

F'ejen's office on the Star Chaser had grown messier since the human arrived, but it had taken on an odd sense of order ever since the duo started their interspecies biology lessons. Everything had a place, however disorderly those places seemed. Mark also frequented the space in what F'ejen soon found out to be attempts at relaxation; This didn't stop the doctor from turning these visits into learning opportunities. *<"So you're telling me that a human got one of your primitive flying machines, this 'plane' of yours... And ate it?!">*

"Some thousand of years ago, yeah." said Mark, feet perched on a section of desk he cleared upon arrival. F'ejen furiously scribbled the tidbit into a journal, what had become the third 'human diary'.

Human stomach acids are capable of digesting metals in strength excess that of nuroha. If contact with this substance is likely, take due precaution.

The physician turned from his book. *<"I know more or less how your stomach works; You've told me, I've seen it! But to think a substance that strong is held at bay by a single layer of mucus... It's insanity!">*

"And it's not the strongest, uh... Eater? Acid?" F'ejen nodded to confirm the pronunciation. *"Acid, yeah."*

F'ejen's jaw began dropping open in disbelief before the doctor slammed it shut again. He capped off his note before shutting the book and putting it back in his coat pocket. Just thinking about a fluid corrosive enough to eat through most substances known to x'errenkind was almost maddening, he needed to calm himself. He rummaged around his coat pocket, finding and removing a box of Iija pods. As F'ejen popped one of the chewables into his mouth, he noticed Mark eyeing the box with curiosity. This research opportunity was too good to resist.

<"You want a pod?"> said the doctor, presenting another pod to Mark.

"No thanks, don't know what that do to me."

<"It's a relaxant."> F'ejen stumbled on his words when he saw Mark's look of confusion. *<"Uh... Stop stress.">*

"Oh, uh..." Mark gave a look betraying deep thought before shaking his head. *"Sure."* he said, sitting up and reaching over to the doctor. The human looked almost comical holding a pod the half the size of his hand. Mark bit into the pod and recoiled slightly. The doctor watched him with nostalgia. *<"It took a while for me to get used to this stuff too, I probably shouldn't have started so young.">*

Mark continued to take small, cautious bites out of the pod, his reactions lessening in intensity as he did so. Before long, his shoulders dropped, and his speech became almost unnoticeably slurred. *"You not kidding, this stuff uh..."* He repeatedly snapped his fingers as he stumbled on his words. *"Relaxant! That's the word."*

<"Relaxing, Mark.">

It has been 6 san'lo since administration at time of writing. Effects of Iija pod on Mark emulates those of dara on x'erren, but at a much quicker speed.

Mark slumped forward, his forearms laid across his thighs. "I needed this... Is this what stoners feel like?"

<"How does it feel?">

"... *Weird... I don't care anything right now.*" Mark's words came slow, and his pronunciation was slipping. With one final lazy gulp, Mark finished the pod and fell face first from his chair, unconscious.

<'Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck!'"> F'ejen was speechless. Here he was in his office with an unconscious human with Iija doing something to his system. F'ejen was unsure what he should be more worried about: The repercussions he would face for experimenting on Mark with a narcotic, or what said narcotic was doing to Mark. Regardless of the outcome, he had to take care of this. He bent over to inspect Mark, the human's face had collided with the floor hard enough to leave a dent. F'ejen lifted with as much strength as he could muster just to raise Mark's head. Mark's eyes were closed and his mouth agape, there was no bruising. The human's upper back was slowly heaving up and down, he was breathing.

<'Don't want to risk hurting him further... I need him on a table.'> At this thought, F'ejen turned from the unconscious alien and peeked out from his office into the ward beyond. <"Mee'lo! You there?!">

Mee'lo peeked out from beyond a curtained off room. <"Yes, Chief?!">

<"How're the patients?!">

Mee'lo walked from the patient's room, waving goodbye to them. <"Stable, but I imagine they're not big fans of their doctors shouting down the ward.">

<"Good. I need your help."> F'ejen peeked back at Mark to make sure he didn't move, he hadn't.

<"With what?">

<"I need you to get the strongest crew members you can get that won't report this to the captain.">

<"We don't have that many hands left after the attack, bu-"> Mee'lo paused and squinted, clearly considering F'ejen's words. <"What did you do?">

<"Just go, I don't know how long we have!">

<"Alright, Chief."> Mee'lo gave an unsure look before bolting from the ward like his life depended on it.

