

## She's a Rescue

By Marie Vibbert

Getting a dog to do what you want in zero-G is about as easy as putting an octopus into a straitjacket. I already had scratches on my face from Fleur's blunt little claws. She was wriggling every which way between my hands, every way but toward the treadmill. I managed to get the first two bungies attached. This kept her shoulder harness within ten inches of the floor, but she twisted the straps around herself, pinning her back to the running surface, showing me her lush tan fur belly, chin tucked to give me a look both adoring and joyful.

How I hated her at that moment.

There was a smack of metal on metal and a sharp DING! And a curse as Dad banged his way through the hatch. "Goddamn coolant leak. Juno! Don't you hear that?"

Hear what? Fleur was instantly still, attentive when her favorite human was around, and as soon as I wasn't frantically trying to wrestle her into place, I heard the soft beep of the comms, which sounded like it had been going on for a while.

"I gave you *one* job." Dad pushed off, sailing past us. Which wasn't true. I had lots of jobs. I was taking care of Fleur. I was keeping the ship log. I was thawing tube-food for lunch. I

wanted to explain that, but he was muttering to himself, “With our luck, this is pirates come to kill us.”

I’d failed to notice the coolant leak, and the comms, and Fleur was still not on her walk. Now he’d never trust me to drive the ship. It was all I’d wanted since forever. Okay, since I first saw the ship, a year ago. Instead of the spheres and scaffolding of the usual cargo haulers, The Paper Crane was a hypersonic bullet, with fins for maneuvering in atmosphere, even hitting atmosphere at the speed of interplanetary trajectories. Yeah, okay, it was out of date – nothing ages like last year’s racer – but it wasn’t like I’d get to fly *this year’s*.

We took out the extra fuel tank and auxiliary engine to make room for cargo. Dad and I did that together, and he all but implied I’d get to drive. Well, okay, I’d asked if there was a minimum age, and he said no, and he’d given me this look where his eyes squinched, so I knew he knew why I’d asked.

But no. He chased me away from the controls even when the ship was on the ground with its engines disconnected. He still thought of me as a kid, even though I’d been a teen-ager for almost two years now!

I wanted to curl up so tight that I’d vanish into a single point, but the dog had chilled out and that wasn’t going to last. I got Fleur flipped and the third bungee hooked. After that, getting her all the way in the puppy-VR helmet was easy. Soon her tail was going crazy, and she was trotting away for her forty minutes of required exercise. I unhooked my feet from the sweat-soaked floor-loops and went to see who was calling our ship.

Dad hadn’t answered, he’d just muted the alert. He hung in the air over the pilot chair like a disheveled balloon.

Before I could ask, he said, "It's your mother."

Damn. If only it were pirates. I reached forward and tapped "accept." Dad gave me a brief, betrayed glare, and turned his Business Face to the camera. "Minerva. What brings you out here?"

Yikes. She was enormous, projected in front of the cockpit windows. Her always-perfect hair was red again, her lips cruelly twisted like usual. The bright lipsticks she preferred made them look like they'd been torn into her flesh.

"Willy," Mom used Dad's least-favorite form of his name on purpose. "A racing ship? Is this your midlife crisis?" She sighed with pretend boredom. "By the authority of Ceres Station, I am officially denying your request to land."

Dad's jaw shifted, but he kept his tone neutral. "Congratulations on your new position. The Paper Crane passed inspection and is authorized to dock on Ceres, which we plan to do in four hours. This is a routine cargo run."

"I don't care, and it gives me great pleasure to tell you to turn around. If that flashy garbage comes within visual distance, I'm shooting it down."

Her fake smile switched abruptly to a scowl as she turned off-camera. "Of course, we can shoot at it, Ken. ... Yes. No. I know this model of ship. Look at the safety regs ... here, let me." Her image flickered off and back on again, meanly triumphant. "As port controller, I have all the authority I need to deny any vessel that I judge might be a hazard to the facility. Your hopped-up, hacked-together racer *definitely* qualifies. If you try to land anyway, well, I can't be held responsible for any rash acts my inferiors make." Her elbow jabbed sharply, hitting someone just out of sight.

