

## Odysseus to Telemachus

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## Odysseus to Telemachus

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### Summary

The Dominion War is over. The Cardassian labor camp at Lazon II has been abandoned.

Kyle Riker finds a familiar face among the prisoners.

### Notes

Title taken from Joseph Brodsky's poem of the same name.

## Chapter 1

The Cardassian labor camp at Lazon II had been abandoned, but the prisoners were still there.

Medical professionals bustled past Kyle Riker as he leaned over a biobed, trying to identify the patient lying there. Whoever he was, he was a Romulan, but his face was so disfigured that Kyle's PADD couldn't match him to any records. He grunted and tried again, this time clasping the patient's hand in his own. He used his thumbnail to scrape the dried blood from the Romulan's fingerprints and then held his hand to the screen.

A chirp. A positive identification. Kyle read the report with dark eyes. The last prisoner he'd identified had been a dead woman – and her only crime was that her son had been tenuously involved with a Bajoran refugee camp, as a doctor. But this patient, alive and well, had been convicted of killing eleven Cardassian children in a terrorist attack. With a sigh, Kyle let the Romulan's hand go and pressed a subdural laser marker to his forehead, leaving behind a lurid pink seal that would identify him as someone the legal team needed to speak to.

He rubbed the back of his neck and moved on to the next patient. He'd barely had time to register the lack of a pulse when someone called for him.

"Dad?"

Kyle Riker bolted upright, his eyebrows raised. He recognized the voice instantly — although it had been a good eight years since he last heard it in person, and right now it was creaky and low. He turned to scan the Starfleet officers all around him, searching for Will's tall form. "Will?" he said, earning a few blank looks.

The boy was nowhere to be seen. Kyle adjusted his search parameters, glancing over the shorter officers he'd skipped before — then checking the array of yellow and blue shirts — then, eyebrows furrowed, the handful of medical personnel kneeling on the floor to unpack crates of supplies. The voice intruded again:

"Kyle?"

And this time Kyle could pinpoint it better, even as the voice hitched and broke, turning into a barely-lucid cry of pain. He turned slowly to face a medical cot he'd passed by on his way in. The patient there was bone-thin and barely-conscious, back arching in agony, one eye swollen shut from a recent beating. A medic sat at his bedside, hard at work cleaning the blood and filth from his skin with a bare cloth.

"Just an after-shock," she said firmly. The patient collapsed back onto the bed, his chest rising and falling in shallow gasps. "If they used electricity on you, sir, you need to tell me where."

The patient's lips moved in a whisper. Unable to hear him, the medic just stuck a hypospray against his neck and went back to cleaning his face. When he reached blindly for her hand, she batted him away, businesslike and undeterred – and he was so frail-looking, so heavily injured, so filthy that Kyle almost didn't recognize him.

But the single blue eye that swiveled his way was unmistakable.

"Will," said Kyle, his heart dropping. He took a disbelieving step toward the cot. They'd shaved his hair and beard already to clear out the lice that infested this labor camp, and beneath the bruises and burns, Kyle could almost recognize his son as he'd seen him years ago. He drew up short, his voice coming out all wrong, brisk and emotionless. "Nurse, has this patient been identified?"

"Aren't you with Clerical?" the medic asked, eyeing Kyle's PADD. She scooted back, making room for Kyle to do his work.

"Will Riker?" Kyle asked, still disbelieving, and the patient only stared at him, one eye swollen shut and the other hooded and flat. Kyle forced himself to move forward, his features steeled.

The sharp sting of body odor was so strong Kyle almost covered his nose. Will had his feet propped up on a towel at the end of the bed, where the fabric could catch any pus dripping from the open wound on his soles. The flesh there was thick and split open, as if he'd been whipped across the bottom of his feet often enough to keep him from walking for months on end. Kyle spared a quick reluctant glance for Will's left foot, where the big toe had been bisected and hung there, half amputated and totally unhealed, the open flesh turning black. The bones of that foot had been crushed so thoroughly that Kyle couldn't bear to look for more than a second. All over Will's body, sneaking out from under his ragged prison uniform, there were signs of torture: scars and burn marks, evidence of electroshock, the heavy reek of confinement and fear.

Kyle swallowed his bile and held his hand out by instinct. With a weak grip, Will grabbed hold, his palm cold and slick.

"You called for me," Kyle said, not sure if Will remembered, if he was even lucid. That pale blue eye assessed him without emotion.

"I thought that was you," Will said finally, groggily. "Can't hardly see across the room. Two meters is about my limit. But you looked familiar."

"How...?" Kyle started, and by reflex, Will squeezed his hand. "I thought you were on the *Titan*. With Deanna. When did you...?"

Will was too gaunt to be a *recent* prisoner. He had to have been here at least six months, to lose all this weight. Probably longer. But Kyle

had *heard* from Will just two months ago, about Deanna's pregnancy. He nudged the medic, silently offering to take over, and she handed him her supplies and hurried off to the next patient.

"Tell me what happened," Kyle ordered, settling down into the medic's seat. He rinsed the cloth she'd been using and pressed it against Will's face, trying to soften up the layer of filth caked to his skin. Will grunted and turned his head away. "How badly are you injured?"

This time, the only answer was a rough laugh. Kyle left the wet cloth on Will's forehead, covering his swollen eye, and dug through the medkit for a scanner.

"I thought you were with your ship," he said, aiming the cheap handheld device at Will's body. He dragged the beam from Will's forehead down to his toes. "Has anyone contacted your wife yet? Sure as hell nobody contacted me..."

His voice died. The scanner's most urgent diagnoses were malnutrition, exhaustion, two broken ribs from a recent beating. But the evidence of torture went back *years*. There were old fractures in Will's bones that hadn't been treated by any modern facility; long-term starvation that had dropped Will's blood pressure and carved out his muscles; scars from electric shocks and whips, knife blades and wooden rods. Kyle's mouth went dry as the scanner listed internal injuries consistent with sexual assault, all of them stretching back for years. When he forced himself to look away from the scanner, Will was staring back at him with one weary, hooded eye.

"This doesn't make sense. I just talked to you two months ago," said Kyle helplessly.

Will shook his head without expression.

"What do you mean, no? Some kind of imposter? A changeling? Will—"

"Not Will," he said flatly. He reached up with a clumsy hand and pulled the wet cloth over his eyes, hiding them from Kyle's sight. "Thomas," he said.

*Thomas.* For a single heartbeat, that name was gibberish. Then it clicked into place. Kyle sat back in his seat, his heart slowing down until every thunderous beat hurt his chest. The clone. The transporter accident. The terrorism on behalf of Maquis — he'd heard, of course, that Thomas had been sentenced to a Cardassian labor camp, but he didn't realize it was Lazon II. He'd never reached out to this version of his son, never really stopped to think about...

"Thomas," he breathed.

"Pleased to meet you," Thomas grunted, his eyes still hidden by the cloth.

Kyle snapped out of his thoughts. "Meet you?" he repeated, dazed. He forced the confusion away and squeezed Thomas' hand. His voice came out brisk, no-nonsense. "I *raised* you. How long have you been in this camp?"

Beneath the cloth, Thomas' jaw tightened, his lips becoming a thin line. Kyle watched his chest and found it unmoving, no breaths taken in the space between his question and Thomas' answer.

"Don't know," said Thomas eventually, his voice an odd mix of light and tense. "What year is it?"

Kyle kept his tone calm. "2375."

Another long pause. Gently, Kyle removed the cloth from Thomas' eyes and pressed it against his cheek again, working on the dirt ground into his skin. Thomas kept his good eye closed.

"Four years, then," he said finally. "And what are you doing here?"

"I was called in as a political consultant," Kyle said. "Due to my work on Cardassia—" Ah, but of course, he'd never talked to Thomas about that. He searched helplessly for the right way to explain. "They needed experts on rehabilitation. Lawyers, politicians, doctors. Anyone with experience, who wasn't afraid to get their hands dirty."

Thomas let out his breath that almost sounded like a laugh and turned his head back, leaning into Kyle's touch with a sleepy bonelessness that implied he didn't really know what he was doing. His breathing evened out, the lines in his face smoothing over as exhaustion claimed him, inch by inch. Kyle swallowed hard and scrubbed gently at the dirt on Thomas' face.

"Thought maybe you came for me," Thomas murmured.

Kyle's heart pounded in his chest. He kept his focus on the task at hand, trying to beat back the wash of guilt that came over him.

"We can discuss it later," he decided. He rinsed the rag out and smoothed it over Thomas' cheeks, relieved to see some of the dried blood softening up. It stained the cloth a pale orange as it flaked away.

"Dad?" Thomas said, his eyes still closed.

"Yes?"

Thomas' voice slurred. What he said was nearly inaudible:

"Stay."

## Chapter 2

The first step, once every prisoner had been identified and their immediate medical needs had been seen to, was to allocate private rooms. Kyle spent the better half of his evening doing grunt work with the ensigns, hanging thick sound-proof curtains and setting up privacy shields in buildings that had, just days ago, been over-crowded barracks. He walked through a lice-killing decontaminator on his way out and felt his whole scalp tingle as the tiny insect bodies deteriorated.

“Over here, sir,” said a medic in a blue Starfleet uniform. Kyle followed her off to the side and submitted obediently to a scan.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“Lazon Flu. Most of the insects – and former inmates – are carriers.” The scanner flashed green. “Good to go.”

Before the medic could turn away, Kyle grabbed her arm.

“Do you have access to the medical roster?” he asked.

“For the private doctors, sir?” she said.

“Please. I need to know if anyone’s free.”

To her credit, she didn’t ask why. She tucked her scanner beneath one arm and dialed up a handheld PADD.

“Starfleet or civilian,” Kyle offered, and the medic gave an absent nod. She ran her finger down the roster.

“Doctor Thosen is still awaiting assignments, sir. If you catch her soon, you can nab the first five slots.”

Kyle gave her a thankful nod and hurried off. Five slots! But he only needed one. He tapped at his wrist communicator, weaving through the crowds with his head down. Will – Thomas – had been moved to one of the private cubicles already, so that was where Kyle headed.

“Dr. Thosen,” he said into his comm. “This is Kyle Riker. Would you be so kind as to meet me at Cubicle Ninety-three, Barracks Alpha?”

All he got for confirmation was a three-pronged beep. Good enough. Kyle made his way down to the very end of the barracks, far from the front doors. He ducked through a group of workers busy dismantling the filthy wooden bunks where prisoners had been forced to sleep without mattresses. Insect carapaces and dry tufts of human hair scattered over the floor, where a makeshift decontaminator sizzled into life and blitzed them out of existence. Kyle kicked through the dust and reached Thomas’ room.

There he paused. Holding his breath, Kyle called up Dr. Thosen’s information again. He still had the results from Thomas’ medscan saved; all it took was a press of his thumb against the screen and those results were sent her way. That, at least, would give her an idea of what she was up against – and would save Thomas from another intrusive scan.

Kyle waved his wrist comm over the cubicle’s scanner. “Thomas,” he said when the speaker blinked on. “It’s your father. May I come in?”

The privacy shield deactivated. Kyle stepped through the curtain and came up short. A bald-headed Deltan woman was stationed at Thomas’ bedside, a cellular regenerator held delicately between two fingers. She glanced sideways at Kyle as she ran the regenerator over Thomas’ swollen eye.

“I’ve already fixed his ribs,” she said flatly. Then, when Kyle just continued to stare at her uncertainly: “Doctor Thosen. I was on my way here when I got your message. Happy coincidence, no?”

“You were assigned to Thomas?” asked Kyle, keeping his voice low.

“He’s asleep,” Dr. Thosen said, answering a question Kyle hadn’t asked. Deltans were empaths, he recalled; she must have sensed his concern and guessed the source of it. And now she smiled slightly, as if she sensed his displeasure at being read. “Your son’s clone has a bit of a reputation, Mr. Riker. Starfleet wants to make sure he’s in good hands.”

*Your son’s clone.* Those words left a bad taste in Kyle’s mouth. He circled around Thomas’ bedside and dropped into the visitor’s seat, his legs killing him.

“Thosen,” he said, reaching for the mini-replicator on Thomas’ bedside table. “That name sounds familiar. You were stationed on the *Gandhi*, weren’t you? After Thomas left?”

“Chief Medical Officer now, although I was just an underling at the time,” Thosen confirmed. “Actually, my time overlapped with Lieutenant Riker’s, just by a few months.”

She scanned Thomas’ supine body, checked the results, and moved down to his feet. There she dug in her medkit until she came up with a laser debrider – something Kyle recognized all too well from his long recovery after the Tholian attack, in Kate Pulaski’s hands. He grimaced at the sight of it.

“Is he sedated?” he asked.

“He’s not authorized for sedation,” said Dr. Thosen with a hint of apology in her voice. “Not until we get a regular supply chain going; our assessment shows he has a higher pain threshold than most.”

She aimed the debrider at Thomas' scarred feet, but paused, glancing Kyle's way.

"Before I do this, you should know something. The *Gandhi* is a small ship; we did not have a designated counselor aboard, so medical staff were expected to handle both physical and psychological wounds."

Kyle furrowed his eyebrows. "And?"

"And Lieutenant Riker spent seven years alone on Nerval Four," said Dr. Thosen simply. "That much time in solitary confinement certainly leaves a psychological wound."

"You're saying Thomas saw you for treatment? Before he defected to the Maquis?"

"I'm saying he should have." Dr. Thosen switched the debrider on, and a pale purple light lanced across Thomas' sole. The top layer of skin evaporated, leaving the flesh underneath shiny and raw – and a second later, the muscles cramped all at once, bunching up beneath the skin, and Thomas jolted awake with a hoarse cry.

"Easy!" Kyle said, grabbing hold of Thomas' arm. Thomas surged into a sitting position, and if Kyle hadn't been there to hold him, he suspected Thomas would have lunged for the debrider and torn it out of Dr. Thosen's hands. He wrestled Thomas back down to the mattress. "Easy," he said again. "It's just the doctor—"

Thomas jerked his head to the side, burying his face in the pillow. His lips pulled back from his teeth. "The Gul?" he said.

Kyle's heart skipped. "No," he said. Slowly, clearly, he repeated himself. "The *doctor* is here. Doctor Thosen. You remember her from the *Gandhi*?"

Thomas raised his head, eyes glazed. He glanced down the length of the bed at Dr. Thosen.

"Too far away," he muttered. He untangled his hand from Kyle's and rubbed at his eyes.

"He'll need glasses," Dr. Thosen said, and at the sound of her voice, Thomas seemed to wake up a little. "My scanner didn't know what to make of his vision, but I've got a few theories, and I don't think laser surgery will fix it. Lieutenant?"

Thomas dry-washed his face with his palms. "Yes?" He craned his neck to squint at her. "I do recognize you," he said belatedly. "They called you Magic Touch."

Dr. Thosen waved this off with a flick of her fingers. "Lieutenant, which barracks were you assigned to?"

Kyle understood where she was going with this. He'd only been able to access the most rudimentary camp records so far – they were still decrypting most of them. But he'd noticed the same discrepancies.

"Beta," Thomas said.

"Which bunk?"

"Twelve."

Dr. Thosen met Kyle's eyes. Hesitantly, Kyle scooted his chair a little closer to Thomas' bed.

"Thomas," he said quietly, "Bunk Twelve was assigned to a man named Holey th'Chani. That's been his bunk for the past four months."

Thomas' eyes tightened. "You asked where I was assigned. I'm not lying to you."

"But have you been *sleeping* where you were assigned?" Dr. Thosen asked.

Thomas' expression shuttered. Slowly, he rolled over onto his stomach and covered his head with the thin pillow he'd been given.

"Lieutenant, I'm not implying..." Dr. Thosen faltered as Kyle shot her an alarmed look. "I mean to ask, have you been *allowed* to sleep in your bunk? Or have you been confined elsewhere?"

Thomas' fingers clenched on the pillow, but when he spoke, his voice was muffled but steady. "Elsewhere," he said.

"A cell?"

No answer. Dr. Thosen tapped Thomas' left foot, indicating her intention to debride the infected skin. "Confinement to a small cell can temporarily affect one's vision," she said. "It's not something that can be fixed through surgery. You'll just have to wear eyeglasses until your eyes adjust. Have you heard of eyeglasses?"

The debrider lit up and Thomas' foot jerked in Dr. Thosen's hand. "Yes," he said, his voice strained. "How long?"

"My guess? Anywhere from two years to the rest of your life." She stroked his ankle, and to Kyle's surprise, the tension in Thomas' muscles faded away. "One more time, Lieutenant."

He grunted in acknowledgment just as the purple light washed over his foot and cleared the remaining dead skin cells away. This time there was no flinch, like it didn't hurt at all.

"Where can we get them?" Kyle asked. "Eyeglasses. Can they be replicated?"

Dr. Thosen shook her head. “He’ll need a specialist – and luckily, we can get one here soon. Lieutenant–”

“Just Thomas.”

Dr. Thosen pursed her lips. Slowly, she ran her fingers over Thomas’ calves, urging him to relax the muscles there so his feet lay flat against the bed, soles exposed. “Let me know if you feel this,” she said, and she tapped the debrider gently against the arch of his left foot.

Thomas jerked his foot back in a flinch. “Yes,” he said.

“And this one?”

His muscles seized up as he tried to keep his right foot still. Thomas’ back arched, the pillow over his face sliding away to reveal eyes squeezed shut in pain. “Yes,” he said.

Expressionless, Dr. Thosen checked the damaged big toe that Kyle had noticed earlier. It was bandaged now, held in place by gauze and medical glue. “Until your nutrition gets back into balance, your wounds are all going to be in danger of reopening. For you, that means especially your feet, the lashes on your back, and–” She hesitated, glancing sideways at Kyle. Voice lowered, she said, “And if you have any trouble in the bathroom, let me know.”

Thomas rolled back over and stared at the ceiling, his eyes dull.

“You’ll need at least six more sessions with the debrider and regenerator,” Dr. Thosen warned him. “That’s assuming you don’t reopen anything – so take it easy, alright? Do you want me to touch your feet before I leave?”

