

Gralgiran watched the technicians work while he waited for the hunter to return. He remained by the deactivated reactor, ensuring he couldn't accidentally be in someone's way.

When Thuruk returned, he looked pensive, then startled at seeing him.

He stopped just within claw's reach. "Alpha." There was no doubt as to what their interactions would be.

"What can you tell me about what just happened?"

The brindled fur male look over his shoulder at where he'd come from. "I'm unsure, Alpha. The Engineer is completely at ease around the reactor, but we seem to make him uncomfortable at times. He flinched when I went to place cutter claws on his hand."

Gralgiran raised an eyebrow, and Thuruk took the item Jeremy had handed him before hurrying out. Three claw-covers connected to a hand control. He put it on, adjusted something, then flexed and plasma claws extended.

"He didn't want to wear it?"

Thuruk shook his head. "The sense I got was that it was my touch. I tried to smell his state, but he's the first Earther I've interacted with. I don't know what they mean. But once I demonstrated what it was, he was okay with it. Seem to enjoy having it, actually. I don't know if it means anything, but he seemed to be interested in my claws, hand and foot."

"It could be it was his first time seeing them. You were his first Kelsirian."

"You are," Thuruk said, removing the cutter. "His first, I mean."

The idea Jeremy hadn't felt anything resembling what Gralgiran felt any time the Earther found his way in his mind unsettled him. Then the idiocy of the thought registered.

"He might have seen me before you, but his commander's office wasn't a place he could indulge his curiosity. I also had the sense he hadn't been expected us. He fidgeted. If he was Kelsirian, I would have said he was nervous, uncomfortable. Did he say anything about his behavior while you escorted him?"

"I'm not sure of the state his mind was in. When I called to him before he lost himself deeper in the ship, I thought he was going to bolt away from me. At first, he seemed reluctant. Like when I tried to put the cutter on. It was like he needed to convince himself to follow me, even if he had to know I knew the way better than he. He said he'd be here tomorrow. Which reminds me. Do you know which clock Earthers use?"

"Clock?"

"Theirs, ours, or Federal?"

"I don't know." He hadn't thought about it. He kept his ship on Kelsier Station Time, since by the time anyone boarded it back home, they'd been on the station long enough to adjust to it.

"Will that be in the hunter files on them?"

"I doubt it. I'll contact Ambassador Querik to find out."

"Thank you, Alpha."

"You say the Engineer was comfortable around the reactor, as if he knew how it worked?"

"No. He was clearly confused by it, but he understands the technology, although I'd like to see an Earther design if climbing the column was the best way he could think to get a scan of the anti-matter reaction chamber."

Gralgiran looked at the top. "That's what he was doing?"

"It's the only thing he could need to scan there. It would be part of understanding how it works if he is going to make the repairs we need."

"Which he can't make too quickly," he reminded the hunter.

"That won't be a problem."

"Good. Go home. I'll have the information on their clock for you shortly."

"Thank you, Alpha." Thuruk headed for the inner ship's exit.

"Hunter," Gralgiran called. "In case there is confusion among the technicians, your only hunt is the Earther. All other duties come after that. I need you to ensure he isn't impeded in his duties by others, and doesn't impede ours."

"Yes, Alpha. I'll make sure the Engineer has no other interferences than those I need to apply to delay the repairs." He turned and exited.

He watched the technician work while trying to work out why he'd felt relief when Thuruk had confirmed Jeremy would return, then left engineering as well.

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The only person he recognized on the bridge was Jurani, the hacker from Batrrix's team. The male at comms had the folded ears of someone ill-at-ease. A civilian they's had to pull in to listen-in on Earther communications. Gralgiran has been surprised when Batrrix had given him six civilian names as people who could be at comm while hunters learned the language. There were more. It seemed that many of the civilians had seen Leiha about learning it, expecting to interact with Earthers on the station. Those were the ones with the psychological profile that suited them best for the temporary work.

Gralgiran had limited their duties to listening in for a list of words to flag on the recordings, instead of asking them to make judgment call on something they weren't trained for. He headed for Jurani. His previous attempt at putting the civilian who had been at comm hadn't gone well.

It was the reason he didn't go to the clubs as himself; as the captain of the ship. To the civilians, he was something close to a hero from the ballads, rather than a Kelsirian, like them.

"Any progress?" he asked the muscular female. The six screens on the board had lines and lines of texts. Only two were in Kelsirian, or at least a Kelsirian he understood. Code possibly qualified as a Kelsirian language, but he'd always left that to the professionals.

"Some," she replied, and added distractedly, "Alpha." She kept typing, her claws clicking as they hit the bottom of the indentations on the board. "Without having tests systems to see how good my syntax is, I need to be careful. I have a blind scan of their code, and I've been using other species' code to build a similarity base that's giving me confidence, but I'm not going to be testing it until I'm certain I won't leave any scent behind."

"Good. Are you getting your sleep?"

She paused and looked at him, blinking. "Of course." She grinned. "I'm not risking the opportunity of learning an entirely new set of code language just for some fun with my friends, Alpha. You can tell Bat he doesn't have to worry about that."

"I will." He headed to the hunter at the sensor board. "Anything?"

“Only that we’ve been scanned, Alpha.”

“Have they been more intrusive than before?”

“No. This matches what is on file about their technology.”

“Possibly, but we’re here because there are suspicions they aren’t sticking to the rules they have been told to operate under. Also expecting them not to have held back some of their military technologies is knocking at Gezbiliam’s door and asking to be let in.”

