

Voyages of the Mara

Chapter 5: First Tragedy

“Come in,” Minister Kormin called as he heard the knock; the avian glanced up as door to his office opened, and a black labrador stepped in, carrying a datapad under his arm as he walked in. Kormin hit the sleep button on his terminal and faced the canine fully, recognizing him as Albert McCain, one of the newest employees on the Board of Economics for the White Star Sector.

New, but in no way a stranger to the world of business; easily one of the most impressive employees despite how short a time McCain had been part of the team of Accountants the White Star Sector’s Board of Economics employed, he had proven himself to be an astounding manager of money; he managed one star system, like all Accountants did, and turned many operations that were yielding only minimal profit into higher gains for the Sector, and turned others that were costly into affordable losses. His ability to find discrepancies in current operations was truly marvelling, and had already earned him a promotion to vice president of the Collections Agency.

“Mr. McCain,” Kormin stated, leaning back in his chair as he looked up at the labrador. “Your message says you have something that required my attention; my time is precious so try to make this brief.”

“Of course, Minister,” McCain returned. “I’ll skip on the details. Do you know of the planet, Trident IV?”

“Yes. I believe it was deserted ten years ago, just before the last minister retired and I took his place, and now a new colony seems to have settled there for whatever reason,” returned Kormin. “What about it?”

“Well, it was not entirely deserted,” returned McCain, passing the datapad he carried to the minister. “And that colony is not new; according to this, it has been there secretly since the planet was deserted. Unlawfully, I might add, without paying their dues.”

This caught Kormin’s attention. He took the datapad from McCain and switched it on, reading the files contained within the holographic folder. “Mara Colony; former Titanium mining colony, founded and financed by IronCorp; company bankrupt in 2701, planet abandoned before Mara Colony was sold to another corporation...” He mutters intelligibly for a moment. “So they have been living there for ten years and nobody tried calling for evacuation or went to check on them? Why?”

“Perhaps the manager liked being in control and hoarding all of their money for them self,” replied McCain. “I have heard that they have a ship, and have been trading salt to a grocer on Denver XII. This could also mean they are not paying the proper sales taxes, and no business licenses have been issued to anyone on that world, so they are also selling the salt illegally, producing it with equipment once belonging to IronCorp which, under section 1632-b of the Economics Regulations, any property not claimed by its former owners or bought out by

other investors belongs to the Government by default. In short, whatever they are using to produce the salt –I’m assuming Salt Water Separators- belong to the White Star Sectors’ government.”

Kormin eyed him quizzically. “You found out all of this? How?”

“I always keep an ear to the ground, sir,” returned McCain, smiling confidently at the avian.

Kormin looked at the datapad once more, reading the list of violations the Mara Colony listed, before he flicked it off and passed it back to McCain. “Well then, since you know the details, I’ll leave it in your hands. I shall type a document that officially recognizes the Mara Colony as an active community in the White Star Sector.”

McCain nodded. “I’ll handle it personally, Minister,” he said, with an all too obvious hint of satisfaction in his voice...

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Six months had passed since the battle over Ithica VII. According to local media, the Confederacy had won the conflict; the Grunikan Empire had been driven back to their territory and the planet was secure, but a fleet still maintained orbit over the planet for additional security, and a statement from the Confederate Admiralty confirmed they were considering an appropriate response to the Grunikans for their unprovoked aggression.

For now, the Red Nebulan Confederacy was safe. Trade with Ithica VII was resumed as before, and the four factions’ alliances of the Red Nebula were no longer on high alert. According to the message Felix had received from Jody, the planet was recovering well, and soon everything would be back to normal.

For the Mara’s Hope crew, things were going great; Felix typed his message to Jody, telling her of how their salt trade had picked up; once word spread across the station of the high-quality, but bargain-priced salt, business had increased exponentially, the sales had skyrocketed, and the colony was finally getting some real money. Everyone had steady jobs in the colony, and with the communication tower back online they had a chance to open trade with other worlds; they might have a chance at really making a life for themselves here, or, if they so desired now, move somewhere else.

Felix had already taken a few passengers to Denver XII in that time, and only a few ever decided they wanted to stay there; almost everyone would return to the colony, being the only home most of the younger generations –like himself, really knew. With a chance to make something of the world they had been left on, almost nobody wanted to leave anymore. Nobody needed to.

The dolphin smiled. Mara colony was becoming a home he and the others could be proud of; he felt himself actually looking forward to the future, instead of dreading it. As the ship left warp speed and the planet of Trident IV filled the viewport, he took his time steering the Mara’s Hope down to the planet’s surface.

“We almost back?” Felix heard a voice behind him.

The dolphin looked over his shoulder, and saw Jessica standing in the doorway, in her medical clothes as usual. She was staring through the viewport at the planet, a nostalgic expression on her face, expressing her joy at returning home after their recent voyage; they had just come back from a delivery job to the Midgard VI ice fields, delivering supplies to an outpost there and taking a small shipment of water to one of the acceleration gates of the system; the crew there had run out sooner than usual and needed a new shipment, a contract Felix was offered moments after finishing the first delivery, and readily accepted.

The dolphin nodded to the doe. "Yeah; we'll be planetside in a few minutes."

Jessica sat down at Felix's side, in the co-pilot's chair, her face full of joy. "These last few months have really been something, haven't they?" She asked. "All the things we've done, without even a full cycle passing."

"I know what you mean," returned Felix. "I never would've thought we'd have so many adventures out here in the great beyond."

Jessica looked at Felix. "Suppose next we save up for a new ship?"

Felix shrugged. "I don't know," he said, reaching a hand over to the console before him and rubbing over the top of it as if it were a pet. "I'm growing rather fond of this ship. After all, if we didn't find her, we'd never have been able to save the colony as we have. It's only thanks to this old freighter we have a legitimate business, and that the colony lives on."

Jessica rolled her eyes, giggling. "It never surprises me how men can develop such attachments to inanimate objects."

"Oh come on," said Felix, nudging her with his elbow. "You love this ship too."

"I never said I didn't, but if we get a better ship, we can do a better job, right?" Jessica replied. "Still, it'll be a while before we can do that."

"Yeah, that's..." Felix paused, his eyes fixing on something ahead of the ship. They were coming up on the island where Mara Colony awaited the return of its heroes. But there was something else at the island; something that he knew wasn't supposed to be there. He didn't hear Jessica when she spoke his name, his gaze fixed entirely on what looked like a ship flying in low altitude just above Mara Colony. A massive ship, easily triple the size of the Mara's Hope if not bigger; he didn't recognize the model, but as they came closer, he could make out a symbol on the side of the ship, painted into the hull; a large, white sphere with a flame detail in the middle, surrounded by a ring –not like an asteroid belt type of ring, just a solid, circular one around the star.

A White Star Government vessel.

Jessica, having followed Felix's gaze now, spotted the ship as well, her eyes widening with a mix of surprise and curiosity. "Felix... is that Confederacy ship?"

"Yeah, I think it is; it's got the White Star Emblem on its hull," said Felix.

"Do you think that's the evacuation your mom's been calling for; did she finally get through?" Jessica asked, hopefully.

