

Voyages of the Mara

Arc 2: Edge of the Law

Chapter 4: Progression

The dirt palace was its usual self that night. The filthy halls of the derelict space station, filled to the brim with the scum of the galaxy, ranging from common thugs robbing from each other, to nefarious star pirates who robbed anything from an armed vessel to a casual cruise liner. Seemingly a normal hive of busy little bees, but underneath, the biggest cesspool in the territory of the Red Nebulan Confederacy; if there were any justice, the whole place would be eradicated off of the galactic map, with nothing left but debris.

Fortunately for those who made their home there, they were in a region of little interest to the Confederacy. The only planets in this region were barren places of no value; little more than oversize meteors that didn't move. They were not concerned at all by what took place in this area; the Dirt Palace was the slum of all slums, filthy and diseased. Most just swept its existence under the rug and ignored it, trying to pretend the place did not exist. But the number of criminals living there was not something that could be denied.

For the faint of heart, it would be Hell.

But for the scum of the universe... it was a haven of indulgence. Something Zack was enjoying right now; while his cohorts had bedded down for the night, he had used some questionably acquired cash to purchase his two favorite women from the brothel next to their motel –the Hangman's Rest, and was spending the entire night with both of them. The rabbit probably assumed the others could not hear him, but Felix, in the room next door, had his head between two pillows, trying to drown out the racket.

'I swear if he starts bringing those girls onto my ship, I'm going to shoot his little prick right off,' Felix growled in his mind, already picturing putting his pistol between Zack's legs and pulling the trigger; see him stick anymore gals while there was no longer any plumbing. Not that he'd ever do that of course... but the rabbit was making him cranky enough that he was deeply considering it. Hell, he almost wanted to go out there and do it *now*.

Seeing as how he couldn't sleep, he threw off the covers of his bed and sat up, running a hand down his face, groaning before he stood up, tugging his boxers up slightly as he felt them slipping, but would soon be taking them off anyway as he headed over to the bathroom, stepping inside and turning to the shower, reaching inside and turning on the water. He let his boxers fall, then kicked them aside before he stepped in, feeling the hot water rushing over his tired body, hydrating his skin and warming his muscles.

He turned his back to the faucet, leaning back his head and feeling the water caressing his body as it ran down his bare back, leaving his skin with a shine as it hydrated, sighing in pleasure as his muscles lost some of their tension in the warmth. Sadly, it wasn't enough to remove all of it; he still felt stressed despite this being his usual means of relaxing, but today it just wasn't working. Before long, he groaned and gave up, shutting it off and letting the water trickle along his body as he leaned against the wall of the shower stall.

“This is ridiculous... why am I so stressed out?” He asked no one in particular.

He was tired. He was cranky. It wasn't even because of Zack bedding two prostitutes next door; he was just so... agitated, like he wanted to hit something, and the more he kept thinking about it the more frustrated he became. Eventually cursing himself and getting out of the shower, he got dressed and left his room, making sure that the door was safely locked behind him as he stepped out; too many junkies that would likely raid it looking for an unlocked CreDrive or even some spare plastic credits –who even carried those anymore?

On the subject of junkies, he nearly tripped over one that was lying half-conscious on the floor outside of his room as he turned proceeded down the hallway; the man reeked of booze and narcotics, and looked up at Felix with a dazed grin on his face. “She’s taking it deep, man,” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Zack’s room.

Felix ignored the man and kept going, trying not to hear the sounds coming out of Zack’s room as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and walked down the hall, keeping his tail off of the dirty carpeted floor and away from the stains. Why did they stay at this motel anyway?

Oh right; because the job bulletins were right across the street, and were updated every day. It saved them from having to cross two hundred kilometers of slums on foot from their ship where they could be jumped by a mugger around every corner. Convenience over cleanliness, he supposed. Plus, their favorite bar, aptly named Pacifist Tavern –the only one with clean glasses and that didn’t allow weapons, was part of this motel. It was just about the only peaceful location on the Dirt Palace, as most people were coming to this area for the brothel next door and not looking for a fight.

He marched through the motel lobby, finding the fat Reptilian woman who managed the front desk passed out and snoring at her desk, not paying any attention to anyone coming in or out of the office. ‘*Very professional,*’ Felix thought sarcastically before heading out the front door, shaking his head. The junkie listening in on Zack’s... playtime, had probably wandered in while she was drilling asteroids.

Out of the motel he walked, and made a right turn, heading over to the bar next door that shared the motel’s name. If he couldn’t sleep and showering didn’t help relax him, having a drink was the only thing left he could think of to try and relieve some stress. Part of him wondered if he’d find Amber or Gustav there; if they were having as bad a night as he was, or if he’d be drinking alone because they were able to find the rest he couldn’t...

“Fuck my life,” he mumbled.

He couldn’t emphasize it often enough; he hated it. *Hated* everything he had to do to get by; becoming a criminal. Even if he never did anything truly dastardly, it left a pit in his stomach that he couldn’t fill. This was never what he wanted; having to steal from the Confederacy, no matter how angry he was with them. This just wasn’t who he was; wasn’t who he ever wanted to be! He was a star captain, a delivery boy, and a citizen of the Mara Colony... that had been enough for him.

But now he was a thief.

A scavenger.

Making money on stuff that was not his to take.

‘*Damn you to hell, McCain...*’

He stepped through the front door of the bar, immediately assailed by the smell of beer and bodily odor, but thankfully nothing worse than that, and made a slow beeline right for the counter, seating himself on one of the stools and waiting until the bartender made her way over to him, keeping his tail off of the floor as he propped up his arm and rested his head in his hand, fingers tapping the counter as he waited. His eyes scanned the bottles lining the shelves at the back of the bar, glancing at his favorite first but then pressing his lips together, deciding against it.

Finally, the barkeep made her way over to him. "Hey there, hon," she said. The barkeep was a rather attractive reptilian girl –a gecko, to be precise, with the big, sparkling round eyes they were known for. Hers were blue in colour, and mirrored his sad face in them. Felix had met this girl many times before; her name was Amanda, although he'd never heard her surname. None of his business anyway.

She was about his age, though; maybe younger yet, but at least in her twenties like him. She had emerald green scales that complimented her eye colour quite well, and although she was a little on the thin side, he had a shapely figure of a healthy woman. Her scales were shiny as if polished, and when she spoke, one might see she had a rather red mouth, with breath always smelling of licorice. She wore a see-through black top that barely left any sense of modesty, fully revealing her figure and the white bra beneath, but rather than a skirt like the other women working at the bar, she wore black form-fitting capris that, as Zack put it once, 'hugged her butt rather nicely.'

"Hello, Amanda," returned Felix, half-heartedly.

"You look like you just lost your best friend," she returned. "Zack didn't bed the wrong lord's daughter, did he?"

"Oh no, no; the group's fine," assured Felix. "I just seem to be having an off-night is all."

"Your usual pick?"

Felix shook his head. "Something stronger this time," he said. "Surprise me."

She nodded to him, turning back to the shelf and scanning over it with her eyes until she found one, reaching up and picking it off the shelf before turning back to Felix, placing it in front of him before she reached under the counter. "Ice?" She asked.

"Sure," he replied.

She produced a glass, dropping one ice cube into it before setting it down in front of Felix. With that, she uncorked the bottle, and poured him the first serving, filling the glass up a couple of inches until it was over the ice cube. "There you go."

"Thanks, Amanda," said Felix, before putting the glass to his lips, tipping it back and downing the contents, feeling the burn in his throat and the sharp taste of the brew that made his eyes water, shaking his head and scowling with clenched eyes at it. "Whoo... strong stuff, alright."

She folded her arms across the counter, looking him in the eye. "So, you wanna tell me what's got you so bummed out here?"

"Sure you have time for me?"

"Might have skipped your attention, Felix," Amanda began, before waving her arm in a wide arc. "This place is dead."

Felix looked over his shoulder, glancing around the bar, and much to his surprise, she was right; despite the smell, the place was actually rather quiet, with only a few patrons to be found, including himself. Half of those who remained had passed out at their tables, fast asleep, the rest were sitting quietly by themselves, without a care in the world. It seemed he had come at a good time to avoid a rush hour.

