

A spasm wracked his body.

He remembered a woman in tattered clothing. A switch. Electricity coursing through him.

Darkness. Another spasm.

Shackles, guards. He was forced into a tube. Then it filled with liquid. He remembered anger, held deep within him. A promise to himself that he would escape and make those responsible pay.

He held his breath, knowing it was a futile gesture of defiance. It enraged him that he lost the fight with his body, even knowing the cost of winning.

He tried to breathe, choked on the liquid, and darkness claimed him again.

There was another spasm, and this time he opened his eyes. He was floating in a thick liquid. He tried to breathe, but his lungs filled with it, not air. Before he could stop himself, he was thrashing. He couldn't breathe. He was going to drown.

The liquid drained, and he was on hand and knees, retching and coughing. He took a deep, ragged breath. He didn't move, and he forced his breathing to slow, to steady. He forced his body to stop shaking. He was Tristan; he controlled himself, and his destiny.

He searched through his memory for the pieces that would tell him how he'd gotten here. The woman: she'd captured him, on a job, a retrieval job. A setup. She'd brought him to this ship. He'd been scanned, then put in this tube.

Someone banged on the glass. He didn't respond; things were still piecing themselves together: he was on the Sayatoga, a prison ship. He was in a cryosleep tube. The banging came again, and he looked up. A human, female. Not the one who had caught him, or the one who had scanned him.

“Stand up, furball.”

For a moment, he considered not moving. No one ordered him about, but he needed to remember that he was a prisoner. He needed to play the role if he was going to find a way to escape. He stood, keeping his eyes on her. Behind her were two guards, male, also human. She pressed a button, out of view, and the air filled with a cloying mist.

He didn't bother holding his breath. The mist was a sterilizer, standard procedure for an old-style cryosleep system like the one he was in. It killed the organic components in the liquid he had been suspended in. He breathed it in deeply. He choked on it, but forced himself to keep breathing it; if too many of those micro-organisms stayed in his lungs, it wouldn't be pleasant.

When the mist cleared, she put a uniform in a drawer, which slid into

the tube. "Put it on," she said.

He looked at the bright-purple clothes in their sterile bag, and then back at her. Did she really want him to put that on while his fur was wet? The mist killed the micro-organisms, but they were still in his fur. He considered asking to be allowed to shower, but he could see on her face he wouldn't be granted that luxury. Humans didn't have that problem. Liquids just dripped off their bodies.

He looked at the bag again and then shook himself.

The sudden motion made the guards take a step back and lift their weapons, but she didn't react. With a gesture, she had them lower them. She watched him, took in his body, there was amusement in her eyes, but also interest. He smiled back at her, though not a friendly one; he showed teeth, a muzzle full of pointed teeth. She didn't react. Interesting.

He considered her. Her eyes kept drifting down, and her face flushed lightly. He thought about enticing her, using her desire to his advantage. He could make a show of slicking down his fur, of putting on the clothing. He decided against it. She wouldn't act on her desire, not here, not while the guards were present, and the area had to be under surveillance.

He slicked down his fur in a few efficient motions, then extended a claw to slice open the bag. He noted he would have to trim then at some point. This old cryo system didn't fully stop the body from aging; it simply slowed it down tremendously. He pulled out the purple prisoner's uniform, and put the pants on, dropping the shirt back on the bag.

"The shirt too, furbag."

He kept his eyes on her for a moment. She now wore a professionally neutral expression. If he could manage to get alone with her, he would be able to charm her then. He shrugged and put the shirt on. Humans and their taboos. He had fur, he didn't need clothing, but he again had to remember, he was their prisoner.

Prisoners complied.

Once he was dressed, the front of the tube unsealed. She motioned for him to step out, and the guards kept their distance as he exited. At the bottom of the steps, she had him stop. She moved closer to scan him.

She wrinkled her nose.

He knew he stank. Maybe now was the time to ask for that shower. He had to wash that stuff out of his fur.

She was using a Toleda datapad to scan him. It had subtle differences to the two-hundred model he'd last used. It wasn't an older one. As she

turned to move away, he caught a glimpse of the back. It was a four-hundred. How long had he been in there? Tolera was in the habit of updating their models every four or five years. The two-hundred had just come out before he was caught. He'd missed an entire generation of them.

He curled his finger into a fist to stop himself from grabbing it out of her hand. He wanted to take it apart, to see how it had been modified.

What else had he missed?

"You will follow me," she ordered once she was satisfied with what she read, forcing him out of his thoughts. Her voice was steady and authoritative. "You will stay exactly five steps behind me. If you try to shorten the distance, you will be shot. Is that understood?"