"Only one way to find out," returned Felix. "Go tell the others; they'll want to know about this."

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The Hope touched down in its usual place on the landing pad. Felix powered down the ship and stood up from his chair, stepping out of the bridge. He found the rest of the crew waiting for him by the airlock. Their expressions, he noticed, were mixed; Zack looked highly curious, Jessica looked concerned, while Gustav and Amber both appeared uncertain. He'd never seen them in such turmoil before.

"Guys... are you okay?" He asked them.

"I've just got a bad feeling about this," replied Amber.

"Me too," agreed Jessica.

"Same. Why is the Government here now, after we got our communications back up months ago?" Gustav inquired. "We heard Brunhilda get through the government two months ago, and now they've been using the thing to try and open up new trade with businesses across the sector to buy our salt. Why didn't they come here sooner?"

"You know politicians; they always take too long," remarked Zack. "I'm sure they're just here to collect taxes or something."

"Zack, tax collection is done through Vastnet credit transfer," Amber pointed out.

"Nobody collects them manually anymore except..." She paused. "Except collection agencies."

"Oh come on, Amber; don't you think you're being paranoid?" Zack asked. "We don't owe anybody any money, so what would a collection agency be doing here in a Confederate ship?"

Amber had a point though, and suddenly Felix felt a chill creeping up his back. He swallowed nervously, and turned towards the airlock. "Come on; let's go see what's happening out there," he said, insistently as he pulled the lever to lower the airlock ramp.

With a hiss and the sound of moving parts, the ramp was down; the crew descended the ramp and began to make their way to the walls of the colony. Even from this distance, Felix felt a lot of tension in the air; not from his friends, but from the colony itself, and it was not the good kind of tension either, caused by when people were excited and gleeful; this was more like the kind generated by people who were angry or frightened.

Felix quickened his pace; the others quickened with him, until soon they were almost running towards the colony. They charged through the gate, and entered the colony to find something had changed...

Several of the pre-fabricated homes were missing from the inside of the colony; lots once occupied by the aluminum, weather-proofed structures were now empty, leaving blank spots of dirt and deep impressions in the ground where the houses had once been. Colonists were standing by these lots with shocked expressions on their faces as men and women in Confederate uniforms handed them clipboards, moved items towards a magnetic crane that was hovering above the colony, or even hid behind armed guards as the angrier colonists became more hostile.

"What the *hell* is going on here?!" Amber demanded.

"Why are some of the houses gone?" Gustav added.

Felix was unable to come up with an answer, too shocked by what he saw in the colony.

"You bastards!"

The loud voice caught the group's attention; they turned towards it, and saw an anthro crocodile yelling at a Confederate representative who was hiding behind a guard. "You abandon us on this drowning world for ten years, and when you come back the first thing you do is start taking everything we have worked so hard to build and keep?! How the hell can you do this to us?!"

As the crocodile became more hostile, trying to grab at the unarmed Confederate soldier cowering behind the armoured guard, he was bludgeoned by the rifle of said guard, who aimed it at him and warned him to stay back or he would fire. The crocodile was too angry to simply take being hit with a grain of salt; he lunged at the guard, and was shot right in the chest.

"Dr. Hanson!" Jessica screamed in horror, breaking away from the group and running over to the downed crocodile, who was none other than her mentor and the only trained physician in the entire colony, Dr. Edmond Hanson.

Felix and the others followed her, and both she and Gustav dropped to the side of the downed crocodile, checking him, while Amber approached the guard; he turned his rifle on her, only for her to grab it by the barrel, thrusting it upward and smacking him in the face with it, sending him reeling, but not off of his feet.

"You filthy, trigger-happy lunatic; you call yourself a soldier, shooting an unarmed man?!" She screamed at him.

"I had no choice; he was getting violent!" The guard protested.

"You still didn't have to shoot him!" Amber roared back, baring her row of sharp teeth, professional restraint and respect for the law the only thing keeping her from drawing her handgun and shooting the guard right in his unprotected face.

The guard turned his rifle to the side, showing it to her. "It's just a stun blaster!" He said, glaring at her. "He'll be fine."

"Even stun blasters can cause permanent harm if you fire them point-blank, idiot!" She informed. She turned to Jessica, who had opened the doctor's shirt and was checking the mark left by the blaster on Hanson's chest. "Jess, is he okay?"

Jessica didn't answer for a moment as she looked closely at the burn, and then moved up to look at the doctor's face. She called out his name, and his eyes opened, looking up at her weakly. She looked over her shoulder at Amber, and nodded. "Yes; he's okay," she replied. "He's got a third degree burn but nothing more serious than that; good thing crocodiles have such dense skin."

Amber glared at the guard again. "You're lucky, pal; if he was dead, I'd be taking you in for man slaughter. Next time, show more restraint with your rifle!"

The unarmed Confederate, a crow who wore a set of government attire, stepped forward. "This man was simply protecting me; I was the target of your doctor's anger."

"And who are you?" Felix asked the crow.

"I'm a Sector Collections Agent from Denver XII, here on orders from Minister Kormin," replied the crow. "We're here collecting back taxes owed to the Government of the White Star Sector, from the people of Mara Colony."

"Back taxes?" Felix echoed in disbelief. "What taxes? We were left here a decade ago!"

"Under Confederacy Law, this planet still belongs to the White Star Government, and therefore registered Confederate Citizens are still subject to taxation for living here; taxes have not been paid by colonists of this world for ten years, and at the insistence of the Vice President of the Collections Agency, we're here to gather those taxes."

Gustav stood up. "And where is your Vice President?"

"Currently speaking with the manager of this colony, Miss Brunhilda Kaufmann."

"Then we'll just go see him," stated Felix. "Jess, stay with Doc Hanson; we'll be back in a moment."

"It's okay Felix; she can go with you," the crocodile stated, sitting up and holding the burn on his chest. "I'm fine. Just need to go put some ReGel on this." He looked at Gustav. "Help me up, sonny."

"You sure, Doctor?" Gustav asked, letting the crocodile use him for support as he stood.

"Don't worry about me; I may be old but I'm not frail," he replied, and glared at the Collections Agent. "And you, you can take your back taxes and stuff them under your tail feathers for all I care."

"Sorry sir, but the law is the law," the crow reasoned.

Amber leered at the crow. "Why don't you just back off, and chat with him when you don't have an amateur with an itchy trigger finger as your bodyguard?" She asked.

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"I can't believe you'd do this, to your own colony!" Brunhilda said scornfully to the Labrador. "It's not enough you abandon your own family here, you come back just to take everything we have?! How the hell can you live with this?"

"Simply doing my job, Ms. Kaufmann," returned the Labrador, who was none other than Albert McCain, wearing the same uniform as the other collections agents outside, except his had an epaulette marked VP on the shoulder. "This colony is full of people who have lived here unlawfully for ten years; I was sent to collect on the taxes they failed to pay in that time."

"We were *abandoned* here!" Brunhilda almost screamed, slamming her hands on her desk. "How the hell can we owe taxes when the entire Confederacy forgot we even existed?!"

"This is still a Confederate world, and you're all registered residents," replied McCain. "That is all that there is to it."

