

Tori stared at the enormous hatch. At roughly belly-level, the smooth aluminum door was jagged and melted from being welded shut and then cut back open. She tapped it with her green cane. "This is going to be a problem," she said.

Onaha ran a pad across the surface. "I'll have a team grind it down flat. Make it look good as new."

Tori turned to her. "No, *that's* the problem. The rest of this hatch is old and dirty, but the grinder will leave this area shiny. The investigator will wonder why you were working on it recently."

The chief of engineering frowned. "We can tell him that someone backed into it with a lift—dented the metal. It had to be repaired."

Tori thought for a moment before shaking her head. "No, too risky," she said. "Have someone *actually* run into it with a lift. Dent it good, fix it up. If the driver gets so much as a bruise, take him to med bay, make sure there's paperwork for the accident, injuries, lift repairs, everything. Then make the whole team sit through a boring refresher course on safety so it *never happens again.*"

Onaha scowled. "You're just trying to make my guys hate me."

"Good," grunted Tori as she hobbled through the hatch. Over her shoulder, she added, "If they curse your ancestors for the next year, then that means they lived to do so."

"Would you rather I do it myself?" asked Onaha. "We'd bring one fewer geroo into the conspiracy that way."

"Absolutely," said Tori as she looked around the commissioner's state room. "If it's plausible that you'd be driving the lift, then do it, but not yet. There's a lot for you to oversee."

When the chief stepped into the krakun's chamber, her ears wilted flat.

Tori's eyes shifted between the engineering chief and the massive room, but she couldn't spot what the older geroo was reacting to. "What's wrong?"

"The smell," groaned Onaha, covering her nose. "It's awful!"

"It is?" She sniffed the air out of habit, but of course, she couldn't smell a thing. The sulfur burns inside her muzzle had scarred her sinuses. From the way Onaha's eyes watered, Tori felt relieved to be spared the experience.

The linings of the chief's ears went pale, and Onaha dry-heaved once before regaining a semblance of composure. Gesturing toward the partially-open door to the commissioner's restroom, she added, "Stinks. Like he crapped all over the deck then lit it on fire."

"He might have done just that," said Tori. Correcting herself, "The first bit, about the deck, not the lighting it on fire part."

Onaha managed a weak smile.

“Put a team in hazmat suits and have them scour every centimeter of the bathroom with high-pressured steam. Recycle everything that’s not bolted down. If you get any of the carpet in here wet, cut it out and recycle it too.” She pointed at the open drink container. “Recycle that. Scrub every surface. Recycle every rag, every brush, bucket, spray bottle, their hazmat suits, cleaning equipment, *anything* that might have been contaminated.”

“Recycler’s down. Trinity is offline,” Onaha reminded her.

Tori nodded. “Fine. Load it all in bags. Stack the bags on pallets. Put the pallets on the conveyor belt at the mouth of the recycler. The moment the trinity comes back online, all that evidence needs to be a cloud of ions.”

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After keeping the trinity offline for twenty-eight hours, the reactor had been rebuilt, and Tori had run out of ideas to cover up the mess. She’d checked off the final task from her to-do list and set the tablet full of illicit notes on the to-be-recycled pile herself. Now, she waited in the back corner of the busy bridge, nervously swinging her paws while the captain paced.

“Where’s Onaha?” asked the security chief.

“Med bay,” grunted Gutassi. “Broke her ankle in some kinda accident. Bad luck piled atop of more bad luck.”

Tipohee sighed. “She gonna be okay?”

“I presume,” said Captain Gutassi. “Anything left? Is that everything?”

Tori shrugged. “I guess,” she said, “was everything I could think of, at least.”

“Well, no point in dragging our tails,” he sighed. Then, in a louder voice, he announced, “Bring the trinity back online.”

“Coming online now,” said the lieutenant who’d first broken the news about the commissioner’s plumbing. “Reactor approaching one hundred percent. Drive, recycler, and gate online.”

Gutassi sighed. “Nothing to do now but wait—”

“Incoming call from Krakuntec,” said the lieutenant.

“They wasted no time,” said the captain, scratching the back of his neck. “Put it on screen.”

The screen at the front of the bridge flickered, and a white krakun with a mask of black scales appeared. “Where in the names of the dead gods have you been?” he demanded. “You’ve been out of contact for two days straight!”

"I'm very sorry, sir," apologized the captain, his back straight and paws folded behind him. "I ... misunderstood the commissioner's orders, so we ended up doing two trinity shutdowns back-to-back. It won't happen again." He paused. "If I may, sir, who am I addressing? Usually, only the deputy commissioner ever contacts—"

"You just stay right there, mammal," warned the krakun. "Don't you move a muscle."

"Yes, sir," Gutassi sighed.

A moment later, the call became a three-way—the screen splitting down the middle and a new krakun face appearing on the right half of the video connection. "Officer Jintauroka?" said the black-faced krakun. "This is Yanalooka, director of the geroo fleet for Planetary Acquisitions. We spoke yesterday."

"Yes, I recall," said Jintauroka as his eyes scanned the image on-screen. "Is this the mammal in charge of your wayward ship?"

"Yes, sir, this is Captain Gutassi of the *Sailor's Gambit I*."

"Wayward ship?" squeaked Gutassi as he glanced back toward Tori. "Commissioner Troykintrassa *ordered* us to begin the reactor rebuild as soon as he was safely back in krakun space. I don't understand why us being offline would be a surprise to—"

"I have a number of questions for you, mammal," interrupted Officer Jintauroka.

"Yes, sir," sighed Gutassi. "How can I help you?"

"I'll ask my questions in person," said the officer. "Prepare to receive me within the hour."

Gutassi blinked and the call ended as abruptly as it had begun. "Well..."

"Well, indeed," agreed Tori.

He turned to her and gestured at the door. "C'mon. I guess we should go meet him." But she violently shook her head.

"Absolutely not!" said Tori. "How could you ever explain that? 'This is Tori, she's investigating a series of poisonings, but that's *totally* unrelated to anything...' No. I'm gonna go hide away in my apartment where he won't be liable to run across me. Call me when it's all over."

"Hrm, yeah, that could be bad," he agreed. "Thanks for pointing that out. I guess I'll go alone."

"Good luck," said Tori as she climbed to her paws. "Remember, show some surprise when he drops the news."

"Yeah, good luck, Cap," echoed Tipohee.

“Show surprise, show surprise,” Gutassi muttered to himself as he made his way down to the shuttle bay. “You can do this. No big deal. Just try to keep everyone from being murdered...”