Kyle did a double-take, but Thomas just said, “Please.” And as soon as Dr. Thosen skimmed her hands over Thomas’ feet, the tension in his body leaked away. Thosen checked her PADD, then her watch.

“Mr. Riker,” she said to Kyle, “I have a few minutes to discuss, if you like. Outside?”

He glanced to Thomas, but Thomas had slung one arm over his eyes, his expression hidden from view. Kyle joined Dr. Thosen just outside the cubicle, with the sound-proofing curtain blocking their conversation from Thomas’ ears.

“You’re a Deltan,” Kyle said. “I’ve heard Deltans possess an ... analgesic touch, so to speak?”

“We can relieve pain,” said Dr. Thosen. “Temporarily. But we can’t heal injuries by touch alone.” She held her PADD out to Kyle. “He’ll be assigned a proper counselor within a week, but until then, you’ll have to rely on my analysis as an empath.”

“And?”

Her face was grim. She shoved her hands into her labcoat, avoiding Kyle’s eyes. Instead, her gaze skittered over the ward, where thousands of prisoners like Thomas were sequestered in their private cells.

“Most of these prisoners have families to return to,” she said. “Careers, home planets, friends. For many of them, that’s the only thing that keeps the temptation of suicide at bay.”

Kyle’s facial muscles tightened against his will. Dr. Thosen turned to face him, taking a deep breath.

“He was right to correct me,” she said flatly. “I called him Lieutenant – he *isn’t* a lieutenant. He may still be bound by Cardassian law. When he gets out of here, when his injuries are healed, he might be heading straight for a new labor camp, or to Cardassia itself.”

Kyle clutched the PADD tight. He was well aware of the uncertainties Thomas faced. He’d been carving out slots for holo-calls all through this week and into next, marshaling his contacts to see what he could wrangle. But Dr. Thosen didn’t need to know any of that.

“You’re telling me he’s suicidal,” he said.

“Deeply,” said Dr. Thosen, with no sugar-coating. “Dangerously.”

Kyle swallowed, his throat tight. He kept his features an indifferent mask as he glanced back at Thomas’ cubicle. “That’s why his replicator has so many restrictions,” he muttered. “I noticed when I called up the menu earlier.”

Dr. Thosen gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Like I said, he’ll be assigned a counselor. Soon it will be out of your hands. But until then ... I’m counting on you to keep him invested in his treatment, Mr. Riker.” Her face darkened.

“Holistic rehabilitation,” said Kyle hollowly. He lifted his hands and let them slap against his thighs. “That’s what I’m here for.”

He just didn’t expect the application to be so personal.

## Chapter 3

It had been three years since Kyle Riker left his fifteen-year-old son in Valdez alone. Better for the both of them. Things had been tense between them ever since Elisabeth died, and close to the breaking point since Will was twelve. Kyle wasn't the type of man who could provide warmth or affection for a child — his love was shown via skills taught, lessons learned. Preparing a child for independence: how to filet a fish, how to build a shelter, how to use a regenerator on yourself when your arm was broken, how to fly a transport through a storm. By fifteen, Will had learned all there was for Kyle to teach him, which wasn't to say he knew it all — just that he knew how to find out without his dad to hold his hand.

Three years. By the time the Tholians attacked Station 311, Kyle couldn't tell Starfleet officials where his son was.

"He's eighteen," he rasped from the hospital bed. "He could be anywhere."

The doctor — he didn't know her name yet — tapped at her PADD. "What's his name?"

"Will. William Thomas." A cough interrupted Kyle and lit up the collapsed areas of his chest. Pain blurred his vision completely as Pulaski entered Will's name into her PADD. When Kyle's vision cleared, her lips had quirked into a smile.

"He's at Starfleet Academy," Pulaski informed him. "You want me to tell his teachers?"

Kyle groaned, and obligingly, Pulaski held a hypo spray to his neck. "God no," he said. "Don't interrupt his studies for this."

"Couldn't do him much harm. His class standing isn't exactly—" Pulaski raised her eyebrows. "Well... is there anyone else I can contact? A spouse? Multiple spouses?"

"Zero," Kyle said.

"No one to go home to?" Pulaski asked, her voice light. She tapped Kyle's injured knee, where a complex splint was holding his fractured bones in place. "What are you looking forward to when you get out?"

Kyle went distant. He could go home, he supposed, though he'd stopped thinking of it as *his* house and started thinking of it as Will's. He had his career to look forward to — maybe. If Starfleet still wanted him after this. But mostly...

Kyle adjusted the gastro tube feeding nutrient sludge straight to his gut.

"I'm looking forward to a home cooked meal," he said.

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The guards' kitchen was configured for Cardassian cooking methods; some of the tools on display were totally unfamiliar to Kyle. But the pantry was stocked and the air was filled with the scent of roasting vegetables, and as Kyle's stomach tightened, a sizzle of eagerness sharpened his eyes and set his fingers tingling. He eased through a group of better-off patients who were taking advantage of the free kitchen to cook traditional meals.

"Anything Terran?" he asked a skinny Orion girl in a medsuit. She ran a self-conscious hand over the stubble on her scalp and nodded toward the larder.

"What are you cooking?" she asked.

Kyle felt her curious eyes on his neck as he checked the supplies. "My son was a prisoner here," he said. "I want to make some of his old favorites, see if I can get his appetite up."

"Your son?"

Kyle studied the supplies at hand. He and Will hadn't shared many meals during their short time on the Enterprise together, but there was one night in Ten-Forward when he spotted Will and the Klingon sharing a platter of earth peppers stuffed with Klingon meat and strong Andorran spices. He could make up something like that easy: bold flavors, slick butter, mouth-searing slices of pepper—

"Your son?" asked the Orion girl again.

Kyle turned and raised his eyebrows. The girl has crept up on him, lingering close by his elbow as he gathered supplies. Louse bites had scabbed over from the corners of her eyes all the way over her skull.

"Will—" Kyle started, and bit his tongue. "Thomas Riker."

The Orion girl searched Kyle's face. She eased back on the balls of her feet, letting him access the counter. As Kyle prepared the dish, he sneaked glances at the girl, the still-healing bruises on her wrists and ankles. An Orion. It must have been hell for her, here. Everyone in the galaxy had heard the rumors about their pheromones — whether she was the right gender to produce them, Kyle didn't know, but he doubted it mattered. Not to the guards.

And was it just Kyle, or were the other patients giving him a wide berth now? Quiet conversations took place all around him in mutters but no one attempted to draw him in. And when Kyle offered a taste of the finished dish, only the Orion took him up on it — and even she did so with a pinched face, her expression closed off.

He put it out of his mind. Laden down with the stuffed peppers, Kyle made his way back to Thomas' cubicle, grinning a little at the curious,

near-ravenous stares that followed him as people caught scent of the dish. He accessed Thomas' quarters without knocking and set the dish down on the bedside table. Lying on his stomach, Thomas turned his head, but made no effort to sit up.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

Kyle ignored him. He replicated a set of forks and handed one to Thomas, placing it between unwilling fingers. "Do you need help sitting up?" he asked.

"I'm not hungry," Thomas repeated.

Kyle didn't dignify that with an answer. He eased Thomas into a sitting position, keeping him upright with one hand between his shoulder blades. "Good?" he asked before he drew away.

Thomas just nodded, his hands clenched in the blankets. He watched, eyes shuttered, as Kyle doled out a helping of stuffed peppers.

"I trust you still like this?" Kyle asked, handing him a plate.

Thomas stared blankly at the mess of meat and cheese. "I've never had it before," he said.

"What?" Kyle blinked at him. "...Really?"

Thomas set the plate aside. "Seven years on a space station. Kind of limited my options."

"Ah." Kyle picked the plate back up and placed it solidly in Thomas' hands. "You'll like it."

"I don't think so."

"Will loves it."

Thomas shoved the plate back into Kyle's hands and laid down, all the strength going out of him. He covered his eyes. "It stinks."

Kyle stared at him in disbelief. He speared a chunk of seasoned meat on his fork — perfectly prepared, juicy and red and mouth-watering — and rolled it around on his tongue. "This stinks to you?" he asked.

Thomas rolled over, hiding his face. What Kyle could see of his skin was pale.

"Okay," said Kyle, recalibrating. He shoved a hefty forkful of food into his mouth as he thought it over. "Too spicy?"

Thomas nodded wearily.

"Too much meat? What do you want, no meat at all?"

"I'm not hung—"

Kyle set the plate down and turned to the replicator. "Have you had any meat at all the past four years, kid?"

Will's temper would have flared at being called 'kid.' Thomas didn't seem to hear it.

"Sometimes," he said, his voice barely audible. "You'd find chunks of it in the soup. The water, really. But if it was there, it was usually diseased."

"So you'd get sick from eating it?"

Thomas just nodded, saving his voice.

"And you've been on something of a starvation diet...obviously."

Another nod.

"Bland foods, then," Kyle muttered to himself. "Easy to digest." And he couldn't assume that Will's tastes were the same as Thomas', but he'd known both of them when they were kids — when *they* were a kid — so he knew what Will had liked when his tastes were undeveloped. Kyle tapped the replicator's menu to life. "One whole tomato, sliced, cold," he said. "And zero-point-ten grams of black pepper."

Thomas twisted around to glance over his shoulder. This time, he didn't protest. He watched with vague interest as Kyle sprinkled the pepper over each slice and took one for himself first, the same way he used to when Thomas — when Will was a kid. Or both of them. Hell, it gave him a headache to think about.

"Want one?" he asked, holding out the plate.

Thomas scanned the contents, checking them for — for insects, Kyle supposed, or for rotten bits. With shaky fingers, he plucked up one of the slices and bit into it, eyes sliding closed. There was still a purple blush over his beaten eye, and he was too pale for Kyle's liking, but with his face smoothed out like that, he looked almost like a kid again.

"You know an Orion woman?" Kyle asked, trying not to look too relieved when Thomas finished the first slice and reached for another.

"Yes," said Thomas, his voice guarded. "There's only one in the camp."



Kyle grunted. "I met her in the kitchen. What's her name?"

Thomas' lips parted for a bite of tomato. But he stopped there, his teeth showing, and gradually closed his mouth again. "Vissal," he said. He forced himself to finish the tomato slice in two bites, but from the look on his face, he may as well have eaten ashes. "She spoke to you?"

"A little." Kyle studied Thomas' face. "I don't imagine she had a good time of it here, under the Cardassians."

Thomas gave a hollow laugh. He laid back, his feet shifting restlessly beneath the blanket. Only when he saw the tightness in Thomas' jaw did Kyle realize why.

"Foot cramp?" he asked.

Thomas let his breath out in a slow hiss.

"Doctor Thosen's report said you might experience them for as long as—"

"A lifetime," said Thomas through his teeth. "I know."

He bent his knee, one foot pushing at the sheets in a helpless kick, muscles tightening against the pain. Kyle clamped a hand over Thomas' ankle to hold him still.

"Not a lifetime," he said firmly. "But it might last a while. At least until you get your nutrition back in order." He braced himself for an argument. "Let me give you a muscle relaxant."

Thomas twisted at the hips, his teeth bared, and nodded.

"It'll put you to sleep, but it'll get rid of the cramp," Kyle said. "Doctor Thosen approved it for—" He blinked, finally registering Thomas' nod. Without wasting anymore time, he keyed the replicator for a single-use hypospray and tucked the prongs against Thomas' neck. Will would have argued, he knew it in his bones. Will would have insisted on riding out the pain – or he would've demanded that anyone other than Kyle administer the medicine – or he would have snarled in Kyle's face, accused him of treating Will like a child, enjoying his own son's vulnerability, the opportunity to be top dog—

"On three," Kyle muttered, shaking the thoughts away. His voice came out gentler than he expected: gentle enough to embarrass him. But it seemed to calm Thomas. "One, two..."

On 'three', he hit the hypospray, and the loud hiss of dispensing medicine covered his voice. Thomas grit his teeth and arched his back in one last spasm of pain, and then settled against the mattress. His leg flopped to the side, the muscles in his foot still twitching underneath the skin.

"It'll take twenty minutes to kick in fully," Kyle said. "I want you to finish your food, and then I'll help you to the bathroom. If you need a sleep aid—"

Thomas shook his head.

"For nightmares," Kyle clarified.

Almost instantly, Thomas nodded. Kyle's gut tightened.

"Then I'll give you a sleep aid, too," he said, trying to stay casual. He picked up the plate of tomato slices and placed it in Thomas' trembling hands. "Come on, son."

Will wouldn't have accepted the sleep aid, he knew. And Will would never accept help to the bathroom, either – not from Kyle. But then, if it were Will here, there would be no room for Kyle at his bedside. Deanna Troi would be sitting here; his first officer on the other side; his Chief Medical Officer scanning him for injuries, his friends – his real family—

And Kyle was all Thomas had.

## Chapter 4

By the fifth day, Kyle's schedule had been relaxed. Official paperwork now showed that he had a son among the ex-prisoners, and his duties had been adjusted accordingly. No longer was he expected to assist in securing political asylum for a thousand strangers; now he could concentrate on the important stuff.

Like carrying Thomas to the bathroom. Or helping him in the shower. Or force-feeding him the same bland foods he would feed a particularly-picky child.

Actually, Kyle was going insane. He nodded at Dr. Thosen when she arrived for Thomas' daily physical and ducked through the curtain, determined to get some fresh air. Outside, where the climate-control shields had fallen, a thick snow fell over the labor camp, covering up fire pits and mass graves. Kyle paced among the ruins of a bombed-out barracks building, the charred rafters shifting beneath his feet. Snowflakes fell into his hair and kissed his cheeks, soothing the feverish hot temper that prickled just beneath the skin.

When he closed his eyes, he saw this morning's shower all over again. Thomas' ribs, poking out of his skin like a shipwreck. His hair growing back thanks to daily stints with a regenerator, matted and sticking up like broken blades of grass on his scalp. Yellow bruises and unhealed scars; a dullness in his eyes, a tightness in his jaw, like he was determined to send his mind somewhere else, to cooperate only as much as necessary...

...and when Kyle's hand skimmed down to his hip, Thomas flinched.

Outside, in the snow, Kyle scrubbed his hands over his face with a sigh. The more put-together patients had started meeting outside their cubicles for games of chess. They could be spotted at all hours of the day, huddled over a shared PADD to catch up on news, or sparring each other in weak but light-hearted matches of Parrises Squares. One enterprising Andorian had replicated a violin and seemed to enjoy tormenting his fellow prisoners every night with a caterwauling solo, so—

“What did you used to play?” Kyle asked Thomas last night, trying to get him to speak. “In high school?”

Thomas shifted, staring at Kyle with one tired eye.

“In band,” Kyle clarified. “Didn't you play the trumpet?”

“Trombone,” Thomas corrected.

“No, I'm sure it was the trumpet...”

“Trumpet was third grade,” Thomas said without ire. “Trombone started in sixth.” He buried his head in the pillow but left one hand out from under the blankets, tapping his fingers against the mattress. Almost inaudibly, he mumbled, “Piano from age three.”

Piano. Kyle's chest squeezed tight: a hard-suppressed memory of Elisabeth burst into his mind, her head bent over the piano, her shoulders slouched and her fingers sliding down the keys in that idiosyncratic way she had, the method that made some of her songs dance and others drag, depending on how much she'd practiced it. He cleared his throat and shoved the memories away.

“Well, I can replicate a trombone if you want,” he said gruffly. “I have authorization—”

But Thomas just shook his head. “Save the energy,” he said, and after that, Kyle couldn't draw him into conversation again. He'd replicated a trombone anyway, but so far it had sat unused on Thomas' bedside table, surrounded by a litter of empty capsule packets and half-drunk paper cups of water. Dr. Thosen considered it a futile effort; she said Thomas didn't have the lung capacity to play brass instruments anymore, might not ever recover enough to return to his old hobby. But still, it troubled Kyle that Thomas wouldn't try.

Will would try—

Kyle shoved this thought away. He kicked at a clump of snow with a scowl. The sun had risen a little higher, casting a pale warmth over the snow banks, and now a handful of prisoners were streaming outside. They tromped past Kyle, clad in thick coats and replicated hats, but they didn't acknowledge him. Ever since the news spread that he was Thomas Riker's father, acknowledgment had been hard to come by.

Kyle set his features into a hard glare. He headed back for the barracks and bit the glove off his right hand so he could access his PADD. He'd been neglecting his political connections for too long.

It was time to call in some favors.

---

There was a near-inaudible, broken hum of music filling the air when Kyle entered Thomas' cubicle. It faded almost as soon as he registered it, but at least he knew Thomas was awake. With a grunt of greeting, Kyle took up his station in the bedside chair and kicked up his feet, and after a moment, he caught Thomas cracking open one eye to glare at the snow-soaked boots perched so close to his face.

“Personal space?” Thomas grumbled.

Kyle shifted his boots to the floor. He waved his PADD in the air, attracting Thomas' gaze. “I requested access to the camp records,” he said. “Did you know they'd been decrypted?”

Thomas sat up, running a hand through his still-growing hair. It was coming in a little wavy, like Elisabeth's had been after the first round of chemo, when it grew back. Throat tight, Kyle flicked his gaze away.

“I heard earlier,” Thomas said.

“Doctor Thosen told you?” Kyle guessed.

“No.” Thomas planted his palms on the bed and eased himself back against the wall for support. “I went outside.”

Outside. Kyle blinked at his PADD, processing that single word. “Into the common area?” he asked casually.

Thomas’ chest expanded in a deep breath. He gave a slow nod.

“What for?” Kyle asked, studying Thomas’ face.

The wry, humorless grin surprised him. It was the most ‘expression’ he’d seen in five days. “Well, I had to piss,” Thomas said. “And I wasn’t going to do it in bed.”

He surely hadn’t meant that as a chastisement, but it felt like one all the same. Kyle fought back a dull flush. “You could have asked for help. The medics—”

“I know.” Thomas rubbed the back of his neck. “They did help. They let me borrow a wheelchair. Old-fashioned, like Mom used to...”

The rest of his sentence trailed off into a shrug. Thomas leaned over to tap one finger against Kyle’s PADD.

