

2: A Captain's Welcome

(Pre-Campaign)

"-due to subsequent heartbreak, subject has since grown quite needy. Sexual appetite is best described as "voracious", and subject has exhibited bisexual, omni-species-sexual, polyamorous, and versatile tendencies based on interviews with prior liaisons. Still seems to keep some semblance of propriety, as no reports of over-intoxicated encounters, intimate partner violence, or worse have been reported. Weakness can be seen as an asset if subject is willing to engage in honeypot assignments."

"I fucking get it, Tema-" Kai Uhila gruffly whined before Tema Miles proceeded to grind her knee further between Kai's shoulder blades from her perch on top of him, reading the extensive, 10 page dossier on the Hypatia's latest talent acquisition. Kai hadn't bothered reading a word, figuring he knew enough information since Kyrt Howling-Echo was a public figure. A General League champion, at that. Tema... took umbrage at this, in her usual way. And the usual outcome, Kai thought; their bodies wrecked with the aftermath of their spar, as they lay on the floor of the ship's gym. Which hadn't, this time, rolled into sex, to Kai's frustration. Tema cleared her breath and continued.

"*RESOLUTION*: Kyrt Howling-Echo can become a powerful asset for the organization. While his fame, depression, and sexual appetite might at times become issues, his hand to hand combat, melee combat, computer, and animal handling skills are among the best we've recruited. His fortune and fame can be of great use, both to aid in funding, and to act as diversionary tactics, his depression leaves him with something to prove, and his sexual proclivities can be both a detriment and an asset. After careful consideration, leadership has approved Professor Misty Bay Remains of the Jetty's recommendation, and Mr. Howling-Echo will be assigned with the Professor to the crew of the Hypatia."

After finishing the last sentence with a flourish, Tema rolled off of Kai's back. "So are you going to lay off him, Kai?"

"Nah," he said. He turned to look at Tema, who reignited her glare.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"C'mon, Tema, you mighta convinced me he's not a butthead, but I still think he needs knocked down a peg or two."

"Fuck's sake, Kai..."

"He needs to know who's boss. And he might have the money, but it ain't him. 'Sides, aren't you curious? He's fucked half the staff but he hasn't tried with any of the away team."

"It's his prerogative who he lays with."

Kai turned to leave, and saw something out of the corner of his eye. He realized Tema was already staring in that direction, and turned to see Silent Reading. The quiet Murnau was staring in their direction, tapping away at a datapad.

"Uh, hi Silent."

"Captain. Tema."

"What... whatcha doing champ?"

"Taking notes."

“...about?”

“Taking. Notes.”

“Did you see all of that?”

Silent shrugged as he continued to tap. “You’re in a public room.”

“We had it privately reserved.”

“It is a common room on the ship. I have every right to be here.”

Kai rolled his eyes while Tema let out a laugh. She turned to leave.

“Well, if you boys are done I have to get Libi for some training. Kai, don’t be a prick, and Silent... maybe leave them alone?”

“If they have relations in one of their bedrooms it would be improper to admit if I was in there.”

Kai started to open his mouth to argue with both of them, and thought better. He just sighed and headed for the hangar. Spoiled giant rich boy was usually in there with those damn Genepals when he wasn’t eating, talking with the Professor, or fucking.

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“Please, can’t we just fucking talk?”

“No, Kyr. I’m... I’m done, fuck this.”

“Juliette, please. Gerald is full of shit, we’ve known this our whole lives!”

“It doesn’t matter, Kyr. Can’t you just break one of our hearts instead of both?”

“Gordie, I... I love you both. I can’t decide-”

“So you ARE just yanking us around!”

“I AM NOT! WHY CAN’T WE JUST BE TOGETHER?!?”

“Cause there’s only one of you, dumbass!”

“Can’t I be enough for both of you?!?”

“No, you idiot! You can’t trust us enough to talk to us, you can’t just pick one, you have to slink around and hem and haw and... and...”

“I thought you cared, Kyr.”

“But... but I...”

“It’s over.”

“It’s over.”

“Please... please don’t leave me...”

A high pitched whine brought Kyr back into the present. He was back in the Hypatia, laying in the hangar after a long training session with Pep Pup and Sol-Edge. Unbothered, the trio opted to grab a cat nap. It was just the three of them. Gordie and Juliette... were long gone. Pep Pup, who was now sitting up next to him, was whining and whimpering.

“Pep... Pep Pup...”