“Besides,” Amanda went on. “I like your crew; you and Gustav are about the only men who come into this place who say more than five words to me before they think they can get into my pants. So...” She shrugged. “What’s bothering you?”

Felix hesitated, feeling a little iffy about sharing his problems with the woman that served him drinks at his favorite bar... Amanda had always been fairly nice; a welcome reprieve for him knowing he was living amongst the most unwanted people in the galaxy at the Dirt Palace. But that was partly why he didn’t want to share this information; he didn’t want to make her day as unhappy as his was. She didn’t deserve that; she was one of the few people here who were actually decent.

“It’s... uh...” He paused.

“If you say complicated, I will be tempted to punch you right in the jaw,” she warned.

“Well, it is,” replied Felix, leaning back somewhat as he expected Amanda’s fist to hit him in the mouth, but it never came. So, with his face spared a fist, he continued. “It’s *extremely* complicated, and hard to explain –I don’t even know where to start. Are you sure you even want to sit through this?”

“My shift is over in ten minutes, and nobody else is coming today,” she returned. “The other girls can clean the place up without me. So, blab away.”

Felix let out a long sigh, taking a sip of his drink before he began to talk; he left out where he was actually from, as he didn’t want anyone finding out there was a colony out there the Confederacy wasn’t protecting. He trusted Amanda, but not anyone who might eavesdrop. He included how his crew had started off, trading salt to a grocer on Denver XII. Not a wealthy lifestyle, but a passable one; it had provided jobs and enough money for the colony to get by, and a few months in they had already made plans to expand their salt production to double their output and possibly sell to other grocers.

The story seemed like your typical, happy tale at first... until it all came crashing down, when Felix got to the point of where Albert McCain –without actually saying his name- had destroyed their lives, using the laws of the White Star Sector’s Economic Board to take everything from them, claiming it as back-taxes owed to the Confederacy for squatting on one of their planets without paying tax or rental fees for the unclaimed buildings of their old colony. Amanda’s expression remained unchanged as Felix told the story, but when it reached the part about McCain’s betrayal, it caught her attention.

“After that, we relocated to another abandoned colony, took out a loan to buy it from the Confederacy before the traitor could turn *that* on us too,” he explained. “And now we’re paying off a huge debt; our ship’s too small for us to make hauls big enough to pay it off quickly, plus we need some money for ourselves to maintain the ship and the colony. All in all, it’s taking us much longer to pay off the debt, and as taxes and interest rates keep rising due to the war effort, it only gets harder.”

Amanda bit her lip as Felix concluded his story, before asking the question. "So is that why you're so down?" She asked. "Your past keeps bothering you?"

"I can't change the past," replied Felix. "But I hate this future I'm building... I never wanted to be a criminal; a Star Captain, that was a dream come true. A delivery boy, that was an acceptable trade. Hell, we were even labelled heroes at Ithica VII by a group of marines we rescued from the Grunikan Imperial Army. Life was *good*; I was good. I was proud of who I was..." He hung his head. "And now... I'm a petty thief, and I dragged my whole crew into it with me."

Amanda lower her head a little to peer at him at his lowered gaze, her tail whipping in agitation behind her. "Well... you know, Felix, there are those on this slimehole who have it worse than you do," she said. "Not everyone here was a criminal by choice –in fact, very few people are. What makes them stay criminals is what they find the bad side of life can give to most of them started out as someone faced with desperation, debt, or just driven here by one single mistake."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Felix asked, gruffly. "Just means I'm more like these people than I want to be."

Amanda continued. "But then there are those," she said. "Who were put here by those they once trusted."

Her tone... Felix looked up, his gaze meeting hers. In her eyes, he saw sadness, and the same kind of emotions brought on by betrayal that Felix and his entire colony had felt two years ago; a deep emotional scarring that her outward persona didn't express, making it hard to have seen before.

"To be honest with you Felix, I'd kill to have the life you do," she said. "You aren't stuck on this shithole; you have a home you can fly back to, probably a family waiting there you didn't mention while telling your story. But me, I don't have that luxury. This bar? This is as close to home as I've had in a long time, and all I've got is my co-workers, some of whom also aren't here by choice. But you, and all of those you work with, you did choose, and you have the option to walk away at any time."

"Wait, what're you trying to say?" Felix asked.

"First," began Amanda, her voice scolding. "Your crew weren't dragged into anything; they had the choice of not following you into this life. Second, there are people here who have it a lot worse than you do; be grateful for that. And third," her expression softened. "Some of the 'petty' rogues you find around here don't like this life either, but they find a way to cope with it, by balancing the good with the bad. That's something you're not doing, and that, I think, is what's eating at you. Find a hobby; occupy your free time with something that'll help relieve your stress. Don't be focused solely on work and brooding, because if you do, that'll eat away at you until there's nothing left." She chuckled. "Basically, I'm saying... live a little. We all have to. And afterwards, you might find your job a lot easier."

Felix lowered his gaze again, suddenly feeling as though a ton of bricks had just been lifted off of his back. He hadn't thought of it before, but his life wasn't really *that* bad... maybe he was stealing to survive, but he wasn't doing it for his own gain; how many times had he reminded Zack of that? How many times had the *others* reminded Zack of that? And now here

he was, treating himself like he was like the other scum on the Dirt Palace; like the ones who *enjoyed* covering the galaxy in their filth. He was being hypocritical and foolish...

He had raised his glass to his lips for another drink when he had paused, and then set it down, not taking it. "You're right," he said. "It could be a lot worse than what I'm doing now; I'm being way too hard on myself, and my crew." He sat there quietly for a moment, deep in thought, before he looked at Amanda and gave her a warm smile. "It seems I owe you, Amanda; you set me straight."

She smiled back. "Like I said, Felix, I like you, and your crew," she said. "You guys help remind me that the galaxy has some good people in it, even where the grass doesn't grow greener."

"You speak with so much experience though; what happened to you?" Felix asked, his curiosity now piqued.

She chuckled wryly before standing up from the counter, her hands resting on the ledge. "My story," she said, plainly, "Is for another time, handsome. It's the end of my shift, we'll be closing up any minute, and I should be ringing up your bill..." She rolled her eyes at that last sentence, before she smiled again "Yanno what, forget it; you only took one sip anyway, so this one's on the house. If anyone asks, it was a free sample."

"You offer samples here?" Felix asked.

"I do now," replied Amanda. "Now, you ought to go get yourself some sleep." She reached over to him and stroked his cheek tenderly. "Don't need dark sacs under those gorgeous eyes."

He blushed at her compliment as she took the bottle back from him, recorking it and placing it back upon the shelf where she'd found it before. She turned to him, and shooed him off, telling him again to go get some sleep. At that, he got up from his seat, still feeling his face warm, and his mind numbed by the wisdom of her words, although his curiosity was still rampant, wondering how she understood his situation so well. Could she be one of the 'worse off' people that she was referring to?

But damn he *was* tired...

He left the bar, waving to Amanda as he walked out the door and headed back to the motel, feeling... relieved. Unburdened. Like things would get better sooner than he thought. It was a good feeling, and he let it sink in as he walked through the front door –ignoring the *still* asleep receptionist and the newly arrived, passed out man reeking of whisky with a broken bottle in his hand, lying face-down on the floor across from the desk, snoring just as loudly as the woman who was supposed to be managing this office.

He kept going, reaching his room; he heard no sounds coming from Zack's anymore, indicating the rabbit had finally calmed it down for the night –or morning, whatever time it was now, and the junkie that had been listening in on the session was gone. Felix unlocked his door, opened it and stepped inside, and then closed and relocked it before heading over to his bed, kicking off his boots and removing his vest, but not even bothering with the rest of his clothes before he collapsed onto the mattress, and was asleep in minutes...

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The team was due to meet for breakfast at Gustav's room that morning; Amber awoke bright and early as she always did, showering and cleaning up as needed, tying her hair back into a ponytail as she had taken to do, the length extending below the dorsal ridge fin growing from the back of her head. When it was securely tied, she got dressed, wearing her usual outfit of a sleeveless top and pants, of which she had several.

