

He cursed as the slat that should slide refused to do so. Where had he gone wrong? He froze as his father's boots pass by his bedroom door, and kept going.

He didn't know why what he'd drawn had caused the uproar he'd overheard, but he didn't want to make things worse by his father finding more of his drawing. He started again, slat after slat. This was the only place he knew his father wouldn't think to look in, and if he thought about it, he wouldn't be able to unlock it and show it to that other doctor. He'd given up trying, well before Jeremy had cracked it.

The last slat moved, and the cover slid.

He hurried to pull the pages out of the sketchbook, quickly looking through all of them for any with naked Kelsirian men. He didn't get why, but those had made his father angrier. His father was coming again, so he shoved the entire sketchbook in, placed the cover back and pushed the slats.

When the steps stopped before his door, he wasn't done, but still lobbed the box in his closet, where it fell on the line of shoes only to roll partially out.

He had to put it completely out of view, or—

"Jeremy," his father said, tone severe, "we need to talk."

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He ran back in the house, cursing his inattention. He'd been the one to suggest a game of baseball, and *he* had forgotten the box of balls? He'd be the last one there, but it was better than showing up without it.

"Did you see this?" his father demanded angrily, his voice carrying all the way from the kitchen.

He stopped. He'd never heard his father this angry.

"He's just practicing anatomy," his mother replied.

"Really? And what's *that*?"

"I think they're called Kalsirans? You know I don't pay attention to what happens out there, Harry."

Kelsirians, Jeremy nearly called out, to correct his mother.

"He has no business knowing what those cats look like there! There's something wrong with him."

"Harry, calm down. He's a teenager. He's curious. That's all."

"Then where are the women? Maria, I think our son is sick."

"No, he isn't," she snapped.

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Jeremy rubbed his arm where the cuff which had taken all the reading had been. It had done nothing to him, but his skin still felt cold.

"Well?" his father asked.

The doctor hummed as he looked at the screen. "Everything looks fine. Jeremy is in good health. He gets plenty of exercise. I'm please to say that whatever has you worried isn't—"

"That's because you haven't—"

His mother stopped his father from reaching into the pocket of his jacket. "Harry." She looked at Jeremy meaningfully, and his father pulled his hand away angrily.

He knew what he'd been about to take out. Jeremy had noticed four of his drawing

had gone missing. He had no idea what about them made his father angry, but he'd been told about the appointment as soon as he'd returned home from the game.

"Jeremy, honey, do you mind going back to the waiting room?" his mother asked. "What we need to talk about with Doctor Felicity is private."

How was it private when it was about him? He wanted to ask, but she smiled at him, and he didn't want to make her unhappy by making a fuss.

He was alone there, so as soon as he closed the door, he pressed an ear to it. The insulation was good, but not perfect. The occasional word made it through when his father raised his voice.

Men

Cat

Sex

Sick

Then the conversation was too soft for him to make out anything. He rushed to a seat when the handle turned, taking out his tablet and looking at the blank screen.

"I'll contact a specialist," the doctor said. "I am certain it's nothing more than teenage hormones, but they will be able to run the proper tests to tell if he—" they seem to realize Jeremy was in the room. "So they can confirm it."

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"Mom?" he asked when the man escorted her and his father out of the room. "Mom, can we go home?" he couldn't get out of the chair.

They'd secured him to it because the tests were sensitive. If he moved, it would cause the results to be inaccurate. The man wearing a lab coat over the suit had explained in tone so sweet and understanding it had made Jeremy sick. He hadn't wanted to sit in it, but his father had ordered him. And recently, not doing what his father said led to punishments Jeremy didn't understand the reasons for.

The tests had been painless enough. A machine over his head, instructions to look ahead at the display in it. Flashes too fast for him to make out anything. Then it had been lifted, and before the man had motioned for his parents to leave the room with him, the technician was attaching another one to the back of the chair.

"Mom!" he yelled as the door closed, no longer caring about trying to appear brave. He was scared and his parents had left him alone with them and this machine. He struggled to get out of it. He pleaded with the man and woman working on the machine, but when they looked at him, the sorrow in their eyes scared him.

