



Dare: A M/M Sci-Fi Romance (Mindset Duet Book 1)

Author: C.J. Dragon

Category: LGBT+

Description: Dare Munro possesses empathic abilities, a mutation that emerged in humans during the past climate crisis. Some people interpret these mutations as Mother Nature's way of seeking revenge or finding solace for what has been lost.

When his 'gift' became evident, his parents abandoned him, but now he's a counselor of high repute with a Mindset Three rating.

Only Dare knows that he is not what he appears to be.

Dare's true abilities came to light when he assisted a client dealing with the loss of his family. It was only a matter of time before the Service came for him to lock him away and use his talents for their own gain.

Determined to escape Earth, he secures passage on the colony ship, Gambit. On the ship, he'll find Jason Stravetta, the ship owner's son, who is famous for his strong aversion to Mindsets.

Despite the other man's dislike, Dare is drawn to Stravetta, hoping for a friend rather than an enemy.

Will Stravetta force him to reveal his truth?

Will that truth cost Dare his freedom and his life?

Find out today in the first book of this new sci-fi duet from C.J. Dragon!

Total Pages (Source): 34

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:41 pm

It was a gray, overcast morning, as were most mornings now. The temperature was in the low seventies and would rise to the nineties before the day ended. The climate cataclysm had struck several hundred years ago, and in the aftermath, most days were gray and the temps high.

Ignored for a long time, climate change altered the Earth in ways that could not be undone. As the temperatures rose, so did the seas, flooding sea level cities, causing the first multitude to die. Famine followed, causing more death, which rode on the back of old diseases becoming new and more virulent. Animals and marine life either adapted or died, causing mass extinctions to rise as humans struggled to survive a catastrophe of their own making. Mother Earth had no pity and took her own vengeance to remake what had been lost.

Mutations abounded and humans were not exempt. Animals changed to stay alive and humans changed in order to adapt. Empaths emerged; some say in response to the pain Earth was experiencing. Others posited evolution, while some felt it was a malignant adaptation. Laws were quickly passed to control those who were gifted, varying from protective to punitive.

This is the world that Dare Munro woke to—on his last day on Earth.

Dare came out of sleep abruptly, the dream he was having dissipated without memory. He blinked deep blue eyes to clear them, then sat up. Unruly dark hair fell into his face, causing him to frown before pushing it away. Staring around his ten-by-ten room, he took a breath, waiting for the dampers to completely wear off. He hated taking those every night, but there was no choice. Otherwise, his shields would drop while in sleep, allowing him to hear and feel everything around him. Even if he'd

wanted to chance it, today was his last day here. Being rested and alert was a necessity.

Swinging his legs out of his covers, the young man stood up. Everything in this room would stay except for his personal belongings. He gave himself a faint smile. Not that there was very much, but he still needed to pack it for transit. Once on his feet, he stretched, warming his muscles for movement in the mild heat of his room.

Going to a panel to the right of his bed, he touched it to open the bath. The panel slid back, exposing a four-by-four inset that included a toilet, tiny sink, and a wet room shower. Dare used the toilet, drank some lukewarm water, and took a quick shower as the water automatically shut off after five minutes. Glimpsing himself in the mirror, he saw a solemn young man, slender, finely muscled, though not tall, then gave himself a mocking smile. He dressed in loose, breathable pants and a long shirt. Padding across the room barefoot, he pulled out the regulation luggage he'd been given and packed.

Consulting the list that he was given by the liaison for the ship, *Gambit*, he packed only those items listed, putting the dampers in a safe pocket. Dare wasn't sure if his services would be needed during the voyage out. The *Gambit's* liaison had been vague about that, not that Dare cared one way or the other. The most important thing was that he had found a ship to take him off planet before he was discovered and could never leave.

He grimaced as he added the last item of clothing to his luggage, inwardly cursing himself. He'd been too open, too helpful. He was a Mindset, an empath capable of feeling the emotions of others. Dare had trained as a counselor, preferring to work in public health. He was rated as a Mindset Three, able to transmit emotions but not alter another's feelings. He shook his head. He had extended his abilities to help a man who had lost his family to the latest environmental plague, and in doing so, others had seen he was more. They'd kept quiet so far, but he couldn't count on their

silence. Everyone had secrets, some worse than his, and he could only hope they didn't want those exposed any more than he did. He grimaced. Not that he'd do that to another person, but those "others" didn't know that.

Years of hiding his abilities, fooling the tests, likely lost in a few moments of comfort. Dare was a Mindset One, capable of receiving and transmitting feelings and thought, a rare combination of empath and telepath. A One never left Earth, and in fact, were rarely seen. They were used in government facilities, by the military, or used in experiments. But not irrevocably harmed, as they were far too valuable for that. He was lucky the Gambit would take him. They weren't a government sponsored ship, and in fact, might be taking this voyage to get away from problems of their own. Dare didn't care and didn't want to know. As long as he was put down on a planet with the other colonists, whatever the Gambit did was fine with him.

Anything was better than being punished with life on this planet because of who he was and what he could do. He didn't care if he died in cryo or was killed on the new planet. Anything was better than being held in confinement and endlessly used.

Packing done, he put his case by the door. There was just enough food stored to have a breakfast comprising high calorie yogurt, a precious piece of fruit, and tea. He ate sitting on the futon, hearing the heat pump wheezing to keep up in the rising outside heat. Thoughts drifting, he remembered seeing his parents for the last time.

They were both considered nice and well-liked by their neighbors. Dare was an only child, a state he'd mourned while growing up. Neither parent was overtly loving, but he was never abused. His needs were met, unquestioningly, until his gift manifested as he reached puberty. The distance between parent and child became wider as each ability opened until Dare realized they were actually afraid of him. He knew then they could never show him the love he wanted, no matter how much they took care of him. Wise beyond his twelve years, he'd fooled the tests and downplayed his abilities until now. Shaking the memory away, he finished his meager breakfast. He hadn't

said goodbye since neither parent seemed interested in what he did, plus he didn't want anyone to know he was leaving until it was too late.

Putting the waste from his meal into the recycler, he glanced at the clock. It was time to go. It might take him over two hours to reach the airfield for the shuttle taking him up to the Gambit. Pulling on his sturdiest shoes, he mused about his upcoming flight. He was thankful that, despite the climate misery, the search for viable planets had continued, along with improved propulsion methods. There was a small colony on the moon, and another, more successful one, on Mars. Both were too close for him, but a one light-year trip to New Eire should take him far beyond the reach of anyone wishing him harm. He sighed, then stood, picking up his luggage. He took one last look at the nondescript room he'd lived in for over a year, then nodded.

He was used to being alone, but constantly wished for more, craving a connection he would never allow.

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Dare caught the train leaving for the spaceport, sitting in third class because that was what he could afford. His luggage was wedged in an overhead bin, and he glanced around at the other passengers, wondering if any were going where he was, then shrugged. Everyone was assiduously not looking at anyone else, so the young man opened his reader and dropped into the world of an old thriller.

The train stopped at the port station a little short of two hours later, much to Dare's relief. Pulling his bag down, he stood with everyone else, waiting to leave. He turned off his pad, stuffing it into its padded pocket within his bag. The line finally moved, disembarking into the humid air.

Anxiety and anticipation warred in Dare's gut as he looked for the correct departure area, noting he wasn't the only one doing so. Glancing around, he deliberately tamped down his gift. His own emotions, now that the reality of leaving was upon him, were enough for him to manage. Making eye contact with a few others, he gave a faint smile, carefully broadcasting empathetically his harmlessness, before moving towards the embarkation area.

Paperwork ready, he queued up, moving to another line for working passengers. He had to work his passage as he could not afford to pay for it, and he'd do what he'd always done for people—provide reassurance and comfort. He shook his head. There'd be no cryo for him. He would work for the two years at half-light speed the trip would take, either with the crew or other passengers. Two more years of stuffing his true abilities away. There was no choice, and he would do it, whatever the cost to himself.

Mulling over these thoughts, he was surprised to be at the head of the line. A thirty

something year old man, name tag stating "Tate", put out a hand for his documents. Dare wordlessly handed them over, politely bowing his head. Tate looked the papers over carefully, then looked up at the young man with a smile, his brown eyes twinkling as he ran his hand through his sandy brown hair.

"Mr. Munro, let me be the first to welcome you to the Gambit. You'll be berthed on the crew side of the ship. I'm glad you're with us. We've been without a Mindset for some time, and things have been a bit tense as a result." Dare gave Tate a hesitant smile before the older man went on.

"Do you need to pick up anything before we leave?"

Dare shook his head, "No, sir. I've got everything in my bag." Tate nodded.

"In that case, move over behind me, and I'll take you over to the shuttle once I've checked in the other passengers. Least I can do since we'll be co-crew on this trip."

Dare allowed his empathy to reach out just enough to get a read on Tate. Thankfully, he was what he seemed—a decent, helpful person with no apparent agenda other than being useful. Smiling a genuine smile, Dare thanked him and moved behind the other man. Taking a deep breath, he hoped that was a good sign of the voyage to come, or at least he'd met someone who wanted nothing from him. So far.

Tate was true to his word. Once finished checking in the paying customers, he shut down his console and waved Dare forward, giving him another smile.

"Ever been on a starship before, Mr. Munro?"

Dare shook his head. "No, sir. I went to the moon for a visit with my parents when I was a child, but nothing else."

Tate glanced over at him, shaking his own head. "By Gaia, don't call me sir. I'm Lieutenant Tate if you want my rank, or you can call me Mike. The Gambit's not that formal, but we do have to follow orders or Captain Arends gets pissed. You don't want to be on the receiving end of that, believe me."

Dare relaxed just a little. "Please, call me Dare then, Mike. Mr. Munro makes me think I'm in trouble."

Mike grinned. "You're not at this point, so don't worry about that. We're just glad you decided to emigrate. Being without a Mindset has been tough. You know, crowded ship, all those personalities, and nobody to mediate. Don't be surprised if Captain Arends wants you to stay with us when we get to New Eire. Most of the Mindsets we've had on board could only stand to be away from Earth for the trip out. Had to put them in cryo for the return. Here's hoping you're different."

Dare's eyes widened in alarm. "I've heard nothing about that. Nobody ever said anything about having trouble leaving Earth." His heart rate kicked up, and he paled. "I want to leave—I hope that makes a difference. I have nothing to come back to."

Mike stopped walking, taking Dare's arm. "I know you must have left a job, but what about your parents?"

Dare swallowed, then ducked his head. "They're not really involved in my life since I became an empath."

The lieutenant frowned. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Maybe wanting to leave is the difference."

Dare nodded numbly. "I...I hope so. I don't want to come back to Earth." He could feel Mike's warm hand through his shirtsleeve tighten, then let him go.

"Then we'll do our best to help you settle on the Gambit, and then on New Eire. We'll be orbiting the planet while all of you get settled down there. Worrying about this won't help, so try not to. If it's any consolation, you seem different from the other Mindsets we've had. I mean that in a good way."

Dare gave him a barely there smile. "Thanks, Mike. I'm going to hope for the best. It's all I can do."

Mike nodded and started walking again. "Let's get you up to the ship and settled in. For what it's worth, I think you'll do fine. This is our last stop, so all the colonists are finally here and ready to go. New Eire is starting with two hundred people. I've been by the planet, and it looks good."

Dare nodded mutely, hoping he'd be alright.

The shuttle was full. Dare was the only new addition to the crew and sat with Mike. He gazed over at the other passengers, keeping his empathy to himself. He'd have plenty of time to get to know them all and help them if they needed it. Most of them were older than him, maybe in their thirties. Dare had his twenty-fourth birthday two months ago and knew he was young for what he'd chosen as a profession. Most thought him too young to help because of his "lack of experience". What they didn't know was he'd been fast tracked in the counseling program at age 18, finished the requisite courses at twenty, and then spent a year under supervision before being licensed. In that time, he felt and experienced so many emotions from others he didn't need to experience them himself because he already had. It had become easier once his boundary shields were formed.

He gave an internal shrug. Many empaths burned out because of emotional overload due to failing boundaries. His were an unassailable wall in his mind, and once up, unbreakable. Not that he didn't feel what others felt, but at least it was on his terms, not theirs.

Mike nudged him, pointing out the tiny porthole window. "There's the Gambit in all her glory."

Dare stared at the ship that would be his home for the next two years. It was huge, with a cylinder that rotated to produce the artificial gravity needed. The only thing he was sure of were the engines at the rear of the ship. Everything else was a mystery.

Mike sighed. "It'll be good to be home," then laughed at the expression on Dare's face. "No, I mean that. I've been part of the crew for five years, and most of them I consider family. You'll see."

Dare gave him a slow nod, and a questioning look, obviously thinking. Maybe I'll make some friends, but family? Probably not.

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The shuttle landed without fanfare on the cavernous flight deck. Mike spirited him out of the debarkation ramp before the rest of the passengers.

"No sense waiting for all of them to get organized. We'll go through the crew decontamination unit and get you settled in your berth. I'll need to report for duty then, since I'm the navigator for the trip out of here. I'm assuming you've never been through decon before?"

Dare was looking everywhere as they walked. The walls were uniformly light gray, the air scentless. The lighting was just enough to see, and Dare had a moment of loss, thinking he should have looked up at the sun before he boarded. Too late now. He shook his head at Mike's question.

"No, I've never had to do that. Do you do that every time you come back to the ship?" He glanced over at his guide. "I have been immunized for absolutely everything at least once."

Mike grinned his understanding. "Getting vaxxed is for you, decon is for the rest of us. Yes, every time. Never know what you might bring back. The flight deck is opened to vacuum once we're underway, and no one gets into the body of the ship before going through decontamination. I'll go through first so you can watch. It's a little uncomfortable, but you'll get used to it. There'll be a flight suit and ship shoes for you when you exit. Leave what you're wearing in there, so it can be recycled. Give me your bag—it has a separate decon to go through. If you've got a pad, turn it off. Otherwise, it'll get fried."

Dare nodded his understanding, feeling a little anxious. Mike gripped his arm again.

"Don't worry, Dare. Just watch what I do and copy me."

Mike undogged the hatch to a small room after shoving Dare's bag into a separate hatch. He pointed to a small window. "Watch me through there. Oh, I forgot to mention—this has to be done naked. Hope you're not too modest."

Mike was inside before Dare could comment. He stripped off his flight suit, kicking off his shoes. Moving to an "x" on the deck, he stood with his arms out and legs spread. Glancing over at Dare's apprehensive face, he smiled. "Here we go."

Dare tried not to stare at his compact body with its obvious muscles, firm butt, and ridged abdomen. He was attractive, but Dare didn't want to ogle him. Or have a physical reaction he didn't want to explain.

Dare heard him say "Decontamination on for adult human male," then a bright light made him blink as a cloud enveloped Mike. It was over in less than five minutes. The navigator turned before leaving the unit. "Make sure you close your eyes, Dare. Let the unit clean up from me and then come on through. The outside light will show green when it's ready."

Mike left out the opposite door without further comment. Dare waited, taking a deep breath to quell his nerves. The light turned green, and he went in. Dare copied everything Mike had done, including the words he spoke, then closed his eyes tightly. The whirling cloud burned a little as he realized that it was atomizing the top layer of his skin. The rest of the odor was that of an airborne broad-spectrum antibiotic he inhaled, not that he was aware of that at the time. The unit announced softly that he was done as Dare cautiously opened his eyes, found the door, and wasted no time getting out.

Mike was waiting for him, handing him his flight suit and shoes while giving him a critical look. "You need to gain some weight while you're on board. It's hard work

being on a new colony, and you look like you haven't been eating much." He patted his own flat stomach. "We'll set you up so you can work up more muscle, too." Dare flushed, feeling far too exposed, then ducked his head. Mike gave him a kind smile before turning away. "Get dressed and I'll show you where you'll be living for the next two years or so. I'll drop you off at the mess before I head to the bridge."

Dare nodded, not making eye contact until he heard Mike sigh. "If I embarrassed you, I'm sorry. I'm too used to being around the crew where modesty is unknown."

Dare forced himself to look up at the navigator. "It's alright, Mike. You've been very kind. I'm just...I mean, I lived alone and haven't been around naked people very often. I'll manage, don't worry."

Mike gave him a searching look, then nodded. "Thanks, Dare, I know you will. Let's get you where you need to go, and then we'll get you some food."

His berth was smaller than his room on Earth, but comfortable for all that. The bunk folded down from the bulkhead with two drawers opposite. A table folded down off the wall at the end of his bunk with a hard stool attached. At the far end was a panel covering a toilet and sink. He was surprised to see that the color was a light blue, rather than the gray he'd seen before. Mike explained the showers were communal and needed to be taken at least three times a week, more if he was given work that actually made him sweat. Showers were timed to three minutes, and he would be assigned a cubicle and time, usually before or after his shift. His bag was waiting for him when they arrived, and he slung it up on his bed since Mike needed to get to his shift. One more glance around and he followed Tate out into the corridor.

Mike gave him a quick overview of the mess, saying it was open all the time because of the constant shifts being crewed. Food was set out, and his guide encouraged him to take as much as he wanted, made sure he knew his way back to his berth, smiled, then left.

Dare let out a breath before tucking into more food than he'd had in months. A few other crew members wandered in, gave him a nod, ate, and left.

Dare went back for seconds, feeling a little guilty but still hungry. Starting on his second meal, he nodded to himself. He could do this, and maybe, just maybe, everything would work out. He would be safe for the first time, sailing through the stars, heading for a new life.

Hopefully.

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Dare made it back to his berth without mishap. He saw no one on his way there, then realized they were all on shift, or sleeping. The young man did a thorough tour of his living space, checking out the bathroom out of necessity, then packing his clothes into the drawers provided. He lowered his bed, putting his pad on it, then went to see if he could increase the light level. Some trial and error later, he could up the lights to a setting he felt comfortable with.

Stuffing his two pillows behind his head, he settled back on his bed to read, feeling a little sleepy from the food he'd eaten. Dare was almost finished with the story he'd started earlier in the day when the speaker he'd noticed, then forgotten, squawked.

He jumped, startled, then rolled off the bed, going over to where the noise was coming from. He saw then that there was a screen and a speaker, and as he stared at it, it made another annoying sound. Thinking "what the hell," he tapped the screen to answer.

Another young man's face resolved on the screen, smiling when he saw Dare. The empath noticed the short blond hair and startling green eyes, figuring this crew member was closer to his age than Mike was.

"Dare Munro?" Dare nodded cautiously. "I'm Riis Sorenson, admin assist to Captain Arends. The captain would like to meet with you at oh eight hundred tomorrow morning. Don't worry, this is just a meet and greet he does with all new crew. Just remember, he's the captain, and that means the law out here in the black. Mike Tate said he'd got you settled in. Do you need anything or have any questions?"

Dare pulled up a credible smile. "Thank you, Riis, but Mike sorted me out. I know

how to get to the mess and back here. I don't know where to go to see the captain, though. I also need to be put on the shower roster and told where to find more flight suits."

Riis gave a friendly nod. "I'll come get you tomorrow morning. Otherwise, you'll get lost for sure. You'll be receiving a week's worth of suits tomorrow, and are you a morning or evening bather? I've got openings on both rosters. If what you choose doesn't work, we can usually switch."

Dare gave it a moment of consideration. "I'll take an evening slot for now. I don't know what I'll be doing other than counseling work."

Riis grinned at Dare's thoughtful expression. "I don't know either, but I'm sure the captain does. I'm sure Mike told you we've been without a Mindset for a bit, so I'm betting you'll be busy as soon as you speak with the captain. I'm thinking that Captain Arends will let you settle into that for a while, since that's the reason you're here. Everyone is looking forward to speaking with a professional counselor, rather than grouching at our co-workers. You'll need to fit in the colonists if they need you, too."

Dare shifted into his professional role, giving Riis a quick nod. "How many crew? I know there's about two hundred colonists. I'll need a quiet office to see everyone in, too, and secure storage for my notes."

Riis gazed at Dare and shrugged. "We've got fifty crew, rotating in two shifts, starting at seven each morning. Good choice on an evening shower, since you'll have to get up early for the night shift. We've got an office set up for you—the Mindset we had before used it with no complaints. I'll take you there tomorrow when the captain's done with you. Any other concerns?"

Dare shook his head, smiling. "No, you've answered all my questions and concerns,

thank you. I'll be ready when you get here tomorrow, Riis."

"Perfect. Welcome aboard, Dare. Have a good evening and I'll see you in the morning."

Dare smiled, murmured a "goodbye", then shut off the device.

Moving back to sit on his berth, he picked up his pad, then put it down, thoughts whirling with all he'd heard and seen.

Unable to focus, he shut down the pad, pulled off and folded his suit, and climbed into the bunk. Dampers forgotten, he fell asleep.

Dare woke, almost crying out. His mind was full of others' thoughts, others' feelings. Belatedly realizing he'd neglected to take his nightly medication, he carefully drew in a breath, then rebuilt his shields, causing a headache to form behind his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he completed his boundary shield, sighing when it "clicked" into place, shutting out the noise of others' thoughts and emotions. The headache persisted, a dull throb he hoped would leave when he ate breakfast. He glanced around for a chronometer, seeing that the vid screen displayed the time. It was oh six hundred, thank Gaia. He had time to freshen up and eat.

Poking around in the bath area, he discovered recyclable towels and cloths for washing, as well as a toothbrush. He'd used a beard suppressant a week ago, so that didn't need to be done. After cleaning up, he brushed his teeth, combed his hair, then pulled it back into a short tail after fishing out a hair tie from his case. He put on the suit he'd been wearing the day before, since he had nothing else he could wear to see the captain, then went out the door to get breakfast.

The mess was much busier this time, with a commensurate noise level. Projecting his "nothing to see here" empathetically, he filled a plate, grabbed what was real coffee,

and found a small, empty table. A few of the crew nodded to him, but none came over, thankfully.

He ate everything he'd put on his plate, but rising anxiety prevented him from going back for more. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he busied his dishes and left to return to his berth.

There were forty-five minutes to wait until Riis came for him. He made his bed, cleaned up the bath, recycled the towel and cloth, then made sure his drawers were shut, and his room was presentable. Sitting on the bed cross-legged, he opened his pad, hoping for diversion but found only worry. At least the headache was gone. Dare spent a few minutes berating himself for not taking the medication he needed before sleeping, knowing he wouldn't forget it now for a long time. He could not afford to become complacent about anything, no matter how safe he felt.

He was still in that rabbit hole when Riis knocked on his door. Dare turned off his pad, then slid off the bed. Opening his door, he was surprised to see Riis and Mike, both grinning at him.

Involuntarily stepping back, Dare stared at them before murmuring a greeting, feeling overwhelmed. Mike glanced over at Riis, then back to Dare.

"I told you both of us showing up was going to throw him, but no, you thought it would be a good idea. Riis, you need to go down to the planet sometimes and see how it is, rather than thinking everyone is as outgoing as you are. It's different down there, right, Dare?"

Dare, recovering his equilibrium, nodded. "It's very different, but I live here now. It's alright, Riis. I'm just not used to surprises."

Riis ducked his head. "I thought you'd like a little welcoming committee as an escort

to the captain. I didn't mean to upset you." Mike nudged him.

"That's not much of an apology, Riis." The admin assistant shot him a look and frowned a little before turning back to Dare.

"I'm sorry, Dare. Mike's right. I spend so much time on the ship that I really do not know what it's like on planet. That's my excuse and I'm sticking to it."

The young empath chuckled. "I get it. I don't know what ship life is like, so we're even. I'd stay on ship too since you need to go through decon every time you come back. That sucked."

Riis poked Mike in the ribs. "See? He understands, even if you don't."

Mike shrugged. "I get it. I enjoy being on a planet once in a while, so sue me. I don't like decon but I'll pay that price to breathe fresh air."

Dare took a deep breath and grinned. "You think it's fresh because you're outside. You'd be wrong about that."

Mike shook his head as both younger men laughed softly. "Sure, sure. I don't know why you're laughing, Riis. You wouldn't know fresh air if it flew up your nose." He gave them both a smile. "Guess we'd better get going. You know how the captain feels about tardiness."

Riis tugged at his suit. "Crap, that's the truth. C'mon, Dare. We'll walk Mike to the mess and then we'll go on to the captain's office. I've got some work to do while the cap gives you the once over."

Dare stiffened. "We're just going to talk, right? I mean, what's the 'once over'?"

Riis turned a calming look on him. "I was teasing. It's going to be just talk and he'll probably ask about your training. He won't be checking out anything else or asking you for a date."

Mike reached out and gave Riis a solid poke in the ribs. "Stop it, you ferret. You're making him nervous again with your runaway mouth."

Dare surprised himself by laughing. "Ferret? I've seen pix of them. I guess Riis kind of looks like one from the right angle." Riis gave him an affronted look. "Now I'm teasing you. It's alright, Mike. I can manage talking since I do that for a living."

Mike nodded, then peeled off to go into the mess. Riis and Dare walked in silence for a minute before the assistant glanced over at the empath.

"I didn't mean to upset you again. I just don't know when to stop talking sometimes."

Dare gave him a friendly smile. "It's fine, so stop worrying. I think we're a matched set since I don't know how to talk, unless I'm working."

Riis nodded, returning the smile. "Thanks. You're a nice guy, and I hope we'll be friends. Mike likes you, too, and he's the best."

A little flustered, Dare nodded. "I'd like that. You've both been patient and kind. I appreciate that."

Riis slowed, then stopped at an official-looking door, the nameplate declaring "Captain Richard Arends". "My desk is just inside, so let's go in. I'll let the cap know you're here, and then he'll see you."

Giving him a brief nod, Dare waited for Riis to open the door, letting him go through

first. Riis' desk was spotless, his comp front and center on it. He motioned Dare in front of him before hitting the intercom.

"Captain Arends, Dare Munro, Mindset Three, is here as ordered, sir."

A deep voice responded. "Send him in, Mr. Sorenson."

Riis stood, going to the door between his desk and the captain's office. He opened it, said Dare's name again, then ushered him in, closing the door behind him.

Dare drew in a stuttering breath, blinked twice, and looked over at the man who held his fate for the next two years.

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The captain's office was a little bigger than Dare's berth, the color a warm yellow. The desk was towards the back bulkhead, with enough room for a chair behind it and nothing else. Dare took all of this in before looking at the other man in the room.

Captain Arends stood up halfway, motioning Dare into the room and waving him into a chair before sitting down again. Dare nodded, then sat in one of the two chairs positioned in front of the captain, looking at him closely.

Richard Arends was in the prime of life, approximately forty-something years old. He was lightly tanned, his auburn hair threaded with silver, his eyes a warm brown. They regarded each other for a moment before the captain spoke.

"I'm sure Mr. Sorenson told you I meet with all new crew. I want to welcome you, Mr. Munro, as we need a Mindset more than usual currently. Having been without that outlet for a year and a half has been hard for the crew, and that reduced our efficiency, which is hard on me. I don't expect you to do anything other than what you're trained for right now. I'm sure the crew will keep you busy, as will the colonists. The colonists have some non-gifted therapists with them, as well as doctors, so they may or may not wish your services right away. I know the crew is waiting for you to settle in before filling your schedule. Has Riis set you up with everything you need? I know Mike Tate has been checking in as well."

Dare took a calming breath and nodded. "Yes, sir. Riis is taking me to my office today and has answered the rest of my questions. Once I check the files setup, I'll be ready to see the crew. Perhaps the day after tomorrow?"

"That will work, Mr. Munro. I'll inform Riis to tell the crew so they can make

appointments with you. I do have two other pieces of information I want to impart before you leave today.” He leaned forward on his desk, folding his hands, his eyes watching Dare.

”First, I want you to know that I am telling you this information not as a threat to you, but to make sure you know what’s waiting for you back on Earth. As we left the Sol system, I received a communication from the Office of Gifted Services. They wanted to know if you had boarded the Gambit, and if so, ordered me to return you at the end of this voyage. Apparently, they tracked you to the shuttle port, but didn’t know whether or not you left Earth.”

Dare lost what little color he had, as his heart raced. He took an audible breath, then coughed as he choked on it. Eyes tearing, he looked at the captain with fearful resignation.

Arends met his eyes sympathetically. ”Calm yourself, Mr. Munro. I told them you weren’t on board, and that I had no idea where you might be. I do not approve of the way the gifted are treated on Earth, and in fact, my brother is a Mindset Five, and works on one of our sister ships. I don’t know why the Service wants you, but I suspect your Mindset rating is not what you say it is. I don’t expect you to tell me, so don’t worry. I won’t mention this again but felt you should know you can’t return to Earth for your own safety, even if you wanted to.”

Dare took another breath, wiping his eyes dry with his fingers. ”I thought I was being so careful, but I know the reach of the OGS is long. I never planned on returning because of my...circumstances. Thank you, captain, for letting me know, and for keeping my whereabouts secret. Since you’re holding my secret, I’ll tell you what it is. I’m a Mindset One. I have extraordinary shields, and my ethics preclude me from abusing what I can do. If you wish, I will take dampers every day to shut down my abilities. I already take them each night. I don’t want you to think I am a liability to this ship or...you.”

Captain Arends shook his head, giving the younger man a faint smile. "Mr. Munro, I didn't offer you passage without checking who you are. You did very well in your training, and your colleagues and clients all liked you and felt you did good work. There were no reports of abusing your abilities for personal gain or profit. You lived in a subsidized room, with minimal possessions. Your parents are alive but seem uninterested in you. No siblings, and few friends. In other words, a perfect person to join this ship with minimal upheaval. I appreciate your confidence in me, but unless you start winning all the poker games, I'm not worried you'll be a problem. I will not put your "new" rating in my log, so you will stay a Mindset Three while on board."

Dare returned the smile as color returned to his face. "Thank you again, Captain. I...I didn't expect anyone to understand. Was there something else you wanted to tell me?"

The captain's expression became shuttered. "It's more like a warning. One owner of this ship is on board. His name is Jason Stravetta. He does not like anyone who is gifted, for reasons I don't know. Although it's unlikely you'll come across him, please attempt to avoid him if you can. He comes from a powerful family and is no stranger to violence. I do not want you to come to his attention for your own protection and the continued peace on this ship. Have Riis show you his pix, so you'll know him on sight."

Dare gazed at Arends, his smile vanishing. "I will do that, sir. I'm no novice at recognizing bigotry, but I'll steer clear of Mr. Stravetta. I'm pretty good at fading from notice, too."

"My brother does that. Always made me crazy when we were younger, but it's a great skill to have." He shrugged. "That's all I have for you today, Mr. Munro. Get your office set up and take the rest of today and tomorrow to get settled. Any questions?"

Dare shook his head, pulling up another smile. "No, sir. You've been very clear. Thank you."

"You're dismissed then, Mr. Munro. Enjoy your leisure while you have it."

Dare stood, smiled, then bowed his head politely before quietly leaving.

Riis was hard at work when Dare came to his desk. Holding up a hand, the assistant nodded. "Give me a sec to finish this."

Dare looked around the office for several moments before hearing Riis sigh.

"Thank Gaia, that's done. Everything alright with the captain?"

Dare met Riis's eyes. "Yes, everything's fine. He wanted you to show me a pix of Jason Stravetta so I can avoid him."

Riis frowned. "Everybody should avoid him. He's trouble." He inputted a few keystrokes, then motioned for Dare to come to his side of the desk.

"This is him—one of our not so illustrious owners. He's a living example that being pretty doesn't make you a good person."

Dare studied the pix. "He is good looking, isn't he? At least, I won't forget what he looks like. Where's his berth?"

Riis grinned. "He's where neither of us will ever go—officer country. They have their own mess and services up there. Oh, I put you on the shower roster. Show up at eighteen hundred hours today. That slot's for you and no one else. Toiletries and towels are provided but be sure to drag your clothes in with you. Otherwise, it's a walk of shame with only a small towel."

Dare frowned a little before dryly commenting. "I don't think I'll forget that. I've shared communal showers before. Don't tell me—you did that."

"Nope, it was Mike. It was quite a show."

Dare's eyes widened. "Poor guy." Riis snorted.

"Don't feel sorry for him. He only had a towel when someone threw one at him. Modesty isn't one of his problems."

Recalling the day before, Dare nodded thoughtfully. "I think I knew that from yesterday."

"Decon?"

"Decon."

They shared a knowing smile before Riis stood. "Time to show you your office and the shower you'll be using. Do you want to see where the colonists are berthed?"

Dare shrugged. "Let's see how much time we have. I've got the next couple of days to get settled so we could do that tomorrow. I don't want to cut into your workday."

