pole device for moving hazardous metal items that couldn't be touched by hand, tossing it to Gustav. The orca caught it, holding it tightly as he switched it on with a flick of his thumb on the toggle, and held it over the ruptured cell until the magnet picked it up. While he did that, Zack retrieved an empty, lead-lined titanium container and brought it over, holding it open until Gustav lowered the ruptured cell inside, shutting off the magnet as he set it down and pulling it away as Zack shut the lid,

"Felix, they're here! Two small ships just appeared outside the debris field!" Jessica informed. *"Scanners are labelling them as Escort Cruisers!"*

"If those are Escorts, then that means a bigger ship's still coming!" Amber exclaimed. *"Felix, get up to the cockpit and get us out of here! We got this!"*

"Okay!"

Felix rushed over to the door out to the corridor; a second later, the cargo bay had full re-pressurized, and finally the door opened. Pulling off his helmet and tossing it to the side, he strode across the corridor, past the gun turret and onto the bridge. *"Jessica!"*

"Engines are hot!" The doe called, dashing out of the way as Felix appeared on the bridge, letting him take his place at the pilot's chair.

He dropped heavily into the seat, and grasped the throttle, inching it forward hard to send the ship forward, the engines practically exploding with energy at the rear of the ship as it surged forward. Jessica nearly lost her balance as the ship jerked, and would have fallen to

the floor if not for her grabbing the back of Felix's chair to catch herself. Shakily, she moved back over to the scanners to check them, and looked at Felix worriedly.

"The Escort Cruisers are coming our way, and a Carrier just emerged from warp drive!"

"Don't worry; we can outrun them," Felix assured her.

"Surrounded by all of these wrecks?" She asked, incredulously.

"Escort Ships are armoured vessels meant primarily for shielding VIP ships," Felix explained. "They're built to take damage, but not for speed; they can't catch a 102."

"Oh... okay, then we're..." The doe paused, looking at the scanners again. "There are smaller signatures coming off of the carrier; fighters, and they're headed right for us!"

Felix scowled and looked at the ceiling in exasperation. "Me and my big mouth!" He complained before he reached over to the intercom. "Amber; we've got fighters incoming! I need you on the gun!"

"Hang on; we're almost done!"

"Hurry up; they're coming in!"

"Amber, go! The cell's contained; we got the rest!" Zack's voice chimed in.

"Alright; I'm going!"

Jessica looked back out to the corridor as the cargo bay door opened, seeing Amber take off her helmet and drop it on the floor before she practically swung around the tube for the gun turret, dropping into the chair and securing herself before tapping a button on the side, looking up as the chair began to elevate into the turret where she grasped the controls and switched on the gun; a light flashed on the terminal in front of Felix as the main turret powered up, indicating the safety was off and the gun was active.

The doe turned back to Felix. "Can you make it to warp drive before the fighters reach us?" She asked, desperately.

Felix shook his head. "Not those things; they're too fast, and we're facing the wrong way," he replied. "We want to go the opposite direction but now they're between us and our escape. I can outrun the Cruisers and the Carrier –could even dodge around them if I wanted to, but with those fighters on our tail they'd get us before we could get around the debris field; one hit to our engines and we can't use warp drive."

"So what do we do?" Jessica asked, worried.

"We're going to have to make for the planet's surface," replied Felix. "We'll find somewhere to hide down there and try to wait them out." He looked at her. "How many fighters are coming?"

She turned back to the scanner terminal again, mumbling to herself before looking at Felix again. "Three," she replied.

Felix looked back over his shoulder. "Amber, three fighters detected, coming in hot! I'm going to try and make for the planet's surface; can you hold them off?"

"Count on it!" Amber replied.

Felix turned his gaze forward again, knuckles white as he gripped the tiller tightly and steering the ship around the wrecks, seeing the planet beyond the debris field –a vast globe of blue, with a hint of orange and green to starboard, slowly disappearing around the eastern half of the planet, sitting beyond a field of wrecked ships and debris. The planet's rotation had

taken the land towards the night-time side of the world, meaning they would have to come in above the ocean. Knowing this made a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek; they'd be out in the open once they made entry to the planet's atmosphere... not a place he wanted to be.

The fighters were in hot pursuit of the Mara's Hope, racing and dodging around the debris with greater ease than the larger, light freighter could do. The Mara's Hope was fast, but one-man fighters were built for speed, meant for combatting small vessels or chasing down escaping ships; they were *made* to chase, and to fight, the latter which the Hope was not...

As Felix dodged around one more large ship, they were out of the debris field; out of the frying pan and into the fire, for ten seconds after clearing the debris field, the three Grunikan fighters, each one resembling a dragon whelp made of metal with short, angled wings and no legs. They soared through the abyss, engines ablaze as they chased the Mara's Hope while it made its attempt for the planet. Once they were in range, though, a red sphere sped away from the ship, lancing across space and narrowly missing the lead fighter.

Amber found her target and fired a second time, the barrel of the turret emitting a crackling hum with each shot fired. The fighters took evasive action, breaking formation and continuing their pursuit. The first fighter accelerated ahead, spinning to the side as Amber took a second shot at it, but the third one glanced its wing, making the shark grin in satisfaction as it teetered; she'd glanced over its stabilizer, making it much harder to fly, and with a fourth shot, she scored a direct hit; the ship exploded, its wings spinning off into the empty space as the cockpit went up in flames.

"She got one!" Jessica informed Felix.

"Excellent," Felix said, before looking back over his shoulder. "Nice shot, Amber!"

"Don't celebrate yet; there's still two of them out there!" Amber called back. "Better do a little evasive action, Felix!"

Almost as if on cue, Felix felt the ship jolt, and saw a warning light on the panel ahead of him indicating the ship had taken a hit on the port side, right on top of the cargo bay; not a breach, but the hull had been damaged. The armour on the Mara's Hope was only light, low-grade plating that might save the ship from one or two hits or a few glancing blows, but not from a perfect shot. He banked the ship, beginning to fly side-to-side to make them a harder target, seeing laser beams lancing past the Hope as he narrowly evaded taking more damage, hearing the gun turret let off several more shots as he carried on.

They were nearing the planet's atmosphere within minutes, flying more than two – hundred thousand miles per hour through open space, but as they neared the atmosphere, both the Hope and the Grunikan ships would have to slow down or risk burning up on entry; in the atmosphere, the Mara's Hope would be at its most vulnerable, but Felix had faith in Amber's ability to protect the ship from the fighters. He eased the ship an angled entry position and slowly pulled back the throttle to decelerate, feeling the ship rumble as it began to pass into the atmosphere.

He heard Amber curse after firing another shot, the shaking of the ship throwing off her aim and making it difficult to hit the Grunikan fighters as they closed in. Several more lasers raced down in front of the Mara's Hope as they attempted leading shots on the Hope. He felt

the ship rock as the ship took a hit just off to his right, and silently hoped his bedroom was not breached... or anyone else's... or the medical bay, or lounge –*'ah fuck it; just stop shooting my ship!'* He screamed in his head, despite how futile such a wish was.

The Grunikans were closing in; even though they had to slow down to make entry to a planet, their smaller size allowed them to keep a slightly higher speed than the Hope could risk as they entered, and now they were getting closer. The ship rocked again as it took several other hits on the top, but stopped as the ships caught up with the Hope and then dashed around it, flying on ahead; they had a brief moment of reprieve, but fighters that size would take only a few seconds to circle back around and resume the attack.

"Felix, keep it steady!" Amber called, aiming the gun forward. "This is my chance!"

"Go for it, Amber!" Felix called back, doing what he could to keep the ship still.

The shark, peering down the sights of her gun and hearing the monitor on the controls beeping as she found her target, she took careful aim, watching as the first fighter made its rotation and came at them again. She had barely heard the beeping of the computer before she pulled the two triggers, firing the red plasma sphere, seeing it race through the air and strike the Grunikan fighter directly, scoring a hit on the cockpit and slicing off the upper half of the ship, sending the rest hurtling down to the ocean below as nothing more than a smoking husk.