Tristan studied the guards' weapons—Pisteron threes. An older design from that company, but a reliable one. They were modified, not standard modifications, and he doubted those made them less lethal. They wouldn't be shooting him to stun. Actually, if he judged those changes correctly, there wouldn't be anything left of him if they fired.

He looked back at the woman and nodded, the human sign for understanding. His ears flicked the same message, but she wouldn't understand that. She started walking.

He let her take two steps, to put the distance between them at five, then followed. He matched the rhythm, as well as the length of her stride, his too-long claws clicking on the cold metal floor. The guards stayed seven steps behind him. He smiled. They were afraid of him.

Tristan took notice of everything around him as they walked: terminals, comm systems, access panels, as well as the types of locks on the doors—Emerik. He also memorized the path they took. He didn't expect to have to, or want to, come back to the cryosleep area, but he couldn't know what would happen. It paid to be prepared. Through the walk, what he was really looking for was a clock.

When he saw one, it took an effort not to miss a step. Ten years. He'd been out of the world for ten years.

He gritted his teeth. He felt his claws poke in the palm of his hands; that was the reminder he was letting his anger get out of control. Someone was going to pay.

They were going to pay for making him miss who knew how many new security systems and weapons. His survival depended on him knowing what was out there, on studying them and making sure he knew how to defeat them.

He felt wetness on his finger and forced himself to calm down again. He reminded himself that after all this was over, he'd have research material for years to come, and that made him smile. But first,

someone was going to pay.

Before, he would have made them pay out of principle, to make sure everyone knew that you didn't take Tristan on with impunity. But now that he knew exactly how much had been taken from him, he was going to find the most painful way to make them pay.

She stopped, and he had to focus on the here and now, instead of his planned revenge. They were before a large door. It went from floor to ceiling, made of a metal denser than the walls, and had sealed joint. A cargo bay access door, he decided.

She spoke in her comm, a generic Tarin model. Unless things had changed in the last ten years, it was the model used on all ships. The door opened, confirming it was a cargo bay. She motioned for him to enter.

A quick look in told him he was joining a large group of prisoners. He had a moment to make a decision; the cargo bay made it easy to eject them to space, but the ship would be losing money if they did that. They needed to prove they had their prisoners to get paid.

He stepped in, and they didn't follow him. The door closed behind him. He quickly noted the twenty guards posted around the room, all armed with Pisteron threes. They were in vacuum suits and anchored to the walls, so the possibility of being exposed to space was real, but he didn't think it was the plan.

He did a count of the prisoners. Including himself, there were thirty. That was a lot of money for a ship like this to lose. No, being in this room was in case things went badly. He approved of the guards. It was nice to know someone knew how dangerous they all were here.

The ratio was a little off; there were only three non-humans in the group: a Daran, one Kyrin, and him, a Samalian. For a better representation of the galactic population, there should be two more non-humans. It probably spoke to the humans' predilection with crime.

Even within their suits, and being heavily armed, Tristan could tell the guards were afraid to be in this room. Good, they weren't over confident. They knew their weapons and armor didn't mean much among this group. If things turned violent, some of them would die before the room was exposed to vacuum.

The wall on the opposite side of where he'd entered shimmered. The image of a well-groomed man appeared: red hair, trimmed short; a beard, also red and short; and a crisp white uniform with a captain's insignia on the shoulders.

All the prisoners turned to watch him.

He looked them over, a grave look on his face. "Today, you are being

given a rare opportunity to earn your freedom. Each one of you has committed so many crimes that, if not for this chance, you will never see freedom again.” He paused. If he was waiting for a response from those assembled, he was disappointed. “Someone has gotten loose on my ship, and he has managed to evade my guards.” That got a cheer, which made the captain glower at them. It didn’t silence them, so he had to wait long moments before he could continue. “You all have a reputation for being determined thieves, trackers, and killers. I am giving you an opportunity to use those skills to help me, and in the process, earn your freedom. Whoever brings me this man will be set free.”

The face of the man they would be hunting replaced the captain’s. Those who had cheered now looked around, worried. The captain hadn’t given his name, no one knew it, but everyone knew what he was called. The shaved head and the cybernetic eyes with the green glow were distinctive enough.

They were hunting the Butcher of Kraven Klaw.

Tristan couldn’t stop the dread from running down his spine. It explained why they had brought out the worst of the worst. Only those who were not only willing but at ease with killing, would stand a chance against him. Tristan pitied anyone who even thought about trying.

“Should you think of using this as an opportunity for your own escape,” the captain’s voice came over the image, “know that before you were released, each one of you was implanted with a kill switch. If you get within three paces of a restricted area, it will emit a low-level electrical pulse as a warning. If you get within one pace, it will shock you hard enough to render you unconscious, and you will be sent back to your tube. Should you somehow manage to stay conscious and cross the threshold, it will explode, killing you instantly.”

