

Voyages of the Mara

Arc 2: Edge of the Law

Chapter 6 (Arc 2 Finale): Long Journey

No good deed ever goes unpunished, some say.

Usually the ones who say this are the ones doing the bad deeds, the ones who the good people wish to stop. But that wasn't the case for New Mara Colony when the Mara's Hope returned, filled with people instead of with supplies as they expected. Never had the crew felt so much animosity directed at them than they did when the colony was almost ablaze with criticism for their choice in rescuing the Nocturnians and other slaves from the clutches of the Empire, and for defying the most dangerous crime boss in the White Star Sector.

Needless to say, the majority demanded that the crew take the refugees to Confederacy, or even dump them off in space; less people cared for the predicament of these strangers than they had hoped, and for a while it seemed like violence towards them would be imminent, if not for Brunhilda stepping in. Speaking as the manager she once was, she addressed the colonists, reminding them of what had happened to them decades ago. Nobody seemed moved by her words, until she reminded them of the original Mara Colony, and how it was abandoned by the Confederacy.

"To abandon these refugees, we're no better than the bureaucrats who abandoned us so long ago, and returned only to take our money," she had said, with a tone of voice that demanded they listen, and her words were heard. The leader they knew her as had come back to them, and was as she had always been. She balanced the people and the interests of the colony, with her humanitarian nature; a trait that always made Felix proud to call her his mother...

But words would only buy the refugees a temporary pillar of support from the Mara Colonists, and so it was that the team worked quickly to find them a new home at one of the other abandoned colonies as fast as possible, before their generosity wore thin. They all agreed that the Nocturnian engineers were capable of keeping whatever colony they reopened functional; they were masters of the craft after all.

As if to quell their fears about a doctor at the new colony, they were pleased to find out one of the rescued males was a Militia field medic from Ithica VII, therefore he had both combat and medical training. It wasn't a doctor, but it was enough that the colony would at least have someone to treat wounds and illnesses. But the problem of a militia detachment to defend this new colony were still present; as Felix and the crew flew off in their search, Amber stayed behind to talk with Zambrano and Brunhilda.

It turned out Amber had been correct; her actions in getting the colonial defense turrets operational again had indeed inspired the over-staffed technician office to transfer many of its younger, less-experienced members to Militia; the colony's defense force had increased to almost a hundred in a few short weeks. Between the numbers and the automated defenses, New Mara Colony felt completely safe, and there were now soldiers to spare...

New Mara Colony was going strong; for once, nobody had to worry about it. But now it was time to expand, which would bring a whole new array of problems... nevertheless, Felix and his crew felt confident it would work. They had not before, but with everything falling into place for the first time in two years, it began to feel like all of their hard work would finally pay off.

But, after finding another colony to grant to the Nocturnians and the other refugees, the crew was on their way back to the Dirt Palace once more. Following Angela's advice, Felix docked the ship into the Entertainment District's port, where Lazar could not come after them without sparking incident with one of his rivals.

When the ship was docked, they disembarked, and of course were quickly met by the thugs who served as the 'toll officers' for the station. Zack looked around at the interior of the hangar, impressed by the extra space and the shiny new panelling. "This place is awesome; how come we never came here before?"

"Five crew members plus one ship; that'll be two-thousand credits," the 'officer' stated. Zack's jaw dropped.

"That's why," replied Amber.

"How much would they charge if we were flying a *heavy* freighter?!" Zack demanded.

"This isn't Denver XII, Zack; they can charge whatever they want here. There's nobody to tell them otherwise," Gustav returned.

"I'll wait here for you guys," Jessica said.

"We know," returned Felix. "See you in a little while, Jess."

As per the usual routine, the group headed to the employment offices, and began to look at the job choices for that week, examining the board for various opportunities. But during the search, Felix noticed Gustav cringe, and looked over at the Orca with concern, seeing the large cetacean backing away from the job board and seating himself in a chair at the long table in the middle of the room. He turned his gaze to Amber who stood where Gustav had been before sitting down, about to try and get her attention, and then he saw the look on her face.

She was staring straight ahead, at the job listings board for bounties, a sharp glare on her face as she studied it. Was she actually considering hunting a bounty? Suddenly, she turned his way, and then cocked her head to the side, motioning for him to come over. Slowly, Felix stepped over, standing at her side, and then followed her gaze to the board, where his eyes widened.

A picture of him, Amber and Gustav rested on the holoboard, with a rather large number –nearly half a million credits- resting below the picture. Under the price listing read these words:

'Full price for Alive

Half price for Dead

Contact Lazar Warden upon completion of contract'

“Shit,” Felix cursed.

“We’re going to have to be extremely careful from now on, huh?” Amber asked, crossing her arms.

Felix glanced over his shoulder, suddenly feeling rather exposed; nobody else in the room seemed aware of the bounty yet, but it may have only been a matter of time before someone spotted it, some of whom looked quite dangerous. “No, we’re not,” he said, firmly. “Because we’re leaving.”

Amber turned to face him as the dolphin spun on his heel and began to head for the exit. “Where are we going?”

“Far away from here,” replied Felix, approaching Zack briskly and getting the rabbit’s attention with a tap on the shoulder. “Zack, can you erase a listing off of the board?” He inquired, keeping his voice low.

“Sure; these boards don’t really have good security,” replied the rabbit. “Hacking it would be a synch. Why?”

Felix placed a hand on Zack’s shoulder and guided him over to the board where Amber still stood, and pointed to the picture of the bounty. “That.”

Zack’s ears stood straight up and his eyes widened to the size of dinner plates when he saw the bounty, the terror at what he saw apparent in that expression. He swallowed hard, before glancing at Felix. “Gimme twenty seconds,” he replied before he crouched down to the board’s projector, ducking behind the projected listings and causing them to fizzle slightly, producing his portable terminal and going to work.

“Felix,” Gustav began, looking up at the dolphin. “What are we going to do?”