"And what are we supposed to pay you with?!" Brunhilda demanded. "This colony has just started making money again," she tapped the datapad on her desk, "but all this is just too much! The amount that the colonists are being charged; they can't hope to pay it! And you're taking away people's homes to cover it?!"

"Technically, none of those houses belong to them," corrected McCain. "And even if they did, if their debts cannot be paid, property must be seized in order to cover it; the buildings belong to the Government, and not to the colony, so the seizure of their homes is only taking the debt away from the colonial management—namely you, and not from any of them. And by the way, that also means your ship, the Mara's Hope, belongs to us as well."

Brunhilda was about to retort, when the door to her office suddenly opened. "Mom?!"

She froze, and looked past McCain to see her son and the rest of the crew of the Mara's Hope walking into the office. "No... Felix..."

"Albert McCain?" Amber demanded. "What the hell... *you're* behind all of this?!"

"It's Vice President McCain now, of the Sector Collections Agency," replied the Labrador. "And this meeting is not for civilians."

"They stay," Brunhilda stated firmly. "You might be working for the government, but *I* make the rules here."

"Which is part of the problem," McCain remarked.

"You're still on about that?" Felix yelled at McCain. "You still think my mother trapped everyone on this world for her own self-gain, and now you come back here, six months after abandoning the colony completely, for what, revenge? Greed?!"

Brunhilda's gaze turned back to McCain, her expression hard and full of suppressed rage. "Is that what you think I've been doing for the last decade?" She asked. "That I've been purposely trapping everyone here, on this dangerous world, for all this time?"

McCain deserted his professional, calm composure, and glared at the older dolphin. "Prove me wrong."

"Prove?" She echoed. "What would I have to *gain* from it?! This planet was tapped out of valuable resources years ago; that's why it was deserted, and I was left here too! We were living on borrowed time until we found that ship, and even that was a gamble; why in the name of every known star would I trap people here? I've dedicated my life to try and save them!"

"Liar!" McCain barked. "If you truly cared about saving them, why are they all still here on this mud hole, waiting for the Gelks to come and kill them?! When you got that ship in working condition why didn't you start evacuating them?!"

"With a light freighter?" Brunhilda asked in disbelief. "At most it could carry fifty of the colonists at a time; we'd have to make several trips to and from this planet to move everyone, not to mention having to find somewhere that'd accept us, and everyone would have to start all over again! What could they have used to do that; where would they go, what would they do?! Leaving when they had nothing to build a new life with?"

"Worked for *me* didn't it?" McCain asked. "I made a fresh start, and look where it led me? Now I have everything I wanted, everything I deserved, and after today I'll have even more. If I can do it, anyone here could... or at least, could have, until you selfishly made them stay here. Now, *you* can live with what you've done to them, and share it."

Brunhilda, feeling the strength in her legs fade away, collapsed into her office chair, her expression filled with horror, unable to find words to speak. When she went silent, McCain turned to Felix, and smiled with clear satisfaction as he said, "I'll be taking your ship, too," he said. "It should be enough to cover the taxes you have against you."

"You can't," returned Felix.

"And why not?"

"Because it's worth more than my taxes," replied Felix.

"And how could you know that?" McCain asked.

Felix turned to Amber. "Care to do the honours?"

“Gladly,” she said. “According to Confederate Law, 1112 Section A of the Economic Act, the Government cannot claim items to cover taxes or pay debts if the item they are trying to claim is worth more than the debt itself.”

“I fail to see how that is relevant, considering the debt he owes has ten years of accumulated cost and interest, worth easily as much as that ship,” stated McCain.

“That’s where Civilian Law, 144 Section A, comes in,” continued Amber. “Minors cannot be charged with back taxes; only legal adults can.”

“But Felix is in his twenties, he...” McCain paused, and narrowed his eyes at Amber. “I see... because he only became a legal adult three years ago, that shaves seven years off of his debts.”

“Precisely,” stated Amber. “You’re not the only one in this colony who knows the law, McCain. As such, you can only charge Felix for three years, and the same goes to all others who were not legal adults when that ten year term began. That includes myself, Jessica, and most especially Zack; he only just became a legal adult a few months ago.”

McCain met her gaze for a moment, a long silence stretching out between them, until he smiled. “Well played, Ms. Giles. It appears I’ll have to take another look at just how much is owed. You may have saved this colony more than you realize. However, that still means Felix owes for three years, and you still owe for nine years.” He looked at Felix. “I suppose you get to keep your ship, then... maybe now you’ll actually use it for something besides shipping illegal salt.”

“Illegal?” Felix echoed.

“What do you mean illegal?” Gustav asked. “We *have* a business license to trade it; you told us how to get one!”

“But you don’t have one for producing it,” replied McCain. “So even though you get to keep your ship, the trade you started with Edwin’s Grocery on Denver XII is to cease immediately, and you will be charged with unlawful selling without a business license for the past six months.”

Felix narrowed his eyes. “I’m good for it,” he said.

“Then let’s talk,” began McCain.

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Six hundred thousand credits...

The total debt owed by the Mara Colony, not just by any one person, accumulated to a total of more than half a million... the Collections Agents seized everything but the Mara’s Hope; the turrets, the armoury –weapons and building alike, and every other pre-fabricated structure in the colony, including the new communication tower. In the end, the total sum was never reached; countless colonists still owed thousands upon thousands of credits in taxes. The only things they were left with were their personal belongings, such as clothes, toys, tools or food, but their shelters –their homes, and everything else that could be declared property of IronCorp and, therefore, property of the government; even the Salt Water Separators were taken.

Felix's accumulated debt wasn't too much for him to pay out of his own pocket, and everyone else on the ship pooled their resources together to help out one another; the crew of the Mara's Hope was left debt free, and the ship remained in their possession, but their homes, their families, their friends... they had lost everything. 'Mara Colony' was now nothing more than a big yard surrounded by a wall, sitting on a desolate little island.

McCain left the colony aboard a shuttle. On his way out, he met his wife and children, and offered to take them with him, if they still wanted to have a roof over their heads. His wife, Lydia, slapped him in fury, and said right to his face she never wanted to see him again. McCain stepped aboard his shuttle without another word, and took off back up to the ship.

A crow among the collections agents spoke to McCain. "Are you sure about all of this, Mr. McCain? I mean, sure they owed a debt but we've left them with nothing but an old ship, a wall and some scraps... isn't this a little far?"

"They'll just evacuate, if they know what's good for them," said McCain. "They brought this on themselves."

"But still... we've left them homeless," said the crow.

McCain turned on him, and stood almost nose-to-beak with him. "Yes we have, and they deserved it, so you're not going to tell anyone about it, understood? Else, you may need to look for a new job, and I can make that very difficult for you."

The crow said nothing, and simply answered McCain with a nod as the shuttle flew into the hangar of the larger ship above, and the great vessel began to leave the planet, unaware of the chaos brewing below.

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The entire colony had fallen into disarray; panicked, heartbroken, desperate people flocked to Brunhilda, and she did her best to try and calm everyone in order to buy herself a moment to think. Felix and the others, still reeling from the fact that in a single day their home had been disassembled and literally taken away, stood at the back of the crowd, staring up at the sky until the ship was gone.

