

Voyages of the Mara

Arc 2: Edge of the Law

Chapter 2: Dependence

When left alone, desolate and with no alternative but to survive on your own strength, wits and instincts, your survival will depend entirely upon you. What becomes of you may not always be what you intend; when you're all alone, there's only yourself to depend on, no one else to support, but your mind is what will be most vulnerable; you will either fall to loneliness, lose your sense of identity, even forget how to speak to others if anyone else should ever find you wherever you are.

To some, this sounds like a terrifying fate... but to Gustav it sounded like it would be much easier than what he and the rest of the crew faced. The crew of the Mara's Hope were not simply supporting one person, or just supporting themselves. The fate of an entire colony rested on their shoulders –a burden that often became quite difficult to bear. The Mara Colonists lived on a world that was mostly ocean, inhabited by hostile life forms in a near derelict colony that was in constant need of repair and maintenance. No support, no source of income or materials for their needs, and no way out; the Mara's Hope, as its name implied, was all that they could depend. An old, light freighter was the only lifeline the colony had.

Gustav sat quietly in his room, feeling the ship rumbling with that familiar sensation of atmospheric entry. He had completed all of his duties aboard the ship and was now simply relaxing as he waited for their return home. He absently gazed to the side, wishing he had a window to look out of while they were in the atmosphere, but unfortunately Model 102's were not built with any windows, barring the one the pilot needed to see where the ship was going. Sometimes the orca felt caged while he was in this room, but it was not just where he slept while the crew was out on voyage –it was where he slept even while the ship was parked at New Mara Colony.

This tiny, cramped, windowless and miserable room... it was his home.

When the Colonists had relocated to Ingrid Colony, which they later renamed New Mara, there had not been enough homes for everyone. To spare the colony the burden of over-capacitating what homes there were, the crew of the Mara's Hope chose to stay aboard the ship. They had splurged to refurnish the interior, but nothing they could do ever made the ship truly feel like a 'home'... at least not to Gustav. Zack, Felix, even Amber, they seemed to enjoy living aboard this ship.

Well, with Amber it was a maybe; most of the time she never seemed to care where she slept, as long as she had a place to lie down as well as eat, maintain her guns and brood –lots of brooding with that woman. Felix pretended he was fine, as did Jessica, but their ruse didn't fool the orca; they hated living like this no matter how much they loved the ship. Zack was the only one who was happy living aboard the ship; he could tinker all he wanted, and his bedroom was only a short sprint from his workplace, which was fine for the rabbit.

Gustav dozed a little as his thoughts wandered into melancholy. He desperately wanted this life to end; he dearly wished he and his friends could have a normal life again but a large government-owed debt, substantial war-time taxes and the struggle of everyday life made that dream seem further and further away, and the only time the orca could find it was when he slept.

His nap was interrupted by the jolting of the ship when it landed. Gustav's eyes fluttered open, yawning widely as he sat up. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, the muscular orca stood up from his bed, walking over to the door and tapping a button to open it to step through, exiting into the corridor. When he stepped out, he saw Felix coming off the bridge, and Amber lowering her gunner seat down through the tube leading up to the ship's M.O.T – manually operated turret. Jessica stepped out of the medical bay, a small back tucked under her arm as she made her way towards the airlock alongside Felix and Amber. Zack emerged from the cargo bay, looking at the others as they headed out, and then to Gustav.

"Hey big guy; we're not unloading the stuff?"

"Not yet," replied Gustav. "We're just going to get check in with the manager, and then we'll come right back. In the meantime, Zack, why don't you go see your folks? You didn't get the chance to last time we were here and I imagine they miss you."

Zack scoffed. "Not on your life, big fella," he returned.

Gustav stared aghast at the rabbit, stunned that that he would talk like that about going to see his parents. "Why not?" He asked.

"Because every time I go to visit them it's the same stupid song," Zack replied, before he made a mocking gesture, putting his hands and knees together and making big-eyes at Gustav as he forcefully raised his voice to a higher pitch. "'This life's too dangerous; you shouldn't be going! You should stay here and help the colony! Let someone else handle repairing the Mara's Hope; we don't want you becoming a bad boy!'" He sneered and shook his head. "My ears can't take any more of their bitching; I've had it up to here with it." He jabbed his thumb towards his neck, never losing his scowl.

Gustav frowned at Zack. "They're just worried about you, Zack; that's all it is. Every parent's..."

Zack did not let him finish, interrupting him mid-sentence with an objective remark. "It isn't just that they're worried; they're just jealous that they don't get to be on a ship making real money, not to mention that they just can't accept I'm not a kid anymore. I'm grown up, I'm making my own choices, and they can stick their bullshit right back...!"

"Zack!" Gustav bellowed, sharply, the strength of his voice enough to make Zack jump back in fright. "Do *not* talk about your parents like that," he said, his voice stern. "At least you still have parents to worry about you; there are *some* people here in New Mara who don't get to have such luxuries. Don't forget that."

"Sorry, Gustav," Zack returned. "Got carried away..." He shook his head angrily. "Still, I am staying right here. Nobody else but me can fix this ship, and I'm not letting some amateur from the colony put their greasy paws on my engine and mess it up, not for a Minister's ransom."

"That's *king's* ransom," Gustav corrected.

“Monarchy’s dead, Gustav,” Zack returned, smiling a little while crossing his arms.

“Tell that to the Grunikans,” remarked the Orca.

Zack actually laughed at that; how long had it been since Gustav had heard Zack laugh at a wisecrack? Of course... things had been so grim neither of them spent much time trying to come up with any to toss around. *‘Seems there’s a little of my short-statured friend left inside this punkish shell after all,’* he thought with some mild relief.

“Alright, Zack; just think about what I said,” Gustav urged the rabbit. “Even if your parents annoy you, they’re still your family. Take it from one who knows; you never realize just how much you miss something until it’s gone away, so treasure it for as long as you can.”

Zack let out a long, exasperated sigh, giving Gustav a tired look. “You know, you and Felix both have that same annoying trait when you talk.”

“What trait is that?”

“You make too much damn sense.”

The two laughed together that time.

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The group met with Brunhilda, the colony manager, at her house on the hill located near the solar energy dish outside of the colony wall. Once there, they gave her the colony’s share of the profits from the recent salvage operations, money which she promptly forwarded to the debt the colony still owed to the Confederacy. A debt of six-hundred thousand credits, unjustly dropped onto them two years before by one of their own, turning the Economics Laws of the Confederacy against them and nearly costing them everything they had.