Something about the combination was just appealing to her; she liked having her arms free. But she hated skirts; they felt too vulnerable, too exposed. And shoes? Forget them; a boot was much better for kicking than heels or running shoes.

Straightening out her clothes, she left the room after locking her door, walking down the hallway past Felix's room before stopping at Zack's as his door opened, two scantily clad Rodentian women stepped out of his room, giggling madly as they strut out of the room, looking back inside and waving. "Bye Zack," they called playfully.

They then noticed Amber, who was eyeing them rather coldly, her arms crossed and shaking her head in disgust. "Where did you two leave your dignity; a black hole?" She asked. "Get out of here."

They gave her a 'whatever' look, and turned away, heading down the hallway and around the corner out of sight. Zack emerged from his room, practically nude except for his underwear; Amber looked at him for less than a second before shutting her eyes and turning her head away, groaning. "Okay; I could've gone an entire lifetime of war without seeing your tighty-whities and been a perfectly content woman," she remarked.

"What? I was just having some fun last night is all," he replied.

"Fun?" Amber echoed, glaring at him. "You call bedding under-aged and probably STD-ridden women, fun?"

"Maybe if you got laid once in your life, you'd think differently."

The sound of bone meeting bone as her fist connected with his forehead filled the hallway very suddenly, followed shortly by Zack's voice yelling. "Ow!" before she stormed up the hallway, shaking the ache out of her knuckles as she walked. "Why the hell does Felix put up with you?" She muttered, too low for him to hear.

Like everyone else, Amber admittedly missed the old Zack... she had never truly gotten along with him, but at least when he was just some kid with stashed Adult Magazines and obsessed with exploration, he had been tolerable... and sometimes, the comic relief of the group; Jessica, Gustav and Felix had always found him to be good for a laugh, and she had liked that about him; it made the ship all the more enjoyable to be on. Now... he had become this miserable over-spending playboy who sometimes, she worried, was heading down the path to becoming one of the very sector trash that inhabited this station.

When that happened... things would only spiral out of control even further.

She arrived at Gustav's room, and after knocking on the door and being confirmed by the tenant within that it unlocked, opened the door to the smell of ham and eggs cooking, the scent of the high-protein foods making her stomach leap in joy as she breathed it through her nostrils, sighing hungrily. "That smells fantastic, Gustav," she said.

“Found some nice spices on the ship and brought them with me,” the big orca returned as he remained focused on his work. “Figured I’d try ‘em out, finally. Hope you’re hungry.”

“My mouth calls for some of your cooking,” replied Amber, walking over to the table and sitting down. “Is Jessica coming to join us?”

“Sadly not; she still won’t leave the ship,” replied Gustav, genuinely saddened by a piece of their group missing out on a shared breakfast.

“I see,” returned Amber, sighing.

“Next one of these group meals we have should be on the hope,” Gustav stated. “I don’t like anyone missing out, including her.”

“I hear you,” replied Amber, before she scoffed. “Although I can’t say I’d shed a tear if Zack missed one of the get-togethers.”

“Amber,” Gustav said sharply, his tone scolding. “How can you say that about one of our group? He’s one of us, just like you or me.”

“He’s well on his way to becoming a sleaze ball is what he is,” returned Amber, the aggravation in her tone apparent. “He squanders his money on those prostitutes from the brothel, and I swear, it’s like he looks for opportunities to sneak off while we’re here at the Dirt Palace.” She calmed herself, sighing. “Look, I know he’s been with us since the beginning, but he’s not the same Zack anymore. Half the time we don’t even know what the hell he’s even up to.”

“He’s still a valuable member of the team, Amber,” stated Gustav. “Nobody understands the Hope better than he does; we need him to keep that thing in the air.”

“But Felix knows it just as well,” Amber returned.

“Felix is our pilot,” Gustav reminded. “He can’t do two things at once, Amber... actually, scratch that, he’s already *got* several jobs. He’s the pilot, our captain, and handles many of our legitimate business deals and keeps track of the debts. He has enough on his plate; we don’t need to add more to it.”

Amber couldn’t find a retort to that, admitting Gustav was right; everybody on the ship already did multiple jobs, mostly to stay occupied but all of them dependent on their skills. Felix did more than the rest of them; if he started handling all the ship repairs too, there was no doubt it would cause him to burn out with stress as he already overworked himself with his current tasks.

“Yeah... you’re right,” Amber admitted.

“About what?” Zack’s voice suddenly rang from the door as he entered, casting a glare at Amber. “Thanks for that punch in the face, Amber; can’t even see straight.”

“You punched him?” Gustav asked, giving Amber a look.

“He was being a sleaze; you know I hate those kinds of people,” she returned. “It’s why I left the militia in the first place.”

“Indulging myself in some company is not being a sleaze; it’s being ‘normal’,” retorted Zack.

“Not when you’re buying them off to shake their asses at you,” returned Amber.

“Frankly I think women who sell themselves like that have no pride.”

“Yeah? Well you have no life,” returned Zack.



“Zachary Doyle!” Gustav bellowed.

“No life?” Amber demanded, getting up from her chair and glaring sharply at Zack. “I’m not the one who’s starting to enjoy being a criminal like it’s actually a good thing!”

“What does it matter how we’re making money? We’re making them, paying off those scumbags that call themselves the government, and we make our own rules; nobody tells us what to do.” He pointed his thumb at himself. “Nobody tells *me* what to do, especially not some violent tiger shark who all she does all day is work on her guns and look forward to when she next gets to kick somebody in the face!”

“It matters because everything we do reflects on the Mara Colony!” Amber went on. “They may have agreed to this, but only because it was supposed to be temporary! Some of us have deliberately pooled our money into stuff for the colony or the ship, sharing expenses, but not you; all you do is look for the next piece of ass to...!”

“*ENOUGH!*” Gustav roared, slamming his fists on the counter with such force that the plastic surface actually cracked, the force of his voice making both of them freeze in their tracks and look at him with bewilderment.

Gustav. *Never*. Yelled. Not at anyone, not even when they deserved it. The orcas anger was quickly replaced by sadness, looking at the two with disappointment and a broken heart both clear on his expression.

Felix suddenly appeared at the door, stepping into the room with his expression a mix of surprise and suspicion as he looked at his crew mates. “What the hell is going on in here?” He demanded.

There was a short talk after Felix arrived. Hearing Gustav actually yell had been his first tip something was wrong, but as Amber and Zack both remained ready to snap at each other at any given moment, it was increasingly clear they were the center of it even before the conversation began. Gustav served breakfast, but everyone mostly picked at their food, not feeling very hungry in the midst of such a heated discussion. Several times, Felix had to step in before the two started yelling at each other again.

“You two,” Felix began. “We come to these shared meals to spend time together, like friends and co-workers; like we should be. There’s no reason for us to be fighting amongst ourselves.”

“Tell that to her!” Zack retorted. “And for her to mind her own fucking business!”

“Quit wasting your money on those hookers from the brothel, I will!” Amber retorted.

“See what I mean?!” Zack demanded. “It’s my money; I will do whatever I want with it!”

Felix gave Zack a look. “While I agree with that statement, Zack, why do you insist on spending it on sex-for-hire? Whatever happened to getting it the old fashioned way?”

“Takes too long,” replied Zack. “We’ve got schedules to keep. Even if we didn’t, half the women back at the colony are either stupid, prissy or both.” He shrugged. “Besides; I’m too good for one woman.”

“That,” Amber said, pointing at Zack. “That, right there, is what’s pissing me off. He’s becoming one of the scumbags who live aboard this pit.”

“So what if I am?” Zack asked, dismissively.

Felix looked at Zack. "We've talked about this before, Zack," he stated. "This life was supposed to be temporary, until we paid..."

"Paid the debts; I know," Zack interjected. "But why should this lifestyle be temporary?" This... was a question Felix really wished he did not hear his friend asking.