"The cap gave me permission to do whatever was needed to get you situated, so we're good. We'll boot up the comp in your office, and I'll show you a map of the ship. We can send it to your pad once we get you into the ship's system."

"Can we stop to have a bite to eat? I'm hungry, and it sounds like we'll be walking all over the ship."

Riis grinned, glancing over at the empath. "Did you just read my mind? I'm hungry,

too.”

Dare stared at him. ”I wouldn’t do that without permission, and I can’t ”read” your mind like you’re thinking I can.”

Riis gave him a serious look. ”I was teasing again. Don’t empath’s have a sense of humor?”

Dare was silent for a moment. ”I’m realizing that maybe I don’t.”

Riis nudged him. ”We’ll work on that because you’re going to need one around here, believe me.”

Dare sighed. ”Feed me and we’ll talk.”

Riis linked his arm through Dare’s. ”That’s the plan, Mindset. Let’s go.”

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The two young men grabbed lunch in the mess, eating while Riis tried to probe Dare's lack of a sense of humor. He told the empath several jokes, making Dare laugh, then shook his head.

"You've got a sense of humor, thank every God. I think it's teasing that's got you stymied. Didn't anyone verbally poke you on Earth? Family or a friend?"

Dare's laughter faded as he dropped his eyes to the table. "I only have my parents, and they're not close to me. No other family since I'm an only child. I had a few friends, but they were all Mindsets, so there wasn't any teasing in case it turned uncomfortable and hurt one of us." He paused, glancing over at Riis's sad expression. "It's alright, Riis. I wasn't abused or anything, and I love what I do. Maybe it's being a Mindset. It's serious work, and we don't use teasing as a therapeutic tool. I'll just lighten up and try not to feel like I'm being verbally attacked when someone teases me."

Riis managed a faint smile. "I'm glad you told me that, Dare. I never thought of it feeling like an attack. Mindsets must be very kind to each other to be worried about that. Is it because you feel everybody's emotions and your own?"

The empath looked into his friend's worried eyes, giving him a gentle smile. "I only feel the reflections of their emotions, not the whole feeling. I think it's probable that we are polite and thoughtful, but it's also living on Earth. Despite losing so many in the climate cataclysm, there are still many people in the urban areas. We have to be polite and disengaged in order to survive. That goes double for empaths or any gifted person."

Riis blinked a few times, then nodded thoughtfully. "I can understand that. Just remember you're no longer on Earth, and that you're safe here. The crew wants your help, the captain likes you, and more importantly, Mike and I do, too." He grinned as Dare rolled his eyes. "Seriously, I mean that. You are safe on this ship, and we want you here. I know the crew is going to tease you. If you don't understand what they're saying, ask. Our last Mindset was sheltered, too, so they won't be surprised by that."

Dare shook his head. "I would have said naïve rather than sheltered, but I guess it's true no matter how you say it." He took in a breath and sighed it out. "Don't worry about me, okay? I'll focus on the safety here, and that will take the sting out of any tease."

Riis sat up very straight, staring at Dare. "Teasing is supposed to be done in fun, not to be mean. If that happens, let me know. It'll be the last time they do that."

Dare met his eyes, his voice soft. "Do you think I can't take care of that myself, Riis? Mindsets are taught self-defense, and I'm not afraid to use it if needed. By that, I mean both mental and physical means."

Riis' shoulders relaxed as he gave the empath a relieved smile. "That's very good to know. I might try to defend your honor, but anyone on this crew can kick my butt without breaking a sweat." Dare chuckled, shaking his head as Riis went on. "I still would have done it, but now you've saved me from that. My hero."

Dare laughed quietly for a few minutes. "Come on, my knight in a flight suit. Finish up and you can show me my new workplace. You still good for time today?"

Riis gulped down the last of his cider. "I'm ready when you are. I've got all today to get you squared away, per the captain's orders. That means we'll need to trek down to the colony deck after you see your office. I sent a message to their director to meet us in two hours. She'll bring the section supervisors and non-gifted therapists with

her as well.”

”Good, that will save time for me. Let’s stop by my berth so I can pick up my pad. I might want to take notes on who’s who.”

Riis stood, placing the used dishes on his tray. ”I’ll bus, then we can get out of here. Good idea on the note-taking. There are a whole lot of colonists with weird, I mean, different names.”

”You mean weird like Riis and Dare?”

Riis ducked his head. ”I told you my mouth runs away from me. I didn’t mean to sound like a bigot. It just came out that way.”

Dare pushed his chair back and stood up, squaring his shoulders as he gave his friend a sharp glance. ”I’ve been on the receiving end of bigotry, and I’d hate to see you go down that road for an easy laugh. I won’t be friends with someone like that, Riis.”

The young assistant stared at Dare for a moment. ”I’m sorry, and I’ll do better. It’s just that I’m an idiot. It’s hereditary.”

Dare struggled not to smile and lost, then shook his head. ”I think you’re a bright guy who likes to make people laugh. Just make sure it’s the right humor, or you’ll find out what I learned in my self-defense classes.”

Riis put up his hands in a warding gesture. ”Stand down, soldier. I promise to do better, okay?”

Dare let a little of his empathy wash over the other man, noting he was sincere. ”We will not speak of this again, alright?”

Riis silently crossed his heart, then took Dare's arm. "Let's go see what will be your home away from home after we pick up your pad." They walked in silence for several moments, then Riis glanced over at him.

"Do you have a middle name, and is it, by any chance, Righteous?"

Dare snorted, then cleared his throat. "I don't have a middle name, you smart ass. I'm sure yours would be Oris." Riis looked mystified.

"It means mouth in Latin."

"Now who's being a smartass?"

"I'm afraid that will always be you, Riis, by history and acclamation."

Riis shook his head, then sighed. "Damn."

Dare's office was just big enough for a small couch and two armchairs. The wall color was a soothing blue, and there were two standing lamps and the overhead lights. A desk was situated to the left of the entry, with a stool underneath. The comp, well-used, sat on top, along with a small desk lamp.

Riis went directly to the desk, pulling the stool back before sitting on it carefully. He wiggled around for a moment before sighing. "Why don't desk stools have a pad or cushion on them? This thing is like sitting on a rock." He glanced over at Dare's amused expression and frowned. "Hey, I'm serious and what happened to all that empathy?" Dare grinned, unrepentant, as Riis glared at him. "Give me your pad, Your High Mindfulness, and I'll hook it up to our system. Your first login is your birthdate, so change it right away."

As Riis fussed with the comp, Dare took in the space where he would spend a lot of

his time. He tried out each chair and sat on the couch. They were all comfortable, although they were clearly used. Still, the furniture was better than he had at the public health office, and cleaner, too. The standing lamps gave out a perfect amount of light, and the temperature was just this side of cool. Dare smiled to himself, then nodded. He could work here and be happy with his surroundings.

The empath heard Riis make a sound of satisfaction. Coming over to stand by him, Riis glanced up at him, then smiled, his ire forgotten.

"You're all set. The Mindset that had this office before uploaded all his notes to the server on this ship under lock. Once you input your credentials and rating, the server will check you out and unlock them. Hopefully. If you hit a snag with that, let me know. The captain can override the lock, if needed. I know you are all big on confidentiality, and I wouldn't have that any other way, so I'm hoping it opens for you with no problem. Do you know this system?"

Dare looked at the settings. "I've used this system on Earth, so that's not an issue. What's my login and password?"

"I've logged you in a daremunromindset, and you get to choose your password. I don't need to know it, of course. Have a seat on this torture device and put in whatever you'll remember."

Dare did that, combining his birthdate with his parents to make an eighteen-digit password, Riis pointedly wandering around while he did so. When he finished, the empath turned to Riis who was trying out the couch.

"How are my appointments scheduled? I know this program has a scheduler, but I don't want to access it when I'm not in here."

Riis nodded. "I get that. If you don't mind, I thought I'd have the crew contact me to

schedule them, then I'd send you an email on your pad for the next day. I think that will work without compromising the system or anyone."

Dare smiled, pleased. "That would be great as long as it's not too much work for you and the captain's alright with it. Once everyone that wants to see me is scheduled, we'll keep the same times so that will lessen how much you have to do. What about the colonists?"

Riis settled back into the couch with a happy sigh. "I'm glad you like the idea, and the captain won't mind. I will tell him, of course. As for the colonists, they'll have their own system and set up for you on their deck. They won't want records to be held on this ship, plus they'll want to take them down with them to the planet. Is all this good for you? We can probably find some art for the walls or something."

Dare nodded thoughtfully. "I'm not worried about the walls, but we can look if you want to. I think this will work great as my office. Thanks for your help, Riis. I really appreciate all you've done."

Riis levered himself off the couch. "I enjoy helping you and you're welcome. Remember my wonderfulness the next time my mouth takes over my mind. You hungry? I was thinking we could get a snack before we trek down to the colony deck."

The empath smiled happily. "I was just going to be hungry, but I like your idea better. I'm not used to so much food, but I like it."

Riis snorted as he came over to his friend. "Mike says you're way too thin, so feel free to eat whenever you want to. Yeah, he looked at you while you were in decon—as a concerned crewmate, of course. Mike's into ladies, not gentlemen, and, as mentioned before, does not know modesty for himself or anyone else. Speaking as someone who hasn't seen you naked. You are pretty skinny."

Dare was silent as they went out the door, heading for the mess. He glanced over at Riis before speaking.

"There wasn't an abundance of food on Earth, especially when you have little money. I had a subsidy, and that helped, but I guess I got used to eating just enough to stave off starvation, and no more. I know I'm too thin for my height, so I'll take your advice. Are there any workout rooms on the ship?"

The assistant met Dare's gaze soberly. "Whew. I thought I'd insulted you again. Yes, there are several spaces just for exercise. Everybody is supposed to do so at least twice a week to prevent muscle loss. I hate it, but I go." He grinned suddenly. "Hey, you can come with me, and we can do it together."

Dare gave him a wry look. "You want me to be your external locus of motivation, don't you?"

Riis nodded excitedly. "Yes! To whatever you just said. Anything to make exercise less of a chore."

His friend gave a long-suffering sigh. "Put it on my schedule, you admin ass, and I'll be there."

Riis laughed softly. "You made a joke! I should have that on my nametag, but I think the captain would object."

"I don't know, Riis. He seems pretty flexible. Easy-going, too."

"That's because you haven't seen the Dark Side yet. Still, if I ask him, I'll tell him it's your idea, okay?"

Dare shook his head. "Sure, tell him that. Like he'll believe you now that he's met

me.”

Riis gave him a considering look, then ducked his head. ”Crap. He probably thinks you’re too pure to use the word ”ass” in a pejorative way. Try cussing the next time you see him. It’ll help.”

Dare stared at him as they reached the mess, stopping just outside the door. ”Sure, I’ll do that as in never. I’m not cussing at the captain, not even for you and your new title.”

The door swooshed open, several crewmates brushing past them. Riis shook his head mournfully.

”You’re no fun, Dare. No fun at all.”

Dare went into the mess first to hide his smile. ”You have no idea, Riis. Absolutely no idea.”

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It took a brisk walk, several elevators, and many hatchways before Dare and Riis reached the colony deck. As they entered, a young man nodded to Riis, then looked at Dare with frank curiosity.

"Riis, it's good to see you again. I thought the captain kept you locked up in your office."

The admin assistant grinned, shaking his head. "Larue, how many times do I have to tell you I work for the captain, just like you work with the Administrator. He's not locking me up like I'm some kind of 'bot. Anyway, I'm here to see Vida and whoever she's brought with her. This is Dare Munro, the much-awaited Mindset. Dare, this is Larue Porchet, currently watching the door, but otherwise a mechanic."

Dare smiled at Larue's frank stare. "It's good to meet you, Larue. Riis is taking me all over today in the vain hope that I'll be able to find my way back here. Thank Gaia for maps."

Larue chuckled as he gave the empath a good look. "Welcome, Mindset Dare. We all needed a map when we first arrived. You've probably guessed that we have little crossover with the Gambit's crew, except for Riis here. I think you'd call him our liaison between the two." He turned back to Riis.

"Vida is set up in the main hall. I know you know the way, Riis, but I'll walk you there, anyway. I need to stretch my legs a bit. It's not like we get a lot of visitors." He pulled a comm unit from his belt, letting another colonist know he was leaving the area.

Both men nodded as Larue turned, beckoning them to follow. Riis and their guide were sharing information about people Dare didn't know. He took that time to look around at the colony deck, impressed by what he saw.

It was obvious that this deck had seen more than the current batch of colonists. There were what appeared to be permanent structures lining the "main" corridor, with smaller "streets" branching off from that. Glancing in one open window, Dare saw several chairs and a bed, then nodded to himself. It made sense that there would be rooms for privacy since that would be difficult to find amongst two hundred people. He sniffed, smelling food, then looked down one of the wider branches off the corridor. It was a communal kitchen, with a lot of seating area.

The empath smiled. That made sense. He'd bet there were bath houses, too. Privacy and community in equal measure. That was good planning so long as everyone got along, and he bet that most did since they'd been chosen for this trip. He liked that there was color here, too. Yellows, blues, greens, even some red brightened the outside of the rooms. There were even some murals, mostly of animals, which made him smile. So different from the muted colors elsewhere on the ship.

Riis nudged him gently, drawing him back from his musings. Larue opened the door on a much larger room, allowing them to enter first. Closing the door behind him, he led the way up to the front where there were eight people sitting and standing around a long table. It was a long room, the width the same as the length. Dare estimated it was about forty feet square, then focused on the people they were meeting.

Larue waved to the table, then called out. "Here they are, Vida. You know Riis. He's brought the Mindset, Dare Munro. Riis, you know everyone. Dare, this is Vida Bridger. She's our Administrator. Vida, you alright with introducing the rest? I've got to get back to the entry to finish my shift."

The Administrator was a woman of medium height, with short blond hair and dark

brown eyes. She was dressed in a long, loosely fitting dress with a colorful kimono-like wrap over it. The colors were deep blue and green, faded only through much wear. Dare's glance took in her appearance, just as she leaned on the table, giving all of them a smile.

"Welcome, Mindset Munro. It's good to see you again, Riis. Still keeping the captain organized? Larue, I'm fine with introductions. Get yourself back on sentry duty. I know how much you love it."

Larue rolled his eyes, giving her a nod, then murmured a goodbye to Dare and Riis, before hurrying away.

Vida indicated the chairs at the table. "Please, have a seat, Mindset. Riis, do you want to stay? We can escort the Mindset back to his deck, or you can go visit the market and come back in an hour."

Riis gave Dare a questioning glance. "You okay with me checking out the markets, then coming back for you? They have amazing stuff the ship doesn't."

Dare reached out, allowing a little of his empathy to wash over those he didn't know. He felt no threat. Giving Riis a nod, he smiled at the look of anticipation on the assistant's face.

"That's fine with me as long as you bring me back something colorful for my office. Have a good time."

Riis grinned, giving him a faux salute. "I'm on it, Your Mindfulness. See you in an hour."

The young man said his goodbye to the Administrator, nodded to the rest, then all but ran out the door.

Dare watched him go, then turned back to Vida as he pulled out his pad. "I hope you don't mind me taking notes. I've been immersed in so much new information that I don't trust my memory right now." He paused, looking around the table. "Please, call me Dare. Mindset is too formal for me and is more about what I can do rather than who I am. I would appreciate knowing how you all would like to be addressed as well."

Vida took her place across from him. "I think that will be fine, Dare. Please call me Vida, and I'll introduce you to the rest here today. The four on my left are supervisors who each oversee fifty of the colonists. They deal with day-to-day problems and resolutions. Starting next to me is Leah Ragsdale, then Paul Delmont, Sarah Purcell, and, at the end, Rebecca Carter." She stared down the table. "You alright with first names?" The first three nodded, then Rebecca waved from the end.

"Please call me Becca, Dare." Dare bowed his head slightly before speaking.

"I am pleased to meet you."

Vida smiled again, then indicated the people to her right. "These are our non-gifted therapists. All of them are trained and licensed, of course. Closest to me is Wilma Harcourt. Next is David Ashcroft, and at the end, Henry Drummond."

Before Vida could ask, Wilma spoke up. "Please call me Willie, Dare." She nudged David. "David for you, right?" He nodded quickly, then Willie leaned forward to look at Henry. "You want to be called Hank, right?" A deep voice confirmed that choice.

Dare again inclined his head, giving all three a smile. "I am pleased to meet other therapists. I am sure we will work together well, provided you need me here."

Vida shifted in her chair, calling his attention back to her. Dare focused on her, keeping his expression open after quickly jotting down the names of everyone on his

pad.

"Will you need me to set up any sessions here, Vida? I know the crew of the Gambit wants me, but since you already have three therapists..."

Vida glanced down the table on each side, then met Dare's eyes. "I don't think we do at this time, Dare. It's early days in the voyage, and everyone is still settling in. Although we number two hundred, one hundred volunteered for cryo sleep. That reduced the number that might need therapy, not to mention resources. Can we leave you on-call as it were? I know your skills include reading others, and that this is included in your therapy." She glanced over at the therapists. "Do you have any clients for Dare to see right now?"

Willie and David shook their heads, while Hank shrugged, then looked at Dare. "Most of those I'm seeing are anxious, which is understandable given we're on a ship heading to a planet we've never seen. Nothing out of the ordinary or verging on pathology. If that changes, I can call you."

Dare nodded, his expression intent. "I'm glad to hear that everyone is doing as well as they can right now. Riis offered to do my scheduling for me, so call him if you need me to come here. If that happens, can I borrow an office for a session? I guess I'd need to know how you keep notes, too."

Vida smiled, then sat forward in her chair. "That's the last thing we have to show you today, Dare. We've set aside a room for you to see clients in and to stay in if you wish to visit here. We've got a few minutes before Riis reappears, so allow me to show it to you. Do the rest of you want to come along, or..?"

The supervisors declined, murmuring polite refusals and goodbyes before leaving. The therapists came along, following behind Vida and Dare as they left the meeting space. Taking a left out of the room, they walked for several minutes. Dare looking

for landmarks so he could find it again.

He was still orienting himself when Vida stopped at a dark blue room. "We've set this up for you, but please don't hesitate to let us know if you need to change it." She opened the unlocked door, revealing a ten-by-ten room, painted a cream color. A long couch sat against the wall opposite the door, with an armchair directly across from the couch. A folding table was currently up against the wall, with an actual desk chair underneath. There was another door at the end of the couch that opened into a bath with a toilet and sink only.

Vida allowed Dare to take all of it in for a moment. "Will this do? It's the same as the other rooms we use. The couch folds out into a bed, and there's storage underneath it. Please accept this as your workplace and a home away from the Gambit, should you feel the need for that. As for notes, our charting is less formal, and mostly for our own recall of events. If you see clients here, we'll go over that with you and get you a comp of your own to use."

Dare sighed, giving Vida and the therapists a big smile. "This is perfect. Thank you for taking care to set this up for me. I appreciate that I have another place I can go if I need to get away, as it were, from the ship for a time. You've all been very thoughtful."

Willie and Hank gave him pleased smiles as David cleared his throat.

"We're all aware that you are a Mindset, Dare. In our field, that's a special designation and, frankly, sought after. We want you to feel at home here, whether we need your services or not. It's difficult being a therapist, and I imagine it's even harder for you."

Dare looked down, swallowing, as his empathy flared for a moment, allowing him to feel the truthfulness of what was said. He bowed his head respectfully, then met their

eyes, one by one. "Thank you again. Not everyone realizes that, and I'm happy that you do." He looked up, distracted. "I think Riis is looking for me—I felt him for a moment."

The Administrator nodded briskly. "We'd better go meet him before he runs off." She turned to the empath. "I'm glad you like it here. Feel free to come by anytime if you need or want to. You will be welcomed without question."

Dare murmured a heartfelt thank you as she led the way out, turning right to go back to the meeting area. They came upon Riis, his arms full, just before the meeting room.

"There you are! Hello, everyone—everything alright, Dare?"

The empath grinned at him. "I am better than alright. Give me some of that stuff and I'll carry it. Did you buy out the market?"

"No, I wanted to, but I didn't. Say your goodbyes, and I'll happily shift some of this to you."

Vida and the therapists stopped at the meeting room, grinning at Riis's armload. Vida formally bowed her head.

"Farewell, Dare, and remember you're welcome here, whether you're working or not."

The young man bowed his head in return, then gave her and the others a luminous glance. "Thank you for your warm welcome. Farewell until I see you all again."

He turned back to Riis, hearing the murmured farewells as he walked towards the exit. The assistant looked over at him, noting how relaxed his new friend seemed.

"Went well, didn't it? These are good people, and I'm glad you like them. They obviously like you. Take the top two bundles because my arms are about to fall off."

Dare complied, lifting the bulky items into his own arms. "Looks like you had a good time, too. What did you purchase?"

Riis sighed with relief as the load diminished. "Don't worry. I traded for a great wall hanging for you—it's more barter and trade here than giving credits over."

Dare looked surprised. "What did you trade? Or did you barter? Should I be worried?"

Riis shook his head. "I traded some of my comp skills and set up a short class in composition. Not everyone speaks the same language, and they need that practice. No worries since it's all on me. I didn't bring you into the trade/barter at all. I wouldn't do that without your consent."

The empath glanced at him, nonplussed. "That's good, I guess, since I have no idea what I would trade or barter. I really have nothing anyone would want."

Riis shot him a critical look. "You're wrong about that, but never mind. We can talk about that when I'm not exhausted from walking all over the ship. Let's go put this into your berth and get some dinner. I'm starving again, and I bet you are, too."

Dare gave him a questioning glance, then shrugged. "That's cryptic. Of course I can eat. I think we've proved that."

Riis shifted the load in his arms. "Then move along, Mindset, before I perish from hunger and fatigue." He glanced over at his friend. "I had a great time at the markets, though."

"I know you did."

Riis narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean, you know?"

"I don't have to be an empath to pick up on how happy you are, Riis. Give me a break." He took another bundle from Riis, adding it to his burden.

"Oh. That's good. For the record, you can read me anytime you want. I mean, how could you resist?"

Dare shook his head. "Professional ethics?"

Riis huffed. "Be that way."

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Jason Stravetta signed his name for the millionth time, putting his pen down gently to avoid throwing it across the room. Leaning back in his desk chair, he frowned, rolling his shoulders. He'd been on this ship for a month and wondered how he would manage twenty-three more of the same.

Not for the first time, he wondered what the hell his father had been thinking by sending him to the Gambit. Yes, he was the company's representative, and yes, he could use his business training, but to what end? This ship ran like a proverbial clock. Captain Arends saw to that, and his crew were all long-time employees of Stravetta Shipping. They had only colonists on board, and apparently they were terribly well behaved too.

Jason closed his deep brown eyes, letting his head fall back against his seat. Who was he kidding? He knew why he was here. Nothing had been said or written, but he knew, just as he was aware of his prosthetic arm—always there, and painful.

His father did not want him on Earth. Did not want him visible to their stockholders, or perspective buyers. He was seen as used by his service in one of the many armed conflicts that occurred periodically on Earth. Losing an arm and having severe PTSD did not make him the best company. He knew that. But he was still a son, still family, still worth...what?

Jason leaned forward, bringing both arms up to cradle his head after running his hands through his short, black hair. The thin black glove on his left covered the prosthesis, the leather soft, but not warm. Clenching his teeth, he wondered how many times he would go over this, feeling the coldness of his family's rejection, and the anger that rose when he did so. So much for completing his time in the service, so

much for the promises made to him before he enlisted. No wonder his obligatory therapist at the veteran facility warned him about becoming bitter, then tried to push into his mind to lessen those feelings. Fucking empaths. They always thought they knew better, knew more. Well, he'd punched that therapist and filed a formal complaint.

Looking down at his desk, he saw again the employment form for Dare Munro, Mindset Three. Another asshole mindset, here to fuck around with thoughts better left alone. This one would leave him alone, or he'd find out just how bitter Jason Stravetta was. And how lethal.

One month into the two-year voyage, Dare settled into a routine. He saw clients from the night shift from seven am to eleven am, day shift from seven pm to whenever he finished. In the intervening times between seeing the crew, he exercised, read, and reviewed his notes. Sometimes, he napped to make up for waking early and staying up late. It was an easy schedule compared to how many people he'd seen while on Earth, but the problems were much the same.

The crew were a well-adjusted bunch, but still had trouble with loneliness, anger, and boredom. There were times he sat across from one of the crew, wondering how much he was helping since most just wanted to talk about whatever was on their minds, albeit nothing really pathological. That was different, but fine overall. At least, he didn't have to prove that the crew needed to see him to be "paid" for his services. If they wanted to just talk, he'd listen and provide his counsel when needed.

Finished up with his morning clients, he spent a few moments straightening up the already pristine office. The young empath smiled to himself, realizing he was enjoying his work more than he had on Earth, especially without the specter of being hauled off to be experimented on or simply locked up forever. Today, he planned on seeing the doctor for a refill of his psychic "dampers". He still had several months put away but felt it prudent to make sure they could be formulated if not stocked by the

infirmary. Dare shook his head. I should have thought about that before now.

Leaving his office, Dare turned left, heading for the elevator to take him down to the center of the ship where the medical facility was located. Repeated trips around the ship with Riis had finally given him an internal map. He could now find his way everywhere he was allowed. He knew where the bridge was, and engineering, but never visited either, as invitations were needed to do so.

Mulling over how small his world was, and how he was fine with it, Dare reached the infirmary, the door sliding open upon registering his presence. He heard raised voices and felt a solid hit of anger against his shields. Hastily raising his boundary higher, he inwardly berated himself for allowing them to lower. Feeling safe was no excuse.

Stepping out of the doorway, he took a few steps into the body of the room, noting that the voices were coming from Doctor Highland's office. He could hear the doc's low rumble, but the other voice was unknown and was the one radiating anger as though on fire. Wondering if he should come back later, the decision was taken from him when a tall, dark man burst from the doctor's office as though expelled.

A wall of angry emotion, coupled with endless hurt, hit Dare's shields, the force causing them to buckle slightly. Taking an indrawn breath, Dare forgot everything but the need to help mend that wound. Without conscious thought, he stepped in front of the man raging towards the exit, recognizing him a moment too late. It was Jason Stravetta.

Stravetta barely slowed, his anger a wave boiling before him. Recognition crossed his face, causing him to appear murderous.

"Get out of my way, you fucking empath. Touch me, and I'll kill you."

Dare's eyes widened, the force of the other man's emotion holding him in place.

Before he could summon the will to move, Stravetta shoved him hard on the chest, causing him to stumble back and fall, his gasp of pain unheard.

The door slid shut, the anger receding as Stravetta moved away. Dare struggled to sit up, the psychic onslaught making him clumsy. He felt rather than heard Dr. Highland crouching next to him.

"Are you hurt, Dare? He gave you a solid shove. I'm sorry—I couldn't stop him." Highland's brown eyes roved over Dare, looking for injury.

The empath closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. His shields were up but felt fragile. He held a hand up to stop the doctor from touching him.

"Give me a moment, doc. I need to get myself back together. His emotions...the hurt. Mr. Stravetta is a very dynamic person as far as his feelings go."

Highland nodded, looking concerned, before sighing. "How many times do I have to tell you to call me Peter? I'll help you up when you tell me. I didn't know you knew Jason."

Dare shook his head, giving a tired chuckle. "I don't. I was warned about him, and unfortunately forgot that when I stepped in his way. I had to help. That imperative doesn't happen to me very often."

Peter shook his head. "My advice is to work that imperative out as quickly as you can. Jason Stravetta doesn't want help, especially from an empath. I don't think he'd actually kill you, but I'm sure he'd hurt you if he could. Just stay away from him and his volcanic anger."

Dare met the doctor's eyes, his own wide. "It's not anger, Peter. It's hurt. He's been wounded so badly that he hides it with anger." The empath watched Peter shake his

head. "Yes, I know that won't matter if he slugs me. He needs help. I could help him if he'd let me."

Dare started to get up, Peter taking his arm to steady him, giving him a stern look. "You can't help him, Dare, so don't even try. I don't know why, but he hates empaths beyond reason. Leave him alone for your own sake."

Dare nodded, feeling the residual force of Jason's pain as his shield reformed. "I can't force him to let me help, so stop worrying. It's not that easy to forget that he needs me, though."

Peter gave him a grim smile. "Do it anyway. Jason Stravetta is trouble for everyone, but will end you if he can. I don't want you hurt. Or dead."

The empath smiled faintly. "That would be an over the top response and cause him more problems on this ship."

Peter pulled him into his office, waving him into a chair. "You need to face a harsh reality, my friend. Jason Stravetta is the son of our owner. We are in the black and the only law is the captain, who is his employee. Jason has the power to do whatever he wants, including harming you. Thankfully, he lets the captain run the show. So far."

Dare looked down, his face pale. "I'll stay away from him, Peter. For both of our sakes."

The doctor stared at him for a moment before nodding. "Thank you for that. Now, what brought you in here? You look healthy enough."

The empath shook his head, then smiled. "I'm fine. I came by to see about the medication I use to shut down my empathy while I sleep. I've still got quite a bit but wanted to check on how much you have stored."

Peter returned the smile. "Ah, the "dampers". Fortunately, I've got a vast supply of them. The last Mindset went into cryo-sleep on the way back to Earth, so I've actually got a surplus and it's all yours. Did you know that medication is used to help non-gifted sleep? Another reason to have a big supply."

"I had no idea it had more uses than just for the gifted. I hope the colony can formulate it. I can't imagine waking each day full of other people's thoughts and then having to remake my shields. It's not comfortable to do that."

Peter nodded understandingly. "Don't worry about that. The colonists have a doctor and a pharmacist, and this particular med is easy to formulate. I'll make sure they have it way before we reach the planet. Anything else on your mind?"

"Nope. I'm good otherwise."

Peter looked at the time, then stood up. "I've got to finish up my charting for the day, and you've got to grab some food before your evening clients. Get your butt to the mess, and I'll see you at the poker game in two days."

Dare stood as well, giving the doctor a grin. "Yes, doctor. I'll take a damper before I arrive to play cards."

"Nobody thinks you'll cheat, you know."

Dare's grin faded a little. "That's why I'll take them—so I won't know what anyone is thinking or feeling."

Peter rolled his eyes, muttering, "Mindsets," before shoos the young man out.

The empath left, waving a hand in the doctor's direction, good humor restored.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:41 pm

Waking up before six am almost every day was not Dare's favorite experience. The dampers made him groggy at first, so he usually laid in bed, making sure his shields were adequate for the day ahead. At least, he had his usual morning clients today, then only two after shift clients later. Smiling, he sat up, swinging his legs off the berth. Stretching, he realized that today was poker night, and he'd be able to make it this time.

In the last six weeks, he'd been able to make only three of the game nights because of his schedule, even though they were held every week. It was a good way to see some of his crewmates and socialize. Dare shook his head, smiling to himself. He never won a game, not because he pointedly took a damper before beginning to play, but because he was a terrible card player. It didn't matter to him whether he won or lost. The stakes were purposefully kept low, mostly playing for counters, not actual credits. He enjoyed being around the crew, talking about anything but work.

He'd met Lewis Richards, one of Jason Stravetta's aides, at the last game. Peter had casually introduced them, then stayed by Dare when he stiffened in alarm. Assuring his friend that Lewis was "good people", Peter drew Stravetta's aide into a conversation about books. Lewis, after giving Dare a questioning glance, launched into a fervent defense of a book he'd just read that had been panned by critics. His passion seemed genuine to the empath, and he subtly relaxed just a little. Peter didn't stop there.

"Lewis, Dare met your boss a few weeks ago when Jason ran him over in the infirmary. If you saw him tense up, that was why."

Lewis flushed, then ducked his head. "Mr. Stravetta is, ah, intense most of the time.

He's a good boss, and thoughtful to our team." He gazed at Dare. "You're an empath, aren't you?"

Dare had to look up to meet Lewis' eyes. Stravetta's minion had to be six foot two next to his five foot ten, and his body was proportionally sized. Raising his chin, he gave a quick nod. "I am. I know Mr. Stravetta does not like, or rather hates, empaths. If you feel the same, tell me. I don't want any trouble."

Lewis gave the younger man a tentative smile. "I don't have a problem with your gift. My sis in law is a Mindset Four. Works with kids. I appreciate what you can do, but I don't talk about it with the boss."

Dare visibly relaxed, closing his eyes for a moment. "I'm glad to hear that. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention I was here to your boss. I think he's already wrapped too tight, if you know what I mean. He doesn't need more stress."

Lewis grinned, taking in the empath's smile. "Don't worry, I won't. I don't want to upset him either. He's been through too much as it is."