“Anything good?” he asked, his face tight.

Kyle tipped the PADD up to shake Thomas’ finger off. “It’s a decades-long history of torture and death,” he said gruffly. “None of it is good.”

Thomas’ smile flashed again, brighter this time. “Even the parts about me?” he said.

Kyle just gave him a baleful look. He paged through the report, unwilling to admit that he’d already searched Thomas’ name and prison number. Throughout the guards’ logs, every mention of Thomas was highlighted in red. “It’s an awful lot of confinement,” he said begrudgingly. “If these logs are to be believed, you were getting into fights – and being punished for it – almost every day.”

“Sounds about right,” Thomas agreed. He curled one leg up to his chest and held it there, stretching out atrophied muscles.

“Starting fights with guards?” Kyle asked. He scanned the report. “Calling them names – in the Cardassian tongue? Is this true?”

Thomas just shrugged. The humor had gone out of his eyes. He rested his chin on his knee. Undeterred, Kyle turned back to the report. If it was wholly truthful, then Thomas had been in and out of confinement his entire time at the camp. Why instigate fights with the guards? Why make his stay worse for himself? Medical charts showed the injuries he’d sustained at every fight: broken ribs and dislocated shoulders, fingers smashed beneath boots, ligature marks on his neck. Kyle rubbed sympathetically at his own throat.

“Was there some advantage to confinement?” he asked, glancing up at Thomas. Thomas met his eyes with a flat, curious state. “It got you away from your fellow prisoners...”

“That’s not an advantage,” said Thomas simply. “I don’t think there was one.”

“Then why start so many fights?”

Another listless shrug. Kyle changed tracks.

“What were you humming earlier, when I came in? I didn’t recognize it.” When Thomas’ expression pinched, Kyle added, “A work song? Something the prisoners came up with?”

Thomas shook his head. He stared down at his interlaced fingers, at the scars pockmarking his knuckles. “No,” he said softly. “I made it up.”

“Can I hear it?”

Silence. Thomas shifted one shoulder restlessly, up and down as if it ached when he held it still.

“Are there lyrics?” Kyle asked. A memory sparked. “Remember that country-western band you invented when you were – you must have been eight or nine?”

A ghost of a smile touched Thomas’ lips.

“The most outrageous lyrics,” Kyle remembered. “You would make them up as you go. A perfect parody of a genre I’d never even heard of.”

“I got the ideas from your music collection,” said Thomas a bit gruffly.

“My grandfather’s music collection, maybe,” said Kyle. He waved his hand dismissively. “What was your band’s name, again?”

Thomas pursed his lips. He gave it some thought, but in the end, he just shook his head. “I don’t remember.”

“It was something funny...” Kyle trailed off wistfully. He could remember how he reacted when he heard it: the name, the lyrics, Will’s deadpan performance, all of it combining until Kyle collapsed, laughing helplessly on the floor. But the exact contents of the joke escaped him now. He turned back to his PADD with a sigh. He read the next few lines with a cold weariness, hardly understanding them. The details of Thomas’ sexual assaults were laid out here in clinical language; did Thomas *know* that the guards were so thorough with their reports? Did he understand that everyone who read the logs knew exactly what he’d been through? Kyle doubted it, and he certainly wasn’t about to bring it

up. Anyway, Thomas had been receiving treatment for various STIs since the camp disbanded, and he definitely knew *that* was on his medical record. Those fights — that was what concerned Kyle.

Thomas' counselor thought he instigated those fights for the attention. The other prisoners knew what happened behind closed doors, but they saw Thomas and Vissal — and whoever else the guards touched — as privileged whores. They wouldn't speak to Thomas when he was free; so why not force the guards to speak to him instead?

Stomach twisting, he skipped past a packet of medical diagrams and scanned the next entry. The words pulsed over his brain without meaning, his chest still tight.

"It's a language," Thomas said.

His voice was so soft Kyle almost didn't hear him. He glanced up, heart pounding, and met Thomas' eyes.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The song." Thomas' lips twitched. "The one I was humming when you came in. It's a language." He shrugged one shoulder. "I made it up on the space station — Nerval Four."

To keep sane, Kyle supposed. He'd heard of prisoners doing similar things throughout the galaxy: a political prisoner from Malchus who devised mathematical problems for himself to solve throughout twelve years of captivity; a translator who made herself an abacus out of bread crumbs and counted the vocabulary words she knew in eight different tongues. Kyle studied Thomas' face, thinking back to his own time in recovery after the Tholians nearly killed him. After they massacred his colleagues, his friends.

"I used to visualize a chess board," he confessed. "I would imagine the lay-out, the precise location of each piece, and play until I was bored to tears."

Thomas shifted subtly, facing Kyle a little more fully. "Who did you play against?"

"Nobody," Kyle lied. "Myself."

Thomas' expression fractured.

"Did you imagine there was someone else with you?" Kyle asked, suddenly self-conscious about his answer. "A fellow singer, perhaps?"

A shadow crossed Thomas' face. "No," he said, and Kyle suspected he was telling the truth, if only because he sounded so lost. "Who else would there be?"

Deanna, Kyle thought, but of course, it wasn't true. Deanna had chosen Will. He tried to think of anyone else and came up short. He glanced back down at his PADD, at the name of the Gul who had, more often than not, forced Thomas to share his bed.

Maybe 'nobody' was the best answer, for now.

## Chapter 5

Thomas pulled the pillow over his eyes. The overhead lights were set to a soft yellow glow that was meant to be soothing, but it was still too sharp – and he could hear the hum of electricity in the bulbs, a pattern-less rhythm that dug into his eardrums and scraped at the skin. His pillow, at least, blocked some of that light out.

It did nothing for the sound.

With a sigh, Thomas stretched his legs out and spread his feet. He had to be careful about it. If he kept them still for too long, they locked into place, and it was hell on earth to get them to move again. But if he stretched too far, too fast, the muscles bunched and an agonizing cramp shot through his nerves, so bad that it left him writhing. Tentatively, he spread his toes, felt the tug of tension on his muscles, and quickly pressed them together again.

Not bad. If he could just stay like this, without interruption, for the next few hours, maybe he could stomach a meal. If he focused on the arrhythmic hum, tried to find a pattern, he could take his mind off Gul Dorr Rik. One of the musical languages he'd created on Nervalva Four consisted of hums, both thin and guttural; if he listened long enough, he could almost parse the electric whine into a message.

Into a voice.

Into a tap of fingers on his thigh.

Into Gul Dorr Rik's breath, warm against his ear, whispering–

The privacy field flickered and the soundproof curtain rattled on its hooks. Thomas sat up with a jerk and an embarrassing, flinchy-sounding grunt. His pillow fell off his face, to the floor, as Kyle stepped inside.

"Thought you might want a breath of fresh air," Kyle said. He bent down to retrieve the pillow and slung it on the bed, near Thomas' feet. "I commandeered that wheelchair for you."

Fresh air? Thomas pressed a palm to his eyes until all he saw was the red tint of his lids. "It's cold out," he said.

In response, something soft and heavy struck him in the arm. He shook it off and opened his eyes to see a winter coat crumpled over his lap. Underneath it, tangled together, were warm-weather clothes he could slip right on over his pajamas. A sweater, thick trousers, wool socks...

"I accept your gifts," said Thomas with ironic regality, "but that does not mean I accept your proposal."

Kyle's lips quirked. When he was a kid, Thomas used to put on what he called the Royal Highness voice, part of a special repertoire designed to make his dad laugh when he came home from missions. He had a Rat Pack persona too, and a Vulcan Scientist voice, and a host of others. But he hadn't done the voice in years, and attempting it now just made him cough.

"Help me put this on," he requested, struggling with the sweater.

Kyle sat on the edge of Thomas' bed and guided his arms through the sweater sleeves. The tight collar ruffled his hair as he poked his head through. It was growing back fast, he thought – soon it would flop down over his eyes, and he'd have to push it back off his forehead, like Dorr Rik had done not long ago, when the sweep of brown hair was matted with blood.

Before he could process this image – or the startling, physical sensation of a damp, hot palm against his forehead – Kyle was gently guiding Thomas' legs over the edge of the bed. Thomas watched numbly, his fists clenched in the bedsheets, as his dad rucked the winter trousers up over Thomas' pajamas.

"Where are we going?" Thomas asked finally, his voice sounding distant.

"You're an extrovert," said Kyle simply. "You stay in bed another day, your brain will rot."

"I'm not arguing, but I don't think the two are necessarily related..."

Kyle wheeled the chair around the side of the bed. He sat heavily in it and unfolded the wool socks. "The doctor," he said gruffly, "I mean, your counselor – he thinks you could use some human interaction."

Thomas said nothing. He watched as Kyle took his fragile left foot in hand and eased the sock over his toes, up to his ankle. Thomas tried not to wince at the scrape of wool over still-tender skin. His toes twitched, sparking a lance of pain that shot all the way up to his knee and faded before he could make a sound.

"Ready?" Kyle asked when both socks were in place.

Thomas shrugged into the coat with slow, careful movements. "When you say human interaction..."

"Relax, kid. I'm not gonna put you on a stage or anything. We're just going for a walk."

Thomas could feel his eyes growing strained. He squinted up at Kyle, willing the blurred features to coalesce a little better. "But are we

talking to Starfleet officers? To prisoners?"

"Ex-prisoners," Kyle reminded him, voice gruff. He brushed a single finger against Thomas' sleeve, as if to soften the word.

"Ex-prisoners, fine," Thomas said. "But is that who we're talking to?"

Kyle stared down at him, his face too far away for Thomas to get a good read on it. "I'm taking you out into the common area," he said finally, almost reluctantly. "Are you going to fight me on it?"

Thomas caught his breath for a laugh. But the laugh didn't come. The air stayed locked into his lungs, where it started to burn. "I'm not going to *fight* you," he managed, his voice strangled. "But I gotta say, it's not one of your better ideas."

"You wanna air your concerns, or you wanna keep talking in code?"

Code! Thomas' features twitched, his forced smile fracturing. A sudden heat flooded his ears.

"It's – it's not–" he said, and then fell silent, frustrated by the sudden stammer. In his left ear (two years ago, they'd forced him to his knees, and they'd held an old fashioned concussive grenade right next to his ear, let him listen to the crackle of energy inside, let him smell the chemical stink of a reaction that might kill him if they held the grenade too close) – in his left ear there was a hum, thin like the whine of a mosquito, a soothing song he'd taught himself on Nerval IV. He held his shoulder against his ear to trap the noise inside his ear canal, where it drowned out every other sound. Dimly, deep in his throat, he felt the catch and click of his vocal cords trying to hum along, inaudible.

"Thomas?" Kyle prompted. He kicked the wheelchair a little, gently, as if to rattle some sense into his son.

"I'm fine," said Thomas, his voice tight, the hum overwhelming.

"If you don't want to go–"

"No. You're right." He forced himself to think of his favorite places: the crowded resort on Risa; the happy chatter of the galley on the *Gandhi*; the low lights and human body heat of a planetside jazz bar. The common denominator was people, other people, warm and vibrant, full of energy that he could feed off, learn to rest from. "You're right," he said with a sigh. "I'm a goddamn extrovert. Let's do this."

Kyle studied him first, his eyes narrow, but in the end, he didn't argue. He hooked one arm under Thomas' legs and eased him down into the chair. There, he placed his hands firmly on Thomas' shoulders and looked him in the eye.

"You've got more of a spine, more honor, than any of those pathetic little criminals out there," he said flatly.

Thomas grimaced. "Some of those 'criminals' are innocent political prisoners, and you damn well know it."

"Nonetheless. They think they're better than you?"

Why did he say that? What did he know?

"They're not," said Kyle before Thomas could question him. "You're a Riker. You're *Thomas Thaddeus Riker!* You come from a long line of red-blooded survivalists and hard-nosed soldiers, and don't let those sniveling smugglers and puerile pirates take that away from you."

God, he was bad at comforting people. Thomas shrugged Kyle's hands off and passed a palm over his eyes. "Let's just go," he said. As Kyle circled around behind him to grab the handlebars, Thomas managed a weak, "I appreciate the alliteration, though."

"I thought you would," said Kyle with arch dignity.

And he wheeled Thomas out into the unforgiving light.

## Chapter 6

An Angosian super-soldier stood by the speaker, guarding his music choice with a flexed muscle and a beady eye. Scratchy string music wailed out of the sound system, mangled by static and a volume knob that had been turned up entirely too high. Thomas wedged his shoulder against his ear with a wince.

“He doesn’t like it!” the Angosian roared, and all heads swiveled toward Thomas. He held up one hand with a wince.

“Only ‘cause I’ve heard it a million times,” he shot back. “I think they play this song on a loop in hell.”

At the chessboard, one of the prisoners – an elderly Romulan – sat back with a grunt. “By ‘hell’, you mean Gul Dorr Rik’s quarters,” he said.

“No, by ‘hell’ I mean whatever your poor bunkmate had to endure, listening to you—”

A wail of static covered Thomas’ words.

“—all night,” he finished, and the elderly Romulan turned away, trying to hide a grin. Behind Thomas, Kyle relaxed a little and wheeled his son closer to the window, where sunlight streamed through the glass. Thomas got a brief glimpse of his father’s face, puzzled but relieved, as if he’d expected a fight.

*Not that simple*, Thomas thought. He laced his fingers together and leaned his forehead against them, seeking out his own cool skin. All around him, ex-prisoners chattered at each other in near-shouts, fighting to be heard over the music. The scrape of a chess piece against the board melted together with the coughing laugh of a Meldonian who’d been strangled half-to-death the day the camp was liberated.

There was a puff of air over his shoulder as Kyle moved out from behind him and grabbed an empty chair. He sat down a few meters away, giving Thomas space to socialize. Alone, Thomas dragged his eyes up and forced himself to scan the entertainment options. Not far away, he spotted Helam, a one-eared Bolian with a deck of cards in his hand, tapping it restlessly against the table.

Grimacing, Thomas steeled himself. He forced his lips to move.

“You know how to play Bolian ratscrew?” he asked.

Helam turned his head. His expression was too carefully composed to read anything into it, but he stopped tapping the deck of cards for an unbearable thirty seconds. “You want to play?” he asked neutrally.

Thomas’ chest was tight. He licked his lips. “If you don’t mind losing,” he said.

*Goddamn it, at least try to be likable*, said a voice in his head. Kyle cast Thomas a disapproving side-eye, but honestly, for Lazon II, this was likable. Helam relaxed a little and slid his card table over to Thomas.

“This isn’t a Bolian deck,” he said flatly.

Thomas lifted the top card. “Cardassian,” he said, unable to hide his disappointment. “You know any Cardassian games?”

“No.”

“I can teach you. But I gotta warn you, it’s Cardassian standard to lie about the rules.”

This time, Helam didn’t smile. He just sat back, listlessly waiting for Thomas to shuffle the cards. Swallowing his humor, Thomas cut the deck and bridged the two halves, his fingers trembling – but he managed to keep control. He shuffled again, then a third time, until Helam had become absorbed in watching the nearby chess game and Thomas had become locked into the repetitive motion, soothed by the sputter of cards. When Helam grew irritated and walked away, all Thomas felt was a cool unfolding of relief in his chest.

He sat back with a sigh. The cards were his. He shuffled them one more time, his fingertips raw from scraping the edge of the cards. Across the room, Vissal – the Orion girl – left her cubicle with her head ducked and her scalp shaved clean again.

Thomas watched her go. She kept her eyes down all the way to the bathroom. Just yesterday, when he saw her, her hair was growing back, a shimmering healthy black. Now it was gone, shaved so roughly that there were open scrapes on her scalp. Maybe she’d been picking at her louse scabs, but he didn’t think so. He tracked her until she disappeared into the bathroom, and then he turned back to the other ex-prisoners.

Their eyes were fixed studiously to their games. Thomas’ stomach dropped. The cards fell from his numb fingers, most of them landing in his lap, others fluttering to the floor. When he wheeled forward, shoulders screaming, he rolled right over the fallen cards, and didn’t stop until his foot bumped against Kyle’s leg.

“Let’s go,” he said, his voice tight. Agony danced up the mended bones of his foot, into his shin, but he kept his face neutral.

“Where?” asked Kyle. He rubbed his eyes, like he’d dozed off while Thomas was ‘socializing’.

“Anywhere. Outside.”

“Into the snow?”

Thomas’ breath was coming fast, his temper short. “I’m dressed for it, aren’t I?” He wheeled backward with too little control and slammed into a table, drawing more eyes. “Look,” he said, making direct, unwilling eye contact with the Angosian, “can we just go?”

Kyle was already on his feet. But he didn't steer Thomas toward the door; he angled the wheelchair through the mess of tables and PADDs and wheeled him right back to his cubicle. By then, with his back turned to the ex-prisoners, Thomas was wheezing for breath, heat prickling in his eyes.

"Dad?" he said as they pushed through the curtain.

"Yes?" said Kyle, his voice tight.

"I don't think I'm an extrovert anymore."



## Chapter 7

By the end of the first fortnight, the prisoners stamped with yellow marks were free to go. They'd been given first priority – something Kyle had agreed with, even argued for, when Starfleet's liberation of Lazon II was purely theoretical.

He'd gone through the bodies in the hospital and assessed each patient himself. The Romulan he'd stamped pink – the one with dried blood on his fingers – sat at the chessboard now, watching with narrow eyes as families arrived to collect their loved ones. On the opposite side of the floor, Kyle had stationed himself half-inside Thomas' cubicle, blocking the reunion from his son's view. He poked his head around the corner to watch as a white-haired Orion man scanned the halls.

Vissal's grandfather. Had to be. No one had informed him, then; maybe they couldn't, if he was in warp when the message went through. Stomach twisting, Kyle turned away before Vissal's grandfather could meet his eyes.

"You mind closing the curtain?" Thomas asked from behind him. "Not that I don't love the sound of a happy reunion, but..."

"Daddy!" cried a young Angosian girl, running to embrace her father. Kyle closed the curtain with a grimace.

"Have you spoken to Vissal lately?" he asked.

