
THRESHOLD!
REYKA SIVAO
Grok

# Threshold!

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Note to the Reader:

This story contains material of a sexual nature that is not appropriate for young audiences. It may also be triggering for some who have endured sexual assault.

It has also been slightly edited for content from its original form.

Discretion is advised.

# Threshold!

"Ow, dammit!"

Three pairs of eyes looked up at me, and I paused in the middle of hopping up and down in a distinctly uncommanding manner.

"Uh….at ease," I said sheepishly.

"Are you all right?" asked Merete Andrus-Taurus. As our resident doctor, I suppose I should have expected she wouldn't just let it slide.

"Dropped a sonic regulator on my foot," I explained briefly, leaving out the part where I had tried to hold it balanced between my jaw and my chest while scrabbling with the panel fastenings. I could have just put it down, but no. I was apparently addicted to doing things the hard way, and paying for it when things inevitably went sideways. Too bad I never learned from my mistakes.

"Perhaps you should consider delegating that particular task, Captain Piper," said Sarda. His face was its usual Vulcan mask, but if I didn't know better—and I didn't know better—I would have thought he was laughing at me.,,

"Oh, don't you DARE promote me," I growled at him. "Lt Commander is way more authority than anyone in their right mind should have granted me."

"As you are in command of this vessel, tradition demands that you are entitled to be called captain, whatever your current fleet rank."

He was right of course, but that didn't make matters any better.

"Well, then your *commanding officer* orders you not to do that," I grumbled.

"He's still right about that delegatin'," said Scanner. Well, according to his fleet records, his name was Judd Sandage, but almost no one ever remembered that. Except Sarda. I was never sure if that was a Vulcan distaste for nicknames or if he'd just known Scanner before he'd earned the appellation.

"Gimme that," continued Scanner, scooping up the tool from where I'd dropped it. "You know I can do this faster."

"Mutinous, you're all mutinous," I said, but I wasn't mad, and handed him the tools anyway. It's not like he was wrong—he'd earned

his nickname for a reason, and my speciality was in tactics anyway.

We were on a mission, technically. A delivery mission of sorts.

The *Enterprise* had been on its way to a massive scientific conference at the Orion Institute of Cosmology when she had been unexpectedly diverted. Unfortunately, we had one of the presenters for the conference—namely, Sarda, who had been working on a project I understood nothing at all about. So, when the *Enterprise* had been diverted, we had been sent on ahead so he wouldn't be late. That much, at least, I understood well enough, and that was all I needed.

My ship, the USS *Banana Republic*—a tiny, retrofitted mining vessel Captain Kirk had managed to get assigned to me for his own nefarious purposes—was, unfortunately, a bit of a fixer-upper, and always seemed to require minor repairs, which was how I'd ended up balancing tools in the first place.

Our destination was almost upon us, so I left the finishing up of the repairs to Scanner and slipped back into what passed at the captain's seat—dammit, Sarda, I was NOT a captain yet—and checked the screens.

"Have we been hailed yet?"

"Not yet," said Merete, who was currently acting as communications officer in addition to chief medical officer. "We're just about to come into range."

As if on cue, one of the screens lit up with an incoming hail. I nod-shrugged at Merete, who silently turned the screen.

"USS *Banana Republic*, you are cleared for landing. Welcome to the Orion Confederation."

The science conference was…big. And sciencey. And I was completely out of place.

Sarda was busy setting up some sort of demonstration booth with a big burly Orion man and a Hermat person, who I could only assume were his compatriots in whatever project he was working on. I was vaguely annoyed that he hadn't told me more about it, despite the fact that I would have understood maybe a tenth of it.

Off to one side, Merete had struck up a conversation with a Betazoid xenopathophysiologist—I think was her specialty, try saying

that three times fast—and over in another area, Scanner was happily jabbering away with an Orion woman about sensory modifications. She was wearing what looked like a leather halter top that showed off some truly impressive assets, but all he had eyes for was her spreadsheets.

I turned away to avoid staring, only to find my line of vision on a different pair of scantily covered green breasts. Orion fashion was apparently going to take a little getting used to.

That was distracting enough that it took me a moment to realize that *this* particular Orion had cornered Sarda somehow, and was twirling her hair at him and standing with an air of unsubtle seductiveness. I moved closer.

"Oh?" she was saying. "Nociceptive signal regulation? Tell me more."

Sarda shifted on his feet and looked far more uncomfortable than he probably hoped he did.

"Nociceptive signal regulation has multiple medical applications in various fields–"

"Mm-hmm?" said the Orion. "And how did you get interested in this field?"

"It is not 'my field' specifically, I merely engineered a field effect amplifier–"

"Ooh, a *field effect amplifier.* You should tell me more. Perhaps over dinner."

Sarda looked, if possible, even *more* uncomfortable. I smothered a grin and headed over to help.

"Hey Sarda, how's the setting up going?" I asked.

He glanced up, looking vaguely desperate. "I should continue to assist my compatriots with the necessary tasks," he said.

"Maybe dinner later?" said the Orion hopefully.

"I am not hungry," said Sarda.

The Orion huffed a little. "Are you available or *not?*" she asked in annoyance. "You *smell* more available than any Vulcan I've ever come across."

Sarda stiffened even more than he already had been. "Available does not mean *interested,*" he said finally.

"So, you *are* single then? Because I thought Vulcans practiced arranged marriages."

Wait. They did what?

"That is generally the case," said Sarda, biting off each word like it was a stale ration bar.

"But not you?"

Sarda inhaled. "My original...match was allowed to dissolve our bond after I was awarded a position in weapons engineering."

Wait.

Wait.

Oh, shit.

Was *everything* that went wrong in his life my fault? I wasn't too sure about the concept of arranged marriages, granted, but if that was something all other Vulcans had in common – which I hadn't even known – then that was, again, something I had taken away from him in my ignorance and arrogance.

I shook off the wave of guilt for the moment, setting it aside to revisit at length next time I felt the need to torture myself for my mistakes again, only to realize that Sarda was already being called aside to help his Orion coworker, Dr. R'Aiyan, set up whatever it was that they were going to be demonstrating, and the woman who'd been flirting with Sarda was staring with annoyance, not at HIM, but at ME.

"I would have gotten his contact code too, if you hadn't distracted him," she grumbled at me.

I shook my head at her in bewilderment. "What in any hell makes you think *that?* He's *Vulcan."*

"Yeah, but if you get his code first, I'm never forgiving you."

I skipped right past *why would I give a damn; I have no idea who you are* and went straight to gaping at her misapprehension and saying "I LIVE with him."

She did a double take. "Lucky," she murmured, and then waved me off with what I could only assume was defeat.

"I mean –" I said, about to correct her, and then stopped. If she thought Sarda and me were more than roommates maybe she'd leave him alone. "...yes, very lucky."

She sighed and turned to leave, and I looked over to see Sarda looking at me. I instantly realized there was a fair chance he'd heard every word of the exchange. I colored and nonchalantly scratched my neck to let out some of the heat under my uniform collar. He looked away again and I hoped to any god that would listen that that was the end of it.

"What's that, didn't want to get her code yourself?" said Scanner from behind my shoulder.

I swung around and very nearly clocked him in the jaw on instinct. He leaned back just in case, but I stopped myself in time.

"Yeesh, remind me not to get on your bad side!" he said, without venom. "I'm a very delicate soul. Like a squirrel."

"You've never seen the squirrels on Proxima Beta," I said. They were one of the few earth animals we had brought to fill an ecological niche when we terraformed the planet.

"Yeah, well, maybe that wasn't the best example. What I mean is, please don't hurt me!"

"Ok, fine, just don't tell Merete."

"Tell me what?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "You know what, never mind that either."

"Piper pretended to be dating Sarda to get an Orion lady to leave him alone," said Scanner cheerfully.

"I sort of...implied and didn't correct her assumption," I muttered. "So, can we drop it now?"

"If you say so," said Merete with her usual nondescript fashion. "I was mostly coming to get you for the opening ceremonies."

The opening ceremonies were clearly designed to bore people into actually HOPING to get to the cocktail party afterward, which would normally have bored me into watching paint dry. I wandered around holding a glass of not-even-syntheholic beverage and nodding politely at every toast the interstellar scientific cooperation, which while certainly worth toasting, at *least* deserved a real brandy.

Various speakers were still droning on about basically the same things in the background, while people in both evening wear and

formal uniforms wandered around making small talk.

I had elected for my uniform--last time I'd worn anything resembling a dress, Scanner had caught a holo of the resulting disaster and I STILL hadn't managed to delete it – but Merete had apparently packed a flowing lavender gown that matched the highlights in her skin where her faintly purpleish blood blushed through.

I looked around again, half expecting Sarda to be wearing his Vulcan robes – but while there was more than one robe-sporting Vulcan in my general vicinity, when I spotted Sarda, he was also wearing his dress uniform. I bit my lip and wondered whether he would have done the same if I hadn't accidentally made him semi-anathema to more orthodox Vulcans by forcing him into a position with Starfleet weapons design.

I stood there, sipping a drink, looking busy and trying to sort through the range of conversations going on around me.

"—according to T'Grei's theory of galactic ecology, chroniton/graviton ratios should approach one-to-one as you look at larger scales, but the lower-level variation is absolutely vital—"

"—research into anyon fields is still minimal, but what there is suggests that they have similar effects to antichronitons, without the risk of temporal displacement—"

"—polaric ions have great promise as a power source, but unless they can be stabilized, they are far too dangerous to handle in populated portions of the galaxy—"

"…field research into antileptons suggests that they could be used as a non-lethal weapon."

Something drew my attention in the direction of that last one, even before I recognized the voice. When I glanced over, I spotted Sarda talking with one of the berobed Vulcans from earlier, and I moved at an angle to hear better without seeming to be headed in any particular direction.

Sarda's face was, if anything, even more masklike than usual, but something about him radiated discomfort approaching the level of when the Orion woman had been flirting with him earlier. Granted, the Vulcan man in front of him was *probably* not also flirting with him, but even so I increased my speed just slightly and told myself I was

just going to offer him a social out if he wanted it, and not that I was burning with curiosity and also vaguely worried.

I angled behind Sarda and snatched a glance at the other Vulcan's name badge on my way to a conveniently located *hors d'oeuvres* platter that was marked as safe for humans. Vorin. I stopped and picked up a small blue cube of what was apparently an edible substance and listened with my back turned.

"Is it not also true that you created a synergist that was immediately banned from use as a war crime under the Organian convention?"

I could almost *hear* Sarda stiffen. "That was not my intention."

"Nevertheless, it is correct."

