

Tristan's walk took him away from the underbelly of the ship and to the crew quarters. With the kill switch out, he could go anywhere he wanted, but he couldn't simply walk into one of the restricted zones. He'd be noticed, and then taken out.

What he needed was a way to move about unseen. Fortunately, the designers of large ships like this one were thoughtful enough to have provided maintenance corridors, which could be used for that purpose. All he had to do was find one of the access points to them.

While he hadn't studied the design of this ship specifically, maintenance corridors made little sense without a way to get in them. The map his datapad showed only indicated where rooms were, as well as the restricted zones, which meant that if the Butcher got his hands on one of them, he knew exactly where to go to not be found.

Still, it was easy to figure out what the large voids on the map were, and knowing that, as well as the layout of the rooms, he could make an educated guess as to where he'd find an access.

He walked by the room where he expected the access was. The void behind that room was larger, indicating there should be a junction point there. He glanced at the lock in passing—there were other people in the corridor, staying well away from him so he couldn't do more than look for the moment. It was a first-generation Creyton. A cub without any training could bypass that type of lock.

Tristan had noticed how the caliber of the locks had gone down as soon as he entered the residential area. He couldn't believe the people on this ship were this trusting. Whatever else they might do, they held criminals. They had to know how devious people were.

He turned at the first intersection and leaned against the wall. He took out his datapad and pretended to read it. He had to wait until the corridor was deserted. He'd need more than one pass to unlock it unless he was lucky and had a few minutes without interruptions.

He didn't have to look up from his pad to judge how many people were around him, or how far away they were. His hearing was quite keen, and since his father didn't believe in depending only on one of his senses, he'd trained him in using all of them. By the time he'd left home, he could navigate dark caverns without much trouble.

While he waited until he could hear that the hallway had cleared, he tested the limits of his datapad. As he'd expected, it was caged. He could access the maps and nothing else. When he had time, he'd break the cage, but that was going to be after he'd gotten clean. His fur was dried and matted, and it was itching from all the gunk still in it.

When the corridor fell silent, he headed for the door. This would be his first test of the lock, so he'd mostly check to see if it was modified.

The cover could look like a Creyton, but its insides could be from a different company or just a different generation.

As he got close, he heard footsteps in the distance. He'd hoped for more time; just taking the case off and putting it back on would be cutting it close. He could go back and wait, take a chance, or, he realized, do another test.

He pressed the 'open' button and was stunned when the door opened. He hadn't expected that to work. What kind of people worked here that they left their doors unlocked? The steps were getting closer. He shook away the surprise and stepped in. The door closed behind him.

He didn't move. He waited until the steps walked by the door, and continued going. Still not quite believing it had been that simple, he looked around.

The room had a bed in one corner, and a workstation in the opposite one. Next to the bed was a dresser, and next to that was an opening leading to the shower. In front of the workstation, a couple of plush seats faced a blank expanse of wall.

He reached back to lock the door but stopped himself. If he did, the occupant would realize something was wrong, and their next action would be to contact security. Tristan couldn't afford that, so as much as he went against everything he believed in, he stepped away from the door without locking it.

He went through the dresser, looking for a change of clothing. It contained female clothing, and for someone much smaller than him. Nothing he could use.

He looked at the workstation but decided to investigate that later. First, he needed a shower. The unit wasn't large. He wouldn't have much space to maneuver, but it did use water instead of an ultrasonic system. That made him consider the captain, and where he was putting the money he got from holding the prisoners.

Prisons were paid for each prisoner they held. That money should go to feeding them, maintaining the prison, and making sure they were reasonably well taken care of. Every prison he'd been held in had its own way of cutting costs, from not feeding their prisoners to not maintaining the facility, or even making the prisoners work. His time in the prison mine had been the most memorable instance of that.

Here, by putting them in cryosleep, the captain didn't have to feed them, worry about giving them proper-sized rooms, showers, or recreational areas. He got to keep all that money for himself, or in this case, to pay for a water storage and processing system. Those were expensive for a ship this size; a lot of energy was needed to circulate

the water through the ship. Most captains would only allow their quarters, and maybe their most trusted lieutenants, to have shower that used water, but this one liked keeping his people happy. That's how he gained their loyalty, by buying them luxuries.