The debt became even larger when the Colonists had to officially purchase Ingrid Colony from the Economics Board, else they risked being put right back to square one and being fined for squatting; the debt grew from six hundred to eight hundred thousand with that act, and it fell to the crew of the Mara’s Hope to bring it down. Now the New Mara Colony was an official Confederate Colony, paying taxes and being granted a place on star maps; the only functioning colony on all of Trident IV.

Yet, in those two years, and with the Hope Crew working hard, the debt was still high. For every forty thousand credits that they put towards it, at least a quarter of that seemed to be added back on by interest; they were still sitting at more than three-quarters of the amount, still owing more than six-hundred thousand –something Felix could never make sense of no matter how many times he went over it, but it was all they could do to prevent Collections from coming back for more of their belongings to settle the debt, and the colony could not afford to lose anything else.

With their business with the manager concluded, the Crew –with Brunhilda herself accompanying them, headed back to the ship to begin offloading the cargo, relocating the crates of supplies onto hover dollies, which carried them to their designated locations; medicine to the clinic, food to the ration house and electronic gear to the Technician’s office. All of them, items that would serve the colonists well in the short term.

Brunhilda watched in satisfaction as the goods were distributed, smiling proudly. "Every set of supplies you bring gives hope to the colony," she stated.

"We do what we can," said Felix.

"This is our home after all," Jessica added.

"I wish you five could stay for a while, but I have a feeling you'll be shipping out again soon," Brunhilda said, looking at her son sadly.

"Sorry mom... but we've barely made a dent in the debt we owe the Confederacy between working on this colony and keeping the ship maintained," Felix replied. "If we're going to get that nonsense out from over our heads, then we need to keep working."

"At least take a day to rest," Brunhilda urged, approaching her son and placing her hands upon his shoulders. "You five have been working very hard; it's only the middle of the month and we've made our payments for this period. Why not take a day at least to give yourselves some reprieve before you set off again?"

Amber stepped forward. "Maybe she's right, Felix," the shark said, insistently. "Taking a day or two won't set us back too much and it'd be good for morale. I've also wanted to take another crack at the turrets and gun emplacements; I still want to find out what is it that's keeping them from working but even after all this time I've barely had ten minutes to look at them."

Felix looked at Amber briefly, her council always appreciated and accurate; sometimes he wondered if perhaps she should have been the leader of the Hope Crew. With that, and sighed. "I guess it couldn't hurt," he said. "Alright; we'll stay here to check out the colony and give everyone time to check in with their families. Then we'll sleep in tomorrow before we ship out."

"Sounds good to me," agreed Gustav.

"Me too," added Jessica.

Zack grimaced, but shrugged. "Well, I'm outvoted anyway; staying it is. Those noobie techies at the office could probably use my expertise anyway."

"Whatever works for you, Zack," Amber returned, rolling her eyes without the rabbit seeing. "Cocky little Rodentian," she added in a low mutter.

"How about I make us all dinner tonight?" Gustav offered.

"Wonderful," Brunhilda said, happily. "You can use my kitchen if you like."

"Will do; thank you, Ms. Kaufmann."

Brunhilda chuckled at the orca. "Please, Gustav, I've told you this many times; you can just call me by name," she assured him. "We'll all meet at my house for dinner at dusk; don't be late now."

"That gives us about five-six hours," said Zack.

"Plenty of time," agreed Felix. "Let's go see if anyone around here needs a hand with anything, and then we'll meet at my mom's house for dinner tonight."

With that, everyone wished the other a good day, and they split up, dispersing themselves throughout the colony. Jessica already knew where she was heading; she made a beeline directly for the clinic, eager to check in with Dr. Hanson and readily offer her aid if he needed some help. She'd been away from her mentor for quite a while, having not had a

chance to see him when last the Mara's Hope came to New Mara Colony, so now she was hoping to make up for lost time.

A short trek through the colony grounds later, and she reached the clinic. It was certainly in better condition than the last time she had been here; the holes in the roof and outside walls had finally been patched, and she could hear the satisfying rumble of a proper working refrigeration closet as she stepped through the front door. The money that the Hope Crew had put towards the colony had been put to good use; knowing this gave her some reassurance and reduced her lamenting about the means of gathering the money.

*'It's only temporary,' she thought. 'Soon we can all live properly again...'*

But her mind darkly added, *'Some day... maybe.'*

She wanted to surgically remove whatever part of her brain made her think that.

Jessica shook her head to clear it, straightening her coat as she began to search for Dr. Hanson, but much to her surprise, the clinic was empty! The equipment was still there, but the cabinets were all locked, and there was no sign of Dr. Hanson in the small room. Jessica stepped in, stepping lightly on her delicate hooves as she sought out any sign of her mentor. She checked the two clinic beds; both clean, freshly made and awaiting patients. She moved on to the refrigeration closet, knocking on the door and listening in case he was inside. She received no reply, and so input the unlock code for the door lock and opened it, peeking inside the closet.

No doctor, and all of the supplies in the fridge were neatly organized, though only half of the shelves and medicines were stocked, with countless highly desired items still missing; the doctor was almost out of ReGel and antivenom, making the doe suspect the Gelks had been active with the colonists. She shuddered at the thought, and closed the fridge, ensuring the lock clicked into place before she stepped away.

Only one place left to look; the back room of the clinic—normally also meant for storage, but the doctor had converted it into an office and a sleeping quarter for him, since like the Hope Crew, he did not have a house in the colony. Perhaps he had just slept in that day.

...Which would be odd, since the doctor was an early morning riser.

Crossing the clinic to the backroom, Jessica approached the door, knocking gently on it. "Dr. Hanson, are you in?" She asked.

No answer.

She pressed the button to open the door; with a hiss, it slid into a crevice in the wall, and the light within switched on. Her eyes went to the cot first; it was still folded up against the wall, and the desk and desk chair both sat unused. Jessica rubbed her chin thoughtfully, completely a loss to where the doctor could be.

"Well where in the world..." She started to say.

A hand clapped her on the shoulder.

Jessica shrieked, instinctive twisting around to face her assailant.

A grinning, elderly anthro alligator stared back at her.

"Doctor!" Jessica exclaimed, until her brow furrowed in irritation. "What's the idea sneaking up on me like that?"

"I could not resist," he returned, patting her shoulder in apology. "You were so oblivious to my entrance that I wondered what it'd take for you to notice I was even here." He turned away, walking over to a nearby table and placing an aluminum briefcase onto it. "I had to make a house call; a militia trooper was bitten by a Carnabass while he was out fishing with his brother, and came down with a fever shortly after, so he needed an antivenom."

"I see," returned Jessica. "But if that's the case, why didn't you lock up the clinic?"