Clearly, Vorin was the sort of Vulcan I would be doing well not to have punched by the end of the night.

"The principles I was studying at the time have applications that do not involve the Organian convention in any way. Another synergist I developed has gone on to have applications in developing farmlands on colony worlds."

I relaxed slightly. He had this. Clearly, I was just underestimating him, yet again. He didn't need my help here.

"Is that so," said Vorin flatly. "Perhaps that will make it up to some degree."

I stole a glance. From where I was standing, I couldn't see Sarda's face, but I could see his hand. A hand that actually curled up in response—not quite clenched, but closer than I'd ever wanted to see it. I was starting to really dislike Vorin, and I had started off wanting to punch him in the face.

"In any case, said Sarda, opening his hand a fraction, "that is not the research I am here to present. Currently I am engaged in assisting with a medical research project."

"Oh?" said Vorin, but I was distracted at that moment by a nearby Andorian asking to see the plate of *hors d'oeuvres*, which were also marked as safe for consumption by her species. Honestly, it was kind of weird that such different species as we had here had so much in common that we could even HAVE a dinner party with all of us.

"It is unfortunate that I cannot regulate the use of my projects

after they have left my control," Sarda was saying when I caught the flow of conversation again.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "It surprises me that you would not turn your talents towards projects without the potential for harm."

Sarda's hand clenched again. Time to do my thing and leap headlong into a situation I didn't understand.

Taking an instant to throw out a request to any gods who might be listening—did Vulcans have gods?—I stepped forward, pasted on my best command-line bullshit smile and started talking.

"Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear the phrase 'project without the potential for harm'." I grinned at the visible reactions I got from both of them. The other Vulcan only blinked, but Sarda actually jerked.

"Just thought that, as I specialized in tactics at the Academy, I'd add that that no such projects exist."

There. I'd never known a Vulcan to be able to resist such a low-hanging fruit—such a sweeping statement should be a piece of cake for a Vulcan to disprove.

The Vulcan took the bait.

"Oh? How would you define 'harm'?"

I shrugged. "Fair enough. Human exaggeration. Tell you what: instead of defending my statement, how about you tell me your line of work, and I'll tell you how I could kill you with it."

I stole half a glance at Sarda. To my relief, he didn't seem to be angry at me. Yet.

Vorin raised an eyebrow and took the bait.

"I work with neutrons," he said blankly, but I imagined a triumphant smile in place of Vulcan placidity. After all, what could be less reactive than a neutron?

Actually…that was an easy one.

I widened my eyes in half-mock surprise.

"Neutrons? Like the ones the Xindi used as the power source of a bioweapon that nearly destroyed the population of Earth?"

The Vulcan's eyebrows rose. "I am not familiar with that incident."

I shrugged. It wasn't common knowledge, though I was surprised that a member of the Vulcan Science Academy wouldn't

know. “There was time-travel involved.”

I was telling the truth, but I wasn’t at all sure he believed me, so I added, “Still, I could use a neutronic power source to run any number of weapons. Or I could track your hypothetical warp-capable ship by its neutron signature and then irradiate you and your neutrons with a bunch of anti-neutrons.”

Ok, I wasn’t *entirely* sure what that last one would do, but I was betting it would cause an explosion or something else unpleasant enough to make my case for me.

Judging by his reaction, I was close enough.

He momentarily raised an eyebrow. “Could you indeed?” he said. “Your hypotheticals are…aggressive. Perhaps humans deserve their reputation.”

I squashed the face I wanted to make under another bullshit smile. Reputation? Nice. I was beginning not to like this guy at all. More so.

“I prefer to plan for the worst-case scenario.”

He raised his eyebrow at me again. “I see.”

He also didn’t break eye contact after that, which was more uncomfortable than trying to perform a sexy dance in a seedy Klingon-infested bar, and I should know. I shifted my feet, and the toe of one boot caught on the heel of the other, and suddenly I was losing all credibility and social standing along with my balance.

At least, I was headed that way, until Sarda’s reflexes kicked in and he caught me by the elbow.

“Thanks,” I muttered, but Sarda let go and refused to acknowledge me.

Vorin’s eyes jumped to Sarda, to me, and then back again.

Turning toward Sarda, Vorin made the tiniest of motions towards me before saying something in Vulcan.

“*Nam-tor rikwon-tersu ha*?”

Well, actually, it might just as easily have been ‘nem-tor’ or ‘telsu’—I spoke about six words of Vulcan, and those weren’t them.

Whatever it was, though, Sarda understood him.

And for a single, terrifying second, I thought he was going to slug the man.

Sarda took a step forward and raised one arm halfway up his chest, and when I whirled around, I saw something raw in his eyes.

I looked around, desperately searching for another bullshit distraction. Whatever Vorin had said, I got the distinct impression that I wasn't going to work a second time.

And then I saw my salvation.

"Oh, look, it's Merete!" I said loudly, cheerfully, and desperately. "We'd better go say hi!"

I cut directly between them—was I tall enough to break eye contact?—and wished to high hell that I could just grab Sarda's arm and drag him away. But I resisted the urge and settled for thinking *just walk away!* as loudly as I could, and wishing I could project the calm I could swear he'd offered me on more than one occasion.

For a second, I thought he wasn't going to listen to me.

Then he dropped his half-raised arm.

"*Ko-veh ne ki'ne*," he said calmly, and turned to follow me under Vorin's startled gaze.

He was still angry.

Don't ask me how I could tell. His face was a model of Vulcan calm, and his voice didn't shake at all.

But whatever the other Vulcan had said—what HAD he said?! What did one say that was bad enough to make a Vulcan want to hit you?—it was still there, under his skin, making him utterly *furious.*

"Merete," he said by way of greeting. "I trust you are finding the exhibits of interest?"

She looked up and smiled. "Sarda, Piper," she said. "Yes. I was just talking to Dr. Romsbaat about hir advances in the treatment of Denali-Leutscher syndrome…"

I shook my head slightly, and not just because the conversation was making my head hurt.

Well, ok, it *was* because the conversation was making my head hurt, but it wasn't the content. Not just the content.

Rather, it as the fact that my heart was still pounding, and I could still almost feel the waves of barely-controlled hostility pouring

off of Sarda—and yet here we were, in the middle of a perfectly calm, almost annoyingly mundane conversation. Ok, then.

I listened with half an ear as they discussed whatever it was they were discussing, but I glanced back in curiosity towards the Vulcan we'd confronted…but he was out of sight by now. Damn. I'd half-wanted to retrace my steps and demand a translation.

"…several things which require my attention. Will you be all right here?"

Whoops, I might have missed something.

"Yes," said Merete.

Sarda nodded. "Then I must take my leave."

Merete smiled and nodded in response and Sarda turned to go. With half a wave in Merete's direction, I scrambled to follow him—no *way* was I going to let him out of my sight again.

I nearly ran into him when he stopped dead in front of me.

"Oof," I complained. "Are you going or not?"

"I am."

"Then—"

"I do not require your assistance."

I gaped as the imaginary door slammed in my face. Hurt coiled in my stomach and threatened to turn to anger. I'd been trying to *help,* dammit!

But before I could say anything else, he added, "You should stay with Merete, since I am unable to."

I blinked, confusion taking the place of anything else I'd been feeling, and I turned to look back at Merete as she spoke the Hermat doctor with the dino-lindorf syndrome, or whatever it had been.

"What are you talking—"

My brain tripped over itself in its hurry to inform my mouth that it had no audience.

I looked around, but he was very much gone. It registered as weird that I hadn't noticed…I guess my imaginary Sarda-radar was just wishful thinking.

Pursing my lips in what I hadn't decided whether to call confusion or anger, I turned back toward Merete.

"…shows great promise," said the Hermat doctor. I briefly

considered inventing a science conference drinking game—'shows promise' and 'requires more research' would get me drunk in no time, which sounded nice right about then. "…though my research partner is more skeptical."

I glanced up to see the aforementioned research partner approaching—a large, green-skinned Orion man.

"My partner, Dr. R'Aiyan," introduced Dr. Romsbaat, and then gestured toward Merete. "Dr. AndrusTaurus."

"Pleased to meet you," said Merete, bowing slightly, which struck me as odd. Why didn't she offer a handshake? Orions hardly had a thing against physical contact…

…oh.

Merete's demurely clasped hands were trembling, and now that I was looking, I saw the tightness around her eyes and heard the effort in her voice.

Dr. R'Aiyan followed Merete's lead, bowing back toward her —good policy at this type of event, and a courtesy I could have kissed him for right then.

"Likewise," he said, and his voice was rumbly, but sounded quite pleasant to my ear. I could only hope Merete heard it the same way.

Once again, I wished I was a telepath. Instead, I settled for stepping closer, into Merete's range of side vision. I hoped it would come across as vaguely protective to Merete, without looking too weird to anyone else.

How much had it cost her to come here? I'd been worried about *Sarda,* coming to a convention cohosted by the Vulcan Science Academy, given his history with mainstream Vulcans. How in any planet's hell had it not crossed my mind to wonder how *Merete* might fair, at an event cohosted by the Orion Institute of Cosmology, *on Orion,* given her history with Orions?

"Dr. Romsbaat was just telling me about your work with nociceptor resequencing," she said, pleasantly, but with a sort of distance in her voice.

The Orion nodded. "Yes," he rumbled. "We have managed to reduce nociceptor receptivity by a factor of two, which shows great

promise"—there was that phrase again—"for the treatment of Denali-Leutscher and other chronic pain conditions. Dr. Romsbaat's work on a model explaining why this effect occurs has been most interesting, though I have my doubts about the veracity of hir theory."

Merete nodded. "Do you have plans for research to attempt to disprove the theory?"

"Yes," said Dr. R'Aiyan. "I believe if we try—"

That was right about where I lost track of the conversation again, which left me plenty of time to revel in my idiocy.

How, *how,* had I missed this when she told me she was coming?

Wait…no. *Scanner* was the one who told me she was coming. He must not know. Sarda, on the other hand, clearly *did.*

*You should stay with Merete, since I am unable to,* he'd said. So…he'd planned to stick close to her? And…unable? Had the conversation really shaken him that badly?

Still, however much it had stung when he'd walked away, I was grateful now that he'd made me stay with Merete, even if all I could provide was minimal moral support.

Merete…

I looked at the green Orion face, and tried to see it as she must.

She had been so young— *the equivalent of a human six-year-old,* she'd said, with tears streaming down her face—when the attack had happened.

She'd been the only survivor of an Orion pirate raid on the freighter her family had been travelling on. And worse than that, she hadn't been rescued from the ship for over two weeks.