The shower did lack a dryer. That didn't surprise him; humans didn't have enough fur to warrant one. As he grabbed all the towels he could find, he realized he'd become too accustomed to the dryer. He had grown up washing under waterfalls, letting his fur dry by itself. He would have to start doing that again, when he got back to base, to break himself out of that habit.

He turned the shower on, only cold water, and stepped under the jet. He let himself soak for a long time, feeling like he could finally relax, even if only for a short time. Before he'd even started scrubbing himself, the floor of the shower was covered with fur. He had to constantly make sure the drain didn't get covered up.

When he finally felt clean, he shut the shower off and stood still, letting the water drip off him. That's when he heard the door open and close. He walked out of the shower and headed for her, naked and dripping. She barely had time to register surprise at his presence before he had snapped her neck. He caught her limp body and laid it on the bed.

Now he locked the door and felt some measure of safety. He wouldn't have anyone else walking in unannounced.

He went back to the shower and dried himself. Once that was done, he wiped the floor, then looked through the cabinets in the shower room for something sharp—he needed to trim his claws. Once his claws were manageable, he searched her. He found her datapad, her ID, and a few knickknacks. He left the ID on the bed. He had no use for it since it was tracked by the ship.

At first glance, he thought her datapad was a two-hundred, like the one they had been provided with, but it turned out to be a four-twenty. There had been another upgrade after the four-hundred. He turned it over, examining it. They had changed the case to look like the more classic two-hundred, but it was made of a different material, smoother to the touch. He wished he had tools so he could open it up, see what other changes had been made. He calmed himself. There would be time for that later, and right now he could be satisfied that he had it.

He turned it on, and it wasn't locked. He wasn't surprised; she had been far too trusting a person. The first thing that came up was her schedule. Her work day was done. That was good; she wouldn't be expected anywhere anytime soon. She also had nothing planned for the rest of her day. He went back a week to check and confirmed this

was her routine.

Perfect.

He had time, at least most of the night, to do what he needed to gain access to the maintenance conduit. He went to the workstation, turned it on, and checked what its limitations were. It didn't have many. It could access most of the ship, as well as the galactic network. He also didn't find any evidence its use was monitored. Unfortunately, the one thing he wanted to access, it wouldn't let him. He couldn't access the prisoner list or history. He could probably find a way in, but not if he also wanted to get into the maintenance corridor.

He considered the situation for a moment. He needed to know who had captured him. He realized he had another way to find out. He accessed the bounty hunter's boards; he had a few identities as one of them. Through them, he accessed the posting.

As he'd expected, his bounty had been removed. Going back through the history, he found the record of his capture and delivery to the Sayatoga by a Miranda Sunstar. He considered the name. He'd never come across it before, so she hadn't been on a vendetta; she had simply gone after the bounty.

She might have nothing to do with him being setup, or she might. He had her name, so he'd be able to investigate later. Now he could work on getting off this ship. He accessed the ship's schematics and confirmed the access was behind the wall.

He went to the wall and studied it. It was covered in two-foot-wide panels from floor to ceiling. Since access to the corridor might be needed in a hurry, it wouldn't need special tools to remove the panels. He ran a claw along the joints until he came across one where his claw slipped under the edge. He pried that panel off the wall, and under it was the bottom of a door. He removed the panels above it and revealed the nondescript door with a small viewport in it. He looked inside, and in the dim light, he didn't see anyone. He did see breathing equipment and what could be a toolkit or a medical bag. A toolkit would be very useful if he could get through this door.

Opening the door wouldn't be difficult; all he had to do was override the lock. The difficulty was to open it without anyone being informed. These doors were programmed to send a signal when they were opened, both to monitor the work being done and because only select people had the authority to open them.

This situation wasn't normal, but he doubted he'd be able to convince anyone of that, so he opened the lock and set to work.

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It was hours later when he was confident everything would work. Most of his fingers had burns and cuts, and most of the electronics in the room had been scavenged for parts, but now everything had been rewired as he'd needed. It wasn't pretty, the mess in the room or the wires flowing out of the lock.