<"Three should do it!"> F'ejen slipped back into his office, anxious about his patient. He paced back and forth gathering his charts and scans, never keeping his eyes off Mark for long. He pored over his notes looking for anything related to this, he found nothing. The wait was tortuous, but F'ejen soon heard a knock at his door. The doctor immediately answered the call, opening the door by a tiny fraction; A tall, harsh-faced woman in yellow greeted him.

<"So whaddaya need me for, doc?"> said the engineer, a curious expression on her face.

<"I need to make sure you won't tell the captain, miss... uh..."> F'ejen did his best to fill what little view there was into his office.

<"Uns'la, and you'd be shocked with what I've done on this ship."> The engineer pushed past the doctor and strode into his office with an air of authority. Uns'la didn't take so much as a full step into F'ejen's office before noticing Mark laying on the floor. She paused mid stride and turned to F'ejen. *<"What did you do?">*

<"I, uh... gave him lija?">

The room stood still, and the air seemed to grow cold. The silence was only broken when Uns'la hissed in uncontrollable laughter. The woman nearly stumbled over she was laughing so hard.

<"So Tiny here can't even handle a fucking pod?! By the Gods, he's adorable!"> Uns'la collapsed into the chair Mark sat in as she convulsed with laughter.

<"This is serious! We don't know what lija does to his body, he's literally alien!">

<"And to think I was scared of the little guy!">

A young voice filtered in from beyond the office's door. *<"What little guy?">*

A sentry stepped through the threshold. His fur was unkempt and he looked tired, his steps were cautious and his right hand was held ever so slightly to his rear in a trained stance. His eyes locked to the human motionless on the floor and his face hardened.

F'ejen spoke up. *<"Uh... Thanks for coming, we just need some extra muscle. At this rate, the rest should be here in a few san'pa.">*

<"... Okay."> said the young man, walking to the far corner of the room. He shot a concerned glance over at Uns'la, still in the midst of her laughing fit before he turned his attention back to Mark.

Uns'la's hissing slowly subsided, her first few words came in through stifled giggling. *<"Sorry, I know I should be more worried.">* She took a large breath, and her laughing ceased. *<"So-">* She took another breath. *<"What's the plan? Your buddy just told me I was needed here.">*

<"We have to get him on a table like we did when he first got here. You were there for it, weren't you?"> said F'ejen, pointing to the guard.

<"I was on patrol, I didn't see him until I was assigned to his cell."> The guard's tone was low.

<"I can confirm, he saluted me a few san'lo before impact."> said Chief Officer Che'tr, standing in the open door.

<"S-sir! "> F'ejen turned, his balance unsteady. *<"Aren't you supposed to-">*

<"I'm on break. And you..."> Che'tr turned his gaze to Mark. *<"Have some explaining to do.">*

<"I'm sorry Chief."> said Mee'lo from behind his C.O. *<"These are the best I could find.">*

F'ejen took stock of the situation before responding. *<"So long as they can get him on a table, it doesn't matter.">*

Che'tr spoke for the haphazard group. *<"Just direct us, doctor.">*

<"... Right. Mee'lo, you've got his head and upper back. Un'sla and, uh... Guard, grab his sides. Chief, keep his legs steady."> The assembled x'erren bent down and heaved with all their might. Mee'lo got his share in the air first, followed by Uns'la and the young sentry. Che'tr kept Mark's legs aloft by wrapping each arm around one of the human's thighs. F'ejen rushed on ahead with documents in hand, taking a left out from the ward between a pair of patient rooms.

The operating room was bathed in a bright light from the ceiling. White walls showed no stains or scuffs, just pristine sterility. Machines of all purposes stood fixed to the ground by mag-locks in organized rows, giving an intimidating backdrop to the operating table in the center of the room. F'ejen made for the sink across the chamber, flinging open a compartment full of spare surgical wear as he ran. Hands washed, mask and scrubs on; F'ejen was ready, but the room wasn't. The doctor pulled trays of tools from their holdings and spread them about the table in preparation, inspecting each instrument so as to ensure safety. He pulled a diagram board from the wall and neatly attached his research to it such that each document was legible at a glance. The room was ready for the patient. It took a minute before the chosen load bearers got Mark onto the operating table, each panting in exhaustion upon completion of their task. Che'tr salivated into his cupped hand and massaged it into his fur in an attempt to cool down, Uns'la wasn't far behind; F'ejen was tempted to follow their lead. *<"There are chairs over there. Don't take too long, Mee'lo, I'll need you.">*

<"Yes Chief."> replied F'ejen's fellow physician.