Dare carefully did not reach out to find out what "too much" was, knowing it would breach his ethics. He wished he'd taken his damper before he came since Lewis broadcasted his feelings openly. He could feel Lewis' protectiveness of Jason. That spoke well of him. At least his boss had someone who cared about him.

"I know he's dealing with a lot from our brief, somewhat painful encounter. I could help him, but I know that won't happen." He glanced over at Peter. "We ready to play?"

That brief meeting gave the empath more insight into Jason Stravetta, making the imperative to help him even more insistent.

Tonight's game brought a new player, courtesy of Lewis. Derek Lonley, also an aide to Jason, fortunately had nothing against empaths. He was about the same height as Louis, but whipcord thin, with a wicked sense of humor. Derek kept the laughter going throughout the game, seemingly uncaring whether or not he won.

As always, Dare took his damper in front of the group so they would know he took it before play began. He caught Derek giving him a narrow-eyed glance when he did so, whispering something to Lewis directly afterward. They played a few hands with Peter, crowing with elation since he was winning. Derek smiled at the jubilation, then stared at Dare for a moment. The empath thought to himself, here it comes, just before Derek asked innocuous questions at first, followed by more pointed ones.

Dare answered all the questions honestly as a Mindset Three. There was no way he was going to out himself as a One to an aide of Jason Stravetta, or truthfully, anyone else at the table. They might know about him, they might not, but he would not give them proof. After about fifteen minutes of questions, asked in between bets, Lewis gave his co-worker a nudge in the ribs with his elbow.

"Give it a rest, Derek. You're acting like you'd like to see his test ratings. If you're so curious, make an appointment with him. We're here to relax, not grill a crewmate."

Derek shot Lewis a hard look, then composed his expression as he turned back to the empath. "Sorry, Dare. I guess I'm just curious about how you do what you do. Never spent any time with an empath before, so I forgot my manners."

Dare murmured a polite disclaimer, then turned to Peter and the rest of the group. "I've got an early start tomorrow, so this'll be my last hand. I know you'll miss watching me lose consistently, but I'll try to be back next week with hope in my heart."

A quiet laugh flowed around the table before Artie from Engineering spoke up. "We like you, Dare, because you don't bring any problems in here like some people do. Plus, you've got a quiet way about you. You're a terrible poker player but very restful."

Dare gave the older man a grin before shaking his head. "That's me, unlike you, you card shark. Maybe you should give me lessons so I can win once in a while."

Artie met the empath's eyes, slowly shaking his head. "Oh lord, no. I don't need any more competition at this table. Besides, it's not about winning, now, is it? It's about sportsmanship."

Dare laughed outright. "Is that what it's about? How would you know? You win all the time."

Artie paused, considering his answer, then gave a quick smile, glancing over at the doctor. "I used to lose, didn't I, Peter? I just learned the game finally."

Peter frowned. "That's not how I remember it. You've always been a good card player. Dare may have a point, card shark."

"You were supposed to back me up, Peter. What are friends for?"

The doctor gave him a long-suffering look. "I'm not lying for you, old man. Accept the appellation and let Dare get home to bed."

Artie turned to the empath, giving him a sincere smile. "Have a good rest, Dare, and don't worry about what that quack says."

Dare looked back and forth between them, then around the table, chuckling. "I'm not worried, Artie, except about your memory. Nice meeting you, Derek. Please give my

regards to your boss and ask him to see me if he has any more questions. Good night, everyone.”

Dare pushed his chair back and stood, nodding along with his farewell. Lewis ducked his head, then gave Derek a solid poke in the ribs again, while Derek looked annoyed. Lewis met Dare’s eyes just as he was passing him. ”Have a great night, Dare, and don’t worry about Derek. We’ll have a little chat before returning to duty.” The others around the table murmured their farewells, giving Derek a considering look.

Dare gave them all a smile as he left. Walking to his berth, he reminded himself why it’s a bad idea to poke someone more powerful than yourself. Sighing, he thought, fuck it, and let it go. Sometimes he had to speak up when people thought they were outsmarting him. Tonight was that night, and hopefully, he wouldn’t regret it.

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Dare made a few more poker nights in the next few months. Derek did not make an appearance. When asked, Lewis shrugged, saying he'd taken the night shift and couldn't make it anymore. Dare could feel his uneasiness but didn't press him for more. Lewis obviously knew what Derek had been doing but had no problem with how the empath had shut down his questions. That was all Dare needed to know.

Time passed differently in the black. Some days went by very quickly, while others dragged on and on. Dare tried to spend a day or evening each week on the colony deck, taking the time to get to know and meet most of the colonists. They were a diverse group with artists, scientists, and administrators. Everyone was cross-trained and capable of working multiple jobs. That made sense, as they would be left on an alien planet to live out the rest of their lives, far from the assistance of Earth. The thought made the empath shiver a little, wondering what it would be like to literally start over while building a society. He would find out in a little over a year and a half, and was moved to ask Vida if he should learn another skill to assist the colony.

She had looked at him with surprise, then smiled. "Thank you for asking, but I'm sure you'll be busy as a Mindset once we arrive. There will be a high level of stress once we disembark, and your skills will help defuse that. Otherwise, since you are willing to work, I'm sure you could help in the kitchen or infirmary if you want to with no additional training. My advice is not to worry about that, since any able-bodied person will be called to help wherever they can."

Dare had thanked her and let it go. She was right, after all, and his skill wasn't transferable to anyone else. He enjoyed his stays on the colony deck as he would a vacation. That deck was full of color and positive emotions, as well as being far less structured than his work life on the Gambit. That change was welcome once the

sameness of life on the ship became obvious.

Despite the monotony, Dare was content. He'd put on some weight and muscle by having a regular diet. He'd grown an inch to his now five foot ten, to his own surprise, thinking he was done growing. The doctor explained he'd needed the added calories in order for his body to do that, but now that he was almost twenty-five, he was probably as tall as he would ever be. The empath was fine with that. Being as tall as Lewis was an issue on a starship where room was at a premium. He needed nothing else to overcome and was happy to feel truly healthy for the first time.

Dare integrated into his schedule on the Gambit, and his time on the colony deck, keeping ennui away with a good amount of socializing which included meals with Riis, or Mike, working out daily in one of the gyms, and keeping a watchful eye on those he cared for. He read, kept a journal for his own insights, and slept well. He felt happy and safe for the first time in his life and was grateful for it.

He received a call late one evening, six months into the voyage. The sound of it startled him, but he shook that off as he got up to answer it.

"This is Dare. How may I help you?"

"Dare? Thank Gaia you're home. Please come down to the infirmary as soon as possible. Jason Stravetta has been injured. I need to do surgery but don't have his blood type on hand. You and he have the same type, so if you're willing to donate, please get down here."

The empath stared at the doctor for a moment, then shook his head. "He's AB negative? Of course, I'll do it. Be there as soon as I put my shoes back on."

Dare walked into the infirmary quickly, seeing Peter talking to one of his techs, before the doctor hurried over to him.

"Thank you, Dare. Jason fell while on the treadmill and hit hard enough to rupture his spleen. It's got to come out and he'll need a transfusion to make up for the blood loss. Have you given blood before?"

Dare nodded. "I've given blood fairly often. That happens when you have a rare blood type. You know I'm clean of any disease, so let's do this."

Peter gave him a quick smile, then ushered him onto a gurney where one of his techs was standing. "Harry will get you set up. Just remember not to run out of here the minute you're done donating. Have some juice and an awful cookie, then go home, drink water, and go to bed. You might feel tired tomorrow, but you already know that, right?"

Dare made a shooing motion with his hands. "Go take care of Stravetta. Harry and I will get this done, so stop worrying."

The doctor gave Dare's forearm a warm squeeze. "Thank you." Dare settled himself on the gurney, smiling up at Harry. "Pick a vein, Harry, and we'll get this over with."

The empath followed the doctor's orders, making sure he drank several glasses of juice and choked down a protein cookie. When he felt steady enough, he made his way back to his berth, drank some more water, then went to bed, remembering to take his dampers before falling asleep instantly.

The next morning, Dare rose at his usual time, feeling only a little tired. Washing up in his little sink, he figured he'd stop by the infirmary to check in with Peter since seeing Jason was out of the question. With that thought, he dressed and headed to the mess for a quick meal.

When Dare came into Peter's office, it was obvious that Peter was far more tired than the empath. Nevertheless, the doctor gave him a smile, waving him into the chair in

front of his desk.

"I'm way too old to pull a night shift, but there you go. You look a bit tired, too, Dare. Do you feel okay?"

"No offense, Peter, but I look a lot better than you do. I only feel a little tired, but that should pass quickly. How's Stravetta doing? I know I can't ask him face to face."

Peter nodded. "That's very true. He's doing as well as he can, having just had major surgery. Your donation made the difference in how well he's doing right now. Thank you for being willing, despite his behavior towards you. By the way, he does not know it was you who gave him the blood."

Dare shrugged. "I didn't think you had time to ask him, and it doesn't matter to me if he knows. I hope I'll never be petty enough to withhold something like blood just because the recipient is a dick. I didn't do it for thanks. I did it because it was the right thing to do, not that he'd see it that way."

Peter sat back in his chair, sighing. "If he asks, I'll tell him. Otherwise, I'll let it go. I don't think it would change his mind about you, or I'd tell him right away."

Dare unexpectedly grinned. "I don't think he needs the excitement of knowing some of my blood is in his body keeping him alive, despite his shitty attitude towards me. I think the cosmos has a sense of humor, and this joke is definitely on Mr. Stravetta."

Peter chuckled quietly. "You're right, and at least we both know that. I've got to check on him one more time before I take a nap and pass his care to my techs. Take it easy today, alright?"

Dare stood up, giving the doctor a pleasant smile. "I will, Doc. Get some rest. This has been hard on you, too."

Peter rose slowly, using the desk to steady him. "It's a doctor's life, just like being a Mindset is yours. Neither is an easy path, but at least we're both good guys."

"That we are. Rest well, and I'll see you later."

Dare left quietly to attend to the rest of his day and to care for his clients. Despite Stravetta's attitude towards him, he was glad he would heal and be back to his usual unpleasant self soon, still wishing he would accept his empathetic help.

Sighing, he shook his head, thinking of the irony of his blood keeping Jason Stravetta alive, causing him to give an unwilling smile.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:42 pm

After the excitement of a late-night blood donation, life settled down into its usual monotony. A week later, Dare heard via the ship grapevine that Jason Stravetta had been released from the infirmary and sent back to his suite to finish recuperating. He didn't give that a second thought until he had lunch with the doctor, Peter Highland.

Dare usually ate his midday meal with Riis, Mike, and occasionally, Artie. Peter's schedule was unpredictable, to say the least, so trying to set up a time to meet was more problematic. He just showed up when he was free and hoped to see someone he knew. Dare was lingering over his meal when Peter slid into the chair across from him with a huff.

"I thought I'd never get away today. One clumsy engineer, and the entire group shows up." He took a long swallow of his flavored water. "How are you, Dare? You must be healthy because I haven't seen you in the infirmary."

The empath nodded, smiling. "I've been vaccinated for absolutely everything, and it's hard to get injured when sitting and listening. Hopefully, you won't see me at your place of work unless I'm an angel of mercy again."

Peter grinned, shaking his head, then met Dare's gaze. "We can only hope. Before I forget, Jason knows you donated blood for him. He didn't ask me but caught a tech to question. The tech knew it wasn't a secret, so they told him. Apparently, he was outwardly fine with it. Who knows what went through his mind with that information, but hopefully, nothing nasty. I think he's going to count his blessings and let it go."

Dare shrugged, finishing his soda. "I'm not worried about him visiting me or giving

me trouble about it. It would be great if he was grateful, but I don't need his thanks for doing the right thing. I heard he was discharged from your tender care, so I'm assuming he's doing alright now."

Peter shook his head. "I would have discharged him sooner if I could have gotten away with it. He wasn't happy to be under my care and didn't mind telling me every time I checked on him. When he's unhappy, he wants everyone to join him in feeling miserable."

"From the little I felt from him, he's not a happy man, so that's not surprising. How's the rest of your day shaping up?"

"You mean once the cadre of engineers believe that one of their own will live to rejoin them doing whatever it is they do?" Dare chuckled as Peter rolled his eyes. "I've got staff reviews to complete and physicals to schedule when I have time. Usual doctor stuff."

The empath nodded, giving the doc a smile. "I've got to get my notes done from this morning, then I'm heading to the colony deck to check in before my next round of clients. It's good to see you away from your lair, Doc."

The doctor swallowed a bite of food before answering. "Same, Dare. You going to make it to the poker game this week?"

"I hope so, barring any client problems. Enjoy the cadre, Peter, and I'll see you later."

The doctor nodded agreeably as Dare left, realizing that just talking to the Mindset had relaxed him. Empaths were amazing.

Dare finished his day, made his preparations for the next, then took a shower since it

was his designated time. His trip to the colony deck always made him smile, but today's trip had provided a bonus. He was sure he'd found another Mindset, a young man named Chance. He had no training, but when Dare spoke with him, he could feel his senses being calmed by his presence. He'd arranged to meet with him later in the week to talk. He'd have to open to him to be sure, but Dare was almost positive that Chance was an untrained empath. He would have to verify it, then set up a training regimen for him as well as teaching him the protocols needed to help others.

Luckily, Chance was already an open, caring young man. Hopefully, he would utilize his gift. If not, Dare would leave him as he was. He would not force him to accept his talent as he had been. Dare shook his head, shaking off the memories, then sighed, deliberately thinking of his meal with the colony.

He'd had an early dinner there, enjoying the vegetarian stew and fresh bread, as well as the company. Feeling renewed by the happiness that permeated that deck. They were an easy people to love and care about. A lifetime spent with them would not be difficult.

Glancing at the time, Dare nodded. He had a few hours to relax and read the novel he was enjoying before going to bed. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, he stuffed pillows behind him and was soon engrossed in his book.

He was at a particularly tense spot in the book when his door chime sounded. He jumped, startled, eyes wide, before realizing it was only the door. Shaking his head, he slid off the berth, pulling his sleep pants up and his tee shirt down, before unlocking the door and opening it.

Jason Stravetta was staring at him from the corridor, Derek behind him. Dare took an involuntary step back, his shields raising automatically. Composing his expression to one of polite disinterest, Dare stared back at his visitor before speaking.

"Mr. Stravetta, I'm surprised to see you this late. Can I help you with something?"

Stravetta grimaced, then gave the empath a poor excuse for a smile. "I want to talk to you. May I come in? Derek will remain outside."

Inwardly cursing his good manners, Dare nodded. Leaving five feet between them, Stravetta came inside, glancing around quickly at the tiny space. The empath gestured for him to sit on the only chair that had been liberated from an unused berth while he jumped back up onto his bunk, tucking his legs under him.

The older man sat down stiffly, one hand on his incision, but made no sound. He watched Dare get back on his berth and settle himself. His gaze heated.

Dare returned the stare, then gave the man a patently fake smile. "I have no idea what you wish to talk about, Mr. Stravetta. You made yourself very clear about how you felt about my gift the last time you saw me."

Stravetta's hands clenched on his knees. Then he struggled to take a deep breath, his gaze becoming a glare. "I'm here to thank you, empath, for your blood donation. Dr. Highland indicated it saved my life. I want to know why you did it."

Even with his shields as high as they would go, Dare could feel Stravetta's conflict and confusion. His inner pain was palpable. The young man let his expression soften, then shook his head. "I did it because it was the right thing to do, regardless of how I feel. Are you worried about being polluted by my blood or changing somehow? If that's the case, then we can end this discussion right now."

Stravetta expelled a forcible breath. "No, I want to know what you want, what you got out of this. It must be something."

The empath frowned. "You think I did it to gain something, or get something from

you?” He slid off his bed to his feet, done with this conversation. ”I did it because I would not willingly let anyone die, not even you. I’m sorry that you feel everybody has to be paid for doing a good deed, but then that says more about you than me. You have nothing I want, and I suspect, carry more than you can handle. If you ever want my help, I will help you, but otherwise, I think you should leave now. I’ve got an early morning.”

Stravetta got to his feet far more quickly than Dare thought he could. ”I know you want something. Everybody does. Tell me, or...” He took several steps toward the empath, reaching for him, his anger causing Dare to recoil.

The empath stepped back, hitting his bunk. There was no place to go, no escape. Panicked, Dare reached out with his mind, then grasped the hand reaching out to strike him.

Ten seconds after Dare touched him, Stravetta stopped moving, his eyes wide. The empath could feel his pulse pounding in fear instead of anger.

His voice soft, Dare guided Jason back to his chair, helping him sit, still holding his hand. ”I will not let you hurt me, Jason, out of anger or fear,” he whispered. ”I will stop you, but not harm you. Now you know I am not an ordinary empath. Feel free to share this with whoever you wish. We are in the black. I will leave this ship at the end of our voyage with the colonists, and doubt anyone will think it is worth a two-year trip to retrieve me.” He gazed at the other man, noting that his pulse had steadied.

”I am going to let go of your hand and step back now. I am sorry I had to do this, but I think you needed to know what I am, and how little you can affect me. Do not be afraid. I have never harmed anyone and have no plans to start. Please give me the same courtesy.”

Dare gently let him go, before pulling himself onto his berth again. Stravetta sucked

in an audible breath, blinking a few times to clear his eyes.

”What are you?”

The empath fixed him with a cool look, then bowed his head. ”I am a Mindset One, newly escaped from Earth. My gift far outreaches that of a two or three, but fortunately for all, I am a trained therapist with ethics I will not override for any reason other than self-preservation, as I did with you. I mean no harm to anyone and wish to live out my life helping others, and otherwise being left alone. You may think of using me for my gift, but that is not possible without my agreement.”

Dare sighed, shaking his head. ”I know your anger arises from a place of deep pain. I could help you if you allowed it, and would do so, even after your attempt to hurt me. I can see from your expression that you do not wish to avail yourself of my gift.” He slid off the bed again, coming to stand closer to the older man. ”The offer of help will remain open. Please leave now, and rest. I can feel your discomfort and must sleep soon myself. Remember this, Jason, so take care. I do not want to show you what else I am capable of while defending myself.”

Stravetta stood up stiffly, and in obvious pain. He stared at Dare, his expression caught between anger and hurt, then turned without speaking to leave the room. Dare trailed him to the door, locking it after he went through, thinking to himself. He knows what I am and what I can do. I had no choice but wish it had never happened. The young empath sighed again, as he straightened his bed for sleep, his last thought circling. Where is my safety now?

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Jason Stravetta returned to his suite following his confrontation? lesson? with the empath. He said nothing to Derek, allowing him to pace him as they made their way to the upper deck where he berthed, then dismissed his bodyguard for the rest of the evening.

The older man walked around his suite, too anxious, too overwhelmed, to sit down. Taking deep breaths, he quelled his incipient panic attack by looking at what had happened as coldly as he could, admitting that he was more afraid than angry.

Reviewing what he knew of Mindsets, he realized he knew little about what a Mindset One could do. Obviously, the empath could take custody of his body without hurting him, although the entire experience was a nightmare of losing control. He shuddered while taking his third transit of the room, then forced himself to sit on the couch.

He needed more information to know what level of threat Dare represented, not just to him, but the ship. Picking up his pad, he inputted "mindset one" and waited for the results to load.

The amount of information available was disappointing. He knew Ones were kept cloistered apart from society, so that bit of information was a non-starter. Reading the paltry articles available in the ship's library, he gleaned that a Mindset One could take over the mind of another—and could use them however they wished—although the words used did not include "take over" or "use". Putting his pad down, he closed his eyes before taking more deep breaths to calm himself as much as he could, then replayed the events of his encounter with Dare Munro.

The empath had, surprisingly, invited him into his room, even knowing that he was a threat. The Mindset had been polite and non-threatening until Jason stood and went for him. He'd then effortlessly taken control of Jason's physical body after grasping his hand, using that to gently put him back into his chair. There had been no pain other than the knowledge that he could not control his own actions, which was terrifying. The soft voice telling him what he was, unerringly knowing what Jason suffered, and then delivering a subtle threat, only added to his fear.

Jason fell back against the cushions of the couch. He had to be honest with himself. His hatred of empaths had nothing to do with them as a group. It was his own fear, his own hurt, of being found wanting, of not being good enough, that fueled that loathing. He hated himself and his need to be cared for by his family. Or someone, for Gods' sake. That was such a cliché. It made him want to cut out that part of himself that was weak and wanting, but that would solve nothing. Yes, he'd almost been scanned against his will by that crappy VA empath but reporting him had taken care of that problem.

No, he wasn't afraid of empaths because of the hapless one at the VA. He knew genuine fear now. A Mindset One was capable of a nightmare's worth of games played with live subjects. How much of a threat was Dare Munro, given the level of his gift transcended any Mindset?

Jason shook his head ruefully as he contemplated what could happen. Dare could kill them all with a thought or use them for whatever he wished.

The seemingly gentle empath was an unexploded ordnance, a danger no one could defuse.

Jason wished he could remake the day and had never gone to the empath's quarters, never known what he actually was.

In the cold, dark of space, Jason Stravetta accepted he was afraid and helpless against this empath, knowing too that he needed his help for his own sake. Closing his eyes again, he had one thought.

Irony is a cruel fucker.

Stravetta ordered a light meal even though his appetite was nil. He knew going without food didn't serve him, actually causing him to feel worse, so he'd eat, whether or not he wanted to. He tried reading while he ate, but work reports didn't hold his interest, so he switched to a favorite author, almost losing himself in its prose.

The simple act of eating while reading calmed him. Shaking his head, he metaphorically smacked himself for assuming the worst. The empath had been on board for almost seven months. He'd behaved with perfect propriety as a professional. Jason looked for reports of any problems with his conduct otherwise and found none. He reasoned if the Mindset was going to "take over", he would have done so by now. Perhaps he worried for nothing, not that this would be the first time he'd done that. He smiled grimly into the otherwise empty room.

He would speak with the captain tomorrow to find out how much he knew about Dare Munro and discover if there were any fail-safes in place to control the Mindset. Jason shook his head. He did not know if it was possible to control one who could so easily infiltrate and control minds, but he supposed he would find that out. Until then, worrying got him nowhere.

Taking a calming breath, Stravetta resolutely put his concerns aside, his feet up on the ottoman, and attempted to lose himself in his book. He counted it a win when he finished and felt actually tired.

Retiring to his bed, he left a message for Lewis to make him an appointment with

Captain Arends for the next day, preferably late morning or early afternoon. Sleep came finally, his dreams thankfully forgotten.

Rising earlier than needed, Jason readied himself for his day. A shower, shave, then breakfast before dressing in a formal suit. He wanted to look professional and "boss-like" when seeing the captain. He suspected Arends saw him as "dead weight" on this voyage. If that was the case, he needed to up his act to work beyond that perception. Being the owner's son wasn't enough to win Captain Arends cooperation.

Stravetta wanted answers about Munro. He was going to get them by asking the right questions and offering solutions if he could. Tugging his close-fitting suit jacket into place, he motioned to Lewis to follow him, then made his way to the captain's office, arriving at exactly eleven am.

The captain's assistant, Riis, stood respectfully when Jason came in, giving the company man a polite smile. "Please have a seat, Mr. Stravetta. I will let the captain know you have arrived."

Riis disappeared into the captain's office, emerging a few minutes later. "Please go in, sir. I'll bring some refreshments in a few moments."

Jason stood, signaling Lewis to remain with Riis. Giving the assistant a distant nod, he strode into the captain's office as though he owned it, which, of course, he did.

Captain Arends composed his expression into one of pleasant attentiveness as Stravetta came in. Standing, Arends bowed his head, indicating that Jason should sit, then waited until he did so. Inwardly sighing, the captain sat down again, maintaining a look of openness as he gazed at his owner's son.

"How can I help you, Mr. Stravetta? Your aide said that you urgently needed to speak to me."

Jason stared at Arends's bland expression, composed his own, then nodded. "Captain, I went to Dare Munro's berth last night to thank him for his blood donation and to find out why he did so. My experience is that no one does anything without a reason or wanting something in exchange." Stravetta glanced up at Arends, noting he was slightly frowning, then sighed.

"Look, I'm going to be honest with you. He denied any reason other than it was the "right thing to do," then asked me to leave. I felt he was lying. That made me angry, so I stood up, intent on forcing him to tell me. He stopped me before I could touch him." Jason felt the same fear envelope him again, then he took a much-needed breath, before folding his trembling hands in his lap.

"Let me be clear. He stopped me with his mind after he grasped my hand. It wasn't painful. He didn't physically hurt me, but it was more frightening than anything I encountered in the war. Munro told me what he is—a Mindset One—then told me to remember what he'd done, and that he could do worse if he wished it. I couldn't move or speak until he "let" me go."

Stravetta pinned the captain with his eyes. "I want to know if you knew what he was when he came on board, and if there are any precautions in place, if he uses his abilities on any of us. Mindset Ones are never allowed to leave Earth, so how is he here?"

Captain Arends stared back at him, then shook his head, leaning back in his chair. "Mr. Stravetta, since we're dealing in honesty, I'll tell you I knew what he was when he came on board. I received a communication from the Office of Gifted Services, asking if Mr. Munro was on board, and if so, ordering me to return him at the end of the voyage. From that message alone, I knew he wasn't a Mindset Three. He told me his true rating when I told him I denied he was onboard to the OGS. I do not agree with how Mindsets, or any Gifted, are treated on Earth. So, I lied with no remorse." He leaned forward on his desk, hands casually folded together.

"Lest you think me an idiot for allowing a One on this ship, I looked into Dare's background. He was...is a respected therapist with no violations noted against him of any kind. He lived in a subsidized room, took public transport everywhere, and subsisted in poverty while working in public health. He fled Earth because he didn't want to be a research subject, incarcerated, and generally used. As for precautions, there are none to be taken. Outside of killing him by stealth, nothing can stop a Mindset One if they're bent on doing evil." Unexpectedly, the captain grinned.

"Dare is what he seems to be. A professional therapist with rigorous ethics and a strong conscience. He will not go berserk and take us over for whatever nefarious scheme you think he might have. I was going to say I trust him with my life, but I guess I already have."

Stravetta shifted in his chair, his expression carefully blank. "You've made this ship culpable with your lie. What about the crew talking about him? What if this gets back to Earth? Whether or not you want to admit it, he's a danger to everyone on this ship."

Captain Arends's expression hardened. "Mr. Stravetta, I understand your concern, but I feel it is baseless. The only reason Dare stopped you was to prevent you from harming him. You've admitted that. He would have never shown you his true self without that provocation. As for the crew, those that know him will never give him away, and those that don't, won't. He plans to go down to the planet with the colonists, to live his life out with them."

Arends narrowed his eyes. "Frankly, Mr. Stravetta, I am more concerned about your reputation for violence than I am of Dare's gift. I would be very suspicious if anything untoward happened to Mr. Munro while he is under my command. I remind you that while we are on this ship, I am the law. The penalty for murder is being cycled out an airlock without protective gear."

The captain leaned back, steepling his fingers. "If you wish to report that he is here, that is your prerogative. We will be in the black for over three years. A lot can happen in that amount of time."

Stravetta straightened in the chair, staring at the captain, who wore a slight smile. "Are you threatening me, captain? Do you think I wouldn't be missed?"

Arends shook his head slowly. "I was merely pointing out the hazards of space travel, Mr. Stravetta. As for the other, answer that question yourself. Do you have anything else that requires my attention? I do have a meeting on the Engineering deck in a few moments."

The captain was surprised to see Stravetta slump a little in his chair before rising stiffly to his feet. "No, captain. I see my concerns are mine alone. Mr. Munro is fortunate to have you as a protector, for all that he doesn't need one. I have no desire to harm him, as I know that would be suicidal. I'll keep his presence here quiet as you have, for the time being. Good day, Captain Arends. I appreciate your input and your time today."

Stravetta gave a brief bow of his head, turned, and left. Arends huffed out a breath just as Riis came into his office.

"Mr. Sorenson, I didn't call for you."

Riis ducked his head. "No, sir. But I was...sir, is Dare alright?"

The captain met his assistant's worried gaze. "Mr. Munro is going to be just fine, Riis. Don't worry."

Riis relaxed, his shoulders lowering. "Thank you, sir. Mr. Stravetta..."

"Will no longer be a problem, Mr. Sorenson. Hand me my pad. I've got to get to Engineering."

Riis pulled it out of a spacious pocket. "It's been updated for today, captain. Do you have anything else you need me to do?"

Arends smiled. "Yes, find Mr. Munro and let him know he doesn't have to worry about Mr. Stravetta anymore, although I still recommend he stay away from him. Same goes for you, Mr. Sorenson."

"Yes, sir. If he has questions?"

The captain shook his head, grinning. "I'm pretty sure he'll know why he's getting that message, but if he needs to talk to me, make him an appointment. See you tomorrow, Mr. Sorenson."

Riis smiled in return. "Of course, sir. Have a great meeting."

"With Engineering? Gods know I'll try."

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Dare's concern regarding Stravetta "outing" him as a Mindset One slowly dissipated as time passed with no revelation. Receiving Riis' message from the captain helped to allay his fears for the most part. After two weeks had gone by since their confrontation, the empath felt, if not totally safe, better about his conversation with the older man. During that time, he thought about telling the rest of the ship about his true nature, knowing he would have to tell the emerging Mindset on the colony deck soon.

Years of keeping what he was to himself made it difficult to let go of the spurious safety held by keeping it secret. Finally, he decided to release the information on an "as needed" basis. Knowing the way information spread on the ship, he would not have to tell many for everyone to know. It would be a relief to let the secret out, to be himself at last. He could only hope to be accepted and not feared.

Working with Chance in the colony's quarters was an unlooked-for joy. Chance was a natural therapist; warm, caring, and an excellent listener. With his nascent empathy talent, he would be a wonderful asset for the colony, a true gift.

Dare decided he would share his secret with Chance today, and if he wished, drop his shields to discover what level of empath the young man was. As he walked to the colony deck, the empath thought of ways he could introduce the subject of his gift with the least amount of upset, but finally shrugged, uncertain.

It was a subdued empath that arrived at the colony's quarters. He managed to smile and wave to those he knew as he ambled to Chance's small room. Calling out before he entered, Dare found Chance sitting on his couch, waiting, with a smile wreathing his face, his brown eyes warm, sandy hair soft in the light.

"It's good to see you again, Dare. I'm ready for more training today." Unexpectedly, he yawned, covering his mouth quickly. "I'm sorry. I'm not sleeping very well. It seems like there are so many thoughts around me they fill up my head. It's been worse lately, but it's not new. I've had that problem for several years."

Dare nodded in understanding as he sat in one armchair. "I think you need to take the damping medication before you sleep. Your shields drop low when you sleep, and that allows everyone's thoughts to invade yours. I take that medication every night myself or sleeping becomes more of a nightmare. I believe it's getting worse for you as your gift expands. I have some of the medication in my room here, so we can go over there after your training today. You'll need to see the doctor here, too, so you'll have your own script for them." He gazed at Chance with sympathy. "This is one downside of empathy, my friend."

Chance gave him a wry smile. "I thought that might be what was going on. I'm fine with taking the med if it'll let me get a good night's sleep. What do you want to work on today? I've been holding my shields pretty steady and haven't inadvertently listened in on anyone recently."

Dare nodded agreeably before meeting Chance's eyes. "I think it's time for you to find out what level of empath you are. I can assist with that, but it will mean dropping our shields for a few minutes, then I would look to see what gift you hold within you. It's painless, but invasive. You are an empath whether or not we do this, so it's up to you if we proceed."

Chance sat forward in his seat. "Why bother then if it doesn't make a difference? Would it change my training?"

The older empath bowed his head. "Yes, it would change your training, as I would tailor it to your level. Otherwise, I would stay with the general knowledge I am giving you now. As I said, this decision is yours to make. I will help you with

whatever you decide.”

Chance sat back on the couch, looking thoughtful. ”How do you know how to do this? You’re a Mindset Three—I didn’t think that level had that ability.”

Dare sighed, then leaned forward. ”Mindset Three’s do not, but I am not truly a Mindset Three. I am a Mindset One, which is why I left Earth. I am sorry I kept this from you, but keeping that secret has been my only safety for some time. It was difficult to let that go.”

The younger empath’s eyes widened as he inhaled a breath. ”I thought those existed only rarely. But here you are. I don’t know what to...I mean, thank you for telling me, but you are way out of my class as far as empathy goes.”

The older empath smiled faintly. ”Perhaps, perhaps not. Unless I discover your level of ability, we won’t know. I understand I am not what you thought, and will give you time to consider my proposal, or indeed, leave you alone completely. That, too, is your decision.”

