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Chapter 2 *First Mate Crit Is A Bugger*

My mind nearly froze at the thought that I could share Wilkson's fate. Death by vacuum was not listed among the more pleasant ways in which to leave this existence. Not only did one asphyxiate, but one's body exploded *outwards* in the lack of pressure, the villi of a human's lungs would haemorrhage blood the moment they touched pure vacuum. And spacer lore told that the eyeballs would soon follow.

To hell with the AG system, I let go of my handhold and began sprinting back down the corridor. Running like every breath could be my last, I kept on going until I'd reached an emergency station.

The term 'Emergency Station' was a bit of a misnomer. The only things that had been shoved in the small, grey metal box were, like most everything on the *Serius*, the absolute minimum required by law. Wilkson and I hadn't even bothered with it before as there was almost nothing here of value. But there was a spacesuit.

The thing had been bright green once, but darned so many times that it barely had any of its original material left. And it wasn't made for a human. The suit was two meters tall, and almost as wide. At least it was designed for the galaxy standard four limbs and a head.

I'd worn a spacesuit a total of twice in my life, and both times had been strictly for training. Only once had I ever actually done a spacewalk.

Pulling it from the box, I laid it flat out on the ground before me, chest open. Wriggling into it, I felt its old and brittle synthetic folds rustle around me. A few seconds later I began tugging closed the pressure seals.

I almost had a heart attack when the AGs cut out again and I began to drift.

Finally, now safely tied down, I inflated the suit. The sound of whirring fans and the taste of stale air should have been reassuring, but all I could think about was Wilkson.

We hadn't even been friends, only shipmates, but the man had died not a stone's throw from me. Need to focus. Need to stay alive.

Okay, I've got air for the next few hours. Now what?

I still need to get to the bridge. No one was answering the intercom, and that was the only place

I might be able to call for help.

Okay, smart guy, how're you going to do that? There was only one spinal corridor to the ship, and the pressure door had already snapped shut on it. The pressure doors won't open as long as there's a hull breach.

Bugger.

Well, I was in a spacesuit, wasn't I? Might as well take it into space.

Except the only airlocks on the ship are in the bow. Why can't anything ever be easy?

The hull of the ship groaned as the AGs shifted. The floor was 'down' again.

In a flash of blinding insight, I switched on the magnetic boots of the spacesuit. That should at least keep my feet in place.

Digging through the emergency supplies again, I unearthed a toolkit, mine was long lost. Within was a cutting torch.

We'd already had one hull breach, what was another?

I took a good long look to make sure I wasn't straddling a pressure door, then I flicked the cutting torch on. It was frightening just how quickly it sliced through the hull once I started work.

Even more alarming was how quickly the hole grew. I'd only made it the size of a finger, but within seconds it was big enough to step through. Scraps of hull ripped away before me, floating off in the void. The widening only stopped once all the air had escaped.

I couldn't remember seeing the stars any clearer.

The faceplate of the old spacesuit was streaked and grimy, but the stars burned so bright that it almost seemed like I could reach out and cup them in my hands.

Alien stars. There was not a single formation I could place.

It was a bit of an odd thought. I'd spent so much of my life crisscrossing from planet to planet on any manner of tug and cruise liner, these stars were no more alien to me than anything else. Yet now I had the chilling feeling that *I did not belong out here*. I belonged back home, under a blue sky, on my own little patch of dirt.

I had to be careful when I began moving again. The edges of the breach were sharp, and it would only take a single nick to slice my suit wide open. I doubted the emergency supplies on the *Serius* were any more resilient than the ship itself.

My boots clinked on the outside of the hull, slowly making their way forward, one step at a time. My progress now was almost as slow as it had been with Wilkson when we'd been dealing with the shifting gravity. Emergency suits like this one were designed to keep you alive, not run a marathon. And I had kilometres to go.

It took me over an hour to make it past where the pressure door had shut between Wilkson and I. The gaping hole up ahead in the hull was hard to miss.

And there were still flecks of frozen red floating in the void. I almost didn't notice them until they began to patter against my visor. It took me long moments to realize that they were drops of blood, flash frozen when they had come in contact with the vacuum.

I couldn't just walk past. I had to know. Poking my head carefully around the ragged hole, I

could see him. He was still trapped within, his coveralls having caught on the edge of the hull.

His face was blue and contorted, tongue hanging out and eyes, thankfully, closed. His skin was ruptured in a million places where his blood had sprung forth, fighting free against the zero pressure.

