

He slammed the prototype into the recycler, knowing he should be more careful with it, but not caring.

As if subliminals in his quarters wasn't bad enough, the medicine he'd been taking since he'd been a teen were more mind-altering drugs than anything designed to keep him healthy. He hadn't gotten everything the Kelsirian nurse had told him. Chemistry wasn't a field Jeremy was an expert in. But he'd gotten that they made him susceptible to suggestions.

Another prototype slammed into the recycler.

How many of his decisions had been his own over his life? Was he on this station because someone had suggested it? Was how disconnected he'd felt from the people around him because someone had told him to? Was he an engineer because someone wanted him to be one?

"Get a grip, Jeremy."

He paused in the process of shoving the last prototype in the recycler. He really should take it back to the lab. Only he'd already taken all the readings, it would end up recycled there too. The only difference was that the system in his lab would keep track of all the base element it processed.

He dropped the item in the recycler.

Who fucking cared if the inventory was off. They could always pull from the station's supply.

How likely was it that they could make him susceptible to the point he acted against his nature? Keeping him from acting according to his nature had taken constant reinforcement. If they could change him so much that he'd decide to work on the furthest station when he didn't want to, wouldn't that mean they could take away his attraction to other men completely?

The alternative was that they'd done this out of cruelty. As pissed as he was, he couldn't imagine them doing that to him. Jeremy wasn't important enough to bother to that point if there was a permanent alternative.

He looked over the room.

The floor was clear of everything. Every piece of clothing had been thrown in the wash processor. Why had that been so hard? The fucking access port was in the shower room. Barely a dozen steps and his dirty clothing would have been cleaned, folded, then placed in the closet.

He had to give being pissed this. It did wonders for him cleaning his quarters.

The door buzzed, and he ignored it, undoing his bed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd changed those, and he wasn't sleeping on unwashed beddings tonight.

It buzzed again.

He wasn't dealing with him, not today. Not after Jeremy realized what his so-called friend had been part of. It's not like it could be anyone else. None of his other friends, if they were even that, bothered him when he was in his quarters

He glared when it buzzed again.

What had he ever done to deserve being treated this way?

"Are you okay?"

Jeremy rounded on Omar, standing in the open doorway, looking concerned, and

stared in disbelief. He'd forced his way in. The guy who had been feeding him drugs without his knowledge since the first day he'd arrived had used his medical override and forced his way into his private quarters.

"Jeremy, what's wrong?"

Oh, he was going to tell him what was fucking wrong and...reveal he knew everything.

Fuck! He couldn't make the man who'd manipulated him pay without making things worse. "I'm having a bad day," he managed through gritted teeth.

Omar chuckled nervously. "I can kind of see that. You want to go grab a drink and talk about it?"

"No." He took the sheets to the wash processor, so he didn't have to look at him. Have him see how pissed having him here made Jeremy. "I'm cleaning."

"Yeah, I see that. You planning on keeping anything, or is it all getting recycled?"

"What do you want, Omar?" He demanded when the man was still there.

"I just wanted to check in on you, see if—"

"And how did you even know I needed to be checked on, Omar? Do you have sensors in my room telling you everything about how I am? Is that some doctor privilege, knowing everyone on the station's intimate feeling, or am I special?"

Omar's brown skin turned paler as he raised his hands. "What the fuck? I don't know what's going on, but I don't deserve those accusations."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have barged into my quarters."

"I was worried about—"

"And I've told you I'm having a fucking bad day. How about you leave now and let me clean? Or do you want more of my *misplaced* anger?"

"Okay." Omar stretched the word, reaching back for the door's control. "I'm going to let you work through it. How about I come back tomorrow? Hopefully, you'll be in a more talkative mood."

How about you never come back?

But he was able to keep from saying it long enough. The door closed after the man left. He turned to find something else to shove into the recycler and saw the cube on the bedside table. The only item there.

Just about the only item left on any surface in the room.

There was no way Omar hadn't noticed it. Could he know what it was? Did he have access to the print records so he could find out Jeremy hadn't printed it?

"Fuck!"

He sat on the bed and stared at his hands, then he laughed as he realized he missed the cat. He missed how it would make a nuisance of itself anytime he was down and distract him. He wanted to hold it, feel it purr against his chest.

Now he knew why Byron had hated him for being the reason the cat had been removed from their lives.

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He ran down the corridor, the floor, walls and ceiling shuddering as metal whined and snapped in the distance.

His fault.

All this was his fault, something said, insisted, but he refused to listen.
Turn around, it said, *and it all ends. Turn around and everyone will be safe.*
They could all go fuck themselves.

The station shook.

Why were they so far?

Why was he so far?

The lights flicker off, and in the silence, something growled.

They came on, the station complaining against what was happening, and he almost stopped. Where had it come from? Ahead, behind? Where would he be safe?

Back.

Should he?

Something fluttered ahead, rose, with a line on it? Lines? He couldn't tell, but fluttering meant trees. He was getting closer to them, to him.

Trees were around him, branches reaching down to grab him, keep him from proceeding.

No! He yelled, his silence breaking the sound.

He had to make it. He had to get through and reach—

The metal floor made his head ring, but he force the noise away. Pulled at the branch holding his foot. Brought a heel on it and electronics went flying.

He ran again. Shouldering his way through the ever thicker branches.

Banners were occasionally caught among them, and he followed where they led. They wanted him to make it through, even if the forest was no longer his ally.

He fell due to the lack of resistance and hurried to his feet, ready to run again, but stopped at the sight before him. The majesty of the male, covered in tan fur, teeth bared, claws extended. Gold eyes.

Danger.

He knew that. He knew this male was dangerous. A touch from those claws could cut him open.

A branch touched his shoulder, urged him back, and the male's lips curled into a snarl to go along with the growl that resonated around him.

