

Voyages of the Mara

Arc 2: Edge of the Law

Chapter 1: Salvagers

In space, they say you can hear no sound. That the vibrations caused by the emission of sound can be lost in the infinite vacuum, no gun fired will be heard by bystanders, and no explosion will shake the land around, because the explosion happens in a vast emptiness. Unheard, unspoken, unknown except by those who might witness it...

Felix could only wonder how many had born witness to such a thing as he steered the ship through the debris field. Wrecked Red Nebulan Confederate fighters, ruined Confederate frigates, destroyed Grunikan Empire battlecruisers; ships of all shapes and sizes floated all around him, the hum of the Mara's Hope and her engines the only sound he heard as he carefully maneuvered his way past the floating wrecks. To many this was a graveyard; a field of ships freshly wrecked by the horrors of war, laser fire and missile impacts warping and twisting the hulls of what used to be impressive space-faring craft.

To Felix and his crew, though... it was a gold mine of opportunity.

He reached over to the datapad at his side, tapping it with his hand; holographic images of its contents emerged from the screen; a list of items appeared below his hand, showing various goods that he wanted to find among these wrecked ships. Most of the items were designs of the Grunikan Empire; items always in high demand thanks to their rarity, as Grunikans were a distant faction, making their technology hard to obtain.

After memorizing the list, Felix decided the best place to start would be a Grunikan vessel. He looked around for anything that still looked salvageable. He smiled as he spotted the rarest prize of all; a Grunikan battlecruiser, mostly intact minus a large chunk of its hull missing from the starboard side; a chunk large enough it would depressurize the entire ship. But beyond that single, large hole, the ship was largely undamaged.

"We might have just hit the jackpot," whispered the dolphin as his hand trailed over to the intercom, pressing down on the transmit button. "Everyone to your stations; we're approaching a salvage point; pulling up alongside now."

"We're ready in the cargo bay, Felix," a deep male voice replied.

"Coming up to the bridge now," a lighter, feminine voice informed.

"Roger that, Jessica," said Felix, standing up from his chair.

Moments later, a light-brown furred doe in a doctor's uniform stepped onto the bridge. Felix nodded to her as he stepped out of the bridge; she nodded back, both of them knowing what their jobs were. Jessica seated herself by the communication terminal, while Felix headed over to the cargo bay, the door sliding open as he approached, and he stepped through, hearing it close behind him once he was completely through the door, and found the rest of his crew waiting for him, all of them already wearing their Self-Contained Environment suits—SCE suits for short.

"Ready to get *paid*, buddy?" Zachary, the youngest of the crew, asked.

"Let me get my suit on first, Zack," returned Felix, chuckling as Amber passed him his own suit. Gustav held it for him as Felix took off his vest, shirt and jeans, wearing only a cotton under-suit beneath them; it could get uncomfortable wearing clothes under an S.C.E Suit, so most just went nude or with skin-tight underclothes –for the sake of decency if nothing else.

The tiger-shark walked over to the intercom on the wall, tapping the button and transmitting to the bridge. "Jessica, update."

"Terminal is online; monitoring all Confederate comm-traffic. The last of their evac ships just left the debris field," Jessica returned. *"Calculating the distance between here and the nearest base of operations we have thirty-seven minutes before their salvage ships arrive."*

"Monitor that clock; let us know when it hits the twenty-five minute mark," Amber instructed.

"Copy that."

"Okay guys," Felix began as slipped into his suit, fastening it at the neck and letting the nanobot-operated seals compress it to fit his form, hugging every curve of his body and forming an air-tight compression against him. "We're looking for the usual stuff, but there are some big money makers on the Smuggler's List this week; top credit right now goes to Nocturnian tools. There's a shop on the Dirt Palace that's paying a small fortune for every toolkit we can bring him." He placed his helmet upon his head, closing the mask around his muzzle and letting it pressurize.

He never liked this part; he waited, as the helmet conformed to his skull, the muzzle-mask remaining stiff so that the oxygen recyclers in the helmet could receiver and distribute air to its wearer, and lastly tightening around his neck –Felix always feared that somehow, someday, the suit might suffer a malfunction and keep tightening around his neck until it took his head off. Zack said he was paranoid, but the image was always in his mind when he wore this thing. When the visor display informed him that the suit's interior pressure had matched the exterior atmosphere, he proceeded to test the commlink. "Testing one, two, three. Can you guys hear me?"

