

“Establish contact with the station,” he told the hunter at the comm station as he entered. “Hunter Thuruk Sel Minial, ask them where Jeremy is.” He made a circle with a claw when the hunter at comm looked at him, the symbol to broadcast the conversation.

“This is command,” an Earther said.

“This is Technician Thuruk Sel Minial.”

“Err, what can I do for you technician.... Technician?”

“Engineer Jeremy Bradshaw was scheduled arrive, but hasn’t. I seek to know what is delaying him.”

“Maybe he’s sleeping in?”

“The Engineer is dedicated to his work. When he decides to take a rest, he informs us. He hasn’t contacted me to say that he wouldn’t be here for this shift. I need to know what has happened to him.”

The tone surprised Gralgiran. He was aware the hunter had become close to Jeremy through their work, but the growl spoke of him considering a close friend.

“I’m... I need to check with someone about this.”

“We’re still connected,” the hunter at comm said.

“Who is this?” a female demanded, tone severe.

“I am Technician Thuruk Sel Minial. I am inquiring after—”

“You can stop. He’s not showing up.”

“He is needed to—”

“I don’t care. I’m telling you, he’s not showing up. Get over it.”

“They terminated the connection.”

What were they up to? “Contact them again. I will be the one talking.”

“This is command,” a different male said.

“This is Gralgiran Sel Helrarnvir, Captain of the Brave Traveler. I need to speak with your commander.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“I don’t care.” He bared his teeth. “He will speak with me now, or I will find him and have this conversation in person.”

When the image switched, it was to the commander, in his office. “What can I do for you, Captain?” The tone was polite, but the expression annoyed.

“Jeremy Bradshaw has not arrived for the scheduled shift he has agreed to work. Why is that?”

“Captain, we aren’t here to serve you. Mister Bradshaw has other duties.”

“You would have informed me if he would be taken off the work you set him to do, Commander. Unless you are lax when it comes to following protocols?”

Anger flashed on the male’s face, but resolved into a sigh. “Look. I was hoping not to bother you with this, but the reason Mister Bradshaw can’t work on your reactor is that he’s fallen sick. He’s contagious, in fact. Don’t worry, we don’t think he’s caught this from your ship. We aren’t going to lodge a complain against you, but he has been quarantined for an indefinite period of time. I hope that answers your questions.”

The image vanished, and Gralgiran barely heard the hunter confirm the disconnection.

They were holding his Heart.

Doubt attacked, keeping him from giving the order.

Were they holding him? Or was this Jeremy's way of distancing himself from Gralgiran? He'd seemed happy when they were together, angry that the commander suspected how he felt, but he had still picked the station over the safety Gralgiran offered.

If Jeremy was Kelsirian, he wouldn't— none of this would have happened. He'd have understood what being his Heart meant, embraced it and put that before everything else. But he was an Earther. He couldn't know what he thought. What he truly wanted.

"Alpha?" someone asked.

He let the breath out. Whatever Gezbiliam could be at times, she was his people's god. His sanity might not survive her machinations, but he had to believe that she had Meddled in this for him and Jeremy.

"Scan the station. Maximum strength. I don't care what it takes. Tell me where Jeremy is."

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The hunter stood in the corridor as Gralgiran and two packs of front line hunters headed in his direction. Like them, he was wearing his combat armor. Unlike them, he wasn't armed.

Gralgiran was impressed. For Thuruk Sel Minial to make it to the combat lockers and back here before Gralgiran had done the same, he'd have to run there the instant he'd been disconnected. Do so without knowing what Gralgiran's plan would be.

"I ask permission to join the chase, Alpha."

"These aren't your pack, Hunter."

"Jeremy is my friend. I won't stand for him being mistreated. And, as my beta is sleeping, I report to you, Alpha."

Gralgiran smiled. He like the male's resourcefulness. "Permission granted. Stand with Rokdroranderim. She is your beta for this chase."

As soon as they were outside the ship, he order the infiltration expert to unlock the lift.

"I have control of the lift," the hunter at comm said through his earpiece. "They're already trying to take that away." Someone said something further away. "They are mobilizing, Alpha. But they will not reach the lift before you have exited it."

Only four of them fit in at a time, and as before, he had trouble shaking the sense the walls closed in on him. The relief he felt on exiting, was ended by the approaching ambassador.

