

Gralgiran couldn't stop smiling.

"Growler."

Beyond Jeremy taking his hand, getting to rub his muzzle against his, it had been those eyes, the recognition in them. Jeremy had recognized him. There had been no pulling away this time.

"Growler."

He didn't know what would happen now, but—

Someone grabbed his hand. "Growler."

He stopped and faced them, and the word didn't gain meaning until he looked into Jeremy's brown eyes. "Hi." He loved how deep they were. How smooth his hand was. He wasn't the first furless person he'd touched, but even when it wasn't a carapace or scaled skin, it didn't approach Jeremy's skin.

That skin on his face deepened in color. Gaining a definite red hue. He'd have to learn what the scent meant.

"Hi. I wanted..." He trailed off. "I mean, I thought..." Again, his thoughts seemed to find the way out of the ambush. "Thuruk said... And I want..." He looked around. "Is there someplace private where we can talk?"

He smiled. "My quarters are private."

"That works."

Not picking Jeremy up and running proved difficult to resist.

But he did. Jeremy was overcoming what his people had done to him, and Gralgiran wouldn't belittle that. He'd be patient. He was going to demonstrate he had self control. That he wouldn't simply ravage his Heart.

And that was an image he didn't need in his head right now. What would skin against his fur feel like when they made love? How did Earthers make love? He'd done a cursory check on their anatomy, but hadn't looked into their sexual customs. Was there even a file on that?

He tried to distract himself by looking around, but everyone they passed gave him a knowing smile. They imagined what he and his Heart were about to get up to. What they'd do if they finally found their Heart. What they had done. Surely some of them had found their Heart.

Glancing at Jeremy offered little more. He attempted to say something a few times, but either couldn't find the words or lost the courage to speak with others around.

The one distraction that presented itself was the noise of the leisure alley as they crossed it. Not as busy as it could be, and the alley itself was vacant, the sounds coming from the rooms. A ballad was playing, an adventure, by the music. People were loudly playing a game in another. And there was an argument in a third. If he wasn't busy, he'd look in on it. Make sure it didn't escalate.

Then there were at the door to his quarters, and then inside, and Jeremy look around.

"I didn't realize your quarters were so large."

Gralgiran looked away from his Heart, forced himself to see their surroundings instead of those brown eyes, that smile, the feel of the muzzles rubbing.

The lounge was average. The sharing seat and two single seats facing the wall for when he had friends over and they watched a ballad, or discussed something that needed

referencing. A table could be brought in for games. On the other side was the more intimate space, with the larger sharing seat, for when tenderness accompanied what else they did.

“Most quarters are like this.”

“Really? Mine has my bedroom right here. It’s large enough for a workspace, where my drafting table is, and there’s a few chairs in a corner for when I have friends. Then there’s the kitchen and bathroom. I think it’d all fit in this room.”

Gralgiran tried to imagine fitting his bed here, or his office. How could someone live like that?

Earthers weren’t Kelsirians. Everything seemed to be tighter for them. Maybe their world was smaller? They’d learned to function without as much room?

“I don’t have a kitchen, but my bedroom is through there.” He pointed to the opening. “As is my office and shower. I could have larger, as the captain, but this is enough.”

Jeremy laughed, and Gralgiran loved the gutturalness of it. “I wouldn’t know what to do with all this space.”

“I can think of something.” His ears folded back in embarrassment at the realization he’d voiced that. The things the two of them could do throughout his quarters. Without realizing, he’d pulled Jeremy to him, only for him to pull away suddenly.

“Sorry,” Jeremy hurried to say. “I didn’t mean to....”

“No, I am the one who needs to apologize. I shouldn’t have pulled you, but you are...” He breathed and forced his desires down. He was an adult. A trained hunter. A captain. He shouldn’t be losing control like this just because his Heart was before him. “You wanted to talk?”

Jeremy nodded, then hesitated. “Can we sit?”