"Nice shot!" Felix called.

Amber brought the sighting reticle around towards the other fighter, but barely had time to take aim before the fighter shot first. The green beam lanced across the sky and struck the dome above her head, sending red-hot metal and transparent shielding into her compartment; she screamed as she felt a piece of metal slash across her face, burning her flesh as stars danced across her eyes, and the air inside of the dome began to get sucked out through the hole in the top; they were still in the planet's stratosphere, with little to no air to breath. Were it not for her safety belt the shark would have been ripped from her seat and out into the cold, empty sky of Argo II.

The shark's vision darkened, pain and lack of oxygen stealing her consciousness and making her slump in her chair. Felix noticed the breach indicator at the gun emplacement flashing on his terminal, and looked over his shoulder in horror. "Amber!" He cried.

The automatic safety of the gun emplacement lowered the chair down from the turret, and a door closed off above Amber's head, preventing any more loss of pressure from the interior. Jessica ran out of the bridge to the gunnery turret, putting two fingers to Amber's neck to check for a pulse; to Felix's relief, the doe looked over her shoulder at him, and said, "She's okay!"

"Get her to the infirmary!" Felix ordered.

Jessica turned back to the tiger shark, reaching in and quickly unstrapping her security belts before she tried to lift Amber out of the turret chair. However, the doe found herself barely able to even move her; Amber was bigger and outweighed Jessica by far, and Jess was not exactly a physically fit person. She struggled as she dragged Amber out of the turret, but lost her balance and fell to the floor with the shark strewn across her lap, panting.

Gustav appeared at Jessica's side, reaching down and scooping up Amber in his arms, easily lifting her off of Jessica before using his tail to help the doctor back to her feet. "Come on!" He urged, striding across the corridor towards the medical bay, with Jessica quick to follow him.

Zack appeared at Felix's side a second later, his face white with fear. "Dude, we lost our gunner; the hell do we do now?"

"Don't panic; I'll think of something," Felix returned.

"Don't *panic*?! There's still a fighter out there chasing us; when's a good time to panic?!" Zack demanded.

"You're not helping~!" Felix retorted as he swerved the ship left as he saw, on the scanner past Zack, the fighter was coming around again.

Zack was thrown off of his feet; a trio of lasers shot past the Hope, narrowly evading more damage to the hull. Without Amber, the ship now had no means of fighting back against this pursuing ship; nobody else could operate the turret, and with the damage it had sustained before the turret was nigh inoperable regardless. They were defenseless; this ship did not have energy barriers or military grade armour, and now it didn't even have a gun!

He had an idea of what he could try... but this was going to be *some* trick...

They were flying through open air now; they had fully entered the planet, the planetary engines were active and artificial gravity was no longer needed, disengaging automatically. Soon were flying over the ocean, the Grunikan fighter chasing them every step of the way; Felix did his best to evade, eyes darting from the viewport in front of him to the scanner repeatedly to monitor where the fighter was, swerving whenever he suspected the enemy ship was about to fire upon them. For the most part, his instincts served him well, evading many would-be harmful shots but every now and then the Hope still suffered a hit.

He was at full throttle –planet-side the Mara's Hope was limited to flying at only three hundred and fifty miles per hour, and could sustain that speed indefinitely, but fighters could average speeds of nearly five hundred; even here, on the surface, he couldn't outrun the little fighter chasing them. Fortunately, though, that wasn't his intention. He needed to make the Grunikan accelerate just enough for this to work...

Felix reached over to the intercom. "Everyone, brace yourselves; we're going to be making a very sudden stop in ten seconds!" He notified the crew.

"A sudden stop?" Zack asked, staring at Felix until the realization dawned on him. "Wait, you're not doing what I think you're doing, are you?"

"I am. You better strap in. Four..."

"Felix, you crazy son of a...!" Zack babbled as he scrambled into a chair, hurriedly fastening the seat belt.

"Three..."

"Shit, shit, shit!" Zack cried as he curled up into a fetal position, ducking his head low and covering it with his hands.

"Two..." Felix grasped the throttle.

"This is going to hurt!" Zack shouted before the countdown ended.

"One!"

The dolphin harshly pulled back the throttle and hit the air brakes.

The entire ship jerked as it slowed almost to a crawl in a few seconds, the air brakes struggling to work. Felix was hurled forward in his seat, feeling his ribs groan in protest as his safety belt stopped him from leaving the chair, gasping for air as every ounce of oxygen was forced from his lungs by the pressure. His neck snapped forward and then back, and he knew he'd be feeling some whiplash later, but he grit his teeth through the pain, keeping his eyes focused through the viewport.

Success! The Grunikan fighter shot past, careening somewhat as it narrowly evaded colliding with the Mara's Hope. As soon as it was in his sight, Felix thrust the throttle forward again, putting the ship back to full speed; the Hope shot forward, once more making his head jostle, and he steered it right at the fighter, who was already starting to circle back when the Hope came rushing at them. He saw the ship trying to turn away when the pilot no doubt spotted them approaching, but he was far too late; the Hope came charging at him, and Felix rammed the Grunikan fighter directly into its underbelly, knocking it out of the sky and sending it spiralling out of control towards the waves below.

But the dolphin did not slow the ship down.

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Hours of flying over the crashing waves, the Mara's Hope finally reached land, flying over a vast sandy beach and then over an equally vast forest of tropical trees, expanding like a wall across the land at the head of the beach. The Mara's Hope flew over easily a kilometer-wide expanse of forest before it finally cleared the trees and was above open grassland, although they could see the edge of the start of the desert just beyond the horizon, standing out brightly at the edge of the grassland.

"Wow... quite the place," Zack stated, staring out at the lands beyond in awe.

"Sure is," agreed Felix, finding himself equally breath-taken by the expanse of the Argo Pangea. He had never expected such a simple pattern with nature; ocean, beach, forest, grassland, and finally desert, filling the entire inner portion of the continent, on a continent stretching more than fifty-two million square kilometers, making up the definitive landmass of the entire planet, minus a few islands that existed off the coast.

What Felix found surprising, however, was how smooth and flat the land was. There were little to no hills or elevations anywhere in sight; at their current altitude they could see hundreds of miles across the land from their position. They were not used to being on planets with so much landmass, as their home world of Trident IV was almost entirely ocean, and there they could only see such distances when the sea was calm. Not that there was ever much of a view, since very few islands were in sight of where New Mara was located; what islands there was on the planet were quite isolated from the rest.

Zack took in the view for a moment until he turned his gaze over to Felix. "So uh... where exactly are we heading anyway?"

"I have no idea," replied Felix, bluntly. "When we came down here I hoped there would be somewhere to hide, but this land is so flat and open that in hindsight, that probably wasn't the best idea."

"Neither was colliding with that Grunikan fighter," Zack remarked.

"I'm going to be hearing about that one for a while, aren't I?"

"Damn straight," returned the rabbit. "Let's just hope it didn't cause any serious damage –of course, I can't even get out and check for that until we land somewhere." He scooted closer to the scanner panel, eyeing the screen. "There's got to be an old colony or *something* around here we could use."

Felix cast a glance over at Zack first, before turning his gaze ahead again. Suddenly, he noticed something ahead, and stood up partially trying to get a better look. As the ship got closer, he eyed a cluster of pre-fabricated buildings, resting at the very edge of the desert. "I think I see one," he said.

Zack looked at him briefly, and then rose up in his seat to follow his gaze, spotting the same cluster of buildings. "Say..." He dropped back into his seat, checking the scanners. "Aha, there is one there."

Felix took the controls again, flying low over the surface of the land, switching on the repulsion system to keep the ship in a low hover as they approached the colony. Placing his hand upon the throttle, he gently slowed the ship down, extending the landing gear and peering out the window again, seeing the colony in plain sight. He narrowed his eyes curiously as he studied the conditions of the buildings, caught unexpected by how they seemed to be completely intact.