"We hear you," Gustav replied.

"Okay, as I was saying, besides those tools you know what we're after; firearms, intact power cells, medical kits, Sephilon crystals and, an odd one this time, officer tags; there's a collector at the Palace that's paying fifty thousand credits for every one of those, bonus pay depending on the rank the wearer held. So, be on the lookout for the corpses of Grunikan officers; if you find any, take their tags."

"Kind of a weird item to ask for," Gustav remarked.

"Who cares? Fifty grand in creds is hard to argue with, and Grunikan Battleships usually have three officers," Zack reminded. "We're talking a hundred and fifty thousand right there."

"Enough chit-chat boys; we're on the clock here," Amber reminded. "Opening cargo bay doors in five seconds. Grab your Propulsion Gears and let's go."

On the count of two, Amber tapped the 'open' button for the cargo bay doors. Lights over the exits turned red, indicating the doors had locked to prevent the ship from depressurizing, while the air in the bay was drawn out and stored in the oxygen recycler. At that, the cargo bay had become a zero-gravity vacuum, sending the four of them afloat, and

that is when the door began to slide open with a light hiss, stealing what was left of the oxygen in the cargo bay and sucking them out into oblivion, except for Zack, who remained tied down by a cable; his job was to catch any cargo that Felix, Gustav and Amber deployed from the ship and bring it back aboard the Mara's Hope, since he didn't really have the skills for extraction. This job worked, however, as he didn't really need strength to move heavy objects in zero G's.

They drifted out through the darkness, holding onto their Propulsion Gears; little handheld devices, designed almost like hang gliders, with the 'glider' part, with two miniaturized ion boosters on either end of a pole, activated by triggers on the handholds. When the boosters were switched on, they would carry their bearers through space by use of weak, harmless ion pulses that were of no harm to the user; they even had a magnetic grapple cable for pulling some items, including a metal crate Gustav pulled to carry smaller items such as medical kits that they found. A mandatory item for a humanoid going out into open space!

Steering themselves towards the Grunikan ship, they approached the gargantuan hole in the side, a hole wider than the Mara's Hope –no doubt the work of several consecutive missile hits, or perhaps a new experimental weapon the Confederacy had developed. It was hard to tell without seeing what had happened first hand.

"Okay," Gustav began. "Let's start with the armory; according to my blueprints of Grunikan vessels, for a Battlecruiser, the crew armory should be –oh, nice and close; eight degrees port, six degrees downward at a forty-five, twelve-hundred meters forward."

"Hopefully the guns weren't blown clear of the ship," Amber remarked. "I'll check the armory; you guys be on the lookout for those other items."

"Copy that," Felix returned. "Be careful Amber."

"*You* be careful, Captain," Amber returned, with a hint of sarcasm.

The tiger shark veered off, following Gustav's earlier directions towards the armory. Gustav and Felix carried on to the main body of the ship, flying into the ship with their Propulsion Gear, and floating into an ominous corridor. Six bodies were free-floating in the hall they entered, all of them Grunikan –and long since dead, disfigured by their exposure to the vacuum of space.

Felix underwent the gruesome task of checking the bodies, seeing if any of them possessed officer tags. To his disappointment, though, there were none; these were all common soldiers. Still, he detached their energy blades, removing the highly advanced and intriguing weapons from their armoured wrists and passing them back to Gustav, who checked to make sure the weapons were depowered –they'd already learned the hard way that an energy sword no longer on its wielder's arm could still ignite. Satisfied, he slid open his crate, placed the weapons inside, and then closed it again, securing the items.

"Gustav; it seems feasible that Nocturnian engineers would have the toolkits so where would the Grunikans keep them?" Felix asked.

"Two possibilities; the slave quarters, and the engine room," replied Gustav.

"Where are the slave quarters?" Felix inquired.

"Same deck as the crews; central part of the ship," replied Gustav. "The exact room can vary though; it'd take a while to look through all of the rooms. More time than I think we have to search this ship."