“We should scan them back,” the brown and gray male said.

“We’re here as a merchant ship,” Gralgiran reminded him.

“They have scanners.”

“But not a reason to scan a station.”

“How about because they aren’t letting us on?” The male looked at him while Gralgiran considered what he’d said.

“You wouldn’t be able to use anything strong enough to get us answers.”

“Not directly, but I could eliminate where they can’t keep their anti-matter.”

“Only if their anti-sensor technology isn’t as advanced as ours.”

“The files say that...I’m going to turn around and leave Gez alone. Still, I can eliminate places. We can’t fool sensors into thinking there is movement within a camouflage. So anywhere they have people moving about is a place they can’t have hidden anti-matter. It reduces the places we need to look at. When she’s done, Jurani can probably make us holes through which we can scan what’s left slowly.”

“Don’t count on it,” the female said. “What I’m working on will get me in their general stream. I’ll need a lot longer than we have to learn enough to get into their secure systems. I’m giving us ears, not claws.”

“I still think we should, Alpha. They might be careless.”

Gralgiran nodded and looked at the male. “But if they lodge a complain, someone will have to take the blame.”

“I will, Alpha. I die, so other live.”

He chuckled. “I doubt it’ll come to that. But since you are willing to take the blame, you can proceed.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

As the hunter set to work, Gralgiran headed for his office to contact the ambassador and get the information Thuruk needed.

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The female’s fur on the screen was beyond what could be called disheveled. It was long in place, short in others, and in place Gralgiran swore the colors shifted, which was an amazing achievement, considering this was an ancient recording of the Gezbiliam’s ballad. Her expression was smug pride, as Thuruksamian held her by the neck against the wall, while the glint in her eyes put doubt as to her sanity.

“Why,” the male asked, his voice breaking with grief. “Why would you do such a thing? They were perfect.”

She scoffed as if she wasn’t in the grip of the Father God. “Boring, you mean.”

“Happiness is not boring!”

She scoffed again. “I gave them something to strife for. Something to leave their caves and see what is beyond the forest. They will discover the world and so much more

while they search for those precious hearts of theirs.” The smile that formed on her lips certainly had nothing sane about it. “I’ve made things...interesting,” she said in triumph.

And on that, the screen went white.

“You are looking like it contained your last meal,” Dresdiren said, chuckling. He still reclined on Gralgiran’s bed.

He’d started in the same position, snuggled against the other male, but Gralgiran had found himself leaning in as Gezbiliam went about charming the Messenger, getting access to the box containing Thuruksamian’s creations, then switched the hearts about. Making things interesting, as she’d declared.

“Do you think she could have put hearts into the Earthers?” he asked, letting himself fall back.

“That’s an odd question to ask of a god,” Dresdiren said.

“I’m not asking them, I’m asking you.” He pulled the male to him, gently running a claw through the fur on his back.

“Can she do it? I don’t see why not. But wouldn’t the Earther gods keep her from doing it?”

Gralgiran snorted. “It’s Gezbiliam. She can trick the Father God, I don’t see some Earther one faring any better.”

“Seems you already have your answer, then.” Dresdiren looked at him. “But why even wonder?”

“I—” he closed his muzzle, suddenly uncomfortable. Of all his friends, Dresdiren had been raised as he had, Traditionalist. They all believed to one degree or another, but they also saw most of the ballads as allegories, fantasies to explain the world. Traditionalist understood they were interpretations from the actors, and the directors, but that, at their cores, they were true. If anyone would understand and not judge, it was Dresdiren.

At least he hoped so.

“The Earther Engineer is my heart.” He swallowed. He’d said it. He couldn’t deny it anymore.

Dresdiren sat, looking at him, eyes wide and a smile forming. “Is that what all the Meddling’s been about?”

“I think so,” he said without confidence. “It’s the gods, so it’s not like they’re in the habit of making their intentions clear, but it lines up. Without the reactor failing and injuring Alix, there wouldn’t have been a need for the commander to foster their own Engineer into us so it would be fixed faster and I wouldn’t have met Jeremy.”

“Jeremy,” Dresdiren said, slowly, as if he tested the name, tasted it. “It could be Kelsirian.”

“He’s an Earther.”

His friend smiled. “You found your heart! What’s wrong?”

“He’s scared of me.”

“How can he be scared of you? If he’s your heart, you’re his.”

“I don’t know, but seeing me sent him fleeing off the ship. There was no recognition in his eyes when we first met.”

“You didn’t say anything about it then.”

“He’s an Earther,” Gralgiran said. “It isn’t like I knew what to make of it.”

Dresdiren smiled. “So what changed?”

“He’s my heart. He’s there and in my head. I can’t even think of him as the Earther Engineer. He’s Jeremy, and I haven’t even talked with him.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know!” he whined, hand over his eyes. “She’s purposely driving me insane with this.”

Dresdiren stretched on top of him. “No, you heard her in the ballad. She’s making your life interesting.”

He glared at his friend. “I’m a Hunter on the Line. Doesn’t she know my life is interesting enough as it is?”

“Look, you kept saying that one day you’ll devote yourself to that hunt. Well, that day is now. You’re a hunter, you have your prey. You just have to stalk him.”

“He’s on a station I can’t set foot on. Do you have any idea how frustrating that is?”

Dresdiren ground against him. “Well, frustration is something I can help with.”