I reached a hesitant hand towards him, not sure what I meant to do, but I never had a chance to decide. My gentle touch was all it took to dislodge him from the debris and sent him slowly tumbling away from me.

I scrambled for a moment, but he was already out of reach.

"Fate be with you," was all I could whisper.

Spinning slowly, his corpse sailed into the endless void.

A couple meters further I encountered my next problem. There was more to the hull breach than just a sub-standard plate. A fuel pipe had come loose on the underside of the ship's spine.

The engines needed more power than even the reactor could offer. That's why we had vast tanks of fuel here, mid-way down the ship. The compressed combustive they used as propellant was nasty stuff. It was stored here, neither at the bow near the crew, nor at the stern, where a failure in the engines could cause it to ignite.

And it was venting into space.

The fuel was a light grey colour. Normally semi-liquid, it flash froze as soon as it hit the vacuum, much like Wilkson's body. It was leaving behind a thick slurry that had built up on the hull and begun pushing out into the void.

I needed to get to the bridge. I really, *really* needed to get to the bridge, but it likely wouldn't do me much good if I got there only to find that I hadn't the fuel to turn the ship around and get us back to port.

Pushing forward through the slush, I had to all but shovel it out of the way as it grew past my waist. I needed to make sure that the magnets under my feet got a good grip on the hull – I didn't want to even think of the possibility of losing my footing.

I'd thought the walk before had been time consuming, but now it took me a good twenty minutes just to make the last dozen meters to the rupture.

The fuel line was massive, a good meter in diameter, large enough that I could fit inside it if not for the globs of semi-solid mush gushing out. The ship was supposed to have automatic shutoff valves on lines like these, but it looked like they didn't exactly live up to the standard that the pressure doors had set.

My first thought was to simply try and weld something over the top of the hole, but fat chance of that. The pressure of the escaping fuel was enough to push me back, there was no way I'd ever be able to hold anything in place atop that long enough to weld it solid. And anyway, no make-do weld job of mine would be able to last an hour under pressure like that.

Okay, think... think. There had to be a cut off valve around here somewhere... even if it hadn't kicked in automatically, I should be able to force a manual override.

Looking closer at the pipe before me, that explained why the valve hadn't sensed the pressure loss, half the circuitry was missing, torn clean off in the hull breach.

The primary mechanics of the shutoff valve were here, but all the sensing and control equipment was little more than pretty sparkles free floating out a few hundred meters away.

It took a few swipes of my glove to wipe the congealed fuel from the control panel. I punched at the buttons with an oversized finger... Well, that was useful. The only thing that seemed to be working was the little red light set next to the word 'Error'. Nothing else was responding, not even the emergency shut command.

I had to rack my mind to try and recall my emergency training. Anything that is supposed to fail to a closed state must have a manual way to force it shut for just such a situation as this. Didn't it?

It must have taken me another ten minutes as I cleared the ever growing slurry from around me, hunting for any type of lever or control rod that I could twist to make something happen.

There it was. Flush to the hull and almost invisible, the manual close crank was folded back into the plates.

The slush made the metal slippery as I pulled it free, the contraption folding out into a handle of sorts. It was almost as tall as I was, most definitely not a human design.

Progress was slow, as one might expect with a tool that was designed for a creature that's three meters tall. I could only just keep the thing moving half of the time.

At long last the torrent of fuel began to slow to a trickle, then the trickle to a drip. The inside of my suit was drenched in sweat, but the leak was staunch.

At least now I might be able to get the ship moving when I got to the bridge. This line was down, but there were two more to feed the engines if I ever figured out where it was I needed to go.

The sum value of the rest of the walk to the bridge was to give me a really good, really long look at the stars. The hull of the *Serius* seemed to stretch out endlessly before me, nothing but a mishmash of grey hull plates that stretched on to the edge of sight.

The journey had become so monotone, so step after step that I could almost block out Wilkson's death from my mind, almost stop fearing what I would find when I got to the bow. Almost.

I, in due time, made it to the bow emergency hatch. The thing hadn't been used even once the whole time I'd been on the ship. Most of the crew saw it as nothing more than a little bit of extra storage space. That was why I got a good view of the interior airlock door shredding through some packing boxes as it slid shut before opening the exterior hatch.

I had long moments waiting in the small chamber as the air was slowly pumped in. I'd been alone with my breathing and heartbeat in the silence of space for hours, not even the chatter of conversation over the suit comm, the slowly building hiss of air around me was more than enough to set my teeth on edge.