"Amber," said Zack. "They can't really get away with this, can they?"

"Unfortunately, Zack, they can," returned the shark woman, her voice filled with sadness. "Nothing here actually belonged to any of the colonists except their personal affections; the buildings belonged to IronCorp, which went bankrupt, and when nobody bought this place everything became Government property, and we've been living on that property all these years... we have nothing we can defend ourselves with."

"What about that McCain lived here too?" Gustav suggested.

"He took that with him," Felix pointed out. "Records of inhabitants were on my mom's terminal, which is still in her office, which is now..." he pointed up, "on that ship."

"Then... can we start making trips; move everyone off-world to Denver XII?" Zack asked.

"What would that accomplish?" Gustav inquired. "We'd still have the debts even if we went there. We'd all just be living on the streets; we'd be nothing but bums there." He crossed his arms. "If we'd had more time, some people here may have even been able to get enough

money to move there but now, McCain has taken everything from everyone; they've got nothing they can start anew with." He uncrossed his arms and put one hand over his eyes. "If only we'd had just another month or two..."

Zack looked between his friends, desperately trying to find some answer, something they could use to save themselves and the colonists, but nobody had anything more to say. "So that's it then? Six months of flying in space and now we're all doomed; we've got nothing at all?"

Felix turned to his friend, a look of hopelessness in his eyes. "I'm sorry Zack... but I'm afraid that's the case... our trade has been ended, our separators are gone and there's nothing of value on this entire planet. It's over..." He turned his gaze towards the ship on the landing pad. "We're over..."

Mara's Hope... seemed such a pretentious name to him now; what hope was there? What chance did the colonists have, now that the Confederacy... no... now that McCain had stolen their only chances to rebuild their lives? Moving the colonists and all of their belongings to Denver XII, even if it were a viable option, would take almost a dozen trips, and that's if everyone in the colony was willing to leave most of their belongings behind. If that happened, they really would have nothing...

Felix could not afford to get a business license; private freighting was all that was available to him now, but that would only be enough to support himself and his crew; he could spend years doing that before the colony would be free of its debts, and they'd still have nothing to start their lives over with.

Felix tucked his hands into the pockets of his vest, and began walking towards the ship, his tail hanging limply behind him. Jessica noticed him leaving, and called after him. "Felix? Where are you going?" She asked.

"I just..." He called back. "I need some time..."

The dolphin kept walking. Jessica wanted to follow him, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her; she looked back at Gustav, who shook his head at her. She frowned, and stared after the heartbroken dolphin as he dragged his feet to the Mara's Hope.

The group heard more footsteps approaching; they turned, and saw Brunhilda walking up to them, a look of defeat on her face. "Can the ship move some of the people to another location?" She asked none of them in particular; at this point she seemed desperate for some kind of good news.

"It... depends on where you want to go," replied Zack. "I mean, we've already ruled out Denver XII."

"So has everyone else," replied Brunhilda. "Some of the more desperate ones still want to go there, thinking they might find a chance, but deep down we all know, going there now would fix nothing..." She hung her head, a tear flowing from her eye. "This is all my fault... what if McCain was right? What if deep down, I really did want to keep everyone here?" She rubbed her eye. "Have I been lying to everyone, and myself, this whole time?"

"Don't," Amber said sternly. "None of this is your fault, Manager Kaufmann; you..."

"Please... don't call me manager," she stated. "I hardly deserve that posting now."

“Brunhilda,” began Gustav. “Nobody blames you for everything that has happened, nobody except Albert anyway, but he wanted to believe that you were at fault because he, more than anyone else, shunned the hand we’ve been dealt. He was looking for a scapegoat; nothing more, and he targeted you because you’re the colony leader.”

“Not anymore I’m not,” replied Brunhilda. “There’s no colony to lead now; I’m not a manager... I’m just another refugee.”

Gustav stepped up to Brunhilda. “Be that as it may, the colony has survived thanks to you, Ms. Kaufmann,” he said. “Nobody blames you for any of what’s happened; those that do are just doing what McCain did.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll find a way, just as we always have, but our first priority should be to help the colonists; it sounded like you have an idea so, let’s hear it.”

Brunhilda looked at Gustav for a long moment before she let out a long sigh and looked at Zack. “You and Felix; you found the ship at the old Ingrid Colony, right?”

Zack nodded. “Yeah, we did.”

“Were its structures still there?”

Zack nodded again. “Now that you mention it, yeah; the colony buildings were still there, but Ingrid’s smaller than Mara. Will there be enough room for everyone?”

“We’ll just have to make do,” stated Brunhilda. “Ingrid is the closest colony in this area; until we find somewhere more suitable that we can reach, we should move everyone there.”

“But if we go there, couldn’t McCain just come after us again and charge us for staying in another government-owned site?” Jessica asked.

“Actually, Ingrid Colony, even though all of its buildings were deserted, would still technically belong to the company that founded it,” Amber stated. “So even if he found us, first he’d have to find out who owns it; even I don’t remember who it belonged to, and it’d be up to them to remove us, but all we’d get from them is a trespassing charge, and I don’t think they’d really give a damn; it’s not like they still use the place.”

Brunhilda allowed herself a small smile. “Then that is our best option,” she said. “We should start moving everyone there before dark; I’ll talk with the people, and tell them our plan. Where’s Felix?”

“He’s...” began Zack, turning in the direction of the Mara’s Hope. “On the ship, I think; said he needed a moment.”

Gustav looked at the ship briefly, then at Brunhilda. “Tell everyone to organize themselves into groups, carry as much as they can, and we’ll take them one group at a time over to Ingrid. They’ll need a few minutes to get organized.” He looked at Amber. “You better give her a hand; help her get everyone ready. I’ll go talk to Felix.”

“Me too,” agreed Zack.

“I’ll go too,” added Jessica. “I have a feeling he’ll need the support...”

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Felix leaned back his head as he lifted the bottle in his hand to his lips, taking a long, drawn-out swig of the bubbling, brown beer in the glass bottle, grunting as he felt a slight buzz

in his head from consuming so much at once. He'd drank like this on his eighteenth birthday with some of his friends, but never really got used to the buzz that taking long drinks of beer could do. Still, it kept him from thinking about the nightmare he and his fellow colonists had just gone through... and that was all he cared about; he just wanted to forget.

Forget about the dread.

Forget about the sense of hopelessness.

And most of all... forget his failure to save his home.

He had striven for much; he'd started a legitimate business, shipping goods and making life better for others, all to help his colony. He was a hero to many people on Ithica VII and in the Marine Corps, and a promising young trader to a few others; he had achieved these titles in only a couple of months, and since then had only added to how true they were.

But now, those titles meant nothing, because everything he had worked so hard to do had just been taken away by one of his own fellow colonists, and now he had nothing to save the colony with; nothing but an old freighter, with no goods to ship and crew probably as disheartened as himself...

"What's the point of it all now?" He whispered to himself, knocking back the rest of his beer, setting the bottle down.

"Well there's a sorry sight."