"We're free people now; we don't take orders from nobody," Zack argued. "We make money, we get everything we want—everything the colony wants or needs. What we should be doing is stepping up our game to increase our profits; start salvaging everything we can get. We missed an amazing opportunity on Argo II; there could have been tens of thousands worth in creds left behind in those colonies and we just left it all to rot, waiting for someone else to come and get it.

"But instead we're letting stupid things like how it 'once' belonged to someone stop us; so did the stuff we sell all the time! Over these last two years out here in the galaxy I've learned that if you don't take something when you can, it'll be out of your reach when you need it later. We need some serious creds, and we need stop limiting ourselves to how we get it; make some real money! Then nobody calls the shots but us!"

Everyone stared at him silently. Although there was some truth to his words, particularly about their trade having always been about gathering things left behind, there had been a reason they had been doing things as they had so far, but it seemed that didn't matter to Zack anymore; he didn't just want some money, he wanted a lot of it, and he wanted to live like the others on the Dirt Palace...

Their worst fears had come true... Zack was becoming a criminal, body and mind.

Felix stood up from his seat on the arm chair, and plainly stated, "everyone pack up... we're leaving."

"Wait, Felix..." Zack began.

"You be quiet!" Felix shouted at the rabbit. "It was a mistake ever letting you come into this place, or bringing you into this entire trade. It's poisoned your mind and made you forget everything we set out to do. From now on, you're not leaving the ship when we come here!"

"You *cannot* do that to me!" Zack protested.

"Oh yes I can," returned Felix. "I'm the captain of the Mara's Hope, and when we're not on Trident IV, you will follow my orders." He walked up to Zack and stood almost nose-to-nose with him, staring at him with those hard blue eyes as he tapped his finger against the rabbit's chest, speaking in the harshest tone he could muster. "If you can't do that anymore then you're welcome to leave this crew anytime. We're all here by choice, but the final say is *mine*."

Zack looked at Gustav and Amber, seeing both of them staring at him blankly, but neither one of them rising to defend him. He rolled his eyes and threw out his arms. "All this," he said. "All this drama over the fact that I like my women, and you guys are willing to throw me out—*me*, who got the Mara's Hope in the air in the first place and has kept it flying for all this time, just like that?"

"We're not firing you," Felix assured. "We still want you on the crew, but you've become far too close to this life."

“And it’s not about the women, Zack,” returned Gustav. “It’s about you, and what you’re becoming. None of us were ever supposed to take to this lifestyle so well because it was supposed to end when we paid off the debt we owe the Confederacy.”

“And then what, go back to trading salt?” Zack asked. “We do that and we’ll be living on preserved food all over again; you guys actually want to live like that again?”

“It’d be an honest living,” replied Amber. “The longer we keep doing this, the more our chances of being caught go up. We’ve been *lucky* these last two years, always managing to stay one step ahead of the Confederacy because we’ve carefully planned out everything in advance, using tactics we spent months simulating. But sooner or later, we’re going to be spotted; it only takes on Confederate ship to sight us and suddenly we’ll be fugitives; hell, one probably already saw us once but our ship is unregistered so they didn’t know who we were.”

“If that proves anything, it proves we’re smarter than an entire government,” Zack returned, and then calmed down when he saw the looks the others were giving him, his voice softening as he continued. “Look, I get you guys are not comfortable with this whole life of crime, and I’m not against an honest living. What I *am* against though, is going back to the slum life on Trident IV waiting for the Gelks to climb over our walls and either gun us down or make us into fish food. I for one would give anything to get the colony off that world and living somewhere safer; that’s what I have always hoped we’d strive for.

“Instead, though, we’re trying to pay off a debt that should never have been ours to begin with, the Confederacy is at war leaving job choices severely limited unless we were to join the military –something none of us ever want to do in a million years, except maybe Amber.” He jerked his thumb at the tiger shark, who glared back. “Point is, we’re living a slum life even with what we’re already doing; we give this up, how much further down do you think we’re going to go?

“McCain was scum, but life on Trident IV drove him over the edge, then he took advantage of our own misery because he blamed Brunhilda for making him put up with it for so long. If we quit now or get caught before we have a solid income again, or hell, move the colony somewhere we can prosper better... then it’s all back to square one, not just for us, but for all of them. That nightmare weighs on me every damn day; I don’t want to live like that again, you understand that? Those women... okay, I’m over-indulging; I get it, that’s what you guys are trying to tell me. But I will take this life, over our old one, any day of the fucking century, get it? I should hope I’m not alone in feeling like that.”

His words struck a chord with the others, giving Felix and the others pause, each of them exchanging silent looks. Felix was suddenly brought back to his conversation with Amanda, the bartender, from the night before, about reluctant criminals who sought out means of coping with what they were forced to do in order to survive. He hadn’t thought of it until now –admittedly he’d only assumed that Zack was simply living his perverted fantasies from his teenage days, but maybe all this time, it was just *his* means of coping, knowing that in the life they lived, it could be turned on its head at any moment.

With a long sigh, Felix looked at Zack. “Okay,” he said. “You’ve talked yourself out of a house arrest on the Hope. But I insist you pose a limit on how often you visit the brothel; one of these days, we’re going to have a slow month and you will have blown all your money on

something else. Most of us here set some aside for emergencies either for the colony or for ourselves.”

“Oh I assure you, I have,” replied Zack. “I’ve been putting away a little after every job.”

“How much is a little?” Amber asked.

Felix noticed hesitation in Zack when they voiced that question, until the rabbit answered with. “About a-a thousand, after each job,” he replied.

“Bullshit,” Amber stated plainly.

“Is not!” Zack retorted.

“You hesitated to answer and you stuttered while answered,” said Amber. “You haven’t been putting away that much, have you? Knowing your indulgences, I’d say maybe a couple of hundred, before you’re spending it on a shapely ass.”

Zack frowned. “Okay, busted,” he said.

“If you insist on still going to the brothel,” Felix said. “Limit it to one a month, and put the rest of your money away until you need it.”

“Once a *month*?!” Zack echoed. “But I told Gina I’d be picking her up once every week! You wouldn’t believe the kind of bl...”

“STOP!” Amber interrupted, putting up her hand. “I *don’t* need to know what you have those girls doing to you.”

“That’s my offer, Zack; take it or leave it,” Felix said firmly.

Zack groaned and rolled his eyes again, but after a moment, he spoke again. “Fine... I agree,” he said.

“And,” Felix went on. “This attitude of yours that you’ve developed, that has to have a lid put on it right away. When you disrespected Jessica, I thought that was isolated, but now you’re back to picking fights with Amber two years after I thought you two worked out your differences, but from the sounds of it this whole fight started because of you. Get that under control, understand?”

“What about Amber? She punched me in the face for crying out loud,” Zack retorted.

“You deserved it,” Amber replied plainly.

“What did you say to her?” Gustav asked.

“That maybe if she actually got laid, she wouldn’t judge me so harshly,” replied Zack.

“Didn’t you say that to me outside the bar that night I dragged you out by the ears?” Felix asked. “That’s the kind of attitude I’m talking about; if Amber hit you for it, it should be an indication.”

“Of what, that she likes to hit me?”

The three of them gave him a look that, to him, said, “we *all* want to hit you right now”. Those gazes silenced him.

“Come on,” said Gustav. “Let’s clean up and go find some work for the day; sooner we can get out of here, the better.”

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The next few days went about as usual after the group picked their share of bounties on items they might pick up while salvaging ships; the demand for Grunikan officer tags was still unusually high, and the ever-in-demand Nocturnian Tools as well, mostly by the body shops all across the Dirt Palace. Felix still did not understand why the man or woman who had put up the bounty for the officer tags had such an interest in them, but they were paying well for them, and that was what mattered, even if the act of collecting them always made his stomach want to churn.

Still, the money was not something he could argue with, and sought tips from the information brokers around the Dirt Palace. They had to spend a few credits in order to get what they needed, but after listening to a couple of 'reliable' sources, they learned of a possible goldmine of opportunity. The day before, a Grunikan vessel had been incapacitated by a Confederate scouting party three star systems away, and not just any ordinary vessel, but a VIP vessel that had been carrying numerous Grunikan officers to one of the fleets they had outside the White Star Sector.