Kyr kept sobbing as he gripped his best friend tightly, wracking with sobs as the nightmares continued to haunt him of his lost loves. Pep Pup hitched his forelegs through Kyr’s armpits, his tongue softly licking his remaining eye to wipe away his tears. He didn’t deserve him, Kyr thought. Most Genepals are at least somewhat cognizant of their trainer’s emotions, but Pep Pup could read him like a book. He always had the happy bark, or the soft whine, or the growl exactly when Kyr needed it the most. Sol-Edge was also there, floating behind him, their

sash/hand clasping his shoulder. His two best friends in the galaxy. Maybe now his only two friends in the galaxy.

Catching his breath, he stared out of the transparasteel 'windows' of the hangar. Reaching into his pocket, he felt Gordie and Juliette's Mix Tapes. Instead, he grabbed his phone, playing one of his own tracks to try to calm his nerves.

*"I just
Pretend
That I'm
In the dark and
I don't
Regret
'Cause my heart can't
Take a loss.
I'd rather be
So oblivious
I'd rather be
With you.*

*When it's said, when it's done, yeah
I don't ever wanna know.
I can tell what you've done, yeah
When I look at you*

*In your eyes
I see there's something burning inside you
Oh inside you.
In your eyes
I know it hurts to smile, but you try to
Oh you try to.
You always try to hide the pain,
You always know just what to say
I always look the other way
I'm blind, I'm blind.
In your eyes
You lie but I don't let it define you
Oh define you..."*

Suddenly he heard Pep Pup start to growl. Concerned, Kyrt spun up, putting up his fists... only to see the Captain standing near a crate. Kyrt relaxed. Pep Pup didn't.

"Captain," Kyrt said, trying desperately to pass off his raspy breath as if it was him waking up.

"Kyrt. Got some training in?"

"Yeah, the three of us were going to use the gym, but I saw it was occupied."

"Yeah, well, we all gotta train. At least thanks to *your generous donation* there's plenty of space here in the hangar. Enjoying your time on the ship so far?" Kai said, slowly approaching Kyrt.

"Yes, everyone's been really lovely," Kyrt said, trying to pet Pep Pup to calm him, but his friend continued growling, but not breaking into barks or sparks or bites. Yet.

"Well good, I'm glad. I'm sorry I haven't been around as much to give you a proper welcome."

"You're the captain. You're busy."

"Yeah, well," Kai said, now standing really close to Kyr't's personal space. "I do need to make time."

"I suppose."

"PEP PUP PEP!" Pep Pup shouted, containing himself no more. Kyr't could never fully understand what his friends were saying, but he tried again to assuage him.

"Boy, it's OK. It's just the Captain. I'm safe," Kyr't replied. This seemed to finally get Pep Pup to have some chill. He disengaged and walked behind Kyr't. He turned to look at the dog, and could see that even if he was no longer growling, he was keeping his eyes trained on the captain.

Kyr't turned his eye to also train his gaze. The captain was not his usual well kept self. His clothes bunched up in places, a few dreads spilt out from his hair tie, a boot untied. He'd never admit it, but Kyr't could also tell Kai and Tema had just been together. Her pheromones were all over Kai, her scent intermingling with his. It could have just been sparring, but the way Kai was coming off Kyr't was confused. And Kai wasn't being subtle. His stance was open and wide. He kept a cocky smirk plastered on his face. He met him when he was "alone". Kyr't kept his cool to not slap his forehead, as he started to pick up what Kai was putting down.

"Yeah, you're safe with me, I ain't gonna eat ya... Unless you want me to." Kai said, now fully invading Kyr't's personal space. He stepped forward, his leg pushing against Kyr't's crotch. Kyr't looked down at Kai, who tilted his head slightly and gave a broad wink.

"Are you trying to fuck me, Captain?" Kyr't said as deadpanly as he could at the moment.

"It ain't exactly a secret that you've fucked half my crew already, Mr. Howling-Echo," Kai said, a laugh that Kyr't thought he could hear a twinge of bitterness in. "I'd like to take you for a test drive. Why don't you come back to my room and we can have a roll in the hay. Unless you're scared-"

Kyr't could tell that this was starting to turn into a fucking pissing contest. Kai was trying desperately to assert his authority and dominate any potential liaisons. If Kyr't just gave it up and didn't act assertive in kind, Kai would walk all over him. The only way to skirt that was to go full force, mano y mano.