Not to mention that it was the *only* sound.

Normal procedure on even the most lax ship would be for unscheduled use of an airlock to set off a dozen alarms on the bridge. There should be someone screaming at me over the intercom in the ceiling and watching on the security camera.

No voice came, and the dead eye of the camera didn't follow me as I moved.

And another thing... the airlock was old, but wasn't ten minutes to pressurize a little long, even for this hunk of junk? For that matter, what was up with the lights? The lighting was down to, what,

half? It felt like a bad set from some horror serial, like a shambling zombie might be standing on the other side of the door.

I only had just enough time to work out an uneasy chuckle at that thought before the inner door opened. Or tried to, the debris of all the boxes it had shredded jammed it at no more than a foot open.

I rolled my eyes and braced my back against the frame. Pushing, I was just able to shove the door far enough to slip my oversized spacesuit through.

Well, I wouldn't be using this airlock again anytime soon. The door was all seized up, opening the exterior hatch now would vent the atmosphere as sure as the breach that had killed Wilkson.

I was a good ten strides down the hall before it occurred to me that *there was* atmosphere in here, and I was still wearing my spacesuit, all buttoned up and reeking.

Even the rudimentary gauges in my helmet could tell me that the air in the bow was still in place. No breaches had compromised the hull integrity here...or at least none that the environmental systems hadn't been able to contain.

A quarter turn to the left and the seals of my helmet released with a hiss and a pop that was almost deafening after the near silence. I never thought I'd be longing for the scrubby air of the *Serius*, but it was ambrosia after the stench of my overworked suit.

If I'd thought the silence of my suit was bad, the empty echoes in the bow of the *Serius* were worse. The whole crew compartment wasn't all that large for the number of people we had, you could always hear someone moving near you. There was nothing now.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting... situation normal, perhaps? I'd even be okay with people screaming and running madly off in all directions. At least then there would have been the sound of other people...

There was nothing.

The whirr of the environmental systems was omnipresent in the background, as they were on all ships, but that was it. My booted feet clomping on the metal floor was all that reached my ears.

"Hello?" And the echoes of my voice down the empty hall.

The airlock had deposited me on the third deck, the lowest, by the crew quarters. The bridge was on deck one, and workstations and officer quarters on two.

Without even thinking about it, I was in my quarters. There wasn't much here, just a cot that folded out of the wall, a commode that did the same, and a locker.

Pulling open the locker, I yanked out my only real belonging, a hitchhiker's backpack. I took a quick peek inside before slinging one of its straps awkwardly over my shoulder.

It wasn't that there was much in there, just a couple of ration bars, a towel, and my dieg kit, but it still felt better to have it. I've escaped trouble on a dozen planets with this on my back. Its weight was reassuring.

Back out in the corridor, I threw open the doors of all the other quarters, hoping against logic that I might find someone sleeping.

That was when I found the first body.

I think his name was Gregg; he worked the night rotation on the bridge. He was the one I'd

expected to find here, he always slept while the rest of us were on duty.

He was lying face up on his bunk, eyes closed. It would almost look peaceful if it wasn't for the watermelon sized stain of blood that had soaked through the blankets around him.

I nearly tripped and fell flat on my face as I rushed to his side. My medical training was basically limited to 'panic', but even I could tell he was dead.

His skin had gone an ashen grey, body cold by the time I'd reached out to touch his arm.

Not good. This was not good. Okay, Wilkson was dead. I'd been able to deal with that. I'd even seen his body, but not up close and personal like this. One moment Fred had been there, the next he'd been gone, he hadn't hung around like this... he hadn't lay there almost as if asleep, almost as if I simply needed to shake him to return his cold body to life.

A heartbeat later I was out of the room and sprinting down the corridor to the ladder at the end.

This ship hadn't been designed by humans, and some places it showed more than others. The three meter high ceilings were nice, but the extra far apart rungs on the one and only ladder that ran between floors were not. Each step on the thing was almost twice as far apart as one might expect to see on a human ship. It always left my muscles strained and twitching after climbing it in the best of circumstances.

These were not the best of circumstances. Not only did the additional weight of the suit and backpack pull me down (noting that the AGs were, of course, working again), but the adrenaline that washed through my system left my hands shaking so bad that I could hardly hold on to the smooth metal.

I didn't even bother to stop and look around when I got to the second floor. There was nothing here but a couple offices, a small workshop, and the tunnel leading to engineering.