F'ejen began bringing down the ceiling-mounted scanner by tapping the keys on the table's control pad. A mechanical arm lowered the cylindrical scanner from the ceiling and lined it up with the table. A few more keystrokes and the table was slotted into parallel grooves along the interior of the device, the table's lone leg descended into the floor as the scanner enveloped the operating table. A droning hum sounded from the scanner as it did its work, a screen descended from the ceiling showing the device's progress. Within moments, a full 3D model of Mark's body was completed, showing every layer down to the marrow in his bones. Some keystrokes on the device's control pad and the scanner was dismissed, leaving the screen. The table's leg reattached with a hearty clunk. F'ejen filtered through the layers on screen until he found what he was looking for: Mark's digestive tract. Only the final bite of the pod remained in his system, the rest had presumably been digested. F'ejen cross referenced what he was seeing with his notes; Everything seemed to be in order, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. F'ejen called to his associate. *<"Mee'lo, you've got the table.">*

<"Yes, Chief."> Mee'lo stood from his chair and strode to the table's control pad.

For hours, the duo probed Mark's body as best they can; F'ejen used every bit of knowledge he had learned over the last few days in his efforts to deduce Mark's malady as Mee'lo warped the table: Raising and lowering Mark's limbs, flipping the human onto his stomach, sitting him up and opening the table supporting his back, everything he needed to. All present were shocked that the table could still move under Mark's weight. But despite the pair's efforts, they could come to no solid conclusion. Exhaustion began to set in, and everyone was feeling it.

<"I have to go, it's my turn for patrol."> The young guard stood from his chair.

<"Me too, it's my duty to help run this ship after all."> Che'tr rose from his seat and joined the sentry in his leaving.

F'ejen was frustrated, but he had to face the facts. *<"Okay look, it's obvious we can't do anything here; We have no clue what happening and even if we did, I highly doubt our tools could get inside him to fix it. Just help me get him to a bed.">*

<"... Fine."> Che'tr turned to the guard. *<"C'mon.">*

Once again, the quartet lifted the unconscious human and carried him from the room. *<"We have a spare bed up here, it was vacated yesterday.">* said F'ejen as he lead the party through the hall of curtains. With as much grace as the group could muster, Mark was lowered onto the suspended bed, the mechanical arm holding it aloft creaked beneath the weight. A collective sigh was let out when the rig held.

The young sentry spoke first. *<"Now if you'll excuse me, I must go.">*

<"I too have my duties. I wish you luck."> Che'tr joined the guard in departing from the ward.

Un'sla stretched toward the ceiling, her face gave a sense of satisfaction. *<"Alright, I gotta get some sleep. Let me know if Tiny needs to be moved again. G'night.">* She waved casually as she left the ward, leaving the two doctors left to deal with the problem at hand.

Mee'lo slathered his neck in saliva, still panting from his efforts; F'ejen did the same in an attempt to curb his stress. The pair shared a silent moment before F'ejen spoke. *<"Okay, we don't know exactly what's happening, but I'm confident that he's still fairly okay. The other medics are gonna find out about this; You get them to swear not to tell anyone, understood?">*

<"Yes, Chief.">

F'ejen began strapping Mark to the bed as he spoke. *<"I'm gonna go over my notes, see if I can still figure something out. You go get some sleep.">*

<"Understood."> The pair split off: Mee'lo heading to the sleeping quarters, and F'ejen left for his office. F'ejen scrutinized every scrap of research he had done in every combination possible. The hours ticked by and F'ejen grew frantic, searching for any sign as to what exactly was happening to Mark. He found nothing. The haggard doctor slumped back in his chair, exhausted. As much as he hated to admit it, his mind had run its course and he needed to rest. He laid his head down on his desk, and in the instant he closed his eyes, he fell asleep.

<"F'EJEN ROUR!"> BANG! BANG! BANG! <"YOU OPEN THIS DOOR RIGHT FUCKING NOW!"> Arnd was heard bellowing from outside F'ejen's office.

F'ejen shot awake. *<'I'm dead.'>* He jumped from his seat, heart and mind racing. Arnd's pounding on the door seemed to shake F'ejen's office to its very foundations, diagrams on the walls fluttered against the force of Arnd's fury. F'ejen trembled with every impact, his heart beating ever faster.

