

Part of him clamored that this was wrong. The way he rested against another man, a Kelsirian man, went against everything that was right.

Jeremy ignored it as best he could, running his fingers through the fur on Growler's stomach. The oozing discomfort wasn't as strong as before, and if it reached the point his stomach reacted to it, he summoned the box and shoved it in.

The hand tracing circles on his back felt good.

Jeremy wanted this, even if that voice wouldn't shut up about how wrong it was.

His finger passed over a bump of flesh under the fur, and Growler's breath caught.

He raised his head to confirm his hand was that low. "Is this a nipple?" He felt its shape, and Growler's grumble sounded pleased.

"Of course."

Jeremy ran his hand up and felt three more bumps before the one where he'd expected it to be.

Growler's breathing was heavy, and the front of his pants pushed out. "This is nice."

"Sorry." He pulled his hand, realizing what he was causing.

The laugh was deep. "Never be sorry for making me feel good."

"I didn't mean to make you think that I wanted..." his face burned, and his stomach rebelled at the idea of what he realized he wanted. "You have more than two." He focused on the odd anatomy as he shoved the discomfort in the box.

Unlike the previous times, it didn't entirely go away. Because he couldn't keep from wondering what it looked like, he decided.

"Of course." The tone had shifted; seriousness instead of dreamy. "How many do you have?"

"Two." He kept himself from adding 'of course.' There couldn't be an 'of course' when he'd felt the difference.

"Can I see?" The smile was teasing, and Jeremy's stomach protested.

He told it to fuck off. What they were doing wasn't wrong. He felt nice. The smile made his inside twist, but in a way he liked. A way he wanted to feel more of, instead of the protests.

His hand trembled as he reached for the shirt's button.

Growler took it in his. "You don't have to if it makes you uncomfortable."

Jeremy snorted. If he listened to that discomfort, he'd run out of the quarters screaming.

"It's nervous excitement. I've never done this before."

"You've never undressed with someone else before?"

"Not like this. Men don't..."

"You haven't been with a female?"

"One of my—" His mood soured slightly "—friend tried to set me up more than once." And didn't that take on an entirely new meaning? "But I never... we never clicked. How about you?"

Growler removed his hand. "Once, I'll introduce you to her. It's how I realized I had no interest in females."

"Did you think you would?" Talking distracted him from the fact he was about to expose himself to another man.

“Statistically I should.”

“What do you mean?” And wasn’t that a stupid way to look at it? He’d been shirtless multiple times around guys before.

“Something like seventy percent of Kelsirians don’t make a distinction in the gender of who they are attracted to, sexually or emotionally.”

Of course, it had never been in such an intimate situation. The last button came undone, and he opened the shirt.

Growler paused before his finger touched him. “Can I?”

Nodding was difficult.

Claws!

He shoved that irrational fear in the box and nodded.

The finger’s skin was rough as it caressed the areola, and Jeremy found he couldn’t breathe. The finger passed over the nipple and he moaned. Then his face burned at the idea Growler might notice his erection pressing against the fabric of his pants.

The nose pressed against his neck and breathed in as he pinched lightly, and Jeremy tensed, his cock shoved against the stretched fabric. The pinching happened again and with a whine, he pulled the hand away and was able to breathe.

“I thought you were enjoying this,” Growler said, sounding worried.

“Too much.” The panting kept him from speaking. “It’s too intense.” He wanted to reach down and adjust himself so it wouldn’t be as uncomfortable, but he was terrified of drawing attention there. Of what he might think it invited him to do.

Sick!

He wasn’t. But he definitely wasn’t ready to recreate one of his teenaged drawings.

“I’m sorry.” Growler looked pitiful, with his ear folded back and almost entirely vanishing into his mane.

“Don’t be. I’ve just…”

Those gold eyes shone as Growler smiled, and Jeremy leaned in. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips against his and…

He opened them when nothing happened. Growler looked at him, puzzled, and Jeremy hurried to pull away.

“What were you doing?” The question was gentle, but Jeremy still looked away, face burning.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have presumed.” He had trouble silencing the voice calling him an idiot, among other less flattering terms. He didn’t resist the finger against his cheek that made him look at Growler.

“What do you think you were presuming?”

“That look in your eyes, the way you smiled. I thought you wanted to kiss.”

The puzzlement returned. Then, “I don’t know how.”

Jeremy stared. “How can’t you not know how to kiss?” *He* had a reason.

“I know it’s a show of affection for Earthers, of love, but the lexicon didn’t include how it’s performed.”

“How do you show someone you…love them?”

Growler’s chuckle was filled with promise, and when he leaned in, Jeremy had to force himself not to pull back. The muzzle rubbed against his cheek, and Growler sighed

contentedly. When he moved back, the gold eyes glistened with emotions.

Jeremy swallowed. "That's what you did in Engineering."

"Yes."

Was that how Thuruk had known Jeremy should go after him?

He leaned in and when their lips touched; he didn't wait for Growler to act. He had no idea what he was doing. His only attempt had been with Alice, the one person he'd been willing to try a relationship with, and the kiss hadn't been good.

But Growler didn't know what it should be like. So what did it matter if Jeremy only had movies and watching his parents as examples?

He pushed the lips apart with his tongue, and there was no resistance. Then it was inside the muzzle and there was so much space he didn't know what to do.

When Alice's tongue had pushed past his lips, he hadn't liked it. It had felt like an intrusion. He didn't want Growler to—

Something touched his tongue, then wrapped around it. It pulled, and Jeremy moaned. He tried to suck it in, but air leaked into the muzzle. Then it let go and touched his lips. There was a roughness to it, but he didn't mind. He didn't resist when it entered his mouth.