Zack caught onto this quickly as well, and scratched his head in confusion as he said, "I thought the news reports said the planet got bombarded?"

"That's what I heard too," agreed Felix. "But this one seems undamaged."

"Maybe they evacuated before the Grunikans could hit them?" Zack suggested.

"That seems likely; I doubt the Grunikans would waste power on an empty colony," replied the dolphin, looking over the buildings again before spotting one of interest. "Well, regardless, it's got a hangar; if we can hide the ship from view, we'll be safe for a while until we can figure out a plan."

"That's all well and good, but the hangar's closed," Zack pointed out, noticing the metal door of the building was shut.

Felix cursed under his breath, noticing that as well. He thought for a moment for some kind of solution, before an idea crossed his mind. He looked at Zack one more time. "Can you hack the building's systems and get the door open?"

"Not from in here; I'd have to go down there and do it manually," he replied.

Suddenly, the rabbit stiffened, and slowly turned to look at Felix with a wide-eyed gaze of realization as the dolphin lowered the ship down in front of the hangar. "You actually intend to go out there, while there could be a Grunikan ship chasing us?"

"If you have a better idea, say so now," replied Felix, grunting as the ship jerked upon touchdown with the ground. "Because otherwise, we're going outside."

With that, the dolphin reached beside the console, grasping something hidden on the side before pulling it free, revealing an SL-3P Scattergun. It was a short, hefty weapon, and not his first time using it, for it was the same energy shotgun he had used to kill the gangster known as Slash a long time ago, and to battle Grunikans on the planet Ithica VII; since those times, Felix had used the firearm many times –he had been trained in its use by Amber, and battled several pirates in his two years as a smuggler. It was the weapon he felt most comfortable using; reliable and powerful enough to punch through most armour types. Hopefully it would continue to serve him well now.

“Oh man,” groaned Zack. “So we as in you, and me?”

“Jessica’s taking care of Amber and Gustav is helping her,” reminded Felix. “So yes. Now, go get your gun; let’s go.”

Zack took in a deep breath. “Okay... always considered myself more of a lover than a fighter, but... alright. I’ll go get it.”

Moments later, the boarding ramp for the airlock was lowered, opening with a slight hiss before extending down towards the ground, touching down against the soil and locking in place with a click. Slowly and cautiously, Felix and Zack descended down the ramp, checking the area around them before fully stepping off of the ramp. When they confirmed the coast was clear, they turned towards the hangar and began to cross towards it, keeping low as they moved towards the metal structure.

Every few steps, Felix’s eyes would drift to the buildings near the hangar, and towards its corners, expecting someone to jump out at any time. The colony was deathly quiet; no power generators running, no machinery, no people moving about, not even some of the native animals of the planet –whatever ones there were- anywhere to be seen. It was as quiet as the cold reaches of space itself, the only sound reaching the ears of either of the voyagers being that of their boots crunching in the dry, crusty soil below.

After a moment of walking, they reached the building, and pressed their backs flat against the large door. Slowly, they began to slide along the metal door, making their way towards the personnel entrance at the end. Felix was the first to the door, peeking in through the window before drawing his head back, expecting a shot to be fired, but none came. This time he took a longer look through the window, but it was dark inside and he could not see clearly. That only made the situation more risky... though there wasn’t much choice.

He stepped aside, and motioned for Zack to get to work. Picking his portable terminal from his belt and setting down his pistol, Zack hooked up to the security panel for the hangar, accessing it and beginning to hack in, humming to himself as he worked. “Little of this, little of that –wow, these guys really need to upgrade their security,” he mumbled. “One more to go... come on... and we’re in.”

On cue, the door slid ajar ever so slightly. Zack and Felix switched spots, and slowly the rabbit opened the door and kept watch around them as Felix switched on his gun’s flashlight and shone it inside the hangar, swinging it about to get a view of the interior and checking for trouble. The hangar was huge though, and the little light on his gun couldn’t pierce the darkness enough to see to every corner. “Zack, can you switch on the lights?”

“With a mere tap of my finger,” the rabbit replied, poking a button on his terminal.

The room became ablaze with bright, bluish lighting, chasing away the darkness of the interior. Felix lowered his shotgun as he found the room completely empty; no crates, no other doors, nothing that a person could be hiding behind waiting in ambush. With a long sigh to calm his nerves, he shouldered his gun and looked at Zack. “Okay, wait here and get the door open; I’ll go back to the ship and fly it in.”

“Move quick, man; this place gives me the heebie jeebies,” replied Zack as the dolphin turned and ran back out the door and made a beeline straight for the ship.

While Felix went back to the Mara’s Hope, Zack hacked in to the door controls for the hangar and went to work on getting it open. Meanwhile, aboard the Mara’s Hope, Felix was back in his seat and powering up the engines, switching the repulsion systems on to bring the ship into a low hover, and using the directional repulsors to change which way the ship was facing, turning it about until its back was to the hangar. With that, he used the reverse system to slowly back the ship into the hangar, activating the proximity sensors to be sure of where it was so that he didn’t hit the building itself.

“Been a while since I did this; so used to two-way hangars,” he mumbled to himself. “I just hope the sensors are spot-on or Zack is going to kill me if I scratch the ship further.”

Slowly and steadily he steered the ship backwards, reversing it into the hangar. After a while, a shadow fell over the front window, and he looked up to see the ceiling of the hangar above. That was far enough, he decided, and set the ship down again. The light in the room began to reduce as the door to the hangar door began to close again, bringing shadow back to the interior once more.

With that, Felix powered down the Mara’s Hope; even its electrical systems would leave it detectable if they were left online should the Grunikans come looking for them in this area. Although it would mean they’d be slower on the takeoff –especially when they might have to leave in a hurry, it would at least buy them time to assess their situation.

Returning his shotgun to its original place, he stood up from his chair, taking a deep breath to ease his tension, and walking around his chair and out into the corridor, turning towards the medical bay. As he crossed the corridor, Zack suddenly came sprinting up the boarding ramp, joining them as they made their way over to the door and opened it, stepping inside to find Jessica still at work with Amber, who was lying on the clinic bed and had not yet regained consciousness. Jessica was applying ReGel to her head injuries as they entered, a heart monitor beeping in sync with her heartbeats.

Gustav was standing by the door when the two entered, putting his arm out to halt their advance. “Don’t disturb her,” he whispered to them.

They both nodded, and glanced towards the unconscious tiger shark. “How is she?” Felix asked.

“Mild concussion; she’ll be okay, but she’ll be out of commission for a while,” the Orca replied.

“Oh swell,” groaned Zack. “How’re we getting off this rock without our gunner?”

"We wait, for now," Felix stated, firmly. "I've powered down the ship; they won't track us on sensors if the ship is off. I doubt they consider us enough of a problem to start searching these colonies for us, but just in case, we need to lay low, at least until those ships leave."

"Why do you suppose they came back?" Gustav asked. "Were they a salvage group?"

"No; I didn't see any salvage ships among them," replied Felix. "I have no idea why they'd come back so soon after a battle, not to mention bringing along a carrier ship? It's like they expected to find a small fleet when they got back." He shook his head. "Either way, we can't leave for now. Gustav, what's our inventory like; how long can we wait them out?"

"We have enough food for about a month," replied Gustav. "Water's the iffy one, though; even if none of us take any showers, we've only got enough for a couple of weeks; the water recycler can only re-filter so much water before it becomes too tainted to use."

"And with three aquatics on board, that's going to be tough," Zack pointed out. "I mean, I'm content with smelling like engine grease but don't you, Felix and Amber have to stay hydrated both inside and out?"

"Unfortunately yes," replied Gustav. "Within four days the three of us will need to hydrate our skin too. If we don't, our skin will become dangerously dry; drinking plenty of water each day will slow that don't but not completely. If our skin gets too dry, it starts to crack like an over-calloused foot."