As Kai droned on Kyr't strode forward himself, his own hind leg now grinding Kai's crotch. Kai let out a small gasp, then gave him a shit eating grin. Kyr't tried to keep his face calm and not betray any fear or doubt.

"If you've talked with your crew, then you'd have realized that I'm always down, and I always leave my partners satisfied." Kyr't said. Kai started to stammer a bit, so Kyr't knew he had to keep it up. "So are you down, Kai?" Kyr't said, trying to give a lusty look with a pout.

"...I wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

"Good. Why don't you come to my room."

"But-"

"I need a shower. If you're a good enough boy, maybe you can borrow it since you didn't pay for a private one."

Kyr't removed his leg and stalked over to his Genepals. Sol-Edge was tittering that weird laugh of his, but Pep Pup looked concerned. Kyr't sighed and leaned over to the dog. "I'll be fine, boy. I

promise. And I'm sorry I gotta be alone with dickhead over there for a bit. If you can stay here and play for a bit, I promise I'll tell ya all about it with some scratches later, OK?"

Pep Pup whimpered lightly, but nodded. He gave Kyrt one last lick to his face, then he ran off, Sol-Edge floating after him. Kyrt sighed as his friends went away. It was true, he has spent these past few weeks "getting to know" the staff of the ship. He still hadn't tried to lay with any of the away team yet. Kai was Captain and that'd be a weird power dynamic, Tema seemed willing but he wasn't sure she wanted anything, and Silent and Roscoe seemed... disinterested. But, after that nightmare Kyrt thought that maybe some company would help. For now.

"They good?" Kai asked, approaching Kyrt from behind.

"Yeah. Let's go," Kyrt said, grabbing Kai's hand and dragging him back to his room.

~

*"Take me down to the river bend,
Take me down to the fighting end,
Wash the poison from off my skin,
Show me how to be whole again.*

*Fly me up on a silver wing,
Pass the black where the sirens sing.
Warm me up in a nova's glow,
And drop me down to the dream below.*

*'Cause I'm only a crack
In this castle of glass
Hardly anything there,
For you to see,
For you to see.*

*Bring me home in a blinding dream,
Through the secrets that I have seen.
Wash the sorrow from off my skin,
And show me how to be whole again.*

*'Cause I'm only a crack
In this castle of glass
Hardly anything there,
For you to see,
For you to see..."*

Kai was unsure if Kyrt was attempting to sing in the shower as his own form of a power move, considering Kai's status as the ship's bard, or if he just always sang in the shower. Now that the pair of sharks were circling one another, he had to stay frosty. Even after hearing the whole dossier, knowing Kyrt was also a street rat who dug himself out of the gutter, Kai figured the man had grown soft. Grown content. He'd already gotten his own private room and had people falling over themselves for him. He had to push back and show him who's the boss.

He sat on Kyrt's bed, taking his quarters in. Although the man did have a private bathroom attached to a private bedroom, the rooms were not super huge, and sparsely furnished. The first thing he noticed, near the door, was a key holder. Made him feel like he was on some pre-spacefaring backwater. Looking closer, Kai realized one knob was a leash and a lead, certainly for Pep Pup (or...), and the other was quite heavily padded and reinforced. A few light cuts were in the wall. That peg might have been Sol-Edge's... "bed"?

An end table, a large pet bed for Pep Pup, a queen size bed with some firm-ass pillows, a TV, a dresser, and a desk with a chair. Everything was well made but utilitarian. Bolted firmly down and functional, not lux shit that was going to go crashing about in flight or zero G. No trophies, no pictures, no art, no fan mail, nothing. All his personal shit must be at his home, wherever in the galaxy that is.

Figuring he was in for a penny, in for a pound, he did a quick casing of the room. Nothing hidden in the pillows or mattress. No hidden stash of cash, drugs, liquors, weapons. Dresser held several pairs of pants, several sets of sheets, an emergency space suit, and perhaps the most surprising thing, a few shirts. The bottom few drawers held a few toys for Pep Pup, a pair of whetstones for Sol-Edge, and a few toys and pieces of clothing... that must be for Kyrt, Kai thought, blushing.

The embarrassment lasted longer than he expected. He knew what Dr. Montrose would be saying about doing this. If he's already starting out a relationship with suspicion and snooping, it was not starting on a solid foundation. All of the peacocking and attempting to show dominance are just symptoms of a desire to maintain control. For the longest time he had none, and now that he has some he has to keep it. This "interloper" has come in with his money and fame and Kai was likely worried they'd end up liking him more. He'd no longer be needed.

