

Voyages of the Mara

Chapter 6: First Offense

It had been a dreamless night for Felix, but he got the sleep he needed for the next day. After Amber and Jessica boarded the ship the shark went for a nap in her room, while the doe checked in with Felix, informing him of his mother's condition. She was still sleeping, but she had stabilized, guaranteeing she would pull through. The news had relieved Felix of some of the burden he felt, knowing she'd live, and making a point to go and speak to her whenever they returned home to Trident IV.

They flew out to Denver XII before noon, arriving at the space station within hours, and split up for the tasks; Felix and Amber went to look for jobs, Jessica went to see Edwin, and Zack and Gustav went to go shopping for some of the supplies the colony needed; Zack's mechanical knowledge would help them identify the parts some of the machinery they needed would be, and Gustav could carry most of it himself, so they wouldn't need to rent a hover dolly.

The rabbit and orca wandered through a store that sold the components they were looking for. Zack led the way through the aisles, identifying various machine parts on the shelves and where they would be needed; he tried to spot the most affordable items without going too far down in quality, not wanting to have to be back to this store again in less than a month to buy the same parts again.

"Let's see... oh! Filtration unit; separator needs one of those," Zack muttered, picking the item in question and adding it to the floating shopping cart led by Gustav. "High efficiency light spheres; need those for the colony searchlights. Now we need... shit, they're all sold out of those? Okay, we'll have to postpone that one, and..." He glanced at the contents of the cart and around the store. "Yeah I think that takes care of the big ones. Should be enough to get all the colony utilities in property working order, for now."

"Sure we didn't miss anything?" Gustav asked.

"Oh we missed several things," replied Zack. "They're just out of our price range or out of stock right now." The rabbit shook his head. "But this should take care of the bigger stuff."

Gustav noticed the solemn expression of Zack's face, feeling as if he were looking at a different person. The Zack he knew would have been bouncing around the store like a rubber ball, looking at every piece of tech he could find. However, this Zack was prioritizing, focused and looking only for what they needed.

"Zack," began Gustav. "Are you feeling okay?"

The rabbit turned to look at him, eyeing him quizzically. "Yeah, sure; why?"

"You're just acting a lot differently than the Zachary I know," returned Gustav.

The rabbit flashed his trademark grin, the kind that everyone knew him to give when he was excited or gleeful, but Gustav only answered him with a stare that said 'I know you're faking that' without words needing to be said. Zachary tried to keep it up for a moment before

he slouched, the smile dropping from his features. "Sorry, big guy," he said. "It's not in my nature to be a downer but... after everything that happened yesterday... all that happened just so freakin' fast, I think my brain's still trying to process it all, and hasn't quite caught up to the present moment yet."

Gustav walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "We all feel that way right now, Zack," assured the orca. "But don't let it change who you are, okay? Stay the Zack I know; it's part of what makes this team pleasant and balanced."

Zack smiled at Gustav. "Don't worry, Gustav," he winked and jerked up a thumb at the orca. "Nothin' is ever going to change this bunny."

Gustav chuckled. "That's more like it," he said.

The two proceeded to checkout, and paid for their items, having them boxed up before they exited the store. Gustav carried the heavier stuff—two boxes on his shoulders, while Zack carried only one in his arms, and exited the store. They followed the corridor to the trams, and got on board, taking them to where they would meet with the rest of the crew.

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"This is not good..." Felix mumbled as he and Amber left the job board, both of them utterly devastated by the lack of job listings. "All that's up there are sector-to-sector contracts and small time courier jobs; we can't fly to other sectors without a full business license and those courier jobs will barely maintain the Mara's Hope, let alone the colony or that debt!"

"We must be getting into the low season," grunted Amber, looking over the datapad in her hand, listing all of the jobs that had been posted on the doors, along with their overall payouts; none offered bonuses, being only localized. "Seems our luck just keeps getting worse and worse."

"That's an understatement," said Felix. "We'd have to take five of these jobs to even have a prayer but we can't be away from the colony that long; with the militia down to half its members they'll need us if the Gelks show up. The turret atop the ship may be our best defense against Gelk attacks from now on."

Amber nodded in agreement. "At least until we get the wall-mounted turrets working," she said. "I had a look at those too; easy enough to fix but the parts I need are pricey."

Felix ran a hand down his face. "Dammit... Amber, what're we going to do?"

The shark sighed in defeat. "I really don't know..." She said. "We're running out of options... if we only had a smaller ship we could use the courier jobs but, with our current one..."

"Can we sell it?" Felix asked. "If we sold or traded in the Mara's Hope could we buy a smaller ship?"

Amber shook her head. "Even though the GG-102 is still popular among small-to-medium sized merchant companies, our particular one is old, really old; the 102 is produced today as a fourth generation version, newly refurbished and enhanced with new parts. Ours however is one of the original models. It's over a century old, and so wouldn't hold much value

to dealers; the most we could hope to trade it for is a two-man crew shuttle, not another freighter ship.”

Felix wanted to hit something...

He had never been so angry before in his life; why was this happening to him? His friends and family; what had they ever done to deserve any of this? *They* were the ones abandoned by the Confederate Government so long ago, *they* were the ones who helped save Ithica VII from an enemy faction, and *they* rebuilt their lives from the ground up, with no assistance from the government, or anyone else.

Now, they were the victims; betrayed by one of their own fellow colonists, and robbed of everything they had gained by the same government who had abandoned them, destroying the lives of everyone he knew, and even driving his mother to try and take her own life! It made the dolphin's blood boil in his veins; all this time, he had tried to be a good person, laying his life on the line for his colony *and* for complete strangers on a faraway planet. Did that not entitle at least his friends to some comfort; some happiness? A *chance*?!

“I *hate* this sector...” growled Felix.

Hearing the word ‘hate’ from someone she had known to be so subtle and balanced, Amber actually backed away from Felix, feeling his tension, and the anger radiating from him like a furnace.

“We’ve been loyal citizens of the Confederacy,” the dolphin went on. “But the White Star government... doesn’t matter how much you give them, they take more than what you can provide when it suits them; economists before politicians, that’s what White Star is...” He clenched his fists. “Well... maybe one day they’ll get to see what it’s like when the tables are turned; when someone starts taking something from *them*.”

“That really doesn’t sound like you, Felix,” said Amber.

The dolphin looked over his shoulder at her. “Maybe it’s time for a change,” he said. “Clearly being the good guy isn’t doing any of us any favours.”

“You and I both know you don’t mean that,” stated Amber. “You’re one of the most altruistic people I’ve ever met, Felix Kaufmann; that, combined with your good heart and merchant skills is what helped the colony get back on its feet while still doing some good for others.”

“And what did it get us, Amber?” Felix asked. “We were robbed of everything our ‘good deeds’ brought us; the White Star Government has always been known for thinking about money long before they think about political affairs or their civilians; we saw that firsthand just yesterday, and Captain Noir even said as much when we met him; he hired us out of his own pocket and department budgeting, we weren’t hired by the Government itself.”

Amber paused; that reminder caught her off guard, somewhat. Felix was correct; their relief effort to Ithica VII had not been coordinated by the White Star Government, but by the Military, and though Noir had been willing to throw them a bone despite them being unregistered and unlicensed, the White Star Government itself had not been their employers, only Noir had. She had forgotten about that, admittedly.

“Maybe you’re right, Felix,” said Amber. “But what more can we do? All we have are these.” She held up the datapad. “We could try looking at another station but, the nearest one

we know of is Dory II in the neighboring system; long way to go just looking for a job.” She studied the pad. “Although, maybe if we used one of these jobs that’ll bring us close to that station, we can just stop there on the way back; maybe even take a job that’ll bring us back home again.”

Felix tilted his head at the thought, eyes rolling up as he considered it. “Yeah... maybe that could work,” he admitted, and held out his hand for the datapad. “May I see?”

“Sure,” replied Amber, passing him the datapad. “You’ve always been better with numbers than me.”

Gingerly, the dolphin took the pad, and examined its contents. “Which one did you have in mind?”

“Ice delivery from Midgard VI to the fourth moon of Sparta IX,” replied Amber. “If memory serves, it’s a military outpost; Sparta IX is one of the biggest weapons manufacturer worlds in the sector, and all of its moons serve as training grounds for new ground soldiers, since the weather conditions on each moon make it ideal. Every soldier in the Confederacy goes there to train. This one’s one of the big ones.”

Felix nodded. “Sounds like a plan,” he said. “We stop at Dory II on the way back, and...” He paused, noticing someone approaching out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head, and found Jessica had made her way back to them.

She looked grim.