"Querikrilgral," he warned before the male could assert his authority. "They are holding my Heart prisoner. I will not—"

"I'm not stopping you, Alpha Hunter." He handed the large pack to the hunter on Gralgiran's right as the lift door opened again. "Take my things to the ship."

The hunter took it, but looked at his Alpha, who studied the ambassador. He'd missed the pact in his hurry to ensure he wasn't stopped. That was sloppy. He needed to think clearly, not about the danger Jeremy was in.

He nodded, and the hunter took the lift down.

"If you aren't stopping me, and you aren't going to the ship with your belongings, what role are you looking to serve in his chase?"

“I’m hoping you will allow me to be in front.”

“That isn’t the place of a civilian.”

“I’m not a civilian, Alpha Hunter. I am an ambassador. And this is a situation where my skills may serve your chase better than your own. Or at the very least, keep us from escalating things to all out war.”

He wanted war.

And he knew that was wrong. A Hunter protected, not warred.

“If the Earthers will not listen, you are going behind us for protection.”

“Oh, they will listen. They can’t afford to go to war with us.”

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The pack that blocked their way was led by the commander, and Gralgiran respected the male more for that. He even managed not to react to being so heavily outmatched, unlike the Earthers behind him.

Instead of armor, they wore clothing, and the only weapons they had were batons. Possibly stunners, or powerful enough to kill, but they’d need to get within reach to use them. They would be shot before that happened. Only one of his hunter didn’t have a sidearm or a rifle. Gralgiran was the only other without a rifle.

They looked scared of what was about to happen.

“What is the meaning of this?” the commander demanded, not showing any fear.

“This,” the ambassador said, “is a demonstration of what happens when one of our crew is held without reason.”

“Your crew? I don’t have any cat in my cells. Why do you think I kept the lot of them out?”

“You still have the ship’s Engineer in one such cell.”

“Bradshaw? He’s not part of their crew. He’s one of mine, and he’s where he is, because he’s scared of exactly this. That you’ll steal him away and force him to...do stuff for you.”

The gods were on his side, Gralgiran reminded himself. Jeremy was his Heart. This would resolve itself.

*Why aren’t you Meddling already?*

“One of ours would never force someone as important as Engineer Jeremy Bradshaw.”

“Whatever. Even if I wanted to, he’s in quarantine. You don’t want the Sickness spreading on your ship.”

The smile the ambassador gave the commander belonged on a hunter who had cornered his prey. “Oh, I am well aware of this Sickness. I have done my research on it, and my report had already been sent to the Federation Inclusion Bureau as well as to my government. I can assure you, we are not at risk.”

“That’s not a decision I’m going to risk. If you feel so strongly about it, make a request through your government. I’m sure that better qualified people than either of us will be able to reach a decision.”

“You must speak with him,” someone whispered in his earpiece. He didn’t recognize the voice, but he’d deal with the insubordination later. The idea had merit. At the very least, he deserved to be told by Jeremy if he was going to shatter his Heart.

“I will speak to my Heart.”

“Your what?”

The look Querikrilgral gave him promised reprisals, but he didn't care. “I will speak to Jeremy.”

“He doesn't want to talk to you.”

“Commander,” the ambassador said, over Gralgiran's growling. “That isn't true. And if somehow it is, then you want him to speak with us. I won't go into the cultural details, but know that the Heart is a legal designation recognized by the courts of the Federation. What it means is that in being Gralgiran's Heart, Jeremy has become a Kelsirian citizen, with all rights and protection that implies. As the situation stands, you are holding a Kelsirian against his will. The only way this situation changes is if he tells us that he wants to stay among Humans.”

The commander looked too comfortable with the information. Gralgiran wanted to act now, before he had time to put whatever plan he had in motion. It would be easy to claw through all of them, follow the directions the scan had given them to the brig.

“Alright. And to show good faith, I won't ask you to risk your safety by coming any deeper. I'll get him and bring him here so he can tell you directly that he wants nothing to do with you.”

“That is acceptable,” the ambassador said.

Gralgiran didn't agree. But he'd agreed to let the male be in front. And that meant letting this unfold as *he* wanted.

And being ready to act if the Earthers tried something.