“Don’t worry Gustav; we’ll think of something,” Felix replied in a hushed tone, trying not to sound panicked as he and Amber stood over Zack, hiding him from sight as he hacked the terminal. “For now, removing the listing will buy us some time.”

“Only from this office,” Zack whispered. “There’s four others aboard this place.”

“We’re not currently standing *in* one of those other offices,” Felix pointed out.

“Good point,” the rabbit. “Okay... done.”

The board hummed as the listing of their bounty vanished, and Felix and Amber both relaxed, stepping away to let Zack stand back up. It was a miracle nobody had seen what they were doing, but they weren’t about to question it; they didn’t know how many might have already seen that job listing and were already looking for them. Without a second thought, they ushered out of the employment office, looking as inconspicuous as possible, and headed across the street to the pub...

“This isn’t good,” Gustav muttered, rubbing his face with his hand as he and the others mulled over their drinks, not one of them feeling particularly pleasant at that moment.

“So now we got a fucking price on our heads,” grumbled Zack. “As if we weren’t already in enough trouble with the Confederacy, or...” he looked at Felix. “Held back by your sudden harsh stance against taking from Confederate ships.”

Felix turned to face Zack. “Now where the hell did that come from?”

"After the incident on Argo II you said we're not salvaging from Confederate vessels anymore –'Grunikans are the scum who need to be put down, so let's leave Confederate gear for the Confederates to retrieve' –which was all well and good since Grunikan shit is more valuable, but now we'll have Bounty Hunters chasing us; how are we going to make a single cred with those odds?" Zack demanded. "I told you pissing off Lazar would be a bad idea; now we're completely screwed, and it's all your fault."

"How is it his fault?" Gustav demanded.

"He cut our profits in half by limiting our salvage," Zack began. "And he got us in trouble with Lazar Warden when he let morality win over common freaking sense!

"You disrespectful little prick," Amber growled at Zack. "Having a sense of morality isn't what got us into this, Zack."

"In case you haven't noticed, Amber," Zack began, his glare meeting the shark's. "Morality is holding us back, and it just got us in trouble with one of the most dangerous sons of bitches in the fucking sector! All because our 'captain' decided he's a Confederate Patriot, when I see to recall a couple of years back he hated the Confederacy as much as I did!"

Felix stood up and sharply turned to Zack. "The Confederacy isn't using chemical weapons and taking slaves!" He yelled in Zack's face. "The Empire is fucking *evil*! And so is Lazar!"

"And how is that our problem?!" Zack demanded. "We're not in this for morality; we're thieves! Smugglers! Scavengers for fuck sakes! We're on only one side; our own!"

"And that side will lead us to our deaths," stated Felix. "I have thought over this long and hard, and it is why, as I now, we're out."

Zack's jaw fell open, his ears drooping slightly as he stared, stunned, at Felix, both Amber and Gustav returning the expression. "Just like that?" Amber asked.

Felix nodded. "Just like that; we've lowered the debt enough we can pay it off normally..."

"You fucking *idiot*!" Zack exploded. "We can't pay off the debt with minimum wage jobs; we'll be paying it forever!"

"I've made my decision!" Felix shouted back. "I, not you, am the Captain of our ship."

"A captain who usually consults his peers before making such a stupid choice!" Zack retorted.

Felix relaxed slightly at that comment, and spoke honestly and in a smooth, lucid tone. "You're right; I usually do," he stated. "I apologize; it appears that in my haste, I went on a bit of a power trip by not consulting you guys first."

"Finally, we hear something sensible," Zack grumbled.

"All in favor of continuing our illegal activities, say 'aye'," Felix returned plainly and without another glimmer of hesitation; he wasn't making it his choice at all now.

The suddenness of Felix's call for a vote caught Zack off guard, but he collected himself quickly, and held up his hand. "Aye."

His ears twitched as he realized it was only his voice that spoke it, looking at Gustav and Amber. "Oh you got to be kidding me..."

"All opposed, say nay?" Felix asked.

“Nay,” Gustav replied without a second of hesitation.

Amber had a brief pause, but eventually she too said Nay, and Zack grabbed his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe this!” He hissed. “You guys agree with him, again?! We had a good thing going here!”

“No, Zack, we didn’t,” returned Amber. “And it’s only gone from bad, to worse.” She glared at him sharply. “Sure we’ve made tons of money, but if we keep coming here, so close to Lazar’s influence, eventually he’s going to slap a tracker or something on the Hope and follow us back home, then the entire colony will become a target.”

“Our mission was never about wealth,” Gustav added. “Only stability, and the survival of the colony.”

“The nays have it then,” stated Felix.

“Hold it, what about Jessica?” Zack asked.

“I’ll get her opinion too, but I already know what she’ll say,” replied Felix. “So, enjoy this place while you can, Zack; this is the last time we ever set foot on the Dirt Palace.”

“Dammit, Felix; for once, think with your head and not with your heart,” Zack pleaded. “We can get so much from this lifestyle!”

“We can lose just as much,” replied Felix, crossing his arms. “I know in the past I usually went into a long explanation about things –like some character in a story or a comic holo superhero, but you know what? This time I say, fuck it; the choice has been made. In two hours, we’re out of here, for good, and no force in the galaxy is going to change my mind.”

Zack’s face twisted into a look of rage, his muscles tensing; for a moment it looked like he was going to lash out and swing at Felix but even Zack knew he wouldn’t have a chance in a fight against the dolphin. Although Felix was standing completely unconcerned, prepared to take a hit, and no intention of retaliating against; if Zack wanted to vent his frustrations on him, so be it.

“All this time, I thought we were friends,” said Zack. “That we’d keep sharing interests and always have the good of the colony in mind.” He stared at Felix coldly. “But no... has to be about being the ‘good guy’; has to be about *you*.” He pushed past the dolphin. “Well, fuck you then; have your good deeds and shove ‘em up your ass. I’m going over to the brothel -might as well have one more go with my favorite gals before I enter the dull, unhappy life.”

