

“It is frequency generator,” Querik said. “Or at least, it’s what I gathered. The explanation became more technical than I understood rather quickly. I explained what I needed it to counter, and it’s what she made.”

“To counter what was being done to me.” Jeremy turned the cube over. “I never heard anything.”

The Kelsirian nodded. “What was used is at the edge of human hearing, which we are able to hear beyond. Although I scanned for it to be certain it was what I heard.”

“Okay. So what was being done to me? You asked that I trust you yesterday. Now I’d like to know.”

“Subliminals were used on you.”

Jeremy stared, then laughed. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

“You are not surprised?”

“Of course not. They use that on stations and ships to keep emotions stable.”

“And in your quarters?”

“No, of course not. They’re only allowed to use them in public areas.”

“I have heard it there, too. It was more intense than anywhere else on the station.”

“No, that can’t be.” He looked at the cube. “It’s not like I need my mood stabilized. Other than my stress, I’m pretty much normal emotionally.”

“I am confident the stress you suffer from is why it is there.”

Jeremy snorted. “Then it’s doing a pretty bad job of keeping that in check. I’ve had attacks there...” Querik’s expression made him trail off. “You’re implying it wasn’t to reduce my stress.”

“I am stating it.”

“Okay. How could you know that’s what it did? A scan wouldn’t tell you the intended effects. You’d need... you’d need to study the brain being affected while under its effect and not.”

“Have you heard of Mentalists?”

“Aren’t they people who are really smart? They can do mental tricks, like remember lots of stuff, I think. I’ve heard the term before, but I never looked it up.”

“Among my species, as well as the others within the Federation, the title is given to those who have the ability, and have received the training in sensing other people’s minds.”

Jeremy needed a few seconds to make sense of that. “You can read minds?”

“I cannot. I am not that strong. And even if I could, I would not go sniffing in your mind. That is improper. A large part of the training those strong enough to see minds that clearly receive is in stopping themselves from doing so reflexively, as well as blocking the thoughts others will emit.”

“Emit? As in transmitting? That’s a thing?”

“It is, although I can’t explain how it is. I simply know it is, because I don’t need to try to feel the...shape of your mind. It simply happens. I need a conscious effort to keep myself from feeling others’ minds.”

“So, it’s like what?” He leaned forward. “Like you’ve attached sensors to my head and you register the electrical impulses?”

Querik chuckled. “I don’t have a way to explain it an Engineer might understand. Although I am surprised you are at ease with the idea I have a sense of your mind. Others I

have had to tell did not take it well. It's why all business with my human counterparts is done over transmission. They refuse to meet in person."

Jeremy considered it. "Okay, I can see why they might be afraid you'd find out things they don't want..." He swallowed as realization overtook excitement.

Only, if Querik had found out about all the anti-matter experiments they ran, wouldn't he have reported it? It was why the Commander had warned him to be careful when he spoke about the work he did on the station, wasn't it?

"If it helps soothe your concerns. I can sense your worry. There's something you are afraid I'll find out. But I don't know what that is. Try as I might, I'd have to ask you, and you would have to tell me, for me to find out. And I won't. My role as an ambassador is to help your people adapt to the Federation, so you can join it. My role, as the person you came to today, is to help you however I can."

Jeremy nodded, putting that discomfort in the box. "Okay. Your ability means you've sensed my mind under different conditions. When I gave you the tour, when we were on the ship, and.... Is that why you spend time with me? So you'd sense my mind."

"In part, but also because I enjoy your company. I like you Jeremy."

"Yeah, I... me too." He shoved the oozing discomfort that formed into the box. "So you heard there are subliminals in my quarters, and you sensed they affected me more than what's broadcasted on the station. Which is why you thought this would help." He turned the cube in his hand again. "Your scanner gave you the frequencies it operates on, which you took to a tech, and they programmed this to generate an anti-frequency. But I don't get why there'd be in my quarters if you say they aren't helping my stress."

"I felt more than that, although I do not know what it means. Part of your mind reacts to the subliminals in your quarters."

"That's normal. Subliminals are designed to affect how we feel and think, it's what you—"

Querik shook his head. "I do not feel a change in how they affect you outside your quarters. It's why I didn't understand what I heard immediately. Or thought to pay attention to how your mind reacted to it that first time. Your mind seems attuned to what is being broadcasted in your quarters. And whoever controls it has intensified it the last time I stopped by."