Felix, as much as he wanted to find those tools, let precaution win over the pleasure of extra pay, and voiced his next question. "How far is the engine room?"

"Should be an entrance straight head, fourteen hundred meters roughly, on the left," replied Gustav.

"Engine room it is then." Felix stated, increasing the throttle of his Propulsion Gear and racing through the corridor.

Gustav followed suite, steering after the dolphin. Felix turned a corner with perfect precision –timing only a pilot had, while Gustav had to take the corner more carefully, due to hauling a filled box, but was able to accelerate his Gear as the hallway straightened out, catching up to Felix as the dolphin slowed down to check a door on the left. Outside of the door were two more Grunikan marines; Felix helped himself to their energy blades and sidearms, giving them to Gustav to add to their current haul, and opened the door; two more soldiers bodies were floating just beyond the door, and he added those to the collection.

He slipped into the room, and grimaced with unease as he spotted more bodies in the engine room; bodies that were not Grunikan. They had leathery wings, just like the Grunikans, but grown from the underside of their arms as opposed to growing from their backs. These beings were tall, lithe and bony from head to toe, with glassy eyes from which the colour had faded with their deaths; they had pig-like noses, large ears, short fur and sharp teeth, with a pair of narrow, pointed fangs.

Nocturnians... the bat-like, once peaceful species of the planet of Nocturnia, which had been conquered by the Grunikans more than two hundred years ago –seventy years before the first contact with the Blue Star Republic that pre-dated the Confederacy of the Red Nebula. History told that the Nocturnians were not warriors; masters of engineering and technology but terrible in the arts of combat, which had made them easy prey for the brutal and expansionistic Grunikan Empire, forced into slavery and their technology used for Grunikan purposes.

It made Felix's heart bleed knowing that they were casualties in battle between the Confederacy and the Empire; the Confederates would never condone killing them needlessly, but unfortunately these ships were war vessels of the Empire, and there was little time to consider rescuing slaves when one fleet battled another. This made the Nocturnians an unavoidable sacrifice, in order to win the battle.

Gustav called out to Felix, snapping him out of his melancholy. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah... sorry. I'll check for tools."

Regaining his focus, he returned to the task at hand, and began searching the engine room for tools. He found a few open toolkits –some of which were missing a few items, evident by empty pockets inside. He knew they wouldn't get much for incomplete sets so he started gathering up any lingering tools he could find, deciding he'd have Zack fill the kits with their missing items –or at least as many as he could, back on the ship. He managed to get five kits, along with an armload of mismatched tools, all of which he stowed away into Gustav's crate.

"Crew; it's been fifteen minutes. Are you doing alright in there?" Jessica's voice rang in the earpieces of the two males.

"Yeah we're good, Jessica," Felix replied. "Found some toolkits but they were incomplete so I had to do a little scavenger hunt for missing ones."

"Amber, status?"

"Just got a crate-full of guns onto the Hope," Amber replied. "I'm about to head back to raid the stores for energy cells; we'll get more for them."

"Gustav and I have a full box here, so we're going to come back," said Felix.

"The medical bay should be in the same hall as the armory," remarked Gustav. "If we can hurry back we may still be able to raid it for supplies."

"Make it quick, guys; we have less than twenty minutes minimum before the Confederate salvage fleet gets here," Jessica reminded. "I'm monitoring their channels; it looks like the ships are just waiting for escorts now."

"You heard the lady; let's move," Gustav said to Felix, before he reached out with a hand to push himself away from a wall, turning about and switching on his Gear, propelling himself back down the corridor from where they had come from.

Felix followed promptly, a little eager to get out of the engine room; seeing those poor Nocturnians in there made him feel nauseous, and he wanted to get away from that as quickly as possible. They didn't deserve such a fate; damn the Grunikans to a black hole for enslaving such a harmless species, forcing them to work for nothing and letting them be slaughtered in their endless conflicts... he shook his head, clearing it before he slipped into another trance, and continued to follow Gustav.