Many of the inmates screamed profanities at the captain. Tristan remained silent. He’d learned at a young age, from his father, that anger was a waste of time and energy, so he never let it control his actions. Instead, he was formulating plans, contingencies.

“You will be provided with low-energy weapons,” the captain continued over the yells, “to defend yourself. If you use them on one of my crew, you will be incapacitated and returned to your tube. You will also be provided with a datapad containing the map of the ship, with all the restricted areas indicated on it. That is all.”

The humans talked among each other, agitated, ignoring the non-humans. It didn’t bother Tristan. He’d had to deal with that all his life, and had found ways to use this quasi-invisibility to his advantage. Like

listening to some of the plans being made.

The access door opened, and they were ordered to exit. Most ran and jostled each other, trying to be out first and have the best pick of weapons.

Tristan and three others didn't hurry. He didn't mind being last. If the weapons were low-power, they wouldn't be of any use against the Butcher. It also limited the kind they would be. Knowing that everyone ahead of him would go for what they considered to be the best ones, he might actually be left with something useful.

When he reached the table, there were five datapads left. He made sure there were only three people after him and took two of them. They were two-hundreds. He didn't know if it would come in handy, but his father had raised him to never ignore an opportunity. "You never know when the next one will come," he had been in the habit of saying.

He was surprised at the number of weapons left. He would have expected the captain only to have one per inmate set out, but there was at least a dozen still there, and he'd seen most people take at least one.

As he'd expected, the selection wasn't impressive; all the 'good' ones were gone. If his plan had been to try to take down the most dangerous criminal in the galaxy, he would be in trouble. But for what he was actually planning, the selection was reasonable. He took an old Gunther. It was large, clunky, and probably wouldn't be able to fire any more, but it was useful as more than a weapon. He picked a Kytron forty. It was small and easy to conceal, and reasonably accurate. The main drawbacks were that it took twenty seconds to recharge, and the beam's power was so low only a precise shot, without armor, could be deadly.

He drew a few strange looks from the others as he walked by them, holding the large gun. They were assembled in the hall, in small groups or alone, looking over their weapons. Only one of them seemed more intent on Tristan than what he was holding. Tristan didn't react to him but memorized his features.

The layout of the ship was a fairly standard arrangement of corridors, rooms, and lifts. To someone who hadn't studied a large number of ship's schematics, it might seem to all be rather random.

He didn't pay attention to the people he came across. They gave him a wide berth. Obviously, they had been warned inmates were now walking among them. Not that they would ever think he was one of them, even if he wasn't wearing the purple uniform. His dark brown fur, muzzle, and triangular ears made it clear he wasn't human.

He was looked at with fear by most and awe by some. He doubted any of them had ever seen someone like him. They were happy to live in their microcosm, among people who were the same as them, thought as they did, ate like them, and liked the same things.

Tristan thought that idea to be boring.

The stares, comments, and curses, washed over him. Even if he had a temperament to take offense to them, he didn't have the time. He needed to find a medical room. The first two he'd come across had been within a restricted zone, which made him wonder if they would all be. It did make sense; a lot of medication could be turned into weapons, in the right hands.

He walked by a nondescript door and stopped. He looked at the sign next to it, 'Medical storage.' He double checked the pad. This wasn't a restricted room. A storage room wasn't ideal, but what he needed could be in there. He could continue looking, but that would cost him time, not to mention he might lose the person following him.

The door was locked. A second-generation Emerik, same as all the others he'd seen on the ship. They were good locks. They would stop most thieves or anyone who hadn't spent time dismantling a significant number of them to understand how they worked.

He listened for unexpected sounds, forcing his ears to remain forward, lest he gave himself away to the human following him. He pried the cover open with a claw; maybe he'd find something here to trim them. Once he made sure the insides were indeed those of a second-generation, he cracked open the Gunther's handle. From there, he pulled the two contact bars that encased the power cell.

He heard a slight shuffling in the distance behind him. He turned slightly as he cleaned the corrosion off three areas on the edge of one bar. From the corner of his eye, he saw the human quickly pull back around the corner. He cleaned the opposite edge completely, and then inserted it at the back of the lock, making sure it made contact in the appropriate places.

He removed as much of the rust as he could on the second bar. That one he secured in the case, under the contacts leading to the display and keypad. When he put the cover back on, the bars made contact, there was a puff of smoke, and the short circuit fused the contact points. There was no sign anything had been done; the display even read as being locked.

Tristan pressed the open button, and the door opened.

He looked around once the door closed behind him. Shelves with boxes, plastic bags, empty containers, and a few bins marked 'rejects.' He quickly checked the boxes for what he was looking for. Not finding

it on the first few shelves, he started going over alternative ways of accomplishing his goal.