“I’m guessing it didn’t go well with Edwin?” Felix asked.

“He... is pretty angry with us, yes,” replied Jessica. “Claims that we tricked him, and now blames us for his facing criminal charges for selling unlicensed product. And he said...” She paused, looking disgruntled.

“What? What did he say?” Felix asked.

“I better not,” replied Jessica. “Believe me; you don’t want to know. But the point is, he never wants to see us at his store again.”

Felix sighed. “I always thought the license we had would be all we needed. I mean we have an operator’s license for the ship and a trade license, but just because we weren’t licensed to produce it both we and Edwin were charged?”

“I admit, I didn’t know that either; Salt is such a common item, especially on ocean planets, I didn’t think you needed a license to produce it,” admitted Amber. “McCain sure didn’t hold anything back when he came after us...”

“That greedy dog...” growled Felix. “One day, I hope he gets what’s coming to him.”

“He will,” assured Amber. “Somehow, some way, he will. I just hope we’re there to see it.”

“Guys, please,” Jessica interjected. “I don’t want us all to keep brooding on this; it’s bad for our mentality. We need to stay focused on what is important.”

Felix sighed. “Ever the doctor, Jess,” he said. “Okay; I promise, I won’t bring it up again.”

“I promise as well,” agreed Amber. Her gaze drifted away from her friends, and she pointed past them. “The guys are back,” she said.

Zack and Gustav had finished their shopping, and come to rejoin the group, carrying with them a basket full of the parts they had purchased. Felix took inventory of everything they had, nodding in approval, until. "Wait, you didn't find any Reroute Cables?" Felix asked.

"They didn't have any left," replied Zack. "What did you need those for again?"

"Most power generating stations need them to distribute power evenly between themselves, the colony they power and an extra source of emergency power when the main supply goes out, and, at a control terminal, to be commanded to distribute more power to certain areas." explained Felix. "For example; Ingrid Colony is solar powered, unlike Mara which was powered by heat from a dormant volcano below our island, so in the case of Ingrid, it needs backup power when the sun goes down. Before we left I noticed the reroute cables for the generators were worn out, and since we didn't need any at Mara we didn't have any spares."

"Oh, I see," said Zack. "Well that makes sense."

Felix looked at the parts in the basket carried by Gustav, and then glanced around the station, noticing a nearby corner café called 'Cosmic Cappuccino' and turned back to his crew members. "Hey guys; why don't you all go get us some coffee? Zack and I will take these to the ship and meet you at the café over there." He pointed towards the little café.

"Sounds like a plan," said Gustav. "I could use a hot one right about now."

"Same here," agreed Amber. "Coming Jess?"

The doe nodded. "Sure; I'll go." She said, and looked at Felix. "What should we order for you two?"

"Ah, we'll decide when we get there," replied Felix.

"Yeah, no worries; we won't be long," added Zack.

The five friends agreed, and with that, Felix and Zack took the basket of machine parts, and began making their way back to the Mara's Hope while the others headed to the café. Felix walked briskly, carrying the basket under his arm with Zack walking beside him.

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"Alright, that's all of them," Zack said as Felix placed the last of the items into the storage locker, then set the basket aside and shut the locker, which Zack promptly keyed in the code to lock on the number pad when the door shut. "Hopefully these will help the colony for a while."

"It'd help a lot more if we'd found the reroute cables," said Felix. "I'll have to keep rigging them to make sure the colony keeps an even distribution of power to all of its facilities and the homes. Going to be dirty work too." He shook his head. "Life just doesn't seem willing to throw us a bone this week, does it?"

"Nope," agreed Zack. "But... nothing else we can do yet but press on."

Felix let out a long sigh. "I know... just doesn't make me any less pissed-off about it," he said, kicking at the wall in frustration.

The sound of it caught his ear; the hollow, slightly echoing sound of the panel he hit. Zack too reacted to the sound, his ears standing fully upright as if to listen for the sound again,

before he and Felix shared a brief glance, and slowly turned their gazes to the panel where the foot of the cetacean had struck the wall...

The panel he had hit was out of place.

"There's no way that would come loose just from a kick," Zack stated firmly, picking a pair of pliers from his pocket and ushering Felix aside as he knelt down and used the point of the pliers to pry the panel free, lifting it away from the wall with his gloved paws and setting it aside, peering behind it along with Felix to see what was inside. They expected to just find the circuitry of the ship beyond, but this part of the wall had none; beyond this wall went nowhere but straight out into open space if one went through the next several layers of Quintanium that protected the interior.

Instead, they found a small, open spot, but it was not empty; inside was a datapad, covered in some mild dust as a sign of just how long it had been in there. Zack brushed some of the dust off with his paw, looking at the datapad curiously, and sharing another glance with Felix before he pressed the power switch on its top; the buttons and screen of the pad illuminated with life, but before the contents could be revealed, it prompted them for a password.

"Ever seen this before?" Zack asked.

"Never," replied Felix. "Suppose it was left in there by the people who used to own this ship?"

Zack shook his head. "We'd have found it if it was; we tore this thing inside and out getting it ready. This was put in here after the fact. Big question is, who'd go to the trouble of cutting out a panel to hide this thing?"

Felix thought back to the day after they had the Mara's Hope repaired; back to when they had first come to Denver XII. He remembered the gangsters that had tried to take over the ship when its repairs were done; particularly the large wolf who had led them, the wolf he'd gunned down by his own hand. The one known on ads for the sector's most wanted as 'Slash', who later the crew had learned was a notorious smuggler for illegal salvage, working for the Nebulan Pirates.

He conveyed these thoughts to Zack, reminding the rabbit of that fateful day; Zack remembered all too well, having been shot in the back by Slash. "Ugh... almost wish I didn't," he said, but Felix's implication quickly dawned on him. "You think this datapad was his?"

"Unless one of our crew stuck it in there, it has to be," replied Felix. "Think you can crack it?"

"I can try, but some of these pads and portable terminals are often wired to lock out intruders if the wrong password is entered too many times," explained Zack, standing up and walking over to his desk at the other side of the room. Felix watched the rabbit as he opened a drawer and pulled out a portable terminal, pulling a small cord from it that he plugged into the side of the datapad, the orange lights on its front suddenly turning blue.

"Okay, step one, figure out the password," began Zack. "Or find a way to bypass it."

Felix remained silent, letting Zack concentrate, watching him with his lips tightly pressed together as the rabbit worked his magic with the device. It took several long uncomfortable moments before Felix heard Zack chuckle in satisfaction.

“Well that wasn’t so hard,” said Zack. “Slash only used a four letter password; easy to crack.”

“You’re in?” The dolphin asked, stepping over to his friend’s side.

“Yeppers; now, just to find out what dirty little secrets Slash was hiding on this thing,” returned Zack, punching a few more buttons with the tips of his fingers. “And... viola.”

Felix, peering over Zack’s shoulder, and the two began to read the contents of the items. Within, they saw three program folders; each one marked with a different; one was written simpler ‘Dealers’ but the other two were written with acronyms Felix didn’t understand: ‘S.I’ and ‘I.I.H.D’. “Pull up that ‘S.I’ one,” he said to Zack.

The rabbit complied, tapping the folder in question, and from inside a list of items, followed by a scrolling list of holographic pictures, appeared on the datapad. Zack pressed the enlarge button, and the image seemed to lift away from the screen, the terminal projecting the contents into midair, hovering above it and giving them a close-up view of the contents. At the top, they could see ‘Stash Inventory’ in bold lettering, informing them what the ‘S.I’ stood for, and Zack began to read the contents aloud.

“Nocturnian energy cells, rifle stocks, barrels, lens mounters... what the heck is Sephilon? And size two-by-three lens for microwave laser?” Zack muttered. “Microwave? What, they use lasers to cook food out there somewhere?”

“I think it’s referring to weaponized microwave radiation,” corrected Felix. “The kind used to damage enemy ships or soldiers.”

“Oh, that kind of microwave,” said Zack, understanding. “But I thought the Confederacy used condensed infrared plasma weapons?”

“We do,” replied Felix. “Microwave lasers are used by the Grunikan Empire, and Sephilon is a crystallized gas they use to power their handheld weapons, such as their wrist blades and firearms,” replied Felix. “This entire list is filled with Grunikan weapons components; the Sephilon is used to provide the energy weapons with power that’s converted into the microwave radiation focused through the lens into a laser beam.”

“Wait, so Slash was stashing Grunikan weapon components?”

“And more, by the looks of it,” said Felix, scrolling the list down somewhat. “There’s a lot more than just weapons on here; ship components, body armour, containers of Sephilon crystals.” He looked at Zack. “We found Slash’s inventory list of dirty dealings.”