Oh hell. We couldn't turn around. Even if we had the fuel to change course and the clearance to land back on Mars, we had nothing to go back to. Did Mom know that? Ugh, probably. We'd sold the homestead on Mars for the ship. This cargo stop was going to pay for our fuel and landing on Earth. If Mom was angling for a bribe, she wasn't getting it. All we had to offer were cabbages and spare tube-o-roni.

Dad didn't say that, though, because he's an idiot about these things. He said, "Please cite what rules or regulations we have violated, and we will make a good-faith effort to address them."

That was never going to work. Mom didn't respond to rules. I put my own fear on hold and deliberately pushed myself into frame in front of Dad. "Hi, Mom."

Her shock was almost worth it. "Junie! What are you doing there?"

Ugh. Her "sweet" voice made my skin crawl. "Since you claim to care if I live or die, how about letting us land?"

Dad gripped the console with one hand and gently pushed me out of the way with the other. Through tight lips, he told me, "Don't engage. Don't get personal."

"Oh," Mom said, "it's personal. You are endangering my child in that – what even is that?"

The Paper Crane was built for the Earth-Moon races. Like Fleur, we got her cheap from people who had profited from racing her and wanted to throw her away. She had sleek lines for atmosphere and bright paint for looking pretty at the finish line, neither of which were useful going from Mars to Ceres, but she was airtight, and she worked.

"Just tell me what we need to do," Dad said.

“Go back to Mars,” Mom said, and cut the transmission.

We hung there in the silence. Dad looked tired and scared.

“We can’t go back to Mars,” I said, because I was afraid Dad was going to do whatever Mom said again, like she was Queen of Outer Space.

“No, we can’t,” Dad agreed. He poked the dash and pulled up a projection of our flight path. Most of the still-dashed line was inside the red circle of Ceres-controlled space. We had twenty minutes to come up with a new plan.

*This* plan had taken all year. From the time Mom left, trashing the air filters on her way out, we’d both had to work non-stop in the greenhouse. I’d had to squeeze my schoolwork between sleep and eating. If Grandma hadn’t offered us a place back on Earth, we would have slowly starved. If we hadn’t found the buyer for the hab. If we hadn’t found the ship. If we hadn’t gotten to this cabbage-shipping gig first. It was so much work and luck and now I was seeing my dad, the guy who once lifted a collapsing ceiling and held it for over an hour in the greenhouse, about to let this woman end us.

As for Mom, I didn’t doubt she would shoot. The sabotaging the air thing wasn’t a one-off. Maybe she’d send a lifeboat out for me, as a gesture. If it didn’t cost her. “Is Mom, like, governor of Ceres now or something?”

“She’s something,” Dad muttered, which was as close as I had ever heard him come to complaining about her. Would it kill him to be on my side for once? He had the Ceres Traffic Control FAQ open. There was Mom’s name at the top. Director of Port Authority.

Our little blip on the map inched closer to danger. “Should we call her back? Offer her a bribe?” I hated saying it, but it would work. Mom sent random messages demanding stuff all

the time – naming rights on the hab, a share of the cabbage crop, me. There wasn't exactly a divorce court on Mars, yet. We – okay, Dad – had to bargain every step of the way. Too bad we didn't have anything left. Except... "You're still good-looking for an old guy. Say you'll take her back. Long enough to land."

Dad's stern, anxious face turned to me in a moment of comic incredulity. "Go check on the dog."

Yeah, no. I wasn't going to "run along and play" when my life was on the line. Fleur was fine, grunting pig-like at something the VR helmet was playing. Probably a simulated prey scent. Dad flicked through paragraphs of text, muttered more curse words, and opened a comms channel.

The face that appeared wasn't Mom. It was a lady I didn't recognize, with deep wrinkles and narrow eyes. "What is it?" she snapped. "You're not due for hours."

"There's a problem with the landing."

"What? Your ship break? I don't cover that."

Oh. This was the buyer we were supposed to meet on Ceres. All I knew about her was she was eager to buy our cabbages and had cargo to send with us to Earth. I broke in before Dad could waste time being all by-the-book about it. "Port authority says they'll shoot if we approach."

