Tori groaned and sat back down on the bench. The electrician frowned for a moment before looking back to Druka. “Why the heck were you guys waiting for an administrator anyhow?”

Without waiting for Druka to reply, Tori explained, “Administrator U’ju was supposed to help us get situated here on this ship—find us an apartment, introduce us to our new supervisors, all that stuff.”

“Oh jeez, I’m sorry,” said Biiz. “Well, I don’t know who you’ll be reporting to, but for apartments, you should consider the one next door to us.”

Druka brightened. “Yeah? Is it decent?”

“Should be: furnished, repainted, new appliances. My buddy was paying four-fifty for it, and the landlord will probably try to raise the rent, but stand tough.” He raised a fist in solidarity and grimaced. “Boots in the trash!”

The couple shared a confused glance, but Tori didn’t bother asking for an explanation. “Yeah, that sounds great. We’re hoping to transfer back eventually. Think he’d do a short-term lease?”

Biiz peeled the strand from his shoulder. “I’ll ask. But honestly? Might be simpler to just lose the deposit if you transfer. Not like he can chase you for the back rent.” He started to walk away and gestured for the pair to follow. “C’mon. I’ll grab us some sodas from the market.”

Tori and Druka looked about as they walked. Surrounded by different geroo and shops selling different products, different foods, but the ship looked so similar to the one they’d just left. Sure, the walls had been painted different shades and the stands had been set up in slightly different locations, but otherwise Commissioner Sarsuk could have plopped them back down on their home ship and they’d be none the wiser.

Homesickness gripped her, and Tori wanted nothing more than to call her parents or Kaz, to kiss her niece’s face and hear Lita coo.

Along the way, Tori detoured to take a bathroom break. The restroom itself was nothing unusual—clean and simple, it could have been a public lavatory from any ship in the fleet—but after washing her paws, she paused before throwing away the drying cloth she’d used. Someone had stenciled a black boot on the flap covering the recycler chute.

How curious, she thought. Some bathrooms were a natural magnet for graffiti. Crude jokes, poems, and drawings were the most common fare she’d seen, but a boot? That was a new one.

The legible graphic balanced negative space in the bootstraps and was clearly designed by someone with artistic skill. Although centered on the flap, the boot was angled as if standing on the tip of its toe—or more likely, considering how the vandal had positioned it over the trash chute—held from the back of its collar.

“Boots in the trash,” she whispered to herself, repeating the electrician’s words. *What an odd phrase! Why would anyone throw away their boots?*

Boots were rare items on geroo gateships. Most crew members had little need of them and kept their paws bare. Only a few professions required shoes: those that worked in the recycler certainly, those—like Druka—who worked in manufacturing, and those like the security officers whose jobs could take them anywhere on the ship with little notice. So, why throw their boots away?

Biiz had used the phrase as encouragement, presumably to mean something like “stand up for yourself.” Tori tried to imagine what one could have to do with the other but came up blank. *Must be a local idiom,* she decided, *something that wouldn’t make sense without understanding the context.*

She discarded her cloth and didn’t think about it again until the three arrived at the center of the deck. They worked their way through a busy market and into a crowded dining area. There, she noticed another recycler chute—this one intended for food waste—with the same black boot stenciled on the flap.

“What’s with the boots—?” Tori started to say, but Biiz had left them to buy drinks from a food vendor.

Druka selected a small table with two benches, and the pair sat opposite each other. He put his paws on the table, and she covered them with her own. “Sure has been a crazy day,” he sighed.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” said his mate. “I know you were expecting just a quiet day off, and here we are—new ship, new mates, new jobs, separated from everyone we ever knew…”

“Not everyone!” he said with a smile. “We know Biiz, now.”

“I suppose,” said Tori.

“It’s all going to be worth it though. You’ll see.”

Biiz returned with three cups. Soda was a very different thing on this ship and would take some getting used to. Tori had grown up knowing only citrus sodas, but this drink was sweeter and strangely creamy.

When she set the cup aside, the rusty red geroo looked around the crowded market and raised her ruined ears in confusion. “Hang on,” she said, “this doesn’t look right.”

Biiz turned in his seat so he could look at Tori beside him. “What’s that?” he asked.

“The crowds,” she said, grabbing the table’s edge to help her to turn in her seat. “Everyone is out and about.”

“Oh, right,” said Druka, his ears raising as he realized.

Biiz glanced around. “Yeah, so?”

“Well, the murders are obviously not a secret,” Tori explained. “You said there was a ship-wide party yesterday to celebrate that there were no longer any Administrators.”

When Biiz looked confused, Druka explained, “We had a serial killer back aboard our old ship. By the time he’d taken six—”

“Seven,” corrected Tori.

“Sure, I suppose he did get seven,” Druka said. “But by that point, everyone was so frightened that they hid away in their apartments. They’d go out in groups to shop and then scurry back home. No one hung out in public like this.”

Biiz’s ears took a sad, sympathetic cast. “That must have been awful.”

Tori paused, shaken from investigation to think back before their killer had been caught. “Well, yeah, it was,” she said, “but why are things so different here?”

“That’s easy,” said Biiz with a friendly smile. “What you see all around you is good, honest geroo. No one here is worried because everyone here is *safe.”*

“Safe? How can they be so sure—?”

“Because, Tori,” said the electrician, “it’s obvious who the killer is targeting. Everyone aboard the ship knows if they’re a potential target or not.”

Tori blinked. “Well, you said he killed the administrators—”

“The Executioner is killing all the wicked people aboard this ship,” Biiz explained, “everyone who abuses their power, everyone who generates misery with their selfishness by focusing only on what helps them personally.”

“The Executioner?” Tori squeaked. She pulled her paws away from the edge of the table, and a small wad of strapping tape came with them.

She perked an ear in curiosity, but before she could try to unwind the sticky mess, Biiz took it from her. “Is that?” he whispered as he peeled back the tape. Then excitedly, he raised his voice and held the memory stick up over his head for all to see, “It is! Tori found the next episode of *Boots!”*