"The front door's lock is broken," replied Hanson, plainly as he opened the briefcase and lifted out its contents, carrying a set of vials over to the fridge to return them to storage.

"Do you want me to ask Zack or Felix to take a look?" Jessica offered.

"Well considering I asked Alan six days ago and he still hasn't shown up," Dr. Hanson returned, "yes please; I'd very much appreciate it."

Jessica nodded. "I'll run it past them next time I see them." She put her hands together. "Is there anything I can help with? I'm in until tomorrow."

"Not at this moment," Hanson replied as he closed the fridge again. He peered over at her with mild concern. "How is the crew doing?"

"Good; everyone is in good health," she replied. Although, seconds later, her ears drooped. "Well, at least physically."

"Is something wrong?" Hanson asked, eyeing her with concern.

"Well... maybe it's just an off day, but," she paused, struggling to find the words she wanted. "It's just... I worry about everyone."

Dr. Hanson eyed her for a moment before he gestured with one scaly hand over to a chair at the table, saying nothing. Without a thought, Jessica walked over to the table, seating herself in one of the chairs, while her mentor seated himself opposite, taking the briefcase he'd left on the table away and closing it before he set it down on the floor. With that, he rested both of his thick arms on the table, listening to Jessica's words as she explained her plight to him.

"I worry about the effect this life is having on my friends," she began, leaning on the table but unable to look at the doctor; she just stared at the scratched, polished surface of the metal table, carefully speaking her mind. "I wasn't watching much at first but over the past year, I've started seeing things."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, the most obvious one is Zack," began Jessica "He isn't struggling to come to terms with this new life like the rest of us; he actually seems to *enjoy* it. I always knew he was a little dirty-minded; I found that little magazine stack of his that he started collecting back when the Mara's Hope began her first voyage. Various issues of Galaxy Girls or Exotic Women of the Stars; typical for a boy his age, and also typical for him to forget to put them away sometimes, which is how I found them.

"But I was in the engine room the other night –or day; hard to tell up there, and out of the corner of my eye, I spotted those magazines again. Just on a whim, I pulled out the box, and I noticed they're collecting dust now; he hasn't pulled them out at all for months."

"Why's that so strange?" Hanson asked.

“It isn’t. It just confirms what Amber’s been saying; Zack wastes his money on prostitutes every trip we make to the Dirt Palace. As if that’s not bad enough, some of them are underage, and who knows where they’ve been! Just in the last year there’ve been twenty newly discovered STD’s from all corners of Confederate space, and yet he’s doing something like that, spending his hard-earned money on hookers aboard a thieves den? Worst of all, I actually heard him saying that I didn’t do any work aboard the ship, and suggested reducing my cut of the pay. Felix and Amber defended me, but I think the point is that Zack doesn’t seem to care about anything anymore. He’s the worst case of everyone on the ship but it doesn’t end with him.”

“What else is there?”

“Well...” Jessica bit her lip, uncertain if she should be passing out this information, even to her teacher.

“Remember, pharmaceutical oath,” Hanson stated, sensing her conflict. “What you and I discuss stays here, in this clinic.”

His words reassured her, bringing a weak smile to her face. She took in a breath to calm herself, and went on with her explanation. “Amber spends a lot more time in the turret, even when we’re not in any danger; during our treks between planets and sites, she’s up there, doing... well I don’t even know what but she almost never leaves that turret chair, except to eat or sleep. I always thought she was just keeping a lookout, but then when we’re docked, she’s working on her firearms despite all of them being in excellent condition by now; it’s like she’s afraid of being away from a gun at any time, as if she expects a fight to happen at any second.

“And then there’s Gustav; normally he was the happiest and most cheerful of us, always being a pillar of strength and a warm, comforting blanket if things got to us. That much hasn’t exactly changed –the latter I mean, but he’s... just so unhappy now; I think he hates this new life even more than I do. Cooking for us or distributing supplies at the ration house seem to help him cope, but when he’s not doing that, he’s moping somewhere –either in the galley or in his room. He’s not as social as he normally is.

“Lastly is Felix. His condition is less obvious, but I see him checking the comm terminal for messages at least twice every week, even though there isn’t really anyone we should be expecting messages *from*; most of the ones we get are just advertisements so I don’t know what he’s looking for, but every time he doesn’t find it, I can see him becoming... depressed, like he’s lost someone.”

Dr. Hanson listened attentively as his student told him of her troubles. During the explanation he grabbed a couple of bottles of water from a mini-fridge beside the table, giving one to her before reseating himself. “Have you approached any of them about these concerns?”

“Well Felix and I have talked about Zack, but about the rest... no,” she replied.

“Why not?”

“What could I even say to them?” Jessica asked. “I’m trained in medicine, not counselling; I’m not sure what I could possibly do to help any of them.”

"You don't need to be a therapist to help them with their problems; the fact that you can see and identify them means you already understand the strengths and weaknesses of your crew," Hanson returned, almost scolding her. "You understand them, and you can be the one who helps them cope just by listening to them. Find a means to get them to open up to you, and let them talk out their problems with you." He chuckled. "You have no idea how many of the colonists I've had to help with the same kind of problems, not the least of whom being Brunhilda Kaufmann."

"Felix's mom? She comes to see you often?"

"Yes, often when something is bothering her," replied Hanson. "I don't know if it's because I'm the only physician in the colony –besides yourself, or if it's because I'm the oldest colonist living here, but when there's something she's not sure of, she comes to ask my opinion on the subject, and I answer her as honestly as I can."

Jessica nodded to the doctor. "Okay... I'll try."

"Which reminds me," the elderly gator said, standing up carefully from his chair. "I have something here for you," he informed her as he walked over to the office, stepping through the door and approaching the set of lockers inside, one of which he opened with a three-number key code.

Jessica stood up and watched as her mentor reached into the locker, retrieving a single object from the locker and holding it tenderly in his other hand as he stepped back out and approached Jessica, passing her a tiny, delicate object that at first, she mistook for a pen, except one end of it had a little hook on the end, like a dental tool but rounder and with a rounded end –not exactly useful for carving plaque out of teeth without a point. It was short, barely the length of one of her fingers, and the opposite end was tipped with a small bulbous end.

"What is it?" She inquired, curiously, looking over the small item in her hand. She found a little lever down by the bulb, and at the doctor's nod she flicked it. The bulb at the end lit up with green light, and the hooked end suddenly became filled by a small, green energy, flat on the outside. "Oh my."