I suppressed a shudder as I remembered the descriptions she'd given me in a moment of…well, it was quite a moment.

Pushing the sickening details aside, I turned my attention back to Merete in the present, talking politely to one of the people who had haunted her nightmares for all but her whole life.

Of course, this *particular* Orion had almost precisely zero chance of being affiliated with the pirates who had killed her family, and she knew that. But I sincerely doubted she'd be able to logically convince her trembling hands and shaking breath of that, or the part of her mind that had been willing to turn a phaser on me for a chance to

defeat those demons.

And here she was, discussing the latest advances in her field with one of those demons.

I left myself a mental note to stop underestimating the woman.

"…You should consider visiting our lab while you're here," the Orion was saying.

Merete smiled. "I think I'd like that."

"If you leave your contact code, we'll show you around," added the Hermat.

To my surprise, Merete did so.

"I look forward to seeing the results of your research," she said in parting.

Walking away from the table, I watched her carefully. Constant Vulcan-watching must have done me some good, because I found I could see the little stuff—the too-tight curl of her fingers, the eyes locked just above the crowd, the perfectly-even breath through unmoving lips.

"Merete?" I said cautiously. "You…ok?"

She inhaled slightly more sharply than before.

"I'm fine," she said.

I twisted my face.

"You're not," I said, speaking low enough to be lost in the crowd, "but I can pretend to believe you if you'd really prefer."

For once, I might have guessed the right thing to say, because Merete relaxed slightly. She didn't say anything, though, so in another first, I bit my tongue and shut the hell up.

"How long were you planning to stay?" asked Merete abruptly.

I shrugged. "As long as I have someone to hang out with, I guess." No way in hell was I leaving before her, anyway.

"I think Scanner's still here," she said, "but I think I'm going to head back to the ship."

I hesitated, trying to hear what she was really saying. "Feel like having the cabin to yourself for a bit?"

"That…sounds good, actually."

Damn. She must really be shaken if she was actually asking to be left alone, however obliquely.

I grinned at her. "I'm sure Scanner'd be glad to talk my ear off about sensor enhancements for a couple of hours."

She offered me a real smile in return. "I'm sure he would." She reached for her communicator, but paused. "…Thanks."

Scanner was indeed most willing, and my ear was indeed most thoroughly talked off.

I faked interest as well as could when I could understand maybe every third word. I think my eyes glazed over once or twice.

Mostly, though, I was busy being worried about two of my best friends, which, unfortunately, isn't one the things you can be busy with that makes time go faster. In fact, I would have sworn before a Starfleet commission that one of the chroniton research projects had accidentally caused a localized time dilation effect.

After three hours, I finally made my excuses—which mostly consisted of 'sorry, you've lost me'—and headed back to the ship.

I hit the door buzzer to my own cabin...well, mine and Merete's, currently.

"Come," said Merete, and her voice sounded entirely normal.

"Hey," I said, walking in and depositing myself in a heap on my bunk.

"Long day?" she said, as though she hadn't been there.

"Scanner is an…enthusiastic tour guide," I said. "Not to mention indefatigable. He's still there."

Merete smiled. "Well, there was a lot for him to see."

I stared at the ceiling for a moment. What were you supposed to say when you needed to say something and you weren't sure what it was?

Finally, I settled on my usual route of 'jump right in and damn the consequences'.

"Merete," I said, rolling over, "look…do you want to talk about it? I know I'm about the last person you might choose, but…" I shook my head, not having actually thought of a way to end the sentence. "And if you'd rather I forget I saw anything, just say so."

Merete looked down. "It's nothing."

That…was not technically a request to stop talking, was it?

"It wasn't," I said, sitting up. "It really wasn't. I mean, you were out there facing your demons—"

"He wasn't a demon!" cried Merete, with what I could only describe as anguish. "He was a brilliant researcher, and I can't wait to see the results of their project and I enjoyed talking to him and—"

She dropped her head and let out something like a sob.

"…And," she whispered, "…and I couldn't stop seeing it."

Dammit, I am *not* cut out for this.

"…that's what I meant," I tried.

Merete looked up at me, and I took a deep breath and tried to put my thoughts in an order that wouldn't make things worse.

"He…wasn't a demon. That's not what I meant. I meant…" I shook my head. "Those memories, whatever it is you were seeing—that's the demon. That's what you were facing, just by talking to him. And," I added hastily as the thought occurred to me, "you're not *fighting* your demons." Judging by her reaction to violence, that was a terrible metaphor. "You're…seeing them for what they are."

That was either profound or another terrible metaphor, and I really wasn't sure which.

Merete was silent for a long moment.

"Separating them, you mean?" she said. "Separating the…the 'demons' from the real people I've attached them to?"

"Exactly," I said, even though I wasn't remotely sure that was what I'd been going for.

Merete was silent again.

"I'll have to think about that," she said, and sat up abruptly.

Just as abruptly, the conversation was over. I suppose she needed introvert time to process whatever she had realized, though that was really just a guess, given that I was well-nigh incapable of processing eureka moments without talking to someone else.

"Good," I said, more to the end of the conversation than to her actual statement. "But if you want to talk again…can you please tell me? I don't want to worry about two friends not telling me when something's wrong."

Merete nodded, and then blinked and frowned. "Two?"

She must not have seen the exchange…though I was rather

surprised she hadn't noticed Sarda's anger.

I debated for a second. She wanted attention away from herself for the moment, right?

"Well," I said as offhandedly as I could muster. "Sarda nearly slugged a guy right before tossing me in your general direction."

The look on her face was well worth the effort.

But even before she could work up a response to that, I stood up. "Which reminds me," I said, "I *really* want to know what the other guy said to him."

"What *happened?"*

"I'm not entirely sure, actually," I said. "The last bit was in Vulcan. I think it started off as another weapons-designer-versus-pacifist thing, but then…"

I sat down in front of the computer terminal and pulled up a translation program. Merete pulled up another chair as I explained what had happened.

"…and that's why I want to know what he said."

"I see," she said, eyes still wider than usual. "Can you *remember* what he said?"

"Maybe," I said. Sarda's reaction had locked that moment in my memory pretty well, but I hadn't been sure then.

"Computer: translate from Vulcan. 'Nam-tor rikwon-tersu ha?'"

The computer did its thing for a moment, and then offered:

*Is this your current associate?*

I frowned. "That would make sense in context, I guess, but if Sarda got that mad over *that,* something is very wrong."

Merete frowned too, but hers was more contemplative. "Or else it lost something in translation. You said it might have been something else, right?"

"Yeah. Let me try again. Computer: 'Nam-tor rikwon-telsu ha?'"

The machine thought about that.

*Is this your current bondmate?*

I blinked and sat up straighter.

"Uh…" I said eloquently, pointing at the screen. "That…"

I blinked slowly and drew back my hand to rub my chin.

"…might be what he said, actually." I frowned. "But…"

"…Sarda shouldn't have gotten angry over that," finished Merete.

"Not really," I agreed. "It's not like he did when I let that…" Don't say Orion. "...that woman think we were together."

Merete made a noncommittal noise and turned back to the screen. "What about the other word you weren't sure of?"

"Nem-tor rikwon-telsu ha?" I asked the computer.

The computer took longer cycling through its dictionaries for that one for some reason. But finally came up with a translation for that, too.

*Have you taken (by force or deceit) a temporary bondmate?*

I think my jaw hit the desk, but the noise must have been cancelled out by the sound of Merete falling out of her chair.

I stared at the screen in shock for a few more seconds before I was able to turn toward Merete.

"You all right?" I managed.

"Yes," she said, climbing back in the chair. "Just…overbalanced a little."

We stared at the words again. I was still no expert in Vulcan culture, but that seemed…rude. Let's say rude.

"So…" I said. "You think that could make one Vulcan want to hit another?"

Merete shook her head in disbelief even as she answered. "It's…entirely possible." She hesitated. "How much do you know about Vulcan bonds?"

I frowned. "Apparently there are arranged marriages involved?"

Merete hesitated again and shook her head. "It's more complicated…well. As I understand it, bonds are telepathic, and are generally the strongest telepathic links a Vulcan will form. A fully developed marriage bond can be almost as powerful as a mind meld, even when the partners aren't even in the same room."

I blinked. So, Vulcans *could* use their telepathy without touch, at least in certain circumstances?

"That…how do they deal with having someone mind melded

to them all the time?"

Merete shook her head again. "It's generally more limited, I think. But that's not the point. The point is that forming a bond is about the most powerful mental act a Vulcan can perform. And mental acts are governed by a strict code of ethics—forcing one's mind where it isn't wanted is the worst crime a Vulcan can commit. So, if this man suggested that Sarda had 'taken' a bondmate by force…"

My mouth fell open.

"…if that's really what he said," she finished, "then he basically accused Sarda of mind-raping you. Among other implications."

"That son of a—!"

Merete grabbed my arm.

"Piper," she said. "Are you *sure* that's what he said?"

I shook my head and took a breath. "No. It was too similar, even another Vulcan might have—"

I gaped again. "…he did it on purpose. He did it on *purpose!"* I clenched my fist and glared at the screen. "He deliberately gave his words an innocuous meaning he could point to, so he could claim innocent mishearing. Son of a *bitch."*

I stood up, knocking the chair at a precarious angle, with a half-formed plan to go back down and find the man and slug him myself before asking for an explanation.

"Piper," said Merete.

"What!"

"Sit down before you do something you regret."

I opened my mouth.

Then I snapped it shut again and sat down sharply.

Not with good grace, mind you. I figured that was optional.

"*Fine* ," I said. "But now I'm kind of wishing I hadn't wished for Sarda to walk away. He *should* have slugged him."

"But he didn't, right?"

"Yeah. He just got off a parting shot and left it at that."

"…what did he say?"

I had to think about that one. I hadn't been paying attention to his words.

"Um…something…ne-ki-ne, maybe?"

Turning back to the computer, I tried that in the translator.

*Ne ki'ne. Noun. Shield partner, wingman. The person a warrior could trust most in the heat of battle; a trusted friend and skilled warrior.*

I raised my eyebrows. "Huh."

"Maybe he was responding to the 'associate' question?" suggested Merete. "As in…he was asked if you were his partner, and he used another word for partner to clarify?"

"Maybe." I stared at the screen. "Or maybe I misheard. That's quite the militaristic metaphor." Part of me hoped I hadn't misheard. The idea that I was the one Sarda would trust to have his back in a fight…that was something I wanted to lock away for the next time I faced the crippling self-doubt that came as a package deal with command line work.

