

Jeremy woke late, but fully rested and without a memory of his dreams, which he considered a good sign. He rushed his breakfast, figuring he'd eat at the Kelsirian cafeteria if he got hungry before lunch. He'd noticed how they didn't seem to have fixed times to eat. The technicians left and returned as needed. He put the cube in his tool bag, then headed out. There had been no signs someone had gone through his things, but he still wasn't putting that past Omar and the commander.

"Mister Bradshaw," the commander called, just as the door to Querik's section of the station came into view. "I'm glad I caught you."

He fought the urge to run. Not only would that give away he knew what was going on, but he wasn't giving the man the satisfaction of knowing how unsettled having him show up now made him.

"Commander. Isn't this far from your office?"

"Are you saying some part of the station are off limits to me?" The man smiled, but Jeremy had trouble not hearing a threat in the words.

"No, of course not, it's just that..." That what? "What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me that you're fine, for starters. I had a report this morning that you left the ship rather late, like in the middle of the night?"

Of course, they kept track of his coming and going. Fuck, he'd been stupid to think that because there hadn't been anyone around, the sensors weren't recording his movement.

His chuckle sounded so forced he was surprised the commander didn't call him out on it. "Well, I sort off... I don't know if you know, but I can be something of a workaholic. I get into my work and I lose track of time."

"And that's what happened last night?"

"Yes, of course," he hurried to reply.

"I'm glad to hear that. For a moment, I was worried the cats weren't letting you leave unless you'd done what they wanted."

Did he know? Suspect?

*Stay with me.*

His tongue was like sandpaper. "No, no. They wouldn't do that. I just lost track of time."

"Good. Don't let those cats force you to do anything. Especially not sacrificing your health for them. You are a valued member of this community. I need you to remember that. I'd hate to lose you to something as needless as you letting some cat drive you too hard."

He fucking knew.

"I'm careful."

"I'm glad. I won't keep you any longer. Be sure not to stay too late today."

He watched the commander walk away, utterly uncertain what to do. He wanted to go hide in his quarters. Grab the man and demand to know what right he had to try to control his life. He wanted Growler's arms around him; to feel safe in them.

"Get a grip," he whispered.

He had a job to do. Whatever else was happening, that was a certainty. He'd do that until the reactor was repaired, or... He didn't want to think of the alternatives. He didn't want to believe either of the men would go that far, but they were using mind control. Was

there anything they wouldn't do if they felt it no longer worked?

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Thuruk grabbed the circuit out of Jeremy's hand before he placed it into the reactor's panel. "Isn't this one for the interior of the reactor?"

"No, those are..." He located the stack he'd taken this one from. He cursed inwardly. The commander's words had been bouncing in his head, obviously distracting him. He grabbed the circuit out of Thuruk's hand; then it was no longer in his before he could throw it at the pile. The technician stepped out of reach, again holding it.

"You're fast."

Thuruk smiled and gave a small nod of the head. "Go."

"I'm not... I'm also not leaving my work to be with him. He'll be here after the shift. I'm going to work until then."

"And set everything back days? Whatever is happening, Jeremy, you are making errors any technicians leaving the learning centers wouldn't make. You need rest."

"What I need is for everyone to fucking stop telling me what to do!" Silence fell within Engineering and he felt eyes on him. "Get back to work!" he ordered, uncaring they didn't understand him.

"This isn't you."

He wanted to grab the Kelsirian by the throat and shake him until he stopped looking after him like some...

Fuck. What was wrong with him?

*Wrong.*

Really? That?

He summoned the box, but hesitated. Was what he felt the result of the ultrasonics, of what had been done to him, or had the commander so overwhelmed him that he couldn't tell what he was feeling right now? This didn't have the oozing sense he'd gotten from what caused his stomach to protest. It wasn't even voicing an opinion, which made him inclined to think he was just out of it at the moment.

He was reluctant to use the box for something *he* felt. Maybe if he didn't have the time to deal with it, calm himself, but there was no urgency here.

It took a full minute until his breathing settled. He could feel himself at the trigger's edge, but he didn't expect to explode from being contradicted. Which Thuruk's expression said he should prepare himself for.

"I'm here to work."

"You aren't working. You are stressing."

"Yes, I've had a less than great morning, but that doesn't mean I can—"

"You can. You are the Engineer. You are in charge of this. It is only a place. It doesn't dictate what you do. Alix would send any of us home to rest if we made the mistakes I have kept you from making."

"I thought Alix was some hard-nosed guy who worked you until you dropped."

Jeremy could see Thuruk working through his use of colloquial language. "No. He demands we work well. That means that we have to know when we can't work well. He would send you to your Heart."

"But the reactor—"

“Will not stop existing because you aren’t thinking about it.”

“But it isn’t going to—”

“It isn’t going to be repaired in the state you are. You are being stubborn, Jeremy, or scared. I don’t know which.”

The thought he was scared irked him. It didn’t matter that he was, somewhat. That Thuruk had picked up on it irked him.

The Kelsirian approached him and slowly placed a hand on his arm. “As your friend, Jeremy. I am asking you to go to him. Put everything out of your mind, but him and how relaxed he makes you. One day will not make a difference.”

Jeremy chuckled. “You’re sure ‘relaxed’ is how he makes me feel?”

Thuruk smiled. “Whatever he makes you feel when you are with him, it leaves you relaxed when you return.”