An opportunity like that wasn't going to stay available for long, especially if anyone else knew about the bounty on officer tags, and a VIP vessel full of those tags was going to draw some attention. They hurried to the Mara's Hope and departed quickly, following the directions they had received with the tip, and heading for where the ship had been damaged.

They arrived in the correct system after six hours of travel, fired out of several acceleration gates to reach the correct system before finally coming out of warp drive in order to scan for anomalies; distress signals or other signs that could lead them to the ship's location. They came out of warp above a gas-giant planet known as Neptune VI; from orbit, the strange planet was green with thin, jagged lines of black where the gas was absent. Confederate operations had little use for gas-giant planets like this one, so they were largely left alone and secluded.

Jessica was at the scanner terminal, and initiated a full sweep of every area in range, trying to locate any distress beacons in the system, hoping to find the Grunikan Vessel, while Felix flew into a high orbit over Neptune VI. "Alright, let's see," she said as she watched the screen, modulating the target scans as necessary. "I'm picking up a reading from another planet in this system; Agamemnon III."

"Checking comm channels," said Felix, turning to the communications terminal, tuning it in to the frequencies of Agamemnon III, listening in to the open channel.

"Agamemnon III Orbital Assistance CS-74339 of Valet Shipping company, we have you in sight and are on approach; hang tight, we'll have you going again in a moment."

"CS-74339 to Orbital Assistance; 10-4 on that -your help is greatly appreciated. Over and out."

Felix shook his head. "Crippled cargo ship," he said. "Next?"

"Checking..." replied Jessica. "Picking up a signal coming from an asteroid belt in Second Quadrant," replied Jessica.

Felix tuned to local channels in the second area of the system; it took him a moment to find the correct frequency, as there were often four to choose from in every system, each one

with its own transmission networks. But when he found the correct one, he knew immediately that wasn't it either. "Mining ship, transmitting to its head office," he said. "Next?"

They went through five more possibilities before they finally encountered one that was garbled and did not match any Confederate frequencies in the Mara's Hope communication array. They found their target. Locking on to the signal and angling the ship as needed, he powered up the engines before engaging Warp Drive, and off they went towards their target at faster-than-light speed.

When they emerged from Warp Drive back into regular travel speed, the ship was in sight, and Felix powered down the engines. The ship was not like other Grunikan vessels they had seen in their time out in space; most of the ships flown by the empire had been an expression of their superiority complex, creating war ships resembling feral versions of themselves and carriers that resembled giant reptilian eggs, but this vessel was different. This vessel was a smooth and elongated oval, measuring not much bigger than the Mara's Hope, but thicker and covered in a dense plate of armour, with two large engines at the back. A quick scan revealed the ship had only a few weapons; automated light cannons, but no heavy weapons or missile batteries.

"What kind of ship is that?" Jessica asked, quizzically. "It's nothing like I've ever seen the Grunikans with before."

"Judging by all the armour it has it's probably some sort of armoured transport," replied Felix. "That's got to be the one we've heard about. Check for life readings and see what systems are still active; we should still be out of optimal range for their lasers." As he instructed her, he turned back to the communications terminal, seeing if anyone was talking aboard the vessel.

"Alright, switching scanners," said Jessica, readjusting the equipment laid out before her as appropriate, and beginning the scan of the ship. "It appears the life support systems are inactive; life readings are negative." She looked through the viewport towards the ship. "So either it was abandoned, or it's a space-faring crypt." She went on. "Shield generator is offline, artificial gravity is still active, weapons are depowered and... wait a second..."

"What?" Felix asked, glancing over.

"The engines are still running," replied Jessica.

Her words prompted them both to look back through the viewport, and sure enough they saw that the large ship had moved since they last looked at it; it had come much closer, heading almost straight at them and in the process giving them a good look at its size. The ship was not so crippled after all; despite now being unmanned, it was still mobile.

Felix quickly grasped the controls and eased the throttle forward, moving the Mara's Hope out of the way to avoid a head-on collision from an abandoned vessel moving on its own. Circling the ship back around, he matched its trajectory and retained speed at that of the Grunikan transport. It took some finesse to bring the ship to such an angle, and he had to make numerous corrections along the way, but eventually they were travelling at the ship's flank, like the side-car on a hoverbike.

"Jess; any stars or gas giants in our path that this thing might fly into by accident?"

"No, but according to the star chart, we'll be in uncharted territory in three hours," replied Jessica, looking at Felix curiously and noticing the grim expression on his face. "What's so bad about the uncharted zones?"

"The uncharted areas beyond this quadrant are Empire territory," replied Felix. "The crew of that ship must've tried to flee back home when the scouting party hit them; the ship could still make the journey, but that's not one we want to make." He rubbed his chin in thought. "We don't have a lot of time, but a ship as intact as this could have some valuable items, not the least of which being the Grunikan officer tags we originally came here for. This could help the colony..."

"But it's risky," stated Jessica.

"Very risky," agreed Felix. "We fly into Empire space while that beacon is active and they'll pick it up and come running. We barely got away from them last time; I'm not looking for a second try." He looked at the intercom. "I need to consult the others about this."

"Agreed."

Felix tapped the transmit button for the intercom, sending his voice throughout the ship. "All hands, report in," he said.

"Engine room, here."

"Galley, here."

"Gunner, here."

"Listen up, guys; I need your opinions on something," he said. "And we don't have a lot of time to decide. The ship we're flying alongside is mostly intact but it's still moving, and it's heading right for Grunikan territory. We have less than three hours to scrounge what we want from this ship, and there's still the chance someone else might come looking for it. So, if any of you don't think this is worth the risk, say it, and I'll fly us out of here."

Amber humming through the intercom was heard before the shark replied. *"That's a big chance, guys; I'm looking at the ship too and it's big. It could take us an hour at most just to find anything in there."*

"Still, that's a hard opportunity to pass up; a bigger ship means more stuff to pick from. We move fast enough, we could get away with a good haul," Zack stated. *"I say we go for it."*

"I have to admit, it doesn't sit well with me either... but most of this month has been pretty slow," Gustav put in. *"I guess we should at least try."*

"Alright, I'm in too... what's Jess say?" Amber asked.

Felix looked over at the doe with Amber's mention of her name, studying her expression while he waited for her answer. Jessica shifted uncomfortably, but gave an answer. "They've already decided... I support the choice. Let's at least give it a shot."

Felix nodded. "Then, let's loot us a ship," he said, and turned back to the intercom to discuss their plan.

It took a few shots from the Hope's turret to create an accessible opening in the side of the Grunikan ship. Once they had found where one of the airlocks were, they breached the outside door and made their entry. The inside of the ship was already without breathable air, due to the failure of the life support, so they cut open the door, and made their entry. Once

through the airlock, they entered what appeared to be an armory; the walls were lined with racks containing several weapons and body armour. A few were missing from the racks, but the majority of the armory stock appeared to still be there.

Amber was the first to make entry, garbed in her S.C.E suit, with an added piece of armour over her torso; militia-issued coltan breastplate, meant to protect from energy weapons. It was a low grade of the armour, but even low grade was better than nothing, and could save her from a laser through the heart.

Following Amber were Gustav, Felix and even Zack this time; the rabbit had accompanied them for this journey knowing they'd need his hacking talents. With several of the ship's systems still functioning, there was bound to be a few locked doors and terminals they'd need him to deal with. Meanwhile, Gustav hauled a hover dolly into the corridor, while Felix brought up the rear, armed with his scattergun.

"An onboard armory, built right next to an airlock?" Amber questioned. "I'm no Grunikan, but that just seems like a bad design idea. If an enemy ruptured the hull on this side, like we just did, boom; out goes the entire arsenal into the vacuum of space."

"Why isn't it getting sucked out now?" Gustav asked.

"Already no atmosphere in here; nothing for space to suck out except stale carbon dioxide by now," replied Zack.