He already knew from the dossier now that they had some similarities. Life on the streets, bringing themselves up through hard work. The weight of expectation. A desire to work hard, and play hard. They could build off of that. Form a bond with someone other than Tema. Open up. Relax. Find some peace.

But, clearly the time he finally gives that a shot is the time he'd be let down. The hurt part of his brain told him to press on.

The desk was locked. Datapad too. Kai was sure he could break both of them, but he didn't have *that* much time. A drop dish did sit on the edge of a shelf on the desk. Kyrt had emptied his pockets before he stepped into the shower. A credit stick, his phone, a case for some earbuds, and... two small devices? Looking at them closer, Kai realized both were dedicated music players. He had recalled these being a fad a few years ago, as the dedicated players were filled with music you wanted to share with a friend, called "Mix Tapes." Using his own headphones, he checked both devices.

The first device's wallpaper was a photo of a young woman standing next to Kyrt. Both were on a plinth, holding up peace signs. With his forearms Kyrt was holding a giant cup up at the top level. He was clad, as always, in those paneled leather pants. Kai started to wonder if, for a while, that was Kyrt's only clothing, not by choice but by necessity. The woman seemed baseline human, had a red buzz cut, and was clad in a Genepal League jersey so long her shorts were barely visible. She held a smaller cup in her left hand, on a lower level to Kyrt's right. A third person, a male human, sat sulking on the third tier to Kyrt's left, his own cup laying

on the floor. His fade was tight, and he was clad in a simple shirt and pants, a globe necklace hanging from his neck.

The woman must have been Kyr't's rival, Juliette, and the man Kyr't's pain in the ass, Gerald. The players surely had more photos, but he didn't have time. Flipping the small rectangle of metal over, Kai noticed a rough "J" carved into the back, sanded smooth to the surface afterwards. He pressed play.

*"Said I was gonna take some flowers to my neighbor but I
Ran out of time.
Didn't wanna show up to the party empty handed but I
Ran out of time.
Said I'd walk the dog a little further than the driveway tonight;
The extra mile.
Thought I'd send a card with my condolences but damn I
Just ran out of time.*

*Intentions only get you so far
What if I'm just a selfish prick?
No regarrrrrrrd*

*I'm always running out of time.
I'm always running out of tiiiiiiiiime."*

The second device had a "G" carved in its back, slightly more elegant, and also sanded smooth. Its background was of a pair of hybrid children, one half human, half Murnau that must have been Kyr't. Kyr't had both eyes. The other child was one part human, one part Euridian, one part Zooxanthian. While he had a human head, arms and trunk, it sat on a Euridian waist and sextet of legs, and patches of rough Zooxanthian growths were all around his body. Both children were dirty and in torn clothes. But smiling. Happy.

*"When I'm at
The Pearly Gates
This'll be on
My videotape
My videotape*

*Mephistopheles is
Just beneath
And he's reaching up
To grab me*

*This is one
For the good days
And I have it all here
In red, blue, green
In red, blue, green*

*You are my center
When I spin away*

*Out of control
On videotape, on videotape,
On videotape, on videotape,
On videotape, on videotape...*

*This is my way
Of saying goodbye
'Cause I can't do it
Face to face I'm
Talking to you 'fore
No matter what
Happens now
You shouldn't be afraid
'Cause I know today has been
The most perfect day
I've ever seen..."*

~

Kyrt hummed to himself as he finished drying off after the shower, a high pitched buzz filling the small bathroom. He was trying to focus on the tedium of grooming. He'd hoped it would take his mind off of Kai, off of his worries of performance and his concern that he'd embarrass himself. Sadly, this seemed to be bringing out the same old problems.

He looked in the mirror to try to amp himself up. But flexing all six arms made him again think on how they're too small. Turning around to check his rear and hearing how his plates are too thick. Too bright. All wrong. Giving one last brush to his 'mane' and knowing it's too long. Too hairy. And those were the original sins, given him by flawed creators he had never met in pursuit of perfection, that cast him into the void.

It had always been hard to trust people. Everyone always had an angle. A play. Even those he thought were his dearest friends, what he longed to be something more, were turned against him by the whispered doubts of an idiot. The only people he'd ever met who didn't have an ulterior motive was his dog and his sword. ...and maybe Sol-Edge just thought he was the toughest motherfucker around when they first met.