Not wasting time, he touched the two wires together. There was a spark, and the door clicked open. Nothing visible happened, but he probably wouldn't find out if he'd successfully blocked the signal or not, until security burst in the room. He couldn't let that stop him. He put the wires with the rest of them and forced everything back inside the lock. It took some force to be able to get the cover to snap back in place, but when he carefully moved his hand away, it held.

He opened the door and sniffed. The air had an overly-recycled scent to it. It was clean, and he couldn't smell any humans. That was good. No one had been here recently.

The light didn't come on. That was excellent. It was controlled by the ship's computer, and it had to know the door was opened before it would activate the light. This confirmed he'd blocked the signal.

He found a hand-light next to the door and turned it on. He checked the bag: it was a tool kit. Next, to the breathing mask, he found a medical bag with everything needed to do emergency treatments.

He treated his fingers, disinfecting them and sealing the wounds. They would be sore for a time, but he wouldn't have to worry about infection. He looked the mask over; he wouldn't be able to use it. It was designed for a human, not someone with a muzzle. He didn't expect to need it, as they were there mainly in case a conduit ruptured and released something toxic.

Finally, saving the best for last, he went through the toolkit. Most of the tools in it were to repair damage to walls or conduits: an electron welder, liquid metal sealant, a couple of grabbers, and other things he had no use for, but it contained some basic electronic repair tools.

Those would be useful, right now, actually.

He went back to the room and took up the Tolera four-twenty. He knew he shouldn't take the time to do this. He had more pressing matters to deal with, but he really wanted to see what changes had been made. He had to open it anyway, to take out the tracker that had to be in it, so what if he took a little longer to investigate how it had been modified?

He unsealed the back, and gently took it off. He had an initial pang of disappointment; nothing was obviously different. He looked more carefully and frowned. He opened up the two-hundred to confirm, and

yes, this model had a different processor. Also, now that he was looking for other differences, it had an extra memory card, as well as space for two more. They'd finally given their datapad some level of modularity. The video, audio, and data input could be taken out without needing special tools.

Tristan chuckled. It had taken them long enough to do that. It had been one of the major complaints against the Tolera Corporation. If something broke, the pad was done for, unless someone had the tools and know how to do the repairs, like he did.

The one thing that couldn't be taken out was the tracker. To remove it would render the pad unusable. So, using parts of the two-hundred, he rewired it to work around the tracker. The tracker ended up in the trash, and the pad was none the wiser. Tristan tested it, and yes, he could still access everything, but now it wouldn't give away his position. With that done, he put the purple pants back on, though he wasn't going to bother with the shirt anymore. He placed the body under the covers, the towels and the shirt went into the cupboard, and set the room back to how he found it. All the electronics were reassembled and placed back where they had been. When he was done, the room could pass a quick inspection.

Putting the panels back in place gave him pause. He couldn't leave them on the floor, as that would give away what he'd done here. Two of the three were simple to put back, but he needed to replace all three of them to hide where he'd gone. What he required was a way to hold the panel from the back so the edges would adhere.

He would have a use for the grabbers after all. He pulled one out of the tool kit. It used a more focused version of the gravitic plating used as the floor on ships to hold on to items. Depending on how much power it had, it could support the weight of a few people. This one probably couldn't do that, but it should be sufficient for the panel.

He put the first two panels in place. He pressed the grabber against the last, turned it on, and lifted. It snapped in place. He turned the grabber off, and the panel stayed where it was. He closed the door and put the grabber back in the kit.

He took out the four-twenty and checked the map on it, since it included the maintenance network. Now that he could look at a proper map, he worked out how to get where he wanted to go. He put it away in the toolkit because he wouldn't be able to hold it while moving through the maintenance corridors.

'Corridor' wasn't the right word for what he'd be crawling through. He opened the panel to the side of the small room and looked at the crawlway. He would fit in there, on all fours, but he wasn't looking

forward to it. Ever since getting stuck crawling through caves a few years before leaving home, he didn't care for tight spaces.

He put the kit's straps in his muzzle and climbed into the crawlway.

Forcing his breathing to remain steady, he proceeded forward.