“Zack, you...” Amber started, but Felix stopped her, shaking his head.

“Let him go,” he said. “Let him have his prostitutes.”

Amber groaned. “Fine... but if he gets an STD he better not count on us to pay his hospital bills.”

“Amber,” Felix stated. “I need you to go back to the Mara’s Hope.”

“Why?”

“I may say don’t stop Zack from going to the brothel, but I don’t exactly trust him right now either,” replied Felix. “I’m worried he’ll do something rash. Go back, have Jessica lock down the controls so the ship can’t fly, and if he tries anything... knock him out.”

Amber stared at Felix for a moment as though she didn’t recognize him, but shortly her expression softened and she nodded to him and he let her pass, watching as the shark headed out the door and made a beeline for the hangar.

Felix felt a strong hand grip his shoulder gently. "I know that couldn't have been easy," Gustav said.

"Which part, rewriting our lives again or getting dissed by my best friend?" Felix asked.

"Do you remember when I refused to be part of this life at first, after McCain took everything away from us and left us in this slump?" Gustav asked.

"I do," replied Felix. "Our first offense; the Sephilon shipment."

"Well... after that, I felt... different," the Orca began. "I didn't feel good, or bad; we didn't hurt anyone delivering the crystals, but over the months after I realized sooner or later those would be converted into narcotics and people would start dropping dead from its use, and it made me feel sick, but after that I always felt we were in too deep. For those next two years, I saw all of you taking to the lifestyle with a grain of salt, and I worried my worst fears would come to pass; that you'd all become criminals.

"But then, that day that you stood up for Jessica, I saw that you, as I knew you, still remained intact; Zack had changed, drastically, Amber had become distant and Jessica tried to keep her hands clean of the whole affair but even as a criminal you remained the same man I knew," said Gustav. "Seeing you, always driven, helped drive me, and helped me cope with the life."

Felix looked at the Orca, blinking in confusion. "You're saying I inspired you?"

"Not so much inspired, as motivated," said Gustav. "I admit it was probably as much curiosity as necessary; I could've left anytime, but I wanted to see how long you would persevere, and you never faltered. If anything you were a light in this dark station," he waved his hand around. "A brighter star in a galaxy of specks." He patted Felix on the shoulder. "Your mom will be proud of your choice, just like I am."

Felix chuckled gingerly. "And here I thought the youth was supposed to look up to the elder, not the other way around."

Gustav laughed with him. "Maybe I'm getting close to my mid-life crisis," replied the orca in jest as he nudged Felix, and the two shared a happy, short laugh.

"So, am I going to see two guys kiss or what?" Felix and Gustav turned, and saw the familiar green face of Angela looking back at them with an arched eyebrow, smiling wryly as she stood, propped up on the counter by her elbows as she watched them.

Felix blushed darkly. "Angela... how long have you been there?"

"Since the moment Zack stormed out of here," she replied. "Though I still heard most of the argument –sorry for eavesdropping, but it was a little hard to ignore."

"Sorry about that," said Felix, rubbing the back of his head.

"We didn't mean to make a scene in your bar," added Gustav.

"As 'scenes' go, that's the first one in a while that didn't end in blood spatter or laser burns," replied the gecko. "Keeping it under control, my boss will be happy about."

"Thanks... I think," Felix returned.

Angela elevated herself from the counter, placing her palms on it as she adopted a more serious expression. "So... you guys really double crossed Lazar?"

Felix looked at her with a neutral stare, speaking his response in a glib tone. "He duped us," the dolphin returned, defensively. "He said we were picking up cargo, not people for him to traffic into brothels and forced labor."

Angela's expression soured slightly. "And... now you have a bounty on your head... and feel you have to leave," she said, unhappily. "I won't see you guys anymore."

"I... no... you won't."

Angela sighed. "I suppose it's to be expected; good people never last long here," she said in defeat. "Be it that they have a life-ending disease or they just can't stand the place or go bad. But it was good to have someone around who wasn't always an asshole."

Felix shared her sadness. If anything had been good about the Dirt Palace –anything that had been worth coming back for, it had been the friend they had made in Angela. But now, at the realization that they'd never see her again, Felix didn't feel as happy about his decision to leave the life behind. She didn't deserve to be here; after hearing her life story and finding out what brought her to this place to begin with it just seemed unfair that she had to stay here the rest of her life.

Felix perked up; what was he thinking? Nothing was forcing her to stay... not *now* at least. He turned to face Angela again, and approached the counter. "You know... there are other jobs you could take."

"Come again?" Angela asked.

"We just opened up a new colony back on our home planet," Felix explained. "It's shabby and full of refugees but it *is* in need of someone with some experience in the service industry; someone who can serve food and drink quickly and in an orderly fashion."

The offer was obvious to Angela, her face lighting up with intrigue as she leaned closer to Felix and tilted her head. "Really now? What're the accommodations like?"

"Derelict and dusty old prefabricated houses; they need a little work but we got the best techies in the world working on them night and day to improve them," Felix went on, feigning a sales pitch. "But we offer Nocturnian neighbors, a hundred percent ocean property, promise of Gelks and..." he smiled. "Many friends to be made; good people, who look out for one another, and a promise of a home where there are little to no muggers, thugs or thieves; guarded twenty six hours a day by Militian troopers."

Angela looked to the side, nodding slightly and pursing her lips in thought. "A very tempting offer, but how might one get to this place when they don't have a ship?"

Felix grinned wider. "For a limited time only," he continued with the sales pitch. "Free taxi aboard the Mara's Hope; quiet, smooth ride, got its own onboard medic and the best cook in the galaxy."

"Don't overdo it, Felix," Gustav muttered with a laugh.

Angela smiled broadly at Felix, leaning forward close enough he thought she was going to kiss him, and looked directly into his eyes. "Now that, sounds like a deal I'd be stupid to pass up. Where do I get my ticket?"