Chance bowed his head for a moment, obscuring his face. A few breaths later, he raised his head, grinning. ”Dare, my empathy tells me you are caring and thoughtful. I am not worried about you ravaging my mind or harming me. For Gaia’s sake, don’t leave me to wander the minds of others without more training! I’m saying I trust you, and I want you to find my level so we can customize my training. What do I need to do?”

Dare gave him a thankful smile. ”You are sure?” Chance nodded emphatically, making Dare grin. ”In that case, I will drop my shields first so I can hold you safe when you drop yours. This will feel strange, but it will not take long.” He took a deep breath, dropping his defenses, then nodded to Chance to do the same.

Dare held Chance's gift within his mind, feeling his joy, his warmth, his loving care given to others. Delicately probing, he carefully felt what he could do, then, mind to mind, told him to raise his shields again.

Chance fell back against the couch, opening eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed. "That was...different, but I feel fine. Did you find what you wanted to know?"

Dare swiftly rebuilt his shields, then smiled warmly. "You are a Mindset Two, Chance. We will adjust your training to fit your level. Thank you for allowing me to touch your mind. It was an honor to do so."

The younger empath shook his head. "Um, thank you. All I felt of you was the strength of your mind and the carefulness of your touch. You are scary strong."

Dare met his questioning gaze. "I suppose I am. I have not found my limits thus far, as Earth was not the place to practice my gift. Don't worry—my conscience and ethics keep me in check. I would hurt no one except to defend myself, and would question even that."

Chance slowly nodded. "I'm glad to hear that now that I've felt your mind. Otherwise, you'd be a serious threat."

The older empath bowed his head before answering softly. "Yes, I would be if I wished it. Thank Gaia, that is not so."

They stared at each other for a moment before Chance responded. "Thank you for giving me your truth. It is a gift I will not forget."

Dare shook his head. "Thank you for your acceptance and courage. I will not forget that gift, freely given."

They spent the remainder of the day together as Dare taught his student different exercises to strengthen his shields and the constraints of using his gift. They walked together to the older empath's room to retrieve the dampers for Chance to use that night, then had a meal with the colony.

Dare arranged to meet with Vida the next day to confirm Chance's abilities, with his consent, of course, and to tell her of his own. Chance walked him to the exit, asking his teacher about different psychological theories, pausing only to say hello to other colonists. Dare finally made the "time out" sign to quell the flow of words.

"Chance, therapy is more about being in the moment with another than it is using psychological theories. Read the books I suggested, but otherwise practice being present in each conversation you have with someone. We bring ourselves into therapy to help others. The different theories only give us insight into what might be going on."

The younger man ducked his head. "Crap. I got carried away. I'll remember to bring myself into my interactions with others and not worry so much about what school of thought I'm following."

Dare gave him a rueful smile. "I did the same when I started my training. Don't worry about it. You are a natural therapist, and I know you'll do well. Now let me out so I can get ready for my clients tomorrow. Have a good night, Chance, and remember to take the dampers."

Chance nodded. "Thanks for everything you're doing to help. It means a lot to me, but then you know that, right? Have a good evening, too, and I promise to take my medication. See you in a few days?"

The older empath gazed at his student, giving him a gentle smile. "Yes, I will be back tomorrow to see the Administrator, but will see you the day after. Please ask one of

the non-gifted therapists if we can sit in on a session with one of their clients soon. It is good to see therapy in practice instead of only in theory. Until then, get some rest.”

Chance nodded, grinned, and let his mentor out to return to his deck on the Gambit.

Dare sighed quietly as he left. He no longer held his secret, realizing that his safety had been only an illusion, and was, at last, thankfully discarded.

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As arranged, Dare returned to the colony deck to meet with Administrator Vida. They met at her office just after lunch. After sitting and exchanging greetings, Dare wasted no time getting to the heart of why he was there.

"I met with Chance yesterday. He allowed me to scan him to discover his Mindset level and gave me permission to tell you. He is a Mindset Two, and will be of great assistance to this colony, both here and on the planet. Before doing so, I shared my true level with him and now wish to tell you as well. I am a Mindset One. I left Earth before I was found to hold that rating after spending years pretending to be only a Three. I did not wish to be locked away, experimented on, or used as a weapon."

The empath heard Vida's indrawn gasp, before meeting her startled gaze. "I'm sorry if I have shocked you, but I could no longer keep it a secret. Before you ask, the captain and Chance know, as does one other. I plan on letting this information out soon. I will tell my clients first, then share this with my friends here." He smiled faintly. "I think that will assure that my secret will be disseminated throughout the ship very quickly." He paused, giving the Administrator a searching look. "I know that some will fear me but be assured that my ethics and conscience are unbreakable, as are my shields. I wish to spend my life helping others, not forcing them to my will."

Dare bowed his head, closing his eyes. "If you feel I am too big of a risk to the colony, I ask only to finish Chance's training before I leave. I believe his formal training will be complete within six months, then he will need to be supervised by a therapist for another six months before he may carry his own caseload. I want to ensure that he has every tool he needs to assist those he cares for, and to make sure he can do so without causing himself harm. I don't need an answer today, if you wish to

think about this before deciding.”

Vida stared at him for several minutes, then shook her head. ”Forgive me if I made you think I was frightened of you. It was more of a gasp of astonishment. I never thought to meet a Mindset One, much less work with an empath of that rating. That said, there will be those who are leery of you once this information spreads throughout the colony.” She gave Dare a warm smile. ”I think you will be an immense asset to us, as will Chance. I believe it would be a good idea to have Chance with you when you tell others your ”secret”. He has felt you in his mind and can attest that you did no harm, and, in fact, helped him. Shall I schedule a town hall event for you? We do not have quite the gossip chain that the Gambit has, so this would be the quickest way to release your information. What do you think?”

The empath sat back in his chair, sighing in relief as he gave Vida a pleased smile. ”Thank you for your acceptance of my gift. If you think a town hall is the best way to do this, then I”m willing. I will answer any questions then, too.”

The older woman bowed her head in respect before grinning. ”I will set this up as soon as I can. I”m pretty sure those within the colony will accept you as you are. Thank you, Dare, for sharing your secret with me.”

The empath nodded. ”It was finally time to do it. It was a heavy burden to bear. Now I can let it go and be who I”ve always been.”

Vida gave him an understanding nod, then stood. ”I”ve got another meeting to attend—that”s how my days are spent. I”ll message you as soon as the town hall is set up. I know you”ve got clients to see. Take care, and I”ll speak with you soon.”

”I will, Vida, you do the same. See you soon.”

They parted to go separate directions at the doorway. Dare headed for the exit,

greeting colonists as he did so. No matter how this played out, he was relieved and glad he'd told Vida about his rating. No matter what happened now, he no longer had to hide who he was.

The empath began telling his clients about his true Mindset rating that day, dispensing the information as gently as he could. Most of them did not know what a One could do, and so had no fear of him, even when he tried to explain. A few were nervous and said they would think about continuing with him. Overall, telling them had been a positive experience. With that in mind, he decided to have dinner with Riis the following night, and "come out" to him, figuring he would be the most accepting of his ship friends.

Ready to meet Riis as he got off shift in the mess, Dare found him already seated at a table, talking to Mike at another table. "I'm sure Dare won't mind if you join us. C'mon, Mike, I haven't talked to you in ages."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Since when is "ages", the day before yesterday? Talk about hyperbole. That should be your middle name."

Riis grimaced. "My middle name is Sven, and I'm not exaggerating. I feel like we haven't really had a conversation for a while." He put on a sad expression. "But if you don't want to, then I can't force you, now, can I?"

Mike sighed, looking over at Riis and seeing Dare. "Dare, do you mind if I join you and poor, sad Riis for dinner? He's pining for my company."

The empath grinned. "Please join us, if only so Riis will stop looking constipated. That will put me off my meal."

The young assistant huffed, turning back in his chair to face Dare as Mike sat down next to him. "You're both dicks. I have no idea why I'm here with you."

Mike snorted. "You're here because you know we'll listen to you, no matter how full of shit you are. You poor baby."

Dare chuckled at them both. "Actually, Riis is here because I asked him to have dinner with me. I've got something to say, and I may as well say it to both of you and save some time. Let's get some food, and I'll make the big reveal."

Nodding agreeably, the three men went over and filled their trays with food, Mike and Riis grabbing beers since they were all off duty. Dare still had some clients to see, so he had a soda for the sugar and caffeine.

Settling back at their table, they ate for a few minutes before Riis put down his fork and stared at the empath. "You're going to tell us you're gay."

Dare choked on his food and started coughing. Mike jabbed Riis in the ribs. "Where are your manners, you clumsy Viking? You don't tell someone, you ask."

Riis gave them both a critical stare. "You mean, I should say 'please tell me if you're gay?' instead? I was guessing, Mike, not telling."

The empath held up a hand, stopping the conversation as he recovered his breath. "Really, Riis? For your information, I am gay, not that it's had much bearing on my love life. That isn't what I wanted to tell you, though."

Riis grinned broadly. "I knew it! My gaydar never fails me. You know, I am, too, right?"

Mike laughed. "Everyone on this ship knows that. You're not exactly subtle, you know."

Riis batted his hand like he was fending off a bug. "Bite me, Mike." The blond man

gave his friend a flirty look, "or you can let me bite you."

"Oh, hell no. I know where you've been and who you've been with. How about a kiss instead?"

Riis' eyes widened as Mike leaned over, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Riis blushed, suddenly mute.

Mike turned to Dare, eyes twinkling with laughter. "Now that he's quiet, please tell us whatever you want to."

Dare returned the gazes of his two friends, then swallowed. "I wanted to let you know that I'm not a Mindset Three. I'm actually a One. I escaped Earth just before they could put me away for it. The captain knows, so does Jason Stravetta and my trainee, Chance. I told Vida on the colony deck and we're going to meet with everyone there. Some of my clients know as well—I had to tell them first. I've been holding that secret for so long—I couldn't do it any longer. You...you don't have to worry about what I might do because I won't. Do anything to anybody, I mean."

Mike breathed out a "wow" before turning to Riis. The assistant's expression was one of wonder and surprise. He reached out a hand, taking one of Dare's in his. "You don't have to worry about me," he glanced at Mike, "or Mike. We both trust and like you, no matter what party tricks you can do. I think it's great that you're gay and a mythical Mindset. Go for our team, you know?"

Mike smiled gently at Dare, then turned to Riis with a snort. "He's our Mindset, not just yours. I'm cis, so what if you're both gay—I mean, who cares about that shit?" He turned back to meet the empath's eyes. "I'm glad you told us, and it makes no difference to me either. Do you want us to pass it on through the ship? You know how the gossip is around here. A whisper of information, and soon everyone knows."

Dare closed his eyes in relief for a moment, feeling the acceptance emanating from them both. "I'm not keeping it a secret anymore, but I don't want somebody to freak out and try to kill me, either. If you mention it, just do it casually with the people you know. If anyone has questions, tell them to call me. Gaia, I'm so happy both of you are okay with this."

Riis shook himself, then laughed softly. "We may be ship rats, but we're educated, tolerant ones. We're friends, and that means we stick together. We've got more than a year to go on this trip, and I'm glad you'll be able to be who you really are." His expression became gleeful. "I need to set you up on some dates. You trust me to choose good guys for you, right?"

Dare's mouth opened, but nothing came out. Riis nodded, eyes glinting in the light.

"I knew you did, but I had to ask."

Mike rolled his eyes, giving the empath a commiserating glance. "Good luck, Mindset. You're in for a ride you don't want to take."

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The town hall with the colonists went better than Dare had hoped. With Chance by his side, the Mindset One made his announcement, and was met by a "so what" attitude from the majority of those present. Some had questions about his abilities, but none questioned his integrity. Chance shared his rating, and how Dare had touched him to discover it, emphasizing the gentleness of the empath's brush against his mind. The meeting broke up after that, with only a few coming up to ask more questions or to say they were happy to have two Mindsets.

As Dare walked back to the Gambit, he was struck by how he had been accepted despite being a One. That was a heretofore unknown emotion for him, and it made him wonder how he'd managed for so long, hiding his gift. Shrugging, he shook his head. At least he no longer needed to do that. He was free, and with that freedom came a sense of hope.

Riis' decision to hook Dare up with one of the crew became an exercise in saying "no". The assistant would corner Dare at dinner or lunch, then offer to introduce him to a line cook in the mess, or an apprentice engineer. Sometimes he had photos of them, and he seemed to know everyone he suggested disturbingly well.

Dare always politely refused the offers, trying to be thoughtful of the work Riis was putting into this, but finally he snapped.

"Riis, you've got to stop trying to hook me up. I'm a Mindset. I can't just...leap on someone without knowing them more first. The lovers I've had have all been empaths. I know how to navigate that situation. It would be totally different with someone who can't mentally reach out to me."

Riis frowned, looking upset. "Alright, I know I've been coming on hard, pun intended, with this. I just don't want you to be alone, Dare. You're a good guy, and you deserve someone to care about you."

The empath reached out, laying his hand over Riis'. "Look, I appreciate that. You know I do. It's just that I'm interested in someone right now and they're not into me, okay? I don't even know if he likes guys. It's...complicated."

Riis gave him an avid look, and the Mindset could almost see the wheels turning in his head. Before he could tell him not to make guesses, the younger man leaned in, whispering, "It's Jason Stravetta, isn't it? He's hot, but are you crazy?"

Dare resisted the desire to bang his head on "their" table in the mess, then sighed loudly. "Are you sure you don't have some kind of latent mind gift? Gaia on a carousel, you're freaking me out. If you say anything to him, I'll turn you into a frog, and let you loose in the bio garden."

Riis' grin faltered. "You wouldn't do...you can't do that, can you?"

Dare rubbed his face hard with both hands, then stared at his friend. "Of course, I can't! I'm an empath, not a warlock. I could make you think you're a frog, but I won't. Just promise me you won't talk to him or say anything about this to anyone. That means Mike and everyone you know."

Riis nodded, his smile returning. "How can I help you if you won't...okay, calm down. I promise I won't say anything to anyone, including your scary crush. Thanks for not making me act like a frog, you crazy empath."

The "crazy" empath stared at him for a moment, then relaxed. "I accept your promise. Considering my unwilling revelation, please lay off the blind dates. I'm just not up to managing any of those now, or probably ever." Riis nodded, not meeting his eyes. "I

shouldn't have threatened you. I'm sorry. I'd never hurt you on purpose."

The assistant nodded, looking over at him. "I deserved it. You may have noticed that I get carried away. Sometimes a well-phrased threat makes me stop. I appreciate the apology, even though I think it's all on me."

"No, I take responsibility for making a threat, even if it was spurious. I feel relaxed around you because you're my friend. That doesn't give me the license to scare you into doing what I want. Maybe I should tell the captain of my lapse."

Riis groaned. "Oh, Gods, don't do that. He'd want to see how I act as a frog, and I'm not up for that."

The friends grinned at each other. Then the younger man told Dare of his last date with his current boyfriend, keeping it light for the empath.

Harmony restored; they finished their meal.

Dare had no time to focus on his unrequited whatever it was. The next day, the captain sent an announcement to each com screen, stating there would be an unscheduled shutdown of the trans-ion drive because of an anomaly engineering had found in its programming. Anyone on the upper decks would be moved to the crew deck to protect them from increased radiation while the ship was stationary for repairs. The showers were for infirmary use only, and personnel would be issued clean wipes to use in the interim. All water was to be conserved rigorously and rationing of it would be put in place. Those not on duty were expected to stay in their quarters to reduce the amount of oxygen used. These prohibitions applied to both the crew and colony decks. The shut down and deceleration would occur in thirty-six hours with a klaxon sounding when it began, at approximately fifteen hundred hours the following day.

The captain ended the message, assuring that the anomaly was correctable and they would be back to their regular speed within a week, two at the outside. Everyone's cooperation was appreciated. Any questions should be directed to Riis Sorenson to be brought to the captain.

Dare finished reading the message with mixed feelings. He wasn't afraid, but he was concerned about those that would be. He was also glad he'd taken a shower last night. Today and tomorrow were going to a roundabout of chaos. The empath dressed quickly, went to the mess for a fast meal, and met his first client. There was no time to waste.

The Mindset saw every one of his clients that day, all of them deciding to put their therapy on hold until they were running full speed again. Dare agreed, making sure they knew he was available if needed. Checking in with the colony deck, he found them busy winding up what needed to be done before the shutdown. None seemed frightened, and Dare supposed that deciding to take a two-year trip into the unknown made sure those that did so had a high fear tolerance. He saw Chance and gave him additional assignments to do and asked him to cancel their appointment to sit in on a therapy session with Becca. That could wait until later. The empath would not be visiting the colony until the shutdown was over, unless he was called to help.

When he returned to his own deck, he saw Jason with Lewis and Derek, apparently moving Jason into a berth a few doors away from him. Jason was turned away and didn't see him, although Lewis nodded in his direction. Dare ducked into his own room quickly, taking a deep breath.

He'd examined his interest in Jason Stravetta, and still had no idea why he was attracted. From the moment Jason came at him in the infirmary, he felt something despite the anger the other man was projecting. He'd wanted to help him, but it was more than that. Although Stravetta had a reputation of being a devil, he had the face of an angel. Dare liked he was older and took care of his body, no matter what he was

dealing with. Moving to his couch, the young man sat, determined to work his way to the bottom of his feelings, without thinking about how Stravetta looked.

The empath had been rigorous in avoiding the man, knowing he would bring trouble with him. When Jason arrived at his door ostensibly to "thank" him, he felt nothing but his own shields until he reached out, stopping the older man from trying to touch him by taking his hand in his. At that moment, with that touch, something sparked in him. Yes, he felt Jason's anger, his hurt, and his growing fear, but there was so much more that called to him. His pride in the service he'd given to the world, his longing for family, his sadness for what and who had been lost. Dare knew then what drew him to this man.

Jason sought exactly what Dare did, and held his softer feelings under strict control, allowing only his anger to show. Dare knew he hid his as well, although he did not use anger to mask his feelings. Dare used his position of Mindset to keep a barrier between himself and others. No one questioned him when he did, thinking that was who he was. Despite knowing the feelings of others, Dare had a vast reservoir of emotion within himself, carefully tucked away to protect himself, and perhaps others. He shook his head, sighing. Knowing this changed nothing. He'd frightened Jason deliberately at their last meeting. He doubted the man would forgive that or think of him as anything other than a Mindset One, capable of harm.

Dare leaned back, tilting his head up to stare at the ceiling of his berth. Just because he felt that he and Jason were pieces of the same puzzle didn't mean they would ever come together to finish it. Smiling ruefully, he bowed his head. The only thing he was sure of was the knowledge that he would never have Jason as a client. If he was, they could never have a relationship. He would leave that door open just in case a miracle came visiting. Or maybe a unicorn.

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Jason Stravetta read the message on his com with carefully masked dismay. He did not want to move to the crew deck, not because he felt he was better than others. Rather, it was the knowledge that he would be surrounded by those he did not know. His suite provided the isolation he needed, the sense of peace that he'd fought so hard for. Once on the crew deck, he would be heard if he cried out at night during a nightmare. His trauma was his to bear, but never shown to others. The thought of strangers knowing made his skin crawl with internal loathing.

He briefly considered arguing to stay on his deck, then discarded it. He might be a dreaded Stravetta, but he would not put his staff in harm's way, even if he would do so for himself. He groaned softly. There was no choice. He would be moving down there for safety's sake, knowing there was none for him. As he thought about what to take with him, another, more alarming, thought crossed his mind.

The Mindset One was on that deck. Jason had avoided him assiduously since their last confrontation. Originally fearful, he'd come to feel grudging respect and wonder for what the One could do. He rolled his eyes, grimacing. Alright, he was a little fearful. The Mindset had held him immobile with his mind, for the Gods' sake. Who wouldn't be scared by that? Dare's hand had been warm, and surprisingly gentle, despite the control he exerted.

Feeling a little too close to crazy, Jason realized he felt understood by the Mindset without uttering a word. No amount of trying to make it out to be something else took that away. It didn't hurt that the empath was the type of man he liked. Shorter, lithe, and scary smart. He shook his head. Crap, what was wrong with him? Wanting a man who could kill with a thought was insane. Maybe he finally had lost his mind. It didn't matter if he had, since Dare Munro hated him, with good reason. Although

he'd offered to help him. What was that about? Jason shrugged. He'd never know since he wasn't going there. Not now, not ever.

The klaxon sounded, as promised, at fifteen hundred hours, blaring for only a short time. Soon after, a hush fell over the ship as the drive went offline, and the ship coasted on its own momentum. The change wasn't readily apparent, although the most sensitive could feel the difference, as did the long-term crew.

Jason could feel the difference, but knew he'd be hard pressed to describe what he felt. He almost felt lighter but knew that wasn't a true physical sensation since gravity was still being produced. Whatever it was, it felt weird. He gazed around his tiny berth, his bags up against the far bulkhead. Stravetta knew he needed to unpack, put away what he could, but folded down his bed instead and climbed in, closing his eyes.

He took a deep breath to calm himself. This room was too small, too close. After his combat experiences, he found he was uncomfortable in small, dark spaces, and this berth qualified for both. Memories of being caught in a collapsed tunnel skittered across his mind before he pushed it away. No, I'm not going there. Focus on the present. This room is not a tunnel. I can breathe just fine. He pulled in a stuttering breath, willing himself to calm down. Keeping his eyes closed, he did the breathing he'd been taught, then finally opened his eyes, sighing. Fuck, it was going to be a long week or two.

Dare felt the change in the ship as soon as the drive disengaged. It was as though a collective breath was expelled, then held, waiting for the next inhale. He could feel that without lowering his shields, and knew that if he did, he would feel an increase in anxiety as well. Propping himself up with pillows, he sat on his bed, reading from his pad. However long it took to correct the malfunction, it was going to be too long, as far as he was concerned. The empath was used to being busy, and now, he had an enforced vacation since his clients were all taking a hiatus from therapy for the

duration of this shutdown.

Realizing he'd read the same line three times, he put down his pad. Maybe he could see if he was needed in the infirmary or the mess. Dare shook his head. If this was what a vacation was, he was happy he'd never taken one. Then again, this was hardly a scenic venue. Shrugging, he picked up the pad again and made himself focus. He'd relax, rest, and hopefully could help somewhere until they got up to speed again.

The empath met Riis that evening for dinner. The younger man looked exhausted, his usual energy depleted. Dare cast a concerned glance his way, only to have the assistant shake his head.

"I'm fine, Dare. Yeah, I look like I've been run over by something large, but then I kind of have been. Trying to get everyone off the outer decks was an absolute pain in the butt. The captain moved into his office with no complaint, but some of the other officers acted like I was making them do this out of spite." He gave the empath a barely there smile. "I wanted to tell them to go ahead and fry up there, but couldn't unless I wanted to be hit by an insubordination charge. Thank the Gods that Jason Stravetta just packed up and left without an argument. I could tell he didn't want to leave, but Lewis said that he would not stay and endanger his staff. Lewis tried to swat me because I looked too surprised. Didn't expect that level of consideration from the son of the honcho. I guess acting like an asshole doesn't necessarily make you one."

Dare gazed at him, giving the younger man an understanding smile. "I'm a bit surprised, too, to hear that but glad as well. I'm happy you didn't have to wrangle the officers and Mr. Stravetta. That would have been way too much. I saw my clients today and won't see them again until we get back online. If you need help with anything, let me know. I'm not used to sitting around, and a week or two of that will make me crazy."

Riis groaned. "I wish I could trade places with you. I have to check on the officers over the next few days to make sure they're settling in their perfectly acceptable, albeit smaller, quarters. I'm so glad the captain isn't that fussy. I've got a bunch of other things I need to catch up on, too. If you really want to help, I could ask the captain if you could do those visits. Stupid though they are. I'm pretty sure none of those annoying officers would give you any lip. You'd have to check on Mr. Stravetta and his staff, too. Would you be alright with that?"

The empath looked down, then gave the younger man a thoughtful glance. "I'm fine with doing all that, including checking on Stravetta et al. Ask the captain and let me know tomorrow. Now, finish up your meal so you can get back to your berth. You look like you're going to fall into your chili, face first."

Riis shook his head, while giving the empath a diluted scowl. "Good thing you're going to help me, or I'd have to give you a snappy comeback in the next day or two. Shit, I'm so tired." He stared at Dare with bleary eyes. "You wouldn't have some kind of mojo to get my energy back, would you?"

Dare grinned, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Well..." he glanced around at the other crew members. "I could, but I can't guarantee that you wouldn't spontaneously start yipping like a Jack Russell terrier."

Riis' eyes widened. "Really?"

Dare snorted. "No, not really. Just go to bed—that will take care of the problem. I'll walk you back to your berth. I don't want to hear tomorrow that you fell asleep in the corridor."

The younger man yawned hugely. "I'd laugh, but that's too close to the truth. You're a nice guy when you're not being a comedian."

Dare sympathy yawned, then glared at his friend. "Stop yawning. Let's go, little Viking, so you can get your much needed beauty sleep."

Riss stood, swaying a little on his feet. "When you're right, you're right. Lead on, you ancient Pict, so you can tuck me in."

The empath grabbed one of his elbows to steady him. "In your dreams and nowhere else, Riis."

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Riis contacted Dare the next morning to meet him for breakfast. The empath woke at his usual early hour, determined to stay on schedule. Meeting his friend at oh seven hundred wasn't a hardship, as he'd been up for over an hour.

Riis was his usual bright-eyed self, giving Dare a big smile after the empath inquired about how he was feeling. "I feel so much better. Slept hard, but then I usually do. I contacted the captain, and he's fine with you doing the check-ins, so I can focus on catching up on all the damn paperwork. The captain told me to tell you he's thankful that you're willing to help outside your field of expertise, and that he appreciates it."

Riis bowed his head before glancing back up at his friend. "I appreciate it, too. I think you'll get a better reception from the officers, not to mention Mr. Stravetta. The captain suggested checking on everyone, starting tomorrow at the earliest. I think he expects the officers to complain directly to him, but hopefully not about how I treated them. He'll shut down any problems, especially since he's camping in his office. To be honest, I'm more concerned about Mr. Stravetta."

Dare nodded, keeping his expression bland. "I'll check on everyone anyway, in the interest of ship harmony. I'm more concerned about Stravetta, too, so I'll be more solicitous with him."

Riis wiggled an eyebrow at him, causing the empath to shake his head. "Not going there, Mr. Sorenson, so stop trying to fish information out of me, not that you could. I can keep a secret forever and have."

The younger man frowned, giving Dare a look of mock outrage. "As if I'd do that. I know about confidentiality since I work with sensitive information for the captain."

Outrage fading, he ducked his head. "I was mostly hoping for gossip, but then realized who I'm talking to."

Dare stared at him for a moment, then took a drink of his coffee. "Sorry to disappoint, but I don't gossip...much, and never about the people I care for."

Riis looked dismayed as he shook his head. "I'm not disappointed in you, laconic Scot that you are. Like I said, I understand. Nice play on words there, too. No, I'm not intimating anything. Sheesh, calm down, Mindset. It's too early to get pissed off."

The empath took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He eyed the younger man sternly. "I don't know what it is about you that can get me going, but I swear, you're very good at it. You sure you don't have any gift talent swimming around in your head?"

"Pretty sure. I was tested years ago, and came up null, thank every God known. I think you're confusing being very observant and intuitive with having a gift. Basically, I'm just nosy and don't know how to take a hint, often. I'm not special like you are."

Dare relaxed, chuckling softly. "Having a gift doesn't make me special. It's mostly a burden, really. Now, you are special with a talent for bringing people together, and organizing everyone, as well as being kind and thoughtful. Never think you're anything other than a gift to those you know."

Riis gave him a genuine smile, with none of his usual snark. "Thank you, Dare. I appreciate that and hope it's true."

The Mindset nodded, smiling in return. "It is my friend. Mindsets see very clearly, and that is what I see in you."

The younger man's expression radiated happiness. "I don't know what to say, except you've given me a wonderful start to my day of unending paperwork. Thank you for being such a great friend."

The Mindset grinned. "It was my pleasure, as is knowing you, with some exceptions."

"You had to say that, didn't you? I can't be too perfect, or it wouldn't be fair to anyone else."

Dare nodded agreeably. "Of course, that's the reason, Riis. Of course, it is."

Everything remained quiet for several days. Dare checked on the officers and was thankful to hear no complaints. They were all subdued, so he was sure the captain had shut down any criticism before he'd done his check-in. The Mindset tried to see Jason Stravetta, but he did not answer his door. Lewis heard him attempting to see his boss before opening his door to invite Dare in.

"I think the boss is working. He doesn't like to be interrupted when he's in the middle of something. Is there a problem?"

Dare looked up into Lewis's concerned eyes and shook his head. "I'm doing routine check-ins for Riis. I can't sit around like a passenger when there's something I could be doing. Are you, Derek, and Mr. Stravetta settling in alright? Do you need anything I can provide?"

Lewis managed a smile, showing that Dare should sit in the room's only chair while he took the couch. "Derek and I are doing fine. Mr. Stravetta is too, although he likes more privacy than the crew deck can give him. I don't think there's anything to be done about that until we can move back up to our deck." The big man frowned, giving the empath a concerned look. "I think he's having more of a problem with this

than any of us know, but he has said nothing, so I'm...worried a bit, I guess." The Mindset gave him a questioning glance. "I can't talk about Mr. Stravetta's business, Dare. Not without his consent." Lewis managed to smile with a little effort. "How are you doing with all this?"

The empath shrugged. "I'm used to living around a lot of people, plus my room is bigger than what I had on Earth. I have very strong shields to contain my gift and prevent bleeding over from everyone here. That's day-to-day stuff for me. This shutdown has everyone off schedule and that's a stressor. Fortunately, it's not caused any problems so far. Hopefully, we'll have less than a week to go before we get back to speed." He shot Lewis a keen glance.

"Please let Mr. Stravetta know I came by to check in with him. If he needs me to assist him with anything, let him know I'm available to do so." He made eye contact with the other man. "Lewis, I know about not talking out of turn and getting consent. I'm willing to help if something comes up. I don't know if that will help you or not, but I mean it." The empath nodded, giving the other man a warm smile. "Take care of yourself, and I'll hopefully see you at the next poker game, whenever that is."

Lewis smiled as he stood up. "I will pass that message along, Dare, and thank you. It's good to know that you're willing to help if that's needed. If you want to play a few practice hands, let me know. I've got lots of time to kill right now."

Dare grinned. "I might take you up on that, although I don't think anyone really wants me to win, given I'm a Mindset, and all that. I don't need luck to win, you know."

Lewis nodded shortly. "Yeah, I know, but I also know you've got integrity that prevents cheating like that. The offer stands."

"Thanks, Lewis. I mean it. If you need me, call me. I can only sleep so much each

day, and even reading is beginning to pall.”

Lewis chuckled. ”I hear you. Take care and don”t run all over the ship checking on people.”

”It”s keeping me out of trouble, and that”s a good thing.”

At the end of the first week in shutdown, trouble arrived. Dare was sleeping deeply, dampers on board. It took him longer than usual to wake, hearing the heavy pounding on his door. Stumbling out of his bed, he walked to his door on legs that felt like wood, palming it open.

Lewis stood at the threshold, visibly upset. The empath felt a frisson of fear from him, even through the dampers. ”What is it, Lewis? Mr. Stravetta?”

”He needs you, Dare. He had a nightmare and called out. I can handle that, but now he”s not letting me into his room. I”m worried about him. I don”t know what else to do.”

Dare scrubbed his face with his hands, taking deep breaths to help clear the dampers from his system. Lewis watched him hopefully as the empath straightened up. Dare gave him a nod of understanding. ”I”ll come, but I need to get my shields in place first. And get dressed. Go back to your room if Mr. Stravetta won”t let you in now. I”ll be there in fifteen minutes or sooner.” He paused, looking up at the taller man. ”You know I can”t help if he won”t let me. He has to consent first.”

Lewis nodded; his expression worried. ”I know, but I”m hoping he will. Or maybe open the door for you.”

The empath shook his head. ”We can hope. Okay, get going. I”ll be right there.”

The bodyguard turned, leaving as the door swooshed shut. Dare stared at it for a moment, before going to the couch to bring his shields up to full strength, repelling the rest of the damper medication. Doing his inner work calmed his heart and cleared his mind. He would help if he could, as he always did.