“Whoa, mama... suppose we ought to smash this datapad now, or turn it over to the Enforcement?” Zack asked.

Felix was about to agree, when something made the word fall flat on his tongue. Before he understood why he was suddenly doing what he was doing, he reached past Zack, tapping the key to order the terminal to return to the previous screen, and his finger went towards the second acronym-titled item, ‘I.I.H.D’.

“Uh, Felix, what’re you doing?” Zack asked.

The dolphin froze, his finger hovering over the item; what was he doing? He pulled his hand back. “I... I guess my curiosity was getting the better of me.”

“Well who wouldn’t be curious?” Zack asked. “Suppose there’s no harm in taking a look, right? Not like Slash can use this anymore.”

Felix wanted to say no, worried about what they might find, but something urged him on; maybe his frustration; his desperation? He didn't know, but he nodded to Zack and agreement, a word dying on his tongue as the item list was opened, and they studied the contents within...

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"Are you two *freaking crazy?!* " Amber bellowed, a little higher than intended, earning them some disgruntled looks from people in the café. After an apologetic wave to every, she turned back to Felix and Zack, her stare hard and cold. "You guys found a list telling the location of illegal military equipment, and you're suggesting we go get it?"

"Felix, have you lost your mind?" Gustav asked.

"Guys, listen," began Felix. "I never said anything about the military equipment. I saw other items there; stuff just as valuable."

"Felix... that stuff is still illegal," stated Jessica. "Sephilon is prohibited in Confederate space because of how many crime syndicates across the sectors use it to make narcotic drugs—the effects of which are maddeningly addictive, almost irreversible, and overtime with kill every cell in a person's brain!"

"Not to mention how toxic it is on its own," added Amber. "One touch to a sore or open wound, and you're dead in minutes. Contact with your eyeball you're permanently blind, and touching your tongue with it will kill every nerve in your mouth—if you're fortunate. Felix this is just beyond stupid!"

"I know all that guys," stated Felix. "But just hear me out. I know this is a crazy idea; that's why I'm not so certain of it."

"Then why bring it up?" Gustav asked, sternly.

Felix folded his hands on the table before him, taking a deep breath; he was sickened that he was even considering this option. He never wanted to do dirty dealings; he wanted to be a legitimate businessman, but at that moment, a mountain of debt, a lack of credentials and resources in short supply had driven him and his crew to the edge. "Because we can use it to help the colony," returned Felix. "We don't need to use the materials ourselves, and nothing says we need to do this more than once; there's little we could use Sephilon for anyway. I say, we should just find it, take it to whomever Slash planned on selling it to, collect the money and leave; we're sitting on a treasure trove here that might be able to save our home."

"Or get all of us thrown in prison," Amber pointed out. "Look, I want to save the colony just as much as you do, Felix, but there's other ways to do it. What we're doing could get us in trouble with the laws of the Confederacy."

"And what have the Confeds done for us lately?" Zack asked, with startling coldness.

"That was McCain's doing, not the Confederacy itself," reasoned Gustav.

"Using Confederate law to rob all of us blind," Zack reminded. "Come on, Gustav; they abandoned us for ten fucking years and what the hell is the first thing they do when they come back? They want our money; they aren't there to rescue us, they aren't they to offer any help,

they aren't even there to offer to make us a recognized colony again. They just came to reach out..." he made a grabbing motion with his paw in the air above the table, "and rip everything away that wasn't nailed down or on fire... no scratch that; they took the Separators and our *homes* too, so they also took everything that was nailed down as well. Only thing they didn't steal were our dirty work clothes."

He let his arm fall to the table. "They left us with *nothing* guys; just a mountain of debt and no options for making a fresh start. Aside from the Mara's Hope have no assets, nothing to trade, nothing to sell, the trade contracts Brunhilda was offered went up with the rest of our home. It bears repeating this," he began tapping the table with each syllable as he spoke. "They. Took. Every. Thing."

"So what, you call this *payback*?" Jessica asked.

"I call this a way to *bounce* back," replied Zack. "This pad we found says Sephilon sells at eleven hundred credits per kilo of the shit and there's a hundred kilo's at that stash. That's a hundred and ten thousand credits, guaranteed right there, not to mention what else we can find, like..."

"Hang on, Zack," interjected Felix, putting up a hand and returning his attention to the crew, his gaze meeting theirs. He could Jessica and Amber, slightly moved by Zack's words, seemed to be the ones deepest in thought. But the expression on Gustav's face made his heart ache; the orca actually looked disappointed in him and right as he was about it, he had not said Felix was wrong... yet.

"You guys know how I operate," stated Felix. "I'm not out for self-interest; I only want to help my home. But as always, I will not make a decision without hearing your thoughts first. You've made it clear that this decision doesn't sit well with any of you; if it's that unacceptable then I'll destroy the datapad, and even go destroy those illegal items if you want, then we'll never speak of this again. But, we all know that if we do not pay off this debt the colony owes, as soon as possible, it'll continue to keep getting bigger, and it'll haunt them wherever they go. If we do this, it'll be to help them."

They considered his words, everyone in the crew exchanging glances as they studied each other's expressions. Gustav folded his hands before him, eyes shutting as a scowl crossed his features. Amber was the first one to speak, looking at Felix. "Well we've seen for ourselves that our options are limited," she said. "But you realize doing this doesn't just affect our reputations; whatever money we'd make doing this, the colonists who live on it could be held accountable as well."

"Therefore, this is a decision the five of us cannot make ourselves. Our colony may be filled with outcasts now, but some may still want to hold onto their ideals and take their chances out here, and we've no right to stop them either. I suggest we go back home to Trident IV, and we ask Brunhilda to address the issue directly to the colonists. Then, for those who want to leave... we should bring them here."

"I agree," said Jessica. "I want to help our home, by any means necessary, and I want to always be with the crew of the Mara's Hope. But this is not a decision we can make for ourselves; this must be made unanimously."

Felix looked at Gustav. "And your thoughts, big guy?"

Gustav didn't answer immediately; he sat there, motionless, breathing steadily as he considered what he had heard from the others. For a while, Felix thought the orca wasn't going to give an answer; he couldn't read the expression on his friend's face, and had never known Gustav to be so hesitant before.

But then... "I can't be a part of this."

Felix nodded. "I understand, Gustav. As I said, if any of you disagreed then I would destroy the datapad; we'll find a..."

"No," intervened Gustav. "Destroying the datapad won't do anything; the damage is already done. I won't be part of this; I'm out."

Though the answer did not surprise Felix, he still felt a sting to his heart as the words left Gustav's mouth. The others turned to the orca in dismay as well, clearly just as stunned by his decision. "Wait, Gustav... you're saying you're quitting?" Zack asked.

"It's nothing personal guys... I just don't want us to have to resort to such despicable ways to help the colony; there's always a better way, and we're trying to take a shortcut," stated Gustav. "Maybe we owe a lot of money but that's no reason for us to even consider turning to crime—even if it is for only one time, but the fact that any of you," he looked at Amber and Jessica, "you two most of all, are even considering this, is enough to tell me this is not the same crew I joined seven months ago."

He stood up from the table. "The people I worked with are the reason I stayed with this job; without them, it's not the place I knew anymore. I'm out." He placed a small credit chip on the table, tapping it a few times as a set of numbers appeared on it; money to cover his tab, and turned towards the exit. "I'll see you on the ship." And with that, the orca tucked his hands into his pockets, and walked out of café without another word.

The group sat in stunned silence, watching as their friend left them behind. For what felt like an hour, nobody said anything, until Jessica spoke, a mild tremor in her voice, her question directed at Amber. "What did he mean... 'you two most of all'?"

"I'm a soldier, you're a doctor," stated Amber. "We should be above doing things like this... but our backs are against the wall at this point; there's no work available that'll even cover the minimum payments of the debts the colony owes while simultaneously maintaining our ship and the colony's equipment, and we have no other way to make any money. It's just our bad luck it's the light season for freighting right now..."

"Do you guys agree with him, though?" Felix asked. "Do we really want to take this path?"

"Like I said, it's not a decision we can make ourselves, since it's not just *for* ourselves," returned Amber.

Felix gave her a hard stare. "That's not what I asked you."

Amber met his gaze, blinking noticeably at the way he looked at her, and then sighed. "I still am willing to do what it takes to help the colony. I wish there were a better way, but I saw that job listings board... we either do this, or we spend the next several years jury-rigging the Hope to make sure it doesn't die on us while we're out in space, just to save enough money to pay a few thousand credits in minimum payments every month." She looked at Felix again.