He was resigned to go about it the long and messy way when he found what he wanted in a reject bin. He'd have to find out what was wrong with it, then repair it, but that would be faster, and cleaner, than the alternative.

He was almost done with the repairs, which had required gutting one of the datapads when the man who had been following him finally entered. It was about time, Tristan thought. He'd started to worry he had decided to leave. He didn't look up from his work, and only a tilt backward of an ear indicated he was aware of him.

"You're Tristan, right?" the man asked, timidly.

Tristan didn't reply, content to hear the door close. He finished the repair. It wasn't pretty, and it would never pass as new, but when he turned the small scanner on, it lit up. That was all he cared about.

He turned and leveled a gaze on the human, who backed up against the door, looking afraid. Tristan could tell it was an act; he didn't smell scared.

The human was smaller than most, by a good head and a half, but was aesthetically pleasing enough: short black hair, a round face with no chin fur. Good muscles on him, he might put up a good fight. Tristan pushed the thought aside. He didn't have the time to indulge in sex, and he had plans for the human. Once he'd dealt with all this, he'd find someone.

"I'm... I'm Jack," the man said, breaking the long silence.

Tristan didn't reply. He wasn't here to play the man's game; the human was here to play his. He adjusted the settings on the scanner. Considering he had been in a cryotube when they inserted the 'kill switch,' it had to have been a simple job. They couldn't have taken him out without risking waking him. It meant there were only two places on his body they could have made a small incision and inserted something powerful, but small enough, to kill him.

He ran the scanner over the lower right part of his chest, scanning his heart. The scanner remained silent. He wasn't surprised; even a small electrical charge ran the risk of killing him there. Since they were using electricity as a warning device, they wouldn't have wanted to risk it.

He scanned the right side of his neck, and it beeped. He felt with a finger and found the scar. It was right over the bone that protected the artery feeding his brain—probably the area where the bone was thinnest. He was impressed with their knowledge of his species. The bone was practically unbreakable, but a small charge could shatter the



thin part, creating shrapnel to shred the artery. He would barely feel a sting, and within minutes he'd be dead.

He took the scalpel and cut the scar open. He then dug in with small forceps until he found it. It would have been faster, and less painful, to have someone else do this, but he wasn't going to trust the human to play around his neck. He put the implant on a tray. It was barely noticeable among the blood. He sealed the cut, cleaned most of the blood out of his fur, and the scar was no longer visible. Even with his sharp nose, he couldn't make the blood out from the stink of the cryosleep fluid trapped in his fur. He turned to the human, who had watched him through all of it, a perturbed look on his face.

"Come here." His voice was raw from the sterilizing mist, and lack of use. The human shook his head. "I said, come here!" he ordered.

The human's mask slipped for a fraction of a second. If Tristan hadn't been looking for it, he would have missed the anger in the human's eyes, but then the meekness was back, and he came as ordered.

He scanned the back of the man's neck. He didn't bother with the artery. The spinal cord was human's main weak point, and he found the implant where the spine met the skull. There, the explosion would break the nerves, and the body would simply fall to the ground. He put the scanner down, deliberately within the man's sight, and picked up the scalpel.

"Don't move," Tristan said. The human tensed as the blade moved close to his neck.

He waited for a moment, to see if the man would drop his act. When he didn't move, Tristan started looking for the scar. Because of their lack of fur, they had been much more careful on the human. As far as he could tell, they hadn't left a mark. He cut the skin in the approximate area the scanner showed. He put the scalpel down next to the scanner and picked up his implant with the forceps, both of which were out of the man's sight.

He rummaged in the cut for a moment. He did his best not to cause too much pain, but he wanted the human to know he'd actually done something. "Hold out your hand," he ordered, pulling the forceps out of the cut. He dropped the implant in the hand. "Don't move yet." He used the sealer to close the incision, being careful not to leave any marks on the pristine skin.

With that done, he wiped as much of the blood off his hands as he could. He picked up his things: the Gunther and his datapad, then headed for the door.

"What am I supposed to do with this thing?" the human asked. Tristan turned. "You do whatever you want. Throw it in the trash,

keep it, put it in someone else's pocket. I don't care."

He pressed an ear to the door, and saw the human check his pockets, looking at him suspiciously. When he didn't find anything, he looked at the scanner, a calculating look on his face.

Tristan suppressed a smile. The human had followed him looking to use him. Now Tristan had given him a way to get any of the other prisoners in his debt. He might ask for protection, or earn favors,

Tristan didn't care. All that mattered to him was the confusion having the released prisoners run free would cause. Now he was ready to move on to the next part of his plan.