"Your very own energy scalpel," returned the doctor. "Finest tool in hand-worked medicine; cauterizes as it cuts to prevent bleeding, needing only a steady hand and a charged battery. Will never fail you, not like those automated, mini-turret scalpels that can ruin a perfectly good cut by having a speck of dust in the joint; true surgeons use their hands, not some stupid machine."

"This is for me?" Jessica asked, surprised. Doc Hanson nodded to her, smiling warmly. She looked at the little scalpel again, curious to its origin; the doctor had been using original a hand-crafted obsidian scalpel –the stone collected from a volcanic island far from the New Mara Colony- for years, due to the absence of steel or energy-based scalpels at the clinic. "Where did you find this?"

"Ironically, here in the clinic," replied Hanson. "I found a whole set of them left behind, stored where they were actually well-preserved, so I took them to the techs and they fixed them up for me. They need only a small energy outlet to charge, and are ready within moments." He put a hand on her shoulder, the doe elevating her gaze to meet his. "We've



been behind on your training, but you've had an even better teacher than me –hands on experience from being the medic of the Mara's Hope. But this is different; it's time I taught you proper surgery. Once that is done, we'll be another step closer to certifying you as a doctor."

He walked back into the locker. "Which brings me to the second gift I have for you," he continued, approaching the locker again and reopening it to life out a human-sized dummy, cradling it in his arms as he walked back out. "Your own surgeon dummy –for practice purposes. Anatomically correct down to the deepest organ placement, for both male and female –don't worry, the organs are only foam. Fake skin and muscle that feels much like the real thing, and re-sealable cutting trails so it can be reused numerous times. Like the scalpels this was also left behind in mint condition; I've been saving it for this, and now we can finally use it."

Jessica looked at the dummy, and then at the scalpel, and finally at Dr. Hanson again, their eyes meeting for a moment. In that moment, all of her reasons for becoming a doctor – everything that had driven her to this point of her life was coming together before her very eyes. She was still young, and she should've been years yet from finishing her training, but her teacher believed she was ready for the advanced classes already thanks to her recent hands-on experience. She felt flattered, and a little afraid...

But not overwhelmed.

She nodded to Dr. Hanson. "Okay... let's get started," she said, following the elderly gator to the clinic beds, watching as the doctor placed the surgical dummy upon its cover, and stepped aside to let Jessica take over.

"Now," the Doctor began, putting on a pair of gloves before producing his old, tried and true obsidian scalpel, testing its edge before he approached the dummy. "We'll start with some simple incisions. Watch closely."

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Meanwhile, across the colony, Zack had arrived at the Tech and Engineering offices, taking in the lay of the area around him. It was a known fact Zack was the best technician and engineer in the colony, but even he had to admit that the other techs had done well keeping the colony in working condition; it was not like they were doing routine maintenance. They were keeping old technology functional –a challenge in and of itself, and Zack would know, considering he had been the one who helped Felix repair the Mara's Hope.

Stepping into the office, he approached the front desk –unoccupied, as there was little need for a receptionist since the office was in walking distance of every home in the colony. He leaned over the desk, peering into the back and spotting the other technicians at their own desks. Twenty five desks rested in the back of the office, with five unoccupied –likely men at work, while the other twenty were left to work on tools or await other calls.

Among the regular work positions and several specialty positions available in the colony techs were the most numerous. Nobody in the colony was jobless, but the specialty positions – Manager, Militia Captain, Doctor and, most recently, Space Crew, were all occupied, forcing

the rest of the jobs in New Mara to be filled. Technicians was the only position that was overstaffed, because it was the most sought after. Not because the job was easy, or paid well or had short work hours –none of which it did. It was the most sought after because, aside from Rationing, it was the job that had the least ventures outside of the wall, where the Gelks could attack at any moment and because it meant avoiding becoming militia or fishermen.

In short, it was the safest job title.

Zack could count on both paws how many of the techs on all three shifts –morning, day, night- actually had any skill in their trade, and those techs were all on this shift, and were either out of the office or repairing something at their workbenches. The rest just spent most of the day slacking off, something he'd brought up with Brunhilda before, but what could she scold them for? Most of the work for these men and women was routine maintenance, a task that required only half of the number of employees they had.

One of the techies at the front leaned back in their seat and peered out to the front as they heard Zack's noisy boots tromping through the front. The tech was a lady rat named Alisha; an overweight, bratty girl who had only become a tech thanks to her father being one of the instructors for the role. But she knew about as much about technology as she did about exercise –which was to say, nothing.

'Even in desperate times, you can still find spoiled brats,' Zack thought.

"Oh, look who is back," Alisha said, before turning to look back at the other desk technicians. "Look everyone; mister Space-man is back!" She announced to entire office; some responded by looking towards Zack, the rest just ignored Alisha and kept to their work. Alisha turned to look at Zack again, voicing her next sentence with blatant sarcasm. "What're you back *here* for great voyager of the stars; Felix kick you out?"

Drop dead, cunt, Zack thought, darkly. Alisha, despite being new and next to useless when it came to the job, was always the first to pick a fight. Zack was her favorite target, on account of him having a position she thought *she* deserved, working as the Tech and Engineer aboard the Mara's Hope. Her father, on her behalf, had even asked Felix if they would consider taking her aboard –even going so far as to try appealing to Felix's sympathetic nature by claiming that the Gelk attacks were hard for her, and believed some time in space would help ease her worries.

Felix had, of course, refused, saying plainly "if she has nothing to contribute to the crew then we don't need her," were his exact words. Alisha's father, Ichabod, and of course Alisha herself having been present for the dolphin's answer, were left aghast at how bluntly Felix had just called the Supervising Technician's daughter useless right to their faces –or at least, that was how Zack interpreted it, and proudly at that.

"Just back to make a dropoff; we're leaving tomorrow."

"Whatever," the rat shot back, before turning back to her desk and moving her hands across her terminal, pretending she was busy.

Zack turned his attention to his left, where a holograph board lay bolted into the wall. Much like the job listings boards on space stations, this board held a listing of work needed to be done around the colony. A quick count later and Zack identified eighteen possible jobs –

some of which had been up on the board for days and most of which were not even that big an issue!

The rabbit turned and looked into the back, raising his voice to address the whole crew. “Yo, guys! You aware of the number of tasks up here? Why are you all just sitting around in here when there’s work to be done?”

“Some of us have other shit to do,” Alisha replied, non-chalantly, the rest simply not answering.

“Like what, filing your nails?” Zack shot back. “Look; there’s a broken lock at the doctor’s listed right here –any idiot could fix that in five minutes.”

“So? Go do it.” Alisha returned, not even looking at Zack.