"It's also very painful," Felix added.

Zack cringed at that thought. "That... sounds nasty; I don't want to see that," he said.

"Neither do we," agreed Felix, nodding to Zack before looking at Gustav. "You stay here and help out Jessica if she needs it. Zack and I are going to check the ship for additional damage and repair what we can."

"Alright; if you need a hand, let me know," stated Gustav.

"We will," promised Felix. "Come on Zack; let's get to work."

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The whoosh of Grunikan ships racing across the sky echoed through the air, shattering the still of the Argo II wasteland as scouts scoured the planet for any sign of life on the surface, scanners beeping away as they surveyed the ground below for life signs. So far, the detected readings were only local life forms –the planet's native wildlife, each one varying in size but none matching the profiles of a sentient species.

"Epsilon Squad #5 reporting in," the pilot of the first ship, a blue-scaled draco-morph, spoke as he transmitted his check-in report to the command ship. "Negative signs of the escaped ship or its crew; awaiting further instructions."

"Continue search, #5; that ship could be a Confederate scout. We cannot let it leave the system and report our activity here," was the reply. "Continue patrol along assigned route and maintain visual and electronic scanning."

"Affirmative, Command; will continue search. For the Empire."

"For the Empire."

As the fighter began to turn and go back the way it came, a pair of eyes on the ground below, peering out from behind a prefabricated structure, watched carefully until it was out of sight before stepping out of hiding. Zack wiped his forehead and walked around to the front of the building, finding the entrance –a sliding metal door marked ‘Maintenance’ on the front. Plugging his portable terminal into the door’s lock, he quickly –and rather easily- hacked through its security protocols, ordering the door to open. With a satisfied grin he stepped inside, and began to look around.

“Man, who made the security for this place? This stuff is so easy to crack, it’s almost insulting,” mumbled the rabbit as he stepped into the dimly lit building, feeling around for a light switch. “Now if I can just find those parts we need... where’s that damn light?”

Finally, his hand landed on the toggle switch for the light, and the room became ablaze in a bright, bluish illumination. His eyes scanned over the room he had entered, feeling suddenly nostalgic as he took in his surroundings, seeing countless work benches spread evenly across the back of the room, and to his left, a door to the parts room. Stepping through, his nostrils were assailed by the smell of freshly greased machine components and ship parts, taking in a deep breath of the familiar, sickly sweet smell as his eyes looked over the shelves and cabinets containing parts for every kind of machine a colony could need, from a salt water separator to a solar powered generator.

It felt like he was back in his old workshop on Trident IV at the original Mara Colony, where he’d spent so many of his days before becoming part of the crew for the Mara’s Hope, fixing appliances and household utilities for the colonists. He remembered the feel of working on microwaves –probably one of the most common items he repaired for the colony, oddly enough. Some had taken to calling him the Microwave Maintenance man; a nickname that never really stuck, but he laughed just thinking of it. And of course, the looks on the faces of his co-workers when they saw he, the youngest and least experienced technician at the shop, had helped repair an old derelict ship found on a neighboring colony, seeing how impressed they were with his skills, and their envy that he was about to traverse the stars.

Seeing the stars...

Suddenly he remembered he was on a whole new planet. In all the excitement, he had completely forgotten that he was on a strange world that had not been fully explored yet. His ears shot fully upright and he beamed as he felt old curiosities coming back. By the stars how he wished he could go exploring! Why did work have to get in his way?

Zack shook his head, slapping his cheek. “Okay, got to keep the wanderlust at bay or we’ll all be going up in smoke,” he stated. “Got to find those parts.”

Going over a mental checklist, he recalled everything he was supposed to be looking for, and began to scan the shelves for them, mumbling to himself as he surveyed each item. “Let’s see here... ah! Focus Lenses for the turret... no replacement gun barrel that’ll fit though; we’ll have to weld it,” he went on with his search until he found a transparent dome-like object; the protective cover for a manually operated turret and another item on his list. “Bingo!” He said, excitedly. “Thank the stars for universal turret seats.”

A bump broke the silence of the room.

Zack's heart skipped a beat, ears once more standing fully upright out of reflex to the unexpected sound. "Oh mama, what was that?" He muttered.

He set down the items in his arms and reached for his weapon, drawing his compact blaster pistol and holding it out in the direction he heard the sound come from, holding it tightly despite his shaky paws, stepping slowly and carefully towards the corner at the opposite side of the room, where the sound had come from. Step after step, he drew closer, expecting any second to hear another bump, but so far it remained completely silent in the room, with no repeats of the sound...

"Anyone there?" He called. "Look, if someone's back there, I'm not a Grunikan, so if you're armed, please don't shoot me; I'm not looking for any trouble."

No answer.

Zack swallowed nervously. "Why the hell did Felix have to make me come here all by myself?" He muttered, switching off the safety for his pistol, seeing the indicator light by his thumb turn red, confirming that the gun was ready to fire.

He trekked past a shelf covered in replacement parts for colonial utilities; rotors for salt water separators, wall-mount keypads, solar panels, refrigerator motors, etcetera; everything a colony maintenance team would need. *'These guys are better equipped than we are,'* thought the rabbit before returning his attention to the task at hand, walking past the shelves—peering down the rows each time to make sure he wasn't about to get jumped...

He finally reached the last row, and the corner where the sound had come from. But he found nothing; there was nobody there or down the row to his left. He let out a sigh and turned around to begin to make his way back to where he'd left the components he had been gathering. "This whole fiasco is making me jumpy," he grumbled.

A shrill shriek shattered the silence, and suddenly Zack felt something throwing itself at him from his right, sending him careening into the wall, throwing all of its weight into him and knocking the wind out of him; he gasped sharply, trying to get the air back into his lungs and swung his arm back-handed at whatever had attacked him, feeling the back of his forearm connect with a soft surface followed immediately by bone. He felt a tug at his belt, and knew immediately that this attacker had just tried to go for his weapon; this was no wild animal that had snuck in to attack him.

Two sprints forward, and he spun around, drawing his pistol again and taking aim at his attacker. He saw a white-feathered avian laying stunned on the floor; a male, fit-looking but dirty, wearing coveralls with an open back for his wings and a pair of thick work gloves that looked as though they were part of the uniform... until further inspection. When the avian stood up fully, Zack got a horrifying sight, seeing that the entire left-half of the avian, along with his right hand, were horrendously burned, his gloves and coveralls actually melted right to his flesh. His left eye was missing, a string of flesh and muscle where it used to be connected hanging out of his eyeball. The front of his left wing was no better either, with hundreds of missing feathers and those left were curled up and dry like dead leaves.

"Holy shit..." Zack breathed, eyes wide with shock.

The avian looked as though he was trying to speak, but the burn in his neck told Zack that it was unlikely his vocal chords had survived whatever calamity had befallen him. It was a

miracle the avian himself was even still alive! But the look on the unscarred part of his face was that of both agony and rage, and he was glaring at Zack, as though blaming him for his current predicament, and started to limp towards him. Zack raised his handgun, taking aim at the avian's head.

"Stay back!" He warned.

The avian didn't comply; he continued to keep shuffling towards Zack, that one eye looking at him with the pupil the size of a pea, the sclera bloodshot and crazed. Zack disengaged the safety of his pistol once again, paws trembling as he stepped back from the avian, repeating his warning several times, but the avian did not listen no matter how many times the rabbit said it. He continued to step closer, reaching out for the rabbit with a mutilated, talon-tipped hand...

Zack shut his eyes as his finger pulled back the trigger, hearing the electronic 'zeow!' of the discharge of his pistol, and hearing the body of the avian hit the floor. Zack stood, eyes clenched shut for a moment, until he slowly cracked them open, and looked down at the avian, seeing smoke rising up from his forehead, no blood pooling beneath him though. Plasma-based weapons did not penetrate targets in the traditional sense—they burned through them through shear heat...