Thomas slung a forearm over his eyes. "I really don't think it's a good idea. We shouldn't be seen together."

Kyle eyed him. "Afraid the accusations will rub off on you?"

Slowly, Thomas peeked out at Kyle. "They already have," he said seriously. "But that's not why. My reputation is worse than hers."

Kyle considered that, rubbing his thumb against his forefinger. "But she's the one under investigation," he murmured. He took a breath and squared his shoulders. "Tom."

"Don't call me Tom."

"I want you to testify on her behalf, if it comes to that." Kyle studied Thomas' face, or what he could see of it. "You're a former Starfleet officer. Your word carries some weight around here."

"I'm a former agent of the Maquis," Thomas corrected. "If you're going to recite my resume, at least start with the most recent job."

Kyle thinned his lips. He pulled a chair up to Thomas' bedside, ready to get serious. Arms folded on the mattress, he said, "You know, Vissal's got an advantage of you." He tapped the mark on Thomas' wrist. Pink, like the Romulan's. "You've got your own tribunal coming up. Your own reckoning. It might do your reputation some good to intercede on Vissal's behalf."

Thomas jerked his wrist out of Kyle's reach.

"Thomas," said Kyle patiently, "you do know what holistic rehabilitation is, yes?"

"I am familiar with the term."

"We've got you a doctor, a counselor, a lawyer," Kyle said. "You have access to a gym. Musical instruments. Cards, art supplies."

"Lucky me," said Thomas a tad dryly.

"The point isn't to punish you. It's to get you back on your feet fully. Completely. Hence the lawyer." Kyle paused. "Hence *me* pushing you to actually *talk* to the lawyer."

Thomas let out a tight sigh. "Dad..."

Kyle sat up a little straighter. "Yes?"

"Can you give me some damn space?"

Well, at least he was polite enough to phrase it like a question. Kyle grunted and got to his feet. He didn't relish the cacophony of happy families outside, but in all honesty, it might do him good to spend a shift or two as a consultant, instead of Thomas Riker's 24/7 nurse. He twitched the curtain open and peeked outside.

"Don't you dare leave that thing open," Thomas warned.

... Kyle resisted the temptation to disobey. He closed the curtain carefully behind him and faced the sunny room, the laughing children ... and the Orion grandfather pacing by the door, with a crease between his eyebrows and one fist covering his mouth.

What was his name again? Laycez? Kyle raised his hand in greeting and let his voice boom out over the rec room.

"Mister Laycez! With me!"

---

Some prisoners kept sane by playing games: two-up for the brainless, where pure chance determined winners; poker and pamja for the smarter ones. There was a Bolian who passed time by crafting cards from homemade paper and ink he crushed out of weeds near the border wall. There was a Bajoran like Onu who kept his brain intact by endlessly building comms just for the guards to take them away again, and – before

his fall from grace – there was a time when Thomas Riker kept sane by organizing the band and brewing sweet tobacco from the same weeds that created ink. He did it by soaking the blades in tea, part of their rations, and dusting them with sugar and shoe polish for a kick.

Onu Yumelo kept sane a different way. She kept sane through enterprise.

“For your trouble,” she said kindly, slipping a five-breno coin into the Angosian super-soldier’s hand. His craggy face lit up at the weight of it. Outside, in the Federation, money was meaningless. But on Cardassia, and by extension, in Lazon II, everyone knew the heft and feel of a breno. Even the blind could pick out the different types of coin by touch alone.

“Thanks, boss.” He turned, clutching the coin tightly but casually, hiding it in his fist.

“Wait a moment, Dhen. Anybody give you trouble so far?”

He half-turned. “Little bit. The medics. They said the noise isn’t good for people trying to rest.”

“And you reminded them of these nifty sound-proof curtains, right?” said Onu with a tiny grin.

He hadn’t. She could tell. But he tried to keep his face blank and lied gamely. “Yes, boss.”

“Okay. If it comes up again, you know what to say.”

She would’ve given him a cigarette if he’d actually had the brains to defend himself against these medics. But he hadn’t, so instead, Onu let him watch her light up. She held the end of a hand-rolled cigarette between her lips and dragged a lungful of fragrant smoke. Thomas Riker’s recipe. Longing flashed across Dhen’s face at the scent, but he turned away without complaint and trundled off to follow Onu’s orders, to play his ear-blasting music and cover up any untoward conversations taking place underneath.

The taste of smoke went sour.

“Shit,” Onu muttered to herself. Aching sadness clawed at her stomach as she ground the cigarette out before she really had time to enjoy it. There was no point anymore. The cigarettes’ only value was that they gave you something to do and kept the hunger away. Now that Starfleet was here, every prisoner had his own cubicle, his own replicator. They could eat, drink, and be merry as much as they wanted.

*My economy is in shambles*, thought Onu with a hint of humor. She shoved her hands in her pockets and took a stroll around the rec room. Just two weeks ago, when the camp was liberated, she’d stood out from the pack: healthy(ish), with glowing cheeks and soft, clean hair cropped short to show off her Bajoran ear piercings, and the scars where guards had (allegedly) ripped the earrings away. Clean clothes, too, and a wide array of them: four prison shirts, five pairs of pants, a winter jacket to insulate her from the cold. And her prize possessions, no less than six pairs of underwear, where most prisoners had zero. Now, though, everyone had plenty of clothing, and they could pick and choose styles as they pleased.

Onu wasn’t stupid. The camp queen wasn’t queen anymore. She clasped her hands at the back of her neck and strolled with her elbows out and her rib cage expanded, meditating a while on her new position.

Holistic rehab, they called it. The medics maintained that every prisoner here would be released eventually. They all knew that wasn’t true. Helam the Bolian was a mercenary; he’d killed more Bajorans than Cardassians during his time, but it was the Cardassian victims that landed him here, and Starfleet wouldn’t just sweep those deaths under the rug. Regardless of species. Then there was Soju, the Romulan – and D’Nuhir, his elder – and the children they’d snuffed out, or authorized the snuffing of. Starfleet wouldn’t allow a child-killer to go free.

No. Like Onu, for her involvement with the Maquis – like Thomas Riker, for his theft of the warship Defiant – most of the prisoners here would *stay* here. *This* was a temporary reprieve. A chance for old muscle to grow soft. For sharp brains to turn dull. For survivors to learn how to be helpless again.

Not Onu. One by one, she’d watched the members of her Maquis cell go catatonic. First they slipped into daydreams, anything to escape the reality of Lazon II. Then they’d gotten sick, and they were so busy dreaming they didn’t even fight to stay alive. She was the only one left, and she’d stayed keen the whole time she was incarcerated here: drumming up trade, forging alliances, creating excitement and money and luxuries where there were none. If she did it once, she could do it again.

*You’re sharp*, Thomas told her once, that night when it was sleeting out, when he showed her how to steep the weeds in tea. Onu had fingered the scars on her ear.

*I have to be*, she said.

*Helam thinks the Cardassians are like children*, said Thomas casually. He was watching her from his peripheral vision, she could tell. But he was good at hiding it. *He told me a story about a friendly Cardassian guard at his last camp. A guy with a pet welio – sort of a mix between a cockroach and a rat.*

She’d heard the story. She stayed silent as Thomas rehashed it: the guard doted over his pet until one day it chewed on his boots. Then he beat it senseless and crushed its skull under his heel. When he was done, he shot himself right through the heart, and asked to be buried with the dead disease-riddled pest.

*Helam can’t understand people like that*, Thomas said lightly. *He thinks it’s Cardassian genetics. Bred for stupidity. For cruelty.*

*Maybe he’s right*, said Onu, thinking of all she’d seen in her home camp when the Cardassians raided them.

*You know he’s not right*, Thomas said. *These guards are just people. People under stress. Like all of us. And I wouldn’t look twice if I saw a prisoner killing himself over something he just stomped to death five minutes ago.*

*I'd say that's just an ordinary day at Lazon II, Onu agreed. And I would say the Cardassians are just like everyone else, but I wouldn't say they're driven by stress.*

*What, then?*

*Same as the rest of us, Onu said. Thomas looked at her so guilelessly that for a moment she wondered how he ever found his way to the Maquis. Smiling, Onu leaned closer to him, her voice dropping to a whisper.*

*Greed, she said. Comfort. What would you do for a little comfort, Thomas?*

Of course, he'd acted offended, Starfleet-style, but they all found out exactly what he would do for comfort some time later. Across the rec room, Onu caught sight of an elderly Orion, hunched over in a chair with a pinched face and sweaty palms wedged between his knees. Vissal's grandfather, waiting to hear the verdict, hoping to take his grandkid home. With a slight laugh, Onu pinched the burnt paper off the end of her cigarette and lit it again, returning it to its proper place between her lips.

This time the smoke was sweet.

## Chapter 8

As soon as his father was gone, Thomas leveraged himself into his wheelchair and approached the soundproof curtain. Absently, he bent at the waist, his knees jabbing into his ribcage and compressing his lungs as he rolled the wool socks right off his feet. He tossed them onto his unmade bed without a backward glance.

He twitched the curtain open just a centimeter to listen. As he removed his shirt, Kyle's voice filtered down the hallway: "...granddaughter? Come, I'll introduce you to Ardiff."

Ardiff, the lawyer assigned to some of the trickier yellow cases. Thomas bundled up his shirt and threw it aside. He'd opted not to heal his scars – just the open wounds, which were closed now, and turning a lurid red. With his shirt off, everyone could see his sunken stomach, the lashes carving through his chest hair and lancing over his back, the telltale pinprick bruises of his time in what Gul Dorr Rik called 'the waterbed.' Thomas sat up straight, his chin high and his eyes blazing, and wheeled through the curtain into the open air.

He expected everyone to look at him. He wasn't disappointed. Old friends tossed him furtive glances from beneath their eyelashes. Old enemies – more respectable than the friends – scanned his body up and down, gazes lingering on the scars. Those scars wouldn't change their minds, Thomas knew; no evidence would. They'd think of him as the Gul's pet for the rest of their lives.

But at least the scars would stick in their craws for a night or two. With a deft slide of the palm, Thomas wheeled his chair around, aiming for the ward where Vissal slept. He spotted Onu Yumelo right away, but kept going, refusing to falter.

"Heading somewhere?" Onu asked as he drew up to her. She turned fluidly on her heel to walk alongside him.

"Nowhere fun," Thomas said, reluctantly admiring her grace. He glanced sideways at the subtle plume of smoke emerging from Onu's coat lapel. "You got a cigarette hidden in there?"

She adjusted her lapels ever-so-slightly and shot him a coy look.

"Bum me one," Thomas requested. "Old time's sake."

To his surprise, she obliged. She flipped an unlit tube of paper from her pocket and stooped over, folding her tall form so she could hold it to his lips. Thomas plucked it out of her fingers and studied it instead. Thin paper, torn from one of the Cardassian philosophies that used to line the walls in Gul Dorr Rik's office. The writing system would have been illegible to Thomas just five years ago, but now, as he turned the cigarette over in the light, he could read the script winding around its length.

*There is no man more honorable than a liar,* it said.

Thomas snorted. He held the cigarette between his lips but waved off Onu's offer of a light. "Not for me," he said. "It's for Vissal."

He made it a whole meter down the hallway without Onu at his side. She'd stopped cold, her impassive face like a ceramic mask. Slowly, but with long strides, she caught up to him and wrapped her fingers around his chair's handlebars.

"I'll push you," she said flatly.

Thomas took his palms off the wheels obediently and held the cigarette between his fingers. "It's over-cured," he said. "Too sweet. I can tell just from licking the paper."

"Most people like them sweet," Onu said. "Why are you visiting Vissal?"

"Am I not allowed?"

A pause.

"I'd prefer you didn't," said Onu, with that candid awfulness and dry sense of humor that had, once, made her Thomas' favorite person in Lazon II. "Nothing against Vissal," she said. "But it's just not good optics."

"I don't think anything is good optics for me right now," Thomas said. "Not for us, at least—" by which he meant the ex-prisoners. "--but for Starfleet? Actually, visiting Vissal might be *good* optics when it comes to them."

He cocked his head to the side in an exaggerated Thinker's pose, his cigarette twirling between two fingers. Out of his periphery, he caught Onu studying him, unamused – and his eyes crinkled, and he offered her the same boyish, charming smile that, across the galaxy, Will Riker was offering his wife.

"Save the charm," said Onu. "If you think you'll benefit from courting Starfleet, you're an idiot. They're not going to help you any more than Gul Dorr Rik did."

"Oh, I don't know. He helped me quite a bit," said Thomas idly. His stomach clenched; he heard himself say those words as if from a distance. But he had to make it sound convincing, if only because Onu wanted him to get angry, to protest his innocence. He gestured lazily to a cubicle on the left. "Here."

Onu brought the wheelchair up short. She leaned down over the back of it, narrow eyes searching Thomas' face.

"Did you mean that about the Gul?" she asked, astonishingly serious.

“Oh, yes. He helped me. A warm bed, the comfort of his ample body—” (The Gul had been nearly as emaciated as his prisoners). “--fine literature and better food. And of course, he made sure the other prisoners never harmed me.” Thomas’ eyes twinkled, daring her to deny it. “I’d say the Gul’s protection was definitely worth the price.”

Onu was unimpressed. She flicked her gaze toward a scar under Thomas’ left nipple, an ugly arcing blade wound that he’d received from one of his fellow prisoners.

“The Gul’s protection, indeed,” said Onu. “Enjoy your visit with Vissal – you two deserve each other. No one else could sleep with you without contracting a disease.”

Thomas kept his face set in an insouciant smirk. He was afraid it grew a little hard-edged at the jab about his STDs. There was nothing he could say in his own defense there, so he just kept twirling the cigarette, eyes glassy, like he was remembering a *very* decent lay. With a sound deep in her throat – maybe amusement, maybe disgust – Onu straightened up, out of his sight, but still close. Her hands trailed over his bare shoulders, a thread of warmth bleeding out of her palms and into his hard-knit scars. Her breath ghosted against the shell of his ear.

“King of the camp,” she whispered, and at the sound of that old nickname, at the memory of his first year here, before everything went south, ice trickled down Thomas’ spine and straight into his balls. He kept his face neutral, his cigarette slowly looping in circles between his index and middle finger. When Onu finally pulled away, his chest was gleaming with sweat, the hair there matted and dark.

He waited until she was gone, and then he wheeled straight to Vissal’s door and chimed for access. When it opened, bloodshot eyes stared back at him, and scabs crusted Vissal’s bare head, and the scent of unwashed skin wafted from her pajamas, but Thomas grinned. He knew he looked no better, breathing too fast and wheelchair-bound, with his ruined feet and grisly scars all on display. He twirled the cigarette one last time and presented it to her, butt-end first, with a steady hand.

“Care for a smoke?” he asked.

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“They accused me of being a collaborator,” Vissal said.

“Collaborating with whom?” Thomas asked.

Vissal sat on the edge of her bed, hunched over with her pajama top hanging open, giving Thomas an uneasy view of her mutilated chest. *Quid pro quo*: he had his feet propped up on her bed, where Vissal couldn’t help but see them, smell the sweet, slick scent of infection coming from his debrided flesh. And he in turn could smell the cloying animal reek of waste, a little more metallic than the human kind, coming from a bucket on the other side of Vissal’s bed. Anything to avoid facing the crowd.

Vissal took a slow drag on the cigarette. “The guards,” she said with faux casualness. “Which complicates my yellow status.”

“What were you in for, originally?” asked Thomas, aware for the first time that his own status was pink, which might not be as good as he hoped.

“My mom was an ambassador,” Vissal said. “My dad ran the Hotel Luroo. You ever heard of it?”

Thomas shook his head.

“It was a resort spot,” Vissal said. “Tourists, mostly, and a few wealthy long-term residents from Orion. But the Cardassians took over eventually.”

“Great status symbol for people who grew up hungry,” Thomas mused. Vissal gave him a sharp look.

“Don’t,” she said.

“What?”

“Don’t say things like that.”

Thomas nodded. He kept his eyes away from the swollen orange-green scar that had once been Vissal’s left breast. When she took her next drag on the cigarette, the smoke escaped her in stuttering bursts through teeth that chattered, and Thomas was back in Gul Dorr Rik’s quarters, looking at pictures of the Gul’s twin brothers.

*Ril died first*, the Gul said. *Age two, starvation. Ekkat died soon after. He would stand by the window and call Ril’s name.*

“The Hotel Luroo was a Cardassian hotspot,” Vissal said. “But one of the managers – not my dad – started hiring resistance members. As waitstaff. Janitorial. Front desk.” She shrugged one shoulder, and a streak of clear pus soaked through her shirt. “There were arms deals in the basement, listening devices in the lights. When the Cardassians found out...”

Thomas closed his eyes. “So you’re purely a political prisoner?” he asked. “No crimes on record?”

Vissal hesitated. “Not on record...”

Thomas had to smile at that. “Explains the yellow status,” he said begrudgingly. “Although I heard Onu got yellow status too, and she was with the Maquis.”

“Onu can buy her way into anything,” Vissal said, voice laced with bitterness.

“Well, supposedly we can *sleep* our way into anything,” Thomas reminded her. “So. Collaboration. What do they say you did?”

“Slept with the guards,” Vissal grunted.

“Of course.”

“Garnered favors.”

Thomas tipped his head in a lazy nod. Whatever Vissal was accused of, it would come his way next. “What else?”

Now, with her lips tight around the cigarette, Vissal’s face became pinched. “They say I acted as an informant,” she said, lines wreathing the corners of her eyes. “Like, I spied on other prisoners and got them in trouble.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow at that. If Vissal was explaining the word ‘informant’ to him, then he could only guess she’d had to ask what it meant when Ardif explained it to her, and for the first time in years, he saw how young Vissal was. No older than eighteen when she arrived; not even twenty-two now, the same age as a cadet in her final year.

“How could you be an informant?” Thomas asked. “You were the camp pariah. No one takes the pariah into confidence. What were you going to tell the guards, ‘*I saw prisoners playing two-up along the wall*’? ‘*The Bolians are selling toxic leaves as toilet paper and giving everybody a rash*’?”