"A handshake is all that's needed," replied Felix, leaning back and holding out his hand to her.

"Well then," she said, before grasping his hand. "When do we leave?"

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Albert McCain drank greedily straight from the bottle of champagne as he revelled in his accomplishments in the past few months. He'd been saving the expensive bottle for just this very occasion; the day he was promoted beyond the President position at the Collections Agency he'd held for a couple of years already, which he had gained six months after his sweet revenge on the Mara Colony for holding him back for so long.

He was now the President of the entire Economics board; the President of Economy, a position second only to the Minister. No more accounting for a single star system as he had in the lower of the Economics Board, no more berating comments from people who could not pay back the loans they took out from the banks, as his job in the Collections Agency had entailed –though granted, the opportunity to take Mara Colony for everything it had was worth the stress for such satisfaction.

But now, after serving as the President for the collections office for a full year, he had ascended again, awing everyone with his superior business skills, and was now the leader of the entire sector's economic bureau. The wealthiest job known to all who lived in this sector; he could upgrade from this high-class condominium that he sat in, to a luxury penthouse –a dream home for avians, to be bought by a canine. He could buy anything he wanted now... have everything denied from him for most of his life. Maybe even start a new family, since his previous one had shunned him when he could've given them everything they ever wanted.

Well, it was their loss, and his infinite gain.

As he tipped the bottle to take another drink, he heard a beeping coming from his communications terminal. He scowled, hoping that it wasn't another call from the bank to inquire about his accounts or suggest he build an RRSP –the government wasn't about to take any of HIS money from a taxable savings account. He stormed over to the terminal, and tapped a button to bring the screen to life, checking the caller ID.

'Private Number'.

"Great; a vid-call marketer," he grumbled. "Might as well tell him off." He pressed the accept button. "Whatever you're selling, you skank, I'm not... oh."

The face of a rather displeased-looking rat stared back at him.

"Well, you don't look like a marketer," McCain remarked, noticing the expensive attire the rat wore. "Should I know you?"

"If you were part of the Enforcement Board instead of the Economics, you would," replied the rat. "But I am not here to discuss my... reputation. I'm here to request something from you, Mr. President."

McCain scowled. "And what, pray-tell, makes you think I would grant any favors to you? I don't even know you."

"Oh, but I know a lot about you, Mr. Albert McCain," the rat stated, suddenly catching the labrador's full attention when he said his full name. "Joined the Economics Board three years ago, starting off as a regular System Accountant, before earning a transfer to the

Collections Agency –an interesting choice, as Collection Agents are often hated even *more* than men like me. I would have thought a man of business like you would take to the Commerce, Industry, Foreign Trade or even the Banking sections, but no; you chose to take money from people who owed it. Not so unlike myself, actually.”

McCain snorted. “Whatever you think I am, sir, I assure you I’m nothing like you,” he retorted. “You’re wasting my time.”

“Oh but I’m not done,” the rat continued. “You see I also know a little more than that; you were once a shopkeeper on a colony owned by IronCorp thirteen years ago until their bankruptcy in 2701. In 2711 suddenly you show up on Denver XII, with citizen papers that link you back to the Blue Star Sector; how did you ever manage to falsify your identity so?”

McCain froze in his tracks, unable to form words as he heard the rat.

“But it doesn’t stop there, either; when you became a Collections Agent there was an opportunity present after you worked there for only a month; there was a Vice President position open, and everyone was gunning for it! But somehow, you, the new guy, landed the promotion. Rather incredible, isn’t it? Barely there a month and a half and suddenly you’re the Vice President? Could it have been skill? Luck? Or maybe...” He held up a holoboard with a list of names and various account information, including records of transactions. “A sudden bonus to the accounts of the other competitors; quite big sums, actually, you sly devil you.”

“How... how do you have all this?!” McCain demanded.

“Oh but there’s more,” the rat carried on. “Turns out you bribed those competitors with money you borrowed; you forged the papers claiming you were taking out a loan for a mid-wealth condominium, but you actually bought a cheaper one, and used the leftovers of that loan to perform your bribe. And that is why the banks should not actually give money in a lump sum when they approve a loan, in case it ends up somewhere it should not be. So, with that done you became the Vice President; high up the ladder when you still smelled of sea water. Were I wearing a hat I would tip it to you for your daring.”

“Stop it; you’ve said enough!”

“Not yet, I haven’t,” the rat carried on. “You have one little atrocity left; when you robbed your former colony.”

McCain calmed at that, less intimidated by that subject than the rest. “You bring up that, of all things? Everything I did was legal; they were squatters and I made them pay up. I was a collections agent; it was what I did.”

“But what would happen if it turned out that the colony you took from was actually the same IronCorp colony you lived at for thirteen years, ten of which was when it was government property?” The rat asked. “That would make you one of the squatters too, wouldn’t it? You too would owe the very back-taxes you collected from them.”

Were it not for his black fur covering his face, McCain would have been white as a ghost, but the rat continued. “Or, how about where you also illegally modified the records; turns out the colonists actually owed half of what the total listed sum came to, but the rest that was listed was actually a debt *you* owed –the debt for your so-called mid-wealth home, which you somehow actually worked into the amount owed by the colony; in the end they are the ones paying for your new home, and not yourself.

“But nobody caught wind of this; no one at the colony knew anything about debt collection or taxation percentages, not even their manager since the colony had not had any income since she took over, and so she didn’t recognize what I’m assuming was a cleverly hidden Lien of Release, turning your debt over to the colony. Anyone who might’ve seen something, you bribed to keep quiet about it, and so you walk away with three hundred thousand credits –enough for a Laparian Penthouse- while leaving the poor, desolate Mara Colonists to pay all of your debts for you; the debt for your house and your secret bribes, and leaving you with a clean slate.

