Tori stumbled down the corridor, supporting her weight on the green cane that Druka had made for her. Sese lifted the caution tape once more, letting her walk beneath it. “Stretching your legs again?” she asked.

“I had some more engineering questions. I thought I’d pay Runo’oa another visit,” said Tori.

At this, Sese frowned. “I don’t think you should talk to him without me,” she said. “What if he tries to kill you to cover up what he’s done.”

Tori shrugged. What would it matter at this point? “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “He must realize that you know, and he wouldn’t try to get rid of both of us. I’ll be fine.”

Sese didn’t look happy, but with the network down, she couldn’t call someone for an escort, and she wasn’t willing to leave her assigned post. Unable to stop her, Sese wished her well. “Be safe.”

Tori smiled. “I’ll try.”

In the market, the geroo looked a little less-at-ease than they had previously. The network going offline was a rare occurrence. More unusual still was it being offline this long. No one yet knew that this indicated a more serious problem, but Tori noticed the change in how the crew held themselves. They were worried. It probably didn’t help that the outage coincided with the commissioner’s visit.

Tori hopped down the gravity well, shuffled down a couple corridors and knocked at Runo’oa’s door. When he peeked out, his ears fell. “No big officer in tow this time to keep you safe?”

Tori sighed. “Do I need one?” she asked. “Or could we just sit down as friends and have a chat?”

He scowled. *“Friends?* My friends don’t make clumsy threats to have me executed over something I said while I was drunk.”

“To be fair,” said Tori, “it was never about what you said, but what you’d done.”

He lowered his eyes. “You don’t understand what Subcommander Kimoa was like, Investigator Tori. He was awful. No one was surprised when the killer targeted him. We didn’t really kill him. I mean … not really…”

“And you don’t seem to realize what sort of danger you’ve put this ship in,” said Tori with a frown. “The company views that sort of thing as a *rebellion.* Rebellions scare the krakun. They worry that a ship will be lost in an uprising. What do *you* think the company would do to prevent losing a ship?”

The frown on Runo’oa’s ears deepened.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said. “I’ll forget that you helped murder the subcommander if you’ll forget today’s conversation, take it with you all the way to the recycler and never mention a peep of it to another living soul.”

Despite the offer that he obviously wanted, he looked unsettled by Tori’s seriousness. He pondered it for a moment before opening the door the rest of the way and inviting her in.

“Thanks,” said Tori as she took a seat at his kitchen table. “Standing is a real burden now.”

Runo’oa nodded. “So, what did you want to know?”

“A few random questions,” she said. “First off, is it normal for you to be home in the middle of the morning?”

He shook his head. “They sent us home suddenly without any explanation. I figure they’ll call us back in, but with the strand network down, I’ve been staying near a wired terminal to check my mail.

“It’s making me nervous, honestly. The only time they dismiss the drive control team is when the trinity is taken offline, but there’s no maintenance scheduled for today.” He frowned. “The wireless network being down isn’t helping my nerves.”

“I understand,” said Tori. “I think we’re all feeling that with the commissioner aboard. You remember Sese, right? The big gal that’s been with me when we visited before?”

“Visited,” he huffed. “Yeah, I remember her. What about her? More threats?”

“No,” sighed Tori, “she was explaining something to me about titanium, the reactor, and radioactivity, but I didn’t really follow. Do you think you could explain some of it to me without using engineer-speak?”

He chuckled. “I can try. First off, the reactor fuel isn’t radioactive. It’s just titanium and oxygen. Neither of them are dangerous.”

Tori’s stomach tumbled. Those were the two elements that the commissioner had mentioned. Had he been telling her the truth? “I thought radiation was how reactors worked. What am I missing here?”

Runo’oa scratched his cheek. “Well, it’s important to understand that there’s two different processes in reactors, fission and fusion. When we say a substance is radioactive, we’re talking about fission. Fission happens spontaneously when atoms are unstable. Think of it like you’ve shoved too many springs in a bag and it’s liable to burst at any moment. You don’t know when it will happen, but when the bag bursts, some of those springs are gonna shoot out. Those springs popping out are radiation. That make sense?”

Tori nodded. “But titanium and oxygen don’t do that?”

“Right,” he said. “A fission source would be like cesium one-thirty-seven. You don’t have to *do* anything to cesium to make it radiate. It just gives off gamma rays as it decays. We use isotopes like that to inspect metal welds in the same way that a doctor would shine x-rays through your arm so he could see if the bones were broken. It’s like a flashlight that shines in a color so powerful that it can penetrate solid objects. That’s what makes radiation dangerous if used carelessly.”

“Gotcha,” said Tori. She wondered if Thojy had stolen some of that cesium to poison the commissioner. “So, I guess you use fusion with the reactor fuel?”

“Exactly,” said Runo’oa. “Titanium and oxygen are stable, so if the atoms were bags of springs, they wouldn’t be overstuffed, but the reactor sticks titanium bags and oxygen bags together to make zinc bags. Zinc is stable too, but there’s a few leftover springs in the process, and we convert that energy into electricity.”

“This is just titanium and oxygen?”

“Nah,” he said. “The krakun know how to fuse just about any atom to any other, but they’re all closely kept secrets—except for titanium and oxygen. The schematics for the reactor show how to do that, but we haven’t figured out how to make it work with other combinations.”

“Why so secret?” she asked.

“It’s just another form of control,” he explained. “They picked that combination specifically because titanium dioxide is a byproduct of the reaction, and the only thing aboard that will break that crap down is the recycler.”

“Forcing us to keep the trinity online,” she finished for him, “forcing us to keep the gate open, and allowing the krakun to pop in for a visit anytime they wish.”

“Exactly,” he said. “I thought it would be a lot harder to explain this to you, but you get it.”

“Yeah, I get it,” she grumbled. “So, with the trinity offline, the reactor gets clogged up with this dioxide crap until it stops working.”

“Essentially. It basically runs out of fuel, even though we have plenty of titanium left,” he said. “It’s just bound up as titanium dioxide.”

Tori finally decided to ask the question she’d been tiptoeing around, her whole reason for coming. “And if the trinity were offline, how long would the titanium last before the reactor got too clogged up?”

“Oh, it would last…” His words tapered off and his ears slowly fell to the sides of his head. “And … why would you ask that?”

“Just curious,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Just curious,” he repeated. “The trinity is down, isn’t it?” he asked. “That’s why they sent us home. And now you want to know how long it can stay down before the ship goes dark.”

Growing impatient, Tori tapped her fingers against the table. She spent a moment pondering how to proceed, but it was obvious that Runo'oa had already put the pieces together. She wouldn't be able to keep him in the dark now. "You remember our deal, Runo'oa?" she asked. "You keep this conversation a secret for the rest of your life, and I forget that you helped murder Subcommander Kimoa."

"Yeah," he said, much quieter now. "I remember. So, is the trinity not coming back up?"

Tori growled. "I didn't promise you any answers. Now, answer the damned question. How long can the trinity go down before we all die?"

He dropped his eyes, clearly worried. "I'm not sure exactly," he whispered. "Ten days? Longer? I guess it would depend on how much we could reduce our power consumption."