The shaft finally vomited me out into a small landing on the first floor. There was only just enough space to step safely away from the ladder and belly up against the bridge door.

The bridge was one of the only places in the whole rig that was kept up to snuff... more or less. It's sealed off from the rest of the ship with its own mini AG and environmental system, almost a ship into itself. The door between the bridge and the rest of the ship is always supposed to be closed. It would be now too, except for the body of Chief Engineer McAlaster sprawled through the hatch, slowly leaking a pool of bright red blood across the floor.

The door kept sliding open and closed on his body, as if trying to eat him. Each time it hit his prone form it let out an angry electronic buzz and retracted into the wall again. Almost as if complaining about the inconvenient place he had chosen to die.

I didn't bother to kneel down next to the body. It was all I could do not to splash through the blood as I frantically rushed into the bridge behind him.

It was no better.

At least there was more to be heard here than elsewhere on the ship, a dozen alarms were whaling. Klaxons and red lights blinked across almost every board. Both Captain Bulla and helmsman Marcus were dead, pinprick holes drilled through both their chests.

Oh God, was I the only one left alive? What happened?

Stepping past the bodies, I laid my hand on the bulkhead wall to steady myself, only to pull

back in horror as I almost stuck to the paneling.

I'd missed it at first, but now I could see a light yellow ooze filling a dozen pinprick holes throughout the cabin. It was the automatic emergency sealant, deployed from the environmental system to seal micro hull breaches in the bow. But they hadn't been here earlier today...

I forced my mind past that and stumbled forward to the captain's station, wedging myself between the readouts and the great cold body of Bulla.

This was the only station on the ship that had access to all the logs and security systems. The only place I might be able to pull the recording of the bridge monitor.

I guess I was lucky in one respect. Bulla guarded his access to the ship systems jealously; he always locked his terminal the moment he stepped away from it. He'd died before being able to secure it this time.

Staring at the screen, it took me a few moments to make even the vaguest heads or tails of what the system was throwing at me. He'd customized it to his own language and settings.

The riot of orange and green squiggles that stood before me looked nothing like the galaxy standard settings that I was used to. Leave it to this overweight, half-baked lizard to set his terminal to something that no one with warm blood could understand.

A bit of random tapping and a few kicks to the console and I finally had it set back to defaults, the logo of some long gone shipbuilding company staring back at me from under a shield of stars. The ship's registration number sat prominently at the bottom of the screen, right below the words, 'built to last'.

Someone shoot me.

I'd never accessed the ship security and monitoring functions before, but they were relatively straight forward. About half the cameras were out, and half of those remaining were wobbly and crisscrossed with static, but I had what I needed.

The view of the bridge was high, washed out, and at an odd angle, but I could see Bulla, McAlaster, and Marcus. Beside the image, in smaller windows, were readouts of their screens.

I could only barely make out their voices over the anorexic speakers in front of me, but we'd just finished the transit to NXX-1401, the CE was powering down the transit engines. I couldn't see the captain's face, but even I could tell he was nervous, his giant weight rolling back and forth in the chair, causing it to creak.

For a few moments nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Everyone just went through the minutia of tasks that always followed a transit, checks and rechecks to make sure we were in fact in one piece.

Then, at the edge of the camera's field of view, McAlaster fell over, landing half in and half out of the doorway. Marcus just laughed, I guess he'd thought the CE had tripped, Bulla didn't even seem to notice.

"Hey, Mac, you alright?" Marcus' voice was almost lost on the recording.

It was a second later that Bulla cried out, a rose of orange Solken blood blooming on his chest. A split second later it was followed by two more. Just on the edge of the camera, I could see pale yellow foam begin leaking from the walls with each of his cries.

Marcus, not exactly the most calm and collected man in the galaxy, didn't even wait a heartbeat

before screaming, falling back to his station and almost knocking himself senseless on the counter. A second later he was on the intercom, familiar words ringing in my ears, "Oh God, oh God! Bulla and McAlaster, their dead! James, Fred, anyone, can you hear me? They've killed them! Oh God, we've got a hull breach! Someone's shooting at us, someone--"

He cut off in mid-sentence, his final sounds were nothing more than quiet gasps as he slid bonelessly to the floor, a red stain welling out on the side of his head.

A second later the scene shuttered, and a dozen more red lights sprang to life on the control readouts. About the only thing I could make out was the word 'impact'. Okay... I'm guessing someone had been shooting at us with micro-projectiles (and *really* well aimed ones at that!), then we'd... run into them?