"With the scanner. You kept looking around." Jeremy tried to figure out why, and who was behind it. It had to be the Commander. His stress had increased since he'd been ordered to work on the ship. He'd thought it was just the situation that stressed him. That might have been the goal. Cause him to want to keep away from the ship when he wasn't working, get him to work as fast as he could to remove the source of his stress. As if he would slack off without the external motivation.

"I hate that there's no way to be sure what it's doing. Without that, all this gives me is protection against that active threat. Knowing why could let me confirm who is doing it and convince him he doesn't need it for me to do my job."

"There could be a way," Querik said tentatively. "I cannot offer guarantees, but if you will trust me, we maybe able to explore your mind for those parts that resonate."

Jeremy waited, then, "Can I get a little more of the plan? Or is this another case of it'll change the results if I know about it?"

“It is more a case of me being worried you will refuse if you know what it entails.”

“You know I prefer knowing what I’m getting into. I’m going to accept your help regardless, but I’d like to at least know the risks.”

“There are none. I cannot...change your mind. Only the strongest of us can do that, and they do not find themselves in the position of ambassadors.”

“I’m guessing your military had better use for them.”

Querik smiled. “We have better use for such people than to turn them into weapons. Although it is also an indication of the limitation even they have, that they wouldn’t be well suited as weapons.”

Jeremy raised an eyebrow, but this time, when Querik added nothing, he focused on the immediate situation. “Okay. You can’t make changes. So what can you do?”

“I can help you go into your mind. Accompany you and point to the places I sensed reacting. You may be able to understand why they react, since you will have the knowledge of who you are.”

“What should I expect?”

Querik chuckled. “I cannot tell you. No mind is alike. You will have a better sense now of what to expect than I will.”

He had no idea what to expect. “Okay. How do we do this?”

The Kelsirian exited his seat with more grace than Jeremy thought was possible. “This will be more comfortable in my bed.”

Jeremy nearly stumbled out of his seat as his stomach protested the idea. He put the oozing into the box.

“We can use the floor,” Querik offered, “if that is less concerning to you, but I don’t know how long it will take.”

“No, it’s fine. We aren’t doing anything...” he couldn’t think of a way to express that he wasn’t like Kelsirians that wouldn’t come across as insulting.

“I will have to touch you, your head, or another place if you don’t feel that is appropriate.”

“Does anyone consider their heads off limit?”

“The Shimbarians have a taboo regarding being touched above their shoulders.”

“That’s weird.”

“It is other cultures. There are always differences for which we lack ways of understanding.”

The bed was similar in length to Jeremy’s, but by being round, it was larger. Instead of being flat, it was a shallow bowl. Without having to try, Jeremy was stretched into the center of the bowl. Querik had trouble finding a way to sit at Jeremy’s head, until he told the Kelsirian to let him use his stomach as a pillow.

Jeremy purposely did not think of what his neck might be pressed against.

“Take slow breaths.” The Kelsirian places his hands on each side of Jeremy’s head, the fingers reaching under his jaw.

He realized it placed the claws close to his neck, and was surprised not to have the same visceral fear he’d felt before about them.

“Let your mind relax and I will guide it with itself.”

“Isn’t that you making changed?”

“What?”

Jeremy opened his eyes and glanced up. “If you can take control of where my mind goes, doesn’t that mean you can make alterations to my neural pathways?”

“That isn’t... I don’t...”

“You don’t know how this works, do you?”

“I know how to guide a mind.”

Jeremy smiled. “But you don’t know the biological implications of what that does, do you?”

“I don’t need to know that.”

“But don’t you want to? If you know how you’re doing it, you can—”

“Jeremy, if this is you seeking to prevent this from happening, it is best we simply admit that and go back to conversing. Otherwise, I will simply say that your curiosity may be why you are an Engineer, and I simply an ambassador.”

“Shutting up now.”

Jeremy opened an eye in the stretching silence and Querik watched him, ears canted.

“Really, I’m letting you do the talking from this point forward.”

“Then close your eye and let your mind relax. I will guide it within. Remember that it is you. What you will see is a construct you have created, even if you are not aware of it. There are no threats to your physical body, but thoughts can be painful. Your mind is not a place to wander through carelessly. Where are you?”

* * * * *

Jeremy looked around at... The landscape was shapeless. Shifting mounds that took forms of objects before being formless again.

“I have no idea.”

“The correct answer,” Querik said, “is within you mind.”

Jeremy took a step to the side in surprise at the Kelsirian next to him, and his foot sank a few centimeters before being pushed level. “What are you doing here?”

“Guiding you?” He looked around.

“I was expecting your voice.”

“You prefer the concrete to the abstract. You print your ideas so you can better work with them. So you are giving me form, although I am still me. I am here.”

“Then why is all this kind of... amorphous?”

“Have you spent much time thinking about the shape of your mind?”

“If I had, this would look different?”

“I expect it would. But don’t do so now, please. I need to find my bearings. There.” He pointed in the distance to something that shimmered. As Jeremy focused on it, tried to make it out, the ground leveled in that direction, becoming a path.

“That looks far. Do we have to walk there?”

“This is your mind, so it is your decision.”

“Then, how do we—” They stood before an uneven crystalline wall that distorted whatever was behind it to the point all Jeremy made out were moving lights and shadows. He raised a hand to it and immediately pulled it away as the ground began oozing with something dark.

“What is that?”

“I do not know.” Querik studied the crystal wall.

“I mean that.” Jeremy pointed to the dark mass pooling off the patch of solid ground they stood on.

“That is the representation of your stress. It is what you have been putting in the mental box. I am more curious about this.” He touched the crystal.

“Please don’t.” The mass oozed higher. “I really don’t like it. I don’t think it’s safe.”

Querik stepped away. “Over there.” He pointed to another distant shimmer, and Jeremy thought them there.

He thought he’d brought them back to where they had been initially, but the shadows were colored and moving faster. He stayed well away.

“Can you approach it?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“It’s not safe.”

“How is it not?”

“I don’t know, I just know that it isn’t.”

“This is your mind, Jeremy. There is no need to keep things from me, or yourself.”

“I’m not! I just don’t know how it’s not safe. Is that not normal?”

“Unusual, rather. I want you to think of something pleasant from your youth.”

“What do you—” Where they stood shifted so fast Jeremy nearly lost his footing. They stood before a hole in their surrounding, through which a child lay on a bed far too large for him, papers before him, crude drawings on them as the boy drew more. Jeremy wondered what he looked at, then recognized the bed—

“I’m scared,” a younger him whispered, shaking his father to wake him. “Can I sleep with you?”

A slightly older one stretched on it, next to his mother, flipping through a large sketchbook with a blue cover. “And this is where we get on the ship.”

“Who’s that?” she tapped another drawing.

“That’s dad,” he replied in a ‘how can you not know that’ tone. “He’s piloting it.”

An older him sat before a table with paper and rulers. He sent the image of a building to the wall, then took the ruler and drew lines on it.

The scenes shifted through more versions of him drawing and he wondered at how he’d forgotten how much he’d enjoy sitting with pen and paper, putting down whatever he thought about. Why ever had he stopped?

He bounced off the crystal wall hard enough he expected to feel broken bones as he picked himself off.

“You don’t have bones to break here,” Querik said, looking at the wall.

“Why are we back here?”

“Your thoughts brought us here.”

“I didn’t think about this.”

“We moved from memory to memory as you made connections between them. Therefore, behind this wall is another memory.”

“A bad one.” Jeremy stepped back as blackness oozed from the ground.

“You certainly believe so.”

He focused on the tone. “You don’t?”

“This is what resonated with the subliminals in your quarters. Think of the puzzle box.”

“I—”

They were before a scene of him, nine years old, at the kitchen table, having taken his father’s place before the locked box. Then a succession of scenes of him with the box more and more open. One with his father at his side, an amazed expression as the young Jeremy moved another of the wooden slats.

Then it was opened, and they both took out antique marbles.

A teen him hurried to put things in it as his parents spoke in the background, on the other side of a door.

Him, taking the box out of the shipping package his mother sent him. Him puzzling over opening it. Taking papers out—

Jeremy rolled onto his back, glaring at the crystal wall. “Why aren’t you being thrown around when we hit it?”

Querik smiled. “Because I know we aren’t moving.”

“That’s another memory?”

“Yes.”

“Did the subliminals cause the wall? Because what I was remembering happened on the station.”

“But you made a connection to something from your past. Think about—”

“How about you tell me what you’re doing first? You might not get flung about, but I am. So I’d like to not have it happen again.”

“I am trying to understand what the hidden memories have in common. There may be an explanation to why this was done within that commonality.”

“The box doesn’t have anything to do with me drawing.”

“Except for what you placed within it.”

The sketchbook with the red cover in which he’d drawn—

He landed face first into the ground from the impact. He stood and glared at the crystal wall. This was enough.

“Jeremy?” Querik asked as he approached the wall, fighting against the ooze that caught at his feet, against the knowledge that the wall was there to protect him. That danger waited for him on the other side.

“This is my mind,” he growled. “I am not going to be kept out of my own, fucking, memories.” He slammed a fist into the crystal wall.