Felix half-heartedly glanced over his shoulder, seeing three of his friends at the door to the lounge area. None looked less pleased with Felix than Gustav, who was eyeing the young dolphin with a look of disappointment and scorn as he approached. "This is what you ran off to do; to come and drink?"

"Leave it alone, Gustav," returned Felix. "Right now, I just need my space."

"To do what; drink yourself into a stupor until your confidence comes back?" Gustav asked. "That isn't you, Felix, and I'm not about to let you become it."

"Why not?" Felix asked, tonelessly.

"Because the colony still needs you right now; they need the pilot of the Mara's Hope, they..."

"*What* colony, Gustav?!" Felix snapped, spinning on his stool as he turned on the Orca, fixing him with a stare that threatened to burn out the eyes of anyone who met his gaze.

"Maybe it skipped your attention, but the 'colony' you speak of is *gone*! All of our homes, the armoury, the separators, the storehouse; everything is being carried off in a Confederate ship to be sold for scrap and recycled!"

He stood up abruptly from his stool, but stopped, turning towards the counter.

"Everything we've done... everything we risked, and everything we've gained; all of it is gone, Gustav... This ship," he gestured at the room around him. "This scrounged ship, the 'Mara's Hope'," he said with utter disgust. "This is nothing more than a dead dream now. The Confederacy abandoned us for so long, only to come back and take everything from us, and now we're stranded, left in debt and with no way to pay it, while interest rates allow it to keep getting higher; even if we left this planet now these people would have *nothing*; we wouldn't save them, we'd be leaving them too..."

The dolphin suddenly felt weak; he held onto the bar counter for support, but his arms had no strength left. He slid to the floor, down on his knees as tears began to flow from his eyes, gritting his teeth as he leaned his head against the side of the counter, weeping loudly. "I failed them... I failed them all... we weren't fast enough, and now there's nothing left that can save them." He bashed his head against the counter. "By the stars, I failed everyone!"

"No, you didn't," stated Jessica, kneeling down next to Felix and pulling him away from the bar counter; she turned him towards her and pulls him into a tight, warm hug. "You didn't fail them, Felix. We were betrayed; Albert McCain betrayed all of us, and used the laws of the Confederacy for his own gain. He's the one who is the blame, not you..."

"But I'm the one who told Amber to let him walk away," Felix argued, wrapping his arms around Jessica and holding her tightly, desperately wishing he could find comfort in her embrace. "It was all my fault; I should've stopped him! I shouldn't have let him go..."

"Felix, buddy," Zack said, softly, sitting down next the dolphin and doe and putting his hand on Felix's back. "There's no way you could've known McCain would do this to us; you're not a psychic, bro. None of us could've known this would happen, and even if we had, it's not like we could have just killed him to stop it."

"Zack's right," agreed Gustav, joining his friends on the floor. "I guess because we've all lived so harmoniously for the last ten years, none of us believed McCain would do anything so wretched to us. You let him go because you had no right to stop him; it was his choice, but it was impossible to know he'd do something like this."

"Slimy, wrong and downright messed up, but unpredictable," Zack summarised. "But he didn't take everything, man. Remember; we still have the ship, we still have chance. Not all hope is gone yet."

Felix calmed down a little, slowly pulling himself back from Jessica, rubbing his eyes with the back of his arm. He glanced at Jessica, then to Zack, and finally to Gustav, before he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. "So what do we do?"

"Your mom thinks it's best that we begin moving everyone to the Ingrid Colony," said Gustav. "The buildings there are still standing, and maybe with a little work we can get everything functional. For now, this is our best option."

Felix nodded. "Yeah... yeah, that could work, at least for a while... but how will the colony last until we can get some new supplies?"

"Leave that part to me," said Gustav. "The Confederates took the Storehouse but they didn't take its contents; none of the items in there were actually government property. I'll make sure everyone can last until we can come up with a plan, or go find a different job."

Felix nodded in agreement. "That may be best... but if anyone is going to have a chance at a normal life again we need to make some big money, and quickly."

"We have to worry about the colony first," said Gustav. "We have to move everyone over to Ingrid, and then get the place operational. Once that's done we can start working on providing for everyone and getting them back on their feet, getting their debts paid off, and helping them any way we can."

"The militia also need new weapons," said Zack. "Confederacy took the armoury and a good number of the guns that were in it, since the only ones actually licensed to have guns

were Commander Zambrano, a few militia guys and, of course Amber. But, because her guns weren't registered in the armoury database they found a way to take those too."

"Then there's the clinic; with it gone, Dr. Hanson and I have no place to work," said Jessica. "We need to get the one at Ingrid up and running, and get it stocked up, along with making sure the defenses at Ingrid are in working order; we most of our weapons gone, we'll be relying on the colony defenses if the Gelks should chase us there."

Felix cringed; there was so much to do... they needed money to get everything done, and they needed a way to make that money fast. This wasn't a tomorrow solution –the kind they could wait for, they needed a now-or-never solution, something that could at least buy them time. For now, they just needed to get the colonists to a safe location, get them sheltered and fed, and only the Mara's Hope could do that.

The ship was *still* the only hope of the colony.

Felix's expression hardened to a look of determination, finding strength in his limbs again as he forced himself to stand, the others joining him as he returned to his feet, his tail curling behind him as he took another deep breath and exhaled.

"Let's get to work," he stated.

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Fortunately, the Mara's Hope didn't have to do all the carrying. The Confederates had missed the skimmers and fishing boats that belonged to some of the colonists, including Brunhilda's own skimmer. Each one took as many passengers as possible as they followed the Mara's Hope across the sea to Ingrid Colony, wanting to get there before the sun set, where their ocean trek would catch the attention of the Gelks below.

The Hope itself had to make several trips nonetheless, not only for colonists, but for supplies and personal belongings, for which some volunteers helped them load everything aboard the ship. The sun was setting by the time the empty colony grounds had been stripped clean of everything that was left. It was with a heavy heart that Felix left the grounds behind for the last time, grounds where he had spent his entire life; where he'd grown up. He thought back on his life there, back to his childhood and adolescent days; for the longest time, he wanted nothing more to get off of that island, even to see the world he'd been left with, and now he wanted to stay, but with nothing to stay for.

*Funny how you never ever miss something until it's gone... he thought. Then you find yourself wanting nothing more than what was taken from you.*

Without another thought, he steered the ship away from the island, and never looked back at the home he'd never be able to return to again.

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Ingrid Colony.

Felix remembered the last time he was here; when he and Zachary had first found the Mara's Hope; a ship left behind by the former owners of the colony, remarkably well-

preserved, and after a few repairs, capable of flight. It didn't feel as strange as he thought it would to move here, to live in this abandoned, unmaintained colony, since he was already quite familiar with it. Long before he ever found the ship, he had often come here on salvage runs, but it wasn't until walking to the far side of the colony he had spotted the ship standing by its lonesome on the landing pad, and that day had changed his life.

Now, the colony where they had scavenged for machine parts and other kinds of scrap metal was going to be the new home of the Mara Colony. There was barely anything left, now; the place had been stripped of almost everything in working order, but the techies of Mara had managed to secrete away enough components from the Collection Agency to get at least a few things working.

