

With a grunt, Gralgiran thrust, and Toom held him in place with legs and arms until he was done, and went limps over him.

Toom chuckles, rubbed his muzzle against an ear. "Someone's worked up."

The ears folded back. "Sorry," he said in his friend's neck fur. "You were the closest."

Toom laughed. "I'm not complaining. Quite enjoyed it actually. But you don't usually let yourself reach that point. There are clubs, you know." His voice softened. "Is this about your heart?"

"He ran off."

"And that made you horny?"

The chuckle had Gralgiran glare at his friend, then realized that without the context... "We'd been in bed, snuggling bare chested."

"Is that unusual for him? Remember, I didn't get to meet your Heart."

"His people did... He isn't comfortable exposing himself around me. The first time, he had to put effort into taking off his shirt. This time it was easier, and we held each other. He fell asleep. The way he smells..." Gralgiran smiled at the memory. "He woke as I nuzzled him. He pressed into me, we..." His ears folded back and he couldn't tell his friend about the kiss. The alienness of someone's tongue in his muzzle, of tasting the inside of Jeremy's muzzle; how thrilling it was. "I thought he was ready for us to make love, so..." he rested his head on Toom's chest and sighed. "He freaked out about the time. Said he needed sleep for his next work shift. I offered he sleep here."

"And he ran off."

Gralgiran nodded.

"Maybe it was for the best?"

"I wasn't going to force myself on him," he protested.

"But how comfortably would you have slept?"

He snorted. "This is your sleep shift. I'm on first shift. I just wanted to keep holding him."

"He will be back, won't he?"

"I want him here now," he whined. "And yes, I know I sound like a cub infatuated for the first time. He was right there, and now he's gone."

"It won't be the same thing, Gral, but if you want to stay, you can hold me while I go back to sleep. Well, after cleaning up. You need to move before it dries and we end up pulling fur outs."

He pulled out gently and rolled onto his back

"Are you that afraid?"

"I don't know how to do this, Toom. If he was one of us, I wouldn't have to think about every move. We'd be in sync. We would both want each other."

"He *doesn't* want you?"

"He does. But... Earthers are.... I can generalize off him. When you meet him, I'll see if he can tell you what happened so you'll understand. I'm just afraid of what it means that he prefers going back to that place, instead of spending more time with his Heart."

"Ask him when he comes back."

He fought against the *if* that flashed in his mind. If he came back. What if the people hurting him realized he had a jammer and changed the frequency? He'd asked Zorfiel about

the device when Querikrilgral had her make it. Because of its small size, she couldn't give it the ability to detect the frequency used and then changed what it counteracted.

That he needed a stronger version implied those hurting him realized he had a protection. How long until they decided strength wasn't the solution? Maybe they'd already decided that?

"You're being too quiet."

"I'm sorry. I should let you sleep. I won't be able to relax until he's back where I know he's safe."

Toom paused in the process of standing. "Why wouldn't he be safe among his people?"

Gralgiran cursed quietly. "I shouldn't have said anything. It's not for me to reveal that."

Toom stopped him from reaching for his pants. "At least come wash off. You might be the captain, but I know you like presenting a more professional image than 'I've just had sex with my friend. Aren't you all jealous?'"

He chuckled. "If anyone expresses jealousy, I'll just tell them where your quarters are."

"And that's another reason you're cleaning up. I need my sleep. I have combat piloting exercises next shift."

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The bridge was quiet. Most people set their sleep around Last shift. So it made it one where, for those who had to work it because some positions needed to be occupied at all times, little happened. It meant those locations, such as the bridge, were either livelier than they should, or, as was the case now, relaxed enough the hunter at comm seemed to be sleeping.

The one at sensor noticed Gralgiran and let out a series of whistle as he straightened. The others reacted, and they looked as alert as any other shift. He hadn't recognized the whistle code, so it was a personal one for this group.

"Anything to report?"

"No Alpha," the one at comm replied. "It's Last shift on the station too."

"Theirs going to end an hour before ours today," the pilot said.

"Any progress on the hunt?"

They exchanged a look, and the ear code amounted to 'is he serious?'. He chuckled, and they stiffened.

"Just give me an update."

"Same as the last shift," the hunter at sensor said.

"Which was the same as the shift before that," the one at comm said. "Which is the same as the one before that, and so on. Until we're allowed sharper claws, I don't think we'll learn anything new."

He nodded. As she'd said. This is what had been reported for days now. He'd have to decide on what to report to the Federation Security Council soon, and if he wanted to word it in such a way, they would authorize revealing what he'd been sent to do, or just the facts and have them instruct him to return to Federation Territory.

Soon, but not now. He had a few days before they contacted him asking for a report.

He stepped into his office, and his desk activated as he sat, showing him already completed reports.

The main reason he slept during first shift was that it meant he could deal with the bureaucracy of running a ship when nothing happened. Unfortunately for this moment, being at dock for so long, with an investigation at a standstill, meant he'd already caught up to all the administration he needed to do.

He brought up the feed from the promenade. Only two stores were lit, and the overall lights had been dimmed to that of early evening. He shifted through other public feeds and came across a leisure alley where a party was underway. He chuckled and moved on. Joining them was tempting, but he doubted that a party thrown together during last shift would be eager to have the captain drop by. By the time he washed and altered his appearance enough not to be recognized on sight, it'd be first shift.

The cells showed him Xenial Er Ta Halan, along with two others occupied cells. The Quartermaster had thrown the covers nearly entirely off, leaving the blanket hooked to his foot. He considered authorizing his release. He had been behaving for the last days. But he worried what he might get up to while they were at the station.

Unless their stay stretched on well beyond what Gralgiran expected, the male would stay in his cell.

He brought up the feed of the ship's access and rewound it to when Jeremy left. He'd hurried out without addressing the hunter on duty. He usually greeted them on arrival, and when he left, they reported. Staying with him during last shift had clearly disturbed him.

Gralgiran shutdown his system with a sign and returned to his room. He'd watch ballads to pass the time, and breath in Jeremy's scents.