

Gutassi led the way through the hatch and into a hallway that led past the commissioner's quarters. A scissor-lift with a crumpled front corner sat diagonally across the corridor. A ruined bumper had broken free and been scooted aside.

"Well, I guess I know which vehicle Onaha wrecked now," said the captain. He bent and peeked inside the wheel well. "Yeah, that's all messed up. I see why they left it here."

The krakun touched the freshly polished metal at the edge of the commissioner's hatch. "Your engineers repaired the hatch but not the vehicle?"

"Not surprising," said Gutassi as he stepped inside. "Polishing out a dent just takes time and tools, but we only stock essential parts. Before engineering will be able to repair that lift, manufacturing will have to produce the replacement parts. I'm sure Onaha's people have already queued requests. The details will be in my next report—two weeks from now. Besides, a hatch is vital, and we can live without a scissor lift for a while."

The officer ducked as he stepped inside, carefully studying every facet of the space as he went. With a claw, he flipped open the refrigerator. "Empty," he said.

"The commissioner only visits every other week. Before his next audit, we'll restock some fresh beverages for him—for his replacement, I guess," Gutassi corrected himself.

The krakun peeked in the bathroom. When he pulled his head out, he said, "Smells like everything has been washed."

"Sure," said the captain. "The commissioner visits early sometimes, so I insist that the crew cleans immediately after each visit."

There wasn't much else to look at in the commissioner's office, so the captain glanced casually around the room while he waited for more questions from Jintauroka. He willed his breathing to slow. *Don't panic. Tori made sure that everything was cleaned up. There's nothing for him to find here ... just a display screen, some carpet, metal walls painted to look like rocks, cheap art to fill up space...*

Then, the investigator pointed to a print hanging on the faux-stone walls. "Why is that hanging upside-down?"

Gutassi's stomach clenched with worry. Had it always been upside down? Or perhaps Troykintrassa had done it? What if the commissioner flipped it to send a message to anyone who came looking for him? "I-is it?" the captain stammered.

The krakun turned and stared at the geroo a moment with an incredulous expression on his face before finally looking back at the print. "Obviously, it is. The shore is at the top, the sky is on the bottom. That's ... ridiculous."

"That's... Well, it's really embarrassing is what it is. I'm not sure how I'd feel if someone hung a picture upside-down in my office," said the captain with a nervous chuckle. He glanced around the room, trying to recall if they usually stocked the office with any sort of writing

implement. Then, he wondered if Tori would have thought to check behind the frame when she was destroying evidence. “The commissioners never mentioned that we hung it wrong. My people can’t see infrared or ultraviolet. It just looks like a blank canvas to me.”

The captain managed a smile, but his scent reeked of fear. “But thanks for telling me. I’ll make sure the crew corrects it.” He tapped some notes on his strand, trying to act as casual as possible.

The krakun looked at the print for a moment and the captain stared at his strand while trying to send some sort of telepathic command to the gigantic beast. *Don’t look behind the print! Please don’t look behind the print!*

Of course, it didn’t work. Rolling back onto his haunches, Officer Jintauro grabbed the frame with both of his front claws and yanked it from the magnetic mounts that held it to the wall.

“That’s really not necessary, sir!” gasped Gutassi. “I have people who...”

The captain watched, helplessly. The krakun seemed to move in slow motion. He pulled the print aside and casually peeked behind it, but there was no hidden message scrawled on the faux stone wall.

That didn’t make Gutassi feel any better, however, because from his vantage point on the deck below, he could see what the investigator couldn’t—that someone had scratched a word into the plastic backing on the reverse side of the frame.

In simple krakun runes—each taller than a geroo—stood a single, crude but clearly legible word.

Poison.