Brunhilda, Amber and the Militia had already begun organizing the colonists and returning their belongings to them, so they could start finding themselves a shelter. Each person would be granted living space in the pre-fabricated houses left behind when Ingrid was deserted; most were in fairly rough condition, but still inhabitable, and their weather-proofing was still intact. It wasn't going to be comfortable, for anyone, but at least they would be liveable for the time being. Unfortunately, there were not enough for everyone; Ingrid had not been as large an operation as Mara, and therefore had fewer houses. Most colonists were willing to share with those less fortunate, but even in the harmony of the Mara colony, some were not.

Felix found himself a smaller house at the end of the colony, and was about to walk in when two colonists appeared from around the corner; a mother wolf and her daughter. "Oh, sorry Felix," she said.

Felix knew this wolffess; her name was Roberta, one of the ration house crews, working alongside Gustav. She was the main distributor for food to the colonists. She was a generous woman, and soft-spoken, sometimes timid, but strict about fairness amongst the colonists, ensuring nobody was given any more or less than the next, and priority was to the youngest colonists first.

"For what? You didn't spook me," replied the dolphin in assurance.

"We're... we're still looking for a place of our own," said Roberta. "I was hoping this one wasn't claimed yet because it's so tiny but, looks like it's yours." She patted her daughter's head. "We'll find another one."

Felix looked into the house briefly, and then at Roberta. "Nah; I haven't claimed it yet, and you and your daughter need a place." He stepped aside. "Go ahead; you can have this one. I'll find another."

"Are you sure? I've heard there aren't many left..."

"If I have to, I can always just sleep on my ship. My bunk may not be cozy but it's a place to sleep, after all, and I spend more time there than at home anyway," assured Felix.

Roberta smiled at him. "Thank you, Felix... your mother is truly bless to have such a fine young man as her son," she complimented him, and led her daughter into the house.

Felix shut the sliding door behind them, and tucked his hands into his pockets as he headed up the street, wandering through the colony.

As time progressed, it became clear to Felix that there'd be no space for him in the colony itself. All of the houses were claimed, and the kinder families who might have given him a place had already done so for someone else, or did not have the room to spare. Part of him began to regret giving the house to Roberta and her daughter, until he remembered, if it had not been him wandering about looking for shelter, it'd have been both of them. He could not have done that to a mother and her child; he chided himself for even thinking it, and declared that he might as well just stay on the ship. It'd be enough for himself.

Eventually, he came to the edge of the colony, where a Salt Water Separator rested by the wall. He spotted Zack, at work on the Separator with the other colony technicians, and walked over. The rabbit saw him coming, and stood up from his work at the separator to greet his friend.

"Hey Felix; any luck finding a house?" Zack asked.

Felix shook his head. "None left. The whole colony is already full," replied the dolphin. "What about you; any luck?"

Zack grimaced. "Looks like I'm movin' back in with my folks. Nothing against them but, I had just gotten my own place only a month ago, and now I lost it and am right back where I started," he complained, and then sighed. "Yanno, I'm probably just going to stay on the ship. Least there I can find some privacy."

"Not as much as you think; I'm going to be staying there too," Felix pointed out. "Seems we'll be roommates *and* shipmates, huh?"

"Long as I keep the bigger room," returned Zack, jerking a thumb up at Felix.

Felix chuckled. "Right," he said. "And how's your work here going?"

Zack looked over his shoulder at the separator. "Well thankfully we never scavenged this one," he stated. "So it has all of its parts; just needed a light cleaning and we'll be getting some clean water and cooking salt into this colony in no time."

"Not enough for us to start up our business again, though," Felix remarked, sadly.

Zack returned the sadness through facial expression. "Unfortunately, no... using just this one to keep the ship and the colony supplied with water will max this thing out; try throwing in business purposes, we're biting off way more than we can chew."

"I know, Zack. I guess our business in the salt trade is over, despite only starting it six, seven months ago?" He sighed in exasperation. "I guess it's just private contracts from here on out... hopefully those will be enough. Lucky for us, a business license isn't required for local courier work; only long-distance type work, like going into other sectors."

"Yeah... but we're gonna have to do something like that eventually, buddy; we should see about getting one of those licenses," stated Zack. "It'd make us seem more professional at least."

"I suppose so," said Felix. Suddenly, he perked up, and eyed Zack quizzically. "Wait... since when did you worry about professionalism, Mr. 'Showgirls Magazines in the Engine Room'?"

"Hey! That's some good reading material, bro!"

Felix laughed. "Yeah, with your paw working some pumps, if you get my meaning."

"Dude, there's *people* in earshot of our conversation; put a cork in it!" Zack hissed.

This time, Felix was not the only one amused by how flustered Zack was getting. There was a roar of laughter from the technicians, all at the expense of the rabbit at the revealing of his dirty little secret. Zack gave Felix a cold, hard stare. "I'm going to *get* you," he said.

"Yeah, you keep thinking that, buddy," returned Felix, patting Zack on the head like a pet. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah, scram; some of us got work to do," Zack scolded, although Felix knew he was only joking.

The dolphin continued to make his way through the colony for a while; he saw Amber helping the militia stockpile whatever weapons they still had. For the first time, she didn't seem so disgusted by the presence of Commander Zambrano, nor did the normally sexist militia leader seem so bothered by her knowledge. Deciding to leave them to work, Felix carried on with his walk, looking for something he could do to help.

He found his way over to the decommissioned clinic, and saw Jessica carrying a box of supplies inside. Walking over, he peered into the clinic, seeing her hand the box to Dr. Hanson, who proceeded to place it in the store room, organizing the shelves based on the products they had at their disposal. Knocking on the door frame, Felix announced himself, and stepped into the building.

"Everything going well in here?" Felix asked.

"So far," replied Hanson. "We're just having some minor difficulty with the cold storage unit though."

"What's wrong?" Felix inquired.

"The temperature is too high, and the thermostat in it doesn't seem to be working," replied the doctor.

"Want me to take a look?"

The doctor looked out at him briefly, before shrugging. "Well you are more qualified," he admitted, and turned to Jessica. "Show him where it is, won't you?"

"Sure," replied Jessica, stepping out of the store room and leading Felix to the next door -conveniently marked 'cold storage room'- and opened the door.

Felix stepped into the room; he could already feel the temperature in the room was off, and immediately began looking for the thermostat. He found it, tucked neatly behind a shelf, and studied it; the room temperature was much higher than it should have been for proper storage of items in this room, and despite being adjusted to a cooler temperature the room remained too warm.

"I need some tools; going to have to take off the thermostat and have a look behind it," said Felix, stepping out of the room. "Be right back."

"Okay," returned Jessica.

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When Felix came back to the clinic a few minutes later, he got to work on finding out the problem with the cold storage. After removing the thermostat and checking its inner components, he found the problem wasn't with the thermostat itself; it was working fine, but

the refrigerant that kept the room cold and its contents preserved was the problem; there was a leak somewhere, letting the refrigerant out and preventing it from properly cooling the store room. Felix spent at least a half an hour looking for the rupture, eventually going outside and finding a hole in the back of the clinic where it had rusted away from its ten years of neglect.