"You aren't really here, Jeremy." A hand took his and squeezed. A hand covered with black and brown fur. He looked at a feline face, green eyes, and when he pulled on the hand, Querik pulled him out of the chair.

"What took you so long?" Jeremy demanded, fighting to catch his breath. In the chair, his younger self still pleaded to be let out. "What is this place?"

"Not as much time passed as you believe. And it took me this long to adjust to your...recklessness."

"It was keeping me out of my own memories!"

"And did forcing your way through as you did give you answers?"

Jeremy motioned around them, not that he knew what it meant. Or how it was he'd

ever forgotten something that had scared him so much. He looked at the door. “I wish I knew what they were talking about.”

“Then listen.”

“I don’t hear anything over myself.”

“Then silence yourself. This is your memory. At this moment, you have control over it.”

“You’re doing?”

“I am helping. But you have the control. Simply—”

The panel appeared, and Jeremy studied the controls. “What?” he asked, feeling Querik’s curious gaze. He located the visual, tactile, emotional, and olfactory controls.

“Everyone exerts control differently. Although I have not seen such an...hands on approach before.”

There was the audio. He removed the other controls and enlarged the display. “You mean no one else has controls to control their memories?” He separated the audio feeds. He found the ones marked ‘mom,’ ‘dad,’ and ‘disgusting man,’ and removed everything else. Silence fell.

“Those I trained with had more...instinctive methods.”

He reset the audio to the start and raised it as high as it went. He saw the initial problem. There had been conversations in the room, so those would be deafening. He moved the audio to when it dropped to almost nothing. He tried to increase it, but it didn’t change.

“Is the maximum a result of some preconception I have of what technology like this can do? Or something my mind is imposing?”

“More a result of the limits of your hearing. You only remember what was there.”

“And I’d barely hear anything through a door and while panicking. Okay. Here goes.”

He tapped play.

“I’m afraid it isn’t good,” the man said. Jeremy had to strain to hear.

“But Doctor Felicity said everything was fine with Jeremy,” his mother pleaded.

“I’m afraid that regular doctors aren’t equipped to catch this.”

“So he *is* sick.” His father almost sounded pleased.

“I’m afraid he is.”

Jeremy thought he heard his mother sob.

“But there is good news. Your son’s sickness can be managed. We have the technology to ensure he never gives into those urges.”

“I don’t understand,” his mother said, between sobs. Then she seemed to gain control of them. “How can not acting on them keep him healthy?”

“Your son’s sickness is one of the mind, but it’s one that only aggravates him if he gives into it.”

“Like drugs, right?” his father asked.

“In a manner of speaking. With your permission, my nurses will start the procedure.”

“And if we don’t give it?” his mother asked, tone firm.

“Maria,” his father warned.

“No. I want to know what happens if I decide I want my son to remain himself.”

“Then I’m sorry to say that you will lose him,” the man said sadly. “I can’t tell you how long until the sickness takes him, but the survival rate among untreated is no more than twenty years. But keep in mind that those are years during which they are giving into those urges. You saw what he drew. Those are the things he’ll do during those years.”

The silence stretched. Then the man spoke again. “I understand your dilemma, Miss Bradshaw. Believe me, I do. You love your son. You want to believe you’ll love him no matter what. You want to believe that love is enough to keep him safe. I—” silence again. “My daughter had it. I thought like you do. I told my colleagues that I’d never put her through such a thing. I truly believed that with my love, I would be able to keep her from giving in.”

“What happened?” his father asked, sounding like he had to force the words.

“What do you think?” the man snapped. “I’m sorry,” he said after a silence. “I hate myself for being too stubborn to listen to those who knew better. It’s why I changed field. I can’t force you. I *won’t* force you. But please take me seriously when I say that without treatment, your son’s future will not be a pleasant one, regardless of its length.”

“How much of him will still be there?” his mother asked, crying.

“Nearly all of him. All that will be blocked are the parts of him that can play into the sickness. And we will install a mental safety system to warn us if the sickness is regaining a footing. He will have a specialist assigned to him who will help him navigate those difficulties.”

His mother’s cries were loud.

“Do it,” his father said, sounding as if he was about to be sick.

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Jeremy picked himself off where the impact had bounced him to and nearly screamed in terror at all the black oozing around him. He had to get away. He caught sight of the crystal wall and he ran in the opposite direction.

