



"YOU CAN'T TAKE THE STARS  
FROM ME"  
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# **"You Can't Take the Stars from Me" – The Ballad of Nick Locarno**

By Nathan Warner 2020©

"Life is strange," Nick Locarno muttered with a smile playing across his lips. Never in his dreams would he have imagined he would wind up on a sand dune at night on an ocean planet with no name beyond the boundary of the furthest Federation station, standing beneath a battle-weathered Bird of Prey, landed like a watchful and protective Dragon behind him.

He let out a contented sigh as he stood close to the Pyre log he'd lit for warmth. The Pleiades shone across the ocean, so much closer than they ever had appeared to him on Earth as a child – massive jewels suspended, hanging in the sky close enough to touch. Even nearer, two uninhabited moons were rising above the shimmering of the light on the ocean into the brilliance of the cold, blue stars. Nick shivered, partly from the thrill of standing in the presence of such vast, untouchable beauty and partly because there was a wonderful chill in the air from the water.

"Hey, Maxi," he called through his communicator, "You bringing that Skagaran Whiskey or not?" He instinctively looked above him to the head of the ship nesting above

him protectively. As he waited for a reply, he watched how the light bathed the ship – washing over it like firelight, which was apt, given that he had christened it the *Phoenix*.

“Maxi, you there?” he repeated.

“Sure thing, Captain,” came her reply. “Won’t be a minute!” It wouldn’t be long before the other six members of the motley crew would be down to join him, and Nick took the solitary moments to consider the strange roads that life had led him down to the moment where he stood, sharing the wonder of the infinite cosmos with his closest friends – his family. They were finally free. Free to be their own. It hadn’t always been like that.

His trajectory to the stars had been cut short by an accident in 2368 at Starfleet Academy when he led his command of Nova Squadron in the dangerous and prohibited Koolvard Starburst maneuver and a collision claimed the life of fellow Cadet Joshua Albert.

To cover for his ambition, Nick had convinced the rest of the team to lie about what happened and the investigation nearly concluded in their favor, but in last hour, his friend and fellow cadet, Wesley Crusher, revealed the brutal truth that would end all their careers.

This had been Nick’s own moment of truth, and he took full responsibility for what happened, passionately pleading for the careers of his fellow cadets, which he was successful in at least. But for his transgressions, he was justly drummed out of the Academy. And just like that, his trajectory to the stars fell short. He fell back to earth with his wings clipped – all because of his own ambition. It was a tragedy of his own making; he knew that, now. The accident had been his fault and his doing, and it had gotten a young man killed. He took the lesson well, and after a few months of deep soul-searching, he signed up with the Merchant Marine, intent to regain some measure of self-respect and maybe even a little from those around him. Yet, it was slow going at first – he was last in line at every port and was only accepted in the end because of a shortage of such talent as Nick possessed, which was tempting to the service despite his fall from grace.

He took a post as helmsman on an old, refitted *Antares*-class vessel named the *Hulu*. It had been decommissioned a decade before and scooped up by the civilian services – hardly the hot-rod starship he had always planned to serve aboard.

“More like a Calvarian pig with wings,” he sighed. But a ship was a ship, as they say.

Captained by a balding Tellerite named Ribald, the *Hulu*’s official mission was to survey the rich resources of gaseous reserves along the Badlands in the newly opened up reaches of the Bajoran system where the Cardassian Union was suffering a contraction. But unofficially, the Merchant Marine were prepping the *Hulu* to be the first non-Starfleet vessel through the newly discovered wormhole into the mysterious and unexplored Gamma Quadrant, where rich opportunities were sure to be found.

Nick was cheered by this at least. “Chances are, we all would have gotten our pick of assignments and been on the other side of the Quadrant,” he’d joke with his shipmates (many of whom were also dropouts or expelled Starfleet cadets who hadn’t made the cut). “Just think, we’d be missing this – an opportunity to truly go where no one has been before!”