She looked right at me, like she wasn't surprised to talk to a teen, which I appreciated. "That's ridiculous. What's the charge?"

Dad started to answer, but I spoke faster and louder, "She's his ex."

He gave me *such a look*.

The woman's eyes widened, then she cackled. "Times change; humans don't, eh?" More laughter. Really not helping. She dashed tears from her eyes and returned to being all business. "Sell the ship to me. She'll have no reason to block *my* ship, eh? I own half this dwarf planet. I'm sending you a deed of sale." She tapped furiously at her console. "Take forty percent off my share of the cargo going to Earth."

That was a shitty price for a whole ship. "Won't that interfere with, like, docking on Earth?" I asked, quietly. It wasn't really a question. If we didn't own the Crane, we'd have to keep getting permission from this lady to use it, to get the licenses. Never mind that being a cargo ship team was our whole plan! How were we going to make money without the ship? Were we just going to live off grandma on Earth?

Dad was watching the countdown to Ceres space. His jaw worked and he wouldn't look at me. Less than ten minutes, now.

"We can't do this," I said. Neither of them acknowledged I'd spoken. Dad's eyes were hard and focused. I couldn't imagine seeing that look from him and not backing down. This woman just looked bored.

His jaw stilled. Oh no. That was the blank, resigned look he got before he gave in on one of Mom's crazy demands. He reached for the controls. I beat him, snapping the line closed.

Dad reeled. In zero-G, emotion can really throw you. He smacked the ceiling hard. He jabbed his finger at me. "You don't do that. You don't cut me off when I'm talking."

Dad looked scary-mad, but I held tight to my handhold and glared right back at him. "Mom wouldn't even look at that bill of sale. Think."

"I'm the adult; you are the child," he said, not for the zillionth time, and wasn't that a killer, because it's what he said when he'd gone without food so I could eat. (I'd have gladly gone without either use). He hit the comm controls way too hard, so the buttons squeaked.

We watched the "receiving/not responding" light blink and blink.

Another minute wasted. Finally, a man's face appeared. He glanced into the camera in quick flashes, like he was afraid to meet our eyes. "Look, uh, the port master left. She said not to talk to you, so, uh, sorry. You should really go."

The connection closed. Dad stared where it had been.

I waited for my "You were right, Juno, it would have been stupid to sell our ship."

Five minutes now.

Dad let out a long, slow breath. "Do not. Talk. On comms."

There were times I could see why Mom was so nasty to him. "I'm not a kid anymore!"

"Don't I wish that were true." Dad looked at the ceiling, and I realized he thought he was alone in this, that it was all on him, and I wasn't here to help, I was one of the problems.

"I was right, though." It never feels as good to say it yourself.

For a long, awkward minute, the only sound was Fleur's toenails tapping the treadmill and her soft, contented panting.

"What does Mom even want?" I asked.

"More." Dad floated, gaze miles away. "It doesn't matter what she gets, she just wants more."

Yeah. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted the countdown to Ceres space to STOP. One minute, forty-one seconds.



I took a deep breath. “Are we dead now?”

Dad shook himself. “Right.” He started hitting controls. Lights turned off, the display map, the comms system display. He called up the autopilot and fed it new coordinates, then turned off that display, too. He waved me back. “Turn everything off – the heat, the treadmill, everything. We’ll make ourselves hard to see, no light, no transponder, and change course. The Crane can take a sharp deceleration. They won’t expect that. We’ll correct at the last second.” He paused to look at me. “Minerva’s mean, but someone else will have to shoot, and that isn’t a military base. We make ourselves hard to hit, they’ll save their ammo.”

That didn’t sound like the safest bet, but I knew better than to argue with Dad when he got that look.

Fleur whined as I disconnected her VR. She nosed the helmet, trying to get it back on as I pulled it away. Her floppy ears unfolded to their usual, zero-G upright flags.

“And no talking on comms!” Dad shouted, reaching and flipping switches. “I need to be able to trust you out here!”

Like I was going to call Mom?

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The cold slammed in hard after the heaters powered down. The three of us huddled in a thermal blanket, looking out the cockpit window. Ceres was so close now I could see veils of water vapor emissions tearing around her peaks, the stark craters untouched by habitat or rover, the smears of deposited salts.

