

Jeremy was surprised no one was waiting for him by his door. After Lucy's message about everyone getting together for dinner, he'd expected Omar to be waiting for him to ensure he didn't find a reason to skip out on them.

There were days, especially since he'd started working on the ship, when he thought Omar didn't trust him to keep his word. The only times he'd missed a planned get together was when something urgent came up, and Jeremy didn't plan those.

He exited the shower to a reminder from Omar about the meal. There was plenty of time left.

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The restaurant was busy, and almost loud. He found his friends at a table near the back, with a family celebrating a teen's birthday on one side, and a group who looked to be from the command deck on the other.

He was struck with how easily humans mixed, compared to Kelsirians. Would Growler just laugh with other officers while technicians goofed around at the table next to his? What he'd seen when Querik told him and the other technicians to eat said that no, he wouldn't.

The Captain's golden eyes made his stomach churn, and Querik's words floated up from his memory, disrupting his first attempt at summoning the box to put that oozing feeling in it.

He was fine. He wasn't...like that.

"A bit late," Marcel said, as Jeremy sat. "But you're here, so we can count that as a win."

"Oh, be nice," Alice said. "He probably had to change and wash after being on that ship all day."

"I'm fine. I'd have done both even if I'd been working in my lab. You guys don't need to be subjected to the smells of welding or burnt polymers." He pulled up the menu. "Were you waiting for me to order?"

"Are you okay?" Janice asked once they'd ordered. "You looked in pain for a bit there."

The golden eyes kept him from answering as he summoned the box.

"Jeremy?" Omar asked.

"I'm okay. Just the day's work hitting." The answer wouldn't fool his friend, but it kept him from insisting since it satisfied the others.

He kept from thinking about the Kelsirians by catching up with what the others had been up to. It worked until Marcel mentioned the Kelsirian ambassador had visited the food design labs. His friend's amazement at the visit was lost on Jeremy as he struggled not to let his stomach's complaints be noticed.

He was fine.

They were the ones who had a problem, not him.

They were the sick ones.

He'd shoved the worse of the discomfort in the box by the time Marcel finished speaking, and nodded in appreciation with the others.

Then the food arrived and Jeremy took in the thick slab of meat on his plate, drenched in thick sauce and a mountain of roasted vegetables on the side.

“Someone’s been missing his vegetables, it seems,” William said.

“It’s not like I had any when I had lunch on the ship.” He looked up, vegetables stabbed on his fork in the silence. “What?”

“You ate their food?” Omar asked, the disgust barely masked.

“Meat’s meat. And I wasn’t going to walk all the way here when there’s a cafeteria a few corridors over.”

“How was it?” Janice asked, sounding awed.

“Like I said, it was meat. They prepare them in different ways, but all relatively small so they can dip it in bowls of sauce. Instead of a plate like we have, they pick small ones of whatever meat they feel like eating, then whatever sauces they want with that. A lot of them had six or seven different of each on their trays. They use their claws, so I had to use my fingers.”

His mind froze, and his hand tingled at the memory of the Mechanic taking it. Those claws. How close he’d come to being ripped open.

He shook his head to clear it.

“Are you okay?” Omar asked.

“Yeah, my mind just got derailed. What was I saying?”

Alice chuckled. “Eating with your fingers.”

“Right.” He ignored the way Omar looked at him. “I don’t think they eat vegetables, or at least I didn’t see any among what was available.”

“Would you recognize Kelsirian vegetables?” William asked.

Jeremy shrugged. “Unless they look like meat, I think I would have.”

The comm technician looked at Marcel. “Could you print that?”

“Of course. Meat’s mostly texture and smell. Those don’t need to be protein based. There are a lot of vegetable meats. Most are ordered by parents, but we have a few groups who keep their animal protein to a minimum, but don’t want to appear so different.”

“Is it still animal proteins when they’re printed?” Jeremy asked.

“Ask a philosopher,” Marcel replied. “Not a designer. Unless I’ve confirmed what I’m eating hasn’t been printed.” He motioned to the food on his plate. “It’s all just fuel to me.”

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“Are you sure you’re okay?” Omar asked as Jeremy’s door came into view. “There are a few times when you looked like you could have used your pills.”

He took the bottle out of his jacket. “If I’d needed them, I’d have taken one.”

“You know you don’t have to rely on what that cat showed you. Our ways are—”

“Omar.” He rubbed his temple both in annoyance and to give himself time to deal with his stomach’s protest at Querik’s reminder. He had no idea why he was so easily triggered this evening. “I know you mean well, but shouldn’t you just be happy I have a way to deal with my stress?”

“I am, you know that. I’m just not comfortable with something we haven’t tested.”

“And you think visualization techniques are a problem? You know they’re used as part of treatment for some forms of anxiety disorders, right? Look. I’m sorry for snapping. I appreciate that you care for my health. Just trust me with it too, okay.”

Omar squeezed his arm. “Of course I trust *you* with it.”

“Anyway, this is my door. I’ll see you next time.”

“Jeremy.” Omar hesitated, and he stood in the open doorway. “You shouldn’t spend so much time on their ship. Among them.”

“You go tell that to the commander,” he replied, instead of addressing where *that* was coming from. He stepped into his quarter fully, then closed the door.

He looked at the mess and felt an irrational need to throw everything into the disposal system. That would deal with it once and for all. He summoned the box and threw that vibrating need in it.