“Though if we had any alternatives, I would agree with Gustav, shoot that datapad to pieces and call it a night.”

Felix watched her for a moment, a little uncertain if he’d call that a clear answer, but he didn’t press her for any more and turned to Jessica. “And what about you?”

Jessica grimaced, but was able to give a coherent answer. “I’ll do anything to help the colony. We spent years hoping the Confederacy would help us; they didn’t. We try to help ourselves, they took everything away. I think ‘honest living’ is out of the question now; we have nothing we can build upon except an old ship. I’ll put the needs of the people I care about above all if I have to.”

“And you already know my answer,” returned Zack. “I say we go for it!”

“What we say and what the colony will say are two different things,” stated Amber. “We can’t do this without their blessing.”

Felix nodded in agreement. “Yeah... I can’t imagine *everyone* is going to like the idea.” He looked towards the entrance. “Not even some who we depended on.”

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The Mara’s Hope touched down nonchalantly at Ingrid Colony; in his distracted mind, Felix angled the landing slightly off, resulting in the ship shaking noisily as it dropped onto its second set of landing gear, but remained undamaged. Immediately after touching down, Gustav began to disembark the ship, not uttering a word to anyone aboard as he left, despite Zack’s attempts to make him reconsider his decision, but the orca would not speak to him about it, simply asking Zack to open the cargo bay so that he could unload the supplies and equipment they had brought for the colony.

As Felix went to help, he heard someone call out to him, and turned to face one of the colonists, who informed him that Dr. Hanson wanted the dolphin to come see him at the clinic as soon as possible. Thanking the colonist, Felix got to work, helping the rest of the crew unload the supplies.

Even as they worked, Felix heard Zachary talking to Gustav, and he could feel tensions rising between the two as Zack continued to beg the orca to stay. “Gustav, we need you, man; you’re one of us!”

“You’ve all forsaken yourselves; I won’t do the same,” he replied.

“Forsaken ourselves?” Zack echoed. “What does that even *mean*?”

“It means you guys have changed, and for the worse,” returned the orca. “The men and women I was working with would never consider something as despicable as shipping prohibited goods or working for gangsters; the people I knew were heroes, good folk, and most of all, honest folk.”

“Gustav we’re still the same people; we’re just...”

“Zack,” Felix interjected. “Enough, man. Let him go.”

“But Felix...”

“It’s his decision to make,” the dolphin interrupted again. “Let Gustav follow his own path, just as we all follow ours.”

Gustav said nothing as Felix walked over to stand next to him, but did turn to him when he saw the dolphin raise his finned hand. "No hard feelings, Gustav," he said with assurance, and no trace of anger in his voice.

Gustav looked at the hand of his friend for a moment before he looked Felix in the eye. "None," he said, before raising his own hand and grasping Felix's.

"It's been an honor working with you, Gustav," said Felix as they shook hands. "If ever you reconsider and wish to return, there'll always be a spot open for you."

Gustav wanted to say no, but felt the word die on his tongue. He couldn't just push away Felix, or any of the crew; no matter what he thought of what they were planning on doing, he knew his friends were still there; their actions might change, but inside were the things he admired and loved about them, and so answered Felix with only a nod before the two unloaded the last crate together, placing it on the dolly, and Gustav left with it.

Felix turned to the rest of the crew, eyeing Zack first, who was watching Gustav leave, along with Amber and Jessica, calling all of them to attention. "Meet with your families," he instructed. "Tell them that there'll be a colony meeting soon, and if you need to, tell them why. Everyone deserves to know how their future is going to be affected by whatever happens next."

"What will you do?" Amber asked.

"Doc Hanson wants to see me at the clinic," replied Felix. "I have a feeling I know why... so I'm going to go handle it."

"Felix," Jessica stated just as the dolphin turned to leave. "Remember... she's your mother, no matter what."

"I'll hear her explanation first before I make any sort of judgement," stated Felix, before he walked off without another word, the heels of his boots grinding in the dirt somewhat as he walked with tension in his limbs as if he were fighting an urge to go the other way...

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Felix stepped into the medical clinic; never before did it feel so grim to be in this place of healing before, but as he walked through the door, he felt a sickly feeling creep its way into his body, and almost wished he could turn and walk back out... but he knew he had to face this sooner or later, not only because he needed to talk to his mother, but he also needed to speak to the colony manager... and for him, they were one and the same.

As soon as Felix entered, he saw Dr. Hanson sitting at his desk by the door; the old crocodile, looking up over his reading glasses, stared at Felix. "Welcome home," he said.

"Thanks," he said. "Is she...?"

Hanson nodded. "She's waiting for you," he said, taking off his glasses and standing up. "I'll make sure nobody disturbs you."

"Thank you, Doctor," returned Felix with honest gratitude, stepping aside to let the crocodile stand at the door, his rather large form filling the doorway as he stood watch, preventing anyone from entering as Felix crossed the clinic towards the bed area, to where the curtains were drawn, and he knew that his mother waited.

*"Felix... Remember... she's your mother, no matter what."* The words of Jessica echoed in the dolphin's mind, and with a nervous swallow, he made the final steps up to the curtain, reaching up with his hand and pulling it aside. "Mom?"

"I'm here, son," a weak voice returned.

Through the curtain he walked, and stared at the bed, from which the tired face of his mother stared back at him, her face heavy with guilt as she looked at her son, both hands folded across her stomach. Felix approached the bed side, mild hesitation in his steps, but he urged himself forward, until he reached the stool placed at her side, and sat down, never taking his eyes off of her.

A long, uncomfortable silence was left hanging over them for what felt like hours; clearly neither one knew what to say to the other. Eventually, Felix just came forward and said what was on his mind. "Why mom," he asked, "Why'd you do it?"

Brunhilda's face soured, tears appearing at the lids of her eyes. "I'm sorry, Felix," she said, her voice breaking. "I was just cleaning the house when I started to get a headache, so I took something for it... but then, on impulse, I took more, and more and more, until suddenly I'd downed the entire bottle. I couldn't stop myself; my mind screamed at me to stop but... it just hurt so much..." Her eyes shut, a tear streaming down her cheek. "Everything the colony has fought hard for, everything they've endured, and they finally get another chance, only to have it taken away by the very people they put so much faith in... I couldn't bear it.

"And McCain's words," she carried on. "I couldn't get them out of my head; they were haunting me. I couldn't stop hearing them, even as I tried to take my mind off of them with the housecleaning. They drowned out all other thoughts, every protest of my mind, until it was too late for me to stop myself... and then, I felt so tired... I closed my eyes and..." Her eyes clenched, and tears streamed from both of them now as she rolled onto her side, burying her face in her pillow as she dared not look at Felix. "By the stars, I'm so sorry Felix!" She almost screamed, her voice barely clear through her crying. "I'm a terrible mother, to have put you through such a thing; to do something so selfish!" She curled up, balling like a child that had just lost something very precious. "I'm sorry..."

Felix couldn't contain his emotions... after feeling so enraged with his mother after her attempted suicide, now he saw the pain she was in. Any anger he felt was gone, and instead he was sharing her sadness. The dolphin stood up from his chair, walking around the bed to stand before his mother, prompting her to look at him. She stared into his eyes for a moment before she reached over with one arm and pulled him closer, sobbing more as her son laid a hand on her shoulder, trying to reassure her.

They were in the clinic for a long time, before eventually they had no more tears to shed. Felix wiped his eyes, choking somewhat as he looked at his mother again. "There's something I need to talk to you about," he said.

"Anything," she returned.

"Zack and I... uncovered something on the ship," he began, and went on to explain what they had found; the datapad they suspected had been left on the ship by Slash, the gangster summarily executed by Felix after attempting to steal the Mara's Hope months before, and on to its contents.

Brunhilda listened, a mixed expression forming on her face as she heard Felix's explanation, turning to shock as he told her what he was considering doing. Felix was fully and readily expecting his mother to forbid him from doing so, but just as he thought the words would leave her mouth, she hesitated, her eyes rolling to the side as she considered what she had heard from her son.

Then, "how did the others react?"

"Amber and Jessica were skeptical; they think we should consult the entire colony, not just decide amongst ourselves," replied Felix. "Zack is all for it, but I won't do anything without the opinions of my full crew..." He hung his head sadly. "Although... my crew became a little smaller as of yesterday."

"Why?" Brunhilda asked.

"Gustav quit," replied Felix. "Said he doesn't want to be part of this, and says that us even considering doing something like this is a sign we've forsaken ourselves."

This seemed to catch Brunhilda's attention; she had known Gustav ever since he had begun volunteering at the ration house, and he had even cooked for her and Felix on occasion. She never knew him to be a quitter... "Do you think he's right?" She asked.