“Cool it, cadets,” the older marines mocked. “The only opportunities we’re interested in are of the Ferrengi varieties!”

While they waited, they anchored numerous times at Deep Space Nine, a converted Cardassian space station that stood as a sentinel over the wormhole. It was a welcome port for the survey ship and its crew.

Nick had even run into its commander a couple times on the Promenade – Commander Sisko. He always seemed preoccupied.

“He’s got too much on his mind,” Nick shook his head to the bartender named Quark. “Too much weight in a man’s mind sets the shoulder like that.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Quark smirked, preferring him another Brandy to lubricate his scheme. “Are you in or out of my little ‘re-appropriation’ proposal?” For a moment, Nick considered the proposition to “collect” artifacts from the Gamma Quadrant to be sold at auction by this sometimes-shrewd businessman.

“Maybe,” he replied, downing his Saurian Brandy. “We’ll see what we find... if we ever pass through that looking glass.” Weeks went by and Federation Runabout after Federation Runabout passed back and forth through the wormhole. Still, no civilians were let through.

“It’s times like this, I really wish I wasn’t in civilian service,” Nick lamented, tearing in distraction at his reddish hair.

At long last, the Federation declared the wormhole safe and the causeway open for business and the *Hulu* was one of the first civilian ships through the Bajoran wormhole, after all. And what adventure those first two years had been! Due to his excellent piloting skills, Captain Ribald reluctantly gave Nick command of a “skiff” – in this case, a refitted Bajoran impulse shuttle they’d picked up while at DS9. Ribald also gave him a small team of young surveyors (all ex-Starfleet cadets) to broaden the *Hulu*’s reach on its journey into the unknown.

“You’re all cut from the same cloth,” the captain grunted, wiping his snout distastefully. “Just don’t make a funeral garb out of it.”

“Aye, Sir,” Nick grinned. He couldn’t help it. Things were finally getting interesting.

Everywhere they went, it was the same crazy adventure – the *Hulu* would drop out of warp in a region of interest and several “skiffs” were sent out in opposite vectors to cover more ground. In these days, Nick felt he was closer to his dream of exploration than if he’d been a captain in Starfleet. Every day, they discovered magical wonders too great for mere mortal words.

They’d found a planet where the ground sprang a billion fountains and falls, as thick as trees, effervescent with natural CO<sub>2</sub> bubbling through every pore in the planet’s bedrock – refreshing to drink and transcendent to bathe in.

The following week, they discovered a stellar nebula composed of an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere with sufficient internal pressure near the center for extra-vehicular activity without a suit. Nick recalled the sensation of opening a hatch and stepping out onto the dorsal back of the *Hulu* like an aviator climbing out atop an ancient earth blimp and breathing the freshest air he’d ever taken into his lungs.

Then, there was the Tygon Cometoid Mass, the single largest comet-like structure ever to be surveyed – almost an AU in size, composed of many satellite cometoids orbiting

a central gravitational anomaly, hurtling a lonely trajectory through space. Heated internally by the anomaly's Ingolt radiation the mass streamed the largest tail ever recorded.

"Like being stuck inside a rolling snowglobe!" Nick had grinned as he pushed their shuttle to the max to search out its secrets, vectoring through the mist and fog that concealed debris and large icy chunks. Inside that shimmering wonder, they'd discovered a mysterious starship trapped in the ice – a great behemoth of a thing with just the aft protruding out into space. They successfully beamed in and found it to be an ark of sorts, containing millions of alien samples – mostly flora and fauna.

"It's a seed-ship," Clarkson had nodded – their resident science major. He pushed his hand through his mop of blond hair as he always did when thinking. "It was meant to carry the genetic memory of life on a dying world to a new home. Something must have gone wrong."

Further in, they found evidence of weapon fire and damage to critical systems.

"They were attacked?" Nick exclaimed.

"Looks just so," Clarkson frowned. "There's traces of powerful energy discharges of a type I'm not familiar with – some sort of Polaron signature."