Danger.

The branch wrapped around his arm, but Jeremy pulled against it.

The male launched himself. Muzzle open, ready to bite and ripe apart, claws glimmering in the light. Gold eyes fixed on him.

Death.

He closed his eyes and stood his ground.

He belonged here, someone had told him once. His mother, he thought. He belonged here, and whatever would happen, he welcomed it.

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He sat with a gasp, trying to hold on to the memory. Strength, heat, comfort in the midst of danger. There was more. He was certain of it, but that was all he could pull. He fell back, called up the time and chuckled. Way too early.

He reached for the cube, wondering if it was responsible for the dream, and let go as

soon as he touched it, thinking he'd burned his fingers. They were fine, but the cube was hot. Far too hot.

Querik had said it had an upper limit. Was that what it meant? But why would it have to work harder now?

Because he'd lost it on Omar. When had he ever lost it on him? He'd almost done it recently a few times, but the way he had last night? He'd clued the man in on things not being as they should and he'd cranked up the subliminals.

He hurried to shower and dress. He used the pillow to push the cube into his tool bag and left his quarters for somewhere safe.

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"If I ask you not to wake up Thuruk, will you listen to me?" he asked the guard. They were black and white furred, half the face but even on the black side, the eye was surrounded by white fur.

"My orders are to inform him when you arrive."

"At least tell him he doesn't have to rush. I know I'm early. I'm going to go over some of the panels to—just tell him not to rush."

Jeremy headed for engineering while the Kelsirian spoke on his comm.

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Jeremy pulled himself within the reactor, concerned as to where Thuruk was. As much as he wanted him to stay home until the day started, he knew him well enough to expect him to come as soon as he'd dressed. Not even checking everything was on correctly.

But he'd been here for two hours now and still no sign of him. He disconnected the circuits, scanned them, and put them back in place.

As voices became audible, he compared them to the others. Hand made, definitely hand made. He couldn't imagine the care it took to design and make this many circuits by hand and have the tolerances be so close.

He'd had prints with bigger differences.

He'd print them, and they'd be ready for another set of tests.

He pulled himself out, and as the sounds had warned, the day had started. One of them noticed him and the sense of camaraderie diminished. They weren't dour, but it was clear they couldn't be seen goofing around with the boss watching.

The Engineer.

Him.

But where was Thuruk?

He looked around and froze when, instead of Thuruk, he found Growler walking toward him. The man smiled at him, and those golden eyes shone. He said something.

"Hi," Jeremy replied, unable to look away from those eyes.

"Hello."

They were so deep, so full of amusement, and—

Growler chuckled, and Jeremy's face burned.

"I'm sorry," he hurried to say, looking down. "I didn't mean to stare." Had Growler's chest always looked that firm? He looked further down, wishing Kelsirian wore shirts instead of open vests, and the bulge in those pants caused him to swallow and looked at his

feet, hoping his pants didn't give away his reaction.

Fuck. Was this why they made sure he wasn't attracted to other guys? This burning feeling couldn't be healthy. And how was he supposed to think? Let alone do his job with him around making him feel—

“Are you alright?”

“Yes! I'm fine!” How could his face burn hotter at Growler's smile? How could Growler look so... he couldn't think of a word that did him justice.

“I'm glad.”

Jeremy shook himself. He was an engineer, that was the ship's captain. He couldn't behave this way.

He swallowed. “What can I do for you?”

“So many things,” Growler said with a soft chuckle.

“What?”

A smile, filled with so many sharp teeth, shouldn't be so dazzling. Shouldn't make him want to reach up, pull him close and—

“I will leave you to your work.”

Growler had said more. He'd said something else. Jeremy was sure it had been important, but he'd been so lost in that smile...

“Wait.” He was holding Growler's hand. He'd grabbed the hand of something dangerous, deadly. He could see the tip of those claws. Fuck. Worse than that, he'd unceremoniously grabbed the captain. That had to be an offense, right? Something against rank?

“Yes?”

Then why was Growler smiling at him again? It was just as blinding without the teeth.

“I...” he'd intended to say something, he was sure of that. A response to.... “I mean...” he really shouldn't smile so much. It did something to Jeremy's thinking. He liked it, but it got in the way of thinking.

The hand cupped his cheek. The skin was rougher than he expected, thicker. But the touch gentle.

It did nothing to help him think.

Nothing at all.

Growler leaned in, and Jeremy closed his eyes. He'd never kissed anyone before. Not really, not the way he was imagining it happening now. The way he'd seen it in movies. Even comedies could slow down for tenderness and kissing.

Fur rubbed against his cheek, and someone let out a contented sigh.

Jeremy opened his eye when Growler pulled away and tried to tell him not to go, but his throat was too tight. That smile did something to him again. Then the hand let go of his cheek and the ship's captain walked away.

Jeremy touched his cheek as he watched him. It felt way too hot, but he didn't mind.

“Go,” someone hissed, and Jeremy startled to realize Thuruk was next to him. He pulled his hand down and straightened himself as best as he could. He hoped he wouldn't glance down.

“Good, you're here. I did a scan of the circuit—”

“Go,” Thuruk repeated, his tone insistent.

“I can’t leave. We have work to do.”

The Kelsirian sighed. “Not leave. Go.” He pointed to the archway, where Growler could still be seen.

“What? No, I can’t. We have work to do, and he’s—”

Thuruk grabbed his shoulders and locked eyes with him. There was so much intensity in them Jeremy couldn’t look away.

“You know what he is,” Thuruk stated. “You know what he means. You know what you fought for. You know where you belong.”

“Here,” he whispered, vaguely remembering standing his ground. He’d fought to be himself, and Growler was...

He wrenched himself out of Thuruk’s hold and ran after his Heart.