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Zack leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. They were training in the courtyard today, the first day without any rain since they'd been there. He didn't know how long it had been, he was too tired to care. Every muscle in his young body ached from the intense training he'd been forced into. Day and night blended in this hellish place, especially when the overcast skies and constant storms made it hard to differentiate between night and day. He opened his eyes at the first sound of movement, his instincts automatically on alert. Weak sunlight struggled against the clouds and he squinted to make out the form in the doorway. His body stiffened, coming to attention. Sorka had ordered him and Aidan to the yard only a short time ago. The Satorian was an unyielding taskmaster, tough and fierce, and scary enough that the boy wanted desperately to hide from him. Hiding wasn't an option though, nor was refusing to train. He had to learn to protect himself, as well as Pixie and Grandmother. If the Satorian caught him lounging around, he would punish him. It might come in the form of words, but was more likely to come in the form of a belt or a fist. Zack could barely remember a time when he had felt safe and secure, able to play and run at his own will. He knew it hadn't been all that long, but it seemed a century. He felt old, grown up, and alone. The only person who truly seemed to understand him now was Aidan. Like Zack, Aidan wasn't allowed to do those little boy things anymore. He too had to protect and fight. Zack was afraid fighting was all he was good for anymore. Another sound caught his ears, and he turned slightly, this time taking in the form of his sister. She stood just inside the kitchen door, barely visible, using the shadows to her advantage.

For just an instant, the child in him soared up and smiled. He wished more than anything he could talk to her, let her know how scared he really was, confide in her like he always had. He wished his sister were the one doing the protecting. It was funny how Pixie had always seemed so large to his eyes, so capable of anything. Now she looked lost and fragile. Some of the bruises were healing, but she was still so very pale, and she was thinner too. She looked different too, as if she had somehow grown and changed while he wasn't looking. His eyes narrowed slightly. She looked like a girl, not just a sister and that scared him to his bones. He and Aidan had been included in the male discussions, or at least the ones that reigned around the lunch table. The comments had taken some explaining, and he had asked Grace and V'Lar a couple of times, but once he understood the gist of them, he tried instead to ignore them. He would train harder because he had to. It was the only way he knew to insure their survival.

Another movement, this one from a different area, caught his eye, but he was too late, too slow. He had allowed himself to be distracted and it cost him. Sorka had come up on him, and he was on the ground before he knew it. He nearly

groaned as Pixie came flying out of the doorway, moving between him and Sorka.

"Leave him alone!"

Sorka reached around T'Lin and grabbed Zack by the collar, sneering as he did so. He lifted the boy until his feet barely touched the ground and shook him fiercely. "Are you a baby child that you must hide behind a woman's skirts, and not even a grown woman at that?" He shook the boy again to emphasize his point before dropping him to the ground.

Zack landed with a thud, and though the breath was knocked from him, he forced himself to his feet. He desperately wanted to scream yes, but he knew it was the wrong decision for both himself and Pixie. He shook his head to clear it and straightened his spine. His eyes when they met Sorka's were clear, and steady, though he was shaking inside. "My sister feels it is her duty to protect me as she is the elder. Even among your kind there must be some sort of maternal instinct."

Sorka glanced from Zack to T'Lin and back again. The Satorian grunted. "That is the case sometimes. You would do well to convince your sister to keep her mouth shut, or I will give her something else to do with it."

Zack turned to T'Lin. "You will remain silent, or you will leave. I cannot have you disturbing me."

T'Lin took a step toward him, hurt plain on her face. "But Zack, you are just a little boy."

Neither saw the Satorian move until he was upon her. His hand flew out, catching the girl across the cheek. The blow was so hard it knocked her to the dirt, splitting her lip. "He is male and your better. If he is old enough to claim you as his responsibility, then he is old enough to learn to protect what is his. You will not interfere again."

When her eyes cleared, T'Lin sat up slowly, and finally stood. Her fists clenched at her side as Sorka once more faced off with Zack. Her brother assumed a Vulcan fighting stance, and waited. Once more she wished her link with him was working. He had never looked more Vulcan or more unapproachable. She wondered if he were as scared as she.

Zack bit back the anger and fear that ate at him. Everything in him wanted to run and hide, behind Pixie if at all possible, but he understood that wasn't possible. He understood a lot of things he hadn't before. He knew the look in Sorka's eyes when he looked at Pixie, and he understood what it meant. He also knew he was the only thing standing between his sister and Sorka. For now the Satorian respected him, at least somewhat. They all knew the man could kill him with a

simple twist of his hands, but Sorka seemed intrigued by him, and was determined to teach him to fight as a Satorian. As far as Zack could tell, the lessons would hurt, but they would also help him and his sister survive. Grace had said just about anything was bearable to protect ones you loved, and she was right. He could do this. A shiver of fear raced down his spine as the man smiled, but he didn't let it show. Any display of emotion brought taunting, or worse, a fist in his direction that he couldn't dodge. He had learned quickly to temper his reactions.

As Sorka came at him, Zack dropped and rolled. He grunted as the Satorian's foot caught his ribs, but nearly crowed in triumph and the bigger man fell. Zack was up and moving, landing a series of blows before the Satorian got to his feet. As the elder stood, Zack danced out of his reach.

Though wiry, Satorian fighting depended on mostly brut strength. If they couldn't beat something into submission, they used weapons, and often fought dirty. Zack couldn't understand why Vek and Sorka had decided to train Aidan and himself in different fighting techniques, but he wasn't about to complain. Malcolm had told him once that the best way to defeat an enemy was to know its weakness and to never underestimate it. He figured Sorka and Vek were doing just that with him and Aidan, and he was smart enough to take advantage of the fact, even if it brought a few bruises.