Zack lowered his pistol, feeling a pit in his stomach as he stared at the slain avian for a moment, and then let out a long sigh. "Damn, man, why didn't you listen?" He asked, glib.

Felix and Zack watched as Jessica knelt down to examine the body of the avian, looking as sick and disturbed as Zack had when he'd first seen the bird. After killing the bird, Zack had run back to the hope to tell Felix what had happened, and both the dolphin and Jessica, who had finished her work with Amber, followed Zack back to the shop to see it for themselves, standing with Felix as the doe examined the corpse.

Using her portable terminal, Jessica ran a scan of the avian's body, particular over the burned area, and watched the screen of the device as it analyzed, waiting for a moment before she finally spoke. "There are traces of some sort of phosphorescent chemical in these burns," she stated

"Phosphorescent?" Zack repeated. "You mean like, white phosphorous?"

"Highly concentrated, and mixed with all kinds of stuff I really don't like seeing," Jessica admitted. "There are a lot of corrosive, acidic chemicals in here. Anyone exposed to something like this would suffer third-degree chemical burns in seconds, and it'd be excruciating." She shuddered.

"A chemical weapon," Felix stated with obvious disgust. "It's no wonder this colony looked intact from the air; pre-fabricated structures are made of titanium and are pretty much unaffected chemical weapons."

"I thought chemical weapons were illegal?" Jessica asked.

"In the Confederacy, yes," replied Zack. "This was the Grunikan Empire's work."

Jessica covered her mouth, horrified. "My stars..."

"When it comes to Grunikans, anyone who call themselves their enemies are subject to any kind of end they choose," said Felix in disgust.

“But why is only half of his body affected?” Zack asked.

“He may have been trying to go for cover when the bomb fell,” replied Jessica. “He must have had some exposure before he could get to safety, or he only managed to cover half of himself.”

“Could anything have been done for him?” Felix asked.

Zack looked at him. “Hey, don’t start blaming me for killing him, man; he was freaking me out and wouldn’t keep away.”

Before the two could start bickering, Jessica stepped in. “Not even bathing in a vat of ReGel could’ve saved him,” she stated. “You may not see it, but the chemical is still working; it’s still eating through his flesh and into his bones; tomorrow he’d have been dead.” She shook her head. “This is no way for anyone to die, especially not civilians.” She turned to look over her shoulder, her eyes on Zack. “What you did here may have been an act of mercy.”

Zack grimaced. “Not sure if I feel good about that or not,” he muttered.

“Normally, I’d say to never feel good about killing,” Felix remarked. “But in this case it was the best thing to do.” He looked at Zack. “You doing okay though? It can’t be easy to have seen something like that.”

Zack waved it off. “I’ll be fine. Come on; we need to get those parts back to the ship and get off this planet,” he urged. “Before the Grunikans decide to sic those things on *us* too.”

Without another word, Zack turned away and headed over to the pile of machine parts he’d been stacking up, gathering what he could before carrying it out towards the door, watched closely by Jessica and Felix. When the rabbit exited out the door, the two of them shared a concerned glance, their faces full of both sadness and worry about the rabbit, and his lack of reaction to how he had just taken a life.

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Her head felt like it was going to split open as feeling returned to her body. Amber let out a long groan and placed her hand upon the top of her head as she curled up somewhat on the bed. She felt a bandage over her skull, some blood-soaked hair, and the residue of regel around the edges of the bandage. She’d been treated, but clearly she’d taken a hit... after a moment she remembered, she’d been trading shots with Grunikan fighters that had been chasing the Mara’s Hope. The fact the ship was still operating –and probably that she wasn’t dead, told her they had survived, but what had become of that last fighter?

Rolling onto her side, she confirmed she was in the medical bay. Jessica had left a couple of her tools out, including a tube of ReGel, half-empty, lying on the desk, and a... laser scalpel. Had Amber taken enough damage that Jessica had to surgically open her head to check for trauma? Or maybe it was just to extract something?

She wasn’t alone in the room either. Gustav was seated in the chair normally used by Jessica, seemingly drifting off until he saw Amber move. He sat up hopefully, rolling the chair closer to look at Amber, seeing her eyes meeting his and breathing a sigh of relief. “You’re awake... good,” he said.

“How long was I out?”

"About nine hours," replied the orca. "You took quite a hit."

"No kidding..." Amber returned to lying on her back, letting out a long sigh. "I owe Jess big for this one. Where is she?"

"She was exhausted from everything that's happened today, so at my insistence, she went to bed," replied Gustav. "I told her I'd watch you."

"What about that last Grunikan fighter?" Amber asked. "Did Felix outrun it?"

Gustav shook his head. "Nope; he took it down."

Amber eyed the orca incredulously. "How?" She asked.

"He rammed it; knocked it right out of the sky and sent it into the ocean."

Amber's face went blank, before an amused smirk crossed her features. "That crazy son of a gun," she said, chuckling lightly. "He really goes the distance."

"Was the only way he had to protect us from that fighter," replied Gustav.

Amber nodded in agreement, before turning her gaze to look at Gustav again. "So where are we now? Did we manage to get back to the Dirt Palace or Trident IV?"

Once more Gustav shook his head. "No. We're still on Argo II, currently hiding in an old hangar in an abandoned colony." His face became grim as he said that. "Or more accurately... slaughtered colony."

Amber blinked, sitting up slightly and propping herself up on her arms. "What did you find?" She asked.

"Death," replied Gustav, plainly. "The colony looked deserted when we landed, but then... Zack found a survivor while looking through the maintenance shop. Half of his body was burned down almost to the bone; Zack mistook him for an attacker and killed him –merciful, given his condition, but it made Felix curious enough to search the rest of the colony. Turns out, this place was not evacuated or abandoned. It was the victim of a chemical attack; some kind of phosphorous weapon, probably vaporous."

Amber cringed. "On a civilian colony... is there no level of *low* that the Grunikans won't go to? It's not like they were a threat."

"Sometimes war and those who wage it don't care about the casualties," the orca stated, darkly.

"At least the Confederacy makes an effort to avoid it," Amber returned. "That's what Colonial Militia are for; a first line of defense against ground-force attacks and for evacuation to get civilians out of danger." She shook her head. "If only all of the planets were wealthy enough to afford their own protective fleets, then people could actually feel safe out there."

Gustav nodded in agreement, though it was only a half-hearted nod, his mind mostly on the colonists who had perished in the attack. "I'm going to ask Felix if we can give the colonists a decent burial; they deserve that much."

"You can't," Amber stated.

Gustav eyed her with mild hostility. "Why not?"

"Chemical weapons of today cling to the bodies even after the vapor or gas clouds dissipate," replied Amber. "Touch those bodies once, and you could get some of the chemical on you, and it'll eat away at your flesh where it soaked. We don't have the protective suits required to move those bodies; it's out of our hands."

Gustav hung his head, brow furrowing into a deep scowl. Never once had the orca hated any living being, but the Grunikans were crossing the very last of his nerves, hard at work to put themselves on a list that, to this day, had always remained blank –a list of people Gustav could despise. His fists clenched tightly, knuckles cracking audibly and teeth grinding in his mouth as he stared at the floor. Scoffing, he stood up from his chair. “I need some air,” he said. “You okay on your own?”

Amber nodded. “Don’t worry about me; you know I’m made of tough stuff.”

He nodded to her gratefully. He approached the door to the medical bay, letting it slide open before he stepped through and watched it close behind him, and with that, crossed over to the airlock. The boarding ramp was up, since most of the crew was retired for the night, but with a tap of a button, the ramp lowered, allowing the orca to step out of the ship, checking his belt to make sure he had his communicator, and head for the hangar entrance.

