

[tenses will need to be fixed. Changed how the chapter opened]

Walking to the lab of the person who'd made the cube started uncomfortable. Now aware so many people knew about him and their captain, those looks gained new meanings; expectations. But it didn't take long for his attention to move away from those and to the man he was with, and then...he sort of forgot there were other people there.

The lab captured his attention. It wasn't messy, but there was the disorder of someone working on multiple projects at once. A table had all sorts of components laid on it. Next to that, tools and another, partially build component. A printer worked, and the one next to it was partially disassemble.

The woman working there was all business, as if making devices like the cube was her reason for being, instead of simply being something she knew how to do on top of whatever her job was. She took it when Growler handed it over. They'd talked, and his tone was... curt was the wrong term, direct, stern.

A captain addressing a subordinate, similar to how he addressed Thuruk.

Maybe she was in charge of maintaining the communication equipment? It would explain why she knew about frequencies and how to counter them.

She set to taking the cube apart immediately, and Jeremy followed Growler out. A few hours, he explained, until she was done. Jeremy hoped and feared they'd go back to his quarters, but instead, they went to a part of the ship that felt like historic downtown back home.

The thoroughfare was large. Much larger than there. It felt too large for the number of people walking through it, but everything on the ship felt like that to him. Growler explained they were within the civilian section of the ship, and this was the mercantile area, with stores catering to their needs and leisure.

It amused Jeremy that a merchant ship had such a distinction between the crew and their families, but it matched how rank was important to them. The few stores he glance in through the window sold items and equipment. Some seemed to be for grooming, and he had no idea what others were.

When they returned to the woman's lab, she had something twice the volume for Jeremy. The instructions were the same as what Querik had given him. It would work by itself. Although Growler had chuckled at something she said before translating the instructions. Whatever he'd found funny hadn't been included.

Growler escorted him to the exit, and Jeremy had found himself reluctant to leave. Beyond knowing Omar and the commander were manipulating him, he enjoyed being in Growler's company, and the idea of sleeping in his bed, instead of alone, was...enticing.

But he wasn't here for pleasure. He had a job to do, and he needed his sleep. Something he wasn't sure he'd get if he stayed.

Because of the delay, the corridors weren't as busy, which made Jeremy wonder if he shouldn't rearrange how he worked. Only spending long enough on the station to sleep and print what he'd need could be excused as him working harder to repair the reactor and have the Kelsirian leave.

And that was a horrible thought.

Still, it could just be what he told Omar if questioned. He didn't have to work any faster. He could spend the extra time with Growler. Spend as much of it as he could

before...

Jeremy didn't sleep as well as he'd hoped, but it had nothing to do with ultrasonics, or what had been done to him.

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He woke with the memory of loneliness. Even if he didn't remember the dreams, he could work out their theme from that.

The cube was cool to the touch, so he'd been protected.

Thuruk waited for him at the ship's entrance, as usual, and work proceeded well until they were interrupted.

"Engineer," Growler greeted him. "I need to speak with you."

The tone was what he used when speaking to Thuruk, but Jeremy was suspicious of the reason. He still followed the captain. Even when he entered the Engineer's office. As soon as the door closed, he rounded on Jeremy, reached for him, grinning, then froze, his expression turning concerned.

Jeremy laughed. "I'm not going to run off. I saw this coming from the moment you said you wanted to talk to me, *Captain*."

Growler placed a hand on Jeremy's cheek, leaned in, and their lips touched. Jeremy parted them when the tongue probed, then moaned, grabbing hold of the other man's neck and pressed. Their tongue exchange location, and Growler placed a hand on his back, pulling him close.

Jeremy tensed when the hardness pressed against his own, but he refused to let the other man pull away. It had been a momentary lapse in his attention. He wasn't ending the kiss on that account. Growler loosened and rumbled.

When Jeremy ended the kiss, it was to catch his breath.

Those golden eyes peered into his, and he wanted to never look away.

When Growler leaned in again, he rubbed his muzzle against his cheek. "I have missed you."

"Yeah. Me too."

He pulled him to the couch, then they were stretched on it.

"Isn't the Engineer going to be pissed you're using his office to snuggle with me?"

"Alix will understand."

"It's my understanding he really doesn't like other people touching his stuff."

"He's going to scream at me for a lot more than us enjoying his couch."

"You mean me touching his reactor?"

"Among other things."

Jeremy searched his face.

"His injuries are because the gods Meddled. Gezbilium Meddled because of me."

"And me."

"He won't scream at you. You are outside our chain of command."