The training session was relatively brief. Once Sorka had Zack pinned, he explained where the boy went wrong and actually showed him a few counter moves as well. Zack watched and listened, and when the Satorian told him to practice with Aidan, he did. He barely noticed when Grace came to get Pixie, but he relaxed a little once she was gone. His sister was the hardest to remain impassive to, especially when she was trying to defend him. He would talk to her later that evening. For now he had to get through his own lessons.

Sorka worked with them for another hour, finally deeming the lessons over. Both boys were sweaty and filthy, and eager for a bit of rest, though neither said a word. Aidan was almost as good at hiding his thoughts and feelings as Zack. As the Satorian ushered them to dinner, the boys shared a look. Tomorrow they were going to learn about knife fighting. Zack wondered if the man would be stupid enough to arm them.

Grace sat on the bed and watched as the boys walked T'Lin through the fighting techniques they had learned. She wanted to object but knew it would do no good. She also knew the child needed every edge. She flashed V'Lar a smile as the older woman sat next to her. "She's so fragile looking."

"Pixie is stronger than she looks."

Grace nodded, trying not to flinch as Aidan flipped the girl onto her back. T'Lin did not stay down, rather, she rolled away and to her feet with an obvious grace and skill. "The boys are nearly as tall as she is, and I would swear they both weigh more."

V'Lar watched as the girl spun away, and moved smoothly into a counterattack, taking on both boys at once. "She uses it to her advantage. Speed, stealth and inner strength are her gifts."

"It won't protect her from Sorka, or Vek." Her eyes slid over the swollen cheek. A dark purple marked the cheekbone, and a cut swelled the lower lip.

"Or Arven."

Grace glanced at the older woman. "He's back then?"

"Yes. That's why they called me after dinner."

Grace's eyes traveled over the older woman, looking for any obvious signs of damage. "You are well?"

"For all that he is obsessed, Arven will not harm me. I am too valuable to the cause."

"What exactly is the cause?" She glanced back at the children as a grunt echoed through the room. Aidan was on the floor this time, Zack quickly joining him as T'Lin flipped him. The younger landed solidly on the elder, making her wince. She nearly smiled as T'Lin tossed her head and grinned proudly. The boys took it as a challenge and were back on their feet within minutes. "Vek spouts some nonsense about revenge against the Vulcans and humans for siding with them. It seems senseless to me."

"Vek believes that is exactly the case, and it is to a point. Revenge is a strong motivator, and that is Arven's ultimate goal."

"I understood things were getting better between Andorians and Vulcans?"

"Officially, they are. Both people want peace, and the humans are in the middle of it, the only trusted mediators between the two." She gestured to the children. "Jonathan Archer is at the heart of it. It is he who Arven has a grudge against. Almost thirteen years ago, Archer helped negotiate a treaty between Andoria and Vulcan. He was also the one who facilitated the break in the original one."

"I bet that made the Vulcans happy."

"They were not pleased with the interference. Archer exposed a secret base that had been observing the Andorians for years. That exposure led to the destruction of one of our most sacred monasteries." The silence caught the attention of both women and they turned to find three sets of eyes on them.

The children moved closer. T'Lin tipped her head to the side. "I remember Daddy telling us about that. P'Jem right?"

"Exactly. As I recall, you hadn't been born yet."

"But Daddy said he and mom helped the Andorians and the Andorians helped them. Daddy was part of the treaty that was signed."

V'Lar closed her eyes for a minute. "Your father did indeed help with the treaty and he was to be an instrumental part of the current negotiations between the Andorians and Klingons. When people want to make a change, it is usually engineered through violence. Unfortunately that violence can scar the outcome, alter it so it isn't quite what people expected. There are groups, such as Arven's who do not approve of the negotiations and will stop at nothing to make trouble. Arven, however has a personal vendetta against Jonathan Archer. I wasn't able to get all of it out of him, but apparently it has something to do with the dishonor and death of a sibling."

T'Lin bit her lip, wincing as the motion pulled at the cut in the corner. "Why wait so long?"

"Some believe revenge is a dish best served cold." The children shot her a confused look. "After a while people forget the wrongs they have done others. If one waits long enough, the revenge is sweeter, because no one is expecting it."

Zack scowled. "If my father killed someone, then that person deserved it. My dad is a good man."

V'Lar nodded. "Jonathan Archer is indeed a good man. But even good men can be targeted. If your father was responsible for the death of Arven's sibling, then it was not something he did lightly." She glanced at Zack, then T'Lin. "They are sending me away tomorrow. I'm supposed to be a good faith exchange for weapons and such. You must be careful. You are the tools he intends to use against your father."

T'Lin shivered and wrapped her arms around herself in a self hug. "Do you think he will come?"

V'Lar nodded again. "Your parents would never leave you to these brutes. I have no doubt your father is trying to find you right now."

Zack rested a hand on her arm. "You will warn him won't you Grandmother?" His voice was worried, pleading.

"If it is within my power, I will warn your father."

The boy gave in to the need for comfort and buried his face in her robes. V'Lar gave Grace a helpless look, and then held out her arms. They were soon filled.

V'Lar waited until the children were sleeping before approaching Grace again. The words felt unnecessary, but she needed to be sure. "You will watch over them for me?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." Both women went uneasily to their beds that night.

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