“Did I mention that they managed to pay back half of that debt already, and are now only paying the three hundred you left them with? Word to the right pair of ears, they’d be abolished of that remaining debt, which would be forced back to you, and you’d be fined with half a million different charges in fraud, forgery and bribery that would leave you with nothing, not to mention a compensation fee to the colonists you robbed.”

McCain was conflicted; half of him wanted to explode in rage, the other was terrified beyond comprehension; if word of this leaked to the media, he’d be ruined! Chased from the President position he’d fought so hard and spent so much to achieve, the Mara Colonists would be able to take everything he had bought with their money if word of this had ever gotten back to them!

“Alright, fine; what do you want, rat?” McCain demanded. “You want me to write you a cheque to make all of that blackmailing information go away? Or perhaps shipping manifests so you can rob some of our cargo ships to the Protectorate?”

“Stars above, no,” replied the rat. “Nothing so mild; I’m far wealthier than what I could gain from you or from robbing ships. What I’m after is not so different from what you once had; a passion for revenge.”

“On who?”

“On a certain freighter pilot and his crew, who it just so happens has robbed me of something; commodities I could have sold for more than you make in three months,” replied the rat. “They took them from me, and have hidden them somewhere; I do not know where. I only know the name of their pilot; a dolphin by the name of ‘Felix’. When I met him, he was with a shark and orca as well.”

McCain perked up at the description. “Felix Kaufmann?” He asked.

“You know him?” The rat asked.

“Quite well; he too is from my old homeworld,” replied McCain. “His ship is called The Mara’s Hope; it supplied Mara Colony with money and resources until I stripped the colony over two years ago. I doubt they’d still be on Trident IV; I left nothing behind.”

“Well, he’s living somewhere; clearly neither you nor I know where,” replied the rat. “But that doesn’t mean he’s out of reach.”

“Explain?”

“I’ve received word from a girl in my pocket who works at a bar he favors,” replied the rat. “He arrived there the other night, and actually just hired one of the other girls working there –though she’s of no consequence; some gecko whore that serves drinks. But during that,

he apparently mentioned that he's never coming back to my... 'area', which probably means he'll be working somewhere in yours."

"So what, you want me to find out where he is?" McCain asked. "Then what; you send mercs or assassins to shoot down the Mara's Hope?"

The rat waved his paw dismissively. "Too expensive, too much effort," he replied. "I have an associate coming your way who I want you to get him onto an acceleration gate in order to stage an accident."

"What kind of accident?" McCain asked.

At that, the rat grinned. "The kind where ships enter an Acceleration Gate... and take a little 'trip' somewhere they didn't plan on."

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"And over here," Gustav explained to Angela as he showed her the small 'kitchen' of the rations house, "is where the food prep is done; mind your head as it seems most of the pots and pans were hung up above the counter here, and probably where they'll be kept. Even though you're a server you may have to do prep sometimes; is that okay?"

Angela nodded. "I'm willing to learn," the gecko replied.

"And that should about cover it; rear-most room is used for storage. Aside from going there for items you'll only need to go back there to make sure the door is locked, so no one sneaks in for a late-night snack. Mind you though, this new colony only has fifty-five people so it should be pretty easy going here."

Angela nodded. "I'm used to busy days," she remarked. "After all, I worked in a bar; doesn't get much busier than that."

Gustav nodded in acknowledgement. "And that experience will be welcomed here," he said.

At that moment, Felix poked his head into the room. "Angela; your house is all set – ready to see where you'll be hanging your hat?"

"Sure, if I wore one," the gecko remarked, turning to the door and following the dolphin out, with Gustav the last to exit the building.

They stepped out into the high-altitude colony once called Eyrie Nineteen; founded by the Avian-originated corporation, WingTech, one of the biggest technological titans in the Confederacy. Like many corporations they had left behind their colonial structures on Trident IV when the planet was tapped out of resources, but due to the natural love of high altitudes all avians shared, founding their colony atop high ground was a must. The colony was situated atop an escarpment called the Crashing Wave Mesa – a huge pillar of stone rising out of the ocean, higher than the Gelks could ever hope to reach, but nonetheless equipped with a wall.

How Felix wished they could have found this place long ago; after spending months traversing the planet, he had never known that a colony had been established atop this pillar. He could have moved Mara Colony to this place, and everyone would have been absolutely safe from the Gelks and the possibility of tsunamis, but many would have been left homeless;

the colony was smaller than Mara or Ingrid, equipped with state-of-the-art prefabricated structures, but had only housing capacity for two hundred; less than half of Ingrid or Old Mara.

The small size was necessary for the limited space atop the escarpment, and to leave enough room for a landing pad for ships –one that was almost too small for the Mara’s Hope. The colony had apparently been meant for shipping firms –a rest stop for planetary freighters transporting goods from one hub to another -basically the colony was a rest stop for delivery boys, so unlike Mara or Ingrid, this one did not have old mining gear or around –just hundreds of empty crates and late-model holopads. So far, that old junk was all they had found.

But, it was big enough for the refugees, and some colonists wouldn’t have to share homes anymore; they could move here. “Damn, why didn’t we think of this sooner?” Felix thought aloud.

“We had no idea this colony was even up here,” Gustav pointed out. “I’m... admittedly not too comfortable with the altitude either,” he added with a nervous tone.

“You fly around in a spaceship daily; you can’t tell me that you’re afraid of heights,” Felix remarked as he and Angela both looked at Gustav quizzically.

“Up there in space, gravity isn’t going to send me hurtling twelve kilometers downward,” Gustav returned, pointing up to the sky. “At the speed I’d hit the ocean I might as well land on a steel pad.” He punched his fist into his palm. “Splat! Orca gumbo for the Gelks.”

“Well, just don’t go near the ledge,” Angela stated.

“Profanity is not in my nature, but that comment warrants a ‘no shit’,” Gustav retorted with a frown.