With the door opened, he was greeted by fresh air, taking a deep breath to let the clean, unpolluted atmosphere of Argo II enter his lungs, loving the scents he took in. He could not smell the death, despite it being so nearby, and after propping the door open with a stone, he stepped a short distance out from the hangar, turning his gaze up to the night sky. His gaze drifted to the great White Star –the namesake of the sector which had been his home for years, seeing its glow from so far away, but feeling its light nonetheless. It shone as brightly as the planet’s two moons, and helped him remember that not everywhere in the galaxy was a dark, cruel place.

Stepping backward, he leaned against the hangar door, staring absently at a sky. He blinked away a couple of tears, meant for the colonists that had once lived here, pitying them and praying for a peaceful rest after such a tragic end, wishing he could do more for the desecrated bodies left behind in the wake of the Grunikan’s attack. He just stood, staring, barely making a sound with his eyes on the sky.

Soon, his eyelids began to feel heavy and damp. Rubbing his eyes with the back of his arm, he stepped away from the wall and headed back over to the hangar door, pulling it open to kick the rock away, and stepped back inside, shutting the door behind him as he returned to the ship...

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It had been a long night for Felix.

Barely getting any sleep at all the star captain had worked his brain to try and think of a plan to get his crew off of Argo II safely. The moment the ship tried to fly out to orbit, the Grunikans –if they were still out there- would detect them and chase them down. Even after he and Zack had spent several hours fixing the turret and successfully bringing it into operating condition, Amber having nearly been killed by a Grunikan fighter pilot continued to haunt him; what if she wasn’t so lucky the second time? He didn’t want any of his crew to become another casualty, like the people of the colony where they were hiding...

There were so many variables, so many risks, but they couldn’t hide here in this abandoned colony forever; sooner or later they would have to try and escape. They only had

the supplies to last them another four days; their water supply was not unlimited, and already Felix could feel the early stages of his skin beginning to dry up from lack of external hydration; his arms itched, his eyes burned, and it almost hurt to move his tail. If he was already feeling like this, Gustav and Amber would not be far behind, if they weren't already...

And then, it hit him. It was a longshot, truly a desperate plan with little margin for error, and a very narrow time frame—they needed to leave at just the right moment for it to work. He had to let the others know; after getting out of bed that morning, he called the crew to the lounge to meet with them. They were slow to respond; they were tired and concerned about their current predicament. Jessica and Gustav looked as though they had barely received any sleep at all, though that didn't stop the orca from preparing a pot of coffee for them, which helped them wake up. Drinking coffee while their skin was starting to dry would not help their situation, but at that moment, they didn't care.

Everyone's eyes were on him as Felix explained his plan to the Hope crew. "So, here's what I'm thinking," he began, putting both hands on the table as he spoke. "The Grunikans may or may not still be out there; we can't know for sure. What we do know now is that the debris field is, for some reason, of interest to them, so that's where they'll be hanging out. We know which direction the debris field is, so my idea is this; we wait until the planet rotates to the right angle and fly off-world from a point as far away from the Grunikans at the debris field as possible."

"You really think it'll be as simple as that?" Amber inquired, sounding somewhat doubtful but not put off by the idea.

"Sometimes the hardest problem has the simplest answer," Gustav stepped in, before voicing his own question. "How will it work?"

"By my calculations," Felix began. "Based on the diameter of this planet, the distance between the surface and the debris field, and the recorded flight speed of Grunikan fighters, we'll have a fifteen minute headstart on them if we launch from the opposite side of the world; as long as they're sticking to the debris field and not orbiting the planet itself, then by the time they catch us we'll only need to hold on for five more minutes, then we can make a warp jump right to the Dirt Palace."

"How long until the planet's in the right position?" Zack asked.

"Unfortunately, we're already passed it, so we need to hang on until tomorrow," Felix replied. "Make no mistake; this is a gamble, going under the presumption that the Grunikans are going to stay put and not begin an orbit around the planet so I can't even guarantee this will work. But unless the Confederacy comes back and chases them off again this is all we've got to try."

"We should also contact the Confederacy," stated Jessica. "Once we're off-world," she added.

"Why?" Zack asked, curiously.

"Because, they need to know that the Grunikans are using chemical weapons so that they can prepare countermeasures for it," replied the doe. "After seeing what that chemical does, and how slowly it kills those hit with it, I can't bear the thought of anymore colonists being hit by it."

Zack scoffed. "Let the 'Feds figure it out themselves; no fur off our backs."

"No, Jessica's right," agreed Amber. "We may not be doing the most honest work but we're still citizens of the Confederacy of the Red Nebula, and therefore it's our civic duty to notify the government about what we've found."

"I also took some samples we can send to them," Jessica added.

Zack groaned. "I can't believe you guys want to help those assholes," he said, exasperated.

"So you'd rather wait until another colony gets hit?" Gustav asked. "Do you know how many they might go through before the military becomes aware of what they're employing? And what if they hit Trident IV; what if they gas *our* Colony?"

"Come on, Gustav; what're the odds they'd come to our world?" Zack asked. "We're just some backwater planet with no resources; why would they target us?"

"Because it's populated, and belongs to their enemy," Felix retorted, glaring at Zack. "That's the only reason they attacked Argo II; the Confederacy found this planet not even a year ago, and it was only in the last few months colonies started forming here. The Grunikans couldn't know that the planet could become a valuable, economic asset –hell, this colony we're at now doesn't even have any factories or refineries or anything, it's just a collection of buildings, and they used it as a site to drop a chemical bomb! Are you really willing to chance their mercy just because Trident IV is only scarcely populated?"

Zack scratched his head in irritation, before he let out another groan. "Alright, alright; you've made your point. So who are you going to tell, our old buddy McCain?"

"Captain Noir," replied Felix. "Better this info goes to the Military than directly to the Ministry; they'll be able to start planning countermeasures right away, and the ministers will still be made aware in due time; it betters the chances of having a countermeasure by the time the Grunikans next attack."

Amber, Jessica and Gustav all nodded in agreement. Zack still looked displeased, but didn't voice anymore objections.

"Alright, anybody have any other input?" Felix asked.

"Actually," Zack said suddenly. "I'm having a thought here."

"Why did my skin suddenly crawl?" Amber asked.

Zack leered at her. "Very funny, Amber," he retorted, sarcastically. "Stick to guns; you suck at sarcasm." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, the colony we're outside of; the buildings weren't really affected by the chemical attack, right?"

"Right," Felix answered.

"Well, with all those brand-new pre-fabricated homes over there, why don't we try and do some scavenging while we wait?" Zack replied, grinning. "If we can pull apart some of those buildings, we can take their utilities for parts, and also see what we can find for valuables we could sell back at the Dirt Palace."

Zack was so proud of his idea, he did not even see the horrified looks the rest of the crew was giving him until after he stopped talking. His smile faded, and his eyes darted between each crew member, wrinkling his nose with discomfort when he saw the hard look from Amber especially, like she wanted to bite his face off. "What?" He asked.

“Are you *fucking* kidding me?!” Felix demanded. “You want us to rob from this colony?!”

“Rob from who? Everyone who lived here is dead,” Zack returned.

“This colony still belongs to someone, and the possessions in those homes rightfully belong to the families of the people who lost their lives here!” Felix retorted. “You’re talking about *looting*, Zack; you’re talking about desecrating the dead!”

“And, what is it exactly we do up there in the stars?” Zack asked plainly, pointing his finger up at the ceiling with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s different! We’re salvaging from wrecked military craft, and we’re mostly taking from the Grunikans, but we’re not stealing from Confederate citizens!” Felix continued to protest. “What we *do* take from the Confederacy is stuff they have in abundance and wouldn’t miss, but the things in this colony, they don’t belong to us! We already stole from the maintenance shop because we desperately needed parts; I’m not about to walk into someone’s home and take their belongings.”

Zack rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Felix, can you even hear yourself and how hypocritical that sounds?” He asked. “Who do you think pays for the Confederate ships? The citizens of the Confederacy, with tax-payers dollars funding the military budget; who do you think manufactures those ships? More citizens; they operate, maintain and build the machinery used to mass-produce those space ships, and those same guys also make the pre-fabricated structures that these colonies are built from. How is that any different?”

