

He brought up the feed from the engineering's eatery again. Jeremy looked to be fine. He was talking with Kelsirians, there was clearly translating happening, but he looked at ease.

Maybe Querik had misread what had happened? Although Thuruk's report about Jeremy having been ordered to return to work by his commander seemed to support the ambassador's worries.

Maybe Jeremy had worked it out? Maybe him being on the ship, away from those influencing how he felt was good for him? Maybe he should see about keeping him here? Where he'd be safe.

Against his will?

Was Gralgiran so desperate that he'd abduct Jeremy?

It was people meddling. He had to trust that gods were better at it, even if he felt like screaming at them for letting this happen.

He shut down the feed and returned to reading reports. He had work to do. He needed to focus on that, instead of worrying.

* * * * *

He looked at the sandy furred male in the regeneration tube. "Did they tell you anything?" he asked the unconscious male. "When they caused this to you so I'd meet my heart, did they have the decency to tell you why you had to go through this?"

"I'm not aware the gods speak to any but the seers," the Doctor said, her tone forcefully neutral.

"They did this to him. An explanation is the least they owe him."

"Then maybe he'll tell you when he wakes."

"Any idea when that'll happen?"

Her expression clouded over. "No." He should be awake by now, was what she'd muttered the last time.

Gralgiran nodded. Alix would wake when the gods decided; not before.

"Rest, my friend. You are going to need your energy when you learn that Jeremy been repairing your reactor. I expect you will scream at me until your roars give out for allowing this to happen regardless of what the gods willed."

He ignored the annoyed look the Doctor gave him as he left.

* * * * *

The archway to engineering was in sight when he realized where his mindless walk had taken him. He almost went in, despite Querikrilgral's warning. Couldn't it be considered to be the gods that had guided his steps? If they had brought him here, shouldn't he—stop looking for excuses? He wanted to see Jeremy. To ask if he was fine. He wanted reassurance that they were making progress, in spite of those meddling.

He turned around.

He couldn't risk making things worse.

* * * * *

He knelt before the two flags hanging on his bedroom wall. Trying not to implore Helrarvnr and Gralgiran to intervene in whatever Gezbiliam was doing to him. How could he act for them when she was driving him to insanity with worry?

Toom placed a hand on his, kneeling at his side. "He's going to be fine. They are

looking after him.”

He turned his hand and grasped Toom’s, holding it tight. Trying to pull some of his friend’s confidence into him. He was better as sitting back, studying the unknown and waiting to see what came from it. Part of what made him such a good pilot.

Gralgiran always did better with clear goals. He could wait when he saw the progress. He could deal with the unknown when he was actively working against it. These times of waiting for that unknown to reveal itself to him? Those he could do without.

* * * * *

“Update,” he declared as he stepped onto the bridge.

“I’m in their public security feed,” Tikenires answered. “I can’t tell you anything of use from that. The Earthers are going about their business as Earthers do, I guess.”

“There seems to be tension among people in charge,” Kegril said. “I haven’t confirmed who, since they aren’t that free with information, but there’s definitely two of them, possibly three, whose tension is spreading to the people around them. Also, more encrypted communications leaving the station than just a few days ago.”

“Destination?”

“Unknown, Alpha. But if I was to guess, wherever their superiors are.”

“Scans have shaved more of where they can’t be keeping their anti-matter,” Serzier said. “But that still leaves a lot of places.”

Nothing usable. Nothing for him to claw at and distract himself with. In that case he had to claw at the wind.

“Alright, I want theories. If the Earthers have more anti-matter than they reported, how are they getting it?”

“There’s the usual way,” Narr Er Tilis said. “They’re producing it.”

“Then why lie about it?” Kegril replied. “The Federation doesn’t dictate how little or how much they can make, just the quantities they are allowed to import from member species.”

“How can we determine if they’re producing more than they are reporting?” Gralgiran asked. “It’s possible the treaty they agreed to wasn’t clear as to what the limitations were and they don’t want to risk being rejected.”

“Then sticking to the rules should be how they go about it,” Serzier said. “As for finding out. We don’t have anything like the sensors needed for that. Unless it’s happening right here. But I’d have to read the literature to know what to look for.”

“I doubt it’s happening here,” Tikenires said. “The production facility back on Grizfrog is spread over a hundred times the area of the station. And I think it’s pretty standard for anti-matter production.” He looked at them in the following silence. “My class visited it as part of learning what made home important to Kelser.”

“Then we’re looking at something deep within Earther territory,” Serzier mused. “That’d need one of the scanning array, but they’d have to have been producing for well over a hundred years for whatever a place like that emits to reach the closest one.”

“So we can’t confirm it’s how they are doing it. Other ways?”

“There’s always the Taournians,” Kegril said. “They share a border with the Earther’s too.”