After dropping off their current load aboard the Mara's Hope, Gustav and Felix went back to the ship to rejoin Amber, and the three raided the medical ward, filling their crates with all the supplies they could get their hands on. They even found eight more Grunikan soldiers, claiming their energy blades and sidearms to add to their current haul. By the time they were finished, they were cutting it rather close to their time frame; with barely three minutes to spare before the ETA of a salvage fleet, they got back to the Mara's Hope at full throttle, racing through and out of the Grunikan ship and back to their own.

The engines of the hope were already powering up as they rocketed back aboard the ship; Jessica could not actually pilot the Mara's Hope but, in events like this, Felix had taught her how to start it up and switch on the auto-pilot, which was already locked in on the Dirt Palace. However, in a field surrounded by debris, they could not use the autopilot to leave; it had to be flown manually or it could fly into a wreck.

The bay doors closed, and the cargo bay began to repressurize, filling the room with life-giving oxygen and the artificial gravity generator switched back on, putting everyone's feet firmly back on the floor. As soon as that was done, Felix strode out of the cargo bay, back to the bridge, and took his chair as Jessica stepped aside. He eased it to half speed, and in seconds they were pushing away from the Grunikan ship.

"Sixty seconds before ETA," Jessica informed, returning to the communications monitor, putting the earpiece back into her ear and listening. "Make that ninety seconds; they're just about to make warp jump."

“We’ll be out of sight before they get here,” assured Felix. “Salvage ships don’t scan for active vessels; that’s what their escorts do, but we’ll have a good thirty more seconds before their scanning systems come online post warp jump.”

“Can you fly us out of here in just two minutes?” Jessica asked.

“Watch me.”

Accelerating to seventy-five percent speed—a risky velocity in the middle of a debris field, Felix raced the Mara’s Hope through the wrecks. They passed countless other ships—ships he wished they had time to raid for more stuff, but time was not on their side, and they had to leave before they were caught. Speeding their way out of the debris field, he angled the ship towards their intended destination.

The warp drive kicked in at the nick of time; just as Confederate vessels entered the area, the Mara’s Hope was away at faster-than-light speed, leaving the debris field behind.

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The Dirt Palace.

No matter how many times Felix saw it, he could never get used to the filth and grime that the entire station was covered in from the outside, and its decrepit appearance always had him wondering if the hull would rupture, stealing oxygen and bodies from an entire sector of the station, but it never seemed to; a lot of wealthy men who lived on the station had sectors patched on a weekly basis to make certain that there would be no ruptures that could threaten them. After all, they couldn’t make much money as corpses floating across space, now could they?

Felix and his friends had been coming here for what was going on two years now. After the tragedy that struck Mara Colony, and the crew getting their first taste of how one calamity could destroy the lives an entire community, all on account of one, single, greedy man. That calamity though had also led to the crew knowing the gain of a dishonest life; they made far more money than they had as salt traders, they had everything they could possibly want, and the Confederacy was none the wiser to their activities. The entire Hope crew had been appalled by the very idea of such a life. But having done it for two years already, they had grown accustomed to it.

Except Jessica; although she voiced no protests about it, beyond looking out for the crew of the ship, she never took part in the jobs, and when they made port at Dirt Palace, she’d stay with the ship, refusing to step out into this refuse pit of a station, and shut herself inside the medical bay or the lounge to await their return. Felix would have liked to have her along when they went to celebrate after a good payday, but he respected her decision, though a part of him missed the chipper, social person she had once been.

The Mara’s Hope docked with the station, and they moved on to the next step of their job; to sell the merchandise. Amber had a good buyer lined up for the guns and energy blades they had salvaged, and Felix had, of course, the list of buyers he’d studied prior to the job, wanting the Nocturnian tool kits, and a chemical lab interested in some of the excess medical

supplies and any Sephilon crystals they had. Most of these buyers were sketchy, however, so nobody ever went to them alone.

The buyer for the guns, a rather large, dirty male panther, met them at the docking bay after receiving the message from Amber. His name was Cameron –that was all they really knew about him, besides suspecting he actually worked for someone else, since whenever they had gone to his shop, he always had someone there, watching him. It was never the same person twice, but being on the Palace long enough had taught the Hope crew that usually, if someone who clearly was not wanted in a shop was in that shop, they were probably an enforcer for one of the crime lords, keeping an eye on what would soon be the money of their employer.