His hands were filled with mane. He straddled the man as the tongue moved in his mouth, touching his palate, the inside of his lips, the back of his throat. When it moved back, he closed his lips against it, sucked, now that it was in his mouth, and it moved again, licking and tickling his palate, his tongue.

This felt good.

Beyond good.

There was no protest in any part of his mind at how right this felt. He relaxed against Growler, felt fur against his chest, and moaned again. He slid back, and something hard pressed between his cheeks.

Jeremy fell on his back in his rush to get out of the strange chair, away from *that*.

The utter wrongness of *that* touching him there, even through fabric.

"Jeremy, what's wrong?"

Wrong. It was all wrong.

He couldn't do that. He wasn't like—

Fuck!

His back was against the door. He wanted it out of his way so he could run. He wanted to rush back to Growler's arms, his touch, his taste.

"I can't."

"You can't what?" Growler moved in the seat, went from stretched to sitting with ease.

"That." Jeremy motioned to the other man.

Growler looked at him, expression serious. "You need to speak to me, Jeremy. I'm not a mentalist."

"Sex! I'm not ready for sex!" he fought the urge to turn, look for the controls, to escape.

"It's okay. I'm not looking to have sex."

"You're not?"

"Not if you aren't interested."

His breathing slowed. He was able to think again. To summon the box and shove the disgust in.

He wanted it. He realized. His stomach protested.

“I hate this.”

“Jeremy?”

“It’s still there. This thing they did to me. I keep having to remind myself it’s not me. I’m not disgusted by what we did. I loved it. But then I was so into it, and I felt... you pressing against me and it was there, screaming how wrong it all is.”

“Is there a counselor you can speak with?”

He rolled his eyes. “The one person I’ve always felt comfortable telling all my problems to is in league with those who did this to me. Probably how they planned it to.”

Growler seemed lost. “I don’t know what to do to help you, Jeremy. There are counselors on my ship, but they aren’t trained to treat other species.”

“I’m pretty sure this is the kind of things I have to work thought myself.” He buttoned the shirt.

“You aren’t alone, Jeremy.”

“I am when I’m off this ship.” He pushed off the door. “I enjoyed this, Growler. I want you to believe me. I want this to happen again, but I think that right now, I should get back to work. I need to process... all of it.”

Growler spoke in Kelsirian, and the door opened.

“Jeremy, you are my Heart. That means you are not a stranger on my ship. When you want to see me, ask anyone and they will arrange it so you can find me.”

“I will.” He almost turned. “You’re my Heart, Growler. Whatever that means, that’s who you are.”

He felt better at seeing him smile before he left.

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Thuruk waited for him in Engineering. He sniffed, and smiled, and Jeremy’s face burned at the realization they could smell what had happened. But the nod of satisfaction calmed him.

They worked for a few hours, and the technicians seemed to find excuses to walk by him and sniff. Then spoke in Kelsirian. He ignored them in favor of work, and doing his best not to think of him and Growler in that seat.

As he decided the day had been long enough, a new group of technicians took over, and one of those leaving pointed at Jeremy. Then they each came by, sniffed and said something. They smiled, so it couldn’t be offensive.

“Okay. What are they saying?” He did have enough of it, though.

“Different things. But they all mean they are happy you have finally found your Heart.”

“How do they know that?” he asked, suspecting the answer.

“We can smell him on you.”

He kept his stomach from reacting. “But how do they know about him being my Heart?”

Thuruk stared at him. “The entire ship knows, Jeremy. He has been waiting for him to recognize what he was to you from the moment he met you. We’ve been waiting with him.”

“Everyone knows? Everyone I’ve met? In the cafeteria, in the halls?”

“Yes.”

Wrong!

Oh, bullshit.

If they all knew, and not one of them even looked at him sideways, how fucking wrong can it be?

He picked up his tool bag. He’d have to work at it, but he’d overcome what they did. He wasn’t taking his ‘medicine’ anymore, and the ultrasonics couldn’t affect him with the cube...

He cursed.

“What’s wrong?”

He took the cube from his bag. It had been too hot when he’d gotten out of bed. Was it even still working? “This was made by someone here. Can you take me to them so they can give me a stronger version? I’m going to need it if I don’t want to this to be undone.”

“Yes.” Thuruk scanned it, then searched through his tablet. “Yes, they are...” he looked worried. He unhooked something from the collar he wore and put it to his ear. He spoke, glancing at Jeremy. “He’s coming.”

Since he didn’t have to go to the person who’d made it, Jeremy spend the time opening the next board.

When Engineering fell utterly silent, he looked up to see Growler approaching. Thuruk looked away when Jeremy glanced at him.

What was going on?

Growler smiled, and Jeremy no longer cared.

“Technician Thuruk Sel Minial tells me you need assistance.”

He glared at Thuruk. “Really? You couldn’t help me yourself?”

“Don’t be angry at him. He’s just following orders.”

Jeremy narrowed his eyes. “He has orders to call you if I need help?”

“No. He has to follow the chain of command if he is going to act outside his duties. Right now, that’s me, and I wanted to see you again.”

“We were just together.”

“And I miss you already.”

And he missed him so much, too. The temptation to stay was strong. There wouldn’t be any ultrasonics in Growler’s quarters. There would be so much more too and—

The pain was such Growler caught him.

He wasn’t ready.

He showed him the cube. “I need a stronger one to make sure I’m protected when I’m in my quarters.”

Growler nodded. “Come with me.”