

“Well, look who’s joining us of his own freewill,” Janice called as Jeremy headed to the table his friends sat, tray in hand.

“Ah, ah,” he replied dryly, sitting next to her.

“She’s right,” William said. “These last days, it felt like if you weren’t on that ship, you were locked in your room. I hear even Omar had trouble prying you out of there.”

“Sorry about that. The days had been rough, and I needed time on my own after them.”

“And today wasn’t?” Lucy asked.

“Not as much. I’ve been trying a new technique to manage my stress, and for a first day, it worked better than I expected.”

“Does it have anything to do with who visited you last night?” Omar asked, not looking up from his plate.

“Wait,” Alice exclaimed. “Did our very own, I’m perfectly happy being alone, get a nighttime visitor?” Her grin said what she thought that had implied.

“It was a cat,” Omar said, and Alice’s expression turned disgusted for a second.

“It was the Kelsirian ambassador,” Jeremy said. “He was on the ship that afternoon and saw me take my pills. He was curious why. And yes, Omar. He is who taught me. It’s a Federation technique even they use. And I figured there was no harm in trying something else, because there are times when the pills don’t seem to be enough.”

“You didn’t say anything. I can print you a stronger doze.”

“If this doesn’t work, I’ll let you know.”

“But you said it did work,” Marcel said.

“It’s the first day. And it takes a lot of concentration. I figure it’ll get easier as I practice it, but if it doesn’t, then I keep my pills with me.”

“You met their ambassador,” Lucy said with awe. “Is he as fat as Will said?”

“I said he looked like he was fat,” he corrected before Jeremy could reply.

“He wore his vest, but yes, the way it looked on him, I think there’s...substantial mass to him.”

That made them, except for Omar, chuckle. Jeremy wonderer what was up with his friend. He was usually the first to join in anything that gave them a laugh. Especially when it involved Kelsirians.

Jeremy ate, joining in the usual conversation. If he felt like talking about it, Omar would.

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Was the corridor darker?

Jeremy looked behind him, at the unbroken hall vanishing in the distance, and tried to tell if something had happened to the lights. Maybe it was his imagination. He faced forward and frowned at the hallway, also stretching as far as he could see.

That wasn’t right. There should be something there. Something important. A place he needed to get to.

Wasn’t there? He could swear he’d entered the corridor intent on...something.

He looked at the box in his hands and frowned. Had it always been a box? Why would he carry a box to.... He couldn’t remember where.

He took a step forward and froze. He couldn’t go in that direction. He had to, he

thought, but he couldn't. There was...something ahead of him that wanted...that he wanted...no, it was terrifying. He didn't know how he knew, but he was certain.

The corner of the box poked in his chest, and his worry eased at knowing he had it. It...protected him, somehow. With it, he'd be safe crossing whatever stood between him and his destination.

He stepped forward, and the floor shook. No, the station.

Had he done that? Was he putting everyone in danger by going ahead? He held the box against him tighter, tried to find comfort in its safety, and took another step forward.

The walls cracked, light poured through them and—

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Jeremy sat with a scream, his stomach tied into knots at the knowledge he'd been about to die. His breath wouldn't come. He couldn't calm down. He reached for his pills on the bedside table and his hands knocked the partially unlocked puzzle box off and it fell on the pair of pants he'd left on the floor when he'd undressed.

He stared at it, desperate to latch on to it, for it to make what he felt go away. Which was stupid. It was nothing more than a box his mother had sent him. It wasn't what could help him. For that, he needed...

He looked at the bottle on the bedside table.

The box he held in his mind.

He had trouble seeing it. Probably because he was already panicking. The pills called to him, an easy way to fix this.

But they'd still be there if he couldn't manage it.

He focus on it instead of how shallow his breathing was. He could already envision what he felt. Not something oozing this time, but something filled with sharp angles lodging itself into him, making every breath pain.

When he saw it, getting it open proved just as difficult. He couldn't remember how to unlock it. What slats moved how. He'd never do it. The pill bottle was easy to open. Much easier than this.

He ground his teeth. And he'd open it if he couldn't pull this off. Maybe losing this battle wouldn't mean anything in the grand scheme of the quiet war, but Jeremy didn't want to lose any ground.

It felt like each movement ground against his mind, but finally the cover was off, and he shoved the spiked thing into it, slamming the cover shut behind it so it would get lost in that extra-dimensional space.

He took a slow breath and smile.

Another battle won.

He fell back on his bed, arms over his chest as if the box was cradled there, and chuckled. He'd stood his ground. He'd always stand his ground.

It's where you belong, a voice whispered in the back of his mind. A woman, he thought as he fell back asleep. A memory of his mother, maybe?

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Jeremy pulled himself out from under the control board after installing his latest attempt at a functioning circuit. "Okay, tell me this section's isolated, and that the power charge is ready."

“I’ve verified that all connections to the rest of the reactor controls have been undone. The capacitor is connected and waiting to be discharged.”

Jeremy smiled at Thuruk. It had only taken three days for him to finally understand that when Jeremy told him to ‘do something’ it wasn’t a direct order to do that, but for him to go through the motion of making sure it was what needed to be done. That first miscommunication had meant he now had a full section to rebuild, once he knew how they worked.

“Wish us luck,” he told the Kelsirian, finger over the activation button.