Vissal didn’t laugh. She sucked on the end of the cigarette until the thin paper burned a bright red, right down to her lips. Maybe she *had* informed, Thomas thought suddenly, and felt guilty for the mental betrayal. No judgment, he ordered himself. He wasn’t in the camp anymore; he could afford to sympathize. Look at Onu. Look at *him*, look at the death rate in Lazon II. People did crazy things to survive. Assuming the worst of Vissal – but careful not to show it – he dragged his injured feet off her bed and wheeled over to the shields.

“What are you doing?” Vissal asked.

Thomas unlatched the cover and poked at the wires inside. Decades-old Starfleet training unfolded in his memory, where it had worn familiar grooves into his brain. “Checking to make sure this hasn’t been tampered with,” he said. “Who has access?”

“Just the medics.”

*Medics can be trusted*, Thomas told himself, and he repeated it a few more times until it sounded believable. Reluctantly, he closed the plastic cover. “Just keep it that way,” he said wearily. It wasn’t like Vissal could lock the medics out. She smelled feverish, and there was a giant pus stain on the front of her shirt where her scabs had burst open and leaked. Thomas hesitated, his eyes trailing once again to the bucket in the corner.

“Can you accompany me somewhere?” he asked.

“No,” said Vissal at once, her eyes set on the wall.

“Please.” He took a stab in the dark. “I’d like to use the bathroom without being jumped. Maybe the shower, too.”

Vissal glanced sideways. “You think my presence is going to deter anyone?”

“It might.” He hitched one shoulder into a shrug. “Safety in numbers. Just button up your shirt first. I know none of *us* care—” (They’d certainly seen each other naked often enough to grow immune to it) “--but the Starfleet guys are pretty uptight.”

Vissal’s lips curled into a smile. She faced him head-on, but there was something in the set of her shoulders, the glint in her eyes, that told Thomas she was thinking of something else entirely. Not his request.

“What?” he prompted, voice soft.

“It’s just...” She shook her head, still smiling painfully. “My dad’s a smart businessman. My mom’s smart, too.”

“Yeah?”

She swallowed the grin, but she still had that sharp look of bitter amusement in her eyes. “Would you say I’m smart, Tom?”

He studied her gravely. It wouldn’t kill her ego to hear the truth; he knew that. He remembered early on, when he tried to teach her how to cure the weeds to make tobacco, how she fumbled through the process and forgot basic steps. She hadn’t even known how to boil water or make tea. And she’d been in charge of doling out their food once, just briefly, but she’d struggled so much with the basic math involved with weighing portions that someone else took her place within two days. And during all her time in Lazon II, she’d never learned a lick of Cardassian, despite the lack of universal translators.

Thomas thinned his lips. “What are you asking me, Vissal?” he said finally. “Are you asking if I respect you?”

“No.”

“Because I do,” he said softly.

“That’s not what I’m asking.” She scooted to the edge of the bed. “I’m trying to tell you something, Tom. I’ve got smart sisters, you know? My older sister, she’s a lawyer. My younger sister, she got into the top university on Orion. Best entrance exam score they’d seen in a decade. You know what *I* was doing when the Cardassians caught me?”

Thomas shook his head.

"I was lazing around in the city," Vissal said, "sharing a flat with four friends. Only one of us had a job, and it wasn't me. You ever hear of the Jewels of Sound?"

"Oh, yes," said Thomas quietly.

"They're *divine*. Even the knock-off version. They send you to a whole different world – hell, you were in the band, you can picture it." She closed a fist near her ear and then splayed her fingers out in a starburst, like sound exploding against her eardrum. "It's amazing. You don't want to do anything else. You sleep all day, take the Jewels at night, wander through the city with your friends..."

"It sounds nice," said Thomas, and he poured every ounce of sincerity into it, because he could see the wonder in Vissal's eyes turning into self-hatred. "It sounds like a dream. Like something any kid would want, *including* the smart ones." He shifted in his seat, remembered his first year alone in Alaska, the job he'd taken that summer out on the docks. "If you'd offered me that life at sixteen, seventeen..." he started.

She shook her head. Her hand closed into a fist again. Gradually, she lowered it to grip the sheets. "Don't lie," she said.

"Ah, but the most honorable man is a liar, remember?" said Thomas with a grin.

Vissal's eyes hardened. "You told me all about yourself when you first got here," she said, like Thomas hadn't spoken. "Early entrance to the Academy. First in your class."

"Eighth."

"You were gonna be the youngest Starfleet captain ever."

"Well, I kind of missed that mark," said Thomas dryly. He leaned forward and squeezed Vissal's hand, his voice turning gentle. "I get your point."

"You *don't*. I mean, my sisters, *neither* of them got taken. *They're* the high achievers; they're the ones that actually pose a risk. They could be a real asset to the Maquis, right? They could probably come up with a whole new weapon that would knock the Cardassians right off the planet, but they took *me*. It's just—"

"I know," said Thomas, his voice firm. He thought of Will Riker, captain of the Titan, husband to Deanna Troi, and huffed out a laugh. "Come on," he said, tugging on Vissal's arm. "Come to the bathroom with me. I promise not to bite."

She slipped her hand out of his. She covered her face. The skin over the back of her hands was blemished, dotted with pale green spots. Lack of nutrition. Her shirt hung open, and Thomas remembered the day they slashed her chest open, the yellow fat spilling from the wound, the dirt and waste ground into it to ensure it got infected. He did the buttons up for her like a father would dress his child, hiding her wounds entirely. There was nothing he could do about the pus stains seeping through the fabric.

"*Vissal*," said Thomas softly. "Come on. Come with me to the bathroom. Take a shower. Use the toilet."

"My grandpa's out there," said Vissal hollowly.

"I know. I saw."

The only sound was her thin, thready breathing. "He's a politician," she said. "He's powerful."

"I know. He's going to get you out of here in no time."

"It could have been him," Vissal said, nearly inaudible. "Him in the camp. Not me. If they wanted to punish my dad..."

Thomas watched her. She'd withdrawn too far. There was no reaching her. Not today. With a bracing breath, Thomas wheeled himself around to face the curtain.

"He's old," Vissal said. "He would have died within a month. He wouldn't have suffered."

"He'd have suffered," Thomas said; if he was sure of one thing, it was that everyone in Lazon II suffered, no matter how quickly they died. But Vissal's voice came back fast, firm and strong.

"Not like me."

## Chapter 9

"They look like skeletons," Mr. Laycez murmured.

Kyle followed his gaze. They sat at a coffee station set up for medics and visitors, with a single replicator and a view of the rec room. Across the long hall, patients shuffled around in their baggy hospital pajamas, their cheeks gaunt and their faces nothing but eyes.

"Have you ever seen a labor camp before, Mister Laycez?" Kyle asked.

Laycez's strained brown eyes followed a Bolian patient from one end of the room to the next. "I've been party to famine relief efforts on Havas," he said. "I'm not *shocked* by their appearance. I'm just..."

"Well, whatever you 'just' are, try not to let it show," said Kyle, not without sympathy. He took a sip of watery replicant tea. "They trained us on the transport over. Had to make sure we wouldn't look at them as if..."

"They're dying?" Laycez asked, voice tight.

"As if there's something wrong with them," Kyle said. "As if they're ... less than human."

He hoped the universal translator would find some equivalent for that in Laycez's nonhuman tongue. With Laycez's gaze fixed on the patients, it was hard to tell.

"Why hide your concern?" Laycez asked finally.

Kyle huffed out a humorless laugh. "*We* call it concern," he said. "They don't see it that way."

"How do they see it, then?" asked Laycez with a trace of anxiety.

"They see us looking at them like wounded animals," Kyle said. Even now, after weeks here, it was hard not to see the patients that way. "Or like walking corpses," he said. He rolled his shoulders. "When I arrived here, most of them were naked. No hint of shyness, no spare clothes. They didn't look sapient. Their eyes were dull. Glassy. If they were sick, then they relieved themselves wherever they stood. They seemed to have no concept of society. No understanding of the rules they all grew up with – polite behavior, common comportment." He hesitated, took a steadying breath. "You can't look at them like that, like they're a different species."

"No," said Laycez. "I can see that. But still..."

In the rec room, it took two patients working together to lift the music speaker onto the table. Their arms, as thin as toothpicks, looked liable to snap. Wiry muscle moved over the bone and rippled beneath the skin in ways that weren't visible in healthy people.

"Does *she* look like that?" Laycez asked with a shaky breath.

"Vissal?" Kyle's gaze tracked down the hallway, where in the distance, he noted with a jolt that someone had procured a wheelchair and was pushing a patient toward the very back of the barracks. "They almost all look like that," Kyle said absently.

"Almost? Who are the exceptions?"

There was a hard glint in Laycez's eye that Kyle knew well. Exceptions were never selected by luck alone. In a labor camp – or in a famine – those who stayed fit and healthy did so only by hurting their peers to get ahead. Lazily, Kyle nodded down the hallway to the woman pushing the wheelchair.

"What's her name?" asked Laycez out the corner of his mouth.

"Onu Yumelo. Bajoran."

A slight quirk of the eyebrow was Laycez's only reaction. "And who is she with?"

"Don't know. Can't tell from this angle—" But down the corner, Yumelo stopped and turned, and Kyle saw that the man in the wheelchair was no other than Thomas Riker. His voice died in his chest. He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "Don't know," he said gruffly.

"That's Vissal's room," said Laycez distantly. "I'm sure of it."

Conversation died. Yumelo sauntered back up the hallway, a puff of smoke emerging from her lips. Kyle made careful note of who greeted her and who kept their eyes on the floor. Toadies vs. victims – aw hell, they were all victims, but that Yumelo rubbed him the wrong way.

"Freedom fighter?" Laycez asked.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss any random patient's history with you, Mister Laycez," said Kyle as politely as he could. "Trust me, I understand your curiosity—"

"Yes." Laycez turned his sharp eyes on Kyle. "You do. Your son is a patient here, I heard. Why is William Riker's father permitted to read Yumelo's file, but Vissal Laycez's grandfather is not?"

"*Thomas Riker*," Kyle corrected, but he was impressed in spite of himself. "Where did you learn that?"

"Tell me who Yumelo is and I'll tell you my source," Laycez said.



Kyle held his hand out for a shake. It felt good, insanely good, to grip Layceze's hand, feel the muscle over the bones, the strength in his fingers. After weeks of caring for Thomas, Kyle had forgotten what a normal person's body felt like, and just that quick handshake sent a sweep of sadness through him that he had to fight hard to keep off his face. It helped to stare at Yumelo, to watch her slow progress through the hall.

"From what I've heard, they call her the queen of the camp," Kyle said. "She had an elaborate trade system set up with the Cardassians. Prisoners would give her their belongings – anything of value – and she would haggle with a guard here, or in the village outside the walls."

"She was permitted outside the walls?" Layceze asked.

"Maybe." Kyle shrugged. "Regardless of whether she was permitted, she found a way. Our legal team has already talked to a few witnesses." Subtly, he indicated Helam the Bolian. "He sold her his family talisman. Pure latinum. She told him she could only get nine hundred bremos for it, and from that, she took a ten percent cut. In reality, she sold it for two thousand and change."

"What use is money in a labor camp?" Layceze asked.

"What use?" Kyle looked around at the emaciated prisoners, and at Yumelo, trim but well-fed. "Money is food. Money is safety. It's medicine for the sick, messages home..."

Layceze pursed his lips. "Barbaric," he said, and then he dipped his head. "But it's a barbaric system."

Kyle stayed silent. Would that excuse be enough to pardon Vissal when her hearing got underway? In person, all you had to do was look at Yumelo and Vissal side by side and you could tell who really took advantage, who really stepped over her fellow prisoners for extra benefits. But on paper, 'collaboration' looked a lot worse than 'trading'. Kyle watched, eyes hooded, as the curtain over Vissal's cubicle shifted and Thomas wheeled himself out, looking ragged. His face was lined, his eyes downcast. He carried his sadness on his shoulders.

Kyle had often felt proud of Will Riker. Thomas Riker had given him little opportunity to feel the same, and arguably, consorting with a Cardassian collaborator didn't exactly qualify.

But he was proud that Vissal Layceze had a friend.

## Chapter 10

“You’re dressed up,” Thomas said.

Kyle paused with the soundproof curtain brushed to one side, and glanced down at his pressed suit. “Vissal’s hearing is today,” he said.

“You’re sitting in?”

“You can too, if you like,” Kyle said. He eyed the plastoid box in Thomas’ hands. Its lid was popped open, a tangle of wires and circuitry visible inside.

“Is that safe?” Thomas asked absently, snapping one of the wires out of place. “Letting just anybody attend...?”

“It’s not my call,” Kyle said. “If anything sensitive comes up, or if Vissal requests it, we’ll move to a private hearing, but until that point, the therapy team thinks it’ll be more beneficial for all patients to—”

Thomas wasn’t listening anymore. His attention was clearly focused on the little plastoid box.

“What is this?” Kyle asked. “I don’t remember you being such a tinkerer.”

“It’s the shield box,” Thomas said. “I wanted to see how easy it was to tamper with. To disable.”

He clicked the lid back into place and casually handed the box to Kyle. One eyebrow raised, Kyle said,

“And why are you tampering with the shields?”

“Put that back in place,” said Thomas first. “I got it working again.” While Kyle fixed the box back to the generator, Thomas said, “You know each of these boxes wires into a command circuit? You can shut them all off from the outside.”

“I’m aware,” said Kyle.

“In case of emergencies?”

Kyle just nodded. He searched for Thomas’ cold-weather clothes and found them balled up beneath the guest chair, cold to the touch.

“What if the emergency is that Angosian super-soldier’s mind snapping?” Thomas said. “What if he finds that command circuit and gives himself access to everyone’s private cubicle?”

Kyle shook specks of dirt off the sweater and helped Thomas into it.

“Where are we going?” Thomas asked, his voice muffled by a faceful of wool. Kyle’s gut was tight, the evidence of Thomas’ paranoia a little disconcerting – but the doctors had warned him about it. They saw it in all ex-prisoners; of course they’d see it in Thomas, too.

“I want you to attend Vissal’s hearing,” he said firmly, helping Thomas poke his arms through the sleeves.

“Why?”

“Because you stole a Federation warship, kid,” said Kyle, exasperated. “You’ve got a hearing of your own coming up. Now let me help you into these damn pants.”

Thomas sat back, balancing on his palms so he could lift his hips. A small grin tugged at his lips. “I bet they didn’t want you to tell me that,” he said.

In fact, he’d been ordered not to say anything. Kyle scowled and tugged the cold-weather pants over Thomas’ pajamas.

“I was a Starfleet officer before I was a terrorist,” Thomas reminded him. He stilled Kyle’s hand, wrapping bone-thin fingers around his wrist. Kyle stared down at them for a moment, struck by the cracked knuckles and purple sores. “I had to participate in courts-martial ... sometimes for officers who knew how badly they’d fucked up. Who wanted to just kill themselves and be done with it.” His eyes searched Kyle’s face. “I was always under orders not to tell them they were even in trouble until the medics stabilized them. But they always knew.”

Gently, Kyle extricated his wrist from Thomas’ grip. “You’re not a terrorist,” he said gruffly.

“If you say so,” said Thomas with a half-smile.

“And you’re not suicidal.”

The smile faded. Thomas laid back on the bed, drowning in his sweater. He knotted bony hands together over a protruding rib cage and stared up at the ceiling.

“I’m not going to participate in Vissal’s public humiliation,” he said.

Kyle digested this. He checked his watch, brain churning at a methodical grind. He paced in a circle around the bed, studying Thomas’ feet as he went – the dead, blackened flesh in need of another debriding, the reopened wounds, a lack of collagen causing the scars to split. While he considered strategy, Kyle searched for a pair of clean socks and tugged them over Thomas’ feet.

Briefly – just for one blink of an eye, one heartbeat – he was a young man again, and it was early morning, not yet dawn, and he was checking what he still thought of as “the baby’s room” only to find the bed empty. When he finally located his son, the three-year-old was fast asleep in Elisabeth’s old sickbed, the paper-thin sheets twisted around his legs. And in silence, Kyle untangled the sheets and got Will dressed, sliding socks over bare feet and tying his shoes for him while Will rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

“*Hospital?*” Will asked, still used to early-morning visits to his mother.

“*No,*” Kyle said softly. “*I got a new mission, kid. I’m taking you to a babysitter while I’m away.*”

Kyle blinked the memory away. He looked Thomas over from head to toe, chewing the inside of his cheek, trying to think of a way to force him – to convince him – to go to Vissal’s hearing.

“Yumelo will be there,” he said finally.

Thomas sat up on his elbows. “That’s definitely not a good idea,” he said.

Kyle just shrugged, eyebrows raised, a silent, *What are you gonna do about it?* face.

Ten minutes later, he wheeled Thomas out of his cubicle and down to the hearing floor.

## Chapter 11

It was the softest hearing Kyle had ever been to.

Guests, such as himself, were tucked away behind a screen that hid them from Vissal's view. Mr. Laycez, after much arguing, had been forcefully relegated to this section, where he sat between Kyle Riker and the prisoner known as Onu Yumelo. Thomas sat in the aisle. His feet had started bleeding on the way over, muscle cramps tearing the still-healing scars apart. Bundled in bandages, he sat slumped in his wheelchair, a pale shadow of himself with shuttered eyes.

On the other side of the screen, in a comfortable armchair, Vissal spoke with her therapist in low tones. The counselor's Starfleet pips gleamed in the soft light, so unlike any court-martial Kyle had been present for. He glanced at Thomas and saw the tension in his eyes, and wondered if he was remembering his own trial for stealing the Defiant – his psychological profile picked over, his failures and shortcomings dragged to the surface for everyone to gawk at.

"Does she know she's on record?" asked Mr. Laycez out the corner of his mouth.

"Yes," Kyle murmured.

"She knows, then, that this is a legal hearing, not a counseling session?"

"Yes," said Kyle. Mr. Laycez leaned forward, fingers steepled before his mouth, and listened closely to his granddaughter's halting speech.

