

I'm the star in this disaster movie

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I'm the star in this disaster movie

by [Pixie](#)

Summary

Cadet Katrina Cornwell does not believe in no-win scenarios and she has the anxiety to prove it.

Notes

Written for the prompt "Kat's Kobayashi Maru" and the request to "cram in as many Star Trek ladies around during that time period as possible". Thus I've included T'Pol, Emony Dax, Philippa Georgiou, Afsaneh Paris (Commodore Paris is AOS), and Una Chin-Riley. Also featuring Gabriel Lorca, Christopher Pike and Jonathan Archer (Katrina's grandfather on her mother's side).

Relationships include: Cornwell/Lorca, Georgiou/Paris, potential Cornwell/Pike, Pike & Una (potential Pike/Una), Archer & T'Pol

The title is taken from the song [Faster, Faster](#), performed by Bree Sharp.

Yesterday

Katrina is an avid reader, and has been since childhood. She likes true stories, especially biographies, and memoirs most of all. Motivations interest her. Why people do all the strange things they do. Her current reading is nothing like that, it's all technical, and her mind wanders despite her best efforts.

"Cadet Cornwell."

Kat looks up at the familiar voice. "Oh! Admiral T'Pol." Her forehead creases in a frown. *Did I miss something? A meeting? Am I supposed to be somewhere?*

"An integrative aptitude-treatment interaction approach to strategic skill acquisition'...?" T'Pol reads off the tricorder.

Katrina bites her lip. "I just want to be as prepared as possible."

The admiral raises an eyebrow.

"My tactical experience is ... limited." She's been at the Academy longer than any of her peers in the Command class, and already has two degrees, but she lags on the more technical side of things.

Her teacher takes in the pile of library discs and texts strewn across the table, surrounding student and tricorder in color coded clutter.

"I assure you we would not have scheduled your exam if we did not believe you were ready."

"I appreciate that, Admiral."

T'Pol considers her a moment. A long, quiet, and awkward moment. Kat pushes her hair back, though it wasn't actually in her eyes.

"Go home, Cadet."

She blinks. "What?"

"Go home," T'Pol repeats. "Go for a walk, get something to eat. And get a good night's sleep."

Katrina shakes her head, confused. *Is it an order? A directive? Some kind of vaguely parental advice?*

The Vulcan's eyes betray a small smile. "You cannot prepare for Starfleet by memorizing all these books."

"...Yes, Admiral."

T'Pol holds her look, nods, and leaves. Katrina gathers her tricorder, places all the discs in the return alcove, and heads to the gym.

Usually, getting physical helps Kat turn off her brain, but today is unusual and after forty minutes of trying, she's just more wound up. Frustrated, she slips into one of the smaller multipurpose rooms to attempt yoga or jumping jacks or maybe just screaming as loud as she can for six minutes. Luckily she doesn't start with that because, she's not alone. In the middle of the mat a small blonde woman stands on her head, eyes closed, toes pointed to the ceiling.

"Oh, sorry, I thought this room was empty."

The woman's eyes fall open and flicker to Katrina's. "No worries."

"Are you...meditating?"

"Sort of." The woman rolls out of the headstand with practiced grace and flashes a bright smile in Kat's direction.

The smile is just as practiced, she realizes, recognizing the woman's blonde curls and cascade of dots framing her face—Emony Dax, a medalist at the recent Olympics. Katrina remembers reading something about her Academy appearance, and a Master Class? She doesn't remember the specifics, another casualty to her obsession with the exam.

"Are you okay?"

Huh? Kat has a sinking feeling Dax had been explaining her meditation to her and she has no idea what was said. But she can answer the question. "Oh, sorry. Yes." At the gymnast's look of concern, she shrugs. "Just having trouble focusing."

"Do you have a routine?"

Kat pulls her lips in over her teeth and shakes her head.

"Hm. What's something you'd do as a kid? Any sports? Dance class?"

Katrina thinks. "Ballet?"

Emony's face lights up. "Perfect!" She claps her hands and bounces over to the edge of mat. "C'mon," she calls to a confused Katrina. Unable

to come up with a reason not to, she follows. "Okay, first position, let's do some pliés."

Kat places her hand on the makeshift barre, and follows Emony's lead. Heels together, feet turned out, and bend. Back straight, arm up, fingers curved, toes pointed, and bend.

"The key to a good routine is knowing it so well your body takes over."

Emony switches to second position. Kat follows and they begin again.

"You don't shut your mind off," she explains, "you focus, like you said."

Up and down they go in a calm steady rhythm. After eight dips, Emony, and Kat a step behind, draw their feet back to first position, raise up on toes and spin to switch sides. