

He threw up bile in the toilet this time as memories assaulted him.

They'd owned a cat until his treatment. He remembered playing with it, loving it. He and Byron loved rolling its ball between them and watching it chase it. He'd never understood why Byron was so angry with him all of a sudden. The treatment had sealed any memories he had that related to Kelsirians, no matter how tenuous the link. Jeremy didn't remember playing with it, how much his brother loved the cat, too. He didn't even remember it has existed.

He'd loved the gym.

There had been excitement in catching sight of other guys as he grew up. He hadn't needed prompting for a session of ball, or of football. He'd been the first to join any team as soon as he'd started noticing the way guys made his inside tingle. He'd known it wasn't appropriate, but other than keeping it to himself, he had enjoyed those glimpses, jerked off to them.

And then, Kelsirians.

Lean muscles, fur, teeth and claws. Ferocity and tenderness. Savagery and ravaging. How many of his dreams had been filled with him, taken by one of them.

If his stomach didn't feel about to heave again, he might laugh. His father had been pissed at one picture of a naked Kelsirian. One of him in a sexual position with one of them. If he'd know how many others Jeremy had drawn. How explicit they were. Who knew what his father might have done if then.

Had he found them? Afterward? Found out how deep Jeremy's depravity ran; but hadn't been able to do anything about it, since it would reveal what they had allowed to be done to him? Someone had to have sanitized his room, because there had been no drawings left in it.

Drawing.

The joy of the pencil touching the page and discovering what it would do. They'd stolen that from him. Had they planned on it turning technical, or had Jeremy simply been fortunate that a spark of creativity had survived what they'd done?

What kind of man would he have been if it hadn't been there?

What kind of life would that have been?

"It's all right," someone said, the 'r' rolling slightly. He became aware of someone keeping him from falling into the bowl, since he had no strength left. "Drink."

He looked at the glass and almost protested, but tasted the bile and vomit on his tongue. He swished the water around and spit until the taste was more memory than real. He tried to sit back, and Querik helped him, leaning him against the wall.

"Why?" Jeremy asked, and couldn't voice all the variations of the answers he sought.

"I can't tell you why your people would do this to you, or others," the Kelsirian said, sitting on the floor opposite him. "Until you, I was not aware this was done." The motion stretched the pants over his crotch, and Jeremy found himself looking at the bulge. He looked away as his stomach protested, but instead of visualizing the box, he told it to shut up. He hadn't looked away because of anything wrong with looking at another guy's crotch, but because it wasn't polite.

"Others?" Anything not to focus on how he felt.

"I have sensed others with a similar...effect to their mind, but no one as strong as

yours. I do not know why you have been targeted.”

“The commander,” Jeremy spat. “He’s got to know about this, probably why it was done, too. He’d do whatever he needs to make sure me being among so many Kelsirians couldn’t undo it, or whatever.” He rested his head against the wall. “Fuck. What’s he going to do when he realizes I remember?” He felt Querik’s eyes on him. “What?”

“You would be safe on the ship.”

“Hide there?” Jeremy was surprised at how much he hated the idea of hiding. “And what am I going to do when the ship leaves? This is my home.” Until he found another research station to transfer to.

“I understand. But remember that you have a reason to be there. If you need a refuge, do not hesitate to go.” He stood and offered a hand to Jeremy.

His stomach protested at the idea of taking it. Of feeling another man’s skin against his. Of a Kelsirian touching him.

“You now know what was done to you,” Querik said, while Jeremy tried to puzzle out why he felt this way. “But it did not undo the mental programming they instilled. It runs surprisingly deep.”

“So I’m always going to feel like this?” He took the hand and told his stomach to fuck off.

“No. You know to fight it now. It is your mind, and you are willed. You can undo the programming. But be aware that the person doing this will not make it easy.”

“The commander,” Jeremy stated, and Querik smiled.

“I apologize. My training makes it difficult for me to assign guilt without demonstrable evidence. My work is about maintaining pleasant working conditions between people who might sometimes hate each other. Be at war. If I allow my feeling to influence my decisions, it could make the situations worse. You can think of it as having programmed myself not to notice assigned guilt until it has been demonstratively proven.”

“But the cube is going to keep the subliminals in my quarters from affecting me?”

“To a point. I do not know how strong they can be, and the cube will have an upper limit.”

“Then, how do I know if it’s affecting me?”

“How did you know to seek me out?”

“My thoughts were at odds with each other. Because of what happened when I showed you what was in the box, you were the only one I could think of to tell and not expect to be sent to the asylum or something.”

“Remain aware of your thoughts and emotions. Remember that you still have your mental box, even if you feel you are strong enough to deal with how you feel.” Querik motioned to the bedroom, visible through the open door. “Do you want the box, and its content, back?”

The thought of looking at those drawing tantalized and made him feel sick. He shoved both emotions in the box. “No. If the commander suspects something, he’s bound to have my quarters searched illegally. A wooden puzzle box isn’t going to stop them the way it stopped me. They see those drawings, and…” he shuddered at the idea of being put through what he now remembered suffering through.

“Then I advise you to be cautious.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going to head to my quarters and not get out until tomorrow, when it’s time for me to head to work.”