"It's not really a metaphor," Merete pointed out. "Not since the Rittenhouse affair."

That was true. Arguably, it had been true since the Outlast games—but those weren't a real battle. The Rittenhouse affair was.

"Ok, but why would he willingly associate himself with the idea of being a 'warrior'? He's been trying his damnedest to distance himself from his position as weapons designer in the minds of the other Vulcans."

Merete shrugged. "Maybe he was just angry enough that he didn't care?"

"Maybe. I guess I'll just have to ask—"

"No."

Merete looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite describe. It was way more serious than I'd expected, anyway.

"No," she repeated. "If you care about him at all, let it lie. Don't try to talk about it yet."

I opened my mouth, closed it, and shook my head.

"…yet?" That was the only question I could manage.

Merete looked aside. "Maybe not ever. Maybe if things change." I tried to say something else, but she brushed it aside. "You saw him get angry. Right now, the best thing you can do is let him

pretend you didn't see."

"…it was pretty obvious."

"And how do you think *that* makes him feel?"

I parted my lips.

"…oh."

Idiot. His imperfect controls were my fault too, given his difficulty finding a teacher willing to take him on. "Merete, have I thanked you lately for being my voice of reason? Because I was about to royally screw up. Again."

Merete smiled, but seemed a little distracted. "Any time."

The second day of the conference was even more boring than the first, and didn't come with any built-in drama to speed it up this time. I kept an eye out for Vorin, but he had apparently decided to skip, which left me with zero chances to slug him.

Whoever had organized this had decided that each day need its own, individual opening and closing ceremonies, and they weren't designed to be especially optional. Nevertheless, I managed to bow out of the closing ceremonies due to an overpowering objection from my bladder.

The facilities were placed so that I had to duck through the darkened exhibit hall to get to them. Not feeling in any particular hurry to get back from them, I took my time on the way back.

The hall was big and strange and dim without the presenters in it. My soft footsteps were the only sound other than the slight hum of powered-down machinery

Or...was it?

A soft series of clicks. Quiet breathing.

"Hello?" said a voice. Surprisingly, it wasn't mine. "What are you doing with that?"

I crouched, instantly in combat mode, and slipped forward to peak around a particularly bulky display.

"Routine maintenance," said a rough voice.

"There must be some mistake," said the first voice, and as I risked a glance around the corner, I realized it was Sarda's Hermat coinventor, Dr. Alaron. As for the other figure, I had no idea.

The first voice muttered a curse in what sounded like –

I was around the corner before I consciously registered the word as Klingon.

"Hey!" I shouted, wishing I had a phaser on me.

The mysterious figure whirled, holding something bulky. There was a sound, and a vague tingling feeling all up my right arm and side. The figure – the Klingon? – grabbed Dr. Alaron and aimed a kick at me. There was the sound of a communicator, and then a few short words barked in Klingon, and then the sound of a transporter.

I hit the floor somewhere in the middle of that sequence of events, and was rewarded with a blinding pain all up my arm and right side.

I blinked away the tears of pain in my eyes. There was no sign of either the Klingon or Dr. Alaron.

I swallowed a few choice expletives and reached for my communicator with my good hand.

"Piper to – "

Wait. My first instinct was to call security, but this wasn't Starfleet. I didn't know how to access their communications network.

"Piper to Sarda!"

I counted the seconds.

"Sarda here."

"Sarda, get down to the display hall. Something's been stolen from your booth. Try to get ahold of conference security."

"Acknowledged. We will be there momentarily."

Good. It took him less time to process that than it had me, and I was watching the whole thing.

"Thanks," I said, though I was pretty sure he's already shut down the line on his end, and I rolled to sit up more. My arm and ribs stung horribly, and every stray breath of air seemed to sting my skin.

They got there sooner than I had guessed they would be able to, but by that time I had managed to pull myself to my feet.

Sarda and Merete got there first. Merete saw me holding my ribs and pulled out her Feinberger medical scanner that she'd somehow tucked into her evening gown's tiny matching clutch.

"What happened?" she and Sarda asked at the exact same time.

"Klingons happened," I grunted. "That's about all I got."

"Klingons?" said Sarda.

"Well, judging by what I heard. I may not speak Klingon, but it's pretty unmistakable."

"But there weren't any Klingons at the conference," said Merete.

"That was the assumption that we made," said Sarda, who, satisfied that Merete had me in hand, had moved over and begun examining the table. "They have taken the prototype."

"But *why?*" I said, and then hissed as Merete accidentally brushed the scanner against my arm. "Isn't that medical research? I mean, no offence to your work, but isn't that a little outside the Klingons' usual priority set?"

Sarda frowned but didn't say anything.

"Also, what the *hell* did they hit me with?" I asked Merete. "I've never felt anything quite like it."

Merete frowned too. "There's nothing actually wrong with you," she said.

"Hurts a lot more than nothing!"

Merete shook her head. "I don't know. I believe you, but I can't see anything on here."

"Can I see that?" said Sarda, and there was a strange note in his voice. Merete must have heard it too, because we both looked up at him. She nodded and handed over the scanner.

Everything about this was strange. I mean, everyone learned to use the scanners in basic first aid training, but if an actual doctor didn't see anything, what did Sarda hope to see?

He adjusted two or three settings, looked at it, and silently handed it back to Merete. She took it and did a double take.

"Piper, did you see what it was that hit you?" asked Sarda.

"Uh...not really?" I said. "I mean, I assume it was a weapon."

"It was not," said Sarda. "It was the prototype."

"The…." I trailed off and what very little I had heard about the project tumbled around in my brain. "Wait. Didn't you say your project had to do with nociceptors? And aren't those…"

"Pain receptors," finished Merete. "Yes."

Sarda nodded unhappily. "It appears that the device greatly increases your nociceptive sensitivity."

"Why would you *invent* something like that?!" I said before I could think.

Sarda's lips tightened. "The purpose was the opposite. Decreasing nociceptive sensitivity would have provided an avenue for treating currently incurable pain conditions."

"...oh."

Before I could either put my foot further into my mouth or try to apologize, the lights came up to full and three extremely tardy security officers hurried. At least, I assumed that's what they were supposed to be. Clearly, no one had expected any real threats at the conference.

"What happened?" asked the probable leader, and I was forced to explain what I had seen all over again. In the middle of *that*, Scanner finally caught up and needed the beginning repeated when I was done. Then I went back to the *Banana Republic* for access to long distance comm channels so I could hail the *Enterprise* and let them know what was going on, too. And just to be sure, I made sure it was a secure channel. I wasn't entirely if that was necessary, but I sure as hell didn't want to be the one to make the judgment call that it *didn't.*

"*Banana Republic* to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise* here," came the sweet, sweet sound of handing over responsibility.

"Sir, there's been a development at the conference."

"So, I gathered from the secure channel," said Kirk, and I swallowed a grimace. Right. Yes. That would do it.

"I'm not sure what security rating this should have. The short version is that Sarda's research prototype has been stolen, apparently by Klingons."

The look on Kirk's face got progressively grimmer as I gave the details of the incident.

"So, I don't know that it's the sort of thing that will have intragalactic consequences," I concluded, "but it's bad news for anyone who gets too close."

"Your standards for the gravity of situations may have been somewhat skewed by previous events," said Mr. Spock from the background, completely deadpan.

"Um...yes sir," I said. Last time I had encountered the Klingons we had come within an inch of interstellar war, so he was probably right. This was still plenty bad.

"We'll increase speed to be there as soon as we can," said Kirk, "but we're still most of a day – "

"22.314 hours at warp seven," supplied Mr. Spock.

" – away from the Orion system," finished Kirk seamlessly. "In the meantime, do whatever you can to find out more. We'll be in touch. *Enterprise* out."

I opened my mouth, possibly to protest, though I wasn't sure of that, but the screen had already flipped back to the view of Orion Prime circling below.

"...aye sir," I said to the planet.

"What's the word?" said Scanner when I got back down to them.

"'Detective'," apparently," I said. "They're on their way, but the more we can find out before they get here, the better.

"Uh-huh," said Scanner. "And where are we supposed to start?"

I shrugged. "Security footage?" That was where they usually started in the detective novels I had devoured as a teen, not that I was going to admit that.

"It was *dark,*" said Scanner.

"There still might be something," I argued, mostly because I had no other ideas at the moment.

"I don't think that's necessary," said Merete. Both of us looked at her. She shrugged and pointed up. "They beamed up, right? Klingon cloaking devices still can't handle transporters, can they?"

"Orbital sensory logs," I muttered. Scanner brightened.

"I'll see what I can see!" he said. "Maybe ol' Rex caught something." He never had gotten used the *Banana Republic*'s new name, and always called her 'ol' Rex', complete with missing D.

"Failing that, we may be able to gain access to the Orion orbital authority's logs," added Sarda. "As we are currently the ranking Starfleet representatives."

Shit. We were, weren't we?

"Right. Check the *Banana Republic*'s logs first, though. Let's do this the easy way if we can."

"I think you and me have very different definitions of *easy,*" said Scanner, but gave a sideways salute and headed off.

I sighed and scratched my arm, and then had to swallow a yelp as I was abruptly reminded that my nerves were still on high alert for no reason at all.

"Are you all right?" asked Sarda.

"Other than the blinding pain I'm apparently just fine," I grumbled.

Visible guilt flashed in his eyes, and I realized what I'd said. Again.

"I mean...I just...it's fine, really," I said, trying to pull my foot back out of my mouth. "Just a false alarm. I'll be fine."

"I had hoped…." He shook his head. "It was never meant to be used this way."

I grimaced. "Story of your life, mostly thanks to me."

He shook his head. "I never meant to hurt you."

That...was an uncharacteristically straightforward admission.

"Well, then you're a better person than me," I said. "I'd have wanted to hurt me if I'd fracked up my life that bad."

Whatever strange moment we were having was interrupted by the beep of my communicator.

"Scanner to Piper."

"Go ahead."

"I've got something, but it's a strange something."

"What kind of strange?"

"There was a brief energy reading at the time of the beam-up," he said. "Behind one of the moons, so no clear reading, but in context, I'd bet my eyeteeth it was a cloaked ship."

"Ok, that doesn't sound strange."

"The energy reading wasn't consistent with Klingon

decloaking signatures."

I frowned. "Maybe they upgraded their design?" If so, that was definitely tactically relevant information.

"Maybe," said Scanner. "It's closer to a Romulan signature."

"They are allies," I pointed out. "Maybe they had a technical collaboration of their own."

"Got jealous they weren't invited?" said Scanner. "Yeah, could be. Or maybe it's on the fritz. It's leaving more of a neutron signature than they usually do.