The computer was too damaged to recover anything, and the ship seemed stripped of most of its value. They tagged the wreck for recovery by a more capable Marine vessel and left the mystery of its demise for others to uncover.

Yet, a shadow was growing in Nick's mind. Everywhere they went, there were whispers of something called "The Dominion" – a powerful race that existed somewhere in the Gamma Quadrant and commanded the fear of all who knew of it.

"They just haven't encountered anything like the Federation!" Nick responded to cheer up his shipmates. "I'm sure this Dominion isn't anything to be worried about – probably some provincial conglomerate that has spun up a lot of fish stories to project its own importance."

A few months later, the Dominion introduced itself. News reached the *Hulu* of the U.S.S. *Odyssey*'s destruction and the ultimatum the Dominion to stay in the Alpha Quadrant.

"Can you believe it?" Maxi asked, her blue Andorian antennae recoiling into her white hair. "They destroyed a *Galaxy*-class as if it had been an impulse freighter!" As the Engineer of the *Hulu*, she had calculated the offset in the Federation's matching with the Dominion. "They have a 2-1 advantage over us," she reported. No one wanted to hear it. They all had a sinking feeling that nothing good would come of this.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the Merchant Marine was recalled from the Gamma Quadrant. "So as not to antagonize the Dominion," the official reports said.

Reluctantly, Captain Ribald turned the ship back to the Wormhole and brought with them samples of all the wonders they had encountered, leaving behind the greatest finds, perhaps never again to be shared.

The morale of the crew was low.

They had only just begun their new assignment along the Badlands when war finally broke out. That was 2373. Many Merchant Marine crews disbanded as the men and women that had served them signed up for the Federation's small defense forces that were eagerly enlisting to build up the required ranks. Starfleet itself was not yet desperate enough to

lower its standards to accept its own “rejects” but the Federation had plenty of spaces open for troops that would soon be fighting on the ground in worlds across the Alpha Quadrant.

“What do you say?” Nick asked his team. “Do we stand up to these bullies or go about our business until it becomes their business?”

“You’re one to talk,” an older Starfleet dropout named Ivanoff complained. “You got a kid killed by talking like that.”

“True,” Nick said slowly. “I did that. It happened and I can’t change it. That’s why I have to do this. I have to make a difference for good in a world I made a little worse – by standing up to people who want to do a whole lot worse to good people.”

Those were words Ivanoff understood.

“Count me in,” he replied gruffly. The cadet team – Clarkson, Maxi, Ivanoff, Terdol, Reefer, Galdot, Meecher, Allendel, Rachel, and Crowe – all threw their lot in with Nick, calling themselves the “Royal Rejects”.

They enlisted together and due to their well-ironed record, were assigned command of a Bajoran assault ship, transporting troops to the battlefield and recovering the wounded and dying. Terdol, in his usual poetic mood, named it the *Valkyrie* after the Norse goddesses who collected the souls of the dead. Little did they know how true this sentiment would be.

They hit the ground hard. The Rejects saw the worst of the action on the most highly contested worlds and soon the war began to claim its price.

Terdol was the first to go, caught in the chest by Jem’Hadar fire on Rigel. Then, on the volcanic foothills of Bezal, Rachel was vaporized right before Nick’s eyes by a subspace mine while trying to pull a wounded Starfleet Captain from his escape pod against Nick’s advisement, but at a Starfleet Lieutenant’s orders. Nick could still smell the vapor wafting over him whenever he felt a breeze.

With each brutal turn, the ashes and the blood and the horrors of war saturated Nick’s soul. His entire life had become one long descent into hell.

They fought in the air, on beachheads, on land, and in space. Always, it seemed the same – they were ordered to crawl through the gore to gain a few inches of territory only to be ordered to retreat miles as they were overwhelmed – in Nick’s mind, it was all due to shackled leadership directed by bureaucrats lightyears away.

