Tori arrived at the shuttle bay, huffing and puffing, while the commissioner's shuttle was still gliding silently in through the open bay door. She collapsed hard on the bench beside Captain Gutassi and spent many long moments wheezing, trying to catch her breath. When she finally had, he asked, "Are you okay, Investigator Tori?"

She nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of a paw before replying, "Yeah, came as fast as I could." She turned so she could better face him. "We had two murders this morning and recovered so much evidence. Today couldn't get any crazier."

"I heard," said the captain, "but, uh, why are you *here?"*

"Oh, uh, yeah," said Tori, realizing that he wouldn't have been expecting her. She made a show of tapping her forehead with her fingertips as if she'd been struck. "As you've noticed, the accident has impaired my mobility … well, my *everything* to be honest. I'm going to need some more surgery to get that functionality back, but as I'm managing without it, I don't *technically* require it."

Captain Gutassi nodded. "There's a form for that—"

"Authorization for Elective Surgery," she finished for him. She pulled her strand from its holster and opened the form. With an extra flick, she enabled do-not-disturb mode so that none of the replies she'd been expecting would interrupt. "Yeah, I've got that, but Doctor Amhela is worried that form-or-not, he's going to get in trouble for performing the surgery. So, he insisted that I get additional authorizations. Yours for one."

"This is the administrators' *job,"* groaned the captain. "It's their primary function to analyze needs-versus-resources and make judgment calls like this. If we're not going to trust our administrators, then why even have them?"

Tori raised her palms in tired non-confrontation. Eventually, she explained, "Well, I have an administrator's signature, but like I said, the doctor wants yours as well. Do you mind?"

The captain rolled his eyes and pulled the strand from his shoulder. "Ridiculous," he said as he signed her form. "If the administrators think your surgery is a good use of resources, then why would I disagree? It's their—"

"—job," she finished with him, nodding. Her heart lifted high and optimism coursed through her veins. Two signatures down and only one more to go! Perhaps, Druka had been right? Maybe getting permission wasn't a lost cause after all. "Yes, I understand, and thank you for helping. I'm just doing as he asked."

She put her strand away, turning back to the long bay windows and the shuttle beyond them. It had pulled all the way into the bay, and the bay door was rumbling shut. Though there was no air in the bay yet to conduct the sound, the deck and the bench beneath her vibrated.

When the door finally closed and the pumps switched on to pressurize the shuttle bay, the captain asked, "Did you need something else, Tori?"

She gestured helplessly at the commissioner's shuttle on the other side of the glass. "Yeah, one more signature."

Gutassi growled in frustration. "The commissioner is a very busy guy. He only visits us once every forty-seven years—"

"Which is why this will be my only chance to get his signature," she interrupted with an apologetic tone. "Unless you'd rather call my doctor and assure him that the commissioner's signature isn't required?"

The older male's ears splayed, and he studied her in a fatherly manner for a long moment. "Aren't you friendly with the deputy commissioner?" he asked. "I understand that you've been meeting with him regularly since you transferred aboard. Why didn't you just ask him to sign it?"

Tori frowned. "Yeah, we're friends," she agreed, "but I get the sense that Daskatoma's relationship with his uncle is complicated. He said he can't sign."

"What a nuisance," sighed Gutassi. "Okay, stick around. I'll ask if Commissioner Troykintrassa can reserve a little time in his schedule to speak with you before he leaves."

Suddenly and without warning, Tori's vision swam with tears. And even though she barely knew the older male, she wrapped both of her arms around his bicep and pressed her face into the fur. "Thank you, sir," she whimpered quietly, "this means … everything to me."

In retrospect, she felt stupid for making such an emotional display with a stranger—and her boss's boss, no less—but Gutassi had more of a "fatherly" aura than she'd realized, and she missed her own family so very, very much. She released his arm and sat back straight, taking a moment to dab at her eyes with scar-clubbed paws. "Sorry, sir," she whispered, unable to meet his eyes, "won't happen again."

"I understand," said the captain. The two sat in silence for a moment longer. Then, the indicator beside the airlock hatch blinked blue, and Gutassi stood. He walked to the airlock, but before opening the hatch, he turned back to her with a quick smile and a raised thumb for encouragement.

The green krakun was significantly larger than Daskatoma—longer and heavier too—but he poured from the shuttle like spilled wine, barely shaking the deck.

"You must be Commissioner Troykintrassa!" said Captain Gutassi. "It's such an honor to have you aboard the *Sailor's Gambit—"*

The commissioner ignored the tiny geroo, speaking more to himself than anyone else, "I have no idea what my nephew did to this shuttle. It's rattling and shaking like the damned thing is possessed. I barely made it here alive."

"I'm so sorry to hear that, sir," Gutassi apologized. "Will you be staying long? I can have my chief of engineering run a diagnostic—"

“Not long, no,” said the krakun, finally turning to look at his tiny host. “And yes, please have him figure out what’s wrong with this damned thing, but non-invasively if he can?” The creature’s orange eyes pleaded with the captain. “I’ve got three more ships to visit today, and as much as I’d like to make it through the day safely, I’d rather not get hung up, waiting for your guy to bolt the beast back together when I’m ready to go.”

“Absolutely,” said the captain. “Scan only, and I’ll let you know if we can do more, then you can make an informed decision. I’m sure you know the way to your stateroom. All our ship reports for the past forty-seven years are in their standard location, and I’ve had my team compile a year-by-year summary too for your convenience.”

“Thank you, Captain Gutassi—not needed, but appreciated,” said the krakun. He turned to leave, but then looked back. “I’m sure I’ll have questions once I’ve had a chance to study the logs, so be a sport and stay nearby?”

“I’ve kept my entire day’s calendar clear, and my strand is set to do-not-disturb, just in case,” said Gutassi.

With a nod, the krakun headed off toward the krakun-sized airlock while the captain walked back toward the geroo-sized one. When he passed through, Tori was still there, waiting for him.

“Tori?” asked Gutassi with some surprise. “I didn’t mean to imply that the commissioner would meet with you right now. He’s going to his stateroom, and I’ll ask him to speak with you there, before he heads to his next appointment.”

“No, I understand that,” said the rusty red geroo. “I… I was just hoping to get your impression of Commissioner Troykintrassa.”

“My … impression?” asked the captain, with some hesitation.

“Yes,” said Tori. She explained, “You see I’ve only met two krakun in my life: the commissioner over my home ship and Daskatoma—and the two are about as opposite as two people can be. I was wondering if you had a measure of what this commissioner is like and whether he might consider my request at all.”

Gutassi scratched at his chin a moment in thought. “Well, he seemed pleasant enough to me. He was frustrated about a problem with his shuttle, but didn’t feel the need to shout and threaten. He said both ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. So, I’m guessing he has more in common with his nephew than your former commissioner.”

Tori released a breath that she hadn’t even realized she was holding. “Thank you, sir,” she said. “That’s a real relief.”