"Can you follow it?" I said hopefully.

There was a silence and I tried to guess which face he was making at me.

"Piper, do you have ANY idea what you're asking for?!"

"It's a yes or no question," I said stubbornly.

"It's not...I mean…" he paused.

"I mean, TECHNICALLY, there was a new sensor mod that extended the range of neutron detection. Granted, we're talking about extending from brushing noses to tailgating, so not much. And even then, you're talking about manual adjustments of the wavelength oscillation…!"

"Is that a long way of saying yes?"

Scanner made a sound. "You have no idea what you're asking," he said. "Fine, I'll try. But I make exactly zero promises!"

I grinned. "I knew you'd come through." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw another figure approach us. "All right, you get whatever you need and we'll be up soon."

"All right, but I don't know where to get the *miracle* I'm gonna need to actually do this."

I grinned again and shook my head. "Piper out."

I turned to face the new person and found Sarda conversing with his other co-presenter, Dr. R'Aiyan.

"You *have* to let me come," he was saying. "Ze was *taken* by the Klingons!"

Sarda shot a look at me. I wasn't quite sure if he favored or opposed the idea. Probably both.

Dr. R'Aiyan caught the look and turned to me instead. "You

must let me come," he implored. "They took hir. We must get hir back. I could help you."

"That's probably not a good idea," I hedged.

"There is another concern," said Sarda, overriding Dr. R'Aiyan's next protestation. "I may not be able to reverse the effect of the prototype on you on my own."

Dr. R'Aiyan visibly started. "What effect?"

Sarda explained what had happened to me, but his neutralness was still strained. Dr. R'Aiyan's green skin paled towards lime.

"Oh dear," he said. "Oh dear. This is even worse than I thought."

"It's still not a good idea," I said, not at all sure that taking both a civilian AND a non-Federation citizen with us was what Captain Kirk had had in mind when he had given me his orders.

"*Please,*" said Dr. R'Aiyan, abandoning logic for pure emotional blackmail. "If our positions were reversed, and someone important to you have been taken, would you not do everything in your power to find them?"

I locked eyes with Sarda. It was one of those moments where I could almost believe I could see his thoughts.

I bit my lip and made a choice.

"Alright."

There was enough room on the ship for more than five people, but I'd gotten so used to the four of us that five seemed crowded as soon as we got up, especially on what passed for the tiny bridge.

"All right, Scanner," I said, heading for my command chair. "Show us your magic."

Scanner shot me a dubious look. "You have *way* too much faith in me, commander sir Piper."

"Lieutenant Commander," I corrected under my breath. "Well, prove me wrong then."

"I've got the sensor mods set up, and we've got a nice big ol' cluster of neutrons where the cloak went down, but after that it gets tricky." He stared at the screen and cracked his knuckles.

I'm not sure what I expected, but what I got was a nice view of

Scanner staring at a screen and making tiny corrections on his control panel.

I was just beginning to think I *had* overestimated his abilities when he made sound of triumph. “Got a direction,” he said. “Of course, unless they’re straight as an arrow, we’re gonna hafta creep at a snail’s pace to have a chance of actually following them.”

“Sarda, check the direction,” I said. “Any educated guesses?”

Sarda called up the star maps of the region. “There is an uninhabited class M planetoid in that direction,” he said. “Although of course, they may be meeting another cloaked ship.”

I frowned and made a snap decision. “Head for the planetoid,” I said. “If possible, keep an eye out for more neutron clusters where they might have decloaked.”

Scanner shook his head. “Not at warp we can’t,” he said. “These are sensor mods, not magic wands.”

“All right, all right,” I said, holding up my hands in surrender. “Let’s just check out the planetoid. If they’re not there, well, the *Enterprise* will have gotten here by then and Captain Kirk can figure out where to go from here.” I hoped.

The planetoid was hours away at the *Banana Republic*'s highest sustainable cruising speed, so that left plenty of time to worry, think, overthink, and repeatedly forgot about my overactive nerves and bump my arm against every possible surface and then some. And usually, I reacted by instinctively jerking it back against my equally sensitive ribs.

My eyes watered as I went through this cycle yet again, this time against the doorway out of the bridge. At least I managed to swallow the yelp this time.

“Are you all right?” asked Merete, ever observant.

“Yes. I mean, no, but yes.”

Merete shook her head a little. “I did a little research...I found something that might help a little. Unfortunately, the way the nociceptor field works bypasses most of my analgesics...which is what would have made it so effective as an alternative.”

“I’ll bet,” I said, resisting the urge to rub my arm yet

again. "But yeah, anything you've got, I'm willing to try."

Merete nodded and dug for her hypo. In the middle of that she looked behind me and froze.

It was a small gesture, even for her, and if I hadn't been looking right at her I wouldn't have noticed.

"You are using atriolozine?" came the rumbly voice of Dr R'Aiyan from behind me.

"Hmm," said Merete, and the sound was somehow both affirmative and noncommital. She swallowed before actually speaking for real. "5ccs."

"Hmm, might help. I certainly hope so." He turned to me. "I am very sorry that our research was used in such a way against you. It was never intended to be used as a weapon."

I grimaced. "So I've been told," I said. "It's all right, it's not your fault. None of your faults," I added, throwing a glance back over his shoulder toward where I couldn't see Sarda, but he could probably hear me.

"If we are unable to recover the device, it may take some time before we are able to replicate it," he said, looking sad.

I smiled, or at least tried to twist my lips into the general vicinity of a smile. "It's nice to know it's not definitely permanent, anyway," I said.

"I am sure," he said, and then nodded and moved past me towards wherever he'd been headed in the first place.

I turned my attention back to Merete, who had her gaze set solidly into the middle distance.

"Merete?" I said. "Are *you* ok?"

She looked at me with her wide innocent eyes. "Of course, why do you ask?"

It wasn't like she could fool me at this point, but she still couldn't really admit that she wasn't ok.

"Merete...I'm sorry."

Her lips tightened. "It's all right," she said. "I'll be fine. Just please...don't."

"...ok," I said. "If you say you're ok, I'll believe you."

"Thanks," she said, and looked back down into her pack to

retrieve the hypo she'd dropped when Dr R'Aiyan had shown up. "Here. Let me know if this helps."

I idly rubbed the spot on my good arm after Merete shot whatever it was from her hypo into me. She had long since left for the current privacy of our quarters. Where Dr. R'Aiyan had ended up finding to wait out the ride I wasn't entirely sure. Scanner was still here, but he was so absorbed in his sensory modifications that that more or less left me and Sarda alone.

I looked over, half intending to ask another useless question about whether we were there yet.

His hand was trembling.

Question forgotten, I stood, casually stretched, and moved to stand by the pilot's seat where he was stationed, hopefully close enough to avoid Scanner's admittedly distracted ears.

"You ok?" I asked, *soto voce*.

Sarda started slightly, as though his normally sharp ears hadn't even noticed my approach. He closed his hand around one of the controls to steady it. "I am *fine.*"

I couldn't help tilting my head in incredulity. "You, uh, sure about that?"

He huffed a fraction of a breath through his nose. "Do not ask such intrusive questions!"

Ok, I'll admit it, that stung. I took a deep breath to give myself time to cycle through my first few reactions, and finally settled on a variation of what I'd told Merete earlier. "If you say so," I said. "But if you decide otherwise, just remember you're among friends."

Maybe that wasn't the right thing to say. Maybe I should have pressed him, or maybe I should have said nothing at all. But what was done was done, and I turned away, trying to ignore the hand that had started shaking again even before I finished speaking.

The planetoid was dark. That was the first thing I noticed. Of course, that was to be expected of an uninhabited planetoid, but I was so used to seeing the lights of a planet from orbit that it still struck me as weird.

"Scanner, you got anything?"

"Imma lookin'. It may take a while."

"That may not be necessary," said Sarda. "I am reading life signs on the surface."

"Oh?" I said.

"They are clustered in a specific locality," said Sarda. "Perhaps a grounded ship or a base."

I frowned and rested my chin in my hands. "Do you think they've spotted us yet?"

"If it is a ship, then no. If a ship capable of cloaking had registered our presence, they would have likely cloaked already."

"Then we need to find out."

"The closer we get, the more we risk being spotted," pointed out Scanner. "But, y'know...we don't wanna beam down into a wall either. Either way, I'd say to go in phasers out."

The final consensus was that it was a small base, but only by the time we'd creeped close enough that anyone looking in the right direction definitely could have seen us.

I beamed down with a phaser in one hand and a communicator in the other, set to send the signal to beam me back up at the touch of a single button.

But the area where I'd beamed down was as deserted as our scans had suggested it should be, so I slowly lowered my phaser and raised my communicator. After one more look around the cavernous space, I flipped it open.

"Piper to *Banana Republic*."

"Here," came Sarda's voice.

"Looks clear for the moment. Whenever you're ready."

"Acknowledged."

The transporter whined softly, and Sarda sparkled into existence behind me. The others remained behind as our home base support.

"All right, let's see what we have here," I said.

But before I could do anything else, there was a sort of snapping-fizzling sensation in the air, and the empty space in front of

us was suddenly not nearly as empty as it had been.

The air fizzled and took shape as a shuttle-sized craft directly in front of us. The hull was green and the markings were all too familiar.and they weren't Klingon.

I was already crouched and in combat mode before I consciously recognized the craft as Romulan.

"You Federation types are always so *predictable,*" came a voice. A cold, haughty voice. "Leave one little trail of breadcrumbs and you can't bear to resist."

I fired my phaser in the direction of the voice, but it just bounced off a forcefield between us.

"Don't bother," said the speaker, finally coming into view. "It won't do you any good."

His face came into view, and I did a double take, and then a triple take.

"It can't…" I started, but I was cut off.

"*Vorin!"*

I did a fourth take and shot a look at Sarda.

I would have said the last thing I expected was to see the Vulcan who had rubbed me so wrong at the conference show up here and taunting us, but somehow, the sight of Sarda visibly *furious* at him was still more surprising.

"You may call me that if you wish," said Vorin. "But if you want to be more correct, you could also address me as Wing Commander Veiren."

"You're not Vulcan," I said stupidly.

"Brilliant tactical deduction," he said dryly.

"But...what about the Klingons?"

"My dear human, not only Klingons can *speak* Klingon. I couldn't very well have you leaving the right direction to your compatriots, now could I?"

"*Spy,"* said Sarda with more venom than I'd ever heard from his before. "What was it you were looking for there? Weapons?"

"What I was looking for originally is inconsequential. What I *found* ...was you."

