

Jeremy's headache felt like it stretched all the way to Earth. It couldn't be more than an hour since Omar had left, but it could also easily be an entire day, the way it dug into his mind. Either the Ultrasonics had been raised, or it was the result of fighting against it. Refusing to let his stomach protest when Growler, or the Kelsirians, or the ship, popped into his mind.

He was confident he had the entire design for the anti-matter wave-particle monitor he'd been putting on in his spare time, but he had no idea how reliable it was, with how the headache kept pulling at his attention.

He didn't open his eyes when the door opened. Or at the steps. He didn't care who it was. They could—

"Mister Bradshaw."

He was up, looking at the commander, before he realized he'd moved.

"How are you doing?" The tone and expression were less severe than he'd expected.

He bit back the curse. As bad as his situation was, antagonizing this man could make it worse. He was certain of that. "I'm fine."

"I'm glad to hear it. I have a situation I need you help with."

A way out of this cell? "I'll be happy to help if I can."

"Good. Good. The cats barged in. They are demanding I hand you over to them. They claim you are one of them. Like them."

The fear surged before he had the box ready. *He wasn't like them. They were wrong.* No, they weren't.

*He wasn't like them. For him to be like them made him wrong.*

He wasn't wrong.

*He was normal. He was a normal human. They could be however they wanted. But he wasn't like that.*

"Are you well, Mister Bradshaw?"

His eyes snapped open, and he thought the man had looked pleased for a second. But his expression was reserved now.

"I'm fine."

"I'm glad to hear that. Now, as you can imagine, I won't just hand you over. I'd never do that to someone so valuable to the research taking place here. I hope you believe me."

"Of course, sir." Why would he doubt the man?

He was a prisoner. That man held him captive. Kept him from—

*He was not like that.*

"Good. Good. You see, the problem is that they are claiming you need to tell them you want to stay here. That you belong here."

You belong here. Someone had told him that, his mother, maybe? But when she'd said it, there had been a sense of rightness that was missing here, and he didn't understand why.

"Of course, them thinking they are so much better, stronger, than us means they don't give a fuck about our sovereign rights. So I'm going to take you to them, and you are going to make it clear that you belong here."

"Yes." The word was out before he could stop it.

"Good. Good. Once this is over. Once I've kicked them off my station, I'll make sure you receive the proper treatments for your condition." He reached out of sight and the bars

rose. “You’ll see. Everything will be fine.”

When he took Jeremy’s shoulder, the grip wasn’t gentle; he thought about resisting. He didn’t belong with him. He belonged here; but not in this place.

The image was trees and banners. Gold eyes, teeth, and claws.

He shoved the discomfort in the box. That was the here where he belonged. Whatever that meant.

Security waited for them outside the cell block. He’d never seen them so armed. Heavy rifles, body armor like he’d seen in war movies. And their expressions showed a willingness to use them. They fell into formation around them. Filling the corridor on each side, making how narrow it was more evident.

Made him miss the wideness of Kelsirian corridors.

The commander didn’t let go of him as they marched toward...*them*.

The headache subsided, but the fear increased with the knowledge they were coming ever closer.

*Wrong.*

No!

No matter how much he put in the box, there was more of that oozing pain.

There was nothing wrong with him. This was their doing.

*Stay. There is safety here.*

He tried to convince himself it was a lie, but he was so afraid of what waited for him.

They didn’t take the usual lift. The one they stepped on was for cargo, and they all fit. When the doors opened, he resisted.

*Stay here.*

The commander pulled him forward.

After some turns, the back of people faced them. They parted, and he saw *them*.

*Danger.*

No. They weren’t a danger. Although he had trouble understanding what he saw. Instead of open vests and pants, the Kelsirians wore uniforms in mottled browns and yellows. They even wore boots and gloves. Jeremy had never seen them with foot or hands covered.

*Danger.*

He had trouble contracting the thought. The only one who wasn’t dressed that way was Querik, but he, too, looked dangerous when he glared at them.

“Here he is,” the commander announced. “Now. Why don’t you tell them?”

Tell them what?

He wanted to go.... Where? He wanted safety, for the fear to go away. He wanted home, but he didn’t know what that was.

Gold eyes.

*Wrong!*

“Jeremy.” Querik’s voice was soft, but he had to fight the urge to bolt. “Where do you belong?”

*Here.*

But not like that! Why was this so hard? Why did he have to be the one to decide

this? He was no one. All he wanted was to be safe—gold eyes and teeth—to be held—fur and claws—to be home.

You belong, a woman whispered in his ear. He thought it might be his mother, but the voice was accompanied by the ruffling of banners in the breeze, the smell of trees, and gold eyes.

“There.” The word fought through the pain as he locked eyes with gold ones. “With them.”

The commander kept him from doubling over in pain with his painfully tight grip. There was motion, growls, capacitors charging.

“I believe he has told us,” Querik said. “If you don’t tell your people to stand down, Commander, you will be initiating a battle you cannot hope to walk away from unscathed. One you will drag your species into.”

He forced his eyes open. Growler’s teeth were bared. The others were pointing rifles that looked more powerful than the ones the commander’s security had. He glanced up, and the commander was livid. The look in his eyes, when he glanced back at him, promised violence.

Then he shoved Jeremy at the Kelsirians.

“Fine, take him. You can deal with what he’s going to cause.”

Hands closed on his arms, and he nearly wrenched himself out of them.

*Danger! Death! Wrong!*

Gold eyes and teeth. “Jeremy?” His name from that male scared and comforted him.

He latched onto the comfort. The knowledge he would be safe. “Take me.”

*Wrong.*

They moved. Passed Kelsirians, who fell into formation behind them.

Someone spoke, and Growler’s reply was harsh. “I need to hand you over, Jeremy. I need to lead my hunters. But you will still be safe, I promise.”

He tried to protest, but then saw the brindled fur of the man he was handed to, his amber eyes. “Thuruk?”

“I’ll keep you safe, Jeremy. The same as my Alpha would.”

The pain eased now that he wasn’t held by Growler.

“What are you doing here?”

“Protecting my friend. My Alpha’s Heart.”

The idea the technician would put himself in danger for him was ridiculous.

Growler spoke. Tones of command, but he wasn’t talking to any of the Kelsirians here.

“He is ordering the ship ready to leave.”

“But the reactor’s not repaired. You can escape whatever the commander will do on whatever you have powering the basic system.”

“The commander won’t do anything, Jeremy,” Querik said.

“And if he is brave enough to try,” Growler added, “he will find out my ship is much more than he believes.”

Jeremy looked at the way the Kelsirians were dressed, no, armored. Their weapons. “Who the hell are you?”

The smile Growler gave him was filled with pride. “We are Hunters of the Line.”

A murmur spread among the others, and a second later they said the same thing in unison in the manner than made Jeremy think of a chant.

“At least no one had to die,” Querik said, and Jeremy stared. “Hunters can be... obsessive about protecting others.”

“You aren’t merchants, are you?”

“We are,” Growler answered with that glint of mischief Jeremy had only seen a few times yet. “But that is not all we are. Just like you are not just an Engineer, are you?”

“What else would I be?” he asked with a nervous chuckle.

Growler’s smile turned fierce. “You are a warrior.”