I pulled up what exterior cameras I could, but most of them were long dead. Even going back in time to the point of impact, I couldn't see much of anything. The most I could pull up was a slight glimmer of silver spinning off towards the stars just after the crash.

Flipping off the cameras, I poured over the general readout before me. I'd never really been trained in how to run the bridge, but even I knew that this much red was not a good thing.

Main drives... yellow. They weren't completely off-line, but there was no way I'd ever be able to bring them back around by myself.

Transit drive... black. I tapped the readout a couple of times, hoping the sensor might just be out, but it was worse than red. There was no reading at all.

Okay. I'm alone on a derelict spacecraft, possibly in hostile space, and I can't move...

I've had better days.

The lights next to the communication system were green, yet I was getting nothing but static. Same with the sensors. Something about the radiation in this system was rendering me both blind and mute.

There could be an armada of killer dreadnaughts just out of sight and I'd never know it. Or a flotilla of rescue ships passing no more than a kilometre from me and I'd be blind to them.

I was vainly trying to punch through a distress call when an already red light began to blink, another klaxon adding its self to the mind-numbing chatter of the bridge.

Fine, it wasn't like I was making any progress here anyway. What was it that wanted my attention now?

Oh bugger.

You might recall how I mentioned that most of the power on the ship was provided by a matter / anti-matter reactor in engineering? Suffice it to say that it's a *really* bad thing when a M/AM reactor starts to break down.

The controlled interaction of matter and anti-matter is one of the cheapest and most efficient designs that any race has ever come up with for feeding our ever expanding power needs. Too bad folks didn't like to talk about what happens when things go bad.

Like vaporizing everything in about 0.1 AUs bad. Like turning this ship and everyone on it into nothing more than light and heat kind of bad.

I didn't know what 'blinking red' meant in the context of the bridge control panel, but I think we

could all safely assume that it was not exactly a good thing.

I poked at the controls and tried to pull up some kind of diagnostic, but didn't accomplish much. I couldn't even pull up a camera to see if engineering was glowing a sickly green. Every camera in there was down.

The only line that seemed to still be running from down there was the 'something's wrong' wire. Great.

I took one last look over the bridge before setting back out into the bowels of the ship. There was only one thing here of any value, the MCU.

The Master Control Unit was a fist sized chunk of circuitry that plugged into the top of the captain's console. It was in many ways the 'key' to the ship. It was the final lockout that prevented access to the engines, primary environmental, and (if we had any) weapons.

I yanked it from its cradle and stuffed it into my backpack. It wasn't like it would do me that much good, but it could transfer control of the critical ship functions to a different console, and I might need it to keep things from melting down in engineering.

Not that I wanted to turn off the reactor if I could help it. That would just be the crowning end to a perfect day. Freezing to death, dark and alone in a dead ship out in the middle of space.

Leaving the bridge, the silence of the ship enveloped me again, wrapping around like a cold, wet blanket, making me shiver and long for the meaningless clamour of alarms.

My feet thudded heavily on the metal grate floor of the second level. I couldn't help but peer into each room as I passed. So far the only crewman unaccounted for was First Officer Crit. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

He was a massive feline type creature with a golden coat that seemed to need constant maintenance. I'd never really spoken to him the whole time I'd been on the *Serius*. He'd tended to spend most of his time in his quarters. But he should have been on the bridge during transit. That was the proper place for the first mate – right next to the captain.

The little offices and workrooms scattered on this floor were empty, not even ghosts to be seen. The only place left on the whole ship that I'd yet to search was engineering.

There was a tunnel that lead about twenty meters from the end of the work spaces to where the reactor sat, pressed up against the heart of the craft. It wasn't that the distance made any difference if something should go wrong, it was just there to make people feel better.

There was no such thing as a 'small' problem with an M/AM reactor. They tended to either work right or take out the entire region of space.

The end of the tunnel led to a heavy, reinforced alloy door. Again, it wouldn't hold back the kind of force that an M/AM meltdown would release, but it did make people feel safer by giving them something, however ineffective, to point at and touch.

The door might not do much against anti-matter, but it did do a heck of a good job at keeping me out.

Someone hadn't been thinking when they'd designed the safety interlocks on the doors to engineering. The bloody things sealed shut as soon as an error condition was detected in the reactor.