I started. He had found us? No...no. Not *us.* Sarda. Veiren's

gaze was fixed and his eyes were half-lidded in a look of untroubled triumph.

I glanced around furiously, trying desperately to find us some small tactical advantage.

"Don't bother," said Veiren, not looking at me. "If you think you can get out of here, you're sadly mistaken."

A door opened to the left and I reflexively sent a stun beam that direction, but apparently the force field in front of us was not the only one. Belatedly, I realized just how much of a trap I had led my people into.

I didn't have much time to beat myself up about it before the wide-angled stun beam took us.

I was slowly pulled back to a consciousness I wasn't entirely happy to see.

I groaned and rolled over...and was suddenly wide awake with my eyes watering in pain. I'd rolled onto my bad arm.

Sucking in my breath, I rolled to my knees and looked around. I was alone in what appeared to be a fairly roomy stone-walled cell. No Sarda in sight. I checked my belt: no phaser or communicator either. Not that I had expected them – whatever I could say about Veiren, and that was quite a lot, I couldn't say he struck me as incompetent.

Slowly, I rose to my feet to get a more detailed bearing on my surroundings. I wandered around the edges of the cell, tapping on the walls in a few places with my good knuckles, but without so much as a hint of an echo. Solid stone, probably...were we underground?

Was *I?* I corrected myself. I had no way of knowing where Sarda was. For all I knew, he could be halfway to Romulus right now.

I shook off a chill. That *probably* wasn't true. Yet. How long had I been out?

I stopped at the heavy-looking wood door. I stared at it willing it to get out of my way first, but I didn't tap at it as I had the walls. The hairs on my arms were already standing up, so I waved my hand in front of it until I heard the telltale fizzing sound of a forcefield.

Well then. I folded my arms in front of my chest, winced when

I wasn't as careful as I should have been, and considered my options. It didn't take long.

I was interrupted from my reverie by the sound of the forcefield snapping into nonexistence. I tensed and raised my arms into a sad excuse for a defensive posture as the door behind it swung open.

"What do you think you're – "

" – doing?" said a mischievous voice I wasn't expecting. "Rescuin' you, of course!"

"Scanner!"

"Come on," he said. "We gotta get to a less shielded part of the complex."

"Where's Sarda? How did you figure out we needed rescuing so soon?" I asked, following him at a near jog.

"Dunno yet. Can't tell Vulcan from Romulan at this distance. But we figured when your signal went off on its own, that couldn't be a good sign." Scanner's eyes were glued to his tricorder. "Single vulcanoid life sign this-a-way!" He changed directions abruptly and I skidded to follow him down a new corridor.

"How many total?" I asked.

"Six," said scanner. "Sarda and presum'bly five Romulans."

"Veiren and four others," I noted to myself.

"Who?"

Before I could answer, Scanner abruptly grabbed my elbow and pulled me into an open cell.

"*Company,"* he mouthed silently, and I nodded and shrank into the shadows.

Two sets of footsteps, maybe three. I closed my eyes and willed myself to see with my ears.

The footsteps passed us and stopped just past us, probably the next cell over. The cell with the single vulcanoid life-form Scanner had spotted. Sarda.

There was a faint fizzle of a forcefield dissolving, and then the creak of a heavy wooden door swinging outward the way the door to my own cell had, but Sarda didn't have the luxury of a friendly face on the other side of his.

I opened my eyes and jerked toward the door, but Scanner

grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. Silently, he showed me the screen of his tricorder. Two red dots stood in the center of a crude map, and a little ways away were clustered four green dots. Human and vulcanoid. We were outnumbered and at a disadvantage. I gritted my teeth.

Scanner tapped the corner of the screen, and I looked again. A blue dot? Who…?

*Dr. Alaron.* In my worry, I had momentarily forgotten our original rescue mission. I glanced at Scanner, who tilted his head and raised his eyebrows.

Dammit. He was going to make me choose.

My gut said we needed to get to Sarda immediately. He was *right there.* But we were outnumbered, and I had to think tactically. Logically. Especially since he wasn't here to force me to do it.

I took as deep a breath as I could without noise and tapped the blue dot on the screen.

Scanner nodded and peaked around the doorframe. We were going to have to sneak past the open door to get to the corridor that contained Dr. Alaron.

Scanner pulled his head back and nodded, and I half-crouched, getting ready to move fast.

Almost as one, we emerged from the relative safety of the empty cell into the equally empty hallway. I willed my boots not to squeak and moved as quickly and silently as I could toward the open door of the next cell over.

"Of course you will," came the haughty sound of a voice I'd already come to loathe. "All the remains to be seen is *when.*"

There was a clanking sound and then another, much more grating voice. "Go to hell."

I nearly tripped.

*Please be someone else,* I begged of no one as I threw myself against the wall, but I already knew the answer, and my gut was tying itself in pretzels. No matter how broken it sounded, I knew that voice.

"If you say so," said Veiren mildly. "But before then, I *will* get what I what I want. Or do you think I'll simply let you play the waiting game?"

Scanner tugged at my arm, but I *needed* to hear more.

"You will *not.*"

He sounded *terrible*. What had *happened* while I was in my cell?

Scanner tugged my arm more urgently.

"A pity. You could have made such a *good* Romulan. But no matter – you think you'll win if you keep me waiting long enough, but you won't find I'll let you off so easily as *that.*"

When Scanner tugged a third time, I belatedly realized that the conversation was wrapping up and we were almost out of time. I let him pull me forward, and before the Romulans in the cell turned to leave, we darted past the cell and into the next hallway.

"What was *that* about?" muttered Scanner as soon as we were safely out of earshot.

"I wish I knew," I grumbled back, but my gut was already telling me I wasn't worried *enough.*

Dr. Alaron's cell was unguarded, and Scanners technical wizardry made quick work of the forcefield covering the door.

Ze came rushing through the doorway almost before the door was open, and we both had to jump aside to avoid hir swinging fists.

"Wrong target, wrong target!" yelped Scanner, waving his hands in faux surrender, and Dr. Alaron slowed down long enough to, if not recognize us, at least notice that we weren't Romulan.

"We're with Dr. R'Aiyan," I added just for good measure. "We're here to get you out."

Ze nodded sharply and lowered hir hands. "Which way?" ze hissed.

"Depends," said Scanner. "Dun' suppose you happen to know where the prototype got put?"

"They took it that way," said Dr. Alaron, pointing toward a corridor that teed into this one a few yards away. "Beyond that, I don't know."

Judging by Scanner's face, that wasn't the direction he'd hoped for.

"Can we get to it?" I asked.

"We can try," said Scanner. "But we need to get closer to the surface if we want a beam-out, and that way ain't it."

"We can't let them keep the prototype," said Dr. Alaron.

I let air out between my lips and nodded. "Let's go."

The Romulans were either conserving power, or else *really* believed in mood lighting, that much was sure. The corridors were dimly lit and felt abandoned, and I was beginning to think Dr. Alaron had been mistaken when Scanner abruptly stopped.

"Readin' some field emission readin's," he said. "I think that's a bingo."

"Where?"

Scanner pointed through a doorway.

Dr. Alaron was the first one through. "Bingo indeed," ze said, and I wondered what kind of strange metaphor a bingo was. An animal maybe?

Scooping up the awkwardly shaped but apparently not overly heavy prototype, Dr. Alaron turned back to us. "As I am not armed, I will carry it."

I opened my mouth to point out that I wasn't armed either, and then closed it again. No real need to point that out, and obviously ze didn't realized I'd been a rescuee before I'd been a rescuer.

We made our way back the way we'd came, trusting mostly to Scanner's tricorder to lead us in the right direction.

I really shouldn't have moved to the lead. I was unarmed and didn't have the tricorder. Nevertheless, I was the first one around the next corner.

And right into the welcoming arms of a Romulan Centurion.

I did the only thing I could think of: I gave a wild shout and darted as quickly as I could away from the hall where Scanner and Dr. Alaron still hopefully were hidden.

It didn't buy me much time. Before I'd gotten three meters, my arms were locked behind my back and I was staring at the face I had come to loathe more than anything in the galaxy.

"I see you've decided to save me a trip," said Veiren said mildly.

"Were you planning to stop by for coffee? Sorry, I'm booked."

He made a slight signal, and I found my arms shackled behind my back by one of the centurions.

"Not per se," he said. "Truthfully, it's not you I'm interested in, but you have a part to play yet."

He turned and gestured the guards forward, and I was dragged along with them.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I thought I'd take you to see your...friend."

*Sarda.*

"Where is he?" I demanded. "What have you done with him?"

"You will see soon enough," he said, motioning to his guards. "And I assure you that I have done nothing to him."

"Right," I spat as the guards dragged me along. "Because I'm sure you would never be so cruel."

Vorin raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I would," he said. "It's simply that I didn't need to."

"What's *wrong* with him?"

Vorin glanced back at me. "You really don't know, do you?"

I answered with a glare.

Vorin shrugged. "Vulcans never cease to amaze me."

I bared my teeth, ready to shout, but Vorin finally deigned to answer. Sort of.

"Ah well, it doesn't really matter either way. But since you ask—your friend is turning into a monster."

"No, he's not," I answered automatically.

"Yes, he is," said Vorin, blandly. "They call it the blood fever, the burning blood. It's been licking at the edges of his sanity for a week already, and very soon, it's going to drive him mad. The man you thought you knew will be burned away, replaced with little more than a savage animal, raging and raving as the last pieces of his mind are burned away in agony."

I opened my mouth, but the air in my lungs seemed to have congealed in a solid mass of dread.

"And then," continued Vorin inescapably, "once that inner monster has taken ahold of his mind completely, the fire in his blood will burn him alive. He will suffer in mindless agony for days, and

then he will die."

*"No!"*

I must have lunged forward, because the next thing I knew, I was being pulled backwards by two pairs of Romulan hands.

"No!" I said again. "There has to be some way to save him!"

Some dim part of my mind wondered in Vorin was lying. But the coiling in the pit of my stomach told me he had no reason for such an elaborate lie.

Vorin raised his eyebrow. "Admirable loyalty. You are quite correct."

I barred my teeth at him. "Then do it!"

"Oh, I plan to."

The sick feeling in my stomach only grew for a long, silent moment.

"…in exchange for what?" I asked bitterly. He had me. He could ask me to betray the whole Federation, and I might actually do it. My only saving grace was that I had nothing of that magnitude to offer.

"It's not quite that simple," said Vorin, and I frowned. "You see, it's not so much something *I* can do as something *you* can do."

I opened my mouth, and then shut it again without saying anything.