“You’re safe, Jeremy,” Querik said. Standing next to him.

“What the fuck happened?”

“That memory transitioned to one behind a harder barrier. Based on what we heard, I would say that the procedure they used on you is included among those behind it.”

“Fuck, I am sick.”

“Jeremy.”

“Don’t. Okay. Just don’t. I fucking wish they’d told me, instead of this... whatever this is. I could have worked with it. My dad knows I like knowing what I’m doing. How the fuck did he think leaving me in the dark like this would do me any good.”

“Because it’s a lie.”

“I am not like you! For us, wanting another guy isn’t normal. Only sick men want that.”

The Kelsirian leveled his gaze on him, expression serious. “The Federation is comprised of twelve species, Jeremy. There are at least half a dozen other species that aren’t part of it associated with them. Three of those species cycles through multiple genders in their lifetime.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“All of them have people who are attracted to the gender they are. The ratio varies

from species to species, but it is normal for all of us.”

“Not us! You’re not a xenobiologist. You can’t tell me we’re just like all of you.”

“You’re right. I can’t tell you that, because your people have been strangely reluctant to provide us with that level of information. I only found out recently when I made a query to the Federation about it.”

“Why wouldn’t we be sharing that information?”

“I don’t know.” The Kelsirian pointed to the crystal wall. “But the answer might be behind that.”

Jeremy looked at it, and he was afraid.

And that pissed him off.

He’d never been scared of questions or of their answers. Knowing was always better than not. Even if the answer wasn’t what he wanted. He could work with that. He couldn’t work with the unknown.

“Jeremy, don’t,” Querik said as he took a determined step toward the wall.

“You said the answers are behind there.”

“That they might be, but regardless, we should approach this with care. If this is something they want to protect, they might have safeguards in place.”

“I can’t get close to that thing if I think about it. It scares the shit out of me. It makes me want to get as far as I can from it.”

“I can help. The box.”

“The box isn’t going to help. The only thing I can use to get there is something I feel more than the fear. And right now, that’s anger. If you’re right, they violated me, my mind, who I am. They convinced my parents to let them do that to me. I want to find them and pound their heads into wall until they tell me why. If all the fucking galaxy is like that, why is it so fucking wrong with me being like that too. But they aren’t here. All I have to get my answers is that. And I’m getting whatever answers I can.”

“Jeremy,” Querik called as he strode toward the wall, marshaling his anger. “You don’t know the dangers.”

“Fuck them and their dangers,” he replied angrily. “Fuck them and what they want.”

He hated them. He hated what they’d done to him. He hated that they’d made him scared of answers, of knowing, of the truth. He hated—

He reached the wall, and before he could think about it, think about the risks and give into the fear, he screamed and slammed his fist into the wall.

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The feel of flesh against his felt good. The man’s hand over his chest, over his back, his neck. Their whispers in his ear. The hand moving down. Anticipation of feeling it over his—pain thought his stomach, and he cried out.

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The feel of flesh under his hand felt good, running it over the other man’s chest. Their whispers of approval, of encouragement. He moved the hand lower, anticipating the feel of the man’s—pain through his stomach like a knife being twisted, and Jeremy screamed.

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The hand against his back made him recoil and the pain his is stomach lowered. But

he fought against it. It could feel nice. He knew it. To be touched with care that way. To have another guy move in him and—he screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

He screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

He screamed.

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He ran from the touch. From the idea of being touched that way. He never wanted anyone to make him feel that ever again.

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The feel of fur against his body felt good. The powerful hands over his chest and stomach, his cheeks being pushed apart by—the pain lanced through his stomach, ripped it apart, made him scream for it to stop.

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The fur under his hand, his fingers sinking into it, felt good. He wanted this. More than he thought he could want anything. He wanted to kneel before him, take it in his mouth and—he screamed, the pain ripping beyond his stomach.

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He tried to fight through the fear and touched him. He wanted to feel the fur. Press himself against him, smell him. Smell his—pain. So much pain.

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Was there anything other than pain? Could wanting anything be worth so much pain?

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Never. He never wanted anything to do with so much pain and anything that brought it to him.

He just wanted it to stop.

He just wanted someone to make it all go away.