Felix glared at Zack, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he stared at the rabbit. “Those ships were destroyed, fighting in battle; most of them are destroyed, leaving behind only scrap for scavengers like us to pick up. But this was not a military colony; this was a civilian colony. People like us, killed needlessly; I’m not taking anything that belonged to the people who died here.”

“Not even for Mara?” Zack asked.

That struck a chord with the dolphin, making him hesitate in his retort, and allowing Zack to continue. “Come on, Felix; how long do you think it’ll be before people come back here? Weeks, months, years, maybe not at all? The Grunikans could form their own colony here; they’ll just melt down those structures, turning them into molten titanium that they can use to refine the Quadrinium they use to armour their ships, and all those brand-new, fully-functional parts will just go to waste.”

Felix clenched his hands into fists, fighting the urge to hit Zack then and there... how he wanted to, though; to knock the rabbit upside the head with his strongest uppercut. The dolphin looked at Amber, Jessica and Gustav respectively, seeing their eyes were on him and waiting for his decision. He hated when they looked at him like that, as though they were expecting him to make the wrong choice –the choice that would mean he had truly left behind his old self, as the respectful, once-dedicated citizen of a poor, struggling, but determined colony full of good people... was he going to become one of the few, bad people of the Mara Colony, shaming his mother’s name and staining her faith in him.

No... he wouldn’t. He was *never* going to fall that far.

“When we began this life, I made a promise,” Felix stated. “Never, and I do mean never, was I going to take from civilians. I’ll never draw my gun on a child, I’ll never take food from a

starving family, and I will never tear apart a colony just to serve my own needs. The people at Mara Colony would agree with me; they'd never condone us taking from another civilian colony, regardless of what has happened to us in the past." He shook his head. "No, Zack; we're not taking anything from this colony; we took turret components from maintenance out of necessity, but that's as much as we're taking. Do I make myself clear?"

Zack scowled, ears slumping somewhat as he and Felix stared each other down for a moment until he spoke. "You're wasting an opportunity, man, all out of sentiment."

"I haven't fallen far enough to forget who I used to be," Felix stated, "Or who I hope to be again." He crossed his arms, standing tall from the table. "And if I have my way, I never *will* fall that far."

Zack sighed. "Fine, Felix; you win," he said, standing up. "Since it's going to be a while until we leave, I'm going out to give the ship another once over; see if anything else needs fixing." Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he crossed the room towards the door, stopping just before it to look back over his shoulder at the dolphin. "If we're lucky, we won't need to go *steal* anymore parts from maintenance." Without another word, the rabbit stepped through the door, disappearing as it closed behind him.

Slowly, Felix sat down in his chair, laying a hand over his eyes and letting out a long sigh, feeling his shoulders ache from sheer tension as he ran his hand down his face. He was surprised, however, when he suddenly felt a hand on the side of his head, pulling him over and feeling some soft, moist and warm against his cheek. Recognizing the feeling of a kiss, warmth flushed into his cheeks, bringing redness to his face, and when the hand left his head, he looked over to see Jessica looking back at him, a smile on her face.

"W-what was that for?" He asked, stunned.

"Because I'm proud of you," replied Jessica.

"And so am I," Gustav added, drawing Felix's attention to the orca. Gustav had his usual, big, warm smile back again –the first time Felix had seen it in months, maybe even more than a year. His eyes darted to Amber next, who was giving him an approving nod as well.

"That's the second time you've told him off," said the tiger shark. "And just now, you proved you're still the same star captain we all signed up with."

Felix gave a weak smile of his own, though it quickly faded. "I can't help but feel I'm losing my best friend," he said. "I always trusted Zack; I miss that old personality of his, where he was chipper and optimistic. Now it just seems like he doesn't care; he shows he still cares about Mara Colony, but now he doesn't seem to give a damn about anyone else." He slumped in his chair. "We've all held on to ourselves through thick and thin but he's becoming the very kind of person who ruined our lives in the first place; all he wants to do is take. I don't want to kick him off the ship –nobody knows this thing better than him, not even me, but how long will it be before he does something drastic?"

Halfway through his words, everyone's face had become sullen, their gazes falling to the table and bringing a long silence to the four of them. Amber let out a sigh as she raised her head, glancing at the door. "I guess we'll just have to keep watching him, very closely," she stated. "The question is though, if and when he *does* do something, what do we do?"

That part is what I'm afraid of, Felix thought, darkly...

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The Mara's Hope still needed a few quick repairs. Unfortunately, despite Felix's earlier hesitation to do so, they did need to go back to the Maintenance Shop once to find a few components, including something to patch up a damage part of the hull –something that could have become hazardous when they returned to space. Felix and Amber were quick to weld it on while Zack did an inspection of the engines, concerned about a partial overheat from when Felix had rammed the ship into a Grunikan fighter at full throttle. Although it was a sound concern, Felix believed it was mostly because the two needed some space from one another after their argument in the lounge. It had not escalated much, but still, a disagreement put a strain on any friendship.

Soon, their window of opportunity arrived; the crew took their positions. Jessica joined Felix on the bridge to monitor the scanners, Zack and Amber resumed their usual places; the engine room and the turret respectively, and Gustav secured the supplies and cargo, and then stepped off the ship to open the door to the hangar before heading to the bridge and seating himself in the only remaining chair; the one for the communications terminal, bracing himself for what was to come. The whole crew was aware they were in for a bumpy ride...

"Alright everybody, here we go," Felix announced as he powered on the ship, activating the repulsion system to lift off of the ground, and easing the throttle forward to exit the hangar, flying out to open ground.

Angling the ship upward, he slowly moved the throttle forward for maximum velocity; speed was key for this escape, for the Grunikans would soon be after them, and they needed as much distance between them and the Empire's cronies as possible. The ship rumbled as it raced across the sky of Argo II, the ground rapidly falling below and the clouds above racing towards them. The higher they got, the more the sun peeked over the distance horizon, illuminating the clouds in a light pink.

The sight would be beautiful if not for the beeping on the scanners.

Jessica looked at the console, checking the distance of the two blips from their current position, and glanced over at Felix. "Two fighters incoming," she said.

"Dammit, already?" Gustav asked. "I thought you said we'd have fifteen minutes?"

"Those fighters must've been close by," Felix stated. "We can still get a head start on reinforcements; we'll just have to hope that's enough."

"I'll make it enough," Amber's voice buzzed on the intercom.

"Be careful Amber," Jessica called out to the shark.

"*Those Grunikans are the ones who should be careful; this time I'm out for blood,*" she replied, sounding fierce.

They were rapidly approaching the planet's ozone layer, with the two Grunikan fighters closing in even faster, the whine of the combined engines of two fighters drowning out the roar of the Mara's Hope, the longer, thicker ship rattling and shaking as it began its exit from the atmosphere. The light of the sky was becoming thinner as they pierced the veil, exposing

the stars of open space beyond, but they were not away from the planet yet, and the fighters were still coming. A laser beam racing fast the ship told Felix they were now in shooting range.

Amber swept the turret around to face the pursuing fighters, returning fire with three shots from the turret. A miss; the intended fighter target weaved right, evading the shot, and fired back, scoring a glancing blow on the hull. This time, Amber waited until the ship began to bank ahead, and fired a leading shot, taking off its wing and sending it spiralling out of control; it bumped into the second ship, throwing off its flight pattern and leaving it easy prey for the shark, taking out the cockpit.

"Both fighters down!" She announced to the bridge.

"Excellent work!" Felix called. "We're almost out of the atmosphere!"

The scanner terminal beeped again; Jessica checked it, spotting three small blips and one large one approaching them at an angle. "We've got four hostiles coming in; three fighters and one big one –maybe one of those escort ships!"

"*They're trying to head us off!*" Amber called.