"I don't know," returned Felix, admittedly. "But we've lost so much; I really don't see many options for us. Trade for independent ships like us seems to be slimming down; the jobs we found would barely cover maintenance costs for the colony or the ship, let alone both."

Brunhilda's face soured somewhat at that news, clearly hoping Felix had been able to find a different way. He noticed this, and spoke again. "But if there is another way, we'll find it," he promised. "I won't do this if the colony doesn't want us to. But that's why, mom, I need you to speak to them –to find out what they think; they still consider you the leader of this colony even if you yourself do not." He paused briefly. "So... can you help us?"

The older dolphin thought for a moment, before letting out a long sigh. "Yes... I'll address it to the colonists, and get their thoughts on this matter. At worst, they'll all agree to it, out of their anger for the Confederacy."

"We have to do what's right for the colony," Felix said.

"But is this really it?"

"I wish it wasn't... but we can't afford to wait for more jobs. This place is falling apart; if we don't keep it maintained, we won't have a home at all."

"Sad, but true..." The older dolphin sighed again. "Alright. As soon as Dr. Hanson clears me to leave, I'll send out the word."

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The results had not been what Felix expected.

Brunhilda was cleared the next day, and as promised, she had sent out a poll to the colonists describing the recent proposition by the crew of the Mara's Hope, and before the sun had even set, already the polls were being returned with the colony answers and comments on the issue. Originally expecting most of the colony to be against it, Felix had been ready to take another look at those job listings.

But when the poll came back, he had found the majority of the colony had agreed. In fact, most of the 'No' answers had come back from members of the militia; this didn't come as any surprise to Amber especially, as a former member. The Militia were as much law enforcement for the colony as they were its protectors; to suddenly be part of a colony that lived on dirty money would not sit well with them, especially not Commander Zambrano. However, the majority of the colony citizenry, far outnumbering the militia, had voted yes; comments varied, and most were full of such nonsense as they wanted the colony to thrive, but Brunhilda knew most of them were harboring a grudge to the Confederacy.

Nevertheless, the Hope crew had their objective... and their new job.

Gustav was at the ration house that day; he hadn't filled one of the polls himself but he had already heard the results of it. He was not pleased... but at the same time he was conflicted between his law-abiding nature and his instinct to do what was right for those that depended on him. With his mind in such turmoil, he was making mistakes, at one point even cutting himself by accident with a knife as he was chopping vegetables –something he very rarely ever did, and forcing him to thoroughly wash the vegetables after bandaging his hand, to make sure they were not contaminated.

"Gustav? You here?" A voice called from the front.

The orca looked up from his work, peering over his shoulder and spotting Brunhilda stepping into the building. He immediately set down the knife and stepped up to the front counter. "Hello, manager," he said, forcing a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Just a glass of water please," she replied. "And, a moment of your time, if you can spare it?"

"Of course; I'll be right with you," replied Gustav, turning to the water dispenser and grabbing a clean glass from the cupboard next to it. While the dispenser filled the glass, he removed his apron and set it aside, and then picked up the glass again before heading out front and joining Brunhilda at a table, calling back to Roberta that he was going on a break.

The ration house had once also doubled as a small diner, back when people had credits to spend at Ingrid Colony. Nowadays the furniture mostly sat unused, but Gustav kept it maintained, just in case that ever changed.

He placed Brunhilda's glass of water in front of her and seated himself across, waiting as she took a sip of the water before he spoke. "Now, what is it you wanted to discuss?" He asked, politely.

"Well," she began. "Felix tells me that you left the crew of the Mara's Hope. I was just curious as to why; you seemed so happy there."

Gustav frowned. "I was," he replied. "But this... new idea of theirs... I'm just not sure I can do it. I don't want to become a criminal."

"None of us do, Gustav," stated Brunhilda.

"Then why are you allowing it?" Gustav asked.

Brunhilda sighed. "I wish I didn't have to. But at this time, there is no other way. We need money to keep this colony in working order, and eventually evacuate it. But the jobs you all found at Denver XII just aren't enough, and we cannot start a business again without a license –which is another thing that costs money."

"Isn't there some other way, though?" Gustav asked.

"At this time, no," stated Brunhilda. "I would not have allowed this if there was... but I must adhere to the wishes of the colony. They want us to do this; maybe it is just to get even with the Confederacy but between maintaining this colony and that debt we now owe them, casual courier work just won't be enough."

"Couldn't we take out a loan to start a new business?" Gustav inquired.

"Not with the debt we owe," replied Brunhilda. "We would never be approved for it, and even if we were, salt is not exactly an item in high demand but it is all this planet has. We could trade it to a dozen space stations for twenty years and we still wouldn't pay off the Confederacy debt, let alone a bank loan as well. And it can take months to get a production license either way; we don't have months."

"Furthermore, the Confederacy is at war now; taxes and interest rates will escalate to fund the military operations against the Grunikan Empire, which with trade down will force the Confederacy banks to raise those even higher to keep up with the funding costs. We'll be looking at minimum payments to the debt of eighteen hundred to two thousand credits per month."

Gustav gawked. "Can they really raise it that high?" He asked, incredulously.

"Unfortunately, yes; in war time they can raise it as high as they need to," explained Brunhilda. "To make matters even worse, we're in a near-derelict colony; maintenance costs for this place will run into the high hundreds, plus the maintaining of the Mara's Hope—an equally old ship."

"So you see, Gustav... we're not doing this out of greed, and not just because we're angry with the Confederacy. We're doing it because we have no other options at this point." She gave him a sympathetic look. "I swear to you, from the bottom of my heart, I would take any other option if there were any. But trading those illegal items is the only readily available, and profitable option, for us."

Gustav grabbed his head in frustration. "Why did everything have to turn out like this?" He asked.

"I won't tell you what to do next, Gustav," stated Brunhilda. "But I still want to ask you... do you still want to be part of the Hope crew?"

"Of course I do," he replied. "But they're talking about becoming criminals; something I thought none of them would ever consider."

"Despite what we're doing, Gustav, they're all still the same people you've always known," assured Brunhilda. "I think you know that too. And even if your work changes, the people you're working with will not. Don't you want to stay part of that?"

"After I deserted them?" Gustav asked. "Will they even let me come back?"

"All you can do is ask," replied Brunhilda. "And the worst they can do is say no. Even if they do, you'll always have a place with us."

Gustav allowed himself a light-hearted smile to the manager. "Thanks... Brunhilda."

She smiled back. "Of course. You're like a big brother to my son; it only makes sense I'd treat you as such." Downing the rest of her water, she stood up from the table. "Now, I had better get back to my duties... and I believe so should you."

Gustav watched the dolphin as she left, before his gaze fell to the glass that he left, considering the hidden meaning behind her words. Could he really do this? He always had his job here at the ration house if the others didn't want him back... but he wanted to be part of the crew; to be with his friends. Gustav had been left there on Trident IV alone since his parents had passed away; his mother had died of illness, and his father in service to the militia. Thinking back on it, being part of the Mara's Hope crew had been like... being part of a family again.

It wasn't hard to decide.

He stood up, and peered back into the kitchen. "Roberta... can you manage here without me? There's somewhere I have to be."

The wolfess looked up as Gustav called back to her, and saw the look on his face. She smiled at him and nodded. "Go ahead; not much to do here today anyway."

Gustav returned the smile. "Thank you."

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"Alright, I think we have everything," said Zack as he and Felix carried the last box of supplies into the storage room. "We're all stocked up. Although... kinda looks crowded in this room now."

"Because we stocked it," stated Felix. "We never really were any good at managing space."

Zack frowned. "Do we really have to leave him, man?"

"He made his choice, Zack; Gustav doesn't want to be a criminal. I don't blame him; I don't want to be a criminal," the dolphin said. "But this isn't about what any of us want."

"Yeah, I know," returned Zack. "Still... I'm going to miss the big guy."

"Yeah... me too."

"Hey, why the long faces guys?" A familiar voice called from around the corner behind them.

The two young men turned, and spotted a face they knew well, standing by the wall looking around at them. But then, he looked past them, into the storage room, and chuckled. "By the stars, guys; I'm gone only one day and you already manage to make a mess of the store room. I guess I'll have to reorganize it," said Gustav.

"Gustav? You came back?" Zack asked, his expression quickly turning gleeful as he ran over and hugged the Orca. "Haha! I knew you wouldn't leave us, man!"

"Alright, alright, good to see you too, Zack," said Gustav, patting the gray rabbit on the back before looking at Felix. "Zack, you mind letting me speak to Felix for a second, in private?"