<'Thinkthinkthinkthinkthink... Okay.'> He almost sprinted for the door out of fear of further repercussions. F'ejen flung the door open to be greeted with Arnd. Her fur was standing on end, her ears were pricked up, and her every fang was on display in a show of absolute fury. She breathed deeply before speaking in a tone that made F'ejen shudder. *<"We were scheduled to Jump four san'rc ago. And now I get word that you fed Mark a narcotic.">* Arnd's eyes bored into F'ejen, chilling his blood. *<"You are going to fix this. **NOW.**">*

<"I should point out that he was well aware that this outcome was likely!"> he lied, like a liar.

Arnd seemed to consider the doctors words. *<"Whe- IF he wakes up, if he doesn't say the same thing: You can say goodbye to your job and your medical license. **Am. I. CLEAR?">***

<"Crystal, sir!"> F'ejen felt an impending sense of doom, even more so as he walked past Arnd and into the ward. Angry groans from patients rudely awakened from their sleep sounded from behind their curtained rooms. Arnd tailed F'ejen closely, and it wasn't until now that the doctor appreciated the fact that he was much shorter than she. F'ejen flung open the curtains to Mark's

room at the end of the ward. The human still lay motionless on the table, a thin film of sweat coated his bare upper body.

<"*Why is he wet?*"> asked Arnd.

<"*It's a human cooling mechanism, it's called sweat. It's just salt and water.*">

<"*I'm quizzing him on that too.*"> If nothing else, F'ejen knew there would be no punishment for that.

F'ejen examined the unconscious human. Mark had dug his hands into the bed below, ripping holes through the fabric lining the mattress and the metal bed beneath it, his eyes were also twitching rapidly beneath closed eyelids. F'ejen thought on everything Mark had told him about how humans sleep, but could think of nothing.

<"*So? What's happening?*"> asked Arnd.

<"*Think, you idiot!*" "*He's dreaming, we just need to wake him up.*"> F'ejen knew he was about to be fired, never mind the fact that he had no idea if Mark was truly asleep or not. <"*Here goes.*" "*Mark? You gotta wake up, buddy.*"> The human remained unresponsive. He tried shaking the human's shoulder, failing to so much as budge it. He shifted his gaze to Arnd, gesturing to give it a try herself.

She breathed an angry breath and shouted. <"**Mark!**">

As though Arnd had made a direct command, Mark's eyes wrenched open and he burst from his restraints. "**ANNE!**" The two x'erren present stepped back at the human's sudden awakening, F'ejen's heart was racing even more so than previously. He fought the urge to cool his neck. Mark breathed heavily and his gaze shifted rapidly, only slowing as he registered the two x'erren in the room. He looked down and ran his fingers across his slick chest, clearly unaware that he had been sweating. "What time i- *What time is it?*"

The doctor looked to the monitor to Mark's left, unused as the monitoring nodes couldn't register his pulse through his thick skin. <"*Just hit 08:000, you've been out for uh...*"> He scraped his teeth together as he thought. <"*Fourteen hours.*">

"... Jesus. *I'm sure I needed sleep, but never give me that again.*"

Arnd clicked her tongue to draw attention. <"*On that topic: Mark, did you know beforehand what the Iija you ingested could have done to you?*">

F'ejen thought he saw Mark's eyes briefly flick to him and back. "*Yes. I choose to take it.*"

<"*And it just resulted in you falling asleep?*"> Arnd's tone was noticeably less angry, with a hint of curiosity.

"*Yes, I was asleep. It made some weird, uh... what's the word? Sleep sight?*"

<"Dreams. Just weird dreams?">

"Yeah."

<"And that thin film of liquid, that 'sweat' of yours, it's normal?">

"Yes."

Arnd gave a skeptical look to F'ejen before poking a finger into his chest. <"Don't do anything like this ever again, understood?">

<"Understood, captain."> He watched as Arnd walked from the ward, she turned to face the ward before the door closed behind her. F'ejen wasn't sure if the look she gave was of anger or relief. Regardless, F'ejen felt like he had dodged a bullet; He was elated, what luck! He turned around to face Mark, who was in the process of lowering himself from the bed. Given what the human's heft had done to the floor of his office, F'ejen was thankful for the care he took.