After losing Gordie and Juliette it became thoughtlessly easy to dive head first into a hookup culture. After all, everyone wanted a piece. Now with ALIS, it seemed to still be the same. But, as always, how long until he's no longer the new hotness? None of the staff ever seemed interested in a second date, a second night. Hell, this whole bullshit is just a show. It's so obvious Kai is just making a power move. He's a Genepal with an initiative boost, able to quickly get off the jump, execute his attacks, try to overpower for victory.

In order to defend he has to play a similarly tough offense. If he lays low and just takes what Kai offers he'll get burnt. Kai will assert his dominance, Kyrt will just be a wallflower, maybe even relegated off the away team as "too valuable". He's not sure Kai even likes him. Wants him around. That any of them do. He's just another means to an end. Same as always.

The competitive spark in him caused him to lightly slap himself. He had to focus. He had a gameplan. Just had to execute...

~

As the song ended on a haunting piano, Kai looked up to see Kyrst staring at him from the doorframe. It wasn't the first time he had seen all of him, what with the shared locker rooms on the ship. He remembered in Tema's droning that the dossier mentioned that Kyrst's "father", the prime Kyrst, had tossed the child away. The Library was able to find the documentation. Prime claimed there were dozens of superficial problems with his spawn. "The limbs were too short." "The eyes are too far apart." "His chiton is too light in comparison to mine." A litany of complaints, resulting in a child being fed to the wolves.

A few decades after those notes, seeing the man Kyrst grew into, Kai could not fathom what the fuck that prick saw in light of his perfectionism. The figure in front of him struck him. The six arms and two legs all seemed symmetrical, functional, fine. His eyes seemed well spaced, though one was blinded in some fight Kyrst had as a child. His armored skin was a fair light blue, like a still, clean lake. What in the hell was wrong with him?

Their mutual reverie was broken by a low growl emanating from the larger man. Before Kai could stammer out an apology or excuse for his snooping, Kyrst ripped the device out of his hand. He lifted Kai over his shoulder, then body slammed him onto the bed. Kai definitely felt the power behind it, but it was also clear Kyrst wasn't trying to hurt him. He was, however, rubbing across his body with all forearms while his main limbs pinned Kai's arms down. He opened his mandibles to get his lips close to Kai's.

"I'm.. I'm-"

"Shut up. Just... shut up and let's get this over with..."

~

Tema was walking in the back of the ship, weaving her way through the crew quarters. Libby had been very attentive in her knife skills training, so as a reward they had made a big batch of ice cream. She left Libi with a bowl while she sought out the rest of the crew, see if anyone else wanted to try the flavor combination Libi chose.

She was trying her best to relax, but finding it hard. The Hypatia had been in some rough shape after their last few missions before their new patron joined the team. After his donations the ship was different now. Better, yes, but different. And the work kept getting harder and harder. She was worried that even with new resources, their work with ALIS was going to get overwhelming.

Speaking of new sections of the ship, she was passing by Kyrst's room. Part of his investment was in a fully private room with a bath, as most bunks in the ship either had private rooms with no refresher, or multi-person bunks with one. She and Libi enjoyed their privacy, but it must be nice to have that amenity.

Tema wondered if Kai was in there with Kyrst right now. She was still worried about him, about Kyrst. She wished she could understand why Kai always had to prove himself to other people. If either her or Doctor Montrose could ever get him to finally relax. Another worry was that at one point Kai would either drive them away too and he'd be left alone, or he'd work himself into such a despair that he'd be unable to escape.

A few days ago when Kai was deep in his cups, he had mentioned that he was jealous of Kyr. If it were up to him he'd also try to get some more action. But he pushes people away, or acts too tough and scary for people to try. She wondered if either might have happened with Kyr. As she walked passed the door, she thought she could hear Kai... warming up? Like he was about to sing?

"Godsdamn it," Tema faintly muttered as she heard enough of Kai to recognize what he was doing. He was singing that dumb, dirty version of a shanty he learned ages ago. However, the first time he pulled that out of thin air must have had a similar result on Kyr as it did her, as she could hear some faint laughter inside. It seemed like things were going OK?

As she was about to turn the corner towards her room she felt something hit her shoulder. She looked down and it was a datapad stylus. She looked to the sides, and then looked up. Tucked in the rafters was Silent Reading. He motioned for her to give him back the stylus. Glaring, she directed that he come down. He slid his way down to the floor, quietly, and the pair walked a bit further down the hall to avoid being heard by their compatriots.

