

The hallway's light wasn't as harsh as it was among the rest of the station, and while Jeremy didn't know why, he appreciated it. There was something... lively, about the not quite white tint to it that was comforting.

He wasn't sure why the hallway was deserted, but he appreciated the quiet, away from the living quarter's constant hubbub as he headed...

Ahead, he knew his destination was ahead, but try as he might, he couldn't remember who—what?—he was heading toward. The box in his hand provided no clue where he was going, even if it pulsed with a faint double beat.

He looked over his shoulder, and lost in the distance of the featureless hall, he could just make out the dot, which had to be the door he'd entered through. He hadn't realized he'd walked so far, but he didn't know how far still he had to go.

He stepped among the trees, and couldn't shake the feeling he'd have to cross the stars before reaching his destination. Their banners waved at him on the breeze, encouraged him forward.

His steps slowed at a memory that couldn't be. He'd faced danger ahead, fear. There had been safety where he'd come from.

Except he'd never been here before. Had never seen the banner with the arrow, the one with the mess of lines, or the flower, or the [need symbol for justice/protection]. He didn't know about the clearing he still couldn't see, or the form hinted at by the moving banners.

He stopped as more of *him* became visible, standing, looking in Jeremy's direction. Waiting for him. Gold and tan, shimmering under a sun that wasn't quite the right color. The white of sharpness, which his memory insisted had red to it; but how could it know?

He had a sense that what was in the box belonged to *him*, that he was meant to give it over to him—only that wasn't right. The box was his; part of him. He couldn't give that over, could he?

He looked over his shoulder, memory insisting he should go back, that comfort waiting for him, the safety of knowing how everything was. Ahead only held uncertainty for him, danger.

Jeremy didn't go back, but he couldn't get himself to move forward, either.

That was fine. He could stand where he was. Someone had told him that was okay. That he belonged here. His mother, maybe?

Regardless. He could stay here, admiring the dangerous being waiting in the clearing. Waiting for...

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Jeremy downed his coffee as he stepped over the pair of boots that needed to be replaced and grabbed his tool bag. He then grabbed the boots and set them on the seat closest to the table. Once he got home after work, he'd take them to the cobbler.

For real, this time. If he waited too long, he'd run through his other pair and he'd have to settle for printing a replacement. He didn't care what anyone said. Handmade footwear was better than anything ever printed.

He chuckled, dropping the empty cup in the recycler. Was that why the Kelsirian Engineer didn't use standardized circuits? He felt hand made was better? He grabbed the black cube off the bedside table and dropped it in his toolbag. He'd drop it off at Querik on

his way back.

He stepped out of his quarters and turned to head for his lab and Omar waved at him.

“I need to pick up prints at my lab,” Jeremy said when he kept walking by his friend.

“How are you doing?” Omar asked, falling into step with him.

“I’m fine, why?”

“I just wanted to make sure. You know you can tell me if you didn’t sleep well, right?”

Jeremy laughed. “You’re the one I tell pretty much all my problems to, Omar. Bad dreams, when I have them, don’t exactly make the ‘it’s a problem’ cut.”

“So you had some?”

“Not last night. I don’t remember what I dreamed about, but I woke up completely refreshed, for once.”

“So you’ve been having them?”

Jeremy glanced at his friend, and Omar’s expression was oddly expectant.

“Well, yeah, the stress of working on the ship hasn’t made for good nights of sleep.” The idea of watching the technicians being playful as they worked popped into his head, and by the time he had the box ready to keep the discomfort from upsetting his stomach, he realized he felt nothing about it. Or the idea they might both be guys, or girls, or that they might be more than just friendly.

He wasn’t like that.

But what did it matter if they were? It was their lives.

“Jeremy?”

“Sorry, what?”

“You trailed off saying you weren’t sleeping well because of the cats.”

“Working on the ship,” he corrected. “Of the commander pushing me to get the repairs done faster than I’m able to.” Why wasn’t he freaking out at the idea of Kelsirians being like that? The previous evening, he’d barely been able to shove the stress into the box fast enough to think when that popped into his head.

He placed a hand on his toolbag.

He’d know if it had worked, Querik had told him. He’d know if whatever was used to affect how he thought had been blocked.

“But you slept fine last night?”

Jeremy studied Omar. Why was he so insistent about it? “Yeah, I did.”

“That’s good.”

Was that a lack of enthusiasm in the reply? He had to be imagining it. But he still had to move on with his day. “I’m sorry, but I really need to hurry. Me and Thuruk are hoping to install an entire set of boards in a second panel, run all the tests and not have it blow up when we power it on. I’ll see you tonight for a drink after work.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll see you then.” This time, his friend sounded distracted.

He almost paused to check if Omar was okay, but he couldn’t delay if he wanted to be home before dinner time.