“We didn’t.” He couldn’t believe Thuruk had gone there. That *he* had implied that’s what had happened.

“That isn’t my concern. Just go to him.”

“You aren’t going to give me a choice, are you?”

“No.”

“You wouldn’t treat Alix this way. I’m sure of it.”

“Alix is a reasonable male. I wouldn’t have to treat him this way.”

“Fine, I’ll go to him.” He headed for the archway. “Don’t come complaining if something happens while I’m not here.” Thuruk said nothing, and Jeremy had to keep walking.

He made it three intersections after the second turn before he was calm enough to admit to himself he had no idea where he was. Thuruk was going to be unhappy about him returning to engineering, but it was the only place he knew how to get to on the ship.

Or thought he knew, he decided when he looked at a door, where the archway should have been. He retraced his steps; it had been four intersections, a turn, two more, another turn and...

No archway.

He attracted gazes everywhere he went, but no one stopped him; or even questioned him. Or tried to. What were the odds anyone here knew English?

When his next attempt led him to a public restroom, he gave up.

“Can you help me?” he asked the closest Kelsirian. They...she, maybe? Paused and said something. “Growler, I need you to...” that wasn’t his name. Just what he’d agreed to answer to for Jeremy.

She, he was confident this was a woman, unhook the earpiece from the collar and attached it to her hear, then tapped something on her tablet, and spoke. She nodded, spoke again, and smiled at him. Although if he hadn’t already been acclimated to the toothy smiled Kelsirian gave, he might have tried to leave.

He knew assistance had arrived by the cut of the Kelsirian’s vest and pants. The guards at the entrance wore the same kind of thicker, more solid looking clothing.

“You are Jeremy.” The words had a bite to them that made him think the man hadn’t practiced his English much.

“Yes. I’m trying to get to Gro—the captain.”

“Your Heart.”

His ears burned, and he wished he couldn't hear the capital 'h'. They made it sound like it was some special thing. “Yeah.”

He spoke to the woman, and she nodded, told Jeremy something, then left.

“Come.”

“What did she tell me?”

“She wished you happiness and...” he searched. “Pleasures.”

Jeremy's ears burned again.

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Jeremy thought the corridor was familiar, as his guide stopped before a door. He tapped the panel, then waited. Someone spoke, and he answered, smiling at Jeremy.

The door opened shortly after that and Growler, utterly disheveled, not looking entirely awake, and holding a vest over his crotch, stared at him.

“I said I'd get you after the shift.” He told something to the man, who nodded, then left.

“Thuruk didn't give me a choice about coming to see you. Don't be angry at him. He kept me from blowing up the reactor at least twice before that. My head isn't in my work right now. Sorry for waking you.”

“Do not be sorry for wanting to be with me.” He moved out of the way and Jeremy entered. Then Growler headed for the hall and Jeremy got an eye full of the Kelsirian's ass, firm, with a trail of darker fur going from the top of the crack to under the mane. Then it disappeared into a door, and he chased after it.

Only to stop in the opening on seeing the bed, and having visions of what would happen in it. His stomach protested loudly, and he couldn't quite get himself to tell it to shut up. The idea of sex with him was...enticing, but also scary.

“Come on.” Growler motioned to the bed with his free hand.

“I can't. I'm not...”

Growler stared at him.

“I'm not ready for sex.”

“What?” he looked around, and where they were seemed to register, as the fact he was barely covering himself with his vest. “I didn't mean.... I thought we could snuggle and watch ballads.”

“Okay, but I'm not getting naked.” Fuck, the idea had him hard, but he was terrified that in that state he wouldn't be able to stop himself from doing more and....

He shoved the oozing disgust in the box.

But his feeling remained utterly mixed about it.

“I'll get dressed.” Growler grabbed the pants with a hand and nearly dropped the vest to put them on. Jeremy's heart beat so fast at the glimpse of the tip of the Kelsirian's penis. That it was that high meant he was excited too, or that they were built completely different than humans down there. And try as he might, Jeremy couldn't decide which was more exciting.

Growler left the room and returned wearing the pants.

He sat on the edge of the bed. Like Querik's, it was circular; a shallow bowl. This one was larger. He motioned for Jeremy to approach, and he did.

“You aren’t getting naked,” Growler said, “but can I get you shirtless? I like the feel of your skin.”

Jeremy was out of it faster than he thought possible.

Growler placed his nose close to his skin and breathed in. “I love how you smell.”

“You might be smelling how horny I am.”

The expression was surprise.

“Look. I want to. I jerked off to the idea this morning, and I can’t believe I just told you that. But I’m also terrified, and I can’t tell if it’s what they did to me or because I’ve never done it. I just know that as much as want to, I’m not sure I could keep myself from running away if…”

“I want it,” Growler said. “But only once you are ready. Until then, all I want is to hold you, smell you, nuzzle you, and kiss you.” He pulled him close and their lips touched.

Jeremy closed his eyes, moaned when the tongue passed his lips, then scream in fright as he was pulled forward and he fell on top of Growler then tumbled into the center of the bed.

“Bastard.”

“I lost my balance,” Growler protested, licking Jeremy’s lips.

“I don’t think you’re that easy to unbalance.”

“You have thrown my entire world out of balance, Jeremy. And I’m thankful for it.”

They kissed again.

And again.