"Should we take the guns then?" Felix asked.

"Definitely; there's enough weapons and armour in here to sell for tens of thousands," replied Amber.

"I'll start loading them up; why don't you guys go on ahead?" Gustav suggested.

"No; not this time," stated Felix. *"We don't know what else is on this ship; we stay together at all times. No separating."*

"Ah, man; I was hoping to explore more of this place," Zack complained.

"The faster we load up, the sooner you can" Amber stated. *"So hop to it, Zack."*

The four of them worked quickly to collect the Grunikan arms and armour from the rack, loading the first pile onto the dolly right away before proceeding back to the ship. Using a tow line to guide themselves back across the void between them and the Hope's cargo bay, they brought the weapons on board, hurriedly placing them into crates, and made their way back for the rest. Working together it took them less than ten minutes to get all the weapons in the armory onto the Hope, promising a good payday.

Returning to the Grunikan transport, they ventured deeper into the crippled ship, searching for more valuables they could scavenge. The ship underwent a drastic change in its interior when they ventured deeper; stepping through a set of doors to the inner portion of the ship, they left behind the bland metal walls and suddenly felt as though they were inside of a luxury liner, finding the walls were now decorated and painted, like the inside of a hotel, with the grated floors now replaced by carpeting. Carpeting! On a star ship!

And that wasn't the least of it. They went further, and stepped into a large room that looked like a lounge, with a bar and comfortable seating. Some plates were lying on the table near the sofas, covered in bite-sized delicacies; someone had been eating prior to the ship

being attack that had crippled the ship. The same could be seen at the bar counter; cups and bottles spilt all over the surface, one even fallen and broken on the floor.

"Damn! What kind of ship is this?" Zack asked. *"When we got on here it looked like any old personnel carrier but now we're finding a freaking luxury bar?"*

"Talk about a plush life, and for their military of all people," Amber stated. *"It's no wonder their commanders are terrible leaders; giving them cushy luxuries like this makes a soldier soft and weak."*

"If their military commanders live like this I'd hate to see what their Emperor lives like," added Gustav.

"Okay, cut the chatter guys," Felix stepped in. *"I find this as sickening as you do, but we're on the clock, so let's keep going."*

They resumed their trek. The next stop they made brought them to a gruesome scene, however; they entered the slave quarters, and found sentient life forms of all species there, laying lifelessly across the floor in their barely-modest clothes that revealed the abuses they suffered all too well. The group didn't stay in that room for very long, feeling nauseous just looking upon those unfortunate souls, and carried on.

Not that what they found next was any better.

The group reached what appeared to be a panic room; a sealed-off area of the ship with reinforced walls and a thick quadrinium door, too dense to cut through, but not too much to hack through; Zack had the door open within minutes. Typically onboard panic rooms like this, at least in the Confederacy, would have its own life support systems, so the group opened the door fully prepared to find enemies inside, but the Grunikans had clearly over-looked precautionary backup life support for this VIP safety room; all of the Grunikans inside had already died from lack of breathable air hours ago.

But just as they had come looking for, the room contained the bodies of six ranking officers, each one of them with officer tags—one of them was even a general. The tags for them had a bounty of an additional half of the others, making each one worth seventy-five thousand credits. A difficult bounty to pass on, despite the grim task of collecting them.

At least grim for some. *"Haha!"* Zack bellowed through the comms, loud enough that everyone else's ears were left ringing as his voice surged through their S.C.E helmets. *"Freakin' score!"*

"Argh, my ears!" Amber growled

"Zack, please remember we're all on a linked channel here when you're going to express your excitement," Gustav requested.

"Sorry guys... lost control there for a sec." Zack returned. *"But hey we found a damn gold mine here!"*

"Yes, we can very clearly see that," Gustav returned. *"Let's... just get this over with."*

"Agreed," said Felix. *"Pick a side and start gathering."*

And so they did, each one of them stepping up to one corpse after another, and removing the tags from the necks of the Grunikan officers, trying not to look into their dead, unseeing eyes that stared off into space as they lay slumped over the tables, the discolorations of their scales telling just how they died...

One after another, they collected their prizes; six officer tags total, including the General, promising an excellent lump of credits. In fact... as Felix thought about it, he soon realized that the total sum of credits from these tags alone would be enough to pay off more than half of their remaining debt! His mood lightened a little at that realization, despite the pit in his stomach for looting the dead.

But then, the imminent mood-changer arrived. *"Guys?"* Jessica's voice rang over the comms. *"We've got company..."*

'Ah fuck me with a brown dwarf...' Felix cursed in his mind; one moment of feeling some hope, and then *that* happened. Quickly glancing at his crew, he could almost see his own thoughts in their mind, each of them looking exasperated. *"What sort of company; is it the Grunikans? The Confederacy?"*

"No; the ship that just showed up is Galaxy Glider's model, but it's not fleet vessel," replied Jessica. *"I think we've got some rival thieves, just like you feared, Felix."*

"I really hate it when I'm right sometimes," Felix said with a groan before he urged the others to start making their way out, clenching the tags he'd collected in his hand and sprinting after them. *"Are they heading for the Hope?"*

"Their weapons are armed, but they're not firing," replied Jessica.

"Probably don't want to hurt the ship," Amber suggested. *"They bring this thing in intact they could sell it for a fortune; you can't get Grunikan ships out here, not even on the Black Market."*

"Guys, looks like they're going to board the carrier, they just stopped behind the hope and extended a boarding tube," warned Jessica.

"Jess, shut the cargo bay door and switch on the shields; do not lower them until we get there," Felix instructed. *"We can't let them board the Hope."*

"Okay, Felix... but please, be careful in there. We don't know what we're dealing with."

"Which is why we came prepared," Amber stated as she elevated her rifle, taking point and leading the group through the corridors. Zack and Gustav readied their pistols, powering them up and preparing themselves for a fight. Felix, already carrying his scattergun, followed behind Amber, feeling his heart beginning to race in a mix of fear and concern for their safety...

They worked their way back through the corridors, but they still had trouble finding their way, second-guessing themselves again and again and wasting precious moments as they tried to find their way back to where they had left their ship. The corridors outside of the VIP area were redundant and all looked the same. Soon though, they managed to find the correct corridor...

And that's where the trouble began.

Amber put one foot out into the corridor, and immediately stepped back as a red sphere of concentrated plasma energy raced past, striking a nearby wall and bringing the area of impact to a red-hot glow. *"Dammit; they got here first,"* she cursed.

"Hey over there!" One of the pirates called, transmitting his voice through the loudspeaker on his helmet. *"Whatever youse have found on this ship, you better be handing it over to us, or we'll be turning your bodies into molten sludge!"*

"In your dreams, pal!" Zack returned before anyone could stop him. *"We got here first, so go find your own salvage!"*

"I think we like it here just fine, punk, and until you guys step out and give us all your stuff, you ain't leaving this ship alive," the same pirate retorted.

"They wouldn't spare us anyway," Felix stated. *"Moment we hand anything over to them, they'd kill us all or take the Hope."*

"What should we do?" Gustav asked.

"No other choice; we'll have to fight our way out," replied Felix.

Amber cautiously peeked around the corner, fully anticipating another attempted shot at her, but she managed to peer around enough to get a glimpse of their opposition before pulling her head back. *"I think I see at least twelve of them; we're a little outnumbered here,"* she pointed out. *"We need a more defensive position than these wide corridors."*

"What about the lounge?" Felix suggested. *"There was only a single door leading in there; we could bottle-neck them there."*

"We might corner ourselves in the process," Gustav pointed out.

"These guys can chase us all over this ship; sooner or later they'd corner us anyway," Felix pointed out.

"Maybe not," said Amber. *"We have a count of them but they don't know how many of us there are and they probably know even less of this ship than we do; I think I have an idea..."*

The pirates watched the corner ahead, waiting for the strangers to give an answer. Their boss, a male Felinoid, tapped his fingers impatiently as he stood with his arms crossed, until he finally lost his temper and yelled out. *"I ain't waiting all day, you little shits; give up now or we'll be dumping you out of this ship's airlock!"*

A silver-clad, unarmed hand reached out around the corner; one of the other riflemen in the lead took aim and was about to shoot when the cat motioned for him to stop, watching with narrowed eyes through his visor as the hand reached out further, indicating a surrender. He grinned, and motioned for his men to lower their guns.