Zack groaned. “Good grief,” he muttered as he tapped the job listing with his finger and input his employee number. Zack’s picture appeared on the bottom right corner, indicating the job had been claimed by him, and its background colour changed from blue to red. He repeated this for two other jobs, both of them simple tasks but important nonetheless. “So,” Zack called into the back again. “Where’s Alan at?”

“Out,” Alisha replied.

“Out *where*?”

“Don’t know.”

Zack rolled his eyes, before calling back to the rest of the technicians. “Anyone who *not Alisha* know where Alan is?”

“He’s up at the solar dish replacing a panel,” one of the other techs answered –one of the few in the room who was actually working, repairing what Zack recognized as one of the pistons of the salt water Separator that gave the colony fresh drinking water.

Least someone’s trying to be useful. “He take anyone with him?”

“Yeah; Joe and Ichabod went with him, and I think Derek said he was heading up that way too.”

Zack nodded. “Thanks; if Alan comes back before I find him let him know I’m looking for him, okay?”

Before the tech could answer, Alisha seized the opportunity to give another snide remark. “Go tell him yourself,” she said.

“Like you’re doing anything else besides running your mouth?” Zack retorted, earning a glare from Alisha. “Seriously, have you actually done *anything* for this colony since your dad weaseled you in here?” He elevated his voice again. “No offense, Kris!”

“None taken!” The weasel at the back replied.

“For your information, space-man, not everyone here gets to ride in a cushy ship far from the daily hassles of running this shithole of a colony,” Alisha spat.

“Well then go find your own ship at one of the other deserted colonies and repair it yourself, and then you can come and go as you please,” Zack retorted. “Though please, for all our sakes, stay as far away as possible.”

“Yeah, you were lucky to find that heap you call a ship in the first place; if anyone else here were that lucky they’d have left this place behind.”

Zack's ears lowered, his brow furrowing and eye twitching angrily as he returned the rat's glare. "Did you just call *my* ship a heap?" He asked.

"Yeah; telling it like it is. Got a problem with that?" Alisha returned, adopting her snobbish, annoying tone of voice that always made Zack want to punch her square in the mouth as hard as he could.

His knuckles cracked, wanting to do just that, but he held himself back, and simply forced a smug grin. "You know what, Alisha; go fuck yourself, because you're the only person in the entire colony who ever will."

Alisha's jaw fell agape and her eyes wide open as Zack turned and left, feeling much better now that he had finally told off the rat-woman and made his way out of the office, hands tucked in his pockets.

He did not even react when he heard the heavy, metal object –guessing a wrench- hit the door as it hissed shut behind him.

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"Thanks for coming, Steph," Amber said to the technician as she approached. Amber had contacted one of the noteworthy techs from the offices to come and help her with her diagnostic of the turrets and mounted guns on the walls, to find out why they remained inoperable despite every attempt to reactivate them. Amber knew her guns, but these turrets weren't like handheld weapons; they required as much tech knowledge as firearms knowledge.

Stephanie was Amber's cousin; a tiger shark like herself, from her mother's side. She was several years younger than Amber, roughly twenty years of age, and had a natural aptitude for electronics ever since she was a little girl. She had darker skin than Amber and her hair was black instead of white, but they had the same blue eyes. Stephanie however was shorter and much more lithe than Amber, who sported a more athletic and toned body due to her militia training and all the work she had done as a crew member of the Mara's Hope.

One key difference between them, though, Stephanie was timid and had a mild stutter when she spoke –even with Amber, she felt a little overwhelmed and would start tripping on her words. Sometimes she could control it, but there were times it still slipped through and made her words difficult to follow.

"No p-problem, cousin," she bade Amber, giving her a quick hug before stepping back. "So uh... w-what did you need me f-f-for?"

"Well I'm trying to get these turrets operational," Amber began. "I've tried everything I can think of; I'm jumpstarted them, replaced firing components and even had the overall programming fixed but I can't understand why the hell they just won't turn on." She sighed. "I've asked other techs to help; they told me some parts needed replacing, and I've done that too.

"I used my own money to get parts for these turrets, and they still won't activate; I have a feeling it's going to turn out to be something really stupid that's stopping them –something simple like, there's an on/off switch somewhere I didn't find." She looked at Stephanie. "If

that's the case, I'd rather it be my cousin who finds it, because at least then the entire colony won't be hearing about it."

"I'll s-s-s-see what I can find," replied Stephanie, stepping over to the first turret to begin her examination.

Setting down her toolkit, Stephanie unbolted the access panel leading to the turret's inner access, and carefully removed it from the frame, exposing the sensitive internal systems of the turret. She stuck shone a flashlight inside, parting the darkness and closely examined the inside, humming a little tune to herself as she worked. Amber watched, standing arms crossed and patiently waiting to see what her cousin could find that the older tiger shark had been unable to.

"Hm. This is all s-s-s-some rather old t-tech," Stephanie remarked, her voice distorting as she stuck her head into the turr.

"Everything in the colony is old tech," amber pointed out.

"No I mean r-r-r-really old," replied Stephanie. "S-s-s-some of these c-c-components still use an o-old wiring setup that the C-C-C-Confederacy abandoned years a-ago."

"Is that the problem; it's just degraded?"

"No, it's an oldie but g-g-g-goodie," replied Stephanie. "All of this s-s-stuff is pretty solid, and would take a lot more th-th-than general wear and t-t-tear to leave it inoperable." She pulled her head back out, setting aside her flashlight and reaching into her toolkit for a dusty little object made of old plastic, which she blew on to get some of the dust off before flicking a switch on the side, the item humming to life. "Let me t-try this."

"What is that?" Amber asked, tilting her head curiously.

"It detects electrical cur-cur-currents," she replied. "Don't remember what i-it's called." She held the device inside the turret, maneuvering her arm slowly through the inside. "T-T-Turn on the turret."

"Okay," returned Amber, not sure what it was Steph expected to find if she switched on the turrets, considering they didn't work at all anyway. She stepped over to the main power controls for the turrets; a compartment next to the wall, which she opened and switched on the turret Steph was working on as requested.

Flicking the switch, Amber turned and looked back at the turret. Unsurprisingly, though, it remained inactive; she hadn't expected any more. Still those dual-laser barrels remained aimed at the ground, the inner hydraulics did not elevate the turret high enough to fire over the wall, and the red lights on the top to indicate the turret was active did not flicker. Amber grimaced, shaking her head.

*Sometimes I wish I wasn't so tenacious, she thought. I usually end up disappointed.*

However, much to her surprise, her disappointment was suddenly forced to the back of her mind as Steph called out. "Found the problem!"

Wait, what?