"What might collaboration net you, as a prisoner?" the counselor asked.

Vissal gave an uneasy shrug, a roll of her shoulders that seemed more like a flinch. "It might get you extra food," she said, her head bowed. "An easier work detail. They might say you were sick and you'd get an egg at mealtime every day for a week until you 'got better.' But you were never really sick to begin with."

"That's a cunning way to do it," said the counselor softly.

Vissal gave a reluctant nod.

"Did any of the prisoners ever notice?" asked the counselor. "When someone was faking it?"

"We suspected sometimes," said Vissal. Her eyes were down, her fingers worrying at a loose thread on the armchair. "But you couldn't prove it. If people liked you then they never suspected anything. If people disliked you then they said you were collaborating, even if you were really sick." She hesitated. "One guy, Danbi, lost his teeth. His gums got loose and all his teeth just fell out one by one. He couldn't eat any of his rations. But everyone said he was faking it anyway."

"Did anyone ever accuse you of faking it?" the counselor asked.

Her tone was still gentle, but her blatant lack of interest in Danbi made Vissal's face harden. At Kyle's side, Thomas had the same disgusted look etched into his features.

"Yes," said Vissal quietly. "People accused me. But I never was."

The counselor sat back, consulting her PADD. "It's true you were rarely sick," she said. "That must have helped your reputation. But at the same time, if anyone disliked you, they could point to your good health as evidence you were favored by the guards. Perhaps they went easier on you, gave you better rations..."

"No," said Vissal, her voice hard. "They didn't go easy on me."

The counselor raised an eyebrow. "But they did give you better rations?"

Vissal's hands tightened on her pants. "Look at me," she said, and Kyle forced himself to see her as a stranger would: all bones. "Do I look like I was fed well?" Vissal asked.

The counselor sighed. When she spoke again, her voice was soft and weary, laced with sympathy. "Vissal, *none* of you were fed well," she said. "You're all victims here. What I'm saying is ... sometimes, when your back is against the wall, you do things you thought you would never do, just to survive. And if I'm not wrong, then I imagine everybody in this camp has done something they aren't proud of."

Vissal stared down at her hands.

"If you're honest," said the counselor softly, "maybe we can work it out."

"Who accused me?" Vissal asked, almost inaudible.

"No one accused you, Vissal. Your name was mentioned in the guards' logs, that's all." The counselor hesitated. "And I assure you, you weren't the only one. No one at Lazon Two is innocent, you understand?"

"So we're all going to trial?" Vissal asked.

"It's not a trial. It's a fact-finding mission. If we can confirm the accuracy of the guards' logs, down to every last detail, then we can use them as evidence against the guards themselves when they go to trial," the counselor said. She leaned forward. "Listen. This guard, Tuhorm. Do you

recognize that name?"

Vissal squeezed her eyes shut. At Kyle's side, Thomas stopped breathing, his lips parted in a silent gasp.

"Yes," Vissal whispered.

Gently, the counselor said, "He wrote down everything he did to you, Vissal. If he goes on trial, this log is going to be the single greatest piece of evidence against him. But do you know what the prosecutor will do?"

Vissal was silent, her head bowed.

"He'll call you to the stand," said the counselor, "and he'll show you this entry here, where Tuhorm says you informed on a fellow prisoner, and he'll ask you if that's true. If you say no, then suddenly this whole log becomes suspect. If this is a lie, then perhaps everything is a lie."

"And Tuhorm goes free," said Vissal hollowly.

The counselor sat back, her legs crossed, her face pinched.

"Is it true, Vissal?" she asked.

Vissal kept her head down. She scratched at a scab on her bare scalp, picking the blackened flesh until it bled anew.

"Yes," she whispered.

"What did you do, Vissal?"

A bead of dark green blood trickled down Vissal's forehead, where she wiped it away with the heel of her palm. The counselor leaned in, using her handkerchief to wipe the rest of it clean.

"You can tell me," she said softly.

"I lied to them," said Vissal, her voice choked. "You know what they did to me. I just wanted a break."

"So what did you say?"

Vissal's eyes darted to the screen. She couldn't possibly know who was behind there, who was watching. But she stared at them as if she knew.

"I told them," she said through tears, "that Tom Riker was stealing food from other inmates. It wasn't true."

Kyle glanced at Thomas. His face was expressionless, his chest unmoving. With his hands folded in his lap, he looked almost relaxed. But at the corner of his eyes, stress lines stood out in stark relief.

"They would have hurt him anyway," Vissal said, her voice choked. "They were always hurting him. I just—" She glanced again at the screen, at her grandfather. "I just wanted one week. One week without them..."

She couldn't say it. But Kyle knew: one week without rape, seven days free of the torture heaped on her because of her species – and on Thomas, because of his time in Starfleet and the Maquis. Kyle refused to glance at Thomas; it seemed kinder. But he did look at Yumelo, the only member of her Maquis cell to survive the camp – the only prisoner to enter the rehab facility healthy and whole. She stood gracefully, with a sharp smile on her face, and nodded politely to Kyle and Laycez as she made her way out. She didn't look at Thomas either, but she trailed a comforting hand over his shoulder as she passed.

Through the screen, Kyle could hear Vissal sobbing. Beside him, Mr. Laycez had bowed his head over clasped hands, his knuckles sickly white. The counselor asked no more questions, but they all heard the scratch of her stylus as she recorded Vissal's response.

"Let's go, Dad," Thomas said. "It's over."

## Chapter 12

“You should rest,” Kyle said.

Thomas pretended not to hear. He jerked his foot out of the nurse’s hands and fastened the fresh bandage himself. Outside, through the open curtain, a chorus of jeers was fading, dying down to a low murmur at the end of the hall.

“Call security,” said Thomas firmly. He slid off the bed and into his wheelchair. While Kyle tapped his combadge and murmured a warning to the security forces, Thomas shrugged the nurse off his arm. “Let me go,” he said.

“Sir, you are *officially* on bed rest,” the nurse said, matching his steely tone. “You’re not leaving until you’ve had a warm meal and at least eight hours of sleep.”

Thomas skidded his palm over the right wheel, trying to angle around the nurse, but she blocked him with her boot. On the other side of the cubicle, Kyle ended his conversation with security and joined the nurse, sneaking up on Thomas from behind. He grabbed the chair by the handles to prevent Thomas from moving forward.

“Dad—”

“Security is already posted at Vissal’s room,” said Kyle calmly. “They’re moving her to a safe location as soon as the crowd calms down.”

“Onu—”

“Yumelo is helping,” Kyle said.

Thomas’ protests died in a stammer. He stopped fighting the nurse and went utterly still. Slowly, he turned to look Kyle in the eye.

“She’s helping?” he said, his voice quiet.

“She’s being a leader,” Kyle said, raising one eyebrow to show he shared Thomas’ discomfort with the situation. “So far she’s managed to keep them from growing violent.”

“She’s the one who leaked the information in the first place!” Thomas said. “If she’s calming them down, it’s only to curry favor—”

“Then let her curry favor,” said Kyle, his patience strained. “God’s sake, so long as it keeps Vissal safe, who cares what Yumelo does? Do you really think, Thomas, for one moment, that the Federation is going to look kindly on the *one* prisoner at Lazon Two who isn’t suffering from malnutrition?”

In response, Thomas just turned away again and rested his cheek on his fist. The angle of his head and the hunch of his shoulders hid his face entirely. But Kyle could see the tight rise and fall of Thomas’ chest, a little too shallow for his liking. He dismissed the nurse with a wary nod.

“What do you think Yumelo’s up to?” he asked, moving away from Thomas’ chair. He kept his back turned to his son, focusing on the replicator instead. Anything to give Thomas some privacy.

“I think she wants blood,” said Thomas, his voice a little thin. “And I think she wants a scapegoat.”

“Why?”

“Gives us a common enemy. Someone to fight against.” While Thomas spoke, Kyle punched in the code for a hot cup of raktajino, decaf. The smooth scent of blended liquor and aromatic coffee filled the air, and behind him, there was a sigh and a shift of weight as Thomas relaxed a little. “If she can lead the camp against a common enemy, then she has a way to gain some power back,” Thomas said.

“And why does she need power?” Kyle asked. He waited until the replicator was done and then tapped his fingers against the mug, testing its warmth. He stirred a liquid sedative into it and carried it over to Thomas.

“Both hands,” he said, and when Thomas refused to listen, he forcibly broke Thomas’ grip on the chair and placed both of his son’s hands around the mug. Thomas accepted it with a scowl.

“She doesn’t *need* power,” he said, taking a sip. “She *wants* it. She had it in the camp, thanks to all her outside trading. And she wants to have it again.”

Kyle leaned on the edge of Thomas’ bed, giving it some thought. Thomas took another drink, longer this time, with one ear cocked for the quieting crowd outside.

“What did you put in this?” Thomas asked.

“A sleep aid and an anxiolytic,” Kyle said. “Doctor’s orders. She sent the authorization straight to my PADD.”

He crossed his arms, preparing for a fight, but Thomas just made a face and drained the mug in one go. Together, they listened to the crowd, shouts dissolving into murmurs. A few prisoners shuffled past Thomas’ open curtain, heading back to the rec room with tension knotting their shoulders. A wave of weary sadness washed over Kyle at the sight of them: too frail to really hurt anyone, yet full of rage. He glanced down the corridor toward Vissal’s cubicle, where Yumelo was waving the last few stragglers away with far more efficacy than the security guards.

Kyle twitched the curtain shut.

“I’m next, aren’t I?” Thomas murmured.

Kyle turned sharply. His spike of alarm faded, morphed into something more hollow, when he saw Thomas’ posture – the bone-deep exhaustion hanging off his frame. “Next for what?” Kyle asked.

Thomas lifted one shoulder in a lopsided shrug. “Tribunal,” he said.

“You’re not next on their list, no,” Kyle said. “And yours won’t be like Vissal’s. Vissal, remember, did not break any laws to get her here.”

Thomas half-smiled at that. “So mine will be worse,” he said a little wryly.

Since that seemed almost to cheer him up, Kyle didn’t bother to deny it. He stayed silent, sensing something else behind Thomas’ grin. And in a matter of seconds, that grin faded away.

“That’s not all I meant, though,” Thomas said. “I mean, if they turned on Vissal, they’ll turn on me too. It’s just a matter of time.”

He said it so factually, without any emotion, that Kyle believed him. He took a quick, deep breath to chase away the empty feeling in his gut.

“You have twenty minutes before that sleep aid kicks in,” he said, avoiding Thomas’ eyes. “Do you need the bathroom?”

Thomas stared at his closed curtain, his eyes distant. Maybe envisioning the trek to the bathroom, with that angry crowd watching. “No,” he said.

“Then let’s get you to bed.”

They’d gotten it down to a business-like routine. Kyle helped him remove his day-clothes from his seat in the chair and let him lift himself back onto the bed, balancing on his heels, where his feet were less likely to hurt. He folded the day-clothes into a portable laundry beneath the replicator, where they would be fresh for the next day. Only when that was done did he dim the lights and activate the privacy shield; he turned to leave, as he always did, without saying goodnight.

But this time, even though his face was buried in the pillow, Thomas reached out and stopped him. His fingers hooked around Kyle’s in a tight, impulsive squeeze – so quick that Kyle didn’t have time to return the gesture. He’d barely processed it when Thomas pulled his hand back and tucked it beneath the pillow, his expression hidden from sight.

Kyle couldn’t speak. He couldn’t move. He stared at Thomas in dumb shock, a painful vice heating his stomach – and old images, of Elisabeth in her sickbed, of twelve-year-old Will recovering from his broken leg, of his last disastrous meeting with Will and the anbo-jytsu match where he cheated yet again, all swirling in Kyle’s head.

He couldn’t face it. He squeezed his hand into a fist, his skin stinging where Thomas had touched him.

He left without a word.

## Chapter 13

That night, it wasn't the noise that woke Kyle. It was the sudden silence.

He lifted his head, sleep still clinging to his eyelids. In his guest cubicle, no bigger and no more luxurious than the prisoners', the curtains kept out light and sound alike. But every night the white-noise hum of Kyle's shield generator lulled him to sleep. Now that shield generator was silent. Swinging his legs out of bed, Kyle checked the plastoid box.

All the wires were intact. All the circuits were aligned. He inspected it twice over and discovered nothing: no reason it should stop working.

With a frown, Kyle twitched his curtain open and listened. Downstairs, in the prisoners' hall, there was a rapid slap of bare feet against the floor. A hushed, hoarse cry, maybe a command, maybe a plea. Kyle was still peering out, his eyebrows furrowed, when a shriek of noise burst from the cubicle behind him.

He jumped. Scrabbling to silence it, he shoved his pillow off the bed and found his PADD. Kyle switched the volume off, his heart pounding. It was an alarm he'd hooked up to Thomas' cubicle – an alarm to let him know if Thomas' security shields went down during the night.

And downstairs, breaking through the silence, there came a cry of pain.

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The stairs were slick, and it was so dark Kyle couldn't tell if it was blood or urine. He kept to the edges and watched the shadows flicker on the walls downstairs. The light source, whatever it was, seemed unsteady; every shadow tossed against the floor seemed to jump and fold in on itself, offering zero clues to the number of people running around downstairs, or their exact location and size. Tentatively, Kyle glanced around the corner, into the silent riot taking place.

All the curtains had been thrown back. All the shields were down. Toward the end of the hall, where Thomas' cubicle was located, a mass of prisoners had gathered, moving deftly on bare feet. They were so thin they seemed like ghosts dancing across the floor, and no one seemed to notice Kyle creeping closer for a better look.

“—take her down—”

“—in her mouth—”

“—can't let the guards see—”

“—careful, she bites!”

Yumelo! Kyle's heart rate spiked as he recognized the voice. He kept close to the wall and circled the crowd – gaunt faces, blackened teeth, hollow eyes. The sound of flesh on flesh, of tearing clothing.

“Watch out, she's—”

A howl of pain.

“—bitch! Hold her down!”

“Don't move! She—”

And Kyle was just about to raise his voice, to intervene, when a security guard raced past him, and the silent riot broke into a scream.

“Go, go, go!” someone — he was certain it was Yumelo — shouted. The crowd scattered, but they didn't scatter quietly. Skeletal bodies slammed into security guards. Patients evaded the hands of medics rushing downstairs to help them. A disoriented young woman, her hands streaked with blood, ran straight into the wall at Kyle's side, her hip clipping him, and he lost his balance just as a security guard caught her and shoved her hands behind her back. But at the center of it all, hidden from Kyle's view, there was a nexus, a single point that drew the mob in closer, a frenzy of hard blows and flailing limbs, and someone silent, limp, enduring every strike without a sound—

“Vissal!” Kyle cried, and he'd just gotten to his feet when Cardassian music blared out through the music hall and the crowd, as one, bent low and covered their ears.

The security guards stood tall, flummoxed. The medics glanced around at their now prostrate patients, aggressive fighters sliding limply down the walls, some clutching their stomachs and others curling until their foreheads touched the floor.

Ingenious, Kyle thought, his pulse racing. He turned for the nexus, where the once-rowdy patients were crawling away. This must have been the same music that called them to muster every morning, he thought. Music they associated, more than anything else, with pain. With terror. And for once, he felt little sympathy, because he could see the boneless form huddled on the floor, the bloodied, nude Orion girl, her clothes torn free from her body, her face hidden in her hands.

A medic grabbed Kyle's wrist before he could touch her. One by one, the nurses filed in, forming a perfect circle around Vissal, just like the prisoners had done a moment before. In the darkness, Kyle searched out the attackers, trying to identify them among the huddled, crying victims. But if he'd noticed any identifying details in the shadows, they were gone now.

“Dead?” he asked, his voice ragged.

A single medic pulled back from the group, shaking her head. “Alive,” she said. “Do me a favor. Go find her grandfather.”



“I—” Kyle started to take a step toward the stairs, then froze. “I can’t. My son...”

The medic wasn’t interested in his excuses. She shook her head in disgust and raced for the stairs herself. Kyle watched her go, guilt worming into his gut, and then shook his head too. He couldn’t afford to run errands for them. Not while Thomas was unaccounted for. He skirted the circle of medics, the fallen prisoners, and struggled to orient himself even as the Cardassian music blared.

There. A single thin form, feminine, keeping to the sidelines. She caught Kyle’s eye, and he almost thought he saw a smile. Yumelo.

Of course she wouldn’t lose her mind over the music, he thought with a curse. He raced after her, leaping over a patient who had curled up on the floor. He’d be willing to bet she’d disabled the shields herself, or bribed one of her goons to do it. Ahead of him, Yumelo slipped into a row of cubicles and disappeared. The curtains hid her movement; she could be racing south along the wall or north, right past Kyle, and he wouldn’t know it.

“Shit,” he muttered. The music was so loud he couldn’t hear himself. He turned back, counting the cubicles until he reached Thomas’, where the curtains were jerked open and the bed was empty, the sheets mussed. The music seemed louder here, if possible. Kyle skimmed his hand over the bed, meaning only to check it for warmth, to test how long Thomas had been gone, but he froze when he reached the wet spot on the sheets. Cold, with a sharp ammoniac smell, and now his gut was twisting and he thought he might choke on his own breath. He turned sharply toward the entrance.

Something in the corner of the cubicle moved.

Kyle froze. There. Hidden in the shadows, but staring back at him with a tight jaw and almost defiant eyes, was Thomas. He’d tucked himself into the corner, but he clutched something to his chest, plastoid and heavy. Kyle knelt across from him, ignoring the scent of urine, and held his hands out for the piece of technology.

Fingers shaking, Thomas handed it to him. Kyle turned it over, examined the label with a blank face. He recognized it now. He’d seen the Angosian soldier fiddling with it in the rec room, over-possessive, threatening anyone who asked to touch it or tried to take it away. It must have been an ordeal and a half to steal it, especially for Thomas, for someone who couldn’t even walk on his own steam. Feeling his way blindly over the casing, Kyle found the switch and turned it off.

