

The enormous krakun slithered through the doorway, but Tori was already waiting, sitting in the office chair he kept out for her, arms crossed. He froze midway in, speaking after a moment's hesitation. "You're pissed at me." It wasn't a question.

Tori's muzzle hung wide open before she could regain her composure. Finally, she managed a snarl, "'Pissed' doesn't even start to cover it, Dask. You knew I came here to track down the killer! You knew that, and you let me work in fear that everyone was going to be killed, when you knew all along who the killer was. You knew your uncle wasn't going to purge the ship."

He waited to see if she was done before entering the rest of the way and sitting down on his haunches, so his head loomed high above her. He drew a breath and let it slowly out as he sank a little closer. "I tried telling you that you were wrong about the purge."

"But then you wouldn't explain why!" she shouted back. He closed his eyes as if she had cut him, hurt him with her words.

"Of course, I couldn't," Daskatoma explained, sounding calm. "That would have contaminated the entire experiment."

"Experiment!" she screamed, waving her arms. Tori felt as if her heart could explode. "How can you even think about murder as an experiment? That's sick!"

He frowned, but his expression was otherwise unreadable. Was he ashamed? Disappointed? Irritated by her attitude? She couldn't tell. Eventually, he lowered himself to the deck, so his snout was only two meters in front of her. "Tori, stop. I know your people are sensitive, and you hate it when the company decides to retire geroo early," he said, quieter now, "but calling executions 'murder' is unnecessarily provocative. I don't *want* to do it. It's the worst part of my job, and trying to make me feel worse about it isn't helping!"

Tori groaned. He was *murdering* crew members and upset that she was making him feel *guilty* about it? How could this be any more absurd? She struggled to stand without her cane and put her palm flat against his scaly nose. "Dask, don't you see?" she said. "You terrorized the crew. You had them living in fear because they thought someone was going to poison them."

The krakun gave his huge head a small shake. "Who did? Other duds, that's who. Everyone aboard could see that Thojoy was targeting those who had been abusing their power," the commissioner explained. "If anyone was frightened that they could be next, it was because they were worried about being punished for what they had already done. Good! Let them worry. Perhaps if they're truly scared, it will make them stop acting so shitty."

Tori's ears frowned. As much as she liked Daskatoma, he was still a krakun. He still viewed slaves as disposable, that the proper way to build a good crew was to keep throwing out the bad crew members until only good ones remained. How could she ever get through to him? "It's just wrong," she said. "Wasn't there any—"

He didn't wait for her to finish the thought. "Tori, back on your old ship, before you started investigating murders, you used to repair computers, right?"

"Circuit boards, yeah," she said. The distinction between the two was irrelevant.

Daskatoma held out one claw, turning up his palm as he talked. "Let's say you were doing a bad job. Maybe you were being disruptive at work or something. And your boss—what was his name?"

Tori gave him the side eye. This wasn't about her. Why was he trying to make it about her? "She was Neeka."

"Neeka," he repeated with a nod. Then he scooted the tiniest bit closer. "So, if you were being disruptive at work, it would have been Neeka's job to try and fix it. She would have mentioned that you were keeping others from getting their work done, warned you that you needed to stop, maybe even demoted you if you kept it up." He nodded at her, waiting for her to nod back. "All fairly minor punishments in the grand scheme, right?"

Tori crossed her arms, frowning. "Compared to *murder*, sure."

"Tori!" he said, raising his voice slightly, offended but not shouting.

"Fine," she said, conceding his point. "Execution."

The krakun sighed, then forced a smile. "Well, if Neeka couldn't stop you from being disruptive, then it would have fallen to her boss to take care of it. Any actions he took would surely be more drastic," Daskatoma explained. "If his boss—Neeka's boss's boss—has to get involved, then you're talking about even more trouble. Does this make sense?"

"I guess," she said with a disinterested shrug.