They saw the horrific weapons of the Dominion unleashed on civilians and innocents. And they saw their comrades die in agony in hundreds of ways after being led into Jem’Hadar ambush after ambush by the same incompetence of “great strategists” and planners.

Still, in all the horror, there were small accomplishments and victories.

Against orders, Nick once held a two-hour dogfight with a Jem’Hadar “Bug” in the stratosphere of an uninhabited planet designated J2B, after having distracted it from attacking a fleeing civilian convoy in the system. Finally, the glancing blow of the Dominion’s polaron beam knocked the wind out of the *Valkyrie* and it plummeted to the earth, but vectoring it’s remaining thrust back, Nick managed to train his high-powered phasers on the Bug and blew its port nacelle clean off before the *Valkyrie* pounded aft-first into the soft sands of the desert world. The Jem’Hadar ship crashed less than a Kilometer from them

and over the next week, the surviving soldiers had their own little war between the dunes in a vicious sandstorm. It was here that Allendel was killed, pricked at night by a Jem'Hadar blade. Nick lost control. He strode out alone towards the Dominion ship and through blind luck or providence singlehandedly killed the last remaining Jem'Hadar soldiers. Maxi had to restrain him from desecrating the bodies.

"They're animals," he had said softly.

"I know, Nick," she replied, "but we aren't." They buried their friend in the shifting sands.

"We give them our lives to add into their calculations and their schemes and their strategies and sometimes it sums to zero – and just like that we become meaningless."

"Not meaningless," Ivanoff replied quietly. "Even the largest numbers are composed of zeros. And each death is building towards the final great sum."

Meecher cleared his throat quietly. "When I was bullied in the seventh grade, my grandmother used to quote something... what was it?... Uh.. oh, yeah, she'd say, 'Meecher, you may think things are bad and it's just you, yet, man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards.... Don't be angry because of those who do evil, do not be jealous because of those who commit iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, And wither as the green herb.'" Meecher smiled a faraway smile. "I can still smell her cookies," he said. The words settled over everyone like a warm blanket and the crew huddled closer to the fire on the chilly night among the abandoned dunes, with the wind howling over the sand and the cold light of the planet's two moons washing over the scene. Nick nodded to himself. Yes, times were tough for everyone – life was one long struggle with futility and decay, yet justice would win in the end – even in their little corner of the vast space-time continuum, right would triumph over the seemingly unstoppable juggernaut of evil carried out by the Dominion.

The next morning, they got to work on repairing the *Valkyrie*, and over the following week they made progress with parts cannibalized from the Bug. Clarkson wandered off and stumbled upon the wreckage of an Orion Syndicate smuggler only two kilometers away. Nick helped explore it and they found within its cargo hold two tons of gold pressed latinum.

"If we could get it off this world, we'd be able to each buy our own moons and leave this war behind us," Clarkson grinned through the blood stains on his face. None of them cared to tell him. Galdot hardly bothered apply her medkit to anything less than broken bones or missing limbs these days. She seemed numbed by everything.

"No," Nick replied calmly. "We're going to see this thing through. We're going to make the Dominion pay for what they've done." They agreed together as a team that after the war, they would return and split the money equally between them. Using the *Valkyrie's* tractor assembly, they pushed a sand dune over the smuggler to conceal it from curious eyes.

Finally, the *Valkyrie* leapt back into space and returned the team into the hot, fiery forges of war. As Nick's piloting skills became renown, he and his team were given the unusual mission of serving with their allies aboard a Klingon vessel – the *Ko'Pa*, a Bird of Prey that was assigned to the Honor Guard for deep penetration missions behind enemy lines.

Apparently, the Commander of the vessel, Ka’Ra, had hand-picked Nick for the job, having observed him once in the heat of battle successfully drop the *Valkyrie* through a vertical Cardassian ventilation shaft, still venting plasma exhaust to recover a downed Federation shuttle. It had made a deep impression on him.