Angela only laughed, and the three continued on, approaching a Bachelor-sized house across the way from the Ration house. “We made sure it was close to your work,” said Felix as they neared the building.

It was so much smoother and sleeker than the old pre-fab home Felix had once had back on Old Mara –not any larger, but looked less like a cube and more like a dome, even having its own skylight, a sliding door as clear as glass but equipped with a shading program to darken the window for privacy so that nobody could peep in on the inhabitant, and a porch –a star-damned porch. It didn’t have any furniture, but Felix had never, ever in his life, seen a pre-fabricated home equipped with porch, especially not a bachelor one.

“Those guys working for WingTech sure had it made,” said Felix in awe.

“Maybe we should apply for a job with them,” Gustav remarked.

“The Corp. that ran your old colony didn’t give you a place like this?” Angela asked.

“My old house had only one window; didn’t have anything like this,” replied Felix.

“Aww,” returned Angela, stroking a finger under Felix’s chin. “Drop by anytime; door’s always open for the guy who gave me a new job.”

Felix blushed darkly.

As they approached, the door opened, and out stepped Zack, drying his hands on a rag. He looked up, and scowled as he saw Felix, before looking past him at Angela. “Your climate control is up and running; controls are next to the kitchen, so it can be as hot or cold as you like in there,” he explained. “Can’t get your fridge working myself though; need an extra pair of hands.”

"I can help," offered Felix.

"No thanks; I'll go ask one of the Nocturnians," Zack replied with clear spite as he pushed past Felix and headed towards the street, slinging the rag in his hand over his shoulder.

Angela looked at Felix after Zack was out of earshot. "You and him still at each other's throats?"

Felix shrugged helplessly. "Can't get him to talk to me," he replied. "He just refuses to go near me now; he still works on the ship but he locks the engine room door when he works and hides in his room on his breaks. I don't know what else to do."

"Give him a little longer, Felix," said Gustav. "Sooner or later, he has to cool down."

Felix shook his head. "I may be waiting a long time; Zack doesn't forgive easily, as recent years have shown us."

"If you get the chance, invite him for a beer," said Angela. "And if he explodes on you just let him let it all out; you may feel bad at first, but he'll feel better after, and then things can calm down from there."

"Assuming he doesn't smash my face with the bottle," Felix muttered darkly.

"Hey Felix!"

The three turned, and saw Jessica striding over to them, looking utterly awe-stricken for some reason. "You're not going to believe what the Nocturnians have done!"

"Don't tell me they wrecked something," Felix said with a slight groan.

"No, just the opposite," replied Jessica. "They found a plumbing system for this colony – a Salt Water Separator with a direct feeding line right through this pillar down to the ocean. And that's not all; they even got it working!"

Felix's eyes widened, clearly intrigued. "I'll be damned," he said. "Some of the techies at New Mara might not even need to move here; the Nocturnians can fix this place themselves."

"And they evidently like doing it," Gustav pointed out as he raised his arm and pointed with a finger over to a nearby structure light, where a pair of Nocturnians were curiously climbing over it opening a panel and tinkering with the inner workings. "These guys are like well-oiled machines; they're finding and fixing everything like their life depended on it."

Felix grimaced at that, suddenly realizing the actions of the Nocturnians may have been driven by their earlier enslavement; their lives may very well *have* depended on keeping things maintained not so long ago...

"We still need to go find some work ourselves," Felix stated, changing the subject before he could fall into any more melancholy. "Plus, we still need to go get the volunteers and others who are transferring here."

"I'm going to check out my new pad," said Angela. "Don't be strangers, boys; stop by for a drink sometime –assuming there's any liquor around here."

"Later, Angela," said Felix, waving to the gecko as he, Jessica and Gustav proceeded to leave the property. Tucking his hands into his pockets, he led the way across the colony, his eyes surveying the activity –particularly at the guardhouses and the armories along the walls, and the surprising number of militia manning them.

"Can you believe how many of the techies transferred to Militia?" Gustav asked.

"I know, right?" Felix asked. "Amber was right; making the colony safer with those turrets she fixed up did leave quite an impact; it brought everyone courage."

"Mostly because now they really don't have to do any work," said Jessica in jest.

"That's what *they* think," said Felix. "Wait until Zambrano starts training them. Now, I'm going to go prep the ship; after Zack finishes at Angela's house we've got to get going, get up to Denver XII to find some work."

Later on that same day, the Crew of the Mara's Hope was, for the first time in months, returning to Denver XII. It was a welcome sight to look upon the clean, secure space center again, as opposed to the decrepit, filthy, patch-ridden hull of the Dirt Palace. At least Denver XII didn't look as though it might shatter upon being hit by a runaway ship or a meteorite.

Jessica had to admit it was good to be off the ship for once, and even better to be back in familiar, comfortable territory; she had been spending far too much time there, as she never wanted to step off into the Dirt Palace. The thought of walking through those halls seeing all of the drug-addicts and people who had clearly been in brawls sounded like a doctor's worst nightmare –she knew she would have hated it there, and so had always stayed aboard the Mara's Hope. Now, finally, she was walking with her crew again, feeling once more like a true member of the Hope crew.

'Though,' she thought as she looked back at Felix and Zack, practically able to see the tension still present between them. *'I wish the mood was a little lighter.'*

Nobody said much, equally put off by the obvious friction between the dolphin and rabbit; something they had never expected since the two had once been inseparable. Now it was like the two saw each other as rivals, almost constantly butting heads on every subject, with the only reason why being a difference in morality. Amber, Gustav and Jessica had all supported Felix's decision –hell, he had actually let them choose instead of him, but despite that, Felix was the only target of Zack's anger.

Maybe he felt like everyone in the crew was against him, since everyone was often quick to take Felix's side in their arguments –usually because they all stood on the same side of the river as the dolphin. None of them had ever wanted to be criminals, and Felix had given them the chance to turn away from that life and bring things back to the way they once were, once again winning the support of the crew majority. But Zack, having conflicting ideals and perhaps not even sure what he himself wanted, was never on the same page as the rest of them. He had actually liked the life, and didn't want to lose it.