“Of course.” He motioned for the social side. As much as he wanted it, intimacy might not be what Jeremy wanted at the moment. He dropped into the shared seat and pulled his legs to him. He waited for Jeremy to sit, and to his surprise, he picked the same one. He sat on the edge, then seemed unsure what to do. He reached back, lost his balance, fell into the seat’s stretched bowl, legs flaying about. He rolled, and Gralgiran caught the foot before it hit him.

“Sorry,” Jeremy said, face into a cushion. “I have no idea how you and Querik make it look so easy.”

He released the foot, and Jeremy made it onto his back, then pushed himself to the opposite end of the seat and seemed unsure what to do with his legs. Gralgiran patted his thigh.

“Are you sure?”

He smiled. “Closeness is the point of the seat.”

Jeremy’s skin deepened again. “Does that mean you expect me to....”

“No. You sit how you want. I’m just providing a place for you feet.” He took the offered feet and placed them on his thigh, keeping his hands on them. “You wanted to speak?”

There were a few failed starts, then a defeated sigh. “You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“No, Jeremy. I think a lot of things about you. That’s not going to be one of them.”

He raised an eyebrow, but didn’t ask. “When Thuruk basically shoved me in your

direction.”

“He what?” If the technician had overstepped—

“Right, rank. Sorry. That’s something I keep forgetting about. It was a figure of speech. He basically told me I should go after you. He was slightly cryptic about it, but I still got the message. It’s just that....” He took a breath. “If I say that you’re my Heart? Does that mean anything to you?”

He couldn’t speak. All the things he wanted to say in response. The only thing he knew he conveyed was the smile, and his ears so forwards he worried they’d fall off.

“I guess it does. And it looks like it’s a good thing?”

“You are my Heart, Jeremy.” His mouth hurt from smiling.

“But what does it mean? I don’t even know why I thought it like that. I’m just figuring some things out, and I’m pretty sure I have never heard it referred like that in any of the movies I’ve seen. Especially not the way the ‘h’ is capitalized.”

Later, he’d have words with Gezbiliam for causing such confusion in his Heart. There had to have been an Earther way to make him understand. “When we were made, Thuruksamian gave each of us a Heart. But Gezbiliam was jealous of the perfection of the work, so she tricked Salmialie to gain access and switched the Hearts around so that we’d have to hunt to find it again.”

Jeremy nodded, but Gralgiran had the feeling it was less agreement and more acknowledgment as he processed the information.

“So, in your culture, the Heart is that person you feel like you were destined to be with?”

It was his turn to process it, then nodded.

“We call that our ‘soul mate’.”

He’d been right! Earthers had a concept she could have used.

“That name you used for the one who made you, according to your mythologies. What was it? It sounded a lot like a longer version of Thuruk’s name.”

“Thuruksamian. He’s the....” He found he didn’t know the Earther word. “The one who made us. Who made everything of Kelsar.” How didn’t he have the Earther word for gods?

“You mean, he’s God in your culture?”

Gralgiran tested the word and realized that if she’d used their term, he wouldn’t have been made aware of the lack. “He’s the father god.” He took his tablet and checked the hunter’s name. “Thuruk Sel Minial is named for him. His family must have Traditionalist roots.”

“Then, Traditionalists are those families who believed in those gods?”

“No, we honor them.”

“What’s the difference?”

Gralgiran stared. How couldn’t Jeremy know the difference?

“Don’t you honor your gods?” He had the word for them, after all.

The chuckle was amused. “We have science and reason. We don’t need gods anymore.”

“But they exist. Even if you feel you no longer need them. They are there.”

“Of course not.” The comment was so matter of fact it took Gralgiran by surprise

more than offended him. “We used to believe in things like gods, way back in antiquity, when we didn’t understand the world. They were a shortcut for how things worked. We’re taught about those in history classes and they come up in philosophy and a few other places.”

“That’s... different.” Did he know any species who didn’t have gods? He couldn’t think of one.