Dare met Lewis at Stravetta's door exactly fifteen minutes later. Lewis shook his head at the Mindset's questioning look. "I tried to get in, but he locked the door on me, yelling at me to go away. I...I have a key, but I'm not supposed to enter without his permission."

Dare gave him a steadying look. "Do you think he might try to hurt himself?"

Lewis looked miserable. "I don't know. I thought he was getting better...he doesn't like to talk about it. Everybody thinks he's an asshole, but he's really not. I don't know the right thing to do."

The Mindset nodded decisively. "Unlock the door and let me in. I don't want him to harm himself, and I can help him if he'll let me. I'll take responsibility, Lewis. I'll tell him I made you do it if I need to."

"You wouldn't do that."

"No, I wouldn't, but I think I can sell it to your boss if I need to. That's for later. Let me in now."

Lewis leaned in, unlocking the door quickly. The door opened, and the empath slipped into the darkened room. He could barely see Stravetta, hunched over, sitting on the deck, his back to the door.

"Lewis, I told you to leave me alone. Get out of here before I fire you."

Dare took a quiet breath before answering.

"It's Dare. Lewis is still outside. I made him let me in."

Jason scrambled to his feet, backing away. "What are you doing here? I don't want your help. Get out!" his voice raised in a shout.

Dare remained at the doorway; his expression shadowed in the dim light. He kept his voice soft and low. "Lewis is worried about you, Mr. Stravetta, and his worry was strong enough for me to feel it without trying. I know you don't want me here, but I also know you need my help. I will not force you to accept it."

"You mean like last time? You forced your will on me—you frightened me. Just get out. I don't want you here. This is hard enough without you interfering in my mind."

The empath's heart clenched, feeling Stravetta's fear again. "Circumstances were different. You were going to hurt me, attack me. I defended myself. I did not enjoy doing that to you, despite what you think. I know I am asking a lot for you to trust me after that. But I am asking Mr. Stravetta—Jason. I can help you. I will not treat you as a client, but as a friend. No notes will be done, and whatever you tell me will never be repeated. I can feel your pain, Jason. Let me take some of it from you."

The older man turned, falling onto the couch. "Why won't you get out? Aren't you supposed to leave if I tell you to?" Jason gave him an irritable glance. "You think I haven't received treatment before? Nothing worked. VA Mindsets are not strong or ethical enough to trust, and regular therapy was only a flimsy band-aid over my trauma." He laughed mirthlessly. "I know you can help, but at what cost? Scaring the hell out of me again?" He was silent for a moment before slumping back into the cushions. He covered his face with his hands, sighing deeply. "Yeah, why not? Treat me. I can't stop you, so I may as well give you my consent. Maybe that incredible mind of yours will take over and end me, and that's fine by me. I can't go on like this

anymore. I'm so tired, and it never stops hurting."

Jason leaned over his knees, arms hugging his waist, as he finished speaking. Dare walked slowly into the room until he was in front of Jason. Sitting next to him on the couch, he was close enough to feel his body heat and smell the faint aroma of an expensive, woody scent.

"Give me your hands, Jason, so I may help you. You are safe with me, and always will be."

Jason turned, seeing Dare's caring expression. His resistance was gone, and he no longer had the strength to fight on his own, but his fear remained. Raising trembling hands, he placed them in Dare's. The empath held them gently, his touch warm and dry to Jason's cold, moist palms. "Take a deep breath and let me in, Jason. I will not hurt you."

Jason stuttered in a breath before closing his eyes, and, with a surprising suddenness, he let go.

Only Dare's ability as a Mindset One kept him from being overwhelmed by the amount of trauma and hurt Jason carried. Wave after wave of trauma washed over and through him until he began to form a coherent picture of what this man had experienced. War seen at first through idealistic eyes, turning into a horror of death, loss, and destruction. Seeing friends killed, blown up, body parts everywhere. The loss of his left arm, the ongoing pain, the knowledge that he was no longer whole. Finally, the rejection of his family, promises not kept, exile his only option, knowing he was unloved and unwanted.

Dare felt it all, as he worked to first clear the trauma left by Jason's experience in war time. He lessened the memories, helping them to recede as time would eventually, even as he washed away most of the nightmares, leaving those with positive

memories intact. He knew, as he worked, that it would take more than one session to heal Jason enough. His prosthetic wasn't seated correctly, causing near constant pain. The doctor could see to that. As for his family, Dare felt a pang of loss in himself as he felt Jason's. That trauma could wait a little longer and would take more time. The empath took a cleansing breath, compartmentalizing Jason's memories away from his own consciousness even as he did so for Jason. He then began to disengage. They had been in rapport for thirty minutes. He could feel Jason's fatigue, hopefully this would allow him to sleep.

The empath firmed his grip on the older man's hands, then carefully released him. Jason slumped onto Dare's shoulder, drawing in a deep breath before looking into the Mindset's eyes, his own much clearer, albeit exhausted.

"Dare, I'm so tired, but I feel...my pain...it's less. So much less now. I don't know how to...it's been so long." His eyes pricked with tears. He tried to move away but Dare held him close.

"You will feel overwhelmed for a while. You carried so much pain, Jason. Some of it's gone now, some still need work. Let's get you into your bed so you can rest. I'll help you sleep, if you wish."

Jason nodded as the Mindset helped him stand, pulling the berth down from the bulkhead. Jason managed to climb into it, then Dare covered him warmly. Laying a hand on the older man's forehead, the empath smiled gently. "Sleep now, Jason, without nightmares, and wake up refreshed. I will check on you later today."

Jason blinked, turning his face towards the empath. He smiled faintly, sighed, then uttered a breathy, "Thank you," before falling into slumber.

Dare bowed his head, noting Jason's relaxed, serene expression, and felt an upwelling of joy that his gift had helped one so hurt. Walking stiffly to the door, he

found Lewis sitting in front of it, keeping guard. He gave Dare a hopeful look as he stood, receiving a nod in return.

"Mr. Stravetta will be alright now, Lewis. I'll check on him again later today. Let him sleep as long as he wants to—he's earned it."

Lewis sighed in relief, finally smiling. "Thank you, Dare. I don't know what you did but thank you so much."

The Mindset bowed his head. "I followed my calling, my friend. I could do no less. Get some rest yourself, and I'll see you later."

Lewis nodded, watching Dare slowly walk to his berth. He knew there was a cost when a Mindset worked. He also knew there was no treasure large enough to pay for peace of mind.

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Dare shuffled back to his room, shields raising as he did so. The surrounding clamor thankfully ceased, but he knew, no matter how worn out he felt, he couldn't take another damper since it was too close to morning. He debated trying to lightly nap, dismissing that as an impossible dream. He was too tired to stay awake, but knew if he slept without a damper, he'd wake with a cacophony in his mind. After the session with Jason, he couldn't face that.

Despite his fatigue and Jason's harrowing memories, the Mindset was improbably happy. He had helped the one person he cared for more than his friends, the one who meant something he didn't yet have a name for. Jason trusted him now, and that was more than he'd ever hoped to have from him. There was more work to do, more trauma to overcome, but now there was hope. Hope that they could nurture whatever he felt into at least a friendship. In the secrecy of his heart, he wished for more, then gently pushed that away. It was not up to him.

Determined to begin his day, Dare wiped down, using the unfortunately cold clean wipes, put on clean clothes, and took himself off to the mess. He needed coffee, lots of coffee, to wake himself up enough to get through the rest of the day and a big breakfast to replace the calories he'd just burned up. Mind work was quiet but ate up a Mindset's energy as though he was doing heavy labor.

The empath was nursing his third cup of coffee when Riis breezed into the mess. He smiled when he saw Dare, then went to fill his tray. Sitting at "their" table against the wall, Riis gave his friend a pleased nod, then frowned.

"What happened to you? Bad night? I'm only asking because you look way too tired to be sitting here."

Dare made himself sit up straighter, knowing he'd have to bend the truth. "I had a client emergency that got me up too early. I pushed through my dampers, and it was too late to take more, so here I am. I'll get to bed early tonight."

Riis stared for a moment longer, then shook his head. "I forgot about the med you have to take. Guess that rules out napping during the day. Everybody thinks being a Mindset is a breeze, but it's not, is it? I mean, you're held to a much higher standard than anyone else. You need to take meds to sleep so you don't wake up with a circus in your head, and then, as frosting on your confection, people are afraid of you. Yeah, lucky you, Mindset."

Dare shrugged. "You're not wrong, but it's not like I can turn it off or leave it behind. It's not all terrible, Riis. The feeling I have when I help someone with something difficult is wonderful. That makes everything I have to do worth it." Riis looked skeptical. "No, really, it does, so stop looking at me like that."

The younger man circled his face with a finger. "You mean this look—the one that says you're full of it? That one?" The empath gave him a half-hearted glare, making Riis sigh. "I just worry about you. You work hard all the time, and, let's face it, have little social—as in any—life. I know you're not like me and probably prefer the quiet life. But there's quiet, and then there's dead. I know we've been over this and I'll respect your wishes. Just know if you want to engage more with the crew, or join in with whatever goes on around here, let me know. I'll make sure you're okay if you do."

The empath gave him a fond smile, lightening his expression. "Thank you, Riis. I appreciate your concern and your offer. I'll take you up on that if I feel the need, but I'm just not that social. Haven't been since my gift manifested and took over my life. I can handle poker games, but larger crowds are difficult for me to manage. I have to keep my shields up so high it makes it difficult to interact unless I know most of them."

The younger man gave him a chagrined glance before bowing his head. "Shit, I've done it again. The next time I try to convince you to be like something you're not, smack me. I think because you're fine with me, I always think you'd be good with everyone else. I really am an idiot."

"No, Riis. You're like the brother I never had. Don't beat yourself up for trying to be helpful. I appreciate the effort even if I can't partake of it."

"Stop making me feel better for being thoughtless, Mindset."

Dare reached out, shaking his wrist to get his attention. "It's what I do, and I will not change that for you, you pushy little null."

The assistant finally met his eyes. "That's better—a mild insult. For the record, I'm not little."

"For the record, please don't say any more. I really, and I do mean really, don't want to know."

Riis grinned; good mood restored. "Spoilsport." He glanced at the time. "Crap, I've got to get to work. Take it easy on yourself today, big brother."

"Don't worry about me when you've got the captain to manage."

The younger man stood, piling his dishes on his tray. "The cap and I understand each other. Do you mind bussing my dishes? I've got to jet."

Dare sighed as though put upon. "You're a lot of work, brother."

Riis grinned as he backed away from the table. "You have no idea, bro, and if you're lucky, you never will."

The empath slowly walked back to his room, checked his messages, then realized he couldn't remain seated if he didn't want to fall asleep. No one needed him right now, but he had to keep moving. He knew it was too early to check on Jason. Debating his options, he decided to walk down to the colony deck and check in with them. Technically, he was pushing it since everyone was supposed to conserve energy and oxygen, but then decided he was justified as a Mindset to do so, one of the few perks he could ascribe to.

The walk, albeit at a slow pace, woke him up. The colony was quiet, as most of them were in their homes. Dare called on Chance to make sure he was managing his coursework, and to answer whatever questions he had. Chance answered his door quickly, giving his mentor a big smile.

"It's good to see you! You've got perfect timing, too. I have some questions about the reading I've done about Jung, and my shields have been giving me fluctuations and I don't know why. It's making me crazy."

Warmed by his welcome, Dare went over what he was doing to manage his shields, finding a few anomalies that were easily correctable. Their discussion about Jung cleared some of Chance's confusion, but not all, as the Mindset Two shook his head.

"I get the idea of the collective unconscious—it makes a weird sort of sense. I think I'm having the most trouble with his dream theory."

The older empath nodded with understanding. "He's difficult to read or understand. Keep in mind that these are theories, not facts. Knowing them may give you insight with a client, or you may never even use them. Learning about them is just part of your overall curriculum. As your teacher, I'm more interested in how you will deal with clients than your grasp of every theory out there. I suggest finishing the reading on Jung, then spending more time learning cognitive behavioral theory. You'll use CBT with clients. I can guarantee that. Having any other issues?"

Chance shrugged, then shook his head. "No, not really. Looking forward to getting under speed again. It's been really dull this last week. Everyone's quiet, and managing only what they have to—the cryo tanks, and the crops we're growing. Meals are still served communally, but everybody's subdued. I'm not used to that, but I know it'll pass."

Dare gave him a rueful glance. "That's all I've ever been used to. I'm glad you're more of an extrovert than I am. I think the colony needs that. Hopefully, we only have another week or less to go. I'm ready to get back to working out—exercising in my room just isn't the same, especially when I have to limit my cardio to conserve oxygen. I understand what you're saying, though. The ship feels strange right now."

The young Mindset grinned. "Thanks for understanding. I haven't talked to anyone else about this, but I'm glad I did with you. You have to head back?"

"Yes, I have a client I want to check on. I'm taking an early night tonight since I had a crisis to contend with last night. It's all good now, but I've been dragging all day."

Chance chuckled, giving him a sweeping glance. "I didn't want to say anything, but you do look worn out."

Dare sighed, rolling his eyes. "I've already heard about it at breakfast. I'll be fine tomorrow. If you need to discuss anything prior to our resumption of the usual schedule, message me. I'll wander back down here for you. You're doing very well, Chance."

The young man ducked his head, then smiled. "Thank you. Have a good evening, Mindset Mentor. I'm going to study some more."

Dare stood, walking to his door. "Don't overdo it and be sure to rest when you need to. I'm here if you want me for anything, okay?"

Chance promised as he opened the door for him. Leaving the colony deck, Dare was happy he'd made the walk, and thankfully still fairly alert. He would check on Jason, have an early dinner, and then go to bed—such was the excitement of a Mindset One's life.

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Dare dutifully cleared the table, feeling marginally better after eating again. It was late enough now to check on Jason as he'd promised. As he left the mess, he considered going to his room to make sure he was presentable, but nixed the idea with an internal snort. His mind had touched Jason, so the older man had seen him as most never did. External appearance after that was, literally, an afterthought. Anticipation welling up despite his weariness, he walked as quickly as he could to Stravetta's berth, reminding himself to present as a professional no matter what he felt.

Dare softly knocked on the door after taking a cleansing breath. The door slid open, revealing a smiling Lewis. The big man took in his reduced energy at a glance.

"Dare, it's good to see you, but, boy, you look beat. Crap, you didn't go back to sleep, did you?" Lewis's expression creased with concern as the empath put up a hand to stop him from saying more.

"It's alright. Just a hazard of my job, like protecting is one of yours. How is Mr. Stravetta?" Lewis grinned.

"See for yourself. He's been up for a couple of hours, and I've never seen him so relaxed." He turned away from Dare. "Mr. Stravetta, Dare is here to see you."

"Well, don't keep him standing in the corridor, you lummo. Let him in."

Lewis turned back to the young man and grinned. "My lord and master will see you now." Dare heard Jason call out, "smart ass," as he came into the room.

Jason was sitting on the couch, the bed folded up into the bulkhead. His feet were up, pillows piled behind him, a pad in his hands. His smile was radiant and directed only at Dare. Then he glanced over at Lewis affectionately. "Take a break, Lewis. Dare and I have things to talk about and you've been babysitting me long enough. Mr. Munro will let you know when he leaves." Lewis murmured, "Yes, boss," gave Dare a nod, and promptly left.

Dare stood just inside the doorway, giving Stravetta an uncertain smile. Jason's regard softened, and he beckoned the empath closer.

"Come in and have a seat. I won't bite, unless you ask nicely." Dare gave him a faint smile and sat down in the armchair across from him.

"I wanted to make sure you were doing well after last night. I know it was difficult for you, and sometimes, people feel worse instead of better afterward, at least for a while. You seem...fine, though. Are you having any problems?"

The older man met the Mindset's eyes gently, putting his pad down by his side. "No, I feel better than I have for a very long time. It was painful to essentially relive what I went through, but now I feel as though I've been reborn. Your skill...your compassion has lessened the trauma so much that I actually feel lighter. I know we have more work to do, but I don't know how to tell you that what you've done for me...I don't know how to properly thank you."

The empath blinked his gritty eyes, giving the other man a more relaxed smile. "Mr. Stravetta...Jason, you gave me your trust and yourself, after what I did to you when you came to my room. That means more to me than I can say. No matter how we began, I want to help you—actually, I feel as though I must."

Jason leaned back against his pillows, sighing. He stared at the empath for a moment, then pulled in a deep breath. "You feel it, too, don't you? The connection we have. I

tried to deny it, but then you joined with me, and I can't—I won't pretend it isn't there anymore. I don't know what it means, but I don't want to let it go."

Dare, his eyes wide, raised a shaking hand to rub his face. "Jason, after what we shared, I will not deny it either. I felt it when I first met you and knew you needed me. I wanted that, despite the anger, the hurt, you broadcasted. I meant it when I told you I will not see you as your therapist, for that would rule out any chance that we can have more of whatever this is."

Jason considered him for a minute, then abruptly moved his feet off the couch. "Please come sit by me. I won't touch you if you don't want that, but I feel...I want you closer, if that's alright with you."

The empath stood up so quickly that he became lightheaded and had to grab the chair to keep himself upright. Jason was at his side in an instant, putting his arm around the younger man to steady him. The contact felt like a slight static discharge, causing both to pause for a moment.

Jason gazed down at Dare; his eyes wide with surprise. "Did you feel that?" His glance took in Dare's exhaustion, and not waiting for an answer, he helped him over to the couch to sit down, taking his place next to him.

The Mindset leaned into him, unwittingly drawn in by his strong arm. "I felt it. I don't know what it means since I've never felt that before. I didn't mean to...I mean, I'm just so tired and I should have gotten up more slowly, but your touch...helps in some way I can't define. Maybe it's a residual of our joining last night, although that hasn't happened to me before." He yawned involuntarily. "Sorry, I should get back to my room since I can't sleep without my dampers."

Jason nodded in understanding before speaking. "Is it okay if I touch you? I'd like to put my arm around you for just a bit. You need to be steady to walk back to your

room, even though it's not far from here. I suppose Lewis could carry you."

Dare made a derisive noise. "I'd never live it down and would hear about it forever at the poker game. Yes, you can touch me—I think I need that comfort right now since I'm feeling a little wobbly."

Jason gently placed his right arm over the empath's shoulders, pulling him close. The feeling of connection grew, and their minds drifted together. Dare stiffened, tugging away a little. "I don't know what's happening. I shouldn't be able to access your mind without you letting go of your natural shields, yet I can feel you. You haven't done that, have you?"

The older man looked at Dare's alarmed expression, shaking his head "no". "I can feel you a little, too. Just feelings, and I can tell how tired you are—that's it."

The spike of adrenaline woke the empath up enough to know he needed to leave.

"Jason, I don't want to, but I need to go. I don't know what's happening between us. I don't want to have my abilities do something when I'm too tired to stop or control it. If you're willing, I'll come back tomorrow when I'm completely awake, and we can talk more about whatever this is."

The older man reluctantly moved his arm away from the Mindset. "Yes, please do that. Will lunchtime work for you? I'll have Lewis or Derek get us trays from the mess so we can eat and talk. I don't want to lose whatever we're sharing right now."

Dare took the older man's hand in his, holding it carefully. "That will work for me, and I want to keep this, too." He let go of Jason's hand, then slowly stood. Jason rose a beat behind him, before walking the Mindset to the door. Jason smiled down at the younger man.

"Sleep well, Dare, and don't worry. We'll figure this out together, and it will be good for both of us."

"You are so optimistic for a robber baron, Mr. Stravetta."

"I have hidden depths, Mindset Munro, though not as hidden as they used to be."

"They're safe with me, no matter how deeply held, Mr. Stravetta. I'll see you tomorrow."

Jason nodded, opening the door. He watched the Mindset alert Lewis that he was leaving, then headed towards his room. The older man felt a sense of joy he hadn't had for a very long time and, if he had any say in it, he was never letting that go.

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A message went out early the next morning that the Gambit would resume its regular course and speed at the beginning of the next day's shift. Those currently housed on the crew deck could return to their usual deck at fifteen hundred hours the same day. The captain thanked everyone for their patience and cooperation, and that was that.

Dare read the message after sleeping well for over eight hours. He felt much better, but was hungrier than usual. He'd expected that, knowing how depleted he became after working with another so deeply. After his morning ablutions, he donned a fresh flight suit, and hotfooted it to the mess. Two cups of coffee with eggs and fruit took the edge off his appetite. It was mid-morning, and he wanted to enjoy his lunch with Jason in a few hours, so he could live with feeling a little hungry.

Knowing he'd be back to his regular schedule the next day, the empath went to his office to make sure it was clean and ready for business. He checked his last notes, so he'd be ready to engage each client as needed, then took a breath. It would be good to be back at work, but he'd also enjoyed having his schedule free to roam and do as he pleased. He made a note on his schedule to make sure he had time off every few weeks. Noting the time, Dare sent a message to Riis to let him know of any changes or cancellations for the next day.

As he methodically cleaned and checked notes, his thoughts kept returning to the time he'd spent with Jason the day before. His scent, his smile, and the way his eyes lit up when he saw the empath. The touch of his hand in his, Jason's arm around him, holding him, providing comfort and safety. Dare inhaled, then let the breath out slowly. Whatever he was feeling, attraction was definitely part of it, but only a part. He felt as though he wanted to know all that made Jason who he was, and then cherish it, and him. The young man shook his head. He'd never felt this way before

about anyone. That had to mean something.

It was time to head to Jason's room, and the empath felt his anticipation rise even higher. Gaia help him. He didn't even know what this was with Jason. The only thing he was sure of was he wanted it.

Jason met him at the door, and Lewis was nowhere in sight. "Good afternoon, Dare. Come on in. Lewis went to the mess, so he'll be back in a few minutes. Did you sleep well?"

The Mindset nodded, smiling in return. "I had a solid eight hours and woke up because I was famished. Thank Gaia, the mess is always open. Don't worry, I made sure I'd have room for lunch."

The older man ushered him over to the fold-down table, motioning to him to sit on one of the hard chairs. "I rarely have a big appetite when I'm in the Black, but I was hungry yesterday and today more than I usually am."

Dare gave him a knowing look. "It's the work we did together. Brains need a lot of fuel, and we used up quite a bit. Feel free to have dessert since our minds love sugar and need it to function. That's what I tell myself, anyway, when I have more sweets than I should."

Jason grinned, sitting down next to him. "That's the best excuse I've heard in defense of eating as much dessert as you want. I'm going with it since I heard it from a professional."

The empath gave him a wry look. "As if you need permission to do that. You'll probably feel hungrier for another day, then it will settle back into what you're used to. That's what it's like for me, anyway."

Jason propped an elbow on the table, settling his chin in his prosthetic hand. "You know, I don't care because I feel so much better, so much lighter, now. I've been crushed under that weight for so long that I thought it would be that way forever. I know it's not all gone, and I know we'll have to do more work together, but now I have hope that I can live instead of simply existing. I'll never be able to thank you enough for that."

Dare ducked his head, nodding. "I don't need thanks, Jason. Just knowing you feel better, and I helped you, means everything to me."

Before Jason could reply, Lewis came through the door carrying a huge tray, carefully juggling it so nothing spilled. The big man stopped just inside the doorway, feeling the door slide shut against his clothing. He huffed out a breath, giving Jason and Dare a pointed look.

"As much as I'd like to serve both of you, I think you'd better come over here and grab the drinks before they drown your food. It was a near thing to keep it all upright from the mess, and to be honest, my arms are dying."

Jason and Dare jumped up, going to him, Jason giving Lewis a slight frown. "I thought Derek was going along to help you."

"Couldn't find him, Mr. Stravetta, and I knew you'd both be hungry. I managed okay, sir."

Jason shook his head, helping Dare to take the drinks to the table. Lewis put the tray down as gently as he could. He shook out his arms before giving both men a smile.

"I picked up a little of everything since I know mind work makes the giver and receiver pretty hungry for a day or two. At least, that's what my Mindset sister-in-law always said. Do you need anything else, sir? Mr. Munro?"

Jason smiled, shaking his head. "I'm good, Lewis. Take the rest of the day off, and if you see Derek, tell him to come see me after dinner. No, don't worry about the dishes. We'll get them back to the mess. Thank you, Lewis, for your help."

"It's my job, Mr. Stravetta. You don't have to thank me for that."

"That may be the case, but you know our relationship is more than boss and employee. You basically watched over me and brought Dare to help me. I'll thank you whenever I want to, Lewis, because you deserve it. I know that even if you don't."

Lewis bowed his head, a smile playing on his lips. "Yes, sir. It was my pleasure and my duty to care for you as you have cared for me in the past. Have a good meal, sir, Mr. Munro."

Dare walked him to the door, adding his own thanks, receiving a grin in response. The door swooshed shut, and the young man turned to his host.

Jason was already sitting at the table, parting out the food onto two plates. He glanced over to see Dare watching him and smiled. "Get over here and eat. Lewis, bless him, even brought two large brownies for us. Whatever the company is paying him, it's not enough."

The empath sat down, pulling his chair closer to the table. "He's a good man, and I can tell he genuinely cares for you, and no, I didn't 'read' him. I don't do that without permission. I'd have to lower my shields and that can be problematic, not to mention it would be unethical."

Jason nodded, then took a large bite of a sandwich. He considered Dare while he chewed, swallowed, then took a drink. "I care about Lewis, too. He's been working with me for several years. He refused to do something for the family and was going

to be fired. I took him on instead, and he's more than paid me back." He stared at the empath for a moment. "Lewis has a great deal of personal honor and it sounds like you do too, although you call them ethics." He shrugged expressively. "I try to do good, and not abuse whatever power I have. It's family power, not mine. That said, I've been an asshole on more than one occasion, thus upholding my family's checkered reputation, and that's just on this ship." He took another savage bite of his sandwich. "Now you know who's sitting across from you, Mindset. I'm not a nice person."

Dare finished his bite, put down his sandwich, and rolled his eyes while enjoying the delicious flavors. "I'm sorry you feel that way about yourself, because I can tell you that's a load of shit. Have you forgotten that you've shown me who you are very intimately? Yes, we worked on your combat trauma, but the rest of you was along for the ride. My take is that you are a "nice" person who's been thrust into a family that shows little consideration to others, including family members. No matter what you want to believe, you're a decent man, Gaia help you."

"Gaia and I aren't on speaking terms, so I doubt she'll extend her understanding to me." He glanced over at the other man. "Let's talk about anything but family. I know we need to, but I'm just not up for it right now."

The Mindset ducked his head, picking up his sandwich again. "That's fine. Just remember you started this conversation, not me."

The older man looked up, surprised. "That's not very "Mindset -y" of you. Aren't you supposed to be soothing and all that crap?"

Dare gusted out a sigh after he swallowed a bite. "Let me be really clear about this. I am a Mindset. I always will be whether or not I stay with my practice. I can't escape it or ignore it. Point two—I am not your therapist. I will help you as I would help a friend. You'll get some soothing if you need it and not before. If we want to find out

what draws us together, that's the way it has to be. Point three, and the most important one—I like you, and I want to see where our feelings for each other go. I felt drawn to you, and you said you felt the same. I think we owe it to ourselves to follow that wherever it leads. I hope you understand, because I don't know what the hell to do if you don't."

Jason gazed at him, then improbably chuckled. "I get it, Mindset, and I agree. It was just...well, you've been so gentle that I wasn't expecting to be poked by a metaphorical thistle. I'm glad you've got teeth, so to speak, because I do, and it'll be easier if we can trade bites when we need to." He blushed lightly. "That sounded sexual, and I didn't mean it that way."

Dare laughed softly. "I'm not a virgin, and I know you're not. If we...no, when we get to that part, we can see what we both like. I've only been with other empaths, so it will be great to see what sex is like with someone who can't read me."

Jason's eyes widened, his face pale. "That shouldn't be too hard. No pressure, right?"

The empath quirked an eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure we'll be fine, Jason. Don't worry. I'm an empath. I'll be just as gentle as you are."

The older man took a long drink, closing his eyes. "I'm screwed," he muttered quickly, breaking into a grin.

Dare smiled. "We can only hope."

Lewis went on the hunt for Derek, per his boss's order. This wasn't the first time his co-worker had been AWOL, but Lewis had kept that information to himself, not wanting to get the other man in trouble. He knew what that felt like and had no desire to lay it on another person. If Mr. Stravetta hadn't taken him on, the big man knew he

would have been fired and blackballed, if not physically harmed. The Stravetta family were feared with good reason.

It took asking several people, and checking every cranny, but Lewis finally ran Derek down at one of the communication nodes scattered throughout the ship.

For a big man, Lewis was stealthy on his feet. He watched Derek fervently type in a message, read it over, then hit send. Moving back, the bodyguard pretended he'd only just arrived as Derek strode away from the node.

Derek frowned when he saw Lewis, who gave him a frown in return. "There you are. Mr. Stravetta wants to see you after dinner. You were supposed to help me earlier and were nowhere to be found. If I were you, I'd start working on a good explanation."

Derek narrowed his eyes before giving the other man a sneering smile. "You are such a good lapdog, aren't you, Lewis? Always acting like Stravetta hasn't been effectively exiled and us with him. You may think you deserve to be sidelined, but I don't. Move your huge ass and get out of my way. I've got things to do while you wait on your "master's" pleasure."

Lewis grabbed Derek's arm as he passed him, gripping it painfully. "I don't care what you do as long as you don't jeopardize Mr. Stravetta. I may be a lapdog, but you are a mangy yard dog, rolling in your own shit. Think twice before you push me, Derek, or you won't like the consequences."

The other man jerked his arm out of Lewis' grasp. "Big words, Lewis. I hope I can shove them down your throat soon." He walked away, soon vanishing from the big man's sight.

Lewis had a bad feeling, compounded by wondering who Derek had messaged and how. He knew the captain reviewed all outgoing messages, except ones sent under

the Stravetta seal. He went over to the node and inputted a code he shouldn't have. Derek's message had been sent under the boss's seal and had been sent immediately to the recipient. With no remorse, he read the message, flushing with anger as he did so.

Derek was spying on Mr. Stravetta and reporting back to his family. This message described the "relationship" between Jason and Dare, decrying it with homophobia and prejudice against the gifted. Lewis took a stabilizing breath. That asshole thought he was better than Jason, or apparently, anyone. He'd discover his error soon enough.

Shutting down the node and clearing his own access to it, Lewis walked slowly back to his berth. He would speak with Mr. Stravetta before he saw Derek, so a plan could be put in place. Betrayal was not treated lightly in the family, something Derek would soon find out. There would be no place he could hide from their retribution.

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Agitated, Jason Stravetta paced the confines of his small berth. Lewis had reported on Derek's duplicity, causing anger to consume him. Even as he fumed over this betrayal, the older man knew this was yet another example of his family's disrespect and betrayal. Turning on his heel, he walked to the other end of the room before forcing himself to sit down. At least the answer to the question of Derek's presence was solved. His father had insisted he take more than Lewis and two service staff, offering Derek as another bodyguard/assistant. Reeling from the order to board the Gambit as the company's representative for a four-year voyage, Jason had neither known nor cared who Derek was, numbly complying with his father's wishes.

Jason glanced at the com unit, seeing that it was almost time for Derek to come by. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. As much as he would like to push the dickhead out of an airlock, he would have to play the game with him until some more permanent solution could be found. Although Lewis had not actually said it, Derek obviously thought Jason was stupid and useless. He could play to that, knowing that Derek would find out the truth soon. Jason would make sure Derek regretted the day he first heard the name Stravetta.

Derek arrived a few minutes late, a calculated, albeit minor, insult. Lewis announced him, then stood outside the door. Jason sat on his couch, indolently draped over it.

"Derek, you were needed earlier today and were nowhere to be found. I know you were technically off duty, but still, please let Lewis or myself know where you will be. I do not wish to interfere with your free time but do want you available should there be an emergency. You have served my family for some time, and served well, so I will not inform the family of this lapse, unless you repeat it. That is all."

Derek looked outraged at the mild admonishment, muttered an apology, bowed his head, and left. Jason waited for the door to fully close before he muttered, "Asshole," with feeling, before raising his voice to call Lewis into the room.

Lewis entered quickly, standing just inside the door. "Yes, boss? Did you need something?"

Jason motioned the big man towards him. "Take a seat, Lewis. We need to brainstorm." He waited until Lewis wedged himself into a chair.

"I want Derek's efforts to report on my actions neutralized. I will talk with the captain tomorrow about taking his node access offline. He can send a message, but it won't go anywhere. As much as I don't want him guarding me, I know you can't do it twenty-four hours a day. Leave him on the night shift. I'll lock myself in my room once we've moved up to our deck, and at least I'll be sleeping while he's there. Don't worry, I'll change the lock code."