Kelser and Taourn also shared a border, as they did with a few other species. And

because of the vastness of space, there were a lot of unclaimed territory within those 'shared borders'. It was how Kelsner had discovered the Earthers. Mapping the largest ones looking for planets to establish colonies as justification for expanding their territory.

"How do we prove if they are violating the trade limits?"

"If?" Narr Er Tilis asked with derision.

"Their production levels should be on record," Tikenires said.

"If you can trust those," Narr Er Tilis said. "It's the Taournians after all."

"Not to say they could be selling what they take from the ships they attack," Serzier said. "How much do we keep for our reactors?"

"A lot more than most merchant ships would," Kegril replied.

"The Earthers would still be willing to pay good money for more, if they're going through as much as is suspected and aren't producing enough."

"Good. I'll take that scent," Gralgiran said. It didn't matter how unlikely he'd have anything to sink his claws in. While he hunted, he wouldn't be thinking about Jeremy.

He sat at his desk and placed requests for Taournian, as well as what the Federation had on Earther finances. While waiting to receive that, he pulled up piracy reports, what ships have been targeted, how much anti-matter had gone missing on them, what hadn't been accounted for on the black market, and started teasing scents apart.

* * * * *

"Dungen!" Brelen yelled, as Gralgiran pushed himself off the floor where the impact with the heavy ball had sent him. Lilmari offered her hand and pulled him to his feet. "That's six for the champions, and four for the pretenders." She shoulder checked Toom and Miretel. "If you admit defeat now, we'll have time to wash. Some of us enjoy the assistance while washing, and then be treated to a most wonderful meal at Ashuran's Delight."

"A hunter doesn't admit defeat, Brelen," he replied, grasping the large ball and lifting it. Its weight wouldn't be felt until he released it, adding to the strength he put behind the throw. "A hunter must be defeated. And there is plenty of time for us to snatch victory from your maw, and then, while the pleasure of a shower with Toom and Dresdiren will have to be short, you will be treating us to Marinar."

"Please win," Dresdiren called to Brelen, and Gralgiran stared at his game partner. "Everything Marinar makes is hot! I don't have that burn proof tongue of yours. I want to be able to go home and taste the mother of my children when I lick her."

"Their sauces are not that spicy," he grumbled, raised the ball and launched it as hard as he could at Brelen.

* * * * *

"And then," Brelen said, barely holding back the laugh. "Gral here just throws himself at the Dromian, thinking he can subdue someone twice his size." She lifted the now fully dripped cube of meat and popped it into her mouth.

"Our instructor's always said that it isn't the size of the fighters that matter," he offered in his defense, "but how skilled they are. I was fully trained; among the better to pass the combat classes. That Dromian was nothing more than some underbelly station trash." He grinned at Dresdiren as he put the roll of meat between his lips, then slurped it into his mouth. His friend has sworn he hadn't thrown the game, but Gralgiran had still

made him suffer by spending the little shower they had demonstrating what he was missing on Toom.

Considering how much he was spending on this meal for all of them, he'd felt justified in having some fun at Dresdiren's expense.

"Yeah, underbelly station trash undefeated champion of the illegal fighting club we had been sent it to bring to an end," she laughed.

"No one told me that," Gralgiran declared.

"How long were you in that regen tube?" she teased.

"Two weeks," Toom said, grinning. "Three days. Needless to say, our good captain was quite pent up."

"And that station's lodging wasn't all good with soundproofing," she added.

"Wait," Dresdiren said. "You two being there, I get. Hunters on their first deployment. But you're a pilot, Toom. What were you doing on that end of nowhere station?"

Toom smiled. "Why, my dear friend. Do you believe that even a pilot as talented as I will find a way to avoid the usual crap posting when I left the flight academy? I was on a garbage barge going from one end of space station to another for a whole six years. And let me tell you, running into this one, days before he ended up in the tube, made my stay in that system a whole lot more fun."

He grinned at Gralgiran. "Believe it or not, I had managed to forget how fun you were in those three years we were in different academies."

"And you have no idea how glad I was you were still there when they took me out. I was not looking forward to tracking down whatever other Kelsirian had ended up in that place for some relief."

"I offered," Brelen said, smiling.

"You do remember that one time we gave it a try, right?" he replied, grinning back. And her ears folded back.

"Wait," Litamir said. "You two had sex? I thought you only slept with males."

"I wasn't entirely certain of that, back then."

"And I can be quite persuasive," she added.

"And it was that bad?" Litamir asked.

"Unsatisfying, is how I'd describe it," Gralgiran said. "I'm glad I had the experience with a friend, but that confirmed females do nothing for me sexually."

Litamir looked at Brelen.

"Have you ever been with a partner who, no matter how willing they want to be, can't quite work up the energy to really put their all into it? Like he said. Highly unsatisfying. At least the barracks had other people there. So we didn't have to stay with that memory for long."

Gralgiran raised his glass of Tiriss. "To lesson learned, friendship maintained, and built."

The others raised their glasses to match, and they continued to enjoy the meal and the company.