Amber jogged back over to the turret, feeling a renewed sense of hope for finally repairing the colony defenses as she dropped to one knee to peer into the compartment where her cousin was examining the inside of the turret again. "You did? What is it?"

"The turret's not g-g-getting any power," replied Steph.

Amber's heart sank, and she frowned at her cousin, saying exactly what her expression already did. "I could have told you *that*," she growled with annoyance. "I'm trying to find out *why* it's not getting any power!"

"There's no circuit," replied Steph.

Amber went blank. "No circuit?" She asked. "But why not? The rest of the colony has power; why don't these?"

"I'm n-n-not entirely sure, but I have a suspicion," replied Steph, dragging herself out of the compartment and sitting up, dusting herself off. She looked around briefly before glancing at Amber. "Ladder?"

Amber looked around too, certain she had seen a ladder somewhere nearby on her way there. Sure enough, she found it; there was a tall aluminum ladder propped up against the wall nearby, in use by some engineers who were checking the hydraulics of the colony gate. She stood up, and strode over to meet the workers, politely asking if she could borrow the ladder. They needed to finish what they were doing first, but told her she could use it when they were done.

Waiting patiently for them to finish their inspection, they cleared her to take the ladder. Walking over, Amber gripped the ladder by its sides, and hoisted it up over her shoulder, carrying it back to her cousin, who had sat waiting for her during that whole time. Following Steph's directions, Amber placed the ladder up against the left side of the turret, holding it steady for Stephanie as she climbed it to the very top, removing a second access panel in the uppermost section of the turret and peering inside.

She did not even take a second to find the problem. "It has no energy receiver."

Amber felt her body slack, and nearly lost her balance. "You're kidding me," she stated.

Most of the buildings... no, scratch that. *All* of the buildings in the colony were powered by the solar dish on the top of the hill. It not only absorbed the solar energy of Trident IV's life-giving star, but it also distributed the energy through a process known as Radial Energy Transmission, or R.E.T, where it actually sent the energy to designated sources using a harmless form of electromagnetic radiation, powering all of the buildings within range. Closer proximities to the turret would receive a signal less susceptible to interruption, and their homes would be powered as needed.

It was the most dependable at times; solar energy was an endless, clean energy source, but it was only useable during the day –although each building had its own backup, rechargeable power source that could be used to power them for an additional eight hours, for those who worked at night -or for the clinic if it had emergency night-time visitors. And of course the turrets had similar power sources –or so Amber had thought.

She had just now learned that the turrets did not receive R.E.T Energy from the colony's power source. The entire reason she had been unable to get them working was because they had no Energy Receivers installed; they were just cylindrical husks full of components, with no means to get electricity coursing through their inner workings. In short... they were useless.

"What about the mounted guns on the wall?" Amber asked.

Closing the access panel, Stephanie descended down the ladder carefully, rejoining her cousin on the ground. "Conditions of the g-g-g-gun barrels suggest these t-t-t-turrets were

functional until the colony was abandoned; they must've b-b-b-been using another source," replied Steph. "I would a-a-assume the gun emplacements on the walls used th-the same kind of p-power source."

"What else is there besides the dish?" Amber asked.

"Portable generators," Steph replied plainly. "Or, p-p-possibly, an even ol-ol-older method of power..."

At that, the younger shark girl suddenly dropped down to her knees, surprising Amber as she saw her cousin get down on her hands and look closely at the base of the turret, digging at its rims with her hand. "Uh... what are you doing, St-."

"Aha!" Steph suddenly blurted out—hearing her cousin make an exclamation of any kind was the one thing in the galaxy that had ever made Amber jump, but jump she did, nearly three inches off of the ground as her cousin startled her with the outburst.

"What, what?" Amber asked.

"See this?" Steph asked, pointing to a little... knob? No; more like a rubber tube, running from the very bottom of turret into the ground, painted to match the turret's body. Although some of the paint had flaked away, revealing a black surface underneath. "See this?"

"Uh... what is that supposed to be?" Amber asked.

"Underground power l-l-lines," replied Stephanie. "Another oldie but g-g-g-goodie; more reliable than R.E.T, but less practical t-t-t-today except with p-permanent residents."

"You're telling me these turrets are powered by lines that're running beneath the ground?" Amber asked. "Well okay; archaic, I understand, but if they're so reliable why are the turrets dead?"

"There must be a b-b-break in the circuit some-w-w-w-where along the line," replied Steph, running that unusual device of hers over the grass again. "No power flow through here at all. That ex-ex-explains why none of the t-t-t-turrets work; the break must b-b-b-be somewhere along the l-l-line outside the wall."

"Outside it?"

"Yes; the line must r-r-r-run up to the s-s-s-solar power dish, directly f-f-f-feeding energy into the power line," explained Stephanie. "But if th-th-there's a break anywhere a-a-along the line, the circuit isn't c-c-c-complete."

"Shit," cursed Amber. "So, how do we find the break?"

"Only one way," replied Steph. "We have to d-d-d-dig up the lines and ch-ch-check them."

Amber groaned. "Oh swell... my favorite hobby; digging through the dirt." She let out a long sigh. "Well, I said I'd fix these turrets, and I will. Let's find some digging tools and get to work."

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Felix mumbled to himself as he read over the monthly list of expenses while seating himself in the pilot's chair. "Run diagnostic," he commanded the onboard computer; which clicked and whirred to life in response to his command, and began to run systems check of the

Mara's Hope. Although they had done some maintenance for the ship before leaving Dirt Palace, Felix wanted to make sure they had not overlooked anything –something that could become a problem later.

As the computer ran its analysis of the ship, Felix poured over the records on a holoboard in his hand, reading the costs of both the colony and the Hope crew and adding the numbers together. It didn't look good; maintenance of the colony alone was costing tremendous amounts in Confederate Credits, not to mention the debt and maintaining the Mara's Hope. Doing some careful calculations, Felix assessed the colony and the Hope's expenses added up to a total sum of more than seventy-two thousand per month, including payments to the crew, the colonists themselves, the debt they owed to the Economics Board and their mortgage on the land.

Their average monthly income was barely a few thousand more than that; with the hauls the Mara's Hope could carry, along with their usual intake of items, they could build profits of maybe eighty thousand per month on average; this month had been good, giving them another two extra that Brunhilda could distribute for employee pay, but it still wasn't enough.

"This isn't working," he muttered to himself. "We need to cut our expenses somehow, or we need a second ship to help with the work."