The music stopped. The speakers outside flickered into static and died. All around the patients’ hall, the former prisoners of Lazon II collapsed in on themselves as if their strings were cut. Some sobbed. Others were catatonic. Still others, although shaky, seemed perfectly fine, and one was being ferried even now to the intensive unit, and one was crouching calmly in another woman’s cubicle, listening at the curtain to see if it was safe outside.

“Brilliant, Thomas,” Kyle said.

He said it in a whisper. Somehow, with the music gone and the riot dispersed, it still sounded too loud.

## Chapter 14

The bathrooms were closed – because whatever happened, it seemed to have started there. So Kyle had no choice but to clean Thomas up in the cubicle itself, both of them determined to pretend they were elsewhere. The replicator – thank God for replicators – provided warm water and soap, and fresh pajamas to change into, but there was nothing that could be done for the bed tonight. All Kyle could do was turn the mattress over and settle Thomas in.

It felt wrong to say: *Nothing I haven't seen before.* And it felt wrong to say: *I did the same thing for your mother when she needed it.* Both sentences tangled up in Kyle's head, into a knotted ball he couldn't hope to pick through. But what he really wanted to say was worse. He couldn't allow himself to think it: *Did you wet the bed because of the sedatives?* It was, after all, a known side effect, and Thomas had refused to use the bathroom earlier. Or: *Did you wet the bed out of fear?*

There were some things Kyle didn't want to know the answer to. It shouldn't matter, he told himself. Maybe if it was someone else lying here, it *wouldn't* matter. But this was his son, and it did. He eyed Thomas, still shivering, teeth chattering, muscles tense, like an unwise tourist dragged in after hours from the Alaskan cold. He'd curled up on his side, back turned to Kyle, and one hand clenched down on his upper arm so tight it left indentations on the skin.

*He knows what happened,* Kyle thought. *He knows who did this. He saw.*

But it was past three a.m., and outside, the orderlies were mopping up all evidence of the riot, of Vissal's injuries. And Kyle, exhausted, just replicated a warm blanket and tucked it over Thomas' shivering form. He didn't go back to his own bed. He sat in the chair at Tom's side, his hooded eyes set on the entrance, where the plastoid box for Thomas' shields hung useless just like everyone else's.

They would deal with what Thomas had witnessed – what he might be complicit in – in the morning. For now, with the memory of Vissal's brutalized body burned into his mind, Kyle just wanted to make sure his son made it through the night unharmed.

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It was well past noon when the news filtered through to Kyle: Vissal had been raped. He digested the information without surprise, filing it away as further evidence. With a hot needle, someone had carved a word into her already-mutilated breast – TRAITOR – a word that marked this not just as sexual assault but as reprisal.

"You'll testify," Kyle said when Thomas woke.

Bleary blue eyes stared back at him, uncomprehending. Slowly, Thomas scrubbed a palm down his face and forced himself to sit up. Kyle could see a sarcastic comment forming on Thomas' lips in the seconds before he smelled the sharp ammoniac scent of urine and remembered the night before. The color drained from Thomas' face as he swung his legs over the bed.

"Where is she?" he asked, his voice low. "Is she alive?"

"No fatal wounds," said Kyle, thinking of the needle-point scars. Thomas grimaced in pain as he grabbed at his wheelchair with still-injured feet and pulled it closer. "Where are you going?"

"To visit her."

"She's not accepting visitors."

"Then to visit Onu." Thomas fell gracefully into the chair – for the most part – and landed with a strained grunt. Kyle grabbed the wheelchair's handlebars and held Thomas in place when he tried to steer away.

"I won't ask," he said. "I don't want to know what you and Yumelo have to say to each other. But listen to me. You need to testify to what you saw, and discussing anything with Yumelo first might impact your testimony."

"Testify to whom?" Thomas asked, eyeing Kyle's hand.

"To Starfleet. An institution you swore loyalty to, remember?"

Thomas looked less than impressed, but he took his hands off the wheels and leaned over, elbows on his knees, to give it some thought. "What good will it do for Vissal?" he asked. "She's been declared complicit. The fact that she faced reprisal, and that I witnessed it, isn't going to change her legal status."

"No," Kyle admitted, "but it might change yours."

Thomas glanced over his shoulder, warily searching Kyle's face.

"If you break from your fellow prisoners here, it will show Starfleet you're cooperating," Kyle said. "It might go a long way toward a potential acquittal on those terrorism charges."

Thomas' lip curled, a humorless smile. "That *would* be your angle, Dad. What makes you think I deserve to be acquitted?"

"You're my son," said Kyle, stiffly, fiercely. "It doesn't matter if you *deserve* it or not. I *want* you to be acquitted. I want you out of here, back in Starfleet, home with me."

"Since when?" asked Thomas, his voice harsh.

“Since now!”

The words rang out between them, dulled by the soundproofing curtain. Thomas studied Kyle’s face, his own features inscrutable. He glanced down at the broken plastoid shield generator and huffed out a sigh.

“I’ll testify,” he said, “but not for you. I’ll do it so Vissal knows she’s not alone. That’s all.”

Fine, Kyle thought. He released the handlebars and let Thomas wheel away, through the sound-proofing curtain to the changed world outside. In previous days, when Thomas emerged prepared for the worst, his fellow prisoners always surprised him. They ignored him; they engaged in conversation; they invited him, however reluctantly, to join their games. But now the music player he’d stolen from the Angosian was silent, and the few prisoners gathered in the common area went quiet as Thomas wheeled by. When he disappeared into the freshly-opened bathroom, three of them stood, their shoulders tight and their eyes set.

It was only when Kyle left the cubicle, when he stood in the center of the hallway and faced him dead-on, that the prisoners stopped. Heart hammering, he watched them disperse – back to their cubicles or back to their games, those cold eyes darting every now and then to track the Rikers.

Things had changed.

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Thomas Riker gave his testimony late that evening.

In attendance were his father, Vissal’s grandfather, and Onu Yumelo.

He explained the tension in the air; his mad dash to intervene; the wounds opening up in his feet again; the mad dash to steal the music player when it became clear he couldn’t fight off Vissal’s attackers. He explained his choice in music, the bone-deep terror that a Cardassian reveille evoked. When it was time, a medic unwrapped his feet and showed his seeping wounds to the proctor, explaining how a lack of nutrients and high levels of stress could erode the cartilage and make his scars unknit.

He stayed behind, alone, to redo his bandages when everyone else was gone.

He wheeled through the prisoners assembled outside and knew Yumelo had already told them. He knew by the way they grabbed at his hair and tore his thin replicated clothes as he passed. He felt the hot teasing prick of a needle against his forearm in passing and jerked his arm out of reach, and in his cubicle, alone, he wiped the glob of someone else’s saliva from his cheek and sighed.

Somewhere else in the facility, Yumelo was smoking a tea-leaf cigarette, savoring the flavor Thomas had taught her how to make.

Somewhere else in the facility, Kyle was menacing a bureaucrat, his voice dipping low as he made it clear that this testimony would have an impact, and if it didn’t–

Somewhere else in the facility, Mr. Laycez entered his granddaughter’s hospital room and found it empty.

Somewhere else in the facility, Vissal looped her bedsheets over a rafter and knotted them around her throat.

Yumelo took another drag – Kyle stabbed his finger against the bureaucrat’s desk – Mr. Laycez called for security – Thomas ground his palms into his eyes – Vissal took one final breath.

Yumelo smiled.

## Chapter 15

Kyle dropped his PADD on the registrar's desk with a clatter of plastoid and cold metal.

"What's this?" the registrar asked, using his light-pen to pull it closer.

"Asylum," Kyle said. "For my son."

The registrar raised an eyebrow just a fraction and Kyle kept his expression blank, his breathing even and slow. During the political hubbub over Vissal's death, the registrar had little time for Kyle, but he'd been patient for as long as he could. In the past week, he'd seen the camp change drastically three times over – from a locked-down prison just after the suicide to something more resembling a daycare when the lawyers got involved, and now to a hushed, chaotic ward that reminded Kyle of the teenage lock-ups he'd seen on a war-torn planet called Brimea. The child soldiers he'd met there had been lean, hungry; and they'd prowled the halls looking for fights or sex, scaring the health workers away and driving the more vulnerable among them to...

"Asylum," said Kyle firmly, his mouth dry.

The registrar tapped the PADD screen with his pen. "Your son is a former terrorist," he said blandly. "Asylum is going to be tricky."

"It's tricky for everyone out there," said Kyle, and the registrar gave a tiny nod of agreement, his eyes far away. He read through Kyle's request and laced his fingers over his mouth with a hum.

"You may be able to wrangle a temporary relief order," the registrar said.

"I want asylum."

"And you may get it," the registrar acknowledged, "but it will take time. Possibly years. In the meantime, you—" He hesitated on the inhale and shifted in his seat. "—we don't want Thomas Riker here," he said.

Kyle raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

The registrar met his eyes. "He agitates the other prisoners," he said simply.

He wasn't wrong. Since Vissal died, some silent agreement had turned the other prisoners against Thomas – the rat; the dead whore's friend; the Cardassians' pet. Kyle chewed the inside of his cheek. Why not use that universal dislike to his advantage?

"Do we have a form prepared for temporary relief?" Kyle asked.

The registrar called it up on Kyle's PADD and handed it over. Slowly, Kyle read through every line, making sure he didn't miss anything. The registrar had helpfully failed to erase the pathway to the folder where these forms were kept, and Kyle could see approved orders saved there for prisoners who had left weeks before. Their crimes were less severe than Tom's; it would take more evidence, more wheedling, to get that green stamp. But their forms would at least provide Kyle with some clues to what was acceptable, what excuses might get a man out of Lazon II. He met the registrar's eyes and gave a quiet, grateful nod.

"Don't thank me," said the registrar with a pale smile. "Just get him out of here before someone else dies."

---

In his first year at Lazon II, after months of vicious fighting for respect, Tom Riker lost all his hard-won allies. It happened overnight, and it was no fault of his own. He had saved a man named Jerec from a beating at the hands of the so-called Escape Committee; he had exposed an informant and earned respect in a fistfight; he had developed a reputation for helping his fellow prisoners with their work (when possible) and always sharing his last cigarette.

But that crumbled when the Cardassians plucked him out of bed one night and knocked him out. He woke, not on Lazon II, but on Cardassia Prime, for a months-long series of medical tests and solitary confinement to determine how and why he had been cloned. They wanted to build an army, they said; there had even been a time when Starfleet got involved, sending now-Captain Sisko to negotiate for Riker's release.

He hadn't tried very hard.

When the Cardassians realized they couldn't replicate Tom's cloning, they sent him straight to Lazon II with a "gift" from Sisko in his hand – a gutted Starfleet combadge for him to meditate on, to remember how far he had fallen. Tom returned to find his bunk taken (of course) and his meager possessions parceled out among the prisoners. His clothes, his boots – gone. His allies, by then, had been transferred to other workstations or had joined the faceless corpses frozen by the camp wall.

And it was a scrawny young Bajoran named Onu Yumelo who pulled him out of it.

"I've heard of you," she said, sitting next to Tom with her back against the wall. She pulled her knees up to her chest, just as he'd pulled his up to his, so that their toes were aligned. Hers wiggled beneath worn, taped boots; his lay numb and still, covered in purple spots that he hoped were just blood blisters, not frostbite. "You're king of the camp," Yumelo said.

Tom looked down at his toes, some of the nails striated and clawlike, others ripped free. He managed a wan smile. "Is that what they call me?"

"You had a whole mythos built up when I arrived," said Yumelo wryly. "Everyone mourned the Maquis who got executed in the dead of night."

“Only I came back.”

“Gets in the way of their mourning,” Yumelo said. She slid down on the wall, rucking up her prison shirt a little, and angled her bent knees so her toes faced the sky – trying to look relaxed, despite the hard stone wall digging into her spine and the cold air touching her bare skin, and it there was a tongue-in-cheek, dry look in her eyes that suggested she knew exactly how ridiculous it was to pretend they were two teens hanging out in the war-torn ruins of–

“Are you from Bajor?” Tom asked, eyeing the pattern of empty holes in her ears.

“Diaspora,” Yumelo said. “You’re from ... Earth?”

She was guessing, he realized, so she didn’t know as much about him as she wanted him to think. “Nerval Four,” he said, shaking her hand. Dainty, but callused and covered in sores. “That’s where I was ... er, I guess you could say that’s where I was born.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” said Yumelo baldly.

“It’s a small-town kind of planet,” said Tom, trying not to smile. “What brings you here, the food or the view?”

“Maquis,” said Yumelo with a grin. When she turned to face him, Tom saw for the first time a flush of scraped skin on her cheek, turning into a bruise.

“Guard or prisoner?” he asked, indicating the same spot on his own cheek.

Yumelo’s face darkened. She turned away, rubbing her cheek against her shoulder. “Prisoner,” she muttered, her eyes hooded. There was a hard spark in them that Thomas liked, a hint of steel; and a slow calculated tension in her fingers as she fiddled with the unraveling threads on her sleeve.

“Let me guess,” said Thomas. “The Escape Committee.”

“Always.”

Thomas pushed out a sigh. “They think they can get away with everything,” he said. “But ask me how many people they’ve actually smuggled out of this camp.”

Yumelo didn’t need to ask. They both knew it was zero. There was no escape on Lazon II. At first, Thomas had believed in the necessity of an escape committee. Even if the results were poor, the mere existence would bolster morale. To see industrious, hearty men working toward escape every day, without fail, would bring at least some hope to the prisoners too weak to work for it themselves. But in reality, the Escape Committee was nothing more than a band of thugs – career criminals and informants who press-ganged the weaker newcomers into acting as their servants, curried favor with the guards, and used their pick-axes – whenever they could – to break into the women’s hold at night.

“Did you fight them?” Thomas asked, eyeing Yumelo’s mostly-unripped clothes, her mostly-unbruised body.

Yumelo hesitated. A shadow flickered across her face. She offered him a brittle smile and rolled her sleeve up, revealing a plain medical bracelet – not her own – with a real latinum name-plate. “I have my ways,” she said.

The implication was that she traded with the guards. The implication was that she had the money, or the power, to send the Escape Committee packing. But the reality was written on her skin where her shirt had rucked up, revealing fresh bruises on her hips.

She hadn’t fought them. No. But she’d lived another day, and judging by that bracelet, and the hard gleam in her eyes, she’d live for a few more.

So in Thomas’ eyes, she’d won.

## Chapter 16

The door had a scanner, but it had shattered years ago, maybe in a fight or maybe from the cold. Prisoners had to keep it propped and slide the heavy steel open manually when they were assigned to the pools. Tom Riker always took lead, using his natural bulk to take some of the sting out of his smaller companions. He wedged his shoulder against the door and pushed.

Rust flaked out of the runners. Inside, where it was cool and dark, the smell of rotten water wafted up to soak their lungs. Tom breathed in deep, two full lungfuls, to get himself used to the stink, and then waved for the other prisoners to follow him.

“What do we do?” asked Jerec. His head was shaved, his nose still battered and bloody from the transport to Lazon II. He was a career criminal, a thief, but he’d latched onto Tom right away.

“You know those short, thin trees that grow to the north?” Tom asked. “Kind of stubby, no branches?”

Jerec wrinkled his nose.

“He hasn’t been on a work party yet,” said Amino.

Tom waved this away. “You’ll be sent to cut them down someday. We strip the leaves and soak the trunks in here. When they’re soft, we have to separate the fibers and weave them into ropes.”

A line appeared between Jerec’s eyebrows. One of his small, nimble hands found the back of Tom’s shirt and held on tight, letting the larger man lead the way through the darkness.

“What’s the catch?” he asked.

Jerec was no fool. He must have noticed that while prisoners fought tooth and claw for other “easy” jobs, this one had been “gifted” to Tom and his pals by a guard with a knowing leer. Tom squared his jaw, a glint of determination in his eye.

“Are you scared of worms?” he asked.

Jerec faltered. By then, they’d reached the pools, and the smell of decay was overwhelming. A thick white layer of foam floated on the surface, obscuring any view of what lay underneath. Jerec squinted down at it, keeping his toes well back from the edge.

The white foam moved.

Even knowing what was here, Tom couldn’t help a flicker of disgust. He kept it off his face, his body language serene as he crouched at the side of the pool. He rucked his shirt off and tossed it away, bearing the cold with a brisk shiver.

“Are those...?” asked Jerec.

Tom darted a hand into the white foam and plucked out a wiggling water-worm, its fleshy teeth pulsating as it searched for something to latch onto. Tom pinned it against the duracrete and used the dirty edge of his thumbnail to remove its head. The worm went still.

He caught and beheaded eight more while Jerec was vomiting. The worms lay, pale and motionless, where Tom had left them.

“They’re edible,” he told Jerec almost apologetically. “I found out last year when the Escape Committee stuck my head underwater. He traced the smooth flesh around his eyes and mouth, where for months he’d borne the scars of a worms eating his face. The doctors on Cardassia Prime had healed him when he was held on solitary confinement. “They’re not tasty, but they’re edible. You just have to make sure there aren’t any eggs in the pouch beneath their belly.”

“How—?” Jerec started.

Tom sliced open the nearest worm lengthwise, again using his thumbnail. Black beads spilled out of it. “Those are the eggs,” he said. “If you swallow one with eggs, it eats you.”

Jerec, white around the edges, looked away.

“How do you know?” asked Amino.

Tom waggled his eyebrows at her. “Back when they tried to drown me, the Escape Committee was led by Kobo Mai. You ever meet Kobo Mai?”

“No...”

Tom made a ‘there you go’ gesture and got to his feet. “Do you want worm duty or rope duty?” he asked Jerec. “Either way you have to touch the worms.”

Jerec looked nervously at the water. To give him a demonstration, Tom lay on the side of the pool, his bare stomach chilled by the stone, and stuck his arm into the stinking water up to his shoulder. The layer of white worms parted, seeking his flesh, a dozen aching pinches where their mouths latched onto his skin. Beneath the water, Tom’s fingers brushed against something sodden and soft, and he rolled away from the pool to jerk it out. With his free hand, he brushed the worms away, and battered the water-logged stick against the floor so any worms clinging to its surface would be knocked loose.