“Xeniila’haran be kind,” Thuruk whispered.

Jeremy pressed it. The board lit up, then went dark. He waited, looking for any sign it had failed. When there was no smoke after fifteen second, he jumped and fist pumped. “Finally!”

“Is it...fixed?” Thuruk asked, watching him with what Jeremy thought was a perplexed expression.

“Not even close, but at least now I know this circuit’s design. There’s a dozen other I have to figure out.”

“How long will that take?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I know you probably want to go home as fast as possible, but you guys have designed something truly different from anything I have built before.”

“Alix designed the reactor. I didn’t help build it.”

“You guys really talk your role seriously, don’t you?”

“Rank is important. It tells us our duties. Who we need answer too and who answers to us. Don’t Earthers respect ranks?”

“Not as seriously as you do. And it’s human.”

“Is that an Earther rank?”

Jeremy laughed, resting against the edge of the control board. “No, we refer to ourselves as humans. Not Earthers.”

Thuruk typed something on his tablet, then scrolled until he found what he was looking for; a planet appeared over it. “Isn’t this Earth?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Are you from a different planet?”

“No, I was born on that one. Salt Lake, Utah to be exact.”

“Then why are you calling yourself something different?”

Jeremy’s mouth opened, and he couldn’t come up with an answer. “I guess it’s just what we’ve always called ourselves. Have you always called yourself Kelsirians?”

“It is the planet we came from.” Thuruk hesitated. “Is Earther a term of insult?”

“No, you’re right, it’s the planet I’m from, but don’t be surprised if you get corrected by every human you come across.”

“They will understand. So the repairs will still take time?”

“Yes, but not as much as I was afraid yesterday. Since this test didn’t burn anything out, it means I’m starting to understand how your en—Engineer works. Doesn’t mean I can just print every other circuit, but working out how they’re designed will be simpler with that understanding, and so on. Don’t worry, you’ll be home soon enough. What?”

Thuruk stopped chuckling. “This is my home. My ship, my crew, my family.”

“You have no one on Kelsar?”

“Trarrakar, is the planet I was born on. No one stays, it’s harsh, and few herds. I’m not a digger. I became a technician and joined a ship. Came here nine Kelsar years ago. This became home.”

“I guess I’m like that a bit, too. I don’t really have much of a need to go back to Earth, even if all my family’s there. I’m comfortable here.”

“You love it here.”

Before Jeremy could ask what he meant by that, Thuruk’s eyes flicked to the side and his body language shifted. It always did when he saw *him*.

Jeremy took a breath and called the box to his mind, already mentally taking hold of the oozing mass. Today was the day he finally let that man know how things stood. He shut the box on his stress and turned.

He locked eyes with those golden ones and took a step forward. “Out!” he snapped, pointing to the archway. The tone stopped Growler.

“Jeremy,” Thuruk warned.

“No.” He didn’t let go of the golden gaze. “This is my engineering. I don’t care if Alix let you gallivant in here whenever you wanted, getting underfoot. But I don’t accept that. You want an update? Call Thuruk. There is absolutely no reason for you to come down here and stress me out.” He pointed again. “Get out!”

Hands up and with what Jeremy thought was an amused expression, Growler backed away until he’d left engineering.

Jeremy turned away to notice everyone staring at him. “What?”

“Only Alix talks to the captain like that,” Thuruk said in awe.

“Good, then he’s used to it. Maybe now he’s going to let us work in peace. Come on, everyone, back to work.” He did a shoeing motion that had no effect. He looked at Thuruk, who said something in Kelsirian, and the others returned to their stations.

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The hallway was darker than it should be; he was certain of that, and he clutched the box tightly as he walked. It didn’t provide the sense of safety it usually did, and that thought struck him as odd. It was his first time walking here, among the trees. But that was fine, because he would protect it from the thing stalking them, wanting to take it, to break it and unleash what it held.

He didn’t know what that was, but he had a sense that opening it wouldn’t be good.

The trees shuddered, and for a moment, he thought he’d be vented to space, but he pushed on. He wasn’t letting them win. He didn’t care if losing a battle didn’t mean losing the war. He didn’t want to lose another battle. What he was after was ahead. He wouldn’t turn back. Not this time.

So he pushed through the banners, doing his best not to think of what was only steps behind, waiting for him to falter.

Then he stopped as he made out a form through the settling banners. Tan, lean with tight muscles, hair so long it went down his chest. A muzzle filled with teeth and claws.

Everything about the being standing there screamed danger. If he continued, this creature would rip everything that made him who he was apart. He had to turn back,

something urged him, safety was waiting for him.

Except that whatever was behind him didn't feel safe. Suffocating, was the feeling he associated with it. Something clinging to him. He wanted nothing to do with that, not anymore.

The roar nearly sent him running into it, but he stood his ground. This was where he belonged. He knew that, somehow. With another roar, the creature ahead lunged at him.

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Jeremy sat, panting, fighting for breath, for his heart to slow. Claws. He remembered claws by his head. But he hadn't turned back. He had stood his ground.

He had trouble visualizing the box, but not as much as the previous night. When he grabbed the spiked thing, it oozed over his hand, tried to pull back into his mind, but with finality he visualized himself flicking it into the box and closing it.

He lay back, keeping the box in his mind.

He'd stood his ground, he thought, as he fell back asleep.