"They're too late!" Felix stated, confidently. He switched the engines from planetary to space flight, bringing the throttle down to ten percent power, but already he was starting to accelerate again, leaving the planet's gravitational field and angling the Mara's Hope in the direction of the Dirt Palace. Further and further forward he pushed the lever for the throttle, pushing the ship as hard as he dared while he tried to reach optimal warp launch speed.

"Coordinates locked in!" Jessica announced. "Enemy fighters are two seconds from attack range!"

"Punch it, Felix!" Gustav urged.

"We are *out of here!*" The dolphin declared as he activated the warp drive. The console lights flashed, and the ship rushed forward, blasting off through space at faster than light travel, leaving Argo II and the Grunikans behind...

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Colonel James Noir sat quietly at his desk, reviewing the reports from the recent scouting mission around Ithica VII and the surrounding systems, feeling his heart sink as his eyes scanned across the words on the holopad before him. The Grunikans still occupied the entire system and all of those heading into the outer systems, while the Confederate Fleets were holding them back at the inner systems, preventing them from entering deeper into the White Star Sector.

On a map of the sector, seen from above, it would look as though the Grunikans were going for their left and right flanks; Ithica VII and Argo II sat on opposite ends of the Sector, and the Grunikans had claimed both regions. Now, they could stage an attack from two directions, and they had the numbers to do it. Minister Kormin was in the process of requesting reinforcements from the other sectors, but it would take time for them to mobilize. There was no telling when the Grunikans would attack again; now that they had cemented footholds in Confederate space.

"These dragons are damn tenacious, and there seems to be no end of them!" He growled to himself as he slapped the report down on his desk. "We've destroyed eight of their fleets, losing three of our own, yet still they outnumber us... how do we compete with an army that seems limitless?"

His terminal beeped; he started, and gruffly glared at his monitor, seeing the words 'Incoming Message' flashing across the screen. "Identify," he commanded.

"Kaufmann, Felix," the computerized voice replied.

"Kaufmann..." Noir repeated, tapping the side of his muzzle in thought; the name was familiar to him, but he couldn't quite place it. "Information."

"Confederate Citizen, Private Star Captain, Residence: Trident IV, New Mara Colony."

"Oh!" Suddenly it all began coming back to him; two and a half years ago, he had hired a crew to deliver relief supplies to Ithica VII when it was invaded by the Grunikans the first time. But wait, why would he be calling Noir? Was he looking for work again? "Put through."

A loading bar later, and the face of a blue-eyed dolphin appeared on the monitor. *"Good day, Captain Noir,"* the dolphin said, cordially. *"It's been quite a while."*

"Good day, Mr. Kaufmann. And it's actually Colonel now," Noir returned, turning his chair to better face the monitor. "I didn't think you still had my private number. And, I see you upgraded to projected image calling at least."

"I'm just glad you still use this number," returned Felix before clearing his throat.

"Listen, I have some information I want to pass on to you; don't ask me how I got it, but I think it's my duty as a Confederate citizen to tell you."

"What's the matter?" Noir asked, seeing the concern on Felix's face.

"My crew and I have found out the Grunikans may be employing chemical weapons," replied the dolphin. *"We think we may have sent one of them to one of the colonies on Argo II and it wiped out the population. We were on that planet, and encountered a survivor... but he didn't make it."* The dolphin looked away from the screen, and the tapping of keys could be heard through the monitor.

A loading bar appeared, but remained empty as a command prompt appeared below the bar. 'Allow' or 'Prevent', it read, waiting for the Colonel's voice. The wolf eyed Felix curiously. "Why should I not wonder what you were doing on Argo II? That area's no longer part of the Confederacy, you know," he stated.

Felix frowned. *"Please, Colonel; that doesn't matter. What matters is the Confederacy and its safety,"* he said, firmly, his gaze meeting the Colonel's through the monitor.

Noir tapped his fingers on the desk as he considered the words of the star captain he was speaking to, hesitant to agree, but he had no reason to distrust the dolphin before... with a sigh, he gave Felix an exasperated look. "I suppose I should at least look; I owe you that much for saving my men those years ago," he said, before he stated plainly, "Allow."

"Receiving file. Download complete."

"So what's on this file?" Noir asked.

"My team medic took a sample from one of the bodies affected by the chemical attack," Felix replied. *"I give it to you now, for your own scientists to analyze. It's some kind of*

concentrated white phosphorous mixed with acidic chemicals that eat through the skin and continue burning away at it until there's nothing left."

Noir's eyes widened. "Display," he commanded his monitor, bringing up a string of data and notes recorded by Felix's medic that were passed on with the file; the data made no sense to him, but the notes sure did. "By the stars... if they planted a compound like this on board a ship...!"

"The entire crew would slowly die of chemical burns," replied Felix. "And the air recyclers would not purge it, only spread it. This weapon would mean death for thousands in any manner of confined spaces, including space colonies."

"Those damned drakes!" Noir cursed, pounding his fist on the desk angrily. He shut his eyes, quickly calming himself before looking at Felix. "You were right to bring me this, m'boy," he said. "I'll see to it that the military is made aware of this and also pass it on to the ministries as soon as possible; you may have just saved countless lives."

Felix nodded. *"I'm glad to help,"* he said. *"I've got to go now, Cap... Colonel. Thank you for hearing me out."*

"No, Felix, thank you," he said. "This is a vital piece of intelligence that we may not have learned about until it was too late. By all rights, I should reward you for this."

Felix shook his head. *"Not necessary. Just try to do everything possible to protect people from this weapon, Colonel. That's all I ask."*

"Consider it done," Noir returned.

With that, the two said goodbye, and the line was severed, returning the Colonel to his earlier silence, but now he had something to think about –although it did not exactly take much thought as to what he had to do. He collapsed the file, storing it into a document. "Prepare voice-transmission and file transfers. Recipient: Science Division, Chemical Specialists, Dr. Steven Marius."

On Felix's end, the dolphin released a breath of relief, pleased the colonel had heeded his words and taken the analysis. Now steps could be taken to prevent any other Confederate Colonies or vessels big and small from suffering the wrath of a terrifying weapon. "I think I'm going to treat myself to a hard drink at the pub," he said before standing up from the terminal, walking proudly towards the airlock...

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Never steal from civilians...

Desecrating the dead...

Why the hell should Felix care about trivial shit like that? If something's been left behind then it was up for grabs; the rule of the galaxy. The entire crew of the Mara's Hope was building a career on that very rule!

Well, he wasn't missing out on a treasure trove of opportunity...

Zack approached the bank with the CreDrive held tightly in his paw, looking over his shoulder repeatedly as he checked for his crewmates, not wanting any of them to see what he

was doing at a Dirt Palace Bank –a series of financial businesses not owned by the Confederate Government, but with all of the functions of one, commonly used to open private accounts that could not be traced. He glanced at the drive again and continued on, finding a teller available; a Rodentian like him -Rat to be precise.

The rat eyed him as he approached, and lowered his glasses to look at the rabbit. “What’d ya want, shrimp?”

“I’d like to deposit the Credits on this drive into my private account,” replied Zack.

“Number?” The rat asked.

Zack recited the number for his secret account, and the Rat quickly brought up his information before accepting the CreDrive from him, linking it to his terminal and eyeing it suspiciously. “This isn’t registered to your name and it has no endorsement code on it,” the Rat stated, eyeing Zack suspiciously.

“That’s not a problem, is it?” The rabbit asked with a grin.

The rat grinned back. “Not at all, bad boy,” he returned before setting the drive back down. “Just a quick bypass program, break through the firewall and... viola. As of now the cheque for Mr. Ron Vandermir has been endorsed to you, Mr. Baxter, and you now have five thousand credits added to your account balance.” He looked at Zack deviously. “Can I do anything else for you?”

“Actually, yes,” replied Zack, smiling wider. “I’d like Mr. Vandermir to write me one more cheque...”