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Tristan moved through the crawlways for hours. He'd known it would be long, but knowing that didn't mean it was enjoyable. Each time he reached a junction, he took the time to do an inventory of it. He told himself it was so he could add to his toolkit, and actively ignored that he didn't leave it until his nerves had calmed down. Because of how tight the crawlways were, every so often he'd cut himself, and he had to take the time to seal the new wound.

His destination was several levels lower, on the port side. Because the designers had wanted to make the job as easy as they could for the workers, it was mostly a straight line to port and then down. A ladder brought him to the junction he wanted.

Unlike the other junctions he'd crossed, the door on this one opened to a hallway instead of a room, and it wasn't hidden behind paneling. He could see people walking by in the small window, which meant that if he wasn't careful, they could see him. Another difference was the door. It wasn't locked; it only had a push bar to hold it closed. This was so workers could easily exit here if there were an emergency, even without power.

The thing he still had to deal with was the sensors. Not only would opening this door warn the bridge, but an alarm would sound. If someone exited via this door, there was a serious problem. Tricking the sensors wouldn't be too difficult, so long as he was careful; he'd just have to make sure to avoid being seen through the window.

He started by giving his nerves time to settle, then shook the loose fur off. He'd probably left a trail of it from where he'd started to here. Fortunately, by the time anyone discovered it, he would be long gone.

Once he rewired the sensors, he carefully looked out to get an idea of the layout. The door was in the middle of a 'T' junction, with a length of hall disappearing in the distance before him. He moved away from the window to check his datapad. Yes, down that way was another junction, and if he made a left there, it would lead him to the hanger bay.

The crawlway did go directly there, but he decided against using it to enter the hanger. He couldn't know where the ships would be, in relation to the access, and with his height and fur, he wouldn't have

the luxury to look around for one he could use. He would be restricted to whichever one was closest. Not to mention the security had to be better the closer to the hanger the crawlways got. They couldn't be that lax. This way would take longer, but it was a trade-off he was willing to make to ensure he got exactly the ship he needed.

He was deep within the restricted zone, and as he saw from the glances he caught of the people walking by, everyone was armed. He needed some sort of camouflage; they'd shoot him on sight without it. As far as he could tell, the crew was purely human, and even if there were some other species, everyone probably knew who they were.

He checked the time. It was late evening, ship time. He couldn't be certain about this one, but most large ships followed a day/night cycle. So traffic should lighten up, eventually.

He checked the ship's news while he waited. He'd expected alarms to have sounded by now. That Jack person had to have taken the scanner and used it to unshackle the other inmates. At this point, most of them had to be going wild, without their kill switch to keep them under control.

There was nothing about escaped criminals on the news, not even the Butcher. Either the inmates had more self-control than he'd expected, or the captain wasn't releasing the information. Could he care more about keeping his reputation intact than his crew's safety? It could be. Lives were cheap, while the profit he made from the prisoners was high. He also tried to get more information on Miranda Sunstar, the mercenary who had captured him, but the datapad couldn't gain access to anything with information on her. It could reach the galactic network, but only the general information areas, not the hidden boards like the ones mercenaries used.

He spent the rest of the time looking up what new technologies had been introduced during his absence. He couldn't get many details—he'd have to infiltrate corporate systems for that—but he was building a list that would keep him busy for a while, once he was back in his workshop.

Eventually, the hallway became mostly deserted; he was right about the day/night cycle. Only minimal crew would be working now while everyone else was resting, probably in their quarters, or at least, away from the work areas. At this point, he was no longer surprised the people he saw passing by weren't at their best. They looked tired and distracted; their guards were down. This was a prison ship, holding some of the worst criminals in the universe. A good number of them were now loose, and yet they behaved as if they worked on a cruise ship.

At this point, it was their own fault if he took advantage of it. All he needed now was the right camouflage.

A technician walked by, then another. Neither worked, as too much of his fur, not to say his head, would remain visible. The next person to walk by was a pilot in a flight suit. That could have worked, but the human was too short and didn't have a helmet.

Tristan realized that his height might be a problem. At six-foot-nine, he towered above most humans. Still, that one had been below six-foot, and that was far too short. The next one did have a helmet, but also was too short. Then came the one with everything he needed: the pilot was holding his helmet under his arm, it had the dark visor, and large emergency air system attached to it. He was a little shorter than Tristan, but he should be able to work with that.