Lewis looked dissatisfied, but nodded in agreement. Jason smiled at him, shaking his head. "I know we'd both like to shove him out an airlock or use him for compost in the ship's garden. Despite my reputation, I've killed no one except in combat, and I won't let you do that either. I don't think he's worth the trouble."

The older man gazed at his bodyguard. "Please keep him away from me as much as you can but try to make it look normal. He knows I favor you, and that can work for us. Dare—Mr. Munro—will see clients morning and evening, so at least you'll be on shift when he's here with me." Jason looked thoughtful. "I suppose we'll have to feed Derek some salacious information, so he'll have something to report into the ether. Feel free to grumble about how much time I spend with the Mindset, how close we're getting, you know the drill."

Lewis shifted in his chair, then shook his head. "Are you sure he can't take a walk

out of an airlock? I hate telling him shi...stuff about you and Dare when you're not doing anything wrong."

"Yes, I'm sure. I don't want you to take that walk when the captain discovers who pushed him. He's not worth your life, Lewis. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, but I don't like it."

Jason nodded grimly. "Neither do I, but it's all we have. At least, right now."

Lewis stiffly stood, pushing the chair back. "I've got another hour on my shift, Mr. Stravetta. Want to change the lock code to the door for tonight?"

"Let's do it. Dare's not coming over tonight. He's had a day catching up with everyone. I'm going to read, sign off on some paperwork, and hit the bed early. Thank you, Lewis. I know this isn't easy on you either."

Lewis ducked his head briefly. "I'm fine, sir. I've never felt that comfortable around Derek and now I know why. I'm loyal to you, and only you. The rest of your family, well, not so much."

"We agree then, because I feel the same."

Dare wearily finished up his notes for the day. He'd seen every one of his clients for that day, and so far, none had canceled for the rest of the week. Shutting down his computer, he sighed. Thoughts about Jason had intruded on him all day, causing him to bring his attention back again and again. At least tomorrow was a lighter day with only two clients early and three after the end of day shift. He'd be free at oh nine thirty until seventeen hundred. Plenty of time to check on Chance and then drop in on Jason. The older man would be moving back "up" to his suite tomorrow. The empath needed to know how they would meet when the olderman was on a restricted deck.

As that thought crossed his mind, Dare grimaced. He just wanted to see Jason, be with him. Jason seemed to want the same.

The young man huffed out a breath as he turned off the lights and headed for the door. He was thinking too much. A snack, then bed would take care of that.

The next morning, Dare woke very early and sighed. He'd enjoyed sleeping later during the shutdown and knew he was paying the price for that now. Swallowing a groan, he hefted himself up, washed, and got himself ready for the world to see him. He was happily surprised to see Riis in the mess, looking slightly less chipper than usual. Riis, seeing him, gave him a smile of invitation as Dare filled his tray and grabbed coffee.

"Riis, you look like I feel. Changing back to my usual hours has kicked my butt. Is that happening to you, too?"

Riis unaccountably blushed, looking down at his tray. "Not exactly. I met someone, and we, um, didn't sleep much last night. I know better, but he was so...anyway, I'm mainlining coffee and will be all day. I know the cap will give me shit about it, too. He can always tell when I've been busy with someone. It's one part cute and three parts annoying."

Dare carefully did not allow his expression to change as the younger man eyed him for his reaction. Riis shook his head. "I can tell you want to either give me crap about being so dumb on a workday or just laugh because it's stupid and I know it. Go ahead, brother. You won't be the first or last to do that."

The empath gave him a commiserating smile. "I was actually going to say that the captain is more perspicacious than I thought. I suppose that makes him a good captain." He nodded at the other man. "No, I'm not going to give you shit about this. You're an adult and can do what you like without being judged by me or anyone. At

least, you had a good time and can think about that as you suffer through today. I'd rather have your good memories than just being pissed I had to get up so early."

Riis snorted. "That's true although it's small comfort. Perspicacious. Couldn't you just say shrewd?"

The empath mutely shook his head "no".

The younger man rolled his eyes. "Nerd."

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Jason woke slowly and smiled. He hadn't had any nightmares since Dare had "treated" him. Sleeping through the night and having normal dreams was such a gift after so many broken nights, filled with terror. Energized, he threw back the covers and stood. Thinking longingly of his shower in his own suite, the older man cleaned up the best he could and dressed. It was still thirty minutes until Lewis came on shift. He'd ask him to get him some breakfast since he didn't trust Derek to do so without spitting on his food or worse. Meanwhile, there were always reports to read and books to enjoy.

Lewis delivered breakfast and reported that the night had been a quiet one. The ship was online and building speed as they spoke. Derek was in his quarters as far as anyone knew. Jason nodded, giving the other man a smile.

"Thanks for the update. I've already started packing my things up for the move back to the suite. Thank the Gods I didn't bring much down here. Please check on the other staff before the move. If they need anything, let me know. I hope their "holiday" from duty has been good for them." Jason took a drink of his coffee. "I would like to meet with the captain tonight in my suite for dinner. Please deliver that invitation to his office this morning and wait for a reply. If he says yes, let the staff know I want two full dinners at seventeen hundred hours in the office of the suite. They can move whatever they need to in there. It's the most secure room up there, and I'm not taking any chances with being overheard."

Lewis nodded his understanding. "Good choice, Mr. Stravetta. I'll take care of all of that. Is Mr. Munro coming over today?"

Jason leaned back in his chair and grinned. "He left me a message that he'd be here

after lunch. I want to show him the suite and make sure he has the access codes so he can come and go as he wishes. I mean, if he wants to.” He sighed softly. ”I know it”s not a surprise to you I care about him, and not as my therapist or whatever. We want to see where these feelings go. It”s important to me, Lewis.”

The bodyguard met his boss”s eyes. ”I know, sir. Mr. Munro–Dare, is a good man, and that”s what you deserve, if you don”t mind me saying so.”

”Lewis, you know you can say whatever you want to me. The only reason you don”t much of the time is your good manners. Thank you for saying that. I hope I”m good enough for him. The things I”ve done, seen...”

The big man barely stopped himself from making a rude noise. ”Mr. Stravetta, I wouldn”t be standing here, taking your orders, if you weren”t a decent person. You can”t remake the past, so let it go. Mr. Munro doesn”t care about any of that, he only cares for you as you are, uh, sir.”

The older man stared at him, then raised an eyebrow. ”You have hidden depths, Lewis, and I”m thankful for them and you. Now get going and let me know what the captain says. Meet me back here for lunch–yes, we”re eating together. We can call it a working lunch if it makes you feel better, so don”t argue with me and get going.”

Lewis hid his smile, vocalized a quiet, ”Yes, sir,” and left.

Jason finished his tepid coffee, looking thoughtful. Lewis was an employee, but he was also a friend, an ally, and had his back. He closed his eyes, taking a breath, knowing he was far luckier than he deserved, no matter what his bodyguard said.

Dare headed to Jason”s berth at thirteen hundred hours. In the intervening hours, he”d finished his morning notes, checked on Chance, and given him more to read and practice. The younger Mindset was learning fast and was a pleasure to teach. Now,

the only thoughts in the empath's mind revolved around seeing and being with Jason. Feeling his anticipation grow, Dare reveled in that feeling which made him feel glorious as well as nervous. The Mindset smiled faintly to himself. He'd looked forward to seeing others before, but this was different. More intense, yet softer somehow. He shook his head. Gaia, he was fast becoming a walking contradiction when it came to Jason. A sure sign they needed to talk more about what they were feeling and/or experiencing.

Lewis met the empath at the door, giving him a warm smile. "It's good to see you, Mr. Munro. I know Mr. Stravetta is expecting you. Let me announce you, then you can go in."

Dare touched his suit sleeve to stop him. "It's good to see you too, Lewis, but please just call me Dare. I know you're being respectful—I appreciate that—but I don't need that from you. You've always treated me as an equal anyway. Did Mr. Stra...Jason ask you to address me that way?"

Lewis shook his head. "No, that's all on me. I wanted you to know that I respect you and approve of your relationship with Mr. Stravetta, plus I didn't want to be too familiar with you in a formal setting with the boss. I'm happy to call you by your first name, but I'd appreciate it if you'd make sure Mr. Stravetta is alright with it first. Or I can ask him if you like."

Dare smiled up at the bigger man. "I'll ask him. We need to talk about everything anyway, so I'll add that to my list. Is there a poker game this week?"

"No, too much going on with everything getting back to normal. Next week, usual day and time."

The empath nodded. "Thank you. I'm going to try to be there. Better announce me before Jason wonders what we're doing out here."

Lewis grinned, opening the door. He stepped far enough inside to keep the door from closing automatically. "Mr. Munro to see you, sir."

Jason looked up from his pad, smiling. "I was wondering if you were having a party out there. Send him in, Lewis, thank you."

Dare slid past the big man as he came in, adding his own thanks. He stopped a few feet into the room, giving Jason a warm smile.

"Here I am, as promised." He glanced around the room. "Looks like you're all packed up. I'll miss you being only a few doors away."

Jason stood, coming over to him. Standing close, he drew in Dare's inviting, spicy scent, then looked into his eyes. "I want to...I mean, can I give you a hug? It's alright if you don't want to."

Blue eyes met dark ones as Dare nodded slowly, moving into Jason's arms. He was tall enough to put his head on Stravetta's shoulder, and the warmth radiating from the other man warmed him on the always slightly cool ship. Jason's arms went carefully around him, holding him gently but firmly. They stood close together for several moments before Jason sighed.

"This is nice. I hope it is for you, too."

The Mindset nodded into his shoulder. "You make me feel...cared for and safe. I was going to say cherished but thought that might be too much."

Jason nuzzled the top of the empath's head, then lightly kissed him there. "I do cherish you, Dare, even though I know it's early days for us. You feel you belong in my arms, which is good since I can feel you making your way into my heart."

Dare turned his face into the older man's chest. "I know it's pretty fast, but you're knocking on the door of mine. Whatever connection we have is strong, and I'm glad of that. Amazed but happy."

Jason responded by holding him tighter for a minute. "You want to sit down and talk? If I keep holding you like this, little Jason is going to make an appearance, and I don't think either of us is ready to go there right now."

The empath briefly shook with laughter. "Little Jason? Really?" He held on when Jason tried to pull out of the hug. "I'm teasing you, Mr. Stravetta, calm down." The older man subsided, returning to hugging again. Dare moved back enough to see Jason staring down at him.

"We may not be ready to have sex, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought about it. Very pleasurable thoughts. If little Jason and little Dare make an appearance, then we'll go from there. I'm glad you're alright with taking this slow, even if it gives us couilles bleus."

"Classy, French for 'blue balls', I presume?"

Dare grinned. "What can I say? Languages are easy for me." He gave Jason a final squeeze, then took his hand as they went over to the couch.

"We need to discuss a few things, J. I know you're moving back to your suite today, so it'll be harder for me to see you. We still need to work on family issues—I'm going to tell you about mine, too. There are probably a few more sessions that need to be devoted to your combat trauma as well. That's the practical stuff." He gave Jason a caring smile before continuing.

"I want to talk about our relationship and figure out what we both want from it. We have a little over a year before we make planetfall. I'm supposed to go down with the

colonists while you go back to Earth. I can never go back there if I want to remain free.” He paused, seeing Jason’s eyes darken with his last statement. ”See? We have issues of importance to work through.”

Jason mutely pulled his hand from Dare’s, before putting his arm around him, snugging him close to his side.

”I know we have a lot to talk about, but I need to fill you in on what Lewis discovered.” Jason described what Derek had done, and the plan to prevent further damage. ”I think we need to accept that Derek has already outed you for being here, and I can bet that my family wants you for their own purposes, probably as a weapon.” Dare stared at him, appalled, as Jason nodded.

”Yes, my family would do that if they could. Of course, you could kill them all, but they’d never think of that. I have no need to return to Earth myself. My family abandoned me when I needed them, and having Derek planted to spy on me is the last straw. That said, his influence will have to be mitigated. I’m meeting with the captain tonight for dinner to discuss that. Don’t worry, we will not murder him, although he deserves it. Neither Lewis nor I trust him. I know he tried to pry information out of you, so I’m betting you don’t care about him, either. We’ll have to come up with a plan to shield you from his treachery, but that’s a future problem.” Jason took in the empath’s wide-eyed glance.

”Please don’t worry about that. I won’t let anything happen to you. As for access to me on the other deck, I’m giving you the codes so you can come up anytime you wish to. I’m happy to meet you in your berth, your office, wherever you want. I do have a very secure office, though. Derek is on permanent night shift, but don’t let that stop you. I do not give a shit what he thinks or wants at this point. I also wanted to let you know that I’ve not had any nightmares since you helped me. I know PTSD is the gift that never ends, but it’s glorious not to wake up screaming or acting crazy.” He paused, taking in Dare’s overwhelmed expression. ”That was too much, wasn’t it?

I'm sorry."

The Mindset sighed. "Yes, it's a lot to deal with, but we have to, so there you go. Don't apologize for telling me the truth. I always felt Derek was shady, so whatever happens to him is on him. I'm fine with meeting you in your "very secure office". We can work out a schedule tomorrow. Okay if I come up for lunch? My afternoon is free at this point. Last but not least, I asked Lewis to call me Dare instead of Mr. Munro, but he wanted to make sure you didn't mind."

The older man smiled. "That Lewis. I'm fine with him calling you by your given name. Lunch tomorrow is good for me. Thirteen hundred hours in my suite?"

Dare nodded. "Perfect. We have thirty minutes before the big move. I'd like to know how you kiss. I'm told I'm pretty good at osculation."

Jason pulled the younger man into his lap. "Let's see if that is an accurate assessment, shall we?"

The empath licked his lips slowly before nodding. "Pretty sure you won't be disappointed."

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Lewis knocked briefly on Mr. Stravetta's door just before entering at fifteen hundred hours. He stepped in with a greeting ready to go but was struck dumb by the vision of his boss kissing the empath, as though he would die without him. Flushing red, he was about to back out, hoping he hadn't been seen, when Stravetta held up a hand, holding him in place.

The older man slowly pulled away from the Mindset, giving him one last gentle kiss. Lewis could only see the back of Dare's head as he burrowed in between Stravetta's neck and chest. Jason firmed his hold on the empath, before turning to look at his bodyguard, giving him a slow smile.

His blush fading, Lewis ducked his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know...I mean, I wasn't thinking that you'd be, ah, occupied with Mr. Munro. You asked to be notified when it was fifteen hundred. Should I come back later?"

Jason shook his head, then bent over to listen to what Dare was murmuring. He nodded, giving the younger man a smile, then looked back over at Lewis. "Mr. Munro says it's fine to call him Dare, and we agree it's time to move back up to the suite. Give us a moment, Lewis, and we'll be ready to go."

Lewis backed out quickly, the door closing behind him. Untangling from each other, Dare gave the older man a blissful smile. "That was great. You're a wonderful kisser. That marks another concern off my list."

Jason's eyes widened comically. "You have a list? What is this? A tryout?"

The empath grinned, then licked his slightly swollen lips. "It's important we be

compatible, isn't it? I love kissing, and you are world class in that category." Jason looked heavenward, shaking his head. Dare's smile faded as he looked concerned. "Are you upset? I didn't mean to...make you feel weird or anything."

The older man leaned in, giving him a soft kiss on the lips, his own puffy and red. "No, I'm not upset with you. I enjoy kissing, too, so it's great we can share that. What shall we do next, and do I get to choose this time?"

Dare leaned into him, Jason's arm pulling him close. "Whatever we do, as long as we both enjoy it, I'm game. I'm thinking that having sex is going to happen much sooner than we thought. I wanted to leap on you just from kissing, and I felt the same from you—my shield dropped just a little, that's how I know. I don't think "going slow" is going to work."

Jason chuckled. "No, I don't think it is. We're men, and patience is not one of my virtues. You tell me when you want to spend the night, and I'll be more than ready for you. Has your cock deflated? Mine finally did, so I think we can join the redoubtable Lewis now."

Dare nodded, giving him a thoughtful glance. "I hope we didn't embarrass him too much."

Jason gave him a wry look in return. "He'll live, and probably never open the door again without calling out first."

It was a swift lift ride to Jason's deck. Dare met the other two staff on Jason's payroll, Henry and Lola. They did the cooking, cleaning, and other tasks such as laundry. They were an older couple, and from their smiles, had been with Jason for a long time. Both gave the empath a warm, polite smile. Henry informed his boss that Derek had already gone to his room. Sensitized by their recent close contact, Dare felt Jason's displeasure about that, but said nothing. He did, however, firm up his shields.

The suite itself surprised Dare, although he couldn't say why, given who Jason was. It opened into a living area, complete with a couch, a low table, and two armchairs. The bed and bathroom were off that, with an office on the other side of the living room. The rooms for Henry and Lola were off the small kitchen. That room looked much like Dare's current berth but was large enough for two. Lewis and Derek had rooms in the corridor on either side of the suite. The empath only got a glimpse of the bedroom with its large bed, and the bath that had its own shower.

Jason sent everyone to get settled again, then turned to the Mindset. He gave the younger man a questioning look. "Well, this is my home. What do you think?"

Dare stared at him mutely for a moment, feeling strangely overwhelmed. "I think it's bigger than anything I've ever lived in. I feel kind of exposed in so much space, to be honest." Jason frowned as the younger man hastily added, "I'm sure I'll get used to it. I mean, it's nice and everything."

The older man's expression tightened when he heard Dare trying to placate him. "I'm not upset or anything. I guess I never thought of this as being big, especially compared to where I grew up. I know I've had a privileged life, and you haven't. I don't care if I stay here or go back to my berth next to yours. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, so don't force yourself into accepting this place. I mean that, Dare."

Dare sighed, then finally met Jason's eyes. "That's very nice of you, but we won't fit into the bed together in either of those berths. Your bed looks decadent, and I really, really want to take a shower in your bathroom. I know we come from different lifestyles. I know you're wealthy and I'm not. I'm not into any of that crap. Stay up here, and I'll visit you as much as I can. It'll be like a wonderful vacation for me, and you'll be comfortable. That matters to me as much as my comfort does to you."

The older man nodded. "If you change your mind, tell me. You're more important to me than all these things. Do you want to sit down and talk some more?"

The empath glanced at the comm by the door, checking the time. "You know what will happen if we sit down together," giving Jason a mischievous smile. "You need to get settled in, and I'm meeting Riis for dinner." He glanced around the room. "I know you have a meeting tonight and will want to check on all of that. I'll see you tomorrow for lunch, alright?"

"Fine, be that way." Jason grinned, then gave the Mindset a serious glance. "Does all of this mean we're boyfriends now? I don't know what to call what we have."

Dare wrinkled his nose. "I've never liked that term. We're not boys. I think we're friends, soon to be lovers. I really care about you, Jason, and that's what matters most to me."

Stravetta nodded, his voice soft. "That means everything to me, too. Say hello to Riis for me, and I'll see you tomorrow. Sleep well."

Jason walked him to the door, surprised when Dare hugged him tightly. "You, too, J."

The captain arrived exactly on time, in his dress uniform. Jason met him at the door, glad he'd put on a suit.

"Good evening, captain. I trust you had a reasonable day."

The captain bowed his head, then politely smiled. "If reasonable includes moving day for some of my officers, nervous engineers, and coming up here for dinner, then it was, as you say, pretty reasonable. You know you don't have to feed me to see me. I would have come to you if you'd asked, without the dinner invite."

Jason shook his head, sighing. "Captain, let's pretend for a moment that you like me. I already respect you. I have no nefarious purpose for asking you to dine with me, other than to exchange some information with you that may impact this ship and has

impacted me. As far as dinner goes, I don't enjoy eating alone, so there you are. Since we're both dressed up, let's have a decent meal, and then I'll give you my news. Does that meet your approval?"

Arends gave him a wry smile. "Well, when you put it that way, how can I refuse? For the record, Mr. Stravetta, it's not that I don't like you. It's that I don't trust you."

The older man met the captain's glance. "I see. Perhaps what I tell you tonight will change that. I can only hope." Jason moved forward towards his office. "We are eating in here, as it is the most secure room in this suite. The dining room is nothing to get excited about, anyway."

Arends eyes widened, but he kept pace with his host. "Curiouser and curiouser, Mr. Stravetta."

"Keep that thought, captain, because it only gets better."

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Once the meal was served, Jason dismissed Henry, saying they would serve themselves. Henry bowed his head before saying, "Yes, sir," then quietly left.

Jason eyed the captain. "I suggest we eat first before getting into what I have to tell you, as it will not aid our digestion. Do you read for pleasure, captain? Or would you prefer to talk about your previous travels?"

Arends assayed a pleasant smile. "I just finished a book. I enjoyed it a great deal. Perhaps you've heard of it or read it." The captain went on to describe the story and the reasons for his enjoyment as they served themselves dinner. Stravetta had heard of the book, but never read it, so he made a note of the author before suggesting a book of his own. Dinner passed in a very civilized way, to the surprise of both men.

Captain Arends was in a very mellow mood by the time Jason rang for dessert to be brought in, as well as intrigued by his host. He never expected to have a literary discussion with a member of the Stravetta family, their line not being known for erudition.

When dessert was finished, a very good dulce leche, Arends leaned back, happily replete. "That was a fine meal, Mr. Stravetta, and I enjoyed our discussion. I hope whatever you have to tell me doesn't ruin my glow."

Jason gave him a pleased smile before shaking his head. "I hope it doesn't either, but no promises." He then went over what Derek had done, and how. He added he had been forced to bring Derek along and emphasized he had not been his choice. Looking at the captain's stark expression, Jason gave him an understanding glance.

"To say I'm not happy about this is an understatement. My family coerced me into taking this voyage because they wanted me off Earth and out of their sight. Planting one of their agents to spy on me after essentially tossing me away has destroyed whatever loyalty I felt for them. However, I do not wish to show my hand quite yet. Is there a way to cancel Derek's comm access, but make it appear as though he can still send reports? I am asking not only for myself, but for Dare Munro. I was able to intercept one of Derek's communiques, and he informed my family of Dare's identity and his Mindset rating. They will want him back to work for them, no doubt as a weapon. I will not allow that, and hope you feel the same."

Captain Arends sat back in his chair, giving Stravetta a calculating stare. "I lied to the Special Gift Commission about him, saying he was not on board. I aided and abetted him in escaping Earth, which is a felony. I'd do it again. That said, I do not want to lose this ship." He nodded. "Yes, it's possible to block Derek's access without him being aware of it. However, I sense you have other ideas of how to repair this...breach."

Stravetta gave the other man a faint smile. "I'm not going to have him killed, captain, although it's what he deserves. My family may be killers, but I am not, unless I'm in combat. I have a game to play with my family and feel confident that I will win. When that happens, you and this ship will answer only to me. I have no desire to command and know the value of what you and the crew bring to the Gambit. You would remain captain, and I would simply be here, helping us to plot a profitable course. Does this interest you?"

Arends frowned before shaking his head. "Of course it does! I want more details, but that can wait. No matter what happens with this, I want Dare protected."

Jason was silent for a moment. "I know your opinion of me, captain, but please believe me when I say that Dare will never be harmed. Not by me, or anyone. He helped me when I thought I would have to suffer for the rest of my life. We have,

improbably, become close, and are delving into a relationship at this time.” Stravetta shook his head at Arends astonished expression. ”Your surprise equals my own. So, you see, he will always be cared for, no matter how this goes between us. I know our last interaction was me complaining about him. I’m over that.”

The captain leaned forward, folding his hands on the table. ”I warned him away from you, for all the good that did.”

”It obviously didn’t take.”

”You hurt him, and I’ll end you.”

Stravetta bowed his head. ”You’d have to get in line, captain. If you trust me in anything, trust that he is safe with me.” He glanced over to see Arends’ implacable expression soften.

”I’ll be watching, Stravetta. Don’t disappoint me.”

Jason sat back with a sigh. ”Please do. Dare needs people who care about him.”

Meeting Riis for dinner, Dare concentrated on the young man waxing poetic about his latest crush. The empath listened for all he was worth to avoid his own thoughts about Jason and their relationship, knowing if Riis got wind of it, he would pry it out of him, no matter how long it took. The Mindset had years of practice at looking attentive, but he neglected to realize that the captain’s assistant was far more intuitive than most. Riis wound down from his paean to the still nameless man he cared for, narrowing his eyes as he looked at his friend.

”You’ve got a strange look on your face, Dare. Is that your ”tell me everything while I diagnose you” look? Did you hear anything I said? Friends pay attention, Mindset, and don’t sit there thinking about their last fuck, or lack of one.”

The empath kept a smile off his face by strength of will. "I wasn't doing that. I was listening, but you haven't even told me this guy's name. I can't help if my mind wanders when I don't know who you're talking about, or really, why you are."

"I'm talking about him because I'm into him. His name is Will—I'm sure I told you that before—and he's an apprentice engineer. He's very smart and likes anime like I do. He's thoughtful, and funny, too."

Dare made a "give me more" gesture, making Riis huff.

"Fine. He's great in bed and thinks I'm...." the assistant's voice mumbled at the end.

The Mindset leaned in closer. "Thinks you're what? An acrobat, a wizard? A contortionist?"

Riis eyed him, unsmiling. "Ha ha. He thinks I'm cute, and of course, he's right."

Dare sat back in his chair, grinning. "Was that so hard? I think you're cute too, like a puppy. Maybe a kitten."

"Yeah, bite me, Mindset. He likes me, okay? And that's what matters."

The empath was silent for a moment, before glancing at the younger man. "You're right. That is what matters. Are you two getting serious?"

Riis shrugged, running a hand through his hair. "Hell if I know. I do care about him, but right now, we mostly meet to hook up. Our conversations haven't been that long, but he...feels right to me. We've got over three years before we get back to Earth. A lot can happen in that time."

The Mindset nodded slowly, watching emotion wash over his friend's face. "A lot

can, even love. I hope this works out for you. I can tell you care for him.”

”Was that before you diagnosed me or while you were thinking about the last time you had sex?”

Dare laughed, shaking his head. ”There’s no classification for you since you’re thoroughly crazy and have no filter.” He gathered his used dishes onto his tray. ”I’ve got to get going. I have some reading to do and notes to review.”

Riis haphazardly piled his dishes up, before standing a moment after Dare. ”You have said nothing about your relationship. You know, the one with your scary boyfriend.”

The empath busied his dishes, Riis close behind him. ”Not happening, Riis.”

”But it’s in the Friend Code to share that information!”

”Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not talking. It’s private, Riis.”

”But I’m curious and it hurts not to know. C’mon, Dare, spill.”

Dare stared at him, adamant. ”No. Take an aspirin and don’t call me in the morning.”

Riis looked away, sighed, then muttered, ”You’re mean.”

The Mindset glanced over at him, expression softening. ”I’m a Mindset, Riis. That means I can keep secrets forever. It’s possible that I’ll tell you something before then.”

The assistant heaved another heavy sigh, then nudged the empath’s shoulder. ”I’ll wait until you can. That’s part of the Friend Code, too.”

Dare nudged him back as they walked amiably out of the mess. Harmony mostly restored.

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Dare saw Jason every day, usually in the afternoons when he had no clients and Lewis was on duty. They worked on Stravetta's family "issues" some of that time. Dare shared his own parental problems, noting that they were nothing next to Jason's family's toxic response to him. The empath made sure he spent extra time with his almost-lover after each of those sessions.

Like so many, Jason did not like his family, but still deeply craved the connection with them. He knew that was impossible, but hope took a long time to die, and did not let go without damage. Dare supported him using his gifts, when necessary, but mostly reminded him of his strength, abilities, and compassion. The Mindset also held the older man when the pain was too much, finding that helping Jason also helped him to heal as well. He, too, wished for a connection that would never happen now, as he would never return to Earth.

The Mindset arrived at the Stravetta suite today just as quickly as he could. His morning sessions had gone well. He'd completed his notes, gulped down some lunch, and rode the lift to Jason's deck, filled with his usual anticipation.

Lewis always had a smile for him when he arrived. "I'm glad to see you, Dare. Mr. Stravetta received a message from his family this morning. I'm pretty sure it was nothing good. He told me just to let you in, so here you go." He opened the door, letting the empath pass him, getting only a glimpse of his boss sitting on the couch before the door slid shut again.

Jason stood as Dare came towards him, holding his arms open for a hug. "I'm happy you're here. It's been a shitty morning. Sit down, no, here, next to me, and I'll fill you in."

Dare sat next to the older man on the couch with some space between them. Jason snaked out an arm to pull him closer. "You don't mind, do you?"

The empath smiled warmly. "If I did, you'd know. Lewis said you got a message from your family. I'm guessing none of it was good."

Jason leaned his head back against the cushions, closing his eyes. "There's no way to sugarcoat this. They know about you, thanks to fucking Derek. They want me to deliver you back to Earth, using whatever means I need to, including using my position to coerce you. They intimated that sex might work, too. Nothing like being pimped out by your family. Needless to say, they can fuck off. Neither of us is going back to Earth."

Dare, his eyes wide, glanced up at the other man. "I thought...I mean, I assumed you'd be returning to Earth. You know, I'm supposed to go down to the planet with the colonists." He dropped his eyes to Jason's chest. "I don't want that now, but I don't know if I can back out."

The older man hugged him tighter before kissing the top of his head. "Don't worry about that. I'll go down with you if I have to, but I don't think that'll be necessary. You're training another Mindset, so they won't go without one. Remember the conversation I had with the captain? I'm working on a plan that will free me from the family forever. It will mean that I can't go back to Earth, but truthfully, that's not much of a loss for me. I don't have fond memories of the place, and there's no one I regret leaving. I would only regret leaving you, and that I will never do."

The Mindset sighed, not looking up. "Are you sure? You'd be giving up so much to protect me. I mean, I'm a fugitive, but you don't have to be."

"I'm not giving up anything that matters to me, and I'm gaining you. I'd say that is an equitable arrangement as long as you agree I can stay with you."

Dare was quiet for several minutes. His face turned into Jason's soft shirt. "No one has ever wanted me like you do or wished to care for me. I've always been alone, apart. I don't know if I'm worth that sacrifice."

The older man pulled him into his lap, holding him firmly. "Let all of that go. I want you, will care for you, and I'm not sacrificing anything. I just want to be with you, and to...to love you as you deserve."

His voice muffled in Jason's shirt, Dare murmured, "Is it love or just the help I've given you? How do you know? Are the feelings I have for you love? I've never felt this way about anyone else."

Jason gave the younger man a little shake. "I didn't tell you I love you for you to say it to me. If you feel that for me, great. If not, I'll still love you. You've helped me so much, but what I feel goes beyond that. Only you can figure out what you're feeling. Tell me when you know for sure." He smiled down at the top of Dare's head. "I suppose it would be crass to ask when you can spend the night with me now."

His chest vibrated with the empath's soft laugh. "I can't tonight, but I've arranged to take the next two days off. I'll see my morning clients tomorrow, then I'll come up here, provided that's alright with you."

Stravetta chuckled. "Of course, it's fine with me. Will you stay with me both days? I'd like that if you can."

"How could I pass up such a lovely invitation? I'll be with you the entire time, and probably won't want to leave."

"Someday, I hope you won't have to."

The following morning crawled by for Dare. He'd packed a bag the night before,

stowing it under his desk when he came into his office. Riis knew of his schedule change, and reluctantly, the empath told him where he would be in case of some emergency. The assistant looked only a little surprised, his smirk changing into a smile, before wishing his friend a wonderful time off, mentioning he'd say nothing to anyone. Dare gravely thanked him, giving him an affectionate glance as Riis waved him out of his office, citing he had work to do. It was good to have a friend like Riis.

Working methodically, Dare finished up his notes, dismissed the idea of lunch, and left for his rendezvous. He was excited and anxious at the same time, taking deep breaths as the lift inched its way up to Jason's suite.

Lewis was at the door, his expression professional, although his eyes were twinkling. "I understand you're spending a few days with Mr. Stravetta. Enjoy your stay, Dare." He grinned. "I'm sure you will."

Dare nodded, swallowing audibly. "I hope...I think I will. Thank you."

Lewis opened the door, giving the obviously anxious young man a comforting smile. "I'll be out here if either of you needs anything. I'm happy for you."

The empath nodded again, just as Jason's voice sounded. "That's great, Lewis, but for Gods' sake, let the man in."

Lewis answered with a very civil "Yes, sir," as the Mindset hurried through the door, stopping just inside, dropping his bag with a thump.

Jason was suddenly right there, taking him into his arms. "I'm so happy you're here."