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Jeremy looked around engineering as the calibration on the newly installed circuits ran. He’d like to pay attention to it, but it was all in Kelsirian, so Thuruk would let him

know the results.

It meant he had time to watch the technicians interact and study how he felt. It hadn't changed in the hours of installing boards. The Kelsirian running a hand on the other's shoulder as he, or she, walked behind them on the way to another control station didn't make him feel strange. Didn't make him feel anything. Even thinking about when two had nuzzled as they'd left didn't make him feel anything.

They were a different species. It made sense they had different customs. Different ways of thinking about things. That, for them, it was normal for people of the same gender to be so affectionate toward another.

He wasn't like that. Humans weren't like that. But they weren't human, so they could be however they were.

It didn't bother him.

And that bothered him the most.

Waking up after his nap in the office had left him able to watch the technicians interact without freaking out, but he'd had this need to remind himself that he wasn't like that. He'd still thought about what they might be doing as them being sick.

Now, them doing whatever they wanted didn't make him react at all.

"I can tell him to come here," Thuruk said, and Jeremy looked away from the archway to the Kelsirian, who was looking at his tablet, but smiling.

"No. I don't want him here." Golden eyes. The warmth of the sun on his body. "All he's going to do is stress me out, and I don't want to ruin this stress-free day I'm having." How long had he been staring at the archway, hoping for...? Gold eyes, a toothy smile, warmth.

"If you say so." [need a Kelsirian version of that expression]

"I do." He took the cube from the tool bag and studied it so he wouldn't hope for those eyes. Then Thuruk was glancing at it between checking the readings on his tablet. "Do you know what it is?"

"It looks like—" he stopped and focused on his tablet. "Like our technology."

"Do you know what it does?"

"Not without scanning it." He reached for it, but Jeremy moved it away.

"It's okay. Querik asked that I trust him and not scan it." Thuruk's ears did that twitch Jeremy was confident meant discomfort. "What's wrong?"

"It's disconcerting," the technician said after looking at his tablet for a few seconds, "how familiar you are with the Ambassador." The capitalization was audible.

"He's helping me. It'd feel weird still be calling him ambassador, especially after he insisted I call him by his name."

"You could use his full name."

"Which is?"

Thuruk did a search, then said something. Even expecting it, Jeremy almost didn't understand the start of Querik's name, the way Kelsirian voice box added sounds. It made him realized Querik had purposefully changed its pronunciation when he'd given it.

"I'd damage my voice box trying that. What about yours? What is your full name? I guess you expect me to use that."

"No."

Jeremy was surprised by the vehemence in the tone.

“You are an Earther,” he continued, his ears twitching in discomfort. “I wouldn’t force you to use my full name.”

Jeremy smirked. “If you say so.” He tapped the side of the tablet. “Is the calibration finally done?”

“There is a discrepancy in the forth-third circuit that isn’t resolving.”

Jeremy put the cube in his bag as he crouched next to the removed panel. “That’s the third one in the fourth section of this panel, right?” he send the bag sliding into the open side and followed it in a crouch, again marveling at how much maneuvering room there was inside a Kelsirian reactor.

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Jeremy’s steps slowed, and he looked up from the cube. Four intersections further, the hallway ended at the door leading out of this part of the station, which meant... He stopped when he reached the next intersection and looked to his right. Down there were Querik’s quarters.

He’d intended on returning the cube after he’d eaten, mainly because before his conversation with Omar, he’d felt like he hadn’t needed it. He’d figured it had nothing to do with how well he slept.

But, while he didn’t know if it had anything to do with that, he couldn’t deny it had helped. And his questions couldn’t wait.

The door opened before Jeremy announced himself. This time, the Kelsirian was partially into his ambassador’s vest.

“I can come back later.”

“I am removing it. I have just ended a long discussion with a group of my human counterparts. I was heading for a long soak. But assisting you will a be pleasant diversion,” he said before Jeremy could protest again. “Sit, I will return wearing something more comfortable.”

“I thought Kelsirians made sure to always be comfortable,” Jeremy told the back as it vanished into the bedroom.

“Unfortunately, some comforts are not as much as others. As you may have noticed with the technicians, we prefer clothing to be light.”

“And not a lot of it,” he added.

“Yes, we have fur for protection, which becomes uncomfortable when the weight of heavy cloth is on it for too long.”

“Why wear them if that’s the case?”

Querik returned wearing only pants in a light fabric and a large belt holding them in place. “Because as the one representing my species before others, I must show that what would bother most is insignificant to us.”

“Posturing?”

The Kelsirian snorted, dropping into the bowl of his chair and almost rolling in to a seated position in its center. Jeremy looked behind him as what waited if he let himself fall back from the edge he sat on. He expected he’d end up tangled if he tried.

When he looked up, Querik’s expression was expectant.

He presented the cube. “It worked.”

“You have felt the effects.”

Jeremy chuckled. “Oh yeah. Now, what did it do?”