As the human reached the door, Tristan pushed it open and reached for him. The man was faster than he'd expected, taking a step back out of reach. Tristan had to leave the safety of the junction to reach for him again. A quick look left, and right told him they were alone. When he focused on the man again, he was pulling out his gun, a slim Azeru. He caught the man's wrist and twisted, trying to make him drop it.

The man grunted but kept hold of it. He tried to hit Tristan with his helmet, but he blocked it. Tristan put all his strength in the elbow strike he aimed at the man's neck. It connected, and he heard it break.

He caught the limp form, spun, and dropped him to the floor in the way of the closing door.

He pocketed the gun, but stopped before getting in. He listened, no sounds, no distant echoes of feet getting closer. Good, they were alone and would be for some time. He put the helmet in the junction, then went through the man's pockets, locating his ID. He looked at it. Could he risk bringing it into the junction? The security on the ship wasn't anywhere near what he would demand, so the card probably didn't have a passive monitoring chip in it, nor was the junction setup to tag it. Still, he couldn't take the chance this was the one place the captain had decided to do a good job. If he were found here, there would be no escaping. He also couldn't just leave it on the floor. He couldn't risk anyone seeing and taking it, or just reporting it. He was going to need it.

He looked around. The hall was featureless, nothing that could hide the ID card. The card was clean white, and it would stand out against the blue-gray wall. He pulled his kit out and went through it. There was nothing in there that could mask a signature.

He stood and let out a sigh of exasperation. He had to find a place to hide it, and all he had to work with was the door's frame. Not

something that offered many possibilities. He stopped, looked at the frame, and then the body. He had been the first one to be even close to his height. Would someone smaller be able to see anything on top of the frame? Would they even bother looking there?

He heard steps in the distance. He didn't have a choice anymore. He took some adhesive and stuck the ID on the wall, just above the frame. He then pulled the body in and closed the door. He waited by it until the person passed. Human, female, she was looking at her datapad as she walked.

Now confident the ID would be there when he was done, he took off the man's flight suit. He wouldn't need any of the under clothing he wore, another thing humans seemed to need because of their lack of fur. He tied the man's hands together, and then that to the grabber's handle. He knelt down, pressed the grabber against the wall in front of the ladder, turned it on, and pulled on it to make sure it would hold. He lowered the body, suspending it between floors.

The grabber was almost at full charge. It should hold the body for at least a day, long enough for him to be gone before anyone discovered it. He went through the suit's pockets. He pulled out two extra power packs for the Azeru, which went in his tool kit, and an access card for the flight bay—he'd expected that function to be part of the ID card—and a few items with no obvious uses, probably personal mementos.

The suit had a holster attached to it. He put the Kytron in it. It was a little loose, but shouldn't draw any attention.

He put on the flight suit; it was a little small. If he wasn't careful and flexed, the seams would rip. The gloves would cover the bit of fur the sleeve didn't, but he'd have to make sure to keep his arms down. The boots would cover the exposed fur below the pants cuffs. This wasn't going to be enjoyable; every part of his body was going to be squeezed much tighter than he found comfortable.

He looked the helmet over. It was large enough to cover his head, but there was too much stuff in it for it to fit. He had to rip out the padding, the electronics, and the air system so his muzzle would fit.

He wished there was another way he could do this. He could already tell he wasn't going to be comfortable, but he couldn't afford to access the hanger bay from the maintenance conduits. As lax as the designers had been, someone had to have realized that being able to enter the maintenance conduits from the hanger bay unmonitored would make the job of taking over the ship easier on anyone who could land there.

Now that this was a prison ship, it made it harder to escape.

Putting on the boots was a challenge since he couldn't bend his knees very far without ripping the pants. Hopefully, no one would

notice he hadn't latched them. It wasn't like they could fall off, not the way they squeezed his feet. The pain distracted him from the lack of sensation from the soles of his feet. How humans could walk around without feeling the ground under their feet, he had no idea.

The gloves were just as tight, but at least they didn't require him almost ripping the suit open to put them on. Of course, with them on he couldn't unsheathe his claws, which left him feeling unarmed.