And that was his mistake.

In one swift motion, the figure at the end spun around, revealing their other hand, gripping a pistol, and fired without warning. Their shot was true, landing perfectly in the center-mass chest of one of the leading men, instantly sending him to the floor as the red-hot beam of energy punched through his unarmoured suit, letting his blood out into the no-oxygen environment, leaving it blue as it flowed out.

"We surrender!" The shooter called mockingly in a female voice. *"Come a little closer!"*

"Little bitch! Get her!" The cat yelled, ordering the others forward.

They charged, shouting curses and threats at Amber as she turned and ran up the hallway, remembering the way back to the VIP area –two trips through it served a purpose after all. The others had rushed ahead to carry out her strategy, while she baited the pirates to pursue her. It was a dangerous job, but she was the only one qualified to do it, and so voluntarily nominated herself. Of course the others had been skeptical, but time was not exactly on their side, and so they agreed.

The pirates were hot on her tail, taking shots when the opportunity presented itself. Luckily though, they were undisciplined and terribly inaccurate; they had a few close calls but never managed to hit her as she moved, running side-to-side to make herself a harder target. Every so often, just to annoy them further, Amber would turn around to take a shot at them as they rounded a corner, slowing them a little –even grazing one of them, before she resumed running.

Finally, she reached the VIP area, running past the door to a closet before coming to the lounge door, where she made a sharp right, narrowly avoiding an oncoming plasma shot as she entered, ran across to the bar counter and leapt over and behind it to use it for cover, finding her rifle where she had asked Gustav to leave it for her. She powered it and stood up halfway, propping the rifle on the top of the counter for balance. She saw one of the pirates in the doorway, and fired, the red sphere launching from her rifle and blasting him in the chest as she had done to the first, but this one had far more damage internally, burning through his chest and into the organs underneath; he fell to the ground, dead before he hit the floor.

"We've got her cornered!" One of them called. Half of their remaining group raced across the doorway; Amber shot at them, but missed, and she heard them putting their backs to the walls, going silent for a moment.

'Pretending to be Marines; how cute,' she thought, but she was the real thing; a Colonial Militian Trooper, with training and experience.

"Yo, lady! You all by yourself?" The cat leader shouted.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," Amber retorted through her helmets speaker, never letting her guard down.

"You have to know you can't take all of us by yourself," the cat called. *"You give up quietly, and give us all the plunder on this ship, and you can go free."*

"Yeah, I trust your word about as far as I could throw you," Amber returned.

"Then you're dead, woman. Even if you live through this though, can't say you'll like being alive when we take you with us."

"Not happening," Amber said before she shut off her loudspeaker and spoke into the comms. *"Now guys!"*

Felix was the first to appear, the door to the broom closet from before opening, and out he stepped, levelling his scattergun and firing. The cone-shaped prism-tip glowed prior to discharge, and out of its edges, numerous short, fat beams erupted, peppering the pirates from their blind-sides and striking three of them in a single shot; shot placement killed two and mortally wounded the third. At the other end of the hallway, Zack and Gustav leaned out from around the corners of the hallway beyond, raising their pistols and laying down a suppressive fire with their combined weapons. Amber quickly rejoined the fight from behind her position in the lounge, shooting anyone who stepped into the sights of her rifle as they were pushed in front of the door.

"We walked into an ambush!" One of them screamed before he was hit by a second shot from Felix's weapon.

The dolphin had the perfect tool for close-quarters out of the whole group, the dispersion pattern of the scattergun making it impossible for him to miss at his current range,

and the narrow corridor guaranteeing several would be stricken every time he fired. In just two shots, he had killed four of them –including the one he'd wounded already. They tried to duck into the slave quarters across the hall from the lounge but Amber gunned down the last of them before they could get the door closed. In a matter of seconds, the ten pirates, including the leader, had been completely wiped out.

Felix barely gave them time to rest; there wasn't a moment to lose. *"Hurry guys; back to the ship! It won't be long before they figure out what's happened in here!"*

"Man, it really sucks we have to leave this ship to them!" Zack whined.

"Forget it; it's not worth our lives!" Gustav returned, firmly.

"Hurry; follow me!" Felix shouted, taking point as Amber joined them in the hallway, waiting for them to cross over to him before he broke into a sprint, leading them back into the ship's corridors, keeping his gun handy in the event of any stragglers that might not have been part of the main group. *"Jessica, do you copy?"*

"I'm here; what's happening?"

"We're on our way back to the ship; open the cargo bay and prepare to drop the shield on my word! The moment we're inside, shut the bay doors and speed us up, get us as much distance from those pirates as possible!"

"Okay; standing by!"

On and on they ran, rounding corners hastily until they finally returned to airlock, through which their own ship waited. They wasted no time, crossing the emptied armory as fast as they could run. *"Now, Jess!"* Felix called through the comms.

The cargo bay door slid open just as they sprang out of the armory, leaping across space itself and leaving the gravity field of the Grunikan ship, making them weightless as they leapt towards the ship. Gustav, however, did not time his leap very well; before leaving the gravity field of the ship, he started to drop slightly, and so his angle was thrown off. He flailed his arms as he realized he was heading the wrong direction, but there was nothing to flail his arms against, and so he hit the ship, missing the cargo door entirely while the others went through.

"Gustav!" Zack cried when he realized the orca had missed the ship.

"Jess, don't close the door!" Felix hurriedly commanded. *"Gustav missed it; he's still floating out there!"*

"W-What do I do?" Jessica asked shakily.

"We can't get out of the cargo bay with the door open!" Amber pointed out.

"Jessica, divert all available power to the rear shields! That'll buy us a few minutes!"

Felix instructed before he ran over to the tow line, pulling the cable free and wrapping it around his waist, tying it in a secure knot as quickly as he could before he leapt out through the open door, swinging himself off of the corner of the doorway to hurtle himself towards Gustav.

"Felix! Are you crazy?! You'll be a sitting duck out there!" Amber called.

"We're not leaving him behind!" Zack said firmly before Felix could, surprising them with his eagerness for something besides their next paycheck. *"Jess, do it!"*

"Okay... how do I do it?" Jess asked. On the bridge, the doe was eyeing the control panel nervously; she'd only been taught a few of the ship's basics, but many of the controls were still unknown to her.

"See the button used to switch on the shields?" Zack instructed. *"Look below it; you'll see a small dial, about the size of an olive. Twist it to the right, and it'll automatically divert the forward, starboard and port shields to the rear one!"*

Following Zack's directions, Jessica found the dial, located below a wire-frame display of the ship on a small monitor screen, with an outer blue shell indicating the shield. She grasped the dial gently between two of her fingers, her medical training helping her stay calm and think clearly and twist the dial carefully. The blue shell on the screen altered, with the back portion brightening as the sides and front dimmed; she turned it until most of the power was gone from those other areas of the shield.

"Okay... got it," she said, relieved.

"Good job," Felix complimented.

Back with the dolphin, he was approaching his orca friend, who after striking the hull had floated away from the ship, somewhat dazed from the impact, but thankfully his suit remained uncompromised. Performing swimming motions, Felix brought himself closer to the orca, calling out his name through the comms, but Gustav remained unresponsive, making Felix fear the worst until the orca shook his head and turned his way. Gustav tapped the side of his helmet before shaking his head in a 'no'; to Felix, the message was clear.

The loudspeaker was useless out in space; sound-waves, including vocal, could not be heard in space unless you were only inches from their origin, and even then they had to be quite loud. He simply reached out his hand to Gustav as he drew closer; the orca feebly tried to 'swim' closer to Felix, until he was able to grasp the dolphin's hand, and they pulled closer, until they were able to hold each other in a desperate embrace.

"I got Gustav! Reel us in!" Felix called.