Cameron inspected the guns, grinning widely as he picked out one of the energy blades. “Ah, Ms. Giles; you always remember my favorite merchandise,” he said as he inspected the weapon, finding it to his liking. He smiled at the shark with a mouthful of rather unpleasant teeth. “You bring me all these wonderful gifts, yet you won’t let me show you a good time here on the Palace?”

“Cut the chatter, Cameron,” stated Amber. “I want two thousand credits for each of those blades; they don’t exactly grow on trees you know. And for the guns, standard rate.”

The panther let his smile fade, and went back to inspecting the weapons, counting them out. “So that’s fourteen energy blades; twenty-eight thousand credits, and for the guns, you brought me an entire locker of them, containing two dozen. That’s another twelve thousand credits so... I’ll give you thirty-eight thousand for all of them.”

Amber scowled. “I’m no dropout in mathematics, mister,” stated Amber. “Twenty-eight plus twelve is forty; you’ll pay me the full sum or I’ll take them elsewhere.”

The Panther waved his hands defensively. “Alright, no need to get all uppity. Forty thousand; it’s a deal.” He agreed as he produced a portable handheld terminal and a Credrive, inserting the latter into a slot on the former, punching a few buttons and pulling out the drive, passing it to Amber. “Enjoy the money.”

Amber allowed herself a wry smile. “Always a pleasure doing business, Cameron,” she replied, with a tone that said. ‘I win’ without the words needing to be spoken.

The panther departed, calling for his two helping hands to get the weapons loaded. Meanwhile, Felix, Gustav and Zack were just returning from speaking to a representative of the client who had asked for the Nocturnian tools, the dolphin eyeing a Credrive in his hand. He looked up as he approached Amber. “All done?” Felix asked.

“Yep,” replied the shark. “Another forty thousand credits in our pockets.”

“And I thought I was supposed to be the trader-type. I didn’t even make a quarter of that on the toolkits,” stated Felix. “But, the chemical lab certainly needed some Morphine, apparently; they paid us quite a lot for the haul of it we had. All in all I made about thirty-five thousand.”

“Shame we didn’t find any officer crests,” said Gustav.

“We’d have had to go to the bridge for those,” said Felix. “Nowhere near enough time. Maybe we’ll get lucky on the next one.”

Zack piped up and joined the conversation. “So, the usual split?” He inquired.

“Forty thousand to the colony, thirty-five to divide between the five of us,” replied Felix. “By my math that’s seven thousand each.”

Zack frowned. “I can’t help but wonder why Jessica still gets such a big cut; she hardly does anything but sit on the bridge or at her desk in the infirmary.”

Amber glared at Zack. “Need I remind you that she’s the only reason that scar on *your* back didn’t kill you?” She growled at him. “Not to mention all the other times we’ve been shot at by looters, thugs and even Grunikan scout ships; one of us, if not all of us, would be dead for sure if she wasn’t around!”

“Furthermore, she has been instrumental in making sure we make a clean getaway,” Felix added, sharing the hard stare Amber was giving Zack. “Without her help, they’d have caught us before the first year ended. So have some respect, Zack; she’s just as much a part of this team as you are!”

Zack backed away slightly from the two, looking at Gustav as if for support, but the Orca was not even looking back at him. The rabbit shrugged and moaned. “Fine... I’m sorry,” he said. “Equal share, for all five of us.”

Felix nodded. “Good,” he stated. “I’ll go back on the ship and upload your guys’ shares to your accounts,” he said. “And, think I’ll take a shower too, then join you guys at the pub.”

“Alright,” returned Gustav. “We’ll see you there.”

The three of them headed off; Felix returned to the ship, shaking his head at Zack’s accusation towards Jessica, suddenly needing that shower for more than just hygiene, but also for a means to relax.

As the warm water flowed over Felix’s nude form, he caught a glance of himself in the mirror; how long had it been since he’d really looked at himself? He was surprised by what he saw. He’d gained some muscle from the work they’d done over the last two years, and a few scars from laser burns; one on his thigh, one on his arm, and another across his chest, where a laser had perforated through him, narrowly missing his heart and lungs, when the crew had encountered a rival crew of salvagers while searching a derelict vessel for items of worth. The S.C.E suit’s nanotech had saved him from having his organs pulled out into the vacuum of space, but it had been Jessica who’d saved him from permanent harm, treating the injury immediately after he returned to the ship.