"Aw, do I really have to go?" Zack asked.

"Well I'm not technically back yet," said Gustav, looking at Zack again briefly before turning his gaze back to Felix. "That's up to the Captain."

"Well of course he'll let you come back, right Felix?" Zack asked, looking at the dolphin.

"Sure, but it sounds like there's something he wants to say," returned Felix. "Just head to your shop for the moment, Zack, please?"

"Oh alright," the rabbit agreed, reluctantly. He glanced at Gustav again. "It's good to have you back, Gustav."

"Don't celebrate yet," said Gustav, before he ushered the rabbit up the corridor, waiting until he was out of earshot before the Orca turned to Felix. "Mind if we talk on the bridge?"

"Not at all," returned Felix, turning and walking with the Orca out of the corridor towards the bridge, passing the gun turret where Amber had been working earlier, evident by a few tools laying in the chair, and through the open doorway into the bridge. The two of them seated themselves in the chairs on the bridge, and sat facing each other, waiting for whomever would speak first, although Felix intended to let Gustav say his peace first.

"Look, Felix," began Gustav. "I know I should probably be saying this to the whole crew, but I wanted to start with you... I said some things that I had no right to; the way I claimed you guys had forsaken yourselves, it was wrong of me. Even at my age, it seems I'm still capable of making rash decisions, and I assumed you guys had changed for the worse, and it was wrong of me."

"I understand now, you guys aren't the ones who have changed; everything we once knew, the lives we once lived, *those* are what changed, and I have to accept that. Even if I may not like it now, I feel my place is still here, aboard the Mara's Hope. So, if you would allow it... I would like to come back."

Felix smiled at the Orca. "I don't even need to consider it, Gustav," he stated. "I understand; you were upset, and reluctant. Believe me; I *still* don't want to go through with this but it's the only opportunity we have right now."

"I know," returned Gustav. "But... I must still ask just one thing."

"What's that?"

"We're going to be trading illegal items, that much I understand," began the Orca, looking Felix in the eye. "Smuggling, salvaging, trespassing, things that are harmless and, though illegal, do not put innocent lives in danger, those I can accept. But I will not ever be part of more serious crimes; I will not be a kidnapper, murderer and I will not attack civilian vessels. If you can promise me we will not become pirates, then I will stay with this crew for as long as you allow me to."

Felix stood up from his chair, laying one hand over his heart and returning the Orca's gaze as he, without hesitation, spoke. "I promise you, Gustav; I will never allow this ship to be used for black-hearted deeds such as those. Whatever we do with this new life we are about to enter, endangering the lives of others or selling them for money will never be among them, and I swear that on my life."

Gustav stood up as well, standing over Felix as the two stared at each other for a moment, a long uncomfortable silence forming between them, before the Orca beamed and held out his hand. "Then, consider me back on duty, captain," he said.

Felix smiled back, and happily grasped Gustav's hand, shaking it and nodding to him. "Welcome back, big guy."

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Four White Star Solar Cycles later...

The door creaked ominously as two pairs of hands pulled it open, exposing the dark room beneath the hatch in the ice meteorite. As soon as it was clear, a light on the barrel-end of a rifle was shone into the room, illuminating the airlock hidden beneath. The rifle moved in further, and a figure clad in a S.C.E –Self-Contained Environment- suit, floated in on zero gravity, followed promptly by two more, one of equal height carrying an air-tight metal container on his back, the other much larger than the first. The second approached the airlock door, linking a portable terminal into the control pad alongside it, and after a short hacking job, the door slid open with a hiss, allowing the three entry.

As soon as the door closed behind them, a fog filled the room followed by a deafening *whoosh* of air filling the chamber, followed suit by the engaging of artificial gravity, allowing the feet of the three suited individuals to touch down on the metal floor. With that, the second, innermost door, slid open, and lights came on, illuminating a corridor.

Once in the hallway, the armed individual reached up and lifted off their helmet, revealing the light, orange-brown flesh of a tiger shark with white scalp hair, tied back in a ponytail to keep it out of her face. She let out a sigh as she tasted the air outside of her S.C.E Helmet, and set said helmet down on the floor.

“Damn I hate those things,” she said. “Air tastes stale after the second breath; think I’d do better with a bowl of water on my head.”

The largest of the three removed his own helmet, revealing the face of Gustav underneath. “If they ever invent something like that, I’ll get you one as a birthday present, but even if you can breathe underwater, you can’t breathe in space.”

Felix removed his own helmet. “I can handle the helmets, but damn this suit,” he said, rubbing his tail.

“What’s wrong with it?” Amber asked.

“It was made for a *shark*, not a dolphin,” replied Felix, flicking his tail uncomfortably. “My tail fins are *horizontal*, not vertical; they feel like they’re being crushed in there.”

“It’s the only thing we could find in your size, Felix,” Gustav returned. “Just try and put up with it a little longer; we won’t be here for more than a few minutes, if we’re lucky.”

“We better hope we’re lucky,” said Amber. “We don’t have long before the Midgard VI Patrols come through the ice fields; they see the Hope and they’ll know something’s up, so let’s get cracking.”

“Yes, boss,” returned Gustav, sarcastically.

She gave him a look, before she led the way up the corridor, keeping her rifle in a fire-ready position at all times. They trekked only a short distance before coming to a split; the corridor branched off in two separate directions, one left, and the other to the right, both leading to doors.

“I don’t suppose that datapad of yours has a clue as to which way we go, does it?” Amber asked, looking over her shoulder at Felix.

The dolphin shook his head. “It doesn’t. I guess we’ll have to try both.”

“Why not split up?” Gustav asked. “I can go right, and...”

“Nobody wanders off alone,” Felix stated, sternly. “We don’t know what’s in here, so for now we assume it’s not safe.”

Gustav nodded back. “If you say so,” he agreed.

“Alright, so which way then?” Amber inquired.

Felix glanced in either direction, considering their options, but shrugged. “One is as good as any but let’s try left first,” he said.

Amber stepped forward, siding against the wall as she approached the corner, staring up the hallway on the right first, and then down the hall on the left, following it up to the door, putting her ear against it to listen before she pressed the button to open it; the door slid open slowly, opening to a second corridor.

This hall was different than the last; the entry way had been plain, with no extra rooms or anything that stood out, but this hall looked more like the corridor of a bunkhouse, with multiple doors on either side, each one marked with a number. Amber lowered her rifle as she studied the room, taking a long look over its layout as her boots struck the metal floor audibly with each step.

“This is a bunker outpost,” she said. “Old one but really well preserved. Right now we’re in the barracks.”

“You think Slash was using this as a hideout?” Felix asked.

“It’s possible, but if he was, where would he be keeping a ship?” Amber asked. “I think there’s more to this place than we know.”

“Maybe, but that’s not important right now,” said Felix. “We’re here to get the items and go, before the next patrol comes. Amber; do you know if the stores would be through one of those doors?”

“They *could* use these rooms *for* storage; we should check them. I’ll take the left; you guys take the right,” she said.

“Right,” agreed Felix as he and Gustav made their way to the closest door, sliding it open and peering inside.

The room had been inhabited; there was furniture and pieces of garbage –food scraps, food wrappings, dirty clothes, and rubbery objects that Felix did not want to take a closer look at, to be found all over the room. As they checked the next, they found it to be in similar condition, further evidence that the place was being used as a hideout, or at least a form of rest stop for the gangsters that had been using it.

Then, as Gustav opened a room at the end, he suddenly recoiled as a horrid stench hit him. “Oh, blasted comets!” He cursed, covering his mouth and nose with his big hands.

“What?” Felix asked.

“There’s a body in here,” he replied. “Looks like she’s been here a while, too...”

Felix didn’t want to see the body. Amber walked over and peered into the room, and grimaced. “Disgusting... poor girl; looks like she was being used as a plaything by the scumbags that were using this place.”

“What should we do with her?” Gustav asked.

“Not much we can do; we can’t bury her on this ice meteorite,” replied Amber.

“So we just leave her?” Gustav asked.

“No,” replied Felix. “We’re burning down most of this place anyway; we can cremate her in the process.”

“What about her family?” Gustav asked.

“We don’t even know who she is,” Amber reminded. She saw the look on his face, seeing that he wanted to press the issue, and sighed. “Look, Gustav; your heart’s in the right place, but this is about the most we could do for her.”

Gustav frowned, peering back into the room again, letting out a long sigh. “Just doesn’t feel like it’s enough,” he said, before stepping away from the door. “But alright... come on. Let’s get the supplies and get out of here. I already want out of this place...”