“You believe in them?” again, the question was matter of fact.

“No. They are.”

“What happens to them if people stop believing in them?”

“What happens to you if people stop believing in you?”

Jeremy laughed, and Gralgiran smiled at the sound.

“It’s not the same thing. I’m real, and gods are just a way to explain the world. One bit I remember from my history class is that they needed us to believe in them to have power. It’s the ‘reason’ given for why people believed they disappeared as we transitioned to reason.”

“The gods are real, Jeremy. As real as you and I. I won’t claim you have gods, but I have to wonder who made you, if there were no gods.”

Jeremy smiled. “Okay, can you provide evidence for your claim?”

“Us.” He motioned to the two of them. “You are my Heart, and I am yours.”

“But that’s just a term for the fact that we fit, isn’t it?”

Gralgiran tried to figure out if Jeremy was being stubborn, or mocking him, but he simply seemed curious. Should he bring up Jeremy had admitted he didn’t know how he knew of Hearts?

“How about that we’ve met?” He used instead. “Earthers don’t allow us within your territory. If the reactor hadn’t failed, I wouldn’t have had a reason to be here. If my Engineer hadn’t been the only person gravely hurt, and somehow not healing the way the Doctor believes he should, I would never have met you.”

“But that only happens because the commander...”

“Doesn’t like me. I’m well aware of how he fell.”

“And also because Amanda left for vacation not long before you arrive. If she’d been here, she would have been the one assigned.”

Gralgiran smiled. “Now you see how she Meddled to make our meeting happen.”

“Meddle?”

“It’s what the gods do. Meddle, so events will happen to their liking.”

“And you said ‘she’.”

“Gezbiliam. She’s the goddess of inspiration, as well as madness. Inviting her to your bed is begging for trouble. When she Meddles, it’s always to cause chaos.” He paused. “Except that there’s usually a reason for it, and that in the end, it turns out pretty well for those in the middle of it, if their sanity survives it.”

“And you believe she arranged the events that led to us meeting?”

He snorted. “I know she did. I’ve had the headaches to prove it.”

Jeremy smiled. “You know that this sounds a lot like justification after the fact. Things happened, and you find explanations for why it fits the way to believed they happened. To me, this all just sounds like coincidences.”

“Coincidences?” He had the word, but he couldn’t come up with what it meant.

“It’s when events seem to have a reason behind them happening, when it’s just randomness that caused them to happen.”

“Then, it’s your word for Meddling.” If *god* hadn’t been included in the lexicon, it made sense he couldn’t think of what coincidence meant. They were connected.

Jeremy chuckled. “I guess the reason for why stuff happens isn’t as important as the fact it did. However improbable it is; whoever might be behind it, we met.” He smiled. “I’m glad it happened.”

“Me too.” Gralgralan hesitated. “Can I ask about you pulling away? I know I shouldn’t have. We are just starting to talk, but there seemed to be...more to it than that.” Like how you were before.

“You caught me by surprise,” he finally said. “And it was a reflex.” He took a breath. “I don’t know why this was done to me. But when I was a teen, my parents realized I was attracted to men, and to Kelsirian men. They forced me to undergo a treatment that made me react negatively anytime I find a man remotely attractive. It manifested in my stomach problems. Querik helped me uncover those memories, but knowing what they did hasn’t undone the programing. I know it’s there, so I chose to ignore it, but you surprised me, and I reacted before I realized what had happened.”

“Then, if I ask you to come to me so I can hold you, would you be okay with it?” He offered Jeremy his hand. He saw the conflict in those brown eyes. Querikrilgral had been right not to tell him. If he’d learned without having Jeremy before him to see he was healthy, he wasn’t sure what he’d have done.

Jeremy smiled and took his hand. He pulled and as his Heart moved; he stretched. The seat was small enough he couldn’t fully, but he didn’t mind. He had his Heart against him, and that made a lot of things bearable.