Felix’s thoughts drifted back, to when the crew had begun. Some of them had changed since then... including him. This life had made him into something he barely recognized. He looked away from the mirror before he slipped off again. Shutting off the water to the shower, he stood in the steam, letting the fluid drip off of him, hydrating his skin. He grabbed a towel off of the rack near him, drying himself off before he hung it back up, and went to get his clothes from the locker.

In the midst of putting on his pants, the door to the hygiene chamber suddenly opened and Jessica stepped through, eyes widening with shock as she saw Felix. Quickly she threw her hands over her eyes and turned away. “Oh, sorry!” She cried, but quickly calmed down. “I thought you’d left with the others already.”

“Just wanted to clean up first,” replied Felix, pulling his pants up the rest of the way.

“Sorry...”

“It’s okay,” replied Felix. “Accidents like this happen, especially on a ship with only one hygiene chamber.”

“Yes I... suppose it does,” returned Jessica, turning to look back at him when he was fully dressed.

When Felix saw her face, he saw her expression was a little sour, and the whites of her eyes were pinkish; taking a closer look he saw tear-stains on her cheeks, and eyed her curiously. “Jess... were you crying?” He asked.

Her ears flicked up in realization. “Uh... no just... just some powder I spilt in the medical room. Some of it got in my eyes...” She lied. Felix gave her a blank stare, silently reminding her that she was a terrible liar. She let out a sigh, and rubbed her cheek with the back of her hand. “Okay yes... I was.”

“Why?” Felix asked, concerned.

“Zack,” she replied. “I heard what he said about me...”

“Oh... I didn’t know you were listening.”

“I was on the ramp,” she informed. “Was coming down to ask Gustav where he keeps the butter in the kitchen. I heard Zack mentioning how... I don’t do anything.”

Felix shook his head. “Don’t let Zack get to you,” he assured her. “He doesn’t understand the value of the work you do. All he cares about these days is money.”

“Never thought I would say it, but I really miss the old Zack,” Jessica admitted. “Back when he had all those corny quips to throw around, and how hyperactive and curious he always was.”

“That Zack is still in there,” assured Felix. “Unfortunately, now he seems to care more about money than his old curiosities.” Felix sighed at that. “Doesn’t help that seems to be all we can focus on, lately. I mean, the last two years we’ve raided debris fields for salvage, and I happen to know that Zack still really wants to see other places, but I think part of him is still trying to focus on helping the colony.”

“Sounds rather bi-polar, wouldn’t you say?” Jessica asked. “On one hand he wants money to spend on himself, on another he wants money to give to Mara Colony.”

Felix chuckled. “You’re the doctor; you tell me,” he returned in jest.

“Assistant,” she corrected. “Still not a fully certified doctor.”

Felix was fully aware of that of course, but liked to refer to Jessica as a doctor just because she always took it so literally. Although, it wasn’t really off the mark. “Tell that to this,” Felix reminded, tapping where the laser wound he’d been looking at before was located. “I’d like to see Hanson fix an injury like that with those stubby fingers of his.” Jessica gave Felix a stern look, and he laughed nervously. “Sorry, I guess that was kind of a low blow to the doc.”

“You know he’s getting up there in years, Felix,” Jessica reminded. “One of these days, he might not be able to do his job anymore.”

Felix sighed. “I know... and when that time comes, caring for Mara Colony will fall to you, since you’ll be the only other certified doctor at the colony.”

“Yes.”

“Why hasn’t Doc Hanson tried to train additional assistants?” Felix inquired.

“He did. Unfortunately, when the time came for to help him treat injured patients, they didn’t have the stomach for it; I don’t think I need to remind you, Gelk bites and the wounds left by their weapons tend to look rather nasty. Anyone else who *did* have the stomach for it became part of the Militia, deciding they preferred learning to shoot a gun in five weeks, instead of learning medicine over five *years*.”