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It took the crew some time to sort through the stash of illegal goods when they found them; the items had not been kept in an organized manner, making it take longer to find them all. As planned, they stacked the weapons and weapon components together, and using a canister of thermite, they set the items to burn once they moved the Sephilon Crystals, ship and machinery parts, stolen medical supplies and other items stored in the crates, out of the base and onto the ship.

They used a little of the thermite to burn the body of the unfortunate girl that had been left to die in the base. Upon their departure the inside of the base was left a smoldering husk after the thermite was ignited. With that, they flew away from the asteroid –just in time to avoid the patrol that was arriving as they made the jump into warp speed.

As soon as they were away from the asteroid belt, it was Amber who posed the imminent question. “So... where are we taking all this dirty cargo?”

“Buyers are located on a Rodentian-model space station at the edge of the sector,” replied Felix. “A place literally called the Dirt Palace; it’s controlled by a bunch of crime lords, from what info I gathered on it. You can fence anything there.”

Amber’s expression soured. “That’s a dangerous place to be, Captain. People will be looking to stick energy knives in our back if they think we have any money.”

Felix looked back at Amber, grinning smugly. “Then it’s a good thing we have a professional on the team.”

The shark arched an eyebrow at him. “You’re saying you’ll let me shoot them?”

“If they draw on us, then yes,” replied Felix. “I may not consider violence a first solution, but if it’s in self-defence, then it’s acceptable.”

Amber nodded to him. “Glad to see we’re on the same page in that regard,” she remarked.

Felix nodded back, but still felt a pit in his stomach... he continued to wonder if he was really doing the right thing adopting this life. Even if it was for the colony, it was an awful risk they were taking, doing this. If the life of crime itself did not destroy the, the enforcers of the law might...

But they were at the point of no return; there was no going back now.

The ship came out of warp drive later, after what felt like days; Felix even had time for a full six hours of sleep before the warning signal that they were five minutes from their destination roused him awake, prompting him up from bed and, after a long swig of water, back to the pilot's chair. The ship was quiet when he stepped out, indicating the others were probably sleeping or busy.

Making his way over to the bridge, he seated himself in the pilot's chair, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and giving himself a couple of slaps on the cheek to wake himself up. With that, he deactivated the auto pilot, reaching over to the tiller and gripping it at both ends, counting down the seconds until the ship began to slow.

And there it was.

The filthiest space station that Felix had ever seen; worthy of its name, the entire exterior of the enormous metal structure had clearly been neglected maintenance for quite some time, held together only by patchwork and welding he could make out even from his current distance, but riddled with grime. There were very few ships flying in or out of the station, and unlike the structure itself many of them were well-maintained, especially a few luxurious liners that the dolphin spotted in the mix.

One of the cheaper ship's pilots decided to give Felix a fright, charging towards the Mara's Hope full speed and veering off at the last second; if he hadn't known better Felix could have even sworn he heard the pilot of that ship chortling at his prank as he passed. "Ass... HOLE!" Felix scolded instinctively, but shook his head and decided to forget about it, focusing on the task at hand.

No control tower hailed him as he approached the docking area; no request to land or identification required for this place. Here at the Dirt Palace, it was first come first serve, dog eat dog, and watching ones back else a knife or gun may find it.

Felix steered the ship into the landing corridor, passing between several docking bays. Rodentian stations were constructed with internal landing bays, unlike Avianic stations like Denver XII, but of course had external clamps and extendable boarding tunnels for bigger ships like heavy freighters. The Mara's Hope wasn't that big, fortunately, and fit into the landing corridor just fine. Finding an open bay, he stopped the ship, using its repulsion system to turn towards the bay and gently eased the ship backward into the dock.

No artificial gravity met the ship, leaving the repulsion system inactive as he tried to lower it down. Thankfully, the landing gear could be magnetized for just such an event; the ship touched down roughly as he activated the magnets, and proceeded to power down the rest of the ship except for those.

Amber appeared at the door a moment later, already geared up with a coltan chestplate and her pistol. "We've arrived?" She asked.

Felix nodded. "We have," he confirmed, with little enthusiasm. "Let's get this over with."

"Agreed," she replied. "Will we be taking anyone?"

"No; just you and me," replied Felix. "Neither Zack or Jessica can handle this place, and I'm not so sure Gustav could mentally tolerate it either, but I feel better having him here to watch over them and the ship."

Amber nodded in agreement, but she was eyeing Felix with concern. "Are you so sure *you* can handle this place?"

"I don't really have much choice, do I?" Felix returned as he reached under his seat for the datapad containing the name of their buyer. "Now, let's go find this 'Altov' fellow and get that crap off of our ship."

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Altov Zemrick, one of the biggest name gang bosses in the entire Dirt Palace station, was certainly not who Felix had been expecting. He had expected some gruff, greasy, ugly fat man or some well-dressed, snobbish, pompous person; the stereotypical gang boss kind of appearances, but the short-statured rat, who was barely over four feet tall, was dressed in simple clothes and built like a professional body builder; he had a bit of a belly to him, but his arms were thick with muscle. Over a green button-down shirt he wore a blue jacket and matching pants; he honestly looked more like one of the enforcers than the boss, but everyone around the room was answering to him.

Felix had felt nervous from the moment he had entered the gang boss's territory, and that had no lessened with seeing the man himself up close. After spending hours looking for someone who could get them in contact with him, and having to hand out some credits to bribe for the information, they were finally meeting him; he had agreed to meet them near their ship so he could see the goods himself. An artificial gravity system had been activated – which was good, as Felix would rather be able to run if things went south, rather than swimming through zero gravity as he and Amber had to do when disembarking from the ship.

And now, he stood only a stone's throw from Felix; despite his short stature the rat looked plenty dangerous, but the men with him looked far worse. With Amber at his side, Felix mustered as much courage as he could, waiting for Altov to approach. Despite being almost two feet shorter than Felix, the dolphin still felt like Altov was staring down at him.

"You got my cargo?" He asked, getting straight to the point.

Felix looked towards the Mara's Hope, nodding to the half-open cargo bay door where Gustav stood. The orca slid the door open the rest of the way, revealing the crates inside. "It's all up there," replied Felix.

Altov's eyes peered emotionlessly towards the ship and the cargo, and he nonchalantly told two of his escorts to go check it out before he looked back at Felix, eyeing the dolphin suspiciously. "Not all of it is there," he stated.

"I beg your pardon?" Felix asked.

"Slash promised me a shipment of weapons and components as well," he stated. "So where are they?"

Felix shrugged. "I brought only what I found," lied the dolphin. "Slash didn't exactly give me that datapad of his own volition, you understand; I don't know what happened to your guns or bombs or whatever else you were expecting."

"So you said," returned Altov. "I still find it hard to believe one such as you could wrest this from Slash; he was quite dangerous, you know."

Felix put on a tough look, or what he thought was tough, giving a scowl and eliminating any sort of tone from his voice, saying plainly, "he tried to take my ship; I gave him what was coming to him, and took what he left behind. Now do you want this junk or not?"

"Watch it, boy," the rat retorted. "You're lucky I'm even paying you for this cargo; I paid Slash in advance, and he never brought it. This whole thing has already cost me far more than it should have."

"Nature of the business, Mr. Zemrick," Amber remarked, her arms crossed.

The rat glowered at both of them, but turned away when one of the men he sent aboard the ship waved to him, confirming the promised cargo was all there. "Well, it seems you at least have the sephilon; that's all I really wanted," he said. "So, since the guns are missing, you get a hundred-thousand credits."

"You're joking right?" Felix asked, his tone turning cynical.

"Excuse me?" Altov asked, his scowl returning.

"That Sephilon alone is worth far more than that rubbish sum," retorted Felix. "There's a hundred kilograms of that stuff on my ship; I expect to at least make a suitable profit for that. You'll pay use a hundred *and fifty* thousand, not one credit less."

"You're not the ones I hired to salvage those items, so I have no reason to pay you more than the delivery fee; what I'm offering you is generous enough," Altov retorted.

"Well then perhaps we should sell the sephilon to one of your competitors; I'm sure they'll pay us what we're owed."

Altov's scowl deepened. "You're trying my patience, kid," he warned. "You do *not* want to try screwing with me; I can have you and your entire ship trashed faster than you can say 'dead meat'."

"But you won't," replied Felix, "because we have the greater firepower on our side." He jerked his thumb back towards the Hope, specifically the turret on the top, which was already aimed their way.

Altov visibly paled at the sight of the turret, his two guards going for their weapons, but Amber was quicker, drawing hers and aiming the pistol at them. "Don't even try it," she warned. "Neither of you will even get one shot."

