

The half-hour that followed was the longest of Gutassi's career, and he paced the deck before the airlock so furiously that his paws buffed a shine into the aluminum surface. "I sure hope you buried all the evidence, Tori," he whispered, "for all of our sakes."

"Captain," buzzed the intercom, "The shuttle has come through the gate and will be landing shortly. Should I pump in a compromise atmosphere, sir?"

"Negative," said the captain. "I have no idea how long he'll expect me to meet with him. Give him Gerootec normal."

"Understood."

When the status light turned blue, the krakun-sized hatch dividing the shuttle bay from the rest of the ship swung slowly open. Captain Gutassi strode forward and stood up straight as the shuttle's ramp lowered. "Welcome aboard, Officer Jintaur—" he started to say, but then paused when Commissioner Daskatoma emerged. "Sir? You're not supposed to be here."

The commissioner looked frazzled, and he barely seemed to notice the captain.

"Sir? Please!" Gutassi shouted, waving his arms and trying to get the krakun's attention. "You can't be here!"

"What? I can't?" asked Daskatoma. He plucked an environment-suited ringel from his back and set the slave down on the shuttle bay's deck. He gasped, "But I'm the commissioner! This is still my ship... Isn't it?" He seemed more confused than angry.

The captain put his palms atop his head. "We're expecting another arrival, and the *Sailor's Gambit I* has only got a single shuttle bay."

"But I *need* to speak with Tori!"

Gutassi opened his muzzle to reply, but before he could, his strand emitted a quick series of shrill alarm beeps. He pulled the device from his shoulder and saw that the bridge had patched Officer Jintauroka through. "Hello, sir—" the captain started to say.

"Your bridge informs me that I cannot dock because another vessel is in the bay!"

"Yes, sir," said the captain as politely as he could manage. "The deputy commissioner just arrived, and I was trying to explain to him that the authorities on Krakuntec supersede all company—"

"Remove your shuttle so that I can dock!"

Unsure what to do, the captain turned his strand about and pointed it at Daskatoma. From behind the strand's view, he gestured desperately with his free paw at the krakun and silently mouthed, "Please!"

Daskatoma turned to the suited slave. "Sutzir," he said, "go find Tori and tell her..."

“Tell her what, Dask?” asked the slave in the Ringel language.

With desperation, the krakun managed, “Tell her ... I need her help!”

With a nod, the ringel dashed from the shuttle bay, and Officer Jintauroka started shouting directly at the commissioner.

“Okay! Okay!” said Daskatoma. “I’m moving my ship.”