

The anup shoved the hatch closed and leaned her back hard against it, sucking in great breaths one after another. A tiny brown mysa peeked from behind a cabinet and stared. When he could take the suspense no longer, Trenor hissed, "What?"

"The station is crawling with geordians, searching everyone's bags," Chione cried, letting her back slide against the door until her short tail curled around her hip, and her forehead rested on her knees. "We need to abort the mission."

"Abort?" gasped Trenor. "There's no aborting! What are you even suggesting?"

"They're looking for you. No one gets on a transport without going past them."

"Yeah, so?" squeaked the mysa. "Geordians are tiny compared to you guys. Just thwack 'em with that stick of yours. They'll go down."

Chione glared at him. "First off," she growled, "it's not a 'stick'. It's a span. And second, stop being stupid. They have guns."

Trenor's ears hung low. "Well, uh..." the mysa muttered.

The anup stared at him. "Give me the code," she said. "They're not looking for me. I'll go on ahead without you and get it to the coalition."

"Pfft," he laughed, slapping his knee as he bent over. "No way. That code is the only thing keeping me alive. I tell you, and you'd just thwack me with your stick and be done with me."

"I would not," insisted Chione. "Unlike you, I'm an honorable person. Tell me the code, then go duck into the air vents or something. Those geordians will never find you."

"Maybe not," the mysa sighed, "but I'll also be stuck here for the rest of my life. No deal. This code is my only ticket out of here. Coalition be damned! You get me off this station, or the code dies with me."

The giant black canid frowned and rolled her golden staff across her palms. "How? You go out there, you're caught for sure. And I can't sneak you out. Like I said, they're checking everyone's bags."

His heart beat furiously, and he looked wildly about as if expecting to spot one of the felines inside the storage room. "Well, sneak me out inside something they won't search!" Trenor whined.

She stared at him. "Like what?"

"I don't know!" he practically shouted as he flopped back onto the deck. She hushed him urgently, and he lowered his voice, "I'm small! I could hide inside a computer or something. Maybe a loaf of bread?"

Chione let the span roll slowly back and forth, back and forth, contemplating a long while before she spoke again. "You've lived on this station your entire life, mysa. You ever seen anyone board a transport carrying a computer? Or a loaf of bread?"

The little brown creature pouted in silence.

"Boxes, bags, suitcases, backpacks ... those are normal things to carry onto a transport." She sighed with a rumble that vibrated through the deck. "If I walked out there with a cake or something, I might as well pipe, 'Mysa Inside!' onto the icing."

"Oh, ha ha ha," he grumbled. "At least I'd have something to snack on during the trip."

"Tell me the code!" she pleaded.

He ignored the request. "You could sneak me out in ... in ... in your..."

"Pouch?" she chuckled. "I'm not a geroo."

"No ... I could hide inside your..."

"Tailhole?" she laughed, then covered her ears in embarrassment. "Is *that* what you want to try?"

When he said nothing, her eyes opened wider, and her ears lifted in alarm. "Not a chance!" she snorted indignantly. "Keep your code. No creepy little mysa is going anywhere near that hole!"

"Fine," he grunted. "Could you hide me inside your mouth? I'm pretty small as mysa go. And your muzzle is—no offense—huge."

Chione chuckled. "You want me to swallow you down and barf you back up once we get there, like in some sort of fable? I don't think you'd survive that."

He shuddered in fear. She could easily do that—swallow him without even chewing. Ugh. Why did he have to deal with an anup of all people? The gigantic canines were terrifying. "No, don't swallow me," he said, "just hide me inside your mouth. I'd probably fit. Don't you think?"

She looked down. "Gross," she said, wrinkling her muzzle in disgust.

"What?"

"I love the coalition, and I believe in what they stand for, but you're a filthy, disgusting little rodent. That's gross, and I won't do it."

"I'm not filthy!" he shouted, rising to his paws.

"Yes, you are," said Chione. "You were just lying on the deck. Gross. Plus, you're being loud. You're going to get yourself caught, and I'll claim that I have no idea who you are."

“Sneak me into the bathroom,” Trenor begged. He grabbed onto her ankle. “I’ll scrub all the dust off of me until I’m squeaky clean, okay?”

She continued to scowl. “No, you’re still going to do something gross,” she said, “like go to the bathroom in my mouth.”

“Ew. No, I wouldn’t!” he promised. He stammered in shock, “W-why would you even think that?”

She lowered her ears and looked away. After a longish pause, she said, “I heard about some people being into that ... and it’s so horrible. It just pops into my mind all the time.”

“Well, *I’m* not into that, so you’ve got nothing to fear,” grunted Trenor.

“I don’t think you’ll fit in my mouth,” said Chione.

“But we could try,” he said. “Let’s just try. If it doesn’t work, we’ll think of something else.”

“And if they ask me any questions?”

Trenor frowned some more. “Just act like you’re mute. Type out your responses or something. Don’t anup take vows of silence or something?”

She shrugged. “The ultra-orthodox, maybe?” she said. “Not a commoner like me!”

“But *the geordians* don’t know that!”

With only a little more convincing, the anup left and soon returned with an empty drink cup. She lifted the lid, and he leapt inside. “Are you sure you couldn’t just sneak me out in this?” he begged as she started to replace the cup’s plastic lid.

“No, they’re checking cups,” said Cione. “I’ve seen them do it.”

He took a deep breath, then released it slowly. “Okay, okay, close it up, and take me back to your room.”

With the cup sealed, she peeked down into the straw and the inky blackness within. “Getting enough air?”

“It’s stuffy in here,” he said, “please hurry.”

Back in her hotel room, Chione paced back and forth across the tiny bathroom while Trenor busied himself in her sink. The room clearly wasn’t intended for anup lodgers, and she barely fit, but still she paced. “This is a bad idea,” she muttered. “You’re going to get us caught and killed.”

“We’re not going to get caught,” he reassured her.

“And what if we do?” she asked. “They’ll kill us both.”

“They won’t because they’re not gonna catch nothin’.”

“Oh lord,” she whispered, suddenly frozen in place. “What if they demand to look in my muzzle? I’d... I’d... I’d have no choice but to...”

“Don’t you even *think* about swallowing me!” he shouted, pointing one soap lathered arm at her.

“I wouldn’t!” she repeated. “But what if I *had* to, to avoid getting caught? I’d have to ... live with that!”

“You’d have to live with it,” he snorted, rolling his eyes as he rinsed the foam away. “I’d suffocate in your stomach, and you’re worried about going to therapy. Whatever. Just get down here and let’s give this a try. We don’t even know if it will work or not.”

Trembling, Chione knelt down. With tears streaming down her face, she rested her chin on the edge of the sink. She started to open her muzzle but quickly shook her head. “I can’t!”

“Shh. Of course, you can,” said Trenor, patting her whiskers. “Just try. We have a couple hours before our transport leaves.”

She glanced around. “Shouldn’t you ... dry off or something?”

“Why?” he laughed. “I’m just gonna get wet here in a moment.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” She closed her eyes and opened her mouth. “Just get this over with before I change my mind.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, his voice quieter as he stared at her long white fangs. He swallowed hard. “I’m gonna... Just don’t crush me, okay? Or close your mouth all the way ... I need air.”

She nodded without opening her eyes. Getting down on all fours, he crawled forward, setting one paw on her pale yellow tongue and then the other.

Chione backed away so quickly that the mysa nearly tumbled to the deck. “What? What?”

“Uh, sorry,” she muttered, both paws covering her mouth. “I ... wasn’t ready.”

He nodded, and she knelt once more, rested her chin on the counter and opened wide.