“You fly like a Kogar bat,” Ka’Ra grinned when Nick stepped onto the bridge of the *Ko’Pa* for the first time. “Let’s hope you don’t land like one too – on its face!” He belted out a warm, good-natured laugh. They became easy friends, and his team was already held in respect even by the Honor Guard.

Despite the incompetence of Chancellor Gowron and his arbitrary “leadership”, which saw hundreds of thousands of lives tossed like chaff into the fire of unwinnable strategies, Ka’Ra and his crew managed to painfully prick the Dominion time and time again.

At the helm, it didn’t take long for Nick to push the Bird of Prey to its limits. On Remach IV, he took the *Ko’Pa* into a deep dive through a landfall hurricane in the dead of night, hugging the deck low and then through the labyrinth of the Kavar Canyon, flying the ship on its side between the porous limestone cliff faces. It took every instinctive flinch of Nick’s training to not sheer the wings off the bird in the process – all so they could drop out right on top of a Cardassian staging area, disrupters blazing – they never saw him coming.

It gave Nick some satisfaction that Ka’Ra’s knuckles were whiter than snow where he sat rigid, gripping his command chair with the strength of rigor mortis.

“You okay?” Nick grinned.

“I have seen my ancestors,” Ka’Ra replied weakly. “And they have lost their stomachs.”

Their comradeship deepened which each drop of blood they shed together – and with each loss of friend and fellow warrior.

The missions they served and the battles they fought could fill a Starfleet Academy history textbook, but their deeds would never see the light of day – at least not for decades.

Then General Martok took up the gauntlet of power and things became a little better. The invasion of Cardassia finally neared, and then more abruptly than the war began, it suddenly ended, and Nick and his team prepared for justice to be meted out on the Dominion monsters. It was with utter shock that he learned the terms of the surrender signed and sealed on Deep Space Nine where it had all begun.

Nick felt betrayed. “Billions dead and our terms of surrender are that we won’t step into their backyard? I can still feel Allendel’s blood trickling through my fingers whenever I wash my hands – I see Rachel’s vaporizing face every time I close my eyes, and the sum total of it all is we give the butchers a no-trespassing sign to plant on our noses!” In anger, he and his team had resigned their commissions before the Federation troops were even disbanded.

Nick had torn his bloodstained insignia from his uniform and threw it on the desk of his commanding officer before leaving without saying a single word. He walked out and wasn’t seen or heard from for months.

The rest of the surviving crew had a hard time adjusting back to civilian life and none of them landed anything of permanence.

Then, less than a year later, Nick reached out to them. At an old Scottish tavern on Caldos, he met his crew with a proposition. “I’ve had more than a lifetime’s worth of other people deciding my fate,” Nick declared. “As soon as I am able, I’m taking my share of the latinum we discovered on J2B and I’m headed to the frontier – as far away from these Presidents, Commodores, and bureaucrats and their petty little dictatorships that meddle in our daily lives and decide the fates of billions.”

“We’re with you,” Reefer replied, speaking for the group. He still hadn’t gotten the long scar down his face repaired and Nick understood why. It was a reminder that they had survived hell, and a personal memorial to the many friends who had not.

“We’ll need a ship,” Maxi observed in the silence.

“Leave that to me,” Nick answered mysteriously, brushing his hand through his red hair – a tell he never could break.

“He’s up to something,” Maxi sighed to Reefer.

Over the next few months, the crew hitched rides on freighters, signing up for short bouts, working their way back to J2B.

There, they found the wreckage of the old Orion Syndicate smuggler right where they left it and recovered the precious cargo intact on a spice-mining vessel they’d rented for the mission.

At Maxi’s coaxing, he’d reluctantly gone with her to look for a ship in a few local scrapyards, filled with battle-scarred civilian vessels, but no ship presented the power and capability to defend itself and match most threats that the frontier might kick up.