Dare murmured, "Me, too," just as his stomach grumbled loudly. The younger man cringed, stepping back. "I'm sorry. I didn't take time for lunch."

The older man laughed quietly. "I didn't either. We're quite the pair. I'll go ask Henry or Lola to make us some sandwiches or something. Will that suit you?"

The Mindset let himself be drawn in closer. "You know I'll eat just about anything, so yes."

Jason towed him over to the couch to sit before going into the kitchen area. Dare heard soft voices, then Jason was back.

"Henry is a mind reader, no offense, Mindset. He was already making some sandwiches for us and reheating some soup. It will be ready in a few minutes. You ready to be away from responsibility for a while?"

"I don't really know how that feels, but I'm still looking forward to it. And you."

Stravetta's eyes heated a little. "Gods know, I am. We need to get on the same page, though, don't we?"

Dare stared at him for a moment, then smiled. "Let's do that after we eat, okay? I'm too hungry to focus on serious topics."

Jason nodded agreement as Henry brought out a laden tray, setting it on the table in front of the couch. "Do you wish to eat here, Mr. Stravetta, or the dining area?"

Stravetta glanced at the Mindset, then looked at Henry. "I think we'll eat in here. We can serve ourselves, thank you, Henry." Henry smiled, before heading back to the kitchen.

Jason piled two sandwiches on a plate, handing it to his lover. He put the bowl of chips in between them on the couch, then poured two glasses of cider. "Dig in, Dare. I'm starving, too."

The sandwiches disappeared quickly, but not without some extra licking of lips and seductive smiles. Dare finished first, used to eating on a timeline. He sipped his cider, enjoying its bite as he watched Jason finish his meal. He smiled when the older man met his eyes, his tongue smoothing over his lips for the last bit of sauce, as he chewed his last bite. His libido spiked when he thought of where he'd like that tongue. Sternly telling himself to calm down, he gave the older man a warm glance.

"Thank you, J. I feel better. I'm ready for that discussion if you are. I'm feeling ready for other things, too." Jason, drinking his cider, let his eyes rove slowly over the younger man's body before making a "go ahead" motion with his free hand. Dare sat up straighter, drawing in an audible breath, before turning towards the other man.

"I've only had sex with other empaths, and that, not frequently. I don't think we should have penetrative sex right away, not because I don't like it, but due to not knowing how I'll react with a non-gifted lover. If my shields drop with another empath, they can compensate. I don't want to hurt or overwhelm you inadvertently. My shields have gone down before when I've bottomed, and it's a lot for even another empath to deal with. Otherwise, I'm good with blow jobs, frottage, using our hands." He paused, giving Jason a searching look. "I want you, J. To touch, hold, see you cum. What I feel...is more than that, but I don't have the words."

Jason moved closer, bumping their knees together. "I've likely had more experiences than you since I'm older, but I'm fine foregoing penetration right now. I don't want to do anything that will make you uncomfortable. Hands and mouths are fine with me, but mostly I just want to be with you, however you'll have me. I really want to see what's under that less than flattering jumpsuit."

They stared at each other wordlessly for a moment, before Dare licked his lips, then leaned in to kiss the other man. The younger man whispered against Jason's lips. "Show me your bedroom, J. I'm ready for whatever you give me, and I'll do the same for you."

Jason looked into his eyes, then smiled. He stood, taking the empath's hand to pull him up. "I will show you everything and give you more." He sauntered into the bedroom, stopping by the bedside.

The bed was freshly made, with multiple pillows. A myriad of colors shone from the duvet, glowing in the muted lighting. Nightstands bracketed the bed with the bath located to the right. The room itself was a light yellow, shining as though it was an early dawn. Dare took all of this in, sighing. "This is a beautiful room, and that bed looks amazing. Can I undress you? It will only take me seconds to get out of this flight suit."

Mouth suddenly dry, Jason nodded. Dare stepped in front of him, close enough to feel his body heat. He carefully unbuttoned the light blue dress shirt, pulling the tails out of the other man's pants, then delicately lifted it off his shoulders and over his arms. He saw the prosthetic for the first time, looking at it with curiosity. "Does it cause you pain anymore?"

Jason shook his head. "The doc realigned it and it's been fine ever since. If it creeps you out, I can put a sleep shirt on."

The empath laid a gentle hand on Jason's bared chest. "It doesn't upset me to see proof of your strength and resilience. What would you prefer to do?"

The older man sighed at the understanding in the Mindset's expression. "I'd like to take it off. I don't use it for anything intimate. I don't have that much fine control."

"Go ahead and do that. I'll take a seat on your sinful bed and watch—unless that bothers you." Jason shrugged.

"Most people don't want to see how it looks. I mean, it's capped with the interface, but it's still kind of ugly."

Dare frowned. "I'm not 'most' people. This is part of you just as much as any other. How can I care about it less?"

Jason pressed above where the prosthetic sat, then twisted. His amputation was below the elbow, giving him unaided flexion. Holding the faux arm/hand in his right hand, he nodded towards the bath. "I'm going to charge this overnight. Makes it function more smoothly."

When he returned, he had a blue sock-like piece of cloth covering his amputation site. "I can't get the nodes dirty or it takes forever to clean them. Don't want to snag you on them either."

Dare stood, tugging him closer to the bed. "You've still got too many clothes on, Mr. Stravetta, now hold still."

The younger man kneeled to help him slip out of his shoes, then had him sit on the bed to remove his socks. Every touch was gentle, reverent. As he stood up again, he caressed Jason's back and chest, causing his nipples to peak as the other man shivered with want.

He traded places with the older man, sitting on the bed to undo Stravetta's trousers, slowly pulling down the zipper, revealing an engorged cock held in place by black underwear. He reached out, carefully touching the cock before him, feeling it grow in his hand. Jason gasped in a breath, his voice low.

"You keep doing that, and this will be over before it starts."

The younger man regretfully let go. "We have all day, J. Don't worry about that."

Without pausing, the empath pulled down the perfectly tailored trousers, baring firm abs and muscled thighs. Jason's legs were long, and only slightly hairy, giving way

to strong ankles and well-formed feet. Leaning in, he inhaled the musky scent that said "Jason", before pulling down the underwear carefully, freeing Stravetta's cock, watching it bob and flex. Jason wasn't huge, but neither was he small. The girth of his shaft was more than Dare had encountered in the past, and his mouth watered at the thought of taking him in.

Shaking his head, Dare stood again. "Go ahead and get in bed. I'll peel off my "uniform" and be right with you."

It took seconds for the empath to step out of his "suit" and shuck his underwear. He stood where Jason could see him, turning without haste. Dare's body was slender, but well-muscled, all because of a consistent workout schedule. He had no chest hair, but his cock was wreathed by wiry curls of dark hair, matching his head. Smaller than Jason, Dare's cock was cut and the image of perfection. As he turned, his back showed two dimples above a rounded, firm butt.

Jason eyed him fully before throwing the covers back and growling, "Get in here so I can taste you."

Dare hesitated. "Do you want me to pick up our clothes?"

The older man's eyes narrowed. "Leave them and get over here before I explode."

The Mindset grinned, then slid into the bed without another word. Jason pounced, slipping down the empath's body, taking his cock into his mouth. Dare arched under him, making an indescribable sound, gasping out the older man's name. It was obvious that this was not Stravetta's first time sucking cock. He used his tongue to tease, and alternated between licking, sucking, and swallowing, making Dare writhe. Using his weight to hold his lover still, Jason brought him to the edge several times before finally taking a deep breath and deep throating the younger man. Dare cried out, his cum filling the other man's mouth to overflowing, his shields dropping

enough to pull the older man into his own climax. Jason swallowed all that he could, as he shuddered through his own orgasm, then gently pulled away, wiping his mouth. He'd felt Dare's shields drop a little, comparing it to feeling a warm, soft breeze. It was invigorating.

Glancing up at Dare, he saw the empath lying with complete abandon, his hands clutching the bedsheets, his legs splayed. Eyes closed, he was slightly flushed, his breathing quieting even as Jason's did. The sight of the Mindset so open and unguarded made his breath catch with a mixture of lust, need, and love.

Dare's eyes opened, blinking several times, as Jason moved up his body, taking him into his arms. The deep blue eyes searched the older man's face for a moment, then smiled. "You...that was...amazing. I've never let go like that before—I know my shields dropped a little, but..." He hesitated, "you're alright, aren't you?"

Jason leaned in to kiss him before answering, sharing the taste of him. "Never better. I felt something change just before you pulled me into my orgasm. It felt good, like an exchange of energy. I have no complaints about that, believe me."

The empath snuggled closer. "Good. Sex makes it difficult to maintain my shielding because I have to be vulnerable to enjoy it. You make me feel safe, J. That's a gift to me."

Stravetta grinned, looking pleased. "I'm happy to give you that, be it with sex or in life. You will always be safe with me, Dare, as I will be with you."

The Mindset gave the other man a lingering kiss. "May Gaia always make that so, for both our sakes."

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They spent the rest of that afternoon and evening in bed. At one point, Jason threw on a robe and went out to request some food. Henry, for his part, smiled and suggested a selection of small bites, along with a carafe of water and two glasses of cider. Stravetta agreed, knowing he looked disheveled, but not giving a damn. Henry tactfully said he would knock and leave the tray outside the door. Thanking him, Jason returned to his bedroom, and his new lover.

After consuming some food and drinking all the water, the two used hands, mouths, and their bodies to bring each other off, until Jason, trembling from the force of his orgasm, made the "time-out" sign. "I need to rest a little—I'm not used to doing this anymore than you are. I've got the added extra of being almost ten years older. Coming three times in a row verges on a miracle at my age, plus I'm covered in so much spunk that I'm sticking to everything. Wanna take a shower?"

Dare wiped his mouth, having sucked Jason off a few minutes before, still feeling the echo of his afterglow. "I've been wanting to try out that huge shower since I first saw it." He took a deep breath. "I almost hate to wash up. The smell of us together is intoxicating."

"At the risk of making a terrible pun, there's more where that came from—maybe not right away, but soon."

The empath groaned. "That's bad, but I'm ready for a repeat when you are. Let's shower, drink that cider, and see what "comes up"."

It was Jason's turn to roll his eyes. "Don't diss my puns when you're making worse ones. C'mon, I'll wash your back and anything else I can reach."

The shower was much larger than any Dare ever used, with multiple heads and jets shooting from the walls. The water was hotter than the communal baths, but it was still over much too soon. Jason had washed him, gently running a cloth over him, kissing each part when he was done. Dare leaned back against him after the older man rinsed himself, enjoying the last few seconds of water.

Dare sighed. "Someday, I hope I can shower for as many minutes as I want. I know we have to conserve, but I can dream."

Jason wrapped him in a towel, drying off on another, then put it around his waist. "I've read history that said that people used to shower for fifteen or twenty minutes at a time, with hot water, every day. Sounds like a fantasy, doesn't it?"

"As much as I'd like that, I think I'd feel guilty using resources that way. I've been taught to save and reuse everything. Even if we could, I don't think I could do that. A brief shower every day would be great, though."

Jason unwrapped the younger man from his bath sheet, drying areas that were still damp. "You're in luck then, Mindset. I can shower every day if I wish to—no restriction. I would be happy to do that with you."

Dare moved into his arms, his half hard cock rubbing against Jason's towel. "We'll have to get sticky again. I can't just shower unless I need to."

Jason made a face of faux horror before grinning. "You're so ethical. It makes up for my lack, so I'm not complaining. I promise to get you very sticky so you can take a shower without guilt."

The empath kissed him in the middle of his chest. "You want to start now? I'm ready if you are."

”Even if I’m not, I’ll always be ready to touch you however you want. Get your cute butt into bed and let’s see what happens.”

Jason amazed himself by coming a fourth time, though his spunk made a very weak showing. Gathering Dare into his arms again, he sighed blissfully as they fell asleep. The empath ran his fingers through the older man’s hair gently. He needed to get up and take his dampers. He wished, not for the first time, that he didn’t need them, but there was no changing his reality. Carefully disengaging from Jason, he quietly retrieved his duffle, found the pills, and took one, sighing as he did so. He used the bathroom, wiping off his cum, before going back to bed. Jason reeled him into his arms again, mumbling something unintelligible. Dare soothed him with his hands and voice just before the medication eased him to sleep.

Dare woke early, as that was his habit, and inwardly cursed. Jason was still completely asleep, spooning him. The younger man would not wake him with the effort it would take to get out of bed. Closing his eyes again, he resolutely tried to meditate, or at least do some productive thinking. Feeling his lover’s soft cock against his buttocks was not conducive to meditation, so treatment planning it was.

The empath had completed half of his treatment plans (at least in his mind) when Jason suddenly went from asleep to wakefulness. He briefly gripped the Mindset tightly before letting go.

”I didn’t mean to grab you. I was dreaming and thought you’d left.” Dare gave him a concerned look that Jason felt needing answering. ”No, I wasn’t having a nightmare, so relax. It was more a ”where are you, I can’t find you” type of dream. Fortunately, I woke up and clutched at you, so I knew you were here.” He pulled the empath closer, giving him a kiss. ”We’ve got all of today together. What would you like to do?”

The younger man wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, making Jason laugh. ”Of course, we can do more of that, but I think we’d better eat a meal and walk around a

little before we do. Have you been to the conservatory?"

The Mindset shook his head. "The garden? No, I'm not even sure where it is. I thought you had to have permission to visit there."

"Lucky you know the almost owner of this ship. I have permission to go wherever I wish. We should definitely go—I think you'll love it."

Dare nodded agreement. "I'd like that. I've missed not seeing anything naturally green. Still wish I'd spent more time outside before I left Earth, even though it was always so warm."

Jason looked pensive for a moment. "The family has a large garden with misters to keep it cooler. I always enjoyed sitting out there. It was all decorative, though, no food bearing plants." He made a derisive sound. "Gods know we wouldn't do anything practical like that."

The empath gave him an uneasy glance. "Your family sounds like they're..."

"Entitled? Selfish? Pick a descriptor and don't feel bad about it. It's all about them, so why care about anyone else? I played that game while I was there, but never felt it was really me. Going to war was terrible, but at least it got me away from my family and their overweening crappiness."

Dare was quiet for a moment, before taking a breath and sighing it out against his lover's shoulder. "I know it's selfish, but I'm glad you're here with me. It sounds like both of us were misfits in our families. We have the chance to make a better life for ourselves now. I hope we can do that together."

The older man gave him a thoughtful kiss on the forehead. "I want that, Dare, for both of us. Whatever you want is what we'll do. We have time to figure it out, and

then we'll go from there."

Dare gave him a smile. "Good advice, Mr. Stravetta. I need to clean up a little, then let's have some breakfast. We both used up about a zillion calories last night."

The older man groaned. "How long are you going to call me "Mr. Stravetta"? I don't think we can get any closer since we've had each other's cocks in our mouths. I like it when you call me J or Jason. "Mr. Stravetta" is a hardass."

The empath stared at him with mild outrage. "He is not! He's the part of you that commands formal respect and makes wrongs right. He's the you that takes care of his staff and is thoughtful and caring. Does it bother you when Lewis says that?"

Jason stared back, his eyes wide. "No, but he's part of my staff and he'd never call me by my first name because that's not him."

"If you want to be precise, I'm part of your staff, too. This is your ship, you own it. Everybody on it works for you, so I must be, too."

Jason sat up, carefully letting go of Dare, before turning to glare down at his lover. "That may be logical, but it's not how I feel, and you know it. Want me to fire you? I shouldn't be sleeping with an employee."

"Go ahead. I'm working out my passage, not for a wage."

Jason ducked his head. "Crap. I'm not winning this, am I?"

Dare sat up, sitting cross-legged next to him. "No, you're not and you won't. When I call you "Mr. Stravetta", I'm yanking your chain a little because I can be a brat. But I meant what I said, too."

The older man sighed. "I'm letting this go as my friend, the empath, advised me to do when I can't possibly benefit from something. Truce?"

The Mindset gave him a regal nod. "Of course, but I don't think I said that. It's good advice, though."

Jason looked heavenward before glancing over at him. "Are you ticklish? Right now, a good tickle would make me feel better about you."

"If I am, you'll never know, and if you do, I won't be responsible for what happens. This is your only warning."

The older man raised his hands in surrender. "Message received. It was only a thought."

Dare gave him a sweet, faintly predatory, smile. "Think of something else, Mr. Stravetta."

Jason nodded rapidly. "I already am."

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Dare returned to his schedule after his "weekend" off. Jason regretfully watched him leave, making the younger man promise to return as soon as possible. Leaving the older man with a kiss and fierce hug, the empath knew he had more work to do regarding his relationship with the presumptive owner of the Gambit. He knew he did not trust easily and guarded his feelings more than most. His deliberately inaccurate Mindset rating made that necessary on Earth, and he wondered why he could not let his paranoia of being exposed go. He was as safe as he ever would be on this ship, despite Derek outing him to the Stravetta family. Jason had sworn to protect him, and the captain already was. He had friends, allies here. He was not alone. With that thought, an epiphany struck.

He had been dealing with his "gift" alone, his parents disengaging as soon as his abilities manifested. He was close to no one else on Earth, and had walked there, constantly on guard. Dare gave a long, breathy sigh, then drew in fresh air. He was not alone anymore. He never would be. Between the crew, the colonists, and Jason, he had all the care he could ever use, or need. The weight of the fear he'd been carrying fell away, and Dare Munro, Mindset One, took in the knowledge that he could be who he was, and not be afraid.

Grinning to himself, the empath thought of his lover, remembering their time together, and knew their connection was one of love. He loved Jason and would cherish those feelings until light left the stars.

Dare climbed out of bed as quietly as he could, leaving Jason slumbering on. He still had his morning clients to see, no matter how his lover felt about him leaving so early. Taking a shower despite not "needing" it, he washed quickly and dressed. He was meeting Riis and Mike for breakfast and looking forward to it. There were only

about nine months to go before planetfall, and he wanted to spend as much time as he could with his friends.

As he bent to give Jason a chaste kiss, the empath saw his dark eyes blink open, giving him a sleepy look. "You off to do good, my Mindset? Will I see you after lunch?"

Dare gave him a regretful shake of his head. "I need to go to the colony deck. I've got an appointment with Vida and Chance. Since we've decided to remain together, I need to tell them I'm not going planet side with them. I feel like I'm reneging on my agreement with them, but I can't leave you, Mr. Stravetta. You know that."

Jason snorted. "So, I'm Mr. Stravetta again." He hauled the younger man into the bed, holding him on top of his chest. "Tell me how much you love me, and I'll let you go, my lovebug."

The empath narrowed his eyes. "Never call me "lovebug" again, and I'll let you live." Jason's smile didn't falter as he held on tighter. Dare sighed, relaxing on the wonderfully firm chest underneath him. "I love you more than I can tell you, more than there are words to describe. You give me so much joy, I feel like I am made of starlight, not flesh and bone." He lifted his head to plant a kiss on his lover's nose. "Does that satisfy your need for validation?"

Jason's smile softened before he gave the younger man a gentle kiss, then, groping his butt, he made Dare jump. "That should hold me throughout the day, or until you get back here. Then you can validate me some more."

Dare barked out a laugh. "I thought I'd be the one with the insatiable libido, but that's you, isn't it, love? You know I can't resist you."

"You're doing a pretty good job right now."

"Because I have to work, you child of privilege. I'm also meeting Riis and Mike, so I've got to get going. Unhand me, knave."

Jason reluctantly let go, stealing one more kiss. "Early dinner tonight?"

"Works for me, J. See you around seventeen hundred." He gave Jason a fond glance. "I'll think of you today."

"As I will of you. Enjoy your day, D."

Despite spending most of his free time with his lover, Dare made sure he saw his protégé, Chance, at least twice a week. The other man had completed his coursework, sat in on live therapy sessions with and without the Mindset, and was now practicing under Dare's supervision. Of course, there was no way to formally license him, not that the colony cared about that level of bureaucracy. They cared about expertise, and Chance had plenty of that.

Chance met him at the "front door" of the colony deck as he always did. He seemed to know when the empath would arrive without being given any warning. Dare was concerned about that at first, thinking he had inadvertently linked with the Mindset Two, but realized later that it was their tie as mentor and mentee. Once Chance's training was completed, that tie would dissolve, though it was likely they would always be close.

As Dare cleared the doorway, Chance met his eyes with a sunny smile, his default setting. "Hi, Dare! As always, I've got questions I hope you have answers to. The other therapists have referred two more clients to me for some intensive work, and I'd like to run them by you."

The empath smiled in return, feeling himself relax, as he always did when with Chance. "That's why I'm here, besides just checking in with you. I do have

something to discuss with you, and Vida, too. Let's get to your room and you can tell me more."

Chance's smile dimmed a little at the mention of a "discussion", but he deliberately put that aside. It was time for his bi-weekly supervision and that's what he needed to concentrate on.

Dare approved the plan to treat the new clients, then checked in with the other Mindset regarding his sleep and overall well being. Chance reported that he was sleeping "enough", hated the dampers, but felt wonderful ninety-nine percent of the time. Grinning at Dare as he told him this, the young man radiated good health and stable emotions.

The Mindset One gave the other man a heartfelt glance. "I don't think you realized how relaxing it is to be near you. If I can feel that, with my almost impenetrable shields, then all of your clients can as well." Chance looked concerned as the empath continued. "No, you misunderstand me. This is a gift of inestimable price. You can calm others just by being in proximity and you don't even have to try, you just do."

The Mindset Two ducked his head. "I'm not doing anything, Dare, I swear. It's just me."

The empath grinned. "That's the best part—it is just you. Having this gift is going to make your life as a Mindset so much easier. Much easier than mine."

Chance blinked. "I can't hold people with the force of my mind or speak mind to mind like you can."

Dare shrugged dismissively. "There is not much call for either of those in therapy, Gaia be thanked." He met the other man's eyes. "Any more questions today? We have an appointment with Vida in about fifteen minutes."

”Should I be worried?”

”I don’t think you need to be. You’ve got this, even without my help.”

Vida was not amused to hear that Dare planned on staying on the ship when they reached the planet. Chance, who had ”felt” something from the other Mindset, was not very surprised. The empath met the colony administrator’s disapproving stare, then sighed. ”I am staying for a very good, and to me, wonderful, reason. I have entered a relationship with Jason Stravetta, and wish to remain with him because...I love him. I am not happy to renege on our agreement. However, Chance is a Mindset Two, and has gifts and talents I do not. He is far more suited to being the colony’s Mindset than I.”

He sighed, bowing his head, before looking up at them both. ”I am a weapon who has chosen not to be used in that way. Yes, I am a good therapist, and care for my clients. Chance’s abilities allow him to connect with others far more easily than I will ever be able to do. Believe me, Administrator, you are receiving a better Mindset in Chance than you would be in me.”

Vida shifted in her chair, and her expression softened. ”I appreciate your honesty, Mindset Dare, regarding Chance and Mr. Stravetta. While I am pleased you think so highly of Chance, I wonder at your choice of Jason Stravetta. His reputation is, to put it kindly, checkered.”

The Mindset One drew himself up, his posture almost rigid. ”I have seen Mr. Stravetta’s heart and have no concerns about his purported reputation. Our connection is strong and mutual. I am blessed to have found love, since many Mindsets do not.”

Vida lowered her eyes and nodded. ”I see my concern was misplaced. Happily so. May your lives together bring you joy and Gaia’s grace.”

Dare managed a smile. "Thank you. I hope for both." He turned to Chance. "Have you any concerns in this regard?"

Change returned his glance, smiling. "I know I can care for the colony, as you have taught me well. Otherwise, I wish you only happiness with your lover, and hope I, too, find someone who loves me as you do him."

"I know you will. Not because I've "seen" it, but because you are much more loveable than I." His smile encompassed them both. "I need to return to the ship proper. Thank you for your acceptance of my news, unwelcome as it was. I will help you get set up on the planet as that is the least I can do. Vida, if you want me to give this news to the others, let me know. Chance, walk me out, and I will see both of you again soon."

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The remaining months until planetfall passed quickly. Dare moved in with Jason, with the proviso that he has a room set aside just for him. Jason's carefully masked look of vulnerability caused him to explain why.

"Jason, I see and connect mentally every day with my clients. Sometimes...I need to be alone, to recharge, and renew myself. I am not doing this to upset you, but to care for myself. I promise to sleep with you every night, but I will need time each week to do this."

The older man ducked his head, his face flushed. "I didn't know that loving another...that loving you would make me want to be with you all the time. I know you need time to yourself—I do, too, sometimes." He shook his head. "I'm being stupid, so ignore me."

The empath reached out to take his hand. "You're not being stupid—you are showing me how you feel. I feel that pull to you all the time as well, but my work mitigates it, not to mention my concern for those I counsel. Never feel sorry that you share how you feel with me. I consider it a gift that you do."

"I'll remind you of that when you feel I'm too much to manage."

Dare grinned. "Try harder then. I don't think I'll ever feel that way." He leaned in, giving his lover a kiss.

Jason sighed, smiling. "That's good—I'm a handful."

The Mindset gave him a lascivious smile. "And then some."

The empath usually ate lunch with Jason, although he met up with Riis and Mike at least weekly. Dare still went to the poker games, taking his dampers to make sure no one objected. Having friends was a novelty, and he wanted to cultivate those relationships. Jason declined to attend, and the Mindset didn't push him. Jason felt he had a position to uphold and did so. Dare was just glad to know more people who liked him for who he was.

Finishing his meal, Dare leaned back in his chair, giving his love a thoughtful glance. Jason took his last bite and wiped his mouth on a serviette before looking up. "What? Am I wearing some food?"

The empath shook his head. "What? No, of course not. I was just thinking we needed to make an appointment with the captain. He doesn't know I'm staying with the ship and you. We should tell him formally, don't you think?"

His expression wry, the other man nodded. "I'm sure he's heard the gossip, and equally sure he knows from his own inquiries. You're right, though. We should tell him ourselves." The older man shifted in his chair. "While we're sort of on the subject, I need to let you know what my plan is to free us both from my family. I am going to contact my father and make him an offer. He can give me this ship, not touch my investments and holdings, and forget he ever heard your name. In return, I will not release sensitive information about family dealings to every news outlet. That information will be sent to several reputable outlets and my attorney, to be released in the event of any injury or death of either of us prior to my conversation with him. No, I don't trust him, and doubt I ever will."

Dare's eyes widened in amazement. "I know you've been estranged from them, but I didn't think you'd go this far to protect me. Are you sure?"

Jason's dark eyes warmed at his lover's consternation. "I'm very sure. Being a Stravetta has meant nothing but pain to me. Couple that with how they would treat

you, and it's easy to tell them to fuck off. I won't let anyone hurt you, Dare, you know that. I've already given the captain heads up on this. He's on board. I'll contact dear old dad once we're close enough to Earth. I don't plan to go down there, and you've never been on board per the captain, so no one should be looking for you, except my family."

Dare was silent, searching Jason's face, before looking down at his hands, tightly clasped in his lap. "I don't know what to say. I thought that we'd have the trip back and then I'd have to hide again, or your family would take me away. I never thought—never dreamed—you'd give up your family for me, despite your problems with them."

"You decided to stay with me, thinking I would let my family take you? Dare, I love you! I would never allow that to happen. How could you think that?"

The younger man ducked his head, his face pale. "No one has ever cared so much for me that they'd give up everything. I know you love me, but I guess I still thought..."

Jason's expression hardened as he took Dare's hands in a tight grip. "You are not expendable or just a fancy on my part. Listen to me carefully, Mindset, and believe what I say: I will never let you go unless you ask me to. I will protect you with all my resources, and my life, if necessary. I love you and want to be with you for the rest of our lives. Never think that I will use you for my own ends, or not respect your wishes and needs. Do you believe me?"

The empath stared down at their clasped hands. "I must, for that is how I feel about you. It's hard for me, J, to trust, you know that."

"I will keep showing you, then, every day until you know and understand what I feel for you and would give you."

Dare glanced up, his eyes brimming with tears. Jason made an indistinct sound, pulling him into his arms. "This is what love feels like, and that love will protect you, too."

The empath, held in his lover's arms, unwillingly let himself believe.

Lying in Jason's arms that night, Dare could not rest. His lover, firmly snuggled around him, had kissed the back of his neck, expressed his love, and shortly thereafter, fell asleep. The empath lay there, his mind whirling, unable to settle his thoughts.

How was it he could acknowledge acceptance from his friends and the crew, but not realize that Jason would extend that and more to him? True, no one had ever loved him to that extent, or been willing to let go of long held assets for him. No one had given up their family, no matter how awful they were.

The young empath sighed, feeling Jason's arms tighten even in his sleep. He loved this man, felt connected to him even when he was misbehaving. Dare smiled into the darkness. Jason loved him, and would continue to love him, into a forever the Mindset could not imagine. The older man did not think of him as disposable or replaceable. He let that thought, that feeling, settle into him, and finally accepted it as truth. Jason cared for him more than anyone ever had and would do whatever he must to safeguard him. It was a frightening thought to be so tied to another, but it was also glorious.

Placing his hands over Jason's as the other man spooned him, Dare knew, at last, he had found a home.

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The Gambit slipped out of the trans ion drive and began slowing as it approached New Eire. As they got closer, they would "coast" into orbit around the planet, using thrusters to stabilize its trajectory. It would take about two weeks to do this, and anticipation rose within the ship, knowing landfall was near along with the possibility of literal shore leave.

Dare was not immune to the giddy feelings floating around the ship. After two years, he was ready to be in sunlight, no matter which star provided it. Jason, far more jaded, was caught up in his excitement.

"Are you sure you want to go down to the planet's surface, D?" The older man's expression was quizzical, and a little concerned. "You'll have to go through decon again when you return."

The empath made a face, then shook his head. "I promised to help the colonists settle in, plus I want to feel and see sunlight again. Going through decon is a pain, but I'll do it, regardless. What about you? Don't you want to breathe some unfiltered, completely alien air?"

Stravetta looked torn. "Part of me wants to go down with you, and the other part wants to avoid having an alien bug fly up my nose. This isn't my first planetfall, you know."

Dare sighed, shaking his head ruefully. "Yes, I know, oh great explorer. I'd like to have you with me, but you have to do what you're comfortable with. The survey didn't find that many insects, but knowing you, the only one around would fly up your nose or in your mouth. Come to think of it, we're going to all be wearing masks

until the initial dome is up to avoid contaminating anything before we know exactly what's there. That takes care of your bug concerns, Mr. Stravetta."

"Why is it every time you call me that, a devil dances in the Underworld?"

The Mindset grinned. "How would I know? Has your family a link with it?" Dare casually evaded a swat. "Calm down, J. I'm teasing you. Any devils in your family don't belong to you, and never will."

Jason slumped back against the couch. "You don't know what I've done, and I'm not telling you, so don't ask. I could have a devil or two waiting for me."

The younger man nudged his shoulder with his. "Whatever you've done, you've redeemed yourself with your pain and forgiveness. I'm not blameless either." He leaned in to give Jason a kiss. "Remind me not to tease you. We always end up in these rabbit burrows."

"Rabbit holes."

"Really? I like burrows better. More dignified."

Jason snorted. "I'm sure the rabbits that survived appreciate that."

"Smart ass."

"Now that's dignified."

Dare went to the colony deck the day the Gambit established orbit around New Eire. The colonists in cryo-sleep had been woken two weeks before, with all surviving, much to everyone's relief. A few required some medical care, and all needed physical therapy, but most were walking around without assistance, and catching up

on what they'd missed.

When Dare arrived, the noise level was more than he expected. He cringed back at the door, nodding at Larue's understanding glance.

"A hundred more people means twice as much noise, Mindset. We're all trying to get used to it. Are you here to meet anyone or just visiting?"

The empath checked and then raised his shielding. He'd become lax at keeping them up as he had on Earth, but now he felt those new minds tugging at him. Taking a breath, he did so before answering Larue.

"Just visiting, Larue. I wanted to offer my help, if it's needed. I can't tell what's going on by what I'm seeing right now."

Larue grinned, nodding. "It's a circus. Market day, you know. Everyone is stocking up since we won't have this again until we're settled." He gave Dare an assessing glance. "I heard you're staying with the ship. They say you found love and don't want to leave it. Good for you. Love's hard enough to find without tossing it away. Vida said Chance will step in for you, so that's all good. You'll be missed, Mindset Dare."

The empath swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I'll miss you, too, Larue. I'll miss you all." He cleared his throat. "I hate to leave you, but I can't..."

"You can't leave your love behind. No one should ever do that, since love is precious and rare. We'll be fine, Dare. Don't worry about us."