Mark looked at his body, wiping off sweat with an unpleasant look on his face. "Eugh. *Is there a cleaning room on this ship?*"

<"Uh, yeah. Showers are above the toilets, you can't miss the stairs.">

Mark strode past F'ejen toward the exit. "Thanks, buddy."

<"Wait, before you go!"> Mark stopped his stride. <"What did you dream about? For documentation, of course.">

Mark's reply came after a brief silence. "*The worst day of my life.*" The human left the ward, and F'ejen was left to ponder his words.

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Mark's heart was racing and his head was pounding. His steps fell heavy on the empty hall's alloy floor, echoing down the passageway; Mark was simply thankful his steps weren't leaving dents in the floor. He looked down at his sweat coated body with an air of discomfort, both toward his unclean form and the dream that was it's cause. He walked past the stairs down to the bathroom below and spotted the stairs up to the showers. Mark hadn't had to lift his legs so high to climb stairs since he was a child, he felt like a fool. Midway up the flight, Arnd's voice came in through the ship's speakers. <"All crew to your seats, we Jump in 30 san'lo."> Mark continued to climb, knowing that he didn't need to heed the captain's warning as the alien crew did. Upon reaching the peak of the stairs he noticed a pair of x'erren sprinting down the hall, pulling on their black uniforms, wet footprints shimmered in their wake. 'Techs.'

The alien pair stopped at a handle sculpted into the wall and pulled, a panel in the wall slid away to reveal three seats in an alcove facing toward the bow of the ship. The techs clambered into their seats, pulling down harnesses over their chests. It wasn't until the two caught their breath



that they noticed Mark had been watching them. The one closest to Mark: A woman of indeterminate age, broke the silence. <"H-Hello.">

"Hello."

She seemed to stumble on her words. <"Your name's Mark, isn't it?">

"Yes it is."

An automatic voice sounded from the speakers. <"Twenty san'lo to Jump.">

The second x'erren; A young man, joined the conversation. <"Aren't you going to sit?">

"No."

The alien woman clarified Mark's statement, tilting her head so her voice carried better to the young man behind her. <"You weren't on deck when it happened, but he stayed standing during the Jump; I saw it on the camera feed.">

Mark was treated to an expression of utter shock that the woman was unable to see. The young man closed his mouth before speaking. <"Um... Just how strong are you?">

Mark thought on that for a moment. "Don't know how strong, but I bent metal."

<"I heard about that, you bent their guns."> Mark winced slightly at the mention of weapons, the worst of the attack was still fresh in his mind.

"And walls to fix them." Mark tried to push the cause of that damage from his mind, and failed.

The x'erren blinked repeatedly, clearly in the process of registering just what they had heard; And the expression of shock on their face slowly turned to one of awe. <"How did you get so strong?">

Mark thought back to his days on Earth: The grueling months it took just to get used to exercising, all the blood, sweat, and tears it took to slowly improve his physique. The years of weight training for strength, boxing practice for stamina, and endurance training to improve pain tolerance. He thought of why he did it, and for who. "... I worked hard. Very hard. It would take much longer if I did it on your planet, the, um... What's X'rtan for thing pushing you down?"

The woman in front spoke up, gesturing appropriately. <"Gravity?">

"Gravity, that's it. Gravity doesn't feel strong as Earth's gravity does."

The foremost x'erren continued speaking. <"'Erth', that's your home planet?">

*"Yeah. Funny, it means dirt in my language."*

*<"They didn't think too big did they?">*

*Mark chuckled. "Yes and no. It was supposed to be 'this is world we all live on' thing, but words change."*

*<"... No? Words don't change.">*

*Mark blinked like an idiot, then spoke. "Wait... You're tell me you had same words for thousands of years... and none changed over time?"*

*<"None. What, do words change on your planet?">*

*"Yeah, took thousands years of slow changes and take words from other nations just get my language!"*

*The X'erren in the rear chimed in. <"We've borrowed words from other languages too, but those are only for culturally specific things.">*

*"... Not much culture swap for a while, was there?"*

*<"Of course not, there was only one culture for a long time.">*

*"You can't be serious."*

*<"I am very serious.">*

*"What, so there only one group of X'erren on entire planet?"*

*<"There was, now there's more.">*

*"... Um..."*

*The female technician interjected. <"I could explain it, but I don't know how much X'rtan you know.">*

*"I know enough, I can figure out."*

*<"If you insist. So: When the first animals that could be called x'erren came to be, there was only one place on Kerc-en that had enough proto-x'erren in one place for them to survive. It wasn't always stable, but over time the group grew and grew until it became a true civilization. We founded a religion, learned how to farm and build, everything we needed to live. We*