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The lights in the hallway dimmed, then brightened, and with them, the sense of... impending danger shifted, but didn’t track with the brightness. They seemed independent. He pressed forward, despite—*because*—of that danger. He couldn’t remain still. This was a time when holding his ground worked against him. Forward was where safety—*danger*—was.

The protest intensified when he stepped among the trees, calling him back. Urging him to return to all that he knew. For things to be unchanged.

Too late for that.

The banners were as still as the air, and it struck him as odd. As if someone had turned off life support in an effort to keep them from urging him forward. But he no longer needed their encouragement. He wanted to brave whatever lay ahead. Danger or not. He wanted to—

He parted the banners and froze, looking at the being standing in the center of the clearing. Tall, lean muscle under tan fur, sharp teeth and claws. Gold eyes.

See, danger.

He ignored the voice and took more of him in. There was caring in those eyes, playfulness. The trimmed mane, short at the sides, made Jeremy think of someone rebelling. The cock was plump, inviting. The balls heavy, ready to —

Wrong!

His mouth was dry. Something was stalking him. Wanted to hurt him.

Yes, return. There is safety.

Jeremy stepped forward.

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He sat, rubbing his temple, trying to hold on to the dream. There had been danger. He’d wanted it. He’d wanted him.

Him who?

He ignored his stomach’s protest, but couldn’t get himself to outright shove the feeling in the box.

If the doctors went to such extent to keep him from feeling this, maybe there was a reason? Maybe it was dangerous for him?

He closed his eyes as he remembered the treatment. The torture they’d put him through because he felt this way. Were they willing to do that because of how dangerous the feelings were or—

No, that wasn’t what disgusted him. They hadn’t asked him what he wanted. His parents had made the decision for him. And now that he could think about what he remembered that doctor saying, he wasn’t sure how much of their decision had been influenced by that horror story he’d told them.

But wasn’t his story proof?

Was it even real?

What evidence was there?

Jeremy had heard countless stories of the danger of the sickness. Or how horrible

and deadly it was. But he hadn't known anyone who had it. Known anyone who knew anyone who had it. They'd all been like him. Lucky and it had been a misdiagnosis.

Like him.

He looked at the ceiling and the walls, searching for where the subliminals came from, and was glad he couldn't tell. He'd give away he knew, if he destroyed the broadcaster.

He checked the time. He should sleep more, but he didn't think he could. Not with knowing the cube might not keep working. The shower was quick, then trying to keep himself from running away from his quarter difficult, his hand in the tool bag, holding the cube, wishing it to protect him until he was safe within the ship.

He breathed easier as he stepped out of the lift and saw the Kelsirian standing in the doorway. This one's fur was charcoal.

For the first time, it struck him as odd that a merchant ship would have a guard when the docks were empty. Wouldn't scanning be enough to let them know someone was approaching?

"Go work," he said, then stopped. "Do you understand English?"

"I understand Earther," the guard answered.

"Can you check if Thuruk is sleeping or not? If he is, don't bother him. If he isn't let him know I'm early."

"I will, Engineer."

Another one? Although, as the lone human on the ship, how odd was it those he encountered knew what he did?

He passed Engineering in favor of food, and Thuruk sat before him as he was finishing.

"I told them not to wake you," he said after a glance at the technician's disheveled look.

"I'm your technician. You need my assistance translating."

"I'm sure I can find another tech to translate if I need reference material." He wiped what was left of the sauce in the small bowl and paused, his finger nearly at his lips. "What?"

Thuruk searched the tray while Jeremy licked the sauce off his finger.

"I can get you more meat. Or you can leave the remnants. No one will complain."

"It's good. It's like cinnamon, but hotter. I'm not leaving any behind. And I don't have fur. So it's easy to clean off." He licked it again to demonstrate, and Thuruk looked uncomfortable.

An old memory, one that used to be hidden from him, surfaced. He'd drawn a Kelsirian guy, washing his crotch the way he'd seen the house cat do it.

"Wait, do you wash yourself with your tongue?"

Thuruk looked horrified, then embarrassed. "Well, I wouldn't wash myself that way."

Jeremy changed the direction of his thinking before his stomach could protest. "How about we get to work?"

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Jeremy pulled himself out from the reactor and nearly caused a pair of Kelsirian to trip over him.

“Sorry,” he said. Then stared as them keeping each other from falling changed to something more intimate. A look, the muzzles rubbing together.

A glance, and Jeremy reached for the pill bottle. They were definitely both guys, and enjoying what was happening.

Thuruk said something in sharp Kelsirian and they stiffened before hurrying away.

“They aren’t technicians, you don’t have to—”

Jeremy stared at the bottle. The reflex was ingrained so deep that he’d reached for it this time, instead of calling up the box. Even knowing there was nothing wrong with them. Nothing wrong with men enjoying men, period. He’d still reached for his medicine to calm his stomach.

He stared at the too long name for him to ever remember. Only there was nothing wrong with his stomach. It was a programmed response to him getting... well, to men getting to him.

He turned it, searching the label for more information, but the only thing there was the name, the dosage, and the doctor who had prescribed them.

“Jeremy?”

“Do we have a chemical analyzer?” What did these actually do?

“Engineering doesn’t have one.”

Jeremy stood. “Where can I find one?”

“Medical would have those, Life Research.”

“Can you take me to either?”

Thuruk looked about to protest, then took his tablet, hesitated, and put it away.
“Follow me.”