“There’s thousands more in there,” Tom grunted. Scum and worm waste clung to his skin, dyeing his arm a watery black. He used his fingernails to peel apart the fibers at the base of the stick.

“I’ll kill the worms,” said Jerec faintly.

Wise, thought Tom. Amino joined him from the other side of the pool, her shirt tossed behind her to reveal the masculinized form of her body, all secondary sex features whittled away by starvation and back-breaking work.

I looked like that, Tom thought, his chest squeezing. When I arrived on Cardassia Prime.

He’d spent a full year at Lazon II, building up his reputation and fighting for survival. But eventually, Gul Dor Rikk had called him into his office and said the scientists on Prime were interested in him. A transporter clone, one of a kind. They thought they could build an army out of him: a billion Cardassians with their own minds, DNA identical to whatever strongman they selected to serve as blueprint.

Tom had seen his reflection there, on Prime, for the first time in a year. The camp barber kept his hair and beard trimmed, but the effect looked almost ghoulish on his emaciated frame.

For all the downsides of medical confinement – for all the experimentation and torture, all the interrogation and solitude – there were two upsides. They’d fed him properly and they hadn’t made him work. Now, with his insides still aching from the last laser-vivisection they’d put him through, Tom was the tallest, strongest guy in camp.

And the Cardassians had put him on worm duty.

With a scowl, he finished up the fiber unwinding and reached into the pool for another rod. He’d seen the party sent to the mines this morning. Some of the younger, less-polite prisoners called them the Pharids, after a skeletal species of humanoids in the Beta Quadrant. The camp Pharids were the walking dead, dull-eyed and emaciated. They didn’t speak to anyone. They didn’t have names. Even when you recognized a Pharid, even when you remembered playing cards with him and learning about his wife and kids, you forgot he had a name. The Pharids were past the point of working, so they were past the point of food; they’d die in their sleep, or you’d see them crawling toward the latrine, unable to use their legs. Tom had found a Pharid once who committed suicide that way: face-down in the hole, suffocated in the reek of waste.

To send Pharids to the mines was to execute them. It was that simple. Their hearts would burst the minute they tried to lift a hammer. And Tom Riker would still be lying here, up to his shoulder in dirty water, harvesting enough edible worms that his friends could eat for a week.

He brushed the worms off his arm and into Jerec’s growing pile. With a grimace, Jerec settled back on his grimy bare heels and watched the worms fall.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Tom warned with a grin. “Wait till you hear how we smuggle them out.”

---

That night, Tom tied his boots around his neck and walked barefoot to the women’s hold. Two guards were hunkered next to the wall, one of them rubbing warmth into his hands and the other trying to light a damp cigarette, but they paid Tom no attention as he shuffled by. His boots were off so his footsteps would stay silent in the snow, but it wasn’t the guards he was trying to avoid.

It was the Escape Committee.

Outside the women’s hold, Tom circled to a sheet of shuttle plexiglass leaning against the wall. Months ago, he’d been part of a salvage team, and he’d carried this windshield, with its spiderweb of cracks, all the way to the barracks. It covered a hole in the wall that someone had made with a pick-axe, and again, the guards knew about it, and again, they didn’t care. Tom wiggled the plexiglass so that it crunched in the snow.

“Yumelo,” he whispered.

Nothing. He tapped out a Maquis signal on the barracks wall. A second later, the multifaceted darkness on the other side of the plexiglass warped, revealing the stretched, fractured reflection of his Bajoran friend. Her slender fingers wiggled through the cracks on either side of the plexiglass and helped him slide it away.

Tom slid into the women’s hold. A few hollow eyes peeked out at him from the bunks, but overall, everyone was too exhausted to say hi.

“You got a minute?” Tom whispered.

Yumelo indicated for him to follow her. At the far end of the barracks, she’d set up a room of her own, assembling empty bunks into a sort of protective wall. A stained teapot sat on the floor, its glass chamber filled with weeds from the camp yard, just like Tom had shown her. He removed a paper parcel from his shirt and tossed it to her.

Yumelo gave a low, sarcastic whistle as she unwrapped the worms.

“They’re edible,” Tom said, and the unimpressed glint in Yumelo’s eyes sharpened. “And each one has been checked for eggs, so they’re safe to eat.”

She ran her fingertip down one of the worms, its body dried out and desiccated. “Why...?” she asked.

Tom gave an uneasy shrug. Yumelo’s Maquis cell had been decimated in the early days at camp. Only one was left, an older woman – not quite a Pharid – who had taken up permanent shop in the camp hospital. “It’s protein,” he said. “I thought Bix...”

Yumelo’s face softened. She wrapped the worms again, careful not to crinkle the paper too loudly, and by nervous habit, she touched the scars

on her pierced ear. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. He hesitated – his gaze caught on those scars, he thought of Kira, a flare of shame – he pushed the emotion away. He had already turned back to the plexiglass when Yumelo caught his sleeve.

“How much?” she asked softly, her breath warm against his ear.

Tom froze. She’d asked him the same thing when he taught her how to soak the tobacco in tea.

“I have money,” Yumelo said even softer. “My earring…”

Tom jerked his arm out of her grasp. He turned, studying her anew. She’d made her voice so sweet, so pliant, that to see her real expression was a shock, even though it was the same as always: flat, pragmatic, cold.

“No charge,” said Tom, baffled. “Where did you get money?”

Yumelo showed her teeth in a grin. Her hand made a slow phantom path from her scarred ear – he’d always assumed the guards had yanked it out, the same way they tore the earrings from all Bajorans – to her stomach, where she must have hidden the jewels until she could sell them. She wagged her eyebrows, and Tom gave a disbelieving grin.

“No charge,” he said again, more firmly, and Yumelo’s humorous expression faded into a flat shrug. She turned away, eyes on the worms now, emotionless as she counted them. Tom watched her a moment longer, suddenly filled with a desire to take the worms back, to insist he would give them to Bix himself.

But that was silly. Sneaking into the women’s hold was one thing. The guards didn’t care if men crawled through the plexiglass-covered hole at night; even if they heard screams, they’d stay where they were, backs against the wall and cigarette smoke clinging to their lips. But sneaking into the hospital was a different matter. There were drugs in there, medical equipment, high-ticket items that could earn any prisoner a pretty penny on the black market, and any guard a disciplinary mark on his permanent record.

No. Yumelo was approved to visit Bix, so Yumelo would have to bring the worms. And he trusted her to do that, he told himself. She was his friend.

---

Two days later, Tom pulled burial duty and shunted the latest corpses from the hospital to the crematorium. Maybe they did it on purpose; maybe it was just fate laughing at him, but the other prisoners hauled Bix’s body up and put her on the top of the hoverlift, where her sightless eyes would look Tom Riker right in the face.

He passed the latrines, where a gangrenous Pharid lay half on his side, blinking at the sun. He passed the guards’ lodge, where a single woman was scrubbing the front steps, and the rest of the cleaning committee could be heard through the windows, a hint of hysteria underneath their flirting voices. A hint of pain.

He passed the pools, where Yumelo had pulled worm duty. She stood outside the open steel door, her arms crossed over her chest, and gave Tom a friendly nod as he walked by. Inside, an exasperated voice said, “Yumelo, I swear, there’s no way to tell which ones have eggs–”

Tom tipped Bix, and all the other corpses, into the crematorium. There was no way of knowing, he told himself. And it was silly to think that a little bit of protein from the worms might have saved her. Most likely, she had eaten all she could, and she’d died anyway, because that was just what happened in Lazon II.

But he couldn’t help but think that with her bare muscled arms and her glowing face, Yumelo looked awfully well-fed.



## Chapter 17

They had him moving snow, the sort of busywork that had killed a friend of Tom's last winter, when he was forced to do it right after a tree-felling mission, with no boots. There was little supervision, at least. The prisoners could chat if they wished, but instead, Tom lost himself in the rhythm of shovel to snow, snow to wheelbarrow, wheelbarrow to western wall. His shoulders complained; beneath his prison uniform, he was sweating; and his feet burned with cold, but as he curled his unresponsive fingers around the wheelbarrow's handles, as he threw all his weight against it to get that wheel sticking in the snow—

"Tom!" said a familiar voice.

It cut through the crowd of prisoners, and drowned off the hum Tom hadn't noticed he was emitting. He straightened up as Yumelo jogged his way.

"So much energy," said Tom when she came into earshot. She flashed him a grin, but it faded fast.

"I need your help. There's someone – I don't know what's wrong with him."

Tom dropped his wheelbarrow and followed her at a quick shuffle, the slush of snow catching against his boots. They didn't have to go far. She led him straight to the "police" hut, where the handful of self-important prisoners who acted as enforcers were given special quarters away from the rest. Tom twitched in the doorway. There were no lights inside, no heat, so he passed through a literal shadow to get inside, through a palpable coldness in the air.

"There," said Yumelo, grabbing his arm. Tom's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and when he followed Yumelo's gaze, he could see a Folsan sitting against the wall.

"Gray?" he called.

The only response was an unintelligible mumble. He knew Gray – he'd arrived with him. A political prisoner, not a criminal, who spoke Cardassian so perfectly he'd been able to teach Tom. When had Gray become a cop?

*While you were in solitary confinement,* a voice whispered in Tom's ear, *fattening up.*

He crouched a few meters from Gray and slowly duck-walked forward, his thighs aching. But it was worth it to avoid startling an old friend, even if that friend had become something unrecognizable – something ugly – in the meantime. Tom squinted through the darkness at the patchy hair on Gray's cheeks, where entire hanks of fur had fallen out. He took Gray's clawed hands in his own. The skin was hard and peeling, slick with blood where it had cracked open.

"Let me see your mouth," Tom ordered. When Gray didn't seem to hear him, Tom used his thumb to pull Gray's bottom lip downward, exposing the white-edged sores along his gums. The smell of pus clung to Gray's breath, and when Tom unbuttoned Gray's collar, there was a dark rash ringing his neck.

"Pellagra," Tom said grimly. "Or something like it. Can you stand, Gray?"

No response. Tom got one arm beneath Gray's, unleashing hot sweat and the scent of body odor as he leveraged the Folsan to his feet. Yumelo shored up the other side with her dainty hands on Gray's hip bone and bulging stomach. A glance behind Gray, at his trousers, showed a dark wet stain of diarrhea, with no scent attached. Like rice-water.

Gray. A pang went through Tom's chest. In the early days, before he was taken to solitary, he'd gone to Gray's bunk at night with a group of other men, all of them gathering around to play cards on a dog-eared deck Gray had smuggled in. Once, on a labor party, he and Gray had teamed up to fell trees, and Gray had talked for hours, breathless from exertion but oh-so-casual, about his favorite Cardassian philosophers, his time on Prime at the university, the friends he'd left behind there. Tom couldn't remember the details now, and he didn't have any other memories to call on. In a different setting, on a ship, maybe he and Gray would have been best friends. Then again, even as he moved to cover the shit-stain on Gray's police uniform so no one else would see it, he thought: *Maybe I would have thrown him out an airlock instead.*

They deposited Gray in the medical line, but Tom knew it was hopeless. On the way back, scrubbing his hands clean in the snow, Yumelo grabbed him by the belt and stopped him.

"What was that?" she asked, her voice low.

Right. She was still new to the camps – relatively. "It's pellagra," said Tom. "It's what happens when something is missing in your diet – niacin, I think. It used to be rampant here. They'd separate the sick into shitters and non-shitters. The non-shitters got a special medical diet, and the disease would go away."

"But for the shitters, it's too late?" asked Yumelo.

"Here, it is," said Tom. Eyes strained, he glanced back at the medical tent. "For Gray, it is. Nobody gets pellagra anymore, since they changed our diet. The eggs we get once a week... but Gray's a Folsan. Folsans need a special chemical compound found in their local biosphere. Nagai nuts. It's their main food group."

"And Lazon II doesn't have it," said Yumelo flatly.

Tom shrugged one shoulder. "It's a delicacy. Years ago, Folsans couldn't even join Starfleet because our replicators couldn't recreate the compound. Now, the nuts are so widely traded that the Cardassians could probably get them from the nearest village."

“If they wanted to.”

Exactly, Tom thought, and he didn't bother to say it aloud. He saved his energy instead, pushing his wet boots through the snow.

“He's their cop,” said Yumelo, her eyebrows furrowed.

“Shows how much that matters,” Tom said. He glanced over at his work party, the sunlight glittering off snow and straining his eyes. “If they don't even treat the informants nicely...”

He'd reached the perimeter, where he left his wheelbarrow and shovel. Normally, on a work party, you couldn't leave your load behind like this. The other prisoners would steal it, use it for their quota, rob you of your hard-won food ration. But on snow duty, it didn't matter. The guards didn't bother to keep track. With a sigh, Tom dug through the hard, icy snow to find the wooden handle of his shovel. Bent over like this, with his knees against his chest, blood rushing to his head, he almost felt asleep. His world narrowed to the red tips of his fingers, the ragged black nails, the pleasant, painful push of wood against his sores. Meditative. Quiet. Slow.

The wail of a phase-disruptor pistol jerked him to his feet.

Yumelo's fist tightened on the back of his shirt. He reached for her automatically, each shielding the other with their body – anyone looking at them would think they were cowering together, for how much strength they had. They pinpointed the source before anyone else did. The other prisoners had dropped to the ground, hands over their heads, while Cardassian music kicked to life over the speakers.

“Courtyard,” Tom muttered, just as Yumelo pointed to the guard he'd already seen. The guard's gun was pointed at the sky. They all knew what the music meant. One by one, the shivering prisoners pushed to their feet and forced their unwilling bodies to march.

Tom and Yumelo hung back. Middle of the crowd only. They waited until a good number of prisoners had gone before them and then joined the ranks. To the east, members of the Escape Committee provided cover while their leader battered a weaker prisoner over the head. They claimed his quota and rushed into line with their hands still blood-stained; one of them tipped Tom an insouciant wink.

He looked away. He remembered his first month here, when he saw the same thing for the first time – when he fought back so hard he busted the Escape Committee's leader over the head and left him unconscious for days. Later, Tom promised himself, memorizing their faces.

The guard was shouting. So deep into the ranks, and with the music blaring, Tom couldn't make out the words. He watched his fellow prisoners closely, ready to follow their lead as orders rippled to the back. But nobody moved. Instead, a shadow rolled along the edge of Tom's vision, growing thicker and thicker on the snow as somebody approached.

Gul Dor Rikk.

He was moving slowly, stopping at the end of each row to single out prisoners. They joined him in a slow shuffle, but before they could get near the Gul, the guards would slap their rifles across the prisoners' chest and shunt them off to the side. Against the wall. Dor Rikk plodded on, his footsteps silent, his long black coat flapping in the wind. At the end of Tom's row, he bent primly at the waist and peered at the faces in profile, scanning each one in turn.

Only Tom turned to face him. He met Gul Dor Rikk's eyes coolly, unimpressed. The Gul hesitated, those sharp starved features lighting up as if he saw something he liked.

“You,” he said, and to Tom's relief, he pointed to the guy at Tom's left, a political prisoner named Korik. Korik went weak at the knees. He made it out of the ranks only by gripping the clothes of each person he passed, clutching tight enough to tear the fabric, and then he was pushed to the wall just like everyone else.

“Political prisoners only?” Yumelo asked in a whisper.

Tom tried to sneak a glance at the wall. The other prisoners blocked his view. “I think so,” he whispered back. “But not all of us, obviously.”

Yumelo gave him a dubious look, as if somehow, being Starfleet and Maquis didn't count as ‘political’. He shot the same dubious look right back at her, and with a flinty smile, she subsided. But, he supposed, both of them had committed crimes. The men and women lined up against the wall were intellectuals, academics. Not criminals.

And when Gul Dor Rikk had finished combing the ranks, he raised an elegant gloved hand, and the disruptor rifles fired.

Tom locked his knees. The blue flash of killing light blinded him. He blinked the spots away, all too aware of his height and bulk, what an easy target he made even in the middle of the crowd. But as he'd suspected, when his vision cleared, none of the criminals were dead. All the shots had been aimed at the wall, where the political prisoners now lay slumped, their burning flesh melting the snow.

Gul Dor Rikk gave a pleasant nod to the guards. The blaring music turned down a few octaves, so Tom could hear the sizzle of human flesh. In a whistling, high-pitched voice, the kind that denoted throat cancer or a poorly-healed injury, Gul Dor Rikk said, “Dismissed!”

The prisoners went back to their work. The Escape Committee dropped their loads, confident that no one could steal from them, and lounged in the mining pit where the still-unconscious prisoner they'd stolen from lay bleeding. One of them propped his feet up on the prisoner's back. Another tugged a hand-rolled cigarette from his pocket and held it between his lips.

“Got a light?” he asked when he caught Tom staring.

Tom's eyes narrowed. He stepped forward and plucked the cigarette out of the committee member's hand. “This is one of mine,” he said. “Where did you get this?”

The man with his feet up whistled low. Smiling, gap-toothed from too many fights, the other guy grabbed Tom's wrist and squeezed until the

bones creaked. He stole his cigarette back with a vengeful twist that left the skin on Tom's arm stinging. Yumelo jumped into the fray, her fists tight at her sides.

"He got it from me," she said.

Her posture was aggressive, but a quick assessment showed it was mostly aimed at the Escape Committee, not Thomas. He nodded to her, just a slight inclination of the head, and he thought of Gray in his camp police uniform, the dead bodies slumped against the wall waiting for their friends to drag them away, the unconscious prisoner twitching beneath another man's feet – his hand-rolled tea-steeped cigarettes on this asshole's lips–

Tom reared back, using all of his weight and strength from confinement on Cardassia Prime, and punched the cigarette right out of the prisoner's mouth. It disappeared into the snow, leaving droplets of blood where it fell and an empty socket in the prisoner's gums where Tom's fist had knocked a tooth loose.

He grinned. He felt the first six blows he got in return. His face, his gut, his kidneys, the tread of a steel-toed boot on his spine. Seven Escape Committee members and one Thomas Riker, with Yumelo slipping wisely into the shadows.

He didn't feel anything after that.

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