If I survived this, I'd write a poem. A poem about huddling in the dark with your dad and your dog, all three of you stinking and unwashed and cold, knowing that everything out there wanted to kill you.

This was not how I imagined our father-daughter-team-up-against-the-galaxy adventure would go. I also thought he'd yell at me less.

"It'll work," Dad whispered, now and then, his arms tightening around me like muscle would do anything against missiles, against vacuum. We were between Ceres and the sun now, our shadow racing us over her craters. When we got to the shade, we'd bank and turn everything on, too close to dock for them to stop. Hopefully.

Another squeeze. Again, he said, "We moved right before going dark, and she wouldn't have been looking. It'll work."

The one alert we left running, because it was the minimum for safety, started beeping. It was the proximity alarm. I froze.

"Probably a rock," Dad whispered. Fleur whined and twisted in my arms to lick his face. Right on the stubble. Poor dog was going to die with a sore tongue.

If I got out of this, I was not putting that in the poem.

We waited to hear something impact the hull. "Your plans work," I said, willing it to be true. "It'll work. Like when you tricked Mom into leaving so we could call the marshal."

He ducked his head like getting a compliment hurt. Another long squeeze. "You were right," he muttered, almost inaudible. "Selling the ship wouldn'ta worked. You're a smart girl, Junie."

I couldn't even celebrate finally getting that acknowledgement because the walls shuddered.

You can't hear someone dock with your ship in the vacuum of space, but you can feel it, the jerk of it, and the vibration through metal makes its own echo of a sound.

At first Dad tried to cover me and Fleur with his body, but then he must have realized how stupid that was. "Stay here," he said, and pushed off.

Cold ripped into his absence, the thermal blanket flapping open after him. I grabbed it and tucked it back around Fleur, who wanted to stay with him and made pleading whines, licking my neck, trying to kick free.

Dad floated around the room, turning stuff back on. He pulled himself through the deck down to where he'd been repairing the coolant line and came back with the largest wrench in the repair kit. He put his feet in a holding strap right in front of the door and twisted his white-knuckled fists around the wrench, raising it like a baseball bat, ready to strike.

That was his plan?

I let go of Fleur, who swam over to Dad and nuzzled the back of his neck. He flinched, then pretended he hadn't, and kept his pose.

There was a pry-bar velcroed to the wall for emergency, I dunno, prying. I took it and flew to a handhold near Dad.

He lowered his wrench and gaped at me. "The fuck are you doing?"

I raised the pry-bar, holding it higher on the right, same as he was with the wrench. Like, duh. "Same as you."

He shifted his shoulders and resumed his ready-for-fight stance. "Get your ass back to the pilot seat and stay hidden."

"Two idiots scowling with shitty weapons is infinitely more threatening than one."

"I can't believe you. This is your life. You have to listen--"

The hatch slid open, and I was too scared to even be relieved his lecture got interrupted.

It was Mom. Of course it was, with undulating plastic behind her and the open outer door. A soft lock. Her helmet glass was foggy, but I could still see how smug she was, and that her bright lipstick had gotten on her teeth. It looked coral, almost neon, in the low-power capsule light. "Junie, baby. Put that down. You're coming with me."

I wasn't as terrified as I expected to be. Part of it was that she looked less dangerous, sealed up in plastic and glass, and her movements were awkward. She wasn't used to zero-G.

Dad looked at his pipe wrench like he didn't know what it was. So much for being a big, threatening man. "You can't open the airlock like that," he gestured with the wrench, underhand, like it was a dustpan or something. "You got both doors open. Come all the way in if you want to talk."

Mom of course stayed where she was, in the way of the inner airlock door. She knew what she was doing, making herself a failure point. "It's perfectly safe." Right. She hadn't risked her life without a pressure suit, just mine. Mom's smile strained as we didn't move. "If you cared at all about our daughter you'd step aside. Junie, come."

Fleur yipped, thinking that sharp command was meant for her, and swam over, tail wagging in her wake.

Mom backed up, hands in front of her to hold Fleur off. "What is this animal doing here? Are you breathing the same air? Eeew!"