The ones on the ship were about to draw their weapons as well, but Gustav had a rifle already drawn on them, motioning for them to take their hands away from their sidearms. They complied, and Altov clearly saw that his attempt to turn the situation to his favor had just backfired. He predictably attempted to bluff his way out; "Your people fire on me, they'll fry *you* too," he warned Felix.

"You think they care?" The dolphin continued his own bluff. "I'm just the negotiator; I'm replaceable. To them, so are you; we can always find another buyer if you're no longer interested." He crossed his arms. "The way I see it, you have three options here. The first, you pay us a hundred and thirty thousand, and we *all* walk out of here. Second is you keep trying to gip us, get vaporized and left with nothing but a ceramic urn for whatever doesn't disintegrate when a nineteen inch sphere of concentrated plasma hits you, while in the meantime my crew flies off to find another buyer. Third is you turn down my offer, lose all your cargo entirely and have to hire someone else to collect you more goods, suffering an

even greater loss and one of your competitors benefits from your expense.” Felix’s gaze met Altov’s, locking their eyes together. “So what’ll it be, Mr. Zemrick?”

Felix had the rat right where he wanted him. If he wanted to make any money anytime soon, he’d accept the dolphin’s offer, or he would get nothing; the muscle he’d brought along was helpless, and he dared not risk Felix’s patience now that he had been backed into a corner; if Altov decided he didn’t want the cargo Felix might just kill him for wasting his time – not that Felix intended to, but that was the intended message.

Suddenly, Altov smiled, although it was a reluctant smile. “You play this game well, boy,” he stated. “Very well; one hundred and fifty credits.”

“Agreed,” returned the dolphin.

Altov held out his hand to one of his guards, who passed him a blank Credrive. Altov inserted the device into a portable terminal, tapping a few buttons before he removed the drive and handed it to Felix. “There; try not to choke on it,” he said, the scorn in his voice obvious despite his smile.

“A pleasure doing business,” returned Felix, sarcastically. “And, as a gesture of good will, we’ll still help you guys unload it.” He motioned to Gustav, who lowered his rifle and holstered it on his back.

At Altov’s word, the three began to move crates while one of the other guards standing at his side went to retrieve a hover pad to unload them into the hangar with. “We’ll unload it in here, then I’ll have some men come back for it,” informed Altov, watching the working men for a moment before turning back to Felix. “I trust I will not have to see you again?”

“Not unless you want to hire me,” said Felix. “I understand warzone salvage tends to be quite a commodity; I just might take it up full-time.”

“Well you can find someone else to buy your product,” scoffed Altov. “Tell you what; like any other station you can often find job listings at some of the pubs here in Dirt Palace. The bartenders might ask you for creds before showing it to you but if there’s work to be found, they’ll know it.”

“Thanks for the advice; I’ll take that free of charge,” returned Felix before he looked at Amber, passing her the Credrive. “Tell Zack to get the ship ready; soon as the cargo’s unloaded, we’re taking off.”

“You got it,” she returned, taking the credrive and walking back towards the ship.

Felix turned back to Altov. “Well, my colleagues and I will be shoving off now; take care, Mr. Zemrick.”

“Hope you get turned into space dust,” the rat muttered. Felix heard it, but didn’t comment, and simply walked back to the ship.

“Want me to shoot him, boss?” His bodyguard asked.

“Don’t be stupid; that turret’s still aimed our way,” Altov replied, turning on his heel and heading towards the door. “Just get the rest of that sephilon unloaded and get it to our clients; if I have to bribe them for their patience again I’ll not only be damn near broke, they’ll be wearing my tail as a belt. Send the rest to our warehouse.”

Felix didn’t listen to the rest of the conversation, if anything else was said. He walked back aboard the ship and shut the airlock; the moment it hissed close he let himself fall back

to lean against the nearby wall, releasing a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. Taking a few more deep breathes, trying desperately to calm himself, he stepped out of the airlock and immediately went for the bridge, practically throwing himself into the pilot's seat and beginning the takeoff sequence for the ship.

Zack popped in a moment later, grinning at Felix. "Nice job out there," he said.

"Nice job operating the turret," returned Felix. "Really helped me bluff our way into a better profit."

"Yeah; was a little worried I might accidentally fire the gun," Zack admitted. "Thankfully it didn't happen."

"That's because," Amber's voice sounded from the corridor; the rabbit turned to see her standing there, holding a long cable in her hand, "I removed part of the circuitry to make sure you *didn't*."

Zack scowled. "Where's the trust, Amber?!"

"Trust? Sorry; all sold out," she joked before turning and stepping out, walking over to the gun turret to return the removed cable.

"...Okay, why does my fur stand on end when *she* cracks a joke?" Zack inquired.

Felix chuckled, but couldn't really give the rabbit an answer to his question as he continued prepping the ship. He heard the intercom beep, and heard Gustav's voice. "*Cargo's unloaded, Felix; we're done,*" the orca informed him.

"Good; shut the bay door and we'll get out of here," instructed the dolphin.

"*Music to my ears.*"

With that, Felix fired up the ship's power core, the console coming alive with lights before him. Disengaging the magnetized landing gear and activating the repulsion system, he steadily crept out of the hangar bay, leaving Altov and his men their cargo, and after passing through the energy field he turned the ship towards the exit and put it full throttle, soaring out of the station and leaving the Dirt Palace behind.

Once the ship was properly angled for warp drive travel back to Trident IV, Felix tapped the intercom. "Alright everybody, I'm calling a meeting in the lounge... and someone grab a six-pack from the fridge; I really could use a cold one."

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The room was silent as the crew of the Mara's Hope gathered in the lounge at Felix's request. Everyone was seated, enjoying a choice drink, but nobody said anything; Jessica and Gustav both looked disgusted, Zack looked satisfied and Amber was very stone-faced, clearly having their limits tested by selling such items to a crime lord...

Desperate to break the ice, Felix cleared his throat. "So... we're finished," said the dolphin. "We delivered the items; as bad as it was, we made a profit that'll definitely help the colony." He let out a long sigh. "I can tell this was very taxing to all of you... I won't ask any of you to do that again. We'll find another way from here on out."

"Why bother?" Gustav asked, surprising everyone with his sudden, negative attitude.

"Gustav?" Amber asked.

"As much as I hated every moment of that deal," the orca said, "the conditions of our lives and the galaxy we know are changing drastically."

"What do you mean?" Felix asked.

"The Confederacy is at war," Zack stated, speaking for Gustav. "We just made tens of thousands of credits on *war* salvage."

"The economy is in a slump," Jessica added.

"Taxes will increase drastically for the war effort," Amber threw in.

"And between expenses for both us and the colony," Gustav continued, "no jobs we get now will ever be enough to cover it all. We don't just need to maintain the colony and pay for the debt; we need to build better lives for ourselves *and* all of them."

Felix easily guessed where this was going; he felt a pit in his stomach as he listened to the others, before he decided to conclude what they were all getting at. "And right now, the most profitable trade we can be in... is what we just did."

"Exactly," said Zack.

"How long have you guys been... considering this?" Felix asked.

"We were discussing it on the way to the Dirt Palace," Jessica admitted "We didn't want to wake you, but... we were all in the lounge, it came up in a conversation, and we realized that, even if it doesn't agree with our morals, we've found a golden opportunity by mere chance."

"We didn't bring it up sooner because, well..." Amber went on. "Most of us were still trying to come to terms with it... and with ourselves, I suppose, that we were even considering this... but the credits speak for themselves; we've got a real chance at saving our lives, and those of the colony, at just the right time for it."

Gustav looked at Felix. "But, as you have always done for us, we all agreed we wouldn't make this decision without you. After all, you're the pilot, our captain... and our friend. If you don't want to do this, we won't ask you to, and we'll all just pitch in for whatever jobs we find out there."

Felix was speechless.

Before him now was the very same scenario his friends had been put in *by him* when he and Zack first found that datapad hidden in the Mara's Hope. Now, however, the tables had, quite literally, been turned, and he was on the receiving end of this democratic debate he had started, where no voice went unheard on the crew of the Mara's Hope, but this was the first time his voice was the only one left unspoken.

It was not a pleasant feeling... now he understood he'd put his friends on the spot at the start of this whole fiasco; he supposed he deserved having it come back on him. With their eyes on him, the dolphin tried to think of some other alternative for the Hope crew, but they were right. As of now, with things the way they were, their lives were about to get expensive, and they would need a substantial income to keep up with it.

Forcing a weak smile, and eyeing the group sadly. "So... I guess we've all decided," he said, reaching for his beer and holding it out, letting the others tap their drinks against his. "Let's all become pirates."