*developed writing and architecture, and slowly increased our sphere of influence. It wasn't until we had sufficient weaponry to truly set out that our society began to split apart; Rebellious groups made for all corners of the globe to start their own civilizations. That is what we call The Rift."*> Mark found some parts to be hard to understand, but he could piece it together well enough. He encouraged her to keep going. *"As time wore on, those rebels' bodies and minds acclimatized to their new locations, and their cultures diverged further and further as future generations continued on. All of that led to the Kerc-en we know today."*>

"... Damn. Wait, does that mean there's truth of your species time-changing after you settled into society?"

*"Evolving. And yes there is. I imagine that's not how it happened on your planet?">*

*"Not at all. We were all over place from the start."*

*"Fascinating. Now for the question I was going to ask before I was so rudely interrupted."*> She shot a glance back at the young man behind her. *"What brings you to the showers?">*

Mark gestured to himself. *"Does it look like I have wash recently?"*

*"I don't exactly know what a dirty uh, hyoumin?">*—Mark corrected her—*"-human looks like."*>

*"Well now you do. Now, if I may-"*

Once again, the automated voice spoke from the speakers above. *"Six san'lo to Jump."*> Mark thought back to what the launch from Men-te did to the toilet and winced at the potential damage he could do to the shower. *"On second thought, probably not good idea to get into shower this close to Jump."*

*"No, no it's not."*> And so they waited, and Mark immediately regretted sticking around. The silence was so awkward that Mark would have preferred to still be floating in space. This feeling of awkwardness was not helped by the young man in the chair staring at him with a look of anticipation. As the automated voice counted down the final seconds, the woman's eyes also turned to look at Mark.

'Should I? It wouldn't be dishonest... Fuck it. I might as well put on a show.'

*"Jump."*>

As the ship lurched into Slipspace, Mark crossed his arms and braced. His form betrayed no sign of strain, only stoic might. He tapped his foot with some genuine impatience, but he knew it was mostly for show. He smiled internally as the young man's eyes slowly opened against the pressure, widening in shock upon seeing Mark's display of nonchalance. Mark sighed insincerely, fighting back a smile as the young X'erren's gaze remained locked in awe. The woman's eyes opened, showing the same wonder as her fellow technician. Despite the performance he was putting on, Mark still felt a sense of sympathetic discomfort at the sight of

his alien hosts being forced into the back of their chairs. 'I can only imagine what they're feeling. The centrifuge wasn't fun, I don't wanna think of what that would feel like at light speed.'

When the Star Chaser finally left Slipspace, Mark shifted his footing so as to stay standing. He winced as the pair of techs across the hall were jostled forward into their harnesses. *"You okay?"*

The woman responded first. *<"Yeah, just a bit winded.">*

The young tech behind her followed suit. *<"I'm fine, I'm fine.">* His slow panting proved that was a lie. The man groaned as he removed his harness and got up from his seat. *<"I will be, at least.">*

*"I... If you insist."*

*<"Well, don't let us keep you.">* said the woman as she stepped from the alcove.

*"... Sure, good day."* Mark gave a respectful nod to the pair before continuing down the corridor. He thought of his first experience with whiplash in the front seat of his friend's car back on Earth and winced at the image.

From behind him, Mark heard hushed voices. *<"Are you okay, bora?">*

*<"Yeah, just some bruising. Help me close this up.">*

The showers were empty, the chill of recently wet metal beneath his feet gave Mark an unpleasant shock. The center of the room was divided into many small squares by tall partitions and doors, what could only be a shower head descended from the ceiling into each. Directly to Mark's left was a series of hooks and a chute, their uses were obvious. Mark removed his pants and hung them up. Due to the looseness of the pant's cuffs, there wasn't much of a temperature difference, but a different kind of chill ran up Mark's spine. For the first time since he left his prison cell, he felt truly exposed. He strode into the nearest cubicle and shut the door behind him. A lever and a dispenser of cleanser stood on the wall ahead. 'These guys are covered in fur, I can only guess that this works as a shampoo too.' Mark reached his hand forward, cupping it beneath the device; Thick liquid soap poured from the box at the behest of a hand sensor. Mark turned the lever until the water was just right, and set to work.