“Sad but true. Most would rather shoot guns than learn how to treat the injuries caused by them.” He sighed. “Alright, I better go join the others. You want me to bring you back anything, Jess?”

The doe shook her head. “I’m fine,” she replied. “Thank you though.”

“No problem. Enjoy... well, whatever it is you came in here to do,” Felix returned, stepping out of the hygiene chamber and leaving Jessica to it.

As Felix crossed over to the exit, he stopped, his gaze turning towards the bridge. He stared at his control console for a moment, before his eyes turned to the communication terminal. He turned and made his way over to the bridge, stepping over to the terminal and punching in the code for his own private line –everyone in the crew had one, now- and saw a list of messages, dating back to a year ago, but a blip came up as the new window opened.

*‘No new messages.’*

He looked at the most recent message on the list, last sent three hundred and seventy-one days ago, sent by ‘Jody Ford’. Felix thought back to when he’d first met Jody, aboard Dory II on their way to the planet of Ithica VII to make a dropoff of relief supplies, since the planet was under siege by the Grunikan Empire at the time. They’d only been on the ship together for a day, but they’d had quite the adventure, and the two had kept in contact via private messages.

However, a year ago, Jody had stopped returning his messages. Why, he didn’t know; could it be because she was disgusted by his choice to become a criminal? Had the planet been attacked again? Or was she interested in someone, and spent all of her time with them? He didn’t have an answer...

Shutting down the private line, Felix tucked his hands into his pockets, walking slowly over to the ship’s ramp. On the way, he glanced back at the hygiene pod, knowing Jessica was lightly still upset from Zack’s words. Increasing his pace, he walked out of the Mara’s Hope, heading for the hangar exit.

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The pub was loud. Ever since arriving a brawl or two had already happened, quickly ended by the bouncers, who happily threw the offenders out of the business and told them they could settle their differences out on the street. Gustav and Amber stayed out of it, while Zack was too focused on his latest pickup to even notice; seated over on the sofa, the rabbit was sitting with a girl –another rabbit like him, but brown instead of gray, who was clearly under-aged, who was whispering things in his ear that made the rabbit grin deviously before he leaned over and started gnawing playfully on her neck, making her moan blissfully.

Gustav was watching the rabbit, a deep frown on his face as he tossed around his drink in its glass somewhat, tapping the counter with the finger of his other hand. Amber leaned back on the counter to look past him, seeing what Zack was doing, and sharing the Orca's scowl. "What a disgusting display," she said.

"He has taken to this whole 'gangster' life far too well," Gustav returned, not looking back at Amber. "He seems to forget that we only intend to do this temporarily."

"Maybe we do, but I'm starting to wonder about him," admitted Amber, reaching for her beer bottle and taking a quick swig, licking her lips to get some excess that dribbled out of her mouth. "All he spends his money on, besides tools and parts for the ship, is *that* same girl he's got there." She shook her head. "Little shit even brought her on the ship one while I was down with a headache."

"He brought her on the *ship*?" Gustav echoed, turning to the shark with an expression of appal. "That... he knows the rules; no strangers on the ship, especially not from this place."

"You think he cares?" Amber asked. "Long as Felix isn't looking, he'll do what he wants."

Gustav groaned. "I really should have a talk with Felix about Zack's new 'personality'," he stated.

Amber suddenly glanced towards the entrance. "Speaking of which, here he comes," she remarked. The orca turned, following her gaze and seeing Felix storming into the pub, making a beeline straight for Zachary, waving to Gustav and Amber half-heartedly as he passed them. "...He looks pissed." Amber remarked. "I think he's got some choice words for Zack himself."

"I think you're right," agreed Gustav, watching the dolphin as he approached Zack, curious to see what was about to happen.

Felix reached the couch, trying not to let what was happening deter him as he approached. "Zack," he said. The rabbit didn't answer; his face was buried in the cleavage of the rabbit girl, their bodies tangled together. Felix scowled, and slapped Zack on the back as he raised his voice. "ZACK!"

"WHOA!" Zack reared up suddenly, startled by the sudden slap on his back, and also startling the girl in the process. He turned to Felix with a surprised glance. "What?"

"Get up," returned the dolphin. "You and I need to have a talk, right now."