As if that was even possible; not only could they not maintain two ships, he was the only one in the colony who had bothered to study how to be a pilot. Why no one else would do it was beyond him. For now, it appeared he would have to be patient; the colony was still in the black, even if just barely, but as long as it could keep a positive income the colony would continue to fight on. Somehow, somewhere, something had to come up... something to give them some reprieve and help them.

The computer beeped; he glanced over, seeing the diagnostic was finished. Everything had a green light, indicating that the ship was in working condition and there were no problems detected either by the system or by a thorough examination by Felix himself –which he had done just before he'd entered the ship. The dolphin nodded in approval and shut off the holoboard in his hand, setting it aside and standing up from his chair. It was almost time to head to his mother's for dinner, but there was something he wanted to check on first.

Sprinting to the back of the ship, Felix stopped just shy of the engine room, taking a door on his immediate left and entering an empty room. While not being the only one on the ship –five bedrooms still sat unused at the other end, too small and crowded to even be used for storage- this room had never been used for anything, not even storage.

However, by assessing the weight limits of the ship, comparing to the capacity of the cargo bay, Felix guessed perhaps they could use this room for just that; this was where they could store extra items gathered on their salvage operations. It wouldn't make a significant difference in their overall monthly income but even a few hundred credits per week could go a long way for the colony and the ship...

It was worth a try; it's not like they used this room for anything. Although, directly across from him was the escape pod bay; he needed to make sure the entrance to there would

not be obstructed. A minor task for Gustav's organizational skills, but they'd have to do a little modifying to the interior of the room, in order to make it suitable for such a task.

He nodded in approval; it was a good idea.

With that, Felix turned and headed for the airlock, shutting the door behind him as he exited before venturing through the corridor and making a left at the open lobby. He pulled out the remote in his pocket at he entered the airlock and descended down the stairs leading outside. Once he was at the bottom, a touch of a button later the stairs receded into the ship and the hatch closed behind him, sealing off the ship from potential stowaways.

Night was starting to fall over the colony; the sun was setting and darkness was creeping its way over the horizon to claim the skies for the night. With a sigh followed by tucking his hands into his pockets, Felix walked from the landing pad towards the colony gates to head for his mother's house.

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Zack and Jessica were the first ones to arrive at Brunhilda's house, entering the house together and greeting the manager. Their gracious host had already set up a table where they could enjoy a meal, while Gustav, right at home in the kitchen, prepared their dish. The smell of various spices, ocean meats and canned vegetables stewing filled the nostrils of the rabbit and doe as they entered, making them both lick their lips in hungry anticipation.

The table, set up in the living room of Brunhilda's medium-sized, pre-fabricated home, was meant for four, but she had moved her couch closer to the table to use it as seating, while two chairs were placed at the corners. It would be a tight fit, but not unmanageable for six, especially since –by the smell- their main course was going to be some kind of soup, and bowls did not require very much space.

"Mm... smells great in here; what'cha cooking, big guy?" Zack called.

"Garden vegetable soup and grilled Carnabass," replied Gustav.

"Wait, Carnabass is edible?" Zack asked.

"Well of course," Gustav replied. "Just remove the venom glands and it's just like any other fish –found a nice-sized one too." The orca sighed. "Just wish I didn't have to make the soup from stuff out of a can."

"You make the best out of what we have, Gustav," Jessica complimented as she removed her doctor's coat and hung it on the coatrack, leaving her in just a teal button-down shirt and knee-length skirt as she found herself a spot at the table. "You always have."

The orca chuckled. "Yes, so everyone keeps telling me," he remarked.

Zack kicked off his boots, leaving them on the mat by the door before making his way over to the table, glancing at Brunhilda. "Evening, Brunhilda," he said, cordially.

"Evening, Zack; how was your day?" The elder dolphin asked.

"Eh... the same usual junk happening at the Tech and Engineering Office," replied Zack. "Only half of the guys there actually work, and the other half slack off." He shook his head.

"But, I did some work around the colony; replaced a busted Receiver at the house in the

southeast corner, fixed the fridge at the ration house, and also got the lock working at the clinic.”

“Oh, the lock was broken?” Brunhilda asked.

“Yeah; Doc sent in a request to the techs to have it fixed,” Zack replied. “To no great surprise, nobody responded.”

Brunhilda sighed. “I’ll have to address that.”

“At least Zack was able to fix it,” Jessica remarked. “I’m glad for that. Once he was done, we both just came straight here.”

“I saw Felix coming from the ship; he ought to be here soon,” remarked Zack. “And by the way, what were Amber and her cousin doing up here on the hill?”

“They were trying to find the reason the turrets weren’t working,” replied Brunhilda. “She said she might be a bit late. Apparently the turrets here at this colony are fed power through underground cables; they had to pull some up and find the break in them.”

“After twenty years of being out of commission; would those cables still have any conductivity?” Zack asked.

“I guess we’ll find out when Amber arrives,” Brunhilda replied, shrugging.

The door to the house opened; in stepped Felix, giving a “hello!” as he entered; everyone responded in kind, and the dolphin smiled as he entered, taking off his vest and hanging it on the coatrack next to Jessica’s coat. “Hey everyone; I miss anything?” He asked, rhetorically.

“Not yet; food’s still cookin’,” replied Zack, scooting over on the couch so Felix could sit close to his mother.

The dolphin circled the table, giving his mother a hug before he seated himself next to Zack; the couch was just a little low for the dining table, but just high enough it would suffice. No sooner was he seated that the door opened again, and this time it was Amber who stepped though, giving a sigh as she entered. “Hey; sorry I’m late,” she called, apologetically.

“On the contrary, you’re right on time,” Gustav assured from the kitchen. “Have a seat and get comfy; food’s almost ready.”

“Anywhere I can wash up first?” Amber inquired, showing her dirt-covered hands.

“Bathroom sink works; go ahead,” Brunhilda replied.

“Thanks,” the shark returned before she turned to the bathroom door, which slid open on her approach, and shut again after she stepped through.

The group shared tales about their day, retelling what they’d done throughout the afternoon. Amber joined the conversation moments later with clean hands, retelling her side as well; apparently the cable still had enough working circuitry left to give the turrets at least a little power, but they wouldn’t last long before they shorted out. However, the knowledge that they could still be made into operational colony defenses was enough to give them all some reassurance that the colony would soon be much safer.

Zack and Jessica shared their own stories even as Gustav joined them at the dinner table, serving them their portions. Only Felix, himself, Brunhilda and Amber had any fish; Jessica was a vegetarian, and so was Zack –although he was certainly tempted to try the fish, the smell of it making it seem appetizing even to him. Jessica told everyone of her first lessons

in surgery, practicing on a dummy to learn some of the basic skills from Doctor Hanson, and told them of the new energy scalpel the doctor had given her –though she hadn't brought it with her. They were pleased to hear it nonetheless.