"Hang on tight!" Amber warned, grasping the cable while Zack operated the tow line's controls, bringing them back towards the ship at a low speed while Amber walked to the side, grasping the cable and pulling it away from the door frame, but didn't hold it too tightly to prevent any resistance as it slid through her gloves and ensured they'd pass through the door without hitting the ship again.

Felix and Gustav freed one hand from one another to grasp the tow line as it was pulled taut, but it was then the trouble began. The pirate ship, either now aware of the death of their men on the Grunikan ship or having orders not to let the other crew leave, had begun shooting, forward turrets launching hot projectiles at the Mara's Hope, which dispersed against its empowered shield, but the Mara's Hope had only a civilian-issue defensive shield, and wasn't going to last long against such an onslaught. If they took out the engines, the Hope would be a sitting duck, and they'd be doomed.

Through the open cargo bay door they went, letting go of the cable to float into the cargo bay harmlessly. Amber launched herself across to the door controls and shut the cargo bay door. *"We've got them; punch it, Jess!"* Zack prompted.

Jessica pushed the throttle forward, immediately bringing it up to full power; the ship lurched forward with a sharp jerk, and the ship was off, racing away from the pirate vessel. For whatever reason, the larger ship was slow to react, taking a few seconds to retract its boarding tube before its engines ignited and it flew after the Mara's Hope, but its delay had bought them time; they had moved out of the pirate ship's optimal range, and many of its projectiles flew astray, missing the Mara's Hope and giving the shields a chance to recover from the assault they had already endured.

But they weren't out of it yet. The ship was still in range, and a few shots were still landing. As soon as the cargo bay re-pressurized, Felix left Gustav in the care of Zack and Amber while he raced across the corridor to the bridge, practically throwing himself into his seat as soon as Jessica stepped out of his way and taking off his helmet before grasping the tiller, and steered the ship to port at a wide angle, keeping the shields in the path of the enemy ship's guns as he tried to bring them back into a proper direction to warp jump to a safe location.

"Felix, they won't follow us when we jump?" Jessica asked.

"No; I'm jumping us back to the acceleration gate," returned Felix. "They won't dare follow us there; if they do, and fire a single shot, the gate's defenses will immediately lock onto them and fire back." He locked in the coordinates. "Strap yourself in; jumping in five seconds!" He tapped the intercom. "Guys, brace yourselves; we're about to jump!"

The pirate ship continued to shoot; the Hope's shields held on, but a warning light on the control panel showed that they were about to die under the barrage. But the engines powered up faster than the shields drained; with yet another sharp jolt, the Mara's Hope vanished into warp drive, and the attack stopped...

Felix started to pant, not even realizing he had been holding his breath through the whole ordeal. He slumped in his chair, letting the ship carry on across the system of its own volition as he restored clean, breathable air to his lungs. Jessica shared his stressed expression, feeling like she herself had just dodged a plasma sphere with how intense the situation had become...

Suddenly reminded of what had happened moments ago, both Felix and Jessica got up from their seats and headed to the cargo bay, where the others still remained. The three of them sat, helmets off, with their backs against the wall. But much to their surprise, Gustav, who Felix expected would still be shaken from his little venture out into open space, was laughing. It was a weak, shaky laugh, but a laugh nonetheless. Everyone stared at him with confusion for a moment, exchanging glances with each other... but soon all of them were laughing too, clapping each other on the shoulders as their relieved chuckles continued...

"That... was one hell of a close call," said Gustav.

"Definitely," agreed Felix. "But... we're all okay, and for a bonus..." He produced something from a satchel on his belt, and held up the six officer tags they had gathered on the Grunikan ship. "We also still got away with our loot."

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The group returned to the Hangman's Rest bar after getting back to the Dirt Palace to celebrate their latest haul; they turns in the Grunikan officer tags, collected the bounty, with the sales on the guns to add to it, they made almost four hundred thousand credits! Even after the split between them and subtracting the amount they would be handing over to the colony for its own accounts, they still had enough money left over to pay off half of the remaining debt they owned the Confederacy.

Hope was renewed, guilt replaced by pride that they were so close to their goal. Even the argument they'd had that morning was no longer troubling them. As an added surprise, Jessica even accompanied them to the bar, leaving the ship for the first time since they had ever come to the Dirt Palace, on the agreement they escort her back when it was over. The drinks at the Hangman turned out to be too strong for her though, and soon she was tipsy and a little disoriented, and so Gustav and Amber took her back to the ship, while Felix and Zack remained to continue the celebration and wait for them.

Amanda brought them their next round, pouring the fine liquor into two shotglasses, which Felix and Zack accepted from her. The two clinked their glasses together, leaving heartily with their backs to the counter before tossing back their drinks, feeling the harsh, eye-clenching buzz rushing over them and leaving them both coughing as they shook their heads to clear them.

"Damn, good stuff!" Zack exclaimed.

"I'll say," returned Felix, looking over his shoulder at Amanda. "What was that?"

"An import from Eyrie Prime, called Fainting Reptile," replied Amanda, grinning. "The strongest stuff the Avian home world has; lives up to its name, as more than a few shots of that will knock out even a Komodian."

"That label's not meant as a jab at the long-standing rivalry between the Avians and the Reptilians, is it?" Felix asked.

Amanda laughed and shook her head. "Maybe it once was, but the Confederacy exists to quell those rivalries, right?" She asked. "The old Rock Belt sector people may have once been an enemy of the White Star Protectorate, before it was the White Star Sector, but those days are over; some of my best friends are avians." She eyed Felix curiously. "Which reminds me; where's the Cetacean homeworld; where do yours and Gustav's people come from?"

"That would be Aquarius Prime, in the Blue Star Sector," replied Felix. "It's also where Amber's species come from; like the Avians and Reptilians, our two sides used to be rivals as well, ever since both species settled the planet five centuries ago; it was a constant fight for control." He smiled. "But I'd trust Amber to have my back any day of the week. I mean today, she came up with a plan that took out twelve pirates in less than eight seconds. Who wouldn't want an ally like that?"

Zack nodded in agreement. "Damn straight," he said, raising his glass in praise before setting it down for another shot. "I guess I've been a little too hard on the Confederacy; despite our qualms with it, it did do one really good thing for this galaxy. It united warring people and planets, and brought about a rather peaceful interstellar civilization, with enough strength to oppose even the Draco-Morphs of the Grunikan Empire."



Felix nodded. "Amen to that," he said, before turning to Zack. "You know, you did well today, Zack. You followed directions, and when the situation called for it you weren't focused only on our profit. I'm proud of you."

Zack smiled back. "Thanks, Felix," he said. "I think you've been right; I've been spending way too much time banging girls at the brothel, and not focusing on our objectives. All this time I guess I forgot what we were really doing out here in space, but now I've remembered; the vendetta against the Confederacy was my own. It's the colony that matters."

Felix's smile widened. "Now there's the Zachary I know," he said.

Once more, they tapped their glasses together to toss back a shot of the Fainting Reptilian, and already Felix could feel the effects of the alcohol from just two shots. He was so focused on the buzz, he didn't notice the man approaching him; a human, wearing formal business attire and sunglasses, with neatly combed hair and fresh shaven face; it was the smell of his cologne that alerted Felix to his coming, looking up at him when he noticed the man stepped rather close, and was peering at him through those dark glasses.

"Old fashioned gangster-look here," Zack remarked when he saw the man.

"Can we help you?" Felix asked, warily eyeing the human.

"Are you Felix?" He asked. "The one who turned in all of those officer tags recently?"

"And if I am?" Felix asked, bracing his hands against the counter, ready to move if this man intended harm.

"I am here on behalf of my employer, Lazar Warden," the man said. "He is the same man who you collected those tags for; he wishes to meet with you."

"Why?" Felix asked.

"He has a job he needs done," the man said, lowering his sunglasses to stare at Felix through hazel coloured eyes. "And he's requested you, specifically."

Felix and Zack cast a glance at each other, exchanging a long, hard look, backed by a mix of curiosity and wariness of this stranger, before they turned back to him again.

"What kind of job?" The dolphin inquired.