"Yes," said Vorin. "I am curious as to whether you're willing. It was hardly something he could call in as a favor, after all."

"…what are you talking about?"

"But it doesn't really matter," he continued, ignoring me. "Either way, it will keep him alive."

My stomach did a little you're-gonna-die dance.

"…what does he need? My life? Because he can *have it.* I don't care."

Vorin gave me another look. "Perhaps your loyalty truly is stubborn enough to make it through intact. He is surprisingly loyal towards you as well—I would have expected him to break by now, but he still insists that I keep you away from him."

My stomach iced over that time. "…keep me away? Didn't you kind of just imply that that would *kill him?"*

"Oh, it would. Without you there, he will die in agony. But he still hates himself for what he's about to do to you."

Vorin stopped at a door. "But since you indicated that you would be willing to do anything to save him, I intend to consider this the favor I owed you."

He pressed his hand to the panel, and the door slid open. From behind him, I could make out the shape of Sarda chained to the wall.

"Sarda!" I called out before I had a chance to think it through.

Sarda's eyes flew open and the chains clanked as he fought against them.

"No!"

Vorin made a sound I could more easily imagine directed at a small child. "You should thank me," he said. "I'm saving your life."

The chains made a furious sound as Sarda fought against them. "Let me die!"

"No!" It was my turn to shout. "Sarda! If you die, I'm going to *kill you."*

Vorin smiled coldly. "See? She wants to be here." He reached back and undid the shackles on my wrists.

"She does not *know!"* cried Sarda in anguish.

"You should have told her, *ritelsu,"* said Vorin, almost mockingly.

Sarda's hands clenched into fists, and his head was lowered. "…this is not…"

Vorin shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I've brought her here to help with that little problem of yours, and afterwards we'll talk."

Sarda's head shot up again, and he sent Vorin a look of pure, liquid hate. "That is not *helping!* Let her go!" Something like a shiver ripped its way through his body, and he sank against the chains.

"No," said Vorin simply, and stepped backwards through the open door.

"Hey!" I complained, whipping around as the door shut in my face. "What do you think you're doing, you bastard?"

But if he could even hear me, he didn't answer. Instead, I heard a sound from behind me.

"No," said Sarda. "No. No." His eyes were shut, and I wanted

to call the repetition a mantra. “No.”

There was a slight click, and the shackles that held his hands snapped open. “No!”

Sarda slammed his newly-freed hands over his face and sank to the ground. “No, no…”

“Sarda?” I said, and stepped toward him. He flinched away.

“Leave me alone! Go *away*!”

My heart shriveled up into a lump that lodged itself in the back of my throat.

“Please don't make me.”

I barely whispered the words. It didn’t matter that I *couldn’t.*

He breathed raggedly and said nothing.

“Please don't make me go,” I repeated. “Whatever demons you're fighting...please...just let me stay with you. Maybe there's nothing I can do. Maybe...maybe I'm being selfish by asking you to let me see you like this. But please, please don't make me go.”

Sarda gritted his teeth and stared at me with a look in his eye that I didn't recognize at all.

“If there's any way I can help…”

He launched himself halfway across the floor toward me.

“Do not...SAY that. You...do not know...what you offer.”

“I...don't...CARE!” I was screaming at him. I didn't care about that either. “I don't care what I'm offering! What do you *need?* My life? It's *yours.”*

I shoved myself at him as though shoving my life in his direction and ended up tackling him to the floor, straddling him as I looked down and he looked up.

Sarda made a sound I didn't know he was capable of, but I only had an instant to wonder at it. Before I could do more, his hands shot up and grasped the sides of my face, and I was overcome by agony.

I might have screamed. Fire ripped through and under my skin. My blood boiled in my veins.

My body jerked back of its own accord, breaking Sarda's deathgrip on my face. Instantly, the fire faded.

Sarda made an agonized sound and reached toward my face again.

I took three deep breaths and swallowed.

“Anything you need,” I said, and it was both a promise and a prayer.

I grabbed his hands in mine and pulled them back to my face.

The agony ripped through my veins again, but I probably didn't scream this time. How Sarda had been able to *talk* through this I barely had the wherewithal to wonder. Every ounce of my concentration was devoted to just existing to the next moment.

Dimly, I became aware that Sarda had rolled us over and was now straddling me instead. His hands fell from my face, but the telepathic link didn’t even falter this time.

*Anything you need.*

Sarda's hands found the front on my jumpsuit and *ripped.* The fastening gave all the way down the front.

*Anything at all.*

I clawed at his shoulder, not trying to stop him, just trying to find any anchor in the storm.

He screamed and took what he needed.

It was like water on a fire. The unbearable heat settled back to something almost endurable.

How long it lasted, how many times he fell against me and started again, I couldn't have said.

Finally, he fell against me and into what seemed to be a deep sleep. After a few moments of internal debate, I pulled myself from under him and tried to salvage what was left of my clothes. I finally settled for tying the arms of my jumpsuit around my waist and just letting my bra show.

He was no longer shaking, and the hellish fever had broken. I, on the other hand, was covered in bruises and sore in very sensitive places. I shivered and rubbed my arms.

After a few long moments, there was a change in awareness. I didn't know how to explain it, but when I looked up, he had opened his eyes.

They were filled with abject confusion, but *he* was back in them in a way they hadn't been while he...well, a while.

“Sarda…?” I said hesitantly.

His eyes drank me in, and slowly changed from confusion to horror.

"No," he whispered.

"Are you...all right now?"

He slowly lifted one hand and spread his fingers to cover his face. The other hand white-knuckled the floor.

"There is...no apology for what I have done to you," he whispered into his hand.

I glared and crossed my arms in front of my exposed chest. "Are you all right now or *not?*"

He swallowed. "I will live."

"Good."

"There is nothing good about this."

"When I said I would do anything for you, I *meant* it."

"You could not have meant *this."* He spat the last word and dropped his hand.

Before I could even begin to form an answer, the forcefield fizzled into nonexistence and the door started creaking open. We both tensed, hoping against hope that it was Scanner again.

It wasn't.

"You," I spat with more venom than I'd realized I had left to give.

"Me," confirmed Veiren with Vulcan-like dispassion. "Now, before we were...interrupted...by matters of Vulcan biology, I had come up with some questions that I require answers to regarding the technology you had so helpfully developed."

"I will not answer," said Sarda.

"I haven't asked yet," said Veiren mildly. "But so far your track record of things you've told me you'd never do is zero for one."

Anger/fear/guilt twisted in my gut—

Mine? Wait, that definitely wasn't what I was feeling. Why had I thought it was?

"It's a fascinating piece of technology," Veiren was continuing. "The basic concept is clear enough, but I *do* need to understand how you managed the field effect generation or I'll be stuck affecting one nerve cell at a time."

Sarda said nothing.

"You could always tell yourself it would only be used for medical purposes. After all, isn't that what you did the first time?"

I threw myself to the side without having to look as Sarda, in a burst of rage, made for Veiren's throat.

As I hit the floor, three things happened at once: my arm lit up with blinding pain, Veiren moved fluidly to counter Sarda's attack….and the orange beam of a phaser hit Veiren square in the back.

"The hell did he *say?"* said Scanner from the doorway.

"Tell you later," I said, dragging myself back to my feet. "Let's get back to the ship before he wakes up."

—

We had done it.

Everyone was back on board, and we had left the Romulans to their own devices and were headed at top speed back to the relative safety of Orion space.

I let out a breath it felt like I'd been holding for days and sat down heavily.

"Ow," I said as my bad arm hit the side desk in our tiny medbay.

"Don't worry," said Merete, all but answering my thoughts. "The others started working on reversing the prototype as soon as Scanner got them back."

"And it should be ready," came Dr R'Aiyan's rumbly voice.

I glanced up. The medbay didn't allow much in the way of personal space, but Merete seemed...less uncomfortable than she had been in his presence, at least.

"I'm more than ready," I said.

Dr R'Aiyan nodded in a way I was tempted to think of as "ponderous" and lifted the somewhat bulky prototype like it was a single hypospray and set it carefully on the desk near my arm.

"You should not feel anything from the field effect," he said before turning it on.

He was right about that, anyway. There was no sensation, no beam or light...no evidence that it was even connected to a power

source.

"There," he said, satisfied.

I waved my arm around a bit to test it, and when it worked, I proactively cringed and tapped my elbow.

"Does it hurt?" asked Merete.

"No," I said, surprised at myself. "It doesn't!"

"Excellent," rumbled Dr R'Aiyan. "I am pleased that it has worked as intended."

"Same here," I said sincerely. "Thanks."

He nodded. "Now, if you will excuse me, I wish to return to Dr Alaron. I believe your companion wished to complete your exam."

Merete nodded her thanks at his retreating back but didn't say anything.

"You...seem to be getting along better," I said as she picked up her scanner. I wasn't sure if I should broach the topic or not.

She stared at the scanner, adjusting the same setting back a forth a few times.

"We had a chance to work together," she said, which was apparently her way of pointing out that Scanner had left them alone to rescue the rest of us. "He's really quite a skilled scientist." She stopped fiddling and started actually running the scanner down my body.

I bit back my first response, and then my second. "Glad to hear it," I said, "considering he just messed with every nerve in my arm."

"He really does know what—"

She stopped short and stared at the scanner. Her breath caught in her throat. "Piper…what happened?"

I blinked. "What?" I said stupidly, and then I realized what the unblinking eye of the medscanner must be seeing. Oh. Oh *no.*

"Nothing!" I said quickly, shoving the scanner away from me. Nice move, dumbass.

Merete looked up at me, and I could see the horror written in her eyes.

"Nothing," I repeated. "It's…not what it looks like."

"Not what it *looks* like?" repeated Merete. "Piper…when the Romulans took you away…"

I shook my head. "No. No. Not like that."

Merete was quiet for a moment. "Piper, I'm reading a number of superficial vaginal lacerations. There's no way you got that in the fight. Do you really expect me to believe that you stopped for some consensual rough sex while trying to figure out how to escape the Romulans?"

I made a face. "Well…yes." I gave a bitter half laugh. "You're never going to believe me, but yes. That's what happened."

Merete looked at me. "You know that coercion is still rape, right?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "I wasn't coerced."

Merete gave me a look. "Your face says this wasn't your idea."

I scrubbed my offending face. "Ok, not exactly my idea, but I went along with it. My reasons were my own."

Merete was still looking at me. God dammit.

"Look, I really can't explain…"

Merete looked stricken. Double dammit. I'd just confirmed her worst fears.

"No! I wasn't like that, I swear!" How the hell was I supposed to explain this?

"Who was it?" she said softly. "Vorin?"