"Well, I'm your captain's boss. If trouble makes it all the way up to my level, then it's going to be dealt with harshly. I'm not going to sit down with anyone and try to work out their personal problems." He tilted his head at her, looking for a sign of understanding. "These duds were doing a bad job, and their bosses should have tried to fix that—and their bosses's bosses too. That was the real failing here, what needs to be investigated and fixed. But by the time these duds came to my attention, there was only one way they were going to get resolved."

Despite his gigantic size, Tori kept forgetting just how terrifying Daskatoma was, but this conversation was a startling reminder. Dask was a monster. He was the company. He was the alien race that had enslaved hers. He was a creature that snuffed out lives without thinking, without feeling. Despite how she wanted not to, she could feel herself start to shake, feel her throat closing up and the tears began to blur her vision.

"Oh, don't cry, Tori," he begged. He scooted her chair closer and helped her retake her seat. "I didn't want you to transfer here. Before you got here, security was so indifferent toward the killings, so complacent. I didn't want any extra digging into the case. I don't even know how you managed it. I certainly never approved your transfer."

Tori sniffled and brushed away some tears. "I had a friend help me. He might have ... forged some paperwork."

"Ah," he said, sitting back on his haunches once more, "well, that would explain it." He cocked his head. "But even when I told you to transfer back to your old ship, you refused."

"I couldn't go back! I can't," she shouted up at him. She looked down at her hook-like paws—not completely useless, but barely able to grab or hold anything. She held them up for him to see. "My vision is back to normal now, but I still don't have the dexterity to fix circuit boards. What am I supposed to do there unless there's another killer for me to track?"

He frowned, then lowered himself back down to his elbows. He cupped his claws around where she sat, framing her like a painting. "And you were hoping that Dr. Amhela could clone you a new body."

"Of course, I was!" she shouted at him. "Until I found out that he can't because *you* won't let him!"

He lowered his eyes and his voice, "I'm sorry, Tori. I don't blame you for hating me."

She didn't even bother wiping her face now. She just let the tears run. "But your uncle is gone now, Dask," she pleaded. "You're probably going to be the new commissioner. You *could*—"

"No, Tori!" He pounded the deck with a fist hard enough to make her seat jump. "That policy is the right one for the ship. I'm sorry that it keeps you from getting what you want—"

"What I *need*, Daskatoma!" she shouted, flecks of spittle flying. She couldn't even see clearly now. He was just a gigantic blurry image. "I need surgery, or I'm not going to be useful to the ship—to any ship. If I can't get fixed, they'll execute me for being unproductive!"

The krakun frowned. Then his eyes lowered. He whispered, "I'm sorry, Tori. If there was anything I could do—"

She started sobbing. Though they started small, her cries soon transformed into big heart-rending gasps for air. Her chest felt so tight. Her face hurt. She oozed from her seat as if all her bones had melted, until she laid on her elbows and knees, the side of her face flat against the aluminum deck. She sobbed, and he let her cry, his talons hovering just over her as if wanting to comfort her but afraid of causing her any more pain.

*How could I be so stupid!* she cursed herself. *He's a damned monster like all krakun are! How could I ever have thought that he could show me compassion?*

Eventually, the crying subsided, and she looked up at him with one bloodshot eye. "Well, if you can't help me get the surgery," she whimpered, "can you at least transfer me back to my old ship? I'd like to see my family one last time before the administrators hand me a big orange pill."

Daskatoma sighed and closed his eyes. "I can't."

"What?" Tori gasped, blinking, trying to clear her vision.

"I can't. I'm not a commissioner. I'm not even a deputy commissioner now," he explained with a shrug. "I was using my uncle's authority before, but now that he's dead, I don't even have that."

"But you're *going to be* commissioner!"

"Maybe? Probably?" The krakun managed a hopeful smile. "If the company allows me to take over my uncle's job, then I'll have the authority to transfer crew again."