He quickly checked the corridor before putting on the helmet, grabbing his tool kit, and stepping out. He went to get the ID card and realized he couldn't lift his arm. He cursed; he needed that ID. He reached for it, hearing and feeling the side of the suit rip open. He brought down his arm and left it pressed against his side to hide whatever fur might be visible.

He headed to the hanger bay directly. He wanted out of the helmet and boots as soon as possible. With the helmet on, he had to fold his ears back against his head, which meant he could barely hear anything. The visor also reduced his field of vision in a way he didn't like.

This was why pilots didn't usually wear them outside of the cockpits. There, the internal display fed all the information they needed to pilot their ship. Out here, it just made them, and him, half blind.

Hopefully, no one would question him about it.

The doors to the hanger bay were at the end of the corridor, and they were wide open, which surprised him. He had expected them to be closed and always require an ID to open, another weakness in their security measures. The opening was the width and height of the corridor so they could move large pieces of equipment in and out. There was probably a workshop close by; he could hear the cacophony of repairs even through the helmet.

The map hadn't indicated this side was the maintenance part of the deck. It didn't matter, and it was too late to do anything about it, but he would have preferred entering on the other side, where the ships were parked.

He walked through the ships being repaired, starting to build his mask. He was a pilot. He was cocky, sure of himself, and these mechanics were beneath him.

Some of the mechanics nodded to him as he passed, a few sneered. He ignored them all. They weren't important; the only thing that mattered to him, to a pilot, was his ship.

At a glance, most of the ships were tracker-hunters. He couldn't place the exact model, but they used them only for local work. They wouldn't do for what he wanted. He needed something capable of deep-space

travel. He found them further back, six small personnel carriers. He estimated them as having a capacity of four, plus two pilots, based on their size.

Its armament would be modest as they weren't designed to take down other ships. They could, if the pilot or gunners were skilled enough, and with a good amount of luck. The tracker-hunters were what the Sayatoga used for takedowns, if not the ship's own weapons. The carrier was used to bring extra personnel if a chase moved planet side.

He chose the one at the back, in the shadows, and entered through the open back ramp. He couldn't believe it; all of them had opened ramps. This was becoming ridiculous. No shuttle or fighter should have an open ramp; it was just too easy for an inmate to get in one of them this way.

As soon as he was inside, he took off the helmet, flexed to rip the vest, and then took it off, as well as the gloves and boots, ripping the pants in the process. He gave himself a moment to let his body appreciate this freedom and then went to the control board. A quick glance told him the ship was linked to the main computer. This was good, as he would be able to get the information he needed, the first of which was where they were.

Accessing the Sayatoga's scans, he found they were in deep space, in an asteroid field. They weren't moving. Why they were here didn't matter, although it was probably to mine ice. This ship wouldn't be ideal for navigating through a field like this, but he could make it work.

Now that he knew where he was, the rest could wait. He programmed a mask for the carrier. He couldn't simply erase it from their logs, considering what he was expecting to happen within the coming day. He went through the roster and assigned Corin to this shuttle. That would prevent another pilot from coming on board to use it.

Since Corin was officially off duty, he convinced the computer the ship was under repair and went through the list of technicians to assign it to someone currently off duty. This should prevent the roster from being changed.

Then he programmed a series of overrides, to prevent anyone from stealing his ship. He was going to use it for some time to come, at the very least until he'd made those responsible for his situation pay.

He busied himself rewiring the controls. For what he was going to do, he had to be able to access all the systems, even those that would normally require someone at the scan station. As he worked, the noise

outside the ship increased. The day was starting. He didn't worry about that. With the system believing the ship was under repair, it wouldn't assign it to anyone. It was effectively invisible. He pushed the sounds to the back of his mind.

That would be why he didn't become aware someone else was in the ship until their boots actually resounded on the metal floor. He spun, drew the Kytron, and aimed it at the bald intruder, who looked back at him with green, glowing eyes.

He was wearing dirty pants, a ripped shirt, and aiming a guard's modified Pisteron three back at him. Tristan looked at the lowered ramp and then back at the human. Hadn't he just chided the captain for leaving it open?

They stared at each other for a long moment, and then the Butcher said, "Well now. This is going to be interesting."