She worried for what the future might hold for the crew if this continued...

Soon, the crew eventually found a job listings board; it took them longer than they remembered, likely because it had been too long since they had come here looking for work and the board had either been moved or they had simply forgotten where to find it, and in the end they had to ask for directions. When they found it, they were surprised to find many jobs were on the board.

Amber scanned over the listings for a moment before her eyes narrowed. "Hey... wait a second," she said.

"What's wrong?" Felix asked.

“Not wrong; unexpected,” he said. “A fair number of these jobs have the standard of the Confederate Armada on them –these are job contracts offered by the military.”

“What, enlistment?” Zack asked.

“No; side-contracting –using outside sources to move supplies in order to reduce the number of supply convoys they have to send out –convoys often targeted by enemy fleets,” Amber explained. “And there’s so many of them; they must really need some help!”

“How much are they offering?” Felix asked.

“Let’s see,” Amber began, tapping a listing and expanding it to allow everyone to see. “Medical supply transport from here to Heliopolis XII –that’s a station in the same system as Dory II. Military outpost; pays about forty thousand credits; supplies are picked up from Dory II.”

“Keep that open, but let’s see what else there is,” Felix instructed.

“Alright, next one,” Amber muttered, bringing up a second listing. “Another supply transport; four thousand kilograms of rations to primary White Star Sector Base, Troy IX.”

“That’s a lot of MRE’s,” Jessica remarked.

“I could make them fit, but can the Hope carry that much weight?” Gustav asked Felix.

But the dolphin shook his head. “It’s a thousand over our weight limit; we’d have to make two trips. Where’s the pickup from?”

“Here on Denver XII,” replied Amber. “Two floors up at the vacant offices, which the military have commandeered to use as a command post.”

“What’s the pay?”

“Sixty thousand, with a potential bonus pay if the cargo arrives undamaged,” replied Amber. “And... oh, damn it.”

“What’s wrong?” Jessica asked.

“Someone else just took the job,” replied Amber. “Posting just locked.”

“Damn... okay, next one then,” said Felix.”

“Here’s a pickup order; a VIP Individual needing transport from Dory II to...” She paused. “Olympus VII.”

Jessica tilted her head curiously. “Olympus VII; where’s that?” She asked.

“It’s the capital world of the Blue Star Sector,” replied Felix. “Long ways from here though.”

Gustav looked at Zack. “Could the Hope even make it that far?” The orca asked.

The rabbit looked at Gustav, hesitant to answer, but eventually he did. “Well, we’d have to make a lot of rest stops to keep the engine from overheating but,” he nodded. “It could, yeah; with the upgrades we’ve given it, it should be able to make the trip.”

“Is the listing still open?” Felix asked.

“We’re in luck on that; it was posted here only a few minutes ago,” said Amber. “Job like this though will attract a lot of attention, so if we’re going to take it, we better jump on it.”

“How much does it offer?” Felix asked.

“Fifty thousand credits,” replied Amber. “Plus another thousand for covering travel fees; pretty good deal actually. Job has to be accepted at the site of pickup, though,” said Amber. “If we’re going to take it then we better get moving or someone else might get there first.”

"We taking it then?" Gustav asked.

"Even if we can't get that one specifically, could always take that supply job that would take us to Dory II anyway," Jessica pointed out. "It's worth a try."

"Agreed," said Amber.

"Zack?" Felix asked.

The rabbit only shrugged in reply. "We need work; I'm not going to be picky about it, not this time."

Felix actually smiled at that, and nodded to the others. "Alright; let's get back to the ship, double-time!" Felix urged.

Amber shrank down the job listing again, accepting the first one she had picked out as well and joined the others as they walked, expeditiously, back towards the shuttle bay to return to their hangar...

The Mara's Hope was launched again within the hour, exiting the hangar and angling itself in the direction of the gate that would take them to the neighboring system where Dory II was located, and were off at warp speed shortly after, racing across the stars at faster than light speed, working at their stations full of pride and ready to get to work. No worries about getting caught by patrols, and no fear of being ambushed by pirates; this was a job that was risk-free beyond the journey itself.

For the first time in years they wouldn't be looking over their shoulders while out on a job... now they could focus on the completion of the task and not on whether or not they'd be seen.

As the Mara's Hope emerged from warp speed, the gate was in sight, the large, rib cage-looking structure, covered end to end in bright signal lights to make its gray form stand out against the black of space. As Felix steered the ship towards it, he heard heavy footfalls that could only have belonged to Gustav approaching, and looked to the right just as the orca stepped into view.

"This brings me back to our job out at Ithica VII," he said. "That was our first trip through an acceleration gate."

"And beyond that one and another, we had our first real taste of flying through a battlefield," Felix remarked. "Scary as all hell, but a thrill you never forget."

"Not one I'm looking to revisit just yet," Gustav admitted, eliciting a chuckle from both himself and Felix.

"Alright, hold on to your apron big guy," Felix said, reaching across the console to tap a button. "I'm sending our request to proceed through the gate; in a few minutes we'll be going faster than even light in a warp bubble; don't want to have to take you off the windshield with a paint scraper."

"I'll pass on that," returned Gustav, hurriedly seating himself in the nearest chair.

"This is Civilian Ship Mara's Hope, requesting Accel Warp Jump to Dory II. Over."

"This is Accel Gate control; state your business in neighboring system, over."

"Pickup job at Dory II space station."

Logging the statement into the records and quickly cross-referencing it with public job listings, one of the officers about the gate control nodded in approval to the communication officer, confirming there was indeed a job listing there. He nodded back, and turned back to his terminal. "Verified; proceed to acceleration gate, heading six-one-one-three. Keep your speed at one hundred KPS, over."

