

Gralgiran studied the two hunters before him.

“Care to explain to me,” he told the junior one, “what an Earther was doing in medical?”

“He needed to use a chemical analyzer, Alpha,” Thuruk Sel Minial replied.

“And you thought that taking him to the other side of the ship was how to accomplish that? Taking him to medical, of all places?”

“He said to take him to it; it was the closest—”

“Since when do you take orders from an Earther?”

“He’s the Engineer.”

“He’s an Earther.”

The hunter looked confused. “He’s your—”

“He’s an Earther!” Gralgiran snapped. Once—if—Jeremy accepted him, then the command structure could be redone to take that into account. But for this hunter to simply escort him wherever he wanted to go already?

He shifted his attention to the other male. “Did you know about this, Beta?” He’d already noticed the surprised flick of the ears when he’d said Jeremy had been beyond the engineering part of the ship. So he knew to pay attention to the answer.

“I did.” No hesitation. That spoke well of his willingness to protect his hunter. If not of why he hadn’t been contacted.

“He didn’t,” Thuruk Sel Minial said. “The decision was mine, and mine alone.”

Beta Trojar Dernigarin closed his eyes in defeat.

“And why did you think you had the authority to make such a decision?”

“It was my Beta’s sleep period.”

Gralgiran stared. “How does him sleeping have anything to do with you thinking you can act without his authority?”

“He can’t be woken when he sleeps.”

He looked at the Beta. “What is he talking about?”

The exhale was resigned. “I suffer from Hard Sleep, Alpha.”

He stared. Then check the Beta’s file to be sure. “How has that never come up before?”

“I take Prothistaress when my group is active on a chase, Alpha.”

He had to call up the information on the drug. Prescribed stimulant that prevented someone from reaching the deeper stages of sleep. Not addictive. Extended use led to sleep deprivation symptoms and health complications. Two weeks was the maximum recommended period.

The beta and his group were front line hunters, so they were rarely active more than four days at a time, but that didn’t resolve this situation.

“Hunter, where is Jeremy?”

“We were returning to Engineering when you ordered me here. I had another hunter escort him the rest of the way.” He trailed off.

“Yes?”

“He looked perturbed by the results of the tests and the information the medic provided him.”

“We have files on Earther medicine?”

“She explained the effect of the chemicals to him. She went too technical for me, but he seemed to understand it enough to react. He might not have stayed on the ship.”

Gralgiran almost demanded to know how the hunter could let him leave if Jeremy was compromised. Anything outside the ship could notice his weakness and attack. He couldn't entirely restrain the growl.

But, he'd been the one to order the hunter, and they didn't disobey their alpha. He had done the right thing in assigning another hunter to escort him. And they couldn't force Jeremy to stay on the ship.

“Return to Engineering. If Jeremy is there, return to your duties. If he isn't, go home. You are confined there for the duration. You are only allowed off the crew quarters to work with Jeremy.”

“I live among the civilians with my mate, Alpha.”

“Then—” He calmed himself. Restricting him to civilian quarters meant nothing, with how much of the ship was designated as such. Also, what had he learned about this hunter? He was dependable. He'd acted as best as he could without having access to his Beta. He'd made sure Jeremy had an escort in spite of being ordered away by his Alpha. Too many hunters would simply run and not think of what they left behind.

“Go home, Hunter. Take this time with your family. You are a Technician until informed otherwise.”

“Yes, Alpha.” The male left his office.

Gralgiran kept his temper in check until the door closed. “How could you allow this to happen?” he demanded. “It's a Beta's duty to protect his hunters. You are the one I should have restricted to quarters, not him.” The beta looked away. “Explain yourself!”

“We're at dock, Alpha. I didn't think there'd be a need to go active.”

“So you thought it was fine to leave your hunters without protection? We are docked at a station we are investigating. This doesn't equate to being on leave!” He forced his breathing to slow. “What do you expect me to do?”

The beta's ears folded back. “Revoke my rank, Alpha, for failing in my duties.”

He snorted. Like that would teach him anything. He kept demotions for those who were unredeemable. This was a failure of judgment from a beta who had a good record otherwise. The fact he'd managed his condition for the eight years he'd been a beta and Gralgiran only now had to deal with it showed he was competent. If he had to blame anything, it was complacency.

The issue was how did he go about making sure his beta learned.

“You are remaining a Beta. You are keeping your group. But you will instruct your hunters that when you are sleeping, they are to advise me of any actions they need to take as hunters.”

“You can't.” The expression was pure terror. “You're the Alpha. They can't be taking your time.”

He bared his teeth. “Then fix this. Until you do, I am the one who will handle them while you sleep. And I will instruct the medics that you are not to be prescribed medication to deal with your condition. This isn't about sacrificing your health for the hunt. It's about finding a solution to the problem. Go fix it,” he ordered when the beta opened his muzzle.

“The longer you take, the longer your hunters must deal with me.” He leveled his gaze at the male when he opened his mouth again.