Only the Captain or the Chief Engineer could unlock them. And, inconveniently, they were both dead. I had the MCU, but there was no place to plug it in down here.

I pounded on the door, hearing nothing more than a hollow echo. It would be too much to hope that Crit might still be alive on the other side and open the lock with a smile on his toothy face.

Yep. That was too much to hope for.

Okay... well, one didn't hitchhike across the galaxy without picking up a few... skills. I suppose that was the only upside to being on such an ancient tub as this. I'd never be able to hot-wire a door in anything even approaching a modern ship.

Pulling the pack from my back, I flipped open a small toolkit. There was little in it but a few screwdrivers, pries, a couple of miscellaneous circuit boards, and my diagnostic.

About a minute later I had the control panel free from the wall, ripped from its mooring, never to return.

The mass of wires and chips behind it was all but mind-bending. Some days I wished this was just a serial. Life would be so much easier if I could just smack the panel with something to make the door spring open...

Back when humans made ships you could always count on the red wire being the one you needed. That didn't work so well with ships from other species.

One at a time, painstakingly, I tried each wire that spilled from the wall, patching it into my diagnostic readout. Each one spat out a short and pithy description on the small screen as to what it was the box thought the lead might control.

I'd passed through everything from heating to lighting, and even intercom before I'd at long last finally found one that read 'door lock and actuator'.

My little magic box ran a quick series of pulses through the wire, pausing every few moments to ask, 'Did anything happen?' before I heard the interlock on the door clunk open.

Nice. I was in.

Not that my little box did much for getting the door itself physically out of the way – that seemed to be beyond its rather meagre abilities. I had to do that by hand.

If I'd thought the klaxons and sirens on the bridge were enough to drive me to distraction, the ones down here near deafened me. There were so many going off that it just became a single, unending buzz in my ears. Red lights were flashing on every screen, making the place look more like a badly put together disco than a control room.

And lying spread-eagled on the floor, orange-red blood leaking sluggishly from a wound in his leg, was First Officer Crit. He'd tracked enough blood back and forth across the floor to almost cut it into a checker-board pattern.

I was rushing towards the main console, ignoring his still body as I had the corpses on the bridge, when I heard an inhuman groan escape his rubbery lips.

He was alive? Thank God. I wasn't alone.

I should be worrying about the reactor going super-critical, I should be worried about the entire ship being turned into a close approximation of pure energy, but all I could think about was that I was no longer alone in deep space.

Crit wasn't human. I wasn't sure what he was, as he was the only of his kind that I'd ever met, but he basically looked like an over-evolved lion that had learned to walk on two legs. At over two meters tall and weighing beyond three hundred pounds, I couldn't even turn him over to get a better look at his wound.

I hadn't the slightest what first aid to apply to one of his kind. Even the simplest of medical supplies could be toxic to him, and for all I knew he might fall asleep naturally whenever he got wounded.

Reaching a tentative hand towards his face, I tapped his cheek. I took pains to make sure to keep as far as I could from the finger sized canines that were only partially obscured behind his lips.

His mouth hung open, tongue visible in a light and shallow pant as he raced for breath. His eyes only flickered open for the barest of moments as I prodded him, never falling to focus on me. It was only on the edge of my hearing that I made out his raspy voice.

"Andoceine." He kept repeating the word over and over.

Well, whatever foul words I might have to describe the First Officer, he was pragmatic.

Andoceine was one of the basic drugs that were included in just about every first aid kit ever made. It was highly toxic to humans, but seemed to work as a heck of a pain killer for about twenty percent of the species yet encountered.

Looking around engineering, I couldn't help but detect an alarming lack of medical supplies. Gee, someone truly had been thinking when they'd designed this place.

It was only a couple of steps outside the door I'd hacked open that I found a kit. It was small and under supplied, but it had what I needed – an autoderm loaded with andoceine.

I could only imagine what Crit must have been going through, bleeding to death with a first aid kit not two meters away from him, on the wrong side of a locked door.

Back at the creature's side, I cleared a patch on his pelt, pushing his fur aside until I could see the grey and ailing flesh beneath.

I wasn't sure how much to inject him with, but considering his size I set it to 'large'.

I could only just hear the hiss of the instrument pumping him full of happy drugs. Seconds later his body went slack. He lay so still for a moment that I was almost afraid I'd killed him.

Then his voice came, smooth and soft as velvet, the pain a distant memory as his golden, slit pupil eyes slowly opened. "Madford? What in the name of all the descended gods is going on?"