Jessica, who had accompanied him, stared at the hole curiously. "Can you patch it?" She asked.

"I can, but that's just going to be a temporary fix," replied Felix, laying down on his back next to the hole and shining a flashlight into the hole. "And it won't really fix the core of the problem; it's not just the room that's compromised, but the line that directly supplies the refrigerant gas to the room is ruptured; I can't patch that, I'm going to need to replace it."

"Do you have anything that can work?"

"Maybe," replied Felix. "They use the same kind of hose as any household refrigerator, but the ones for storage rooms are usually longer. I may have one in the parts drawer of my tool chest on the ship that'll work but if it's too short, we'll have to get another one. I'll have to sterilize it first too, so it doesn't spit toxins into the room."

Jessica sighed. "Why do I get the feeling we'll be jury-rigging this whole colony for months?"

Felix sat up and gave her a weak smile. "We both knew this place wasn't going to be in working order, Jess," he pointed out. "But luckily for us, it's still pretty solid; we can at least keep this place going for a few years, as long as we're on top of its issues."

Jessica looked at him for a moment, returning his weak smile. "I guess it's good that the colony has so many technicians and engineers, right?"

Felix chuckled. "Right..." His gaze fell somewhat as memories of earlier that day returned to him; even in the gloom of dusk, Jessica could see the shame on his face. "Hey Jess... about what happened on the ship, when I..."

She held up her hand. "It's okay Felix," she assured. "You reached a boiling point; we all did, and we all took it very hard in our own way."

"I didn't see anyone else having a meltdown," remarked Felix, darkly.

"Doctor Hanson did," said Jessica, earning a curious look from Felix. "When you went back to the ship, I found him actually crying; he assured me it was nothing –you know how he is- but I know he's just as hurt as anyone else in the colony. Some are just better at hiding it, but what happened hit you the hardest because it's only thanks to you flying that ship any of us could even make a living here."

"A sense of accomplishment, utterly destroyed by everything you work for being undone, would drive anyone to a breaking point. I'm just glad that you weren't one of the especially sensitive ones."

"Especially sensitive?" Felix asked.

"Some people would have killed themselves after what happened today," replied Jessica. "I think the only reason nobody has is because we're all used to dealing with such hardship; we lived with it for ten years, and we may live with it another ten yet, but if we don't hold our ground and keep trying while we have a chance, then it's all for nothing."

Felix felt somewhat surprised by the depth of her words, never knowing Jessica was so wise—he'd never thought she was unwise, but she was speaking with experience that someone her age should not have had yet. Just a sign of the strength forged into her very being by the life she had lived. *If only I were as strong as her*, he thought, humbly. "Either way, Jess... thank you, for being so supportive. You, Zack and Gustav... I know I've said it before but I'm honoured to have you three as part of my crew."

Jessica smiled at him. "I'm happy to be a part of it," she said.

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After doing what he could to fix the cold storage unit of the clinic, Felix managed to make the hose he had fit and provide the refrigerant needed to the room, and with Jessica holding a light for him, he patched the hole to keep it safe from the elements. With that, he said goodbye to Jessica, and resumed his walk around the colony to see where else he could offer a helping hand.

He found Gustav at the new storehouse; the orca had loaded the last of the crates of supplies into storage and locked the door before turning to see Felix approaching. "Hey Felix," he said. "Are you doing okay?"

The dolphin nodded. "Yeah... I'm fine," he said. "Nothing a little work couldn't fix; any way I can help out?"

"Sorry; just finished," replied Gustav. "Got enough supplies in here for three weeks if we use the old rationing system again; colonists aren't going to be happy but, not much choice if we're going to live until we get some business going."

"About that," said Felix. "What do you suppose we should do? Salt trading is out of the question, now; without a business license we can't sell it legally, and we only have one separator -not enough for a business."

"No... could we just continue taking shipping jobs?"

"We can, but only local ones now. Still some of those pay pretty well." The dolphin looked around the colony, as if searching for someone. "By the way; have you seen my mom? I wanted to talk to her."

Gustav frowned. "Well... She requested she be given the house up by the Solar Power Generator, up on the ridge." He pointed to the west.

"*Outside* of the colony?" Felix asked, incredulously. "But what if the Gelks come here?"

"They'd never find her up there; it's too high for them to see, and there's no way up there except via an elevator built into the ridge," assured Gustav. "But she claimed that particular house, despite it being one of the smallest and most run-down of all the ones on this isle. I think she considers it a proper exile for herself..."

Felix gawked at Gustav. "Why would my mother want to exile herself?"

"Because, she took Albert's words pretty hard," replied Gustav. "Along with what happened to the colony... I think she blames herself, just as you did, for what's happened to everyone here."

“That... that...!” Felix babbled incoherently, unable to find words to describe his astonishment. “That’s ridiculous! She’s not to blame for anything that happened here; Albert’s a liar, and a crook! She shouldn’t listen to anything he says!”

“You and I know that, but she doesn’t believe it herself,” said Gustav. “So, she claimed the house, and volunteered to maintain the generator up there. “

“But she’s not an engineer; she’s the manager.”

“Not anymore,” replied Gustav. “Or at least, she claims she no longer is. When you went to the ship, she said something about planning to step down as the manager of the colony, once she found someone else to take her place.”

“So she’s running from the responsibility she’s held for ten years?”

“Her spirit and her heart are broken, Felix; she needs time to recover.”

“This colony needs her!” Felix exclaimed. “Nobody else can take her place; my mother is the only one who knows anything about management and leadership!”

“What about Zambrano?”

“Especially not him,” returned Felix, spitefully. “Zambrano may be a good leader in a fight, but he’s wrong for the job; he doesn’t believe in equal rights, especially not for females, and he is from an old line of thinking with little ability to adapt to new ways. If someone like that leads the colony, this whole place will go down in no time; it’s only thanks to my mother everyone on this oversized aquarium survived for so long, and it’s only through her they’ll keep surviving.”

“I agree,” returned Gustav bluntly. “But it’s her choice, Felix.” He put a hand on the shoulder of the dolphin. “Just give her some time, and I’m sure she’ll come around. She just needs to mend for a while; let the scars heal.”

Felix scowled, turning his gaze towards the ridge, barely able to make out the house on the ridge with the fading light in the west, his mind in turmoil wondering why his mother would want to do this to herself. In frustration, he shook his head. “I need to go talk to her,” he said.

“Might not be a good idea just yet, Felix,” stated Gustav. “She needs her space for a bit. Trust me; wait until after she’s at least slept it off.”

“She may be hurting, Gustav,” stated Felix. “You saw how I reacted to everything that’s happened; I know my mom, and I know she’s just as sensitive as I am. If I don’t go check on her now I may find something I’m not going to like when I finally do.”

Gustav, after only a moment of thought, nodded in agreement. “I guess you’re right... Just be careful; it’ll be dark soon and the lights aren’t working yet.”

“I will,” promised Felix. “And tomorrow, we’ll head to Denver XII and start looking up some jobs for us to take... I imagine we should apologize to Edwin too.”

Gustav nodded, sadly. “Yeah... we’ve been selling him an unlicensed product; I guess we should have known that’d come back on us.”