Zack frowned, looking at the girl currently nestled beneath him, and then back at Felix. "Can't it wait ten minutes?"

"You can pump your junk into a prostitute later," Felix returned scornfully, grabbing Zack by the ears with his left hand, squeezing and pulling them painfully. "Now move your furry little ass before I start kicking it!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow! Ears!" Zack protested, feeling himself being dragged off of the couch, the girl clawing after him for a moment only to be yanked off the couch herself as Felix hauled the rabbit away. "Okay, okay, just let go of the ears; that hurts, man!"

Amber and Gustav watched as Felix hauled the rabbit out of the pub, both of them bearing blank expressions as they saw the spectacle unfold. They looked at one another briefly, before Gustav called for the bartender, quickly paying for the drinks they already purchased before the two of them promptly followed the two out of the pub, curious.

Out on the street, Felix finally released his hold on Zack's ears; the rabbit turned to him angrily, baring his teeth at the dolphin. "What the hell is your problem, Felix?!" He demanded.

"You," began the dolphin, "are going back to the Mara's Hope right now, and you're going to apologize to Jessica for what you said about her."

"This again?" Zack asked. "You and Amber ganged up on me about this already; it's not like Jessica heard me, so there's no--"

"She *did* hear you," Felix interjected.

"She... what? How?"

"She was on the ramp; she heard what you said about her. I've heard you talking trash about people since we started this; the Empire, they deserve it, McCain deserves worse, the Confederacy, okay maybe, but when you start talking trash about our crew behind their backs, it's unacceptable; you hurt her feelings, now be a man, go deal with it, and then you can come back here."

"But Michelle will be with another client by the time I get back; she ain't going to wait for me."

"You shouldn't even be screwing that girl anyway; she's not even legal age yet, you're twenty years old and sleeping with a teenager!"

"We're docked in a den of muggers, thugs, thieves and drug dealers; who's going to give a damn who I screw?"

"*You* should," Felix stated. "We may be living as criminals but it doesn't mean we need to be living *like* them!" He pointed over Zack's shoulder. "Now get your ass back to the Hope and apologize to Jessica, or so help me I'll put the bill of every single patron in that pub on *your* tab."

"Hey, whoa! That's blackmail, bro!"

Felix grinned deviously. "We're docked in a den of muggers, thugs, thieves and drug dealers; who's going to give a damn?"

Zack was visibly infuriated by having his words turned back on him like that. At first, Felix wondered if the rabbit was actually going to take a swing at him, but he threw up his hands in surrender, groaning. "Alright, fine; I'm heading back to the ship," he said. "I'll apologize to Jessica."

"Make sure it's heartfelt," Felix said with a warning tone.

Zack turned away from Felix, stuffing his hands into his pockets and walking away, stopping just once to look back at Felix. "Maybe if *you* got laid once in a while you wouldn't be so judgemental of me, Felix."

The dolphin made no retort, simply watching until Zack was out of sight. He turned on his heel to go back to the pub, only to walk only one step before he found Amber and Gustav standing right in front of him. "Oh... hey guys," he said.

"Good job, Captain," said Amber.

"About time you set him straight," agreed Gustav.

Felix frowned. "I haven't... not yet," he returned, looking back over his shoulder in the direction Zack had gone. "We need to start finding some new outlets; something to stir up the old Zack that's still in there."

“Like what?” Amber asked.

“I don’t know... but I have to keep hoping we’ll find something,” he replied. Turning back to the others, he carried on. “What say we head back to Trident IV tomorrow?”

Amber actually smiled at that. “Now that, sounds like something I really want to do.”

“Me too,” agreed Gustav. “I’m sure your mother would like to see you too.”

Felix nodded in agreement. “Who knows; maybe while we’re there, something will come up that’ll give me some idea of what to do next.”

Gustav chuckled. “Maybe. In the meantime, next round is on me?”

“Sounds good,” agreed Felix.

“Count me in,” added Amber.

With that, the three friends wandered back into the pub, making their way back over to the bar counter and sitting down to order a new round of drinks, something stronger this time, to have their usual toast. Holding up their glasses, they simultaneously said, ‘until we’re back to a better time’, before clicking their glasses together and tossing back the shots.