Dare gave him a heartfelt glance, then nodded. "Thank you. I...I appreciate your understanding. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Larue shook his head. "Today's too crazy. I can put you on the roster to help with packing up tomorrow—actually it's more like safely stowing everything. You know, this deck is a transport, right? It'll take us down to the surface, unload, then rejoin the ship. We strap in, enjoy the ride, and come out to a new world."

The empath's look of astonishment made Larue smile. "You didn't know that, Mindset?"

Dare shook his head silently, looking thoughtful. "I wondered how all of you were going to get to the surface with everything, but never asked. That's a splendid solution." He grinned. "I'll come back tomorrow morning. My clients are all busy with ship business, so I've got time to help stow whatever needs it. Thanks again, Larue."

The noise level rose again, so Larue nodded, and waved Dare back out the doorway. On the way back to his part of the ship, Dare thought of all the people he'd met on the colony deck, and how much he would miss them. At least, he didn't have to say goodbye quite yet. It would take a month or more to get the colony up and running enough for the ship to depart. He gave himself a shake as he strode along. Yes, he would miss those he'd met, but he would never regret choosing to stay with Jason.

The transport deck descended onto New Eire one week later. Dare rode down with Chance in his room, feeling excited about seeing a new planet. Jason ultimately decided to remain on the Gambit. He didn't feel he had the skills needed to help set up a temporary dome, or the temperament to work with those that thought he was the bogeyman at worst, or useless at best. He sent Dare on his way with several passionate kisses, and admonishments to be careful, and to stay close to the crew.

The empath could tell he was worried, but knew he had to go as he'd given his word. He also knew in his own heart that, as much as he cherished Jason, he wanted to set foot on and actually see a new planet. This might not be his only chance to do that,

but who knew? Dare kissed his lover, told him not to worry, and said he'd be back when the transport returned. The empath felt the pain of leaving Jason settle deep inside, knowing he must continue to work on being independent from him, for no one could be everything to another person.

The ride to the surface was bumpy as they dropped through the atmosphere, then smoothed out. The feeling of weightlessness made Dare wish for a handhold to clutch. There were no view ports, and the trip down seemed to take a long time, although Dare knew that was his subjective experience talking. Chance had his eyes closed and seemed to meditate, so the other man emulated him.

Finally, they heard the muted roar of the engines, and the solid thump of the transport shuttle landing, then one of the crew came on the com to announce their arrival. Chance opened his eyes, stretched, then smiled. "Welcome to New Eire, Mindset Dare."

Dare grinned. "I thought we'd never get here. So, do we all head to the airlocks or what? I missed the debarkation speech."

Chance shook his head. "We can take off our safety harnesses, but need to stay where we are until called. The crew will set up the dome in the designated area outlined by the survey. After that's done, they'll offload us with what we can carry before the rooms are broken down and reassembled inside the dome. The kitchens will be set up first, followed by the baths. There's a good possibility we'll be sleeping on bedrolls tonight, since the room reassembly will take a while."

Dare nodded, then gave Chance a curious glance. "I'm glad you were paying attention since I wasn't. This is a Class M world, isn't it? I guess I assumed that."

Chance sat up straighter on the small couch after undoing his harness. "It's actually somewhere between a Class L and Class M. Abundant atmosphere, vegetation, and

water, but no discernable animal life other than some insectoids, according to the survey. The soil is supposed to be adequate for sustaining the plants and seeds we've brought with us. We're all vegans, so we don't need animals. I was hoping there'd be birds because I'd love to see them flying free. Part of me hopes the survey missed something like that, but the other part doesn't want some nasty critter to contend with." He sighed, giving the other empath a smile. "We've got our work cut out for us—I am positive about that."

The Mindset nodded thoughtfully. "I know you can do this, but the immensity of the undertaking boggles me. I think the colony is amazingly brave to take this on—it's a completely unknown world, and now it's yours."

The younger man's smile faded. "Like you, we had little choice. Earth was killing us slowly, tearing apart families after taking our work away. I think we all decided—I know I did—if we were going to die, we might as well try to make a new life here. If we fail, at least we tried, and we would die on our own terms. If we succeed, it will be glorious."

Dare reached out to touch his arm, his hand warm against Chance's sweater. "As Shakespeare said, 'Brave new world, that has such people in it.'" He patted the arm he held. "You're going to do fine, Chance. I just...know it."

The younger Mindset met his eyes. "Then we will, Dare. There's no other option I want to take."

The klaxon briefly sounded before the crewmember spoke again, informing them that the dome was up and offloading would begin in five minutes.

Dare almost stood up before relaxing back at Chance's amused look. "I'm excited, okay? Aren't you?"

"Of course! I've just had longer to get used to the idea. Vida and the supervisors will be the first out so they can direct traffic. We're not very far down the line from that, so we'll be out there very soon. Remember to breathe, mentor."

The older empath shook his head. "Why am I surrounded by smart asses? Is it me?"

Chance chuckled. "It's your innocent expression, Dare. We can't help ourselves."

The door slid open then, framing a crewmember. "Come on, you two. Time to step out on your brand-new planet, and it's a sunny day."

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It took closer to five weeks to set up the colony within the dome. It was decided to use the dome as their "city" to reduce the impact on the natural surface of the planet, and to protect the colonists from insect life, at least initially. The life scientists tested the water from a nearby river, and found it pure enough to drink with treatment, but recommended UV filtration anyway. Solar power was set up to provide their energy needs.

Everyone wore a mask/breather combination at first, but the colonists, now styling as "Eireans," soon discarded them. This was their planet now, and wearing a mask would only delay the inevitable if the planet had a killer virus or bacteria. Only the crew from the *Gambit* wore the masks consistently, as doing so would reduce time in decon.

Dare worked hard with the crew and colonists to set up New Eire's first town. Fusion generators powered the settlement until the solar grid came online. Stockpiles of food and incidentals were inventoried and safely stowed. Dwellings were rebuilt and spaced further apart. The dome was bigger than the transport shuttle, and it was felt that two hundred disparate souls needed more privacy than had been possible on the *Gambit*. Everyone worked from sunup to early dark, taking breaks only to eat and sporadically rest.

When quitting time arrived, the *Gambit*'s crew returned to the shuttle, and the air purifiers there. Dare debated with himself and then decided to stay with the colonists. He would spend more time in decon but knew the time he spent with them was worth it. At first, he was so busy and then so exhausted; he didn't have the energy to miss Jason. Having obtained the captain's permission, he could call Stravetta every night, but soon that wasn't enough. Jason always mentioned how much he missed him,

followed by a disclaimer that he wasn't trying to guilt him, and hoped he was enjoying himself. The empath always assured him he was, despite missing the older man.

Three weeks into the colony set up, the tasks went from requiring strength to needing expertise. The Mindset could fetch and carry but wasn't qualified to do anything else. He helped some colonists rearrange their rooms, oversaw the jobs the sixteen to nineteen-year-olds were given, but the truth was they knew more than him. Starting into the fourth week, there was nothing Dare could do, and he hated sitting while others were doing.

Speaking with Jason that night, he described the situation, trying hard not to complain, although he wondered how he would pass the next two weeks. The older man looked thoughtful and sympathetic before nodding.

"I could come and get you, if you like. I have a personal shuttle on board and Lewis can pilot it. I'd have to clear it with Captain Arends, but I doubt he'd say "no" as long as you stay in the back so as not to contaminate either of us. I know you want to say goodbye to everyone, so should I see if that's doable in two days" time?"

Dare visibly brightened. "J, that would be wonderful. I really wanted to stay the full time, but I can't stand having nothing to do, especially when everyone else is so busy. Two days is perfect. Have I told you how much I love you?"

Jason's smile warmed the empath. "Not today, but I love you just as much. I'll drop a message to the captain tonight." He paused. "I meant to ask—have you seen Derek down there? He missed his shift with me last night and nobody's seen him."

Dare frowned. "Believe me, if I'd seen him, I would have told you. I'll ask around just in case, but I don't think roughing it is his idea of a good time."

"I don't think so either, but I had to ask. I'll let the captain know that, too. He'll want to search the ship for him, not that anyone misses him."

"Crap, I hope he's not dead, but that's a fitting epitaph for him."

Jason gave him a sober look. "Honestly, I don't care one way or the other, but I don't abandon anyone who works for me, even a dick like Derek. Let me know tomorrow if anyone spotted him on the surface."

The empath nodded. "Of course. I don't think he's here, though, the weasel."

The older man laughed softly. "I agree, but we still have to look for him." He stared at the other man for a moment. "I'm so glad you're coming home. It's been kind of hell without you here. Lewis keeps asking me how I'm doing, and he's making me crazy."

Dare grinned. "Give Lewis my best and tell him to knock it off. I can't wait to see you. I'll com again about this time tomorrow."

Jason gave him a fond look. "I'll be waiting."

The next day, the Mindset informed Vida that he would leave the day after tomorrow, thanking her for her understanding and care while he was with the colonists. She thanked him in return and said she would let the colony know so they could make their goodbyes to him. Consequently, most of that day was filled with various colonists coming up to him to wish him well and thank him. The goodbyes were bittersweet, but heartfelt.

Despite questioning many of the "Eireans," and a thorough search, no sign was found of Derek.

Towards sunset of that day, Dare was able to pull Chance away from setting up the com system during a lull in activity. Asking him to step outside the dome to witness the coming of night, Chance nodded and smiled, knowing Dare needed to say goodbye to him personally.

They stood, shoulder to shoulder, watching the burnished gold of the star around which New Eire revolved, slowly sink into the far mountains. The air verged on cool, the atmosphere crystalline, making the colors shine without flaw.

Chance sighed with enjoyment. "It's so beautiful here." He looked over at his mentor. "You know you'll always be a part of me, Mindset Dare. Our minds have touched, and I will never let that go."

Dare gave him a distracted look, holding up a hand, as his eyes unfocused. "There's other life here. I can't tell...but it's not aggressive. I think I touched one of their minds. They know you're here...they're curious, but..." He shook his head. "That's all I got. Crap, I hope I didn't wake them, although they don't feel like a problem. Be wary, but open. They don't mean any harm."

Chance stared at him, eyes wide. "The survey said there was no other life aside from insects. Gaia, what do we do now?"

"What you are already doing. It's not that whatever this is doesn't want you here, they just don't know you. Treat them as you have treated me, and you'll be fine. Let Vida know, and she can figure out how to tell everyone else. I'll be here for another day. Have her talk with me if she wants to."

It was now dusk, the last rays of light fading from the sky. Dare turned his back on the remaining light so he could see Chance.

"As for goodbyes, you're correct. You will be with me, and I will keep that part of

you safe within.” He gave the other Mindset a loving smile. ”It has been a privilege to teach and mentor you, and I have absolute confidence in your abilities. This is a beautiful planet, and I would not be averse to returning at some point, depending on Jason’s plans. I wish you all the best, Chance, and will think of you often.”

Chance bowed his head, his face shadowed. ”Thank you, Dare, for all you’ve done for me, and for this colony. I hope you return as you will always be welcome here. I will never forget what you’ve given me, and only hope I can give to those under my care the same understanding you have given me.”

The Mindset’s lips rose in a gentle smile, opening his arms. Chance hugged him tightly, sighing as he let go. ”We’d better get inside. The night bugs are massing.” He tugged the older empath into the dome, returned his smile, and together, they walked away.

Dare found a crewmember to light his way over to the shuttle. He needed to call Jason and remind himself of his future. His job here was, at last, done.

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Jason told Dare during their nightly call that the captain had okayed his retrieval of the empath in Stravetta's personal shuttle. Arends only caveat was that Dare would have to wear a breather and change into a clean flight suit once he was on board. It was doubtful that he carried any alien diseases, but, as the captain pointed out, he hadn't risen in rank by being lax in following regulations.

Dare agreed, adding that he was leaving the clothes he brought down with him to avoid additional contamination. There was a lull in the conversation, then the empath sighed.

"I'm going to miss them, J. Maybe we can return someday. It's a beautiful planet. I'd like you to see it again." He paused a moment. "Before I forget to tell you, there's no sign of Derek. I'm sure they'll keep looking, but I'm pretty sure he's not here. Hard to hide among people who all know each other."

Jason gave him a searching look, then nodded. "I had to check, but I'm not surprised he's not there. As for New Eire, maybe we will. We won't be going back to Earth to retire, so when we're done roaming the galaxy, that could be the place we end up. I know saying goodbye was difficult for you. Goodbyes always are."

"This is the first time I've cared enough about anyone to say goodbye. I didn't know how much that would hurt. At least I have friends there and know I can return if I want to—with you, of course."

Jason gave him a wry smile. "Oh, I'm sure they'd love to have me there. Too bad if they don't because we're a package deal now."

The Mindset rolled his eyes. "Don't worry. I'll protect you from the mean Eireans that don't actually exist. They'll like you just fine, as long as you don't threaten anyone."

"Am I the first to tell you, you're no fun?"

"No, but let's wait until I see you again to discuss this, so we can find out just how much fun I can be."

It took Dare's eyes over an hour to adjust to the lower light level when he returned to the Gambit. The sunlight on New Eire was wonderful. He gave a little sigh, already missing it. Decon was miserable, and twice as long as before, but Jason was waiting for him and that made up for any discomfort.

The empath had barely donned a clean flight suit before Jason was whisking him up to their suite, Lewis grinning as he followed them. Stravetta asked his bodyguard to face the lift doors, then latched onto Dare's mouth like he was starving, pulling a mmpff out of the younger man, before he joined in enthusiastically. Lewis's shoulders shook with repressed laughter until they reached the suite.

Escorting his boss and Dare into their home, Lewis held on to his professional demeanor, thanking Stravetta for giving him the night off with what could be called a mild smirk, or maybe a smile. Jason narrowed his eyes, but waved him off without comment.

The older man let go of his empath long enough to see that he'd lost a little weight and was a bit sunburned.

"You need to eat, and do you want to get something from the infirmary for that sunburn? Looks painful."

Dare moved back into his arms. "Food would be welcome, but most of my sunburn is the damn decon. I thought it was going to cook me medium well. I'm a little sensitive, but not too bad. Want to eat, then have some fun?"

Jason laughed. "Yes, to both. I've missed you every way I could, mind and body. Just in case my behavior in the lift wasn't clear."

"Oh, it was very clear. We made Lewis happy, too."

Jason shook his head. "He's a great bodyguard, but he's not the most subtle person I know. He's been trying to cover for Derek, which isn't working since Lew can't work twenty-four/seven. The whole bodyguard thing is because of my family's status, not because I think somebody is going to assassinate me. I'm putting him on a strict day shift after we metaphorically wrestle about it. He calls me "boss," but sometimes I wonder."

"No offense, but I think you've lost that battle with all your employees because you care about them. Is the captain searching for Derek? It's not like he had many places to go."

"He's instituted a search, although not with much enthusiasm. If he's on the ship, they'll find him. If they don't, then we've done our best."

Dare looked down, then shook his head. "If he's not found, then he's what? Dead?"

Jason stared at him for a moment before taking his hand. "Probably. Since neither I, Lewis, nor you killed him, I'm not concerned. He wasn't a good person and tried to give you up to my family to use. Pardon me for not giving a damn about him. Good riddance."

The empath sighed. "You're right, but he was a person, crappy though he was. Or

maybe is.” He smiled over at the older man. ”Let’s eat and talk about what’s next for us. We’ve done what we can for Derek, and I don’t want to waste my time on him anymore.”

”Smart choice. I’ll ask Lola to fix us something, and then we’ll start planning our next steps. After that, your body is mine.”

”As long as I get equal rights to yours, I’m good.”

Planning fell by the wayside once they finished up a quick meal. Dare gave Stravetta a smile, and before he could do anything, Jason was towing him out of his chair and into the bedroom.

”We’ll have more than enough time to discuss our future on our way back to Earth space. Right now, I just want you, Dare. I want to touch, kiss, and suck you off until you can’t speak. Any objections?”

The empath gazed up at him, his eyes twinkling. ”Absolutely none, as long as I can do the same with you. It’s been a long five weeks without you.”

Jason grinned as he pulled his lover into their bedroom. ”Good plan. I’ve missed you, too. Now get your clothes off. If I do it, there won’t be anything left.”

They slept little that night, caught in celebrating Dare’s return. In the early morning hours, Jason held his empath, marveling at the circumstances that had brought them to this place. As Dare slumbered on, the older man felt his emotions swell with happiness as a smile broke free, glowing into the dimness of the room. This was love, contentment, and home. He needed nothing, and no one else.

They spent the next two weeks sharing their thoughts and bodies whenever they wished. Dare luxuriated in sleeping late, more tired from his sojourn on New Eire

than he realized. Jason was always close by, reading, or watching his lover sleep. Dare had no appointments during this time, as most of his clients were still on the planet. The empath enjoyed his first "vacation" a great deal, allowing tension and worry to leach away under his lover's care. They exercised together, insisting that Lewis join them. They ate in the regular mess to give Lola and Henry some time off. The crew's wariness of Mr. Stravetta waned as he interacted with them without artifice. It didn't hurt that his affection for Dare was obvious and strongly felt.

Riis often joined them for dinner, as did Mike. It didn't take long for them to be charmed by Jason, who tried not to be too sarcastic. He asked the right questions and showed interest in what they did, and that dispelled their concerns about him regarding Dare. Riis went so far as to give the empath his "blessing" while Mike diverted Jason, winning a laugh from the Mindset.

His vacation was over too soon, as they always were. Dare resumed his usual schedule the day after the transport shuttle docked, sending a final message to Chance before the ship left the system, saying only that he hoped to see him again, and sending best wishes to everyone. The empath sat quietly after sending the message, feeling the ache of goodbye fill him. He accepted it was the cost of caring, and worth the pain.

The Gambit headed back towards Earth, her speed increasing as she left the New Eire system. Things settled into a routine, made lighter by the empath's love for Jason, and more interaction with the crew.

If Dare occasionally wandered down to where the colony had been, walking the bare deck, no one knew, or if they did, said nothing.

No trace was found of Derek, and he was soon forgotten by most of the crew.

Jason never forgot what he had done. Although relieved he was gone, he hoped his

ending had been as ignoble and unpleasant as the man himself.

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The first year back to Earth was quiet. Dare became more aware of the crew outside of his clients and participated in their holidays and celebrations. All faiths were represented within the crew, so it seemed that every week there was some celebration or service to mark the day. Birthdays, anniversaries of service on Gambit, or otherwise, were acclaimed in smaller ways, but not forgotten. Besides poker night, there were "pub" quizzes once a week, with silly or useful prizes awarded.

Having realized that he could not maintain the same level of confidentiality on the ship, as everyone knew what everyone else was doing, Dare did not feel uncomfortable joining in. Jason, who had always held himself aloof, was finally cajoled into a quiz night with Dare. He did well, but didn't win, later confessing he didn't want to take a prize from someone who might need it. Dare was touched by his thoughtfulness, knowing his usual desire to win every contest. Dare, who was not competitive, played only because he enjoyed it, but now wondered about winning when he had no need. That was a problem to be faced, if it ever occurred.

Jason and Dare's relationship strengthened, and their connection only grew. Jason's symptoms abated, although he had the occasional nightmare. They discussed his family history until Dare was very glad he would never meet them. Jason was grimly determined to cut all ties with them, although he encouraged the empath to contact his parents.

"J, I don't want to talk to them anymore than you want to see your father. They are afraid of me, and would no doubt tell the Office of Gifted Services exactly where I am. Your family coerced you while mine abandoned me. Neither of us won the parent lottery."

The older man ran a hand over his face. "You got that right. I'll quit bugging you about them since they don't deserve you any more than my parents deserve me. You're my family now, and I'm yours."

The empath nodded solemnly. "You are and I am. We are a small, but mighty, family, and unstoppable."

"Gods, I love you so much."

"Good thing, since this family is forever. I love you even more."

Six months out from Earth, Jason met with the captain. He wanted to make sure they were on the same page as far as his upcoming discussion with his father. He'd belatedly realized that the crew would have to be on board with this as well. Dare had clients to see, but already knew of his plan and had agreed to it. The older man made the appointment with Riis for the following day, then reread his notes again. There could be no loopholes, nothing that his father could slither through, if he was going to get everything he needed to be independent from the Stravettas.

Meeting Captain Arends first thing in the morning was not the way either of them preferred to start their day. Jason, raised to have impeccable manners, fell back on those as the captain rose from his desk to welcome him.

"Mr. Stravetta, what can I do for you? If this is concerning Derek, I'm afraid he is still missing."

"Good morning, Captain. Thank you again for having the crew look for my erstwhile bodyguard. I've concluded that Derek, wherever he may be, is not coming back. I will inform my father that he has gone missing when I speak with him."

The captain indicated he should sit, then resumed his own chair. "My thanks for

taking on that unhappy duty. I was not looking forward to telling Mr. Stravetta, Senior, that we had somehow misplaced one of his employees. I take it then Derek is not why you asked for this appointment?"

Jason smiled faintly as he shook his head. "No, it is not. I will be contacting my father soon, and wished to confirm that you are still willing to work directly with me without the safety net of the Stravetta corporation. My discussion with him will be, of course, confidential. It will be my last conversation with him, as I expect to be released from any family constraints and given complete autonomy over this ship. I understand the crew will need to be apprised of this and given the choice of staying or leaving. When you have that conversation with them, please let them know wages will rise twenty percent initially, with bonuses at the end of each successful run."

Captain Arends gazed at the other man, nodding agreeably. "That is quite generous. If any wish to leave, will you afford them safe passage back to Earth?"

"I will have them delivered in my personal shuttle, with separation pay." Stravetta met the captain's eyes. "I hope that you and the crew will wish to buy into the Gambit's success with personal shares offered by myself. The monies from those sales will set up a retirement fund for the crew, and indeed, yourself, captain. It would be possible for the crew or yourself to withdraw money from that account if needed, prior to retirement."

Stravetta leaned forward. "We have not spoken of how breaking away from the Stravetta corporation would look financially. To put it succinctly, captain, I am a very wealthy man in my own right. I am also a good businessman. I plan on using the Gambit for more colony runs, as that has proven profitable. While we do that, we will make contacts at the different worlds we pass and set up trading contracts. I was thinking we would try for closer planets than New Eire, so to minimize ship time and allow for the odd stopover for trade. I know this will take time to set up, but I will have no difficulty keeping this ship running as it is in the interim."

Jason paused, eyes never leaving the captain. "Does this sound plausible to you? I can make my financial statements available to you to confirm what I have shared. You already know I have no desire to command this vessel and will rely on you to do so."

Arends leaned back, his expression thoughtful. "I have a few questions before I decide. Why isn't Dare with you?"

Jason leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "He had clients scheduled and is already aware of this plan and agrees with it. As for your second, yet unspoken question—no, I didn't have Derek killed, and did not kill him myself. I don't miss him, but I did not harm him. As I've said before, I'm not a killer unless I'm a soldier. Does that reassure you?"

Arends slid his chair in tight to his desk, folding his hands on top. "I believe you, Mr. Stravetta, but I had to know. Yes, I think this is a workable plan and I'm willing to present it to the crew. I will have Mr. Sorenson set up mandatory meetings in between work shifts, and give you their answer in, say, three days' time?"

"That will be perfect. I won't be contacting my father until we are closer to Earth. Do you wish to view my financials?"

The captain shook his head. "No need. You wouldn't have offered if they weren't all you said."

Jason gave him a genuine smile. "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

The captain offered him his own grudging smile. "We'd better hope that happens, Mr. Stravetta, or it won't be pretty."

They stared at each other for a moment, before Jason rose, giving the captain a nod.

”Thank you for your time, Captain.”

Arends stood up slowly. ”At least, it was worth it, Mr. Stravetta. Make an appointment to see me in three days, and we’ll make this official.”

Jason gave him a quick nod, turned, and left, giving Riis a smile as he made another appointment, then left the outer office. Walking down the corridor, Jason mused to himself.

He was committed and there was no turning back.

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Jason was already up when Dare woke. It was barely oh six hundred as the empath blinked at the empty side of the bed, wondering why his lover was up so early. Shrugging, Dare used the bathroom, dressed, and went out into the main living area.

Jason was hunched over his comp, reading, then typing. Obviously not hearing the younger man come in, he jumped when the Mindset touched his shoulder as he sat next to him.

”Woah, J. It’s pretty early to be so wound up. Is everything okay?”

Stravetta shook himself, then leaned in for a kiss. ”Sorry. I was concentrating so hard I didn’t notice you. I’ve got a lot to do before I speak with my father, but at least I heard from the captain. The crew is thankfully ”on board” with this ship going private and off the Stravetta brand. None of them want to leave the ship, which is also a plus. That’s an enormous weight off my mind, not that I couldn’t have replaced some crew, but that I actually like all of them and didn’t want to disrupt their lives.”

Dare leaned into his shoulder. ”I know you’re a brilliant businessman, but how did that happen when you’re so nice to the people who work for you? I’m happy everyone’s staying, don’t get me wrong, but I’ve been wondering about that for a while.”

Jason frowned a little. ”Do you think that doing business means I have to be a bastard? Acting like an asshole only attracts other assholes. Being thoughtful and nice attracts allies and those who actually want to work with you. You may have noticed that I’m not a bastard or an asshole—except on rare occasions. I don’t like being that way and refuse to do business in that manner. I thought you knew that.”

The empath ducked his head. "I do know that, but I guess my experiences with businessmen have been pretty crappy—even when they were clients. I think that made me question how being good equates to being successful. I get it now, so thanks for explaining."

Stravetta shook his head slowly. "Once again, we are washed up on the shore of our different backgrounds. I shouldn't have assumed you'd know or understand what I do, or how I do it."

Dare gave him a gentle poke in the side. "Stop. It's way too early for apologies, and it won't be the last time one of us doesn't understand something. You explained, I get it, and we're good."

"Okay then, crisis averted. Want to go have some breakfast in the mess? I'd like to mingle with my new employees."

"By all means, Mr. Stravetta, let's go review the troops."

"Snark, all I get is snark."

The Mindset grinned, took Jason's hand, and led the way to the mess.

At Jason's request, Captain Arends slowed the Gambit to a position just outside of Pluto. He knew Stravetta did not want to get too close to Earth for a variety of excellent reasons, and he concurred. Notifying his soon-to-be employer they were in position, Jason thanked him and signed off.

The businessman took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was currently mid-afternoon on Earth. His father would be in his office per his public schedule. He let his anxiety wash through him, leaving only his resolve.

Accessing his holographic display, he tuned it so his image was crisp and absolutely clear. Inputting his father's communication code, he stood up, keeping his body as relaxed as possible. Showtime.

His father, Edward, answered after only a few chimes since this number went directly to him, bypassing his staff. Jason's hologram formed, standing with deceptive ease.

"Father."

"Jason? I thought I'd be hearing from you soon. Are you in orbit?" He made an irritable gesture. "No matter. Get down here with Derek and that Mindset. I have work here for them both, and it can't wait."

Jason shook his head, a slow, sharp smile forming on his lips. "Father, you must be thinking that you can still tell me what to do. You cannot. If you wish to continue the Stravetta family business, then I urge you to listen to me now without interruption. If you choose not to comply, I will close this call and complete what I have set in motion."

Edward narrowed his eyes, frowning. "Are you threatening me?" He gave a mean chuckle. "Just who do you think you are?"

Jason met his steely glance. "I think I am the one who knows every illegal business deal, every suspicious death, and where every body is buried in the Stravetta Corporation. I have compiled a dossier and sent it to all the news outlets, my attorney, and various other trusted individuals to be accessed upon any injury to myself, the Mindset, or our deaths under suspicious circumstances. In order to prevent the destruction of the Stravetta family fortune, you will sign over this ship, Gambit, to me, leave my holdings and investments untouched, and forget you ever heard of the Mindset Dare Munro."

Jason's voice hardened. "I will not be returning to Earth. The Mindset is in a safe location, and Derek has gone missing and is presumed dead. I did not kill him, or have him killed because, Father, I am not you. You placed him with me to spy on and undermine me. He tried, but again, failed."

His father huffed, rolling his eyes. "You think you can leave this family? We have cared for you, given you everything you have. This is how you repay that kindness? With betrayal?"

The younger Stravetta clenched his jaw, then made himself relax. "You have used me my entire life, culminating in sending me to war with empty promises. When I returned, disfigured, and in pain, you ostracized me, finally sending me out on the Gambit for four years. Don't pretend to care about me or have any feelings regarding my well-being. I am nothing to you other than a pawn in your despicable games." He narrowed his eyes. "Don't talk to me about betrayal. This is justice, Father. You will give me what I ask, or you will fall. I will still have the ship, and my fortune, so whatever you decide to do doesn't matter to me. I'm giving you this choice because I am the better man. Take it or leave it. Decide quickly."

Edward's expression was murderous. "Your mother should have aborted you. If you do this, I will disown you, and blackball your name. You will be nothing, which is what you have always been, an ineffectual, puking milksop without backbone or spirit."

Jason laughed softly. "You prove my case, Father, by being honest with me about what you feel. If you think to hurt me, think again. I feel nothing for you but contempt. You have never been a father to me, and I am happy to leave you and this poisonous family behind. What is your decision?"

His father was silent, face red, his expression a rictus of hate. He typed furiously on his comp for a moment, hitting the "send" hard enough to crack the key.

Jason checked the pad he was holding, seeing the title to the Gambit come up. He looked up into his father's fulminating glower.

"Take that goddamned ship and leave this system. You are not welcome here and I declare you disowned by the Stravetta family. I know you have protected your assets, and your little fuck buddy, the Mindset. Take him and be damned, as he will probably kill you. If you release the information you have, I will not rest until you're dead, and your Mindset along with you. Get out of my sight."

The younger Stravetta gave his father one last bitter smile. "I'd say it's been a pleasure, but it never has been. Rest well, Father, knowing I hold your downfall in my hands. Fortunately for you, I have no desire to have anything more to do with you unless you force me to. However, your influence does not encompass Earth. The Gambit will stop there when needed, and you will leave her strictly alone. Remember my terms, even as I forget you."

Jason disconnected the hologram transmission, walked over to his desk, and sat down carefully. He was shaking, but at least part of that was elation. It was over. He'd done it. They were safe and free. He sat quietly for a moment, thinking of his family, the price he'd paid, then let it go. Dare was his family now, as were those on his ship. A chosen family, connected by love.

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Mike Tate stretched, feeling the stronger gravity of Earth. Maybe he was getting too old to come down here to make sure the new colonists made it to the ship, but hell, he always enjoyed meeting and helping new people. He glanced over at his "assistant", Riis Sorenson, a not very enthused partner on this trip to Earth. Riis caught his eye and scowled.

"Stop looking at me like I'm going to burst into flames. I'm doing just fine despite the gravity and all these germy people." Mike held up his hands in a token of surrender. Riis' frown deepened.

"You dragged me down here after volunteering me to the captain, so deal with my bad mood. You check the colonists in, and I'll tag their luggage. Let's do this. I want to get back to the ship before I catch some disgusting disease from this planet."

Mike looked at him, worried. "I thought you wanted to help me down here. That's why I asked the captain. I tell you what—why don't you go back to the shuttle? I can manage here. I don't want you to feel bad about helping me."

Riis heaved a huge sigh, before managing a faint smile. "I agreed to help when the captain asked, so I'm going to. I'm just not fond of Earth, but then who is except you? We'll be done quicker if I help, so get to it, Navigator."

Mike smiled; his good mood restored by Riis's sort of gracious reply. He turned to the crowd forming at his embarkation station.

This bunch was going to an established colony to homestead, so there weren't as many as the last run had held, only about fifty people, all of them adults. No cryo for

them since the trip was only six months. He watched as they cued up to his desk, some looking fearful, but most expressed a level of excitement.

The first to the desk was a young man with a tentative smile. He nodded. "Is this the line for the Gambit? I'm Tyler Lang."

Mike smiled warmly. "Yes, it is, Mr. Lang. I've marked you as checked in. Please give your bags to my friend, Riis. We'll make sure it gets to the ship. Do you have questions or concerns I can help you with?"

Tyler ducked his head before speaking. "Does the Gambit have a Mindset on board? Some of us were concerned."

Mike grinned, his eyes twinkling. "Mr. Lang, we have one of the best Mindset's I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. I know he's willing to work with any colonist who requests him."

Tyler returned the grin. "That's great. It will make this voyage easier for all of us."

"Our Mindset is dedicated to helping whoever needs him. Very professional, very talented. He's a nice man, Mr. Lang. One of the best."

Tyler nodded, moving aside to let another colonist check in, which Mike dutifully did, thinking about Dare.

Our Mindset is the most talented One these people will ever meet. And he's family.

The End