"Confirmed, control; Mara's Hope proceeding."

"Acceleration gate, powering up; angling to heading six-one-one-three," one of the officers at the station's control console reported.

"Countdown to launch, starting now."

Three seconds into the countdown however, the lights flickered, and the crew looked around in puzzlement, until one of them suddenly called out in start. "Alert; acceleration gate not at proper heading, power output higher than minimum output!"

"Warp bubble generators won't respond; a new launch speed has been set in! They're going to miss their target!"

"Get it back to the proper heading!"

"We're trying; controls are frozen!"

"Correction rockets are not responding!"

The communication officer hit the transmit button on his console again. "Mara's Hope; there's an error! Pull your ship away immediately, repeat; pull your ship away!"

"Say again, control? I can't hear you," Felix returned, but received only static in response to his inquiry.

"What's going on?" Gustav asked.

"I... I have no idea; I can't hear them," he said. "Maybe the comms are down."

"Ours or theirs?"

"No way to tell while we're in flight, but we're on approach now," said Felix.

"...ull...way...heading... Hope... copy?"

"Control, I can't hear you; you're breaking up too much. We're on approach already."

"Pull aw... ly! The gate is malfunctioning! The gate is malfunctioning!"

Felix and Gustav looked at each other in horror, before Felix gripped the tiller tightly and pulled it back, but there was no responsive. "Dammit! We're already over the rail; I can't pull out!"

"Felix what's happening?!" Gustav demanded.

Without answering the orca, Felix reached over to the intercom button and struck it harder than intended. "All hands, brace for abnormal acceleration! Everyone, hang on to something!"

Felix heard someone –Amber perhaps- attempt to respond, but he didn't even hear it over the crackling of the acceleration gate. He tried and tried to steer the ship off of the rail, but they were already through the first port of the acceleration gate. Nothing could stop them from being fired off now...

Foo-BOOOM!

The Mara's Hope was launched, faster than the acceleration gate should have sent it, surrounded by a static-filled warp bubble carrying them on an unknown heading. Felix could do nothing now; the ship had been sent from the acceleration gate at speeds beyond the capabilities of its engines, locked in to whatever vector the gate had angled itself to. But without a second gate waiting at the end to slow their approach, he had no idea what would happen to the Mara's Hope...

After flashing lights that rendered him almost blind, Felix's gaze had suddenly gone black, and when he regained his senses, all he felt was an ache all over his body, most especially in his neck –a feeling reminiscent of the worst form of whiplash. Fortunately, though, it wasn't as serious as it felt, but his efforts to rub out the pain were futile; it persisted, and he groaned in agony.

He regretted the moment he tried to stand up, feeling incredibly top-heavy, and made the mistake of opening his eyes, sending his whole world spinning as he doubled over. He barely caught himself on his hands, feeling like his every organ was still going at light speed while he body was just being dragged in their backdraft, and forcefully retched, emptying his stomach onto the floor of the ship and coughing harshly.

"Felix... you okay?" He heard Gustav's voice.

Once able to collect himself, the dolphin looked up, turning to Gustav and seeing the Orca, down on his knees and looking as sick as Felix felt, balancing himself on the chair he had just stumbled out of.

"I'll... be fine in a sec," the dolphin replied. "Damn it, what the hell was that?"

"I was going to ask you the same," Gustav replied, falling onto his backside –and onto his tail, which made him let out an 'ow' in reaction. "Where are we?"

"Hang on..." Felix replied, avoiding his own vomit as he crawled over to the console, dragging himself up and reaching for the navigation controls, his vision still spinning and unable to focus as he tried to touch the controls for the computer.

"Felix! Gustav; where are you guys?" Zack's voice called from the hallway.

"In here, Zack!" Gustav called.

"God, I feel like I'm having the worst hangover of my life –oh geez! Who spewed out here?" Zack asked as he stumbled into the room.

"Sorry; my bad," Felix replied as he tapped the button.

Amber and Jessica appeared seconds later, looking just as off-balance as everyone else felt; Jessica was actually leaning on Amber for support, though the shark woman didn't exactly look to be at her best. "I think it's been too long since we used an accel gate," Amber remarked.

"That wasn't how that jump should've been," Felix replied as he tried to bring up the star map. "We were off course, and going way too fast –we may have missed our target completely."

"Then... where are we?" Jessica asked.

"Trying to... find out now," the dolphin replied.

As his vision cleared, Felix suddenly became aware of the dark red glow coming from in front of him; at first he'd thought it was the glow of the Red Nebula, but as he saw clearly, he found himself looking, in fact, at a red sun, and the realization that the ship was facing straight towards it had him switching from the nav system to the controls out of sheer reflex, until he realized they weren't moving towards it any closer. *'Shit! Another four hundred meters and we'd be in the gravity field!'*

"Wait... is that a red giant out there?" Zack asked.

"Looks like one, not that I've ever seen one," replied Gustav.

"Except there *are* no red giants in the White Star Sector," Amber remarked. "The biggest sun is the White Dwarf for which the sector's named."

Felix turned to face the navigation computer again as the map finally came to life, and projected itself above the screen for him to see. "According to the star map, that sun's called Alionos; named after a heroic general of the..." He froze, the words suddenly dying in his throat as he read. "Of... the..."

"What? Felix; what's wrong?" Amber asked.

"Alionos... a heroic general of the Grunikan Empire," Felix finished, turning and looking at his crew in horror. "Guys. We've been launched outside of Confederate space completely. We're in the territory of the *Empire*."

Note from the author:

Hey all! Sorry to leave you with this huge cliff hanger here but this is as far as the second arc goes, and for a short while I have to put this series on hiatus to focus on clearing up some additional projects, so that I can then concentrate my time to a novel I hope to publish and market one day.

Thank you for reading my works; I hope this Arc was satisfying –to any Alberta furs who read this, maybe I'll see you at the next local con and you can get a copy of my book :).

See you all soon!