"Are you kidding me?" Tema hissed.

"Kai is not necessarily wrong about us learning more about our new team member."

"And you think this is appropriate?"

"I'm just taking notes."

"Oh for gods' sake... Have... have you heard anything?"

"Nothing alarming. I thought I heard a bit of a commotion at first, but it seems like they're now enjoying themselves."

"Well, why don't you leave it there. Libi and I made some ice cream, if you'd want to grab some. She wanted to try some of those new fruits we picked up at our last stop."

"Are you sure we shouldn't keep spying on-"

"Why. Don't. You. Eat. Some. Ice. Cream."

"Some ice cream would be lovely. I'll go grab Cheerful Humming."

"Fine. I need to head to my room, then I'll meet you there."

Tema turned back to look towards Kyr's room as Silent scuttled off. She prayed Kai was doing the right thing... for once...

~

The two men laid on the bed, utterly spent. After their initial mistrust and posturing, that had actually gone pretty well. Both men showed care and carefulness. Kai could appreciate the tenderness and restraint in Kyr. Kyr could appreciate Kai's confidence and drive. They turned to each other, staring into the other's eyes.

He seems nice, Kai thought.

He seems cool, Kyr thought.

It can be more than this.

Maybe he'd want to do this again some time.

You don't have to keep pushing people away.

Maybe I can finally find someone who wants me.

You don't have to be alone.

You don't have to be alone.

...but...

...but...

I'm sure he thinks I'm still a fucking asshole.

He's just testing me.

Getting too close to anyone is a risk. A risk I already take with Tema.

This was all just a show for him, to make him feel better than me.

He's surely not looking for something to last.

He's gotten what he wanted.

...still...

...still...

It doesn't have to end like this.

It doesn't have to end like this.

"I..." Kai started to stammer, looking into Kyr't's eye.

"I..." Kyr't replied, his hand starting to reach to touch Kai.

"I should go." Kai said, getting out of bed. Kyr't's hand continued to reach out longingly. They held this tableau for a few moments. It seemed like a flash of recognition. A last chance.

"... yeah, you should." Kyr't said, his hand pulling back.

"Well, that was... yeah."

"Yeah."

"Well... welcome to the crew, Kyr't Howling-Echo."

"Thanks, Captain Kai Uhila."

Kai stood at the doorframe, his clothes haphazardly thrown on, looking back at Kyr't as he lay in his bed. He knew what he should do. He knew what Dr. Montrose would tell him to do. He knew what Dr. Montrose would almost scream at him next session when they would inevitably talk about this. He knew what Tema would *definitely* scream at him when he'd open up about this. He should just admit that there's something. Admit he wants a connection. It doesn't have to be friends with benefits. It doesn't even have to be as friends. Just say what he really feels.

Kyr't looked back at Kai. He knew what he should say. "Can we talk?" "You can't imagine how lonely I am." "You seem lonely too." "Maybe you should stay? We don't even have to speak." "I don't just want something casual, I want something more." "Please."

Instead, the two men nodded at each other, and Kai left. They each lasted almost half a minute before they broke, Kyr't crying harder because he was alone in his own room.

Crying wasn't easy for Kai; it felt too much like weakness. It was easier to drown pain with alcohol, drugs, or anger. Kai tried to keep his tears to a minimum, fearing that the crew could see him, but he turned a corner towards his room and almost ran into Tema. She'd been waiting for him. She started off brightly but her mood came crashing down almost instantly.

"Libby's enjoying some ice cream for doing a good job, so I figured I'd- what's wrong?"

"N...nothin'."

"Bullshit. Did he hurt you? Did you hurt him?"

"No, we're...we're both fine. He was a gentleman. As was I."

"Kai..."

"I gave him his welcome, and that was that. Nothing more."

"Kai..."

"I should shower before the crew smells him on me. I'll... see you later, Tema."

Kai rushed past her to avoid any more of her judgment. He knew she cared. Knew she was concerned. Knew the Dr. would be too. And he figured maybe the walls he and Kyrst were building against each other were lies. He was probably hurting right now, too. But doing anything would mean admitting he was also hurting. He was also afraid. And Kai, sadly, could not admit that. Desperate for distraction, he jammed his earbuds in and just picked a track, desperate to fill the stagnant air with noise.