“Sure, I could refit it with Type 8 Phasers,” Nick shook his head at the Ferengi salesman proffering the aging hulk of the graceful, yet utilitarian Jenolan class. “But can it take a type 8 phaser blast itself?”

Around this time, Nick had heard that the Klingon Defense Force was decommissioning and scrapping many of its battle-weathered Birds of Prey that had been produced en-mass during the war – to be replaced by new productions. He’d grown very fond of his time serving aboard the *Ko’Pa*. It was a gamble, but he reached out to Ka’Ra and visited him at his family estate on Kronos.

After reminiscing through all the glorious battles they had fought together, Nick asked his question.

“What you ask is difficult,” Ka’Ra replied. “It is not permitted for any non-Klingon to be sold our technology.”

“I see,” Nick sighed, downing his bloodwine. “Well, I thought I’d ask.”

“Wait, my friend,” Ka’Ra smiled, wincing only slightly at the scar across his chest as he shifted in his seat. “I said it is not possible to sell it to you, but the prohibition says nothing about gifting it. I owe you my life – several lives in fact. The least I can do is give you my ship. I only wish I was coming with you.”

“You should,” Nick urged. “We could use a friend like you where we’re headed, and I could use your counsel.” Ka’Ra shook his head.

“Gladly I would, but I am a slave to honor and my duty to my people,” he replied. “And you have your duty to your people.” Nick understood.



"Besides," Ka'Ra continued, rubbing his injured chest where he'd taken a subspace mine full on and survived, "I will not be returning to the stars. This blow refuses to heal and they tell me it will have me in the end."

"We all have mortal wounds," Nick answered sadly. "Some of us are already dead." He roused himself with an easy smile. "If ever you change your mind, we'll keep a berth open for you."

And just like that, Nick found himself in possession of a genuine Klingon Bird of Prey, and not just any, but the *Ko'Pa* itself.

He'd left his friends on the Luddite Sanctuary planet of Pavel VI while he travelled to Kronos on his errand (where he'd told them he would try to buy a Klingon freighter or transport). They were in for a surprise.

Nick piloted the *Ko'Pa* alone out of Klingon space, cloaked and passing like the shimmer of a breeze, landed the beast in a secluded meadow where he'd called his crew to meet him outside a wooded valley on Pavel VI where no technology was technically allowed.

He strode out of thin air down the cargo bay ramp to the shocked faces of his crew with a grin larger than the crescent moon of Bicali IV.

"My friends, we've come home," Nick smiled throwing his hands up. He tapped his communicator and ordered the ship to decloak. Everyone recoiled as the huge bird shimmered into view, larger than life.

"How... did you?" Maxi asked, breathlessly stumbling forward uneasily towards the ship, her antennas reaching out in excitement.

"Let's just say life-debts are a good investment," Nick winked. He led them up into the ship.

"With a little tender loving care, it will be a nice space camper!" Meecher nodded.

"Yeah, a camper with enough firepower to put holes in the moon!" Reefer grunted with satisfaction, patting the bulkhead appreciably.

They parted with a little of their latinum and purchased materials and supplies to begin refitting the *Ko'Pa* and remodeling the interior to make it a more comfortable home. Maxi turned the engine room upside down, modding and improving the efficiencies of the engines to "hot-rod" levels as she called them.

The galley got a complete make-over with wooden paneling and warm lighting and a first rate fresh-food kitchen (with a replicator, if you wanted it). The crew barracks were sectioned off and made into cozy studio-quarters. And Nick had a simple, comfortable, solid black leather command chair installed on the Bridge.

By the end of the two-month period, the ship was almost unrecognizable on the inside – more a home than a warship.

At the end of the refit, Nick picked up a bottle of champagne from a visiting freighter, even if it was Chateau Picard vintage, and the crew gathered outside to christen their new home.

"What shall we call her?" Maxi asked.

"We'll call her the *Phoenix*," Nick replied. "Like her, I feel like we're being birthed out of the fire and ashes of our old selves into something new."