“I only hope it didn’t hit him too hard,” stated Felix. “If word got out he was selling unlicensed salt his business would be ruined.” Felix felt a sudden pang of guilt in his heart. “By the stars, I hope we didn’t just drag him down with us...”

“We should make a point to see him when we get up to Denver XII.”

“Yes... but for now, I’m just going to focus on my mother...”

Gustav nodded to him again. “Go... I’ll be here.”

Felix smiled at the orca, thanking him before he turned, and made his way over to the colony gate. The dolphin walked with a brisk pace, not wanting to waste even a moment before he met with his mother. He still couldn’t wrap his head around it; why would Brunhilda give up on the colony so easily? Clearly the decision had been rash, but why wouldn’t she at least talk with him about it first? The recent events must’ve broken her even more than they had Felix...

He found himself breaking into a run, sprinting out of the colony grounds and towards the path that led up to the ridge where his mother had made her home. Rushing proved dangerous as he nearly slipped on the steep path as he climbed, but promptly righted himself and slowed down to a more controlled jog as he made his way up the rest of the ridge. Once at the top, he slowed to a walk, and carefully approached the house.

Felix knocked on the door to the house. No answer. He knocked again, and still there was no response. The dolphin began to get a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach; he tapped the button to open the door, surprised to find it unlocked, and walked into the house, looking around the room. “Mom?” He called.

There was still no answer. He looked next to the door, and saw a pair of shoes on the door mat, freshly cleaned. She was clearly home. The rest of the house had already been tidied up as well, at least enough to look presentable. Had she simply just fallen asleep somewhere after doing some extensive housework?

Felix stepped from the foyer and into the living room, and saw his mother lying on the couch, still and looking comfortable. Felix felt some relief fill his body, and let out a sigh, letting his tension reduce as he stepped over to her, kneeling down to look at her face. Her expression was so sad, it made Felix wish she were awake so he could talk to her, let her know that everything would work out.

He reached over to touch her face, to push some hair from her eyes, but stopped as his palm hovered over her nostrils...

She wasn’t breathing.

“Mom?” Felix asked, immediately moving closer to her and putting a hand to her cheek; her skin was cold and sweaty, and when he checked her pulse, to his dread, he found it was far faster than normal. “Oh no... no, no no! *Mom!*” He screamed, loud enough perhaps the entire colony heard him, and without another thought, he immediately turned and ran for the door, running outside and cupping his hands around his mouth as he screamed for help...

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“It was an overdose,” said Jessica as she met with the others, outside of the curtain separating them from where Brunhilda slept, supervised by Dr. Hanson. “According to the symptoms, painkillers to be exact... a lot of them.”

“How much?” Amber asked.

“Way too much,” was all Jessica replied. “Felix... I’m so sorry...”

"Why?" Felix asked, his voice somewhat raspy; screaming for help after he had found his mother had left his throat raw and sore, making speech a little harder than usual. "Why would she try and do that to herself, to *me*?! Why of all times would she...?!" He grabbed his head in fury, falling to his knees. "Dammit all!"

He felt Gustav kneel down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Felix... I'm sorry too... I tried to talk you out of going to see her, but... I never expected she'd do something like this. If you hadn't have gone, we'd have lost her."

"I don't think any of us realized just how much what happened devastated her," said Amber. "Brunhilda is not a weak woman, but even the strongest wall goes down if you hit it with enough force in the right place."

"Jess..." Zack asked, weakly. "Will she be okay?"

"If Gustav had not carried her here as fast as he had, she might not be. We've given her something to purge the drugs from her system; as long as she rests, she'll be okay," promised Jessica. "But Dr. Hanson suggests we keep her under supervision until she wakes up."

"I'll stay," stated Felix.

"No, you won't," Amber stated firmly.

"She's my mother," Felix returned to the shark, coldly.

"In your condition, Felix, you'd only make things worse," Amber remained firm as she spoke. "You're upset with her; if you're not given time to cool down, you could say something you'll regret later. It's better if someone else stays with her." Her expression softened. "I'll stay and watch over her for the night."

"But I..." Felix paused, and knew in his heart that Amber was right. He was *furious* with his mother right now; as much as he didn't want to be, he was nonetheless, and that rage would only cloud his judgement if she were to awaken and he'd vent his frustration on her; such a thing would only prompt her to try again. With a sigh of defeat, he looked at Amber. "You're right... I can't be the one to see her when she wakes up. But Amber... please, let me know when she does."

"I won't leave her for a moment, Felix," the shark promised, her normally stern face softening to a look of sympathy. "But for now, you better go and get some sleep. We've all had a really long day, and we've got more to do tomorrow."

"Yes... we have to go to Denver XII, and start finding work," agreed Felix.

"Do we really have to do it so soon?" Jessica asked. "We've all been through so much; if we push ourselves too far, we could all collapse."

"Every moment we waste, the colony will get into more trouble," returned Felix. "It's up to us; we're the only ones who can do anything." He took in a deep breath. "Gustav, Zack, I want you two to compile a list for me; we won't need it too soon, but we need to know what the colony is in the most immediate need of. We'll use what's left of our money to get that first and make sure the ship is in good condition. Tomorrow, we'll head to Denver XII, and look for some more work."

"No more work for you today, Felix," stated Jessica insistently. "We've all been running around like mad Gelks since the sun came up and now it's well past midnight, but you were still flying that ship while we were all sleeping, so you especially, go get some sleep."

Gustav and Zachary both agreed, and with that, the group left the clinic, except for Jessica and Amber, who remained to keep an eye on Felix's mother. The dolphin stuffed his hands into his pockets, walking with the orca and rabbit back to the Mara's Hope –it turned out that Gustav had not found a house either, and at this point there would have been none left for him to claim.

"Didn't anyone on the ship claim a house?" Felix asked.

"Nope," Zack returned, bluntly, but not with his usual optimism. "Aside from me living with my folks, the five of us are homeless; the ship is our house, our transport, our job... our lives."

"To be honest, maybe it's for the better," said Gustav. "We spend more time on the ship than we do here, and we already splurged two months ago to get all the furniture fixed up, so, there's really no reason we can't live on the ship."

"I suppose not," agreed Felix. They were already nearing the landing pad where the ship waited –one thing Felix liked about Ingrid Colony, is that unlike Mara, the landing pad was actually inside of the walls, not down by the shore at constant risk of getting sucked into the ocean. He felt better about where it was now.

But his thoughts... they endlessly continued to drift back to his mother. As much as he wanted to be angry at her for doing something so selfish as trying to take her own life, he couldn't help but silently pray she would survive... she was the only family he had now, and if he lost her, he'd have no one. He rubbed his neck where the soreness persisted, wishing he had some hot tea to sooth the scratchy feeling in his vocal cords.

The three males boarded the ship, and said goodnight as they headed to their respective rooms. Felix closed his door behind him, and fell onto his bed; once off his feet, a wave of exhaustion, heavier than a hundred of the bags of salt he used to transport fell over him, followed shortly by grief and fear, his mind constantly drifting back to his mother as he wondered if she'd live... He dragged himself up to the front of his bed, pulling the covers over himself and wept quietly in the dark.