Gustav's day had been simpler; he'd spent almost the whole time volunteering at the ration house, helping them reorganize their stockroom again and serving food to colonists looking for their daily distributions. The stuff he had brought with her were in fact extras of the daily selection no colonists had claimed, so Gustav claimed it himself and brought it to serve at the dinner. The carnabass itself was freshly caught, and Felix was almost shovelling the fish into his mouth, loving the flavour of both the meat and the spices the fish had been cooked with. The stew was also very tasty, as Jessica made clear with a compliment to the orca as she took her first few spoonfuls.

For hours, the six of them talked and enjoyed their meal, and when it was finally over, Felix and Gustav volunteered to wash the dishes –the pre-fabricated homes did not come with dish-washing utilities, forcing the inhabitants to do so by hand. While they worked, the others remained at the table and relaxed, continuing their conversation; Felix and Gustav occasionally rejoined the talk, or just spoke between the two of them.

When it was finally time to go, every bid Brunhilda goodnight. Felix shared another embrace with her before he left, promising to visit her before they set out again on the morrow. Waving to them as they left her house behind, Brunhilda shut the door, locked it, and began to settle in for the night.

The crew returned to the Mara's Hope to end their night; the ship's interior lights hummed to life as they climbed the off-ramp. The others immediately started heading to their rooms, except Felix who turned and headed for the bridge. This did not go unnoticed by Jessica, who paused partway into her room and watched Felix enter the fore of the ship, his eyes once more on that communication terminal...

Felix tapped a button, and looked at the list of messages. Only advertisements filled the list, including a recent 'Breaking News' from the White Dwarf News Network. Felix was just about to switch over to private messages when he heard the unmistakable hoof clomp that could only have been the Jessica. Felix turned his head, looking over his shoulder and seeing the doe standing in the doorway, eyeing him with concern.

"Jess? Something wrong?" He asked.

"That's... actually what I am wondering," she returned. "Felix... for months, I've seen you checking that terminal every week, and you always check the private messages." She frowned. "I... I hate to feel like I'm prying, but as far as I know, there's nobody we should be expecting messages from. Is there someone you're talking to, but didn't tell any of us?"

Felix didn't know what to say. He felt conflicted, a battle in his mind between the responses of telling her to mind her own business, lying to her or just admitting the truth. It wasn't like he intended to keep it a secret that he'd been talking to Jody –or at least had been, until she'd stopped returning his messages. If there was any secret he'd wanted to keep, there was no point to it now. Jessica was on to him either way.

The dolphin let out a long sigh and rubbed his eyes, frustrated, but he took in a deep breath, met Jessica's gaze, and carefully explained. "For about a year and a half, I was trading messages with Jody. Remember her?"

Jessica nodded. "The shuttle pilot from Ithica VII, right?"

"Well... about a year ago now, she stopped messaging," replied Felix. "I've been worried as to why she did. I keep hoping it turns out to be nothing, and that she'll message again soon, but..." He looked at the terminal. "I admit that hope has been diminishing."

Jessica eyed Felix curiously. "You liked her, didn't you?" She asked, a light smile forming on her narrow muzzle.

Felix felt his cheeks warm rapidly, trying to hold back a guilty smirk. "Busted," he replied.

Jessica chuckled. "What did you think we'd do with the knowledge; urge you to go see her?" She asked. "Actually, on that note, why haven't we?"

At that, Felix's smile lessened. "Well... you see... the reason I have been losing hope about hearing from her is because... a days after she stopped messaging, there was a broadcast over the Galaxy Net. Ithica VII had been attacked again, by the Grunikan Empire."

Jessica's smile faded, her ears folding back as she heard those words. "Oh..." She said, meekly, suddenly feeling guilty. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"No, Jessica; it's fine," assured Felix, putting up his hands. "I guess... I was just hoping Jody could be there, the day we return to a proper life; the day we don't have to be criminals anymore, and can just be ordinary traders again. I was going to ask her to be part of it." He looked away briefly, before looking back at Jessica. "With everyone's approval of course."

Jessica chuckled again. "Well, why wouldn't we want Jody?" She asked. "She was a great guest; having her as a permanent member of the team would have been fine with all of us; of that, I'm certain."

Felix nodded. "Yes... I guess it would have." He sighed. "But it's looking like that won't be happening. All I can do is hope that she survived the attack on Ithica, and made it somewhere safe."

Jessica nodded. "I'm sorry I brought all this up, Felix; I was just... I was worried about you. Seeing you check that terminal, so many times a week, I thought something was wrong."

He shook his head. "No. All's well, for now." He looked over at the terminal again. "But, let's check the news anyway, long as I've got this open."

Jessica nodded, and walked over to stand next to Felix as he opened the 'Breaking News' broadcast. The holographic image of an anchorman, introducing himself as Lenard Hernandez, appeared, and gave the report. *"Following the most recent conflict in the Argo II system of White Star Sector, the Confederacy Captain of the Ninth Fleet Marine Corps., Justin Marlow, gave this statement."*

The image soon changed to a brown-scaled Reptilian with amber-coloured eyes; a Komodo Reptilian –large, powerfully built and born warriors of the Reptilian species and the closest thing to a Grunikan Draco-morph that could be found in Confederate Space. The one on screen, Justin Marlow, was big, and covered in marks from battles long past, including a burn-slash scar running along his jaw line, undoubtedly from a Grunikan Energy Blade.

*“The attack on Argo II proves the aggression of the Grunikans will not stop with just military targets,” the komodo said “All attempts at peaceful negotiation have failed, and the Grunikan Armada responds to our most recent appeal by attacking one of our newest colonized worlds; if this is a demonstration of anything, it is that the Grunikans live for causing death. If they cannot be reasoned with, then I am prepared to fight them to their last.”*

The broadcast changed back to Lenard Hernandez. *“You heard it here first, from one of the greatest heroes of the Confederacy. The Grunikans are not settling just for armed opponents, but they also openly assault defenseless colonies. Space Stations in neighboring systems are already taking steps to prepare for an influx of refugees as the military prepares to launch an attack on the Grunikan Armada, and rescue any surviving colonists on Argo II. We will bring you updates as we receive them.”*

Felix and Jessica listened attentively to the broadcast as it played, hearing of the imminent battle between The Confederates and The Grunikans; such a clash of fleets would certainly result in another debris field with lots of salvageable opportunities they could take advantage of...

Felix glanced at Jessica. “I think I know where we’re heading next.”