

A swing, a block. A parry. A grab at his opponent's neck, disengage and shoved back. "You want to talk about it?" Brelen said, while Gralgiran regained his footing.

He snarled. "He left." He attacked. Punches and kicks. Grabs to bring vital points within reach of his teeth.

Jeremy had just left; after admitting the commander was suspicious. He'd refused Gralgiran's offer of protection, because the station was his home. He'd wanted to roar, grab him and throw him in cell until the hunt was done and to the gods with whatever conflict the Earthers tried to make of it.

Jeremy just didn't seem to grasp what it meant to Gralgiran that he was his Heart. How was he supposed to live without him, now that he had found him? How could Jeremy even contemplate putting something as meaningless as home ahead of his Heart?

Block, parry. Step back, jump, block.

Attack. Bite, rip—

Ow.

"Okay, there's clearly more to that than him just returning to his quarters to sleep."

He spat the foam that was part of the protection collar Brelen wore onto the mat his face rested against. They both wore one to keep claws from inadvertently digging into the neck and causing damage, instead of just practicing at doing so.

"How am I supposed to keep him safe when he goes away?" He pulled at the arm she held against his back. She twisted and he bit back the pain.

"Do you have so little faith in him?"

"He's an Earther!"

"He's your Heart. Do you think the gods would have put it into someone who didn't match you?"

"You don't understand." Fear took the fight he had left. "They got to him before me. Did things to his mind. He didn't know me when we first saw each other. And now he's choosing them over me. I thought...." The hope he had trouble holding on was a lump in his throat. "What if he picks them over me?"

She relaxed the hold, but he didn't have the strength to take advantage of it. "Do you really think he'd do that?" She let go.

He rolled onto his back. "I don't know what to think. If it wasn't for Querikrilgral, I don't know what—"

"Who is that?"

"Our ambassador on the station. He—"

"So, they put someone there to help him."

The protest died on his tongue.

He hadn't considered that. That Querikrilgral hadn't found himself on this station at random, but because they had Meddled.

His fear didn't vanish entirely. The male was only that. He'd already made mistakes that had delayed Jeremy recognizing him. Of them being together.

But, if not for him.... For him being someone Jeremy could go to for help. Would he had gotten to hold him, smell him. Kiss him?

Even if it was only Gezbiliam, the gods were Meddling in his favor at the moment.

He had to believe that with her help, he would have his Heart.

“I just wish She told me what her plan was, other than driving me insane.”

She offered him her hand. “We’ve all wished that at one time or another.” She pulled him up and hugged him. “Also, remember you have friends who will support you. The gods might not always be felt, but we are always here.”

He clung to her until he felt her hand against his chest.

When she shoved him away, he retook the fighting stance.

She smiled. “Now, let’s see how you do if you aren’t as distracted.”

* * * * *

He looked at his reflection. Pitiful was the descriptive that popped into his head, with his mane matted down from the shower and his fur still damp.

He should finish drying, find a good scent, put on dancing clothing and... He had no interest in the clubs. If he couldn’t have Jeremy, he... He shook his head. He wasn’t a cub. He could live without his Heart at his side. He hadn’t lost him. He was just on the station. Probably enjoying his evening with friends. Or maybe he was sleeping. He had no idea how the Earther’s clock lined up with theirs at the moment.

At the very least, he should finish grooming himself.

The door buzz was a surprised, but welcome distraction. He opened it to find Toom, holding a box with the picture of a storak frolicking on it, along with Lilmari, next to him.

“I’ve heard,” Toom said, handing the box of sweets to him, “that someone is in need of cheering up.” He pushed Gralgiran out of his way. “I brought the pack.”

Lilmari followed him, then Crestol, Miretel, Litamir, Brelen, and Dresdiren.

He looked out when no one followed the therapist. “Did you call the entire ship?”

“We’d have dragged you to a club, if that was how we’d decided to deal with you.”

“And dressed as you are,” Crestol said, grinning. “I’m sure all the males there would enjoy you.”

“I certainly would,” Dresdiren said. Litamir nodded in accord.

“And we’d be arrested for inappropriate behavior in public,” He replied. “Sex isn’t allowed in the clubs.”

“You’re their alpha,” Lilmari said dismissively. “You can tell them not to bother us.”

“And as the captain,” Toom added, taking glasses out of the cupboard, “You can designate the club as a leisure area.”

Gralgiran crossed his arms over his chest. “Would you really follow a captain, an alpha, who abused his authority like that?”

Miretel walked by him and slapped his ass. “Relax, we’re here, not there. This is private. We can do whatever we want to make you feel better.”

He raised the box. “Is lowering my inhibition really a good idea?”

“You can be all stern and severe tomorrow,” Toom said, opening the bottle he took from Brelen. “Tonight, you get to be in a ballad. You are the hero, deprived of his Heart. We are the gods agents, reminding you that there is life even when your Heart isn’t there.”

He chuckled at the echo of his earlier thoughts and joined Crestol and Dresdiren on the seat. She took the box from him, clawed the seal, and opened it.

Toom, now undressed, stretched over their laps. “Let the revelry begin.”

* * * * *

Gralgiran nuzzled Litamir, and the male snuggled closer, hand moving down with a

barely awake moan.

* * * * *

Gralgiran bit into the gray furred shoulder as the orgasm hit, then the exhaustion claimed him again.

* * * * *

Licking. So many tongues on him. So much pleasure.

* * * * *

Gralgiran stretched. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so relaxed.

"Ouch," someone protested. "Careful with the claws." Brelen looked over Dresdiren's shoulder. His foot was against her ass, the stretching extending his claws.

"Sorry."

Part of Miretel was over his right arm. Crestol was holding onto his left leg. Toom was pressed against his left side, his body under and over some of the others.

The night was a mist of sensations. He'd cursed the gods, the Earthers, the Federation. He'd cried in fear of never seeing Jeremy again. Of never getting to hold him again. He'd been comforted, held, loved.

The worry loomed again, but it was muted behind the reminder he was still alive. That he had friends to look after him. He might have to fight, but the situation would be resolved.

He simply hoped that it did so with Jeremy at his side.

More complaints as he extricated from under, and over, the others. While his bed was, technically, large enough for the eight of them. It never made for an easy exit.

He took care of business and exited the toilet to find Lilmari in the shower. He joined her and they washed each other. Miretel joined them, and once washed, he left them.

He studied his reflection. Hopeful, was the term that popped into his mind. His mane was matted with water, his fur wet, but those were things that could be addressed. Problems could be solved. Not always perfectly, but solutions always existed. He dried and groomed himself.

He rubbed muzzle with a not quite awake Toom on his way to the closet, and dressed.

"Leaving?" Lilmari said, standing in the shower room's doorway.

"I'm the captain. There's only so much shirking of my duties I can do." He rubbed muzzle with her. "Thank you for this. I didn't realize how much I needed the reminder to live."

"Don't forget, we're here whenever you need it."

"I'll do my best. Thank Toom for me."

She licked her lips. "That will be my pleasure."

He left his friends to however they decided to wake up and headed for the bridge.

He was almost there when his tablet buzzed. The name of who was calling put him on alert and he made the decision on the spot.

"Hunter Thuruk Sel Minial, what do you have to report?"

"Jeremy hasn't arrived."