If it weren't for the fact that this was taking place on an alien spaceship, Mark would have found this liberating. Every crevice felt new as the cleansing gel did it's job, and Mark was reassured he wasn't too large as he scrubbed every inch of his back. The relief of tension Mark felt as he massaged the soap into his hair was almost heavenly; It didn't help that the soap itself smelled fantastic: A flowery scent that brought to mind an elaborate garden by the sea. Once the last of the shampoo fell from his now silky smooth hair, Mark just let the warm water beat down on his body; embracing the time he oh so often used for introspection as an escape from it all: Nothing

but the sound and sensation of warm rainfall. Upon feeling that he had relaxed enough, Mark pushed the lever back toward the far wall and turned off the water. Not one second later, a heavy gust of air blew down on Mark's head from all directions, slowly moving down his body. If it weren't for the deafening noise, Mark would appreciate the hands-off drying process. By God, wind blowing directly into your ear hurts.

The automatic blow drying ceased, and Mark was left standing in an empty box, dry as a bone. Upon shaking off the shocking experience, Mark disembarked from his cubicle and made for the clothing rack. It wasn't until now that Mark realized just how loud the shower was, for he was facing down a group of X'erren disrobing.

'At least I know why I didn't hear them... They guys?' Mark glanced further down. 'Yep; they're all definitely guys.'

Mark internally shook off the shock of this new development and kept walking, a show of stoicism in his movements. He fought back his embarrassment with all his might as he walked past the group and pulled on his pants. All the while, he felt their eyes boring into him.

'Seriously, what is it with X'erren and a lack of subtlety?'

As he left the showers, he took such human solace in one fact: 'At least they're all reasonably sized.'

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The television's dim glow illuminated the lounge, the woman on screen spoke in that obnoxious tone all newscasters do.

"... In related news, a NASA engineer and test pilot for a potential Faster Than Light vessel has gone missing. Our reporter asked the Chairman of NASA, Frederick Barnes, to clarify; he had this to say:"

The camera cut to a squat old man in a suit one size too small for him. You could barely make out the small step he was standing on to reach the top of the podium.

"It is true that our pilot is no longer within the confines of our solar system, this is not cause for alarm. His absence from our little sphere of influence is merely a part of the test, and in the highly unlikely event that his craft is unable to make the return journey, he has enough supplies to last him years. In that time, I suspect that we would have already put FTL capable engines up for market. The future is almost here, and I'll be damned if he doesn't see it."

Cut back to the studio, the anchor shuffled her papers with trained efficiency.

"Bold words from Mister Barnes. What do you think of this development, Liam?"

"My confidence is with the experts, Katie. As should yours."

Finn could do nothing else but stare at the screen through a film of cigarette smoke. Any words he could have said would feel limp in comparison to how he felt. The mug in his hand splintered in his grip, Finn felt neither the porcelain piercing his palm or the hot coffee burning his hand; All he could focus on was the injustice he had witnessed.

With what little composure he could muster, Finn put down his cigarette. He got up from his sofa, plucking shards of mug from his palm, and walked to the bathroom. He didn't feel the water running down his hand or the alcoholic wipes cleaning his wounds. He didn't care that he was using excessive force to wrap his injured hand in gauze.

In times like these, Finn was thankful for the cleaning techniques his parents had taught him. Brown stains marred the beige upholstery of his couch, and spots of coffee had exploded across the lacquered wood floor and coffee table. Finn attacked the stains on his sofa with just the right mixture of hot water and baking soda, delighting in their erasure. He was thorough with his mop, making sure that each drop of coffee was gone. His washcloth ran over every inch of the coffee table, leaving a clear view of the floor below in its wake.

It took an hour, but by the time Finn was done, not so much as the smell of coffee remained in the room. But despite the sheer marvel of cleaning he had performed, Finn couldn't get his mind off that news report. He sat back down on his couch, sensation was beginning to come back. He felt his teeth shoot pain into his mouth as they were clenched together, he felt fresh blood seep from the wound on his hand as he balled his fists tighter, he felt his entire body shake with barely contained fury. He had to call someone, he didn't care if they had already seen it. Finn didn't hold his phone so much as he lifted it, not wanting to break something that would hurt his wallet to replace. He barely heard the dial tone, the response was so fast. Percy's voice came through the line, his tone showed a hint of anger. "I saw it. I-"

Finn's rage peaked, but he didn't scream; He just let it all fall from his eyes. "They didn't even say his fucking name."

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