I shook my head.

"One of the guards?"

I shook my head again. She frowned.

"Who, then?"

I made another face. "Look, I'm *fine.* Except for my arm, which has already been fixed."

"You do realize I'm going to have to make a medical report, right?"

My blood ran cold.

"I'd rather that wasn't in there."

She fixed me with a hard stare. "Give me a good reason not to."

I closed my eyes. Oh, *frack* it.

"Off the record."

She looked dubious.

"I swear, Merete, there's a good reason."

Her lips tightened to a hard line. "If you can convince me of that, I'll consider keeping this off the record."

I made yet another face. If I wanted to keep this off the record, that was the best I was going to get. I nodded my assent. "Fine. Just please don't tell him I told you."

Merete frowned. "Tell who?"

My lips parted, but it took two tries before my throat would open up.

"…Sarda."

There was a beat, and then Merete's faintly purple skin went lavender-pale, and I thought she was going to fall.

"He did *not* rape me," I hissed, reaching out with my good arm just in case. "I *told* you. It was consensual."

Merete shook her head in disbelief. "*Why?"*

I gritted my teeth. This was the hard part.

"Because…" I floundered. I closed my eyes, and the memories of his tortured, desperate mind came to the forefront. "Because he had to."

Merete gave me an indescribable look. "Had too."

I nodded. Merete shook her head. "Your Vulcan best friend 'had to' have rough sex right in the middle of a vital mission. Do you think you could have picked a worse time to finally communicate with each other?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "'Communication' would be overstating it considerably."

Merete looked at me again.

I made a face. "Remember how weird he was acting?"

Merete nodded uncertainly.

"Yeah, well, it got worse," I said. "I've got no name for it, but the phrase 'frack or die' comes to mind, and he was losing his mind while he was at it. And for some godforsaken reason, Vorin knew what was going on."

Merete's eyes filled with horror again. Had I said too much?

"Vorin knew too much," she repeated, and I could see the links forming in her eyes. "He…he locked you in, didn't he?"

I sighed. "Look," I said, "if you change your opinion of Sarda

over this, I will never forgive you. He didn't want me there. He begged Vorin not to leave me there, even if that meant dying in agony. If anything, I'm the one who forced this on *him,* so if you're going to blame one of us, it better be me." I looked up at her in defiance.

Merete shook her head. "I can't do that."

"Then don't blame Sarda either. Blame Vorin, if you want. I probably should, but if he *hadn't* done what he did, Sarda might be dead by now, because you *know* he wouldn't have told anyone."

Merete was quiet for a moment, and then slowly nodded.

"If that's really what you want."

I let out a breath of relief. "Yeah."

"Do you need contraceptives?"

I blinked, and then my eyes widened till they hurt. "Oh, *hell.* I haven't had my hypo this month."

Merete nodded, unsurprised. "It's not too late."

"*Please,*" I said.

"All right," she said. "You must be in some discomfort, too. Let me get you something for that, too."

—

"…Merete knows."

I hadn't intended for those to be the first words out of my mouth when I saw him.

Sarda took a moment to rather stiffly sit down across from me.

"I cannot ask you to keep this hidden."

I gave a kind of half-snort. "It wasn't exactly my idea."

Sarda made a kind of Vulcan-confused face. I looked down. "Medical scan," I elaborated shortly.

Sarda froze even more. "I have injured you," he said, and it didn't sound like a question.

I shook my head. "It's nothing," I said. "It's just that she started asking questions."

Sarda struggled for a moment. "…as she should," he said finally.

I made a face. True, but still.

"I had hoped to keep this just between us."

Sarda was quiet for a moment.

"I still hope to keep my species' private affairs out of the public eye," he said quietly. "But I fully intend to submit myself for disciplinary action."

I froze. What was he going to say, then? Without explaining the circumstances?

"Oh no, you don't," I hissed. "If you insist on putting this in your report, then you sure as hell better tell them that I was in on it just as much as you were."

There was a pause of about two of Sarda's slower heartbeats.

"But you were not," he said finally. "Piper…why would you seek to defend me?"

"Because you didn't do anything *wrong."*

"I...violated you. I *took* your mind and body without any right to do so."

I glared at him. "I was literally begging you to!"

He let out a broken breath. "You still do not understand the extent of what I *did."*

I clenched my teeth to bite back the insistence that I did.

"Ok, then *tell me."*

"When I touched your face…"

"That was a mind-meld, right?" I prompted.

His face twitched in some unnameable emotion. "More than that," he said quietly. "I created a bond between us...a permanent mental link."

"...permanent?"

"Permanent if left untouched," he clarified without making eye contact. "It can be undone."

"Oh," I said. My mind was going at about warp three, but I couldn't have said quite what I was thinking.

"Not only that. Because I was...not in control, the link is unbalanced. It favors me far too heavily." He looked distinctly unhappy.

"Are you saying you can read my mind?"

"I am making every effort not to."

I was quiet for a long moment, trying to pull my thoughts into some kind of order.

"We should request leave," he said, not looking at me, "to go to Vulcan and find a healer to dissolve the bond."

Right. Of course we should. That would be the logical thing to do. That would be the realistic choice that was the least likely to lead to pain in the end.

"…or we could not."

Sarda glanced at me briefly, and I saw confusion in his eyes—whether about my motivation or my grammar, I wasn't sure.

I shrugged and looked away.

"I think I could get used to having you in the back of my mind."

That time he really did stare at me, but I couldn't meet his eyes.

He looked away again.

"Piper," he said slowly, and his voice felt like it was weighted with lead. "It will happen again."

I didn't say anything.

Sarda took another breath. "I should seek a Vulcan bondmate. Every seven years I will…change. I cannot ask you to endure that again."

I opened my mouth, closed it, and opened it again.

"You aren't asking. I'm offering."

Sarda's lips parted, but he couldn't meet my eyes.

"…Piper…I violated your mind and your body. Why…why are you not seeking to put distance between us?"

I clenched my fist. "What are you going to do when you can't find a willing Vulcan bondmate?" I asked. Sarda flinched, but I barreled on. "It'll just be the same thing all over again. You'll break the bond, you'll keep looking, and you won't find anyone. You can't even find a *teacher."*

Sarda found a new spot on the floor to stare at. "…my search for a bondmate is not your concern."

Hurt welled up in my stomach. "Yes, it damn well is," I snapped. "Right now, I *am* your bondmate. You can break it off if you want to—I won't try to stop you. But then, when you can't find anyone…when it happens again…" I swallowed again. "I'll still be

there."

Sarda looked up at me with an intensity that almost shocked me.

*"Why?"*

I threw my fists down and shot to my feet.

"Because I love you, dammit!"

Oh god.

Sarda's lips parted as he stared at me, but I think I'd actually managed to shock him into silence.

I took a shaky breath. "I just…you've…you've been there in the back of my mind for a lot longer than I realized. I lost you once as a friend, and that was horrible enough. Today, I…I thought you were going to *die."*

The realization hit me with a force it hadn't had a chance to earlier, and I physically doubled over as my stomach rebelled.

"Oh god," I whispered. "You almost *died."*

"I did not, because of you. I have time to find another, now. There is no need for you to endure it again."

I clenched my fists and straightened up, getting back control over my body. "You still infuriate me sometimes," I muttered. I crossed my arms in a way that was supposed to seem defiant, but mostly just felt vaguely defensive. "I don't *want* you to find someone else. You know why? Because I'm *selfish.* I'm selfish and greedy and I don't want to share you with anyone like that. You'll need me again in seven years? Fine! Even if there weren't any way at all to make it better, I've already proved I can handle it. Even under just about the worst circumstances possible. Next time will be better."

Sarda stared at the ground. "You would really have there be a *next time?*"

I sat down heavily. "Yes."

"Even after what I did to you?"

I sighed explosively. "Sarda, *you didn't do have anything wrong.* I'd have been willing to do far worse."

Sarda flinched again.

"I *used* you."

"I *let* you."

The tension held between us for a long moment.

Abruptly, I let out all the breath I hadn't realized I was holding and looked down.

"Ok," I said. "Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm being unfair. Maybe you will have a chance to find someone better suited to you." I gave a bitter laugh. "It's not like I have a great track record knowing what's best for you. Just…" I paused and swallowed. "Just...if you *can't* find anyone, promise me. Promise me you'll let me help. No strings attached."

I held out my hand, palm up, holding out the invisible offer.

He stared at my hand with an intensity that almost bored through it. Time dragged out between us, but I couldn't bring myself to pull my hand away from his gaze.

"I…" he tried, and then fell silent again. "I...do not know if I can make that promise."

My fingers curled together of their own accord, but I tried to let that be the only sign of my hurt. "*Why?* "

"Because...if….if it is truly what you wish, then I will not search for another."

My breath caught in my throat and I met his eyes, trying to be sure I'd heard what he was saying.

"Are you...is that…" I swallowed and tried again. "Is that what *you* want?"

Sarda took a long breath. "I did not think it was mine to wish."

That took a moment to really sink in.

Hesitantly, Sarda reached out towards me, and stopped, and reached again until he was barely brushing the backs of my knuckles with his fingertips.

I slowed my breathing as though trying not to scare away a butterfly. Slowly, I uncurled my hand and turned it over, bringing it palm to palm with his.

For a moment, Sarda just stared at our joined hands.

Then something *dropped.* For a wild moment, I thought I was falling, but instead, something like electricity charged through our hands and I realized that Sarda had dropped the barrier he'd been holding between our minds.

It was like I'd suddenly remembered how to breathe, as a tension I hadn't even realized I was carrying finally drained out of me. The sense of *relief* was overpowering as a wrongness I hadn't quite consciously noticed faded away. He was *there,* and I didn't want that to change.

He pulled his hand away so that his fingertips trailed against my palm, but before contact could break he folded two fingers against his own palm and used his index and middle to trace the lines of my hand.

I held perfectly still, wanting to reciprocate but not entirely sure how.

But before I could make a guess at it, the door whooshed open and Scanner stuck his head in.

"Yo, Piper—oh *hey."* A grin spread across his face. "Not to interrupt a *moment* or anything, but we're almost back to Orion, and the *Enterprise* beat us there. We're about to come within hailing range, but I could always tell them you're *indisposed…"*

With an unspoken agreement, Sarda and I dropped our hands.

"If you think I'm gonna miss the chance to pass this whole mess back off to Kirk, I'm gonna have Merete check your head."

Scanner waggled his fingers at me. "Whenever you're ready," he said, and his head popped back out of the doorway.

I looked back at Sarda, and he looked at me.

"Let's go home," I said.