I gently turned Fleur and pushed her back toward Dad. I wouldn't trust that woman with a dog.

Dad tucked the wrench under one strapped-down foot. "If Juno goes with you, will you make sure she's safe?"

"Are you crazy?!" I grabbed hold of Dad's wrist and pointed my pry-bar at Mom. "I'll never go with you!"

Dad curled his arm, bringing me close. "Juno, you need to be safe. She's holding the airlock open, and you don't have a suit on."

Now I was struggling out of Dad's grip like the dog had. "You can't let her win."

"Don't worry about me. Let her take you down to the surface." He spoke louder, to Mom, "She needs to get to my mother's house in Buffalo. She's expected. Can you do that? Can you get her there?"

I tightened my grip on my pry-bar. "You need to trust me," I said.

"I do," he said, his eyes shining. "Juno. I am trusting you with the most precious thing to me." He pulled me closer, whispering desperately. "There are other people on that ship. Find someone to protect you."

That wasn't what I meant. I looked back at Fleur, and then at Mom, who had her arms out like I was five and was going to jump into them. "Fleur!" I shouted, "Fetch!"

I threw the pry-bar at Mom, and Fleur flew after it. Mom screamed, dodging the bar, but not the dog. Fleur's paws skittered all over her face-glass. The pry-bar bounced on the

ceiling of the airlock and my heart almost stopped, wondering if it would hit the soft-lock and tear it.

But I couldn't stop to look. I used the distraction to hip-check Mom out of the doorway and get to the manual override. I yanked the door closed and kicked off hard back toward Dad. Mom was sealed in with us now. Fleur fluttered around Mom's helmet, licking and whimpering.

Dad gave me this shocked, impressed look.

Slowly, Mom realized the dog wasn't her only problem. She stopped trying to bat Fleur away. She swung at me, but the suit made her clumsy. I dodged easily, grabbing a new hold on the ceiling.

"This is kidnapping!" Mom shrieked.

Fleur, sensing a threat (about time) growled, the dark hair around her neck fluffing out.

Dad slowly shook his head. "We fixed a problem with our airlock in a way that kept everyone safe. You think different, you'll have to take that up with the nearest magistrate."

Oo. Good one, Dad. Every nation and planet considered messing with airlocks a big crime.

Mom windmilled her arms, trying to back up to the kitchenette. She was almost cute like this. "You small man. You were always jealous of me. Always trying to keep me down! Well, the jokes on you because I'm free, and I'm *someone* now. My crew will burn down that airlock to get me. Ken? Ken!" She turned away from us and held a hand to about where her ear was, like it would clear up her signal. "Ken! No, just shoot it! You got it open once! That's not the law!"

Wow, did I wish I could hear Ken's side of this conversation.

Dad swam to Fleur, who gave him a quick look before continuing to growl at Mom. He ruffled the bristly hair on Fleur's back. "Juno, go to the cockpit. I'll watch our guest."

I huffed. I was way more likely than him to defend myself. "You need me here."

"No." He turned and gave me a slight smile. "I need you to work the comms."

Was he serious? I almost didn't hear the rest of his words. "... tell the other ship we'll get their director to ground safely. They can see we're sound enough to land."

"Yes, sir!" I snapped a salute.

"You'll need to correct our course, too," he said, eyes serious and full of import.

I didn't waste time talking. I kicked my way up to the cockpit.

"You always spoiled her," Mom said.

"Minerva..." Dad started into some soft, placating garbage.

Ken was already trying to signal us. I just had to accept the connection. He was a reedy man, all neck and weak chin.

"Yeah," Ken said, sounding tired and looking embarrassed, "I heard all that."

I awkwardly pulled myself into the pilot's chair and fumbled for the restraints. "Um, I'm going to contact traffic control? Your boss is safe."

"I'm logging that the soft lock failed. Retracting it." He gave me a sober look. "I don't know how I'm gonna explain this."

Before me, the nose of our ship glided over Ceres, close enough now that the sharp peaks seemed to be reaching for us. "She left her ship into a soft-lock you said malfunctioned." My harness clicked into place, and I took the controls. The controls! "Put it down as a rescue."