Resigned, he left and Gralgiran sighed.

He sent the order to medical, documenting the circumstances under which the restriction could be lifted. He hoped the beta would present a solution before it was needed, and he didn’t expect to have to go on active chase while at this station, but unlike his beta, he wanted to prepare for the unexpected.

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“What did you do?” Dresdiren asked, his palm pressing into Gralgiran’s back.

The moan, from the pressure against the knot in the muscle, kept him from answering. “Had to chastise a beta today.”

The male chuckled, moving the pressure higher. “That doesn’t usually leave you this tense.”

“Something’s wrong with Jeremy,” he admitted. “He found out his medicine had components that make him more susceptible to suggestions and he didn’t take it well. When I went by Engineering, he’d already left.”

“Medicine can do that?”

“According to the medic I spoke with. It’s not like the ballads. It doesn’t take away his will, but it makes it easier to shape his decisions.”

“Why would anyone give him that?”

“I don’t know. And the one person I can ask isn’t available. The ambassador is busy right now.”

“Relax, Gral. I can’t help if you keep tensing like this.”

“I hate this. I want him here, where I can keep him safe. I want to hold him. To rub myself over him so everyone will smell he’s my Heart.”

“Have faith in the gods, Gral.”

“It’d be easier to do if Gezbiliam didn’t have a habit of working against both of my namesakes.”

“But she is one of our gods. However convoluted her methods appear. She is looking after us, too.”

“The way this is going, there won’t be much of me left if it isn’t resolved soon.”

Dresdiren chuckled. “Me and your other friends will make sure she leaves enough of you for your heart to enjoy.”

“You’ll take on the gods for me and him?”

“I thought the only one you were worried about was Gezbiliam. I’m not signing on for all out war here. She’s the only one I’m willing to take on.”

“That eager to get in her bed?”

“No one she takes to her bed ever complains about what happens there.”

“That’s because the only one she leave with their sanity are the other gods.”

“Sex good enough to drive me insane is something I’m willing to endure, for your sake.”

“When you say it like that, it doesn’t sound like much of a sacrifice.”

“So long as you and your heart are together. What does it matter what she does to me?”

“You are braver than I.”

“All I’m willing to take on is one god. You’ve gone up against how many people actively trying to kill you in your career?”

Gralgiran shrugged. “I’m a hunter. That’s bound to happen. You’re a therapist; looking after our bodies is where your duty should end.”

“I’m your friend. That’s a duty I take to include making sure you are happy. Even if a god seems determined to make you earn it.” With his traditional rubbing of the back of the neck, he stepped away from the massage table. “All done.”

Gralgiran closed his eyes in contentment.

“That means you can get off the table.”

He chuckled. “You didn’t leave me any working muscle to make that happen.”

The male ruffled his mane. “Then find a way to make it happen. I have another client scheduled. You want something...more indepth, and you have to invite me over to your quarters.”

He rolled onto his back. “I’m spending tonight with Toom. Tomorrow?”

“It’s family meal for us. The next evening?”

He sat and pulled Dresdiren in to rub muzzles. “That works for me.”

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He paused in brushing his fur to answer the call, and the ambassador smiled. “I apologize for being late returning your call. I just finished my meetings. Getting ready to charm someone?”

“I’m spending the evening with a friend.”

“I’m glad you no longer are as annoyed as you sounded. What did you need to talk with me about?”

“How’s Jeremy?”

The male looked uncomfortable.

“He had his medication analyzed. Did you know it’s something that makes him easier to influence?”

“I did not. But I’m not surprised. We made progress, found out what happened to him.”

“Which is?” he asked when Querikrilgral didn’t say.

He shook his head. “It’s not my place to tell you.”

“Please Querik. How am I supposed to keep him safe if I don’t know what’s happening?”

“He might not need as much protection as you think he does. Simply be ready for id he needs it.”

And when would that be? He wanted to demand. As if the male would have the answer. Only the gods knew that.

“Gral, how is your hunt progressing?”

He sighed. “It isn’t. We’ve pushed as far as I’m willing for the time being, but we haven’t been able to confirm the Federation’s suspicions. It smells like they’re right. Too much of the station is shielded from scans for them not to hide something. But to find out how much anti-matter they have, I’d reveal we’re scanning them, and they’d easily work out why. We don’t want to alienate them.”

“No, we don’t,” Querikrilgral said, but the tone made Gralgiran’s ears point forward. “Did you learn something?”

The question surprised the male. “Oh, no. Nothing relating to your hunt. Just... ambassadorial stuff. Unless you have more questions for me, I need to soak this stress out.”

He considered inviting him over to help with it that, but the walk from one quarter to the other made that impractical. “Querik, remember that you’re welcome on the ship when you need the comforts of home. I’ll gladly help you relax.”

“I suspect I will take you up on the offer soon.”

They terminated the call, and Gralgiran returned to preparing himself for an evening of dancing, and other fun times, with Toom.