With that, they left the billowing meadows of Pavel VI, cloaked themselves, and set their nose to the heavens, charting a course as far away from the “powers that be” as possible. Out along the outer edges of the Federation frontier they settled among the Pleiades in the backwater regions of poorly explored territories with a thin string of Federation colonies near the Chrysalian homeworld—a perfect place of free and open space not yet populated by bureaucrats filling life with statutes, laws, and mandates to govern every action and decision.

Here, in this beautiful region of space, they’d found a rough and ready welcome of simple colonies, rugged living, colorful watering holes, and plenty of opportunities for a battle-tested crew.

“It’s the wild west out here,” Nick grinned, clearly enjoying the sentiment too much. He even replicated himself a pair of something he called “cowboy boots.”

True to form, every month was something new and interesting on the frontier—shipping Duvarian rum casks, providing security for a wedding party from Palvian Pirates, stopping a local provincial tyrant from abusing colonists, hunting down privateers in the asteroid belts of Relvus 7, rescuing a genuine princess from a meerbeast, or just pushing the envelope of their own frontiers into the unknown wonders of an infinite and endless universe—but no matter what business or venture they took up, it was on their own terms. They needed no income and relished the freedom and space to do good work in the majestic sights of the cosmos, unscarred by the Dominion War and rarely visited by well-regulated Federation starships.

And that had been the long, twisted, burned out road that had led Nick from expulsion at Starfleet Academy to standing on a sand dune spit on the ocean, wondering what lay beyond the Pleiades and waiting for Maxi to bring out some of that Skagaran Whiskey. The Pyre log crackled happily, and the gentle waves lapped at the sand. Little phosphorescent lights hovered over the water. Suddenly, Maxi was handing him a glass with a smile and Clarkson, Reefer, Galdot, Meecher, Ivanoff, and Crowe gathered round.

“To absent friends,” Nick toasted. “May we meet again.” He downed his glass and then nodded to Crowe. “Okay, out with the fiddle—show us what you got.”

Moments later as the purple and green moons of this unnamed planet rose above the horizon, an Irish jig greeted their ascent.

Nick and Maxi sank down in the sand and watched their friends dance to the music.

“You enjoying this new life?” he asked his engineer. Maxi nodded her antennas.

“I am, Nick,” she said contentedly. “Thanks for bringing us out here to start anew... it’s so peaceful and exciting at the same time.”

“It is, isn’t it?” he sighed with a twinkle in his eye. “Maybe a bit too peaceful. Sometimes I wish the Orion Syndicate would come looking for their latinum.”

“Oh, stop it!” Maxi chided, shaking her glowing white hair. “We were nearly vaporized by that Privateer’s K-beam last week—I’d say that counts as exciting.”

“True,” Nick grimaced, glancing up at the scorch mark on the port wing. “When are you going to buff that out?” She playfully elbowed him in the ribs. That was enough reply.

Nick gestured out across the waters.

“You ever fall asleep under the stars on an unnamed world before?” he asked her.

"Once," Maxi replied coyly. "But it was in a dream. I would have liked to name that place."

"Well, how about you give one to this place," he gestured. "Seems as good as any."

"I'd call it... Baptism," she replied, wistfully. "I feel like we've been immersed in fire, and we've finally come up the other side."

"Sounds about right," Nick nodded. "Like sparks flying upward from the flames to join the stars in the dark night sky." He felt another weight lifting from him in that moment as he nestled further into the sand.

Tomorrow, they'd be stopping by an abandoned world rumored to have thousands of ancient castle ruins and a fountain of youth, but a dreaded place of superstitions, guarded by monsters – at least that was what the local tale-spinners claimed. A young girl had gone missing there and a local sheriff had asked the *Phoenix* crew to look into it. Who could say no to monsters and fountains of youth? Of course, there was the helping people part.

"That's what I'm talking about," Nick mumbled as he watched a shooting star flicker overhead. "Sounds like fun."