"But he's going to scream at you, his captain?"

"And my friend. I give those more leeway in how they show their respect to my rank."

Jeremy rested his head on the furry chest. "Any idea when he's going to be better?"

“No. I expected him to wake, now that we have found each other.”

His chuckled was tainted with sadness. “I should get back to work.”

“You should remain in my arms. The technicians will look after things.”

“Not after the reactor. It’s clear Thuruk doesn’t have the training to repair it. You’re going to be stuck here forever if I don’t fix it.”

Growler laughed, but he shook his head when Jeremy stared at him.

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about it not working?”

“I have you. I have nothing to worry about anymore.”

“Lucky you.”

“You don’t need to worry, either.”

“I have a reactor to repair.” And afterward...?

“You take your work seriously.”

“How else should I take it? Lives depend on me doing my job expertly. Anti-matter isn’t something I can take lightly.”

Growler searched his face, then helped him out of the couch. “I’m letting you go, but I will come get you once the work shift is over.”

“I can work—”

“No. I won’t let you overwork yourself. I will no longer distract you during your shift, but it is the only time you will work. I know Earthers are different. But you are my heart, and I need you to take care of yourself.”

Jeremy chuckled. “Okay. Just the shift. But you realize I can’t get as much work done as if I worked the way I like working.”

“But I get to enjoy time with you.”

There was a ferocity in the words that made Jeremy shiver delightfully. Surprisingly, his stomach did not voice an opinion.

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Jeremy looked over the reading his test returned. “Activate it.”

Thuruk clicked keywells, and the board lit up. The reading fluctuated with the lights, then stabilized. “Another one done.”

He should be happier about the success.

“Just in time,” Growler said. “The shift is ending.”

Jeremy looked at Thuruk, who nodded.

Not entirely sure he could trust either in this case, he looked around, and the technicians were gathering their tools. Two, already leaving.

“Shouldn’t I stay until the next group arrives?”

“Technicians know how to do their work, Jeremy. If they required constant supervision, Alix would have found others already.” He offered Jeremy his hand. “Your shift is over. We are going to eat.”

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Jeremy smiled as the Kelsirians at their table laughed at what the silver furred female said. Growler opened his mouth to translate, but he shook his head. He suspected that he’d lack the context to understand the humor.

Growler had introduced them, but Jeremy could no more remember their names than

he could pronounce them. They were his friends, he'd understood that much. Only three of those he considered his inner circle of friends were absent; one was on her work shift, the other sleeping. Growler promised to introduce them later.

The meal was at a restaurant instead of a cafeteria. Instead of choosing from a counter, they'd placed their orders from their tablets. Jeremy deferred to Growler, instead of going through getting each item translated.

The orders arrived, small plates of meats, rolled, cubed, and some in fancier shapes, but all small enough to be speared with a claw, or Jeremy's finger fork attachment. Along with bowls of sauces. This confirmed it was how they liked their food, and not just something the cafeteria did for ease of serving.

Without being able to tell which meat and sauces were his and Growler's, and since the others seemed to pick from any plates and bowls, Jeremy speared a chunk of meat from a plate before him, and dipped it in the same sauce Growler had used.

He smelled the spiciness before putting it in his mouth, so he braced himself, but even then. His face flushed, and he panted.

Everyone at the table stared at him in disbelief.

"This is hot," he gasped. "Not bad, but man, is it hot."

Growler spoke, grinning, and they responded with more disbelief, then erupted in laughter.

"You have proved you are my Heart," Growler said with pride.

"Was there a test?"

"No, but they claim only my Heart could find my selection palatable." He rubbed his muzzle against Jeremy's cheek, and the sound the others made was oddly similar to a human's 'awwww'.

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Jeremy woke with a start, then chuckled at Growler nuzzling into his neck. He took hold of the mane, pulled the head out and up, and kissed him. The growl accompanied the hand on his ass, and before Jeremy had processed what had happened, his crotch was pressed against the other man and—

He shoved away.

Wrong!

"Jeremy, I'm sorry."

"No, it's..." he forced his breathing to slow. "What time is it?" he pulled his jacket to him as Growler spoke in Kelsirian and a computer answered.

"Eighteen sixty-eight."

Jeremy stared at his tablet. Two in the morning. How? He hurried to put his shirt and jacket on.

"Jeremy?"

"It's the middle of the night on the station. I need to go."

"Stay, sleep here."

"I can't." What would Omar think if Jeremy didn't return to the station to sleep? The better question was what would he and the commander do. "I'll explain tomorrow after the shift is over. I promise."

He ran.