How did Omar have a problem with something that let him deal with every powerful emotion instead of just the pain his stomach caused him?

His drafting table displayed the message that the circuit he’d set had been printed, and thinking of them made him think of the reactor, then the engineering and the technicians, playfully working.

The sense of wrongness assaulted him so fast he was in the shower room, expecting to throw up.

What was going on?

He hadn’t felt that way when he’d been watching them work. He didn’t know if they were like that—sick. He didn’t even know what genders they were. They could be a couple for all he knew. And even if they weren’t, it wasn’t his business—

He could barely manifest the box at how wrong it felt to just suspect some of *those* people were around him.

When he could breathe again, he hurried out of his quarters. Away from the oppression he felt there. Maybe it was his mess. Or the whole day, or Omar’s...he had no idea what to call the way Omar was acting. It went beyond looking after his health. Whatever the reason, he didn’t understand how he could feel so drastically different about what he’d seen on the ship. There was nothing wrong about any of it.

He swallowed the pain and summoned the box, throwing all that ooze into it. He exited the lift as it finally all fit in, and he closed the box. Only then realizing he was on the deck that took him to the unused section of the station that led to the ship.

And Querik’s quarters.

He turned to call the lift back.

Hadn’t the ambassador said something was being done to him?

He’d also said Jeremy was sick. Tried to make it sound like it was normal. Like that the sickness was normal.

He threw the ooze in the box.

But he could make it clear he wasn’t to bring that up again, ever.

He turned and headed for the door.

He didn’t think about the nebulous danger he felt was ahead of him. Or the sense there was something following him. Just things from dreams.

He still had to put his discomfort in the box to keep from running, and he wasn’t sure in which direction he’d do that.

The door to the ambassador’s quarters opened before Jeremy announced himself. Querik looked uncertain, then motioned him in. Like the last time, all he wore were loose pants.

“I don’t want to hear anything about what you think I have. You can keep your

thoughts on that to yourself, clear?"

Instead of being offended at the tone, Querik's nod was small, and his ears were folded back. That he wouldn't meet Jeremy's eyes was more telling to him, of the man realizing he'd been in there wrong.

"You're upset. What can I do to help?"

Jeremy tried to calm himself, and when that didn't work, he summoned the box and shoved all of that in there. He should probably work through that, but for now, he needed to be able to think.

"The other time, you said something about things being done to me. What did you mean?"

Querik motioned to two of the seat, large half spheres with the interior covered in cushions. The Kelsirian sat in, nimbly moving back and tucking his legs under him. Jeremy sat on the edge of it. Worried about falling in.

"Can you tell me why you are asking about it now?" The tone was professional, but the ears still partially back. Discomfort?

"I've been thinking about stuff since I was here. Doing that while working and seeing how your people act and I've reached conclusions about what I think about those things." He kept from thinking about the detail by thinking about all the uncertain variables. "And I was okay with those conclusions. Kelsirians aren't humans. I can't expect you to be like us." He focused on everything that wasn't what that implied.

"You were okay with them?"

"I met up with friends for dinner, and Kelsirians came up in conversation. And some of those thoughts came back to me, and they felt utterly wrong. Wrong in such a way, I have trouble understanding how I ever thought it was fine that you thought different things than we do about...that." He closed his eyes and focused on breathing. His stomach wasn't protesting, but he was familiar enough with it to know it would happen if he didn't think about something less stressful.

He opened his eyes once his breathing settled.

"Did you go to your quarters before joining your friends?"

"Of course. I showered and changed into not work clothing."

Querik considered him, then exited the chair with an ease Jeremy didn't understand. Claws, maybe? The way he'd folded his legs had let him push and then he'd avoided falling on his face by...

The Kelsirian returned holding a cube slightly larger than his palm. "I would like you to trust me enough to take this with you to your quarters."

"What is it?" It wasn't quite featureless. He could make out circuitry in the way the light reflected on the gray-brown surface.

"That is part of the trust I ask for. I know that you prefer understanding how things are to go, but in this case, the lack of knowledge is important, so you will trust the result."

"You don't want my expectations to skew those results."

"The results will be regardless of your expectations, but how you understand them can change. I will tell you that this will not act on you."

If it didn't act on him, that meant it acted on his environment. If he was to take it to his quarters, that was where it was to act, which was supported by the question of if he'd

stopped there. What could be in his quarter— “what?”

“You can’t keep from hunting for an answer.”

“You say that like you expected it.”

“No. But it’s appropriate.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I will explain another time. Will you trust me?”

“Whatever this does, it’s not going to harm me in any way?”

“It will not.”

For some reason, part of him didn’t want to trust Querik. Didn’t want him to trust any of them, but other than trying to apply how Kelsirians were to him, Querik had only helped him. He took the cube.

It was lighter than he’d expected, and he wondered if its inside were as empty as the reactor’s. That Kelsirian’s need for comfort carrying to something they’d never step into. He turned it over, but other than the difference in texture making the circuits on its surface, there was nothing to clue him in as to what it did.

“Do I need to turn it on?”

“Simply place it on the table by your bed.”

Always on? Turned on automatically in response to a stimulus? Or a remote. But why hide that? He ignored the part of his mind providing reasons. Plausible and utterly ridiculous.

“And?”

“Come see me again when you know the results.”

“How am I going to know what those results are?”

Querik smiled. “You will know.”