"Great. That's just great," moaned Tori. She rolled onto her side and curled into a fetal position. "I'm going to die here without even seeing my family again."

"No, don't be like that, Tori," he whispered. "Hey, I brought you a present."

"I don't want anything from you." She covered her face with a paw, wishing he would leave her alone.

"Well, that's not true."

"Okay, fine!" she snapped. "The only things I want from you, you either won't or can't give me."

Daskatoma smiled. "Well, you'll want this present."

The rusty red geroo sniffed and wiped at her snotty nose. With a grunt, she asked, "What is it?"

"It's a *secret*," he said with a real shit-eating grin. Then he explained, "You see, back when I was working for my uncle, he never told the company about our arrangement. For the last hundred years he's been on their payroll. They thought he'd been doing a great job, but it turns out he hadn't done a lick of work."

"Well, if you've been doing the work, and they thought he was doing a good job," she muttered, wiping her snotty paw on the deck, "then that means they'll surely give you the job, right?"

"Probably? I guess we'll see." He scooted slightly closer. "But the thing is, this is such an embarrassment to the company, that it's not like just one person can sign off on me taking my uncle's place."

She looked at him, and he smiled. "No one wants to be responsible for this mess."

"So, what will they do?"

“Well, when no one wants to take responsibility, then everybody will,” Daskatoma answered with a sly grin. “Literally dozens of executives and managers and krakun in personnel are going to have to agree to let me do it. That way, if it turns out to be a bad idea, it won’t be any one krakun’s fault. It will just be something that everyone thought was a reasonable idea.”

Tori sat up on an elbow. “But they will agree to it?”

“Eventually, I think, but here’s the secret…” He grinned even wider and glanced to his left and right as if expecting to see someone listening in. “It’s going to take *time*.”

She shook her head, not understanding the significance, but he seemed undeterred. He only grinned harder. “All those dozens of bosses are going to have to read through a hundred years of reports on two dozen different ships. No one wants to do this, and they’re going to drag their tails until they get tired of being scolded by *their* bosses to get it done.”

“So?”

“So?” he laughed. “So? Knowing Planetary Acquisitions, it’ll take *months* before they decide if I should replace my uncle.”

She shrugged.

“That’s *months* without anyone watching these ships to make sure they’re following my rules.”

Tori sat up with a gasp. She covered her muzzle, not daring to take a breath. Was he saying what she *thought* he was saying? “You mean,” she repeated back, “months of reports sent to the company without a commissioner coming here in person?”

Daskatoma sat back and laughed. “Oh, the captains may bother sending in their reports, but no one’s going to read them. They’re all just going to stack up until someone officially replaces my uncle.”

Tori’s heart pounded in her chest, and her head felt light. Time. That was what she needed. Dr. Amhela had agreed to do the surgery. Holly had promised to look the other way. Even Captain Gutassi had agreed to let the surgery go ahead when she helped conceal Troykintrassa’s murder. But time was the element she couldn’t control. It would take time to clone her a new body, time for the surgery, time to recover before she could contribute to the crew once more.

If Daskatoma wasn’t going to allow her time to recover, then she needed him to not be around for awhile. She needed the ship to go about its business for a few months without company interference.

The tears returned and then the sobbing, but it wasn’t like it had been earlier. Now, she felt like each whimper and wail released a little of the heartache she’d been carrying with her so long. She could feel the pain draining out of her like a ruptured can.

At last, she looked up at the krakun, taking a moment to wipe one eye. "Thank you for telling me your secret, Dask," she whispered.

The former Deputy Commissioner smiled wide. "And thank you for being my friend, Tori."

He held out his claw and helped her back up onto her paws, then let her lean her weight on him as she hobbled her way to the airlock.

"And Tori?" he said, making her look back over her shoulder. "If I do get the job, I very much look forward to coming back. I can't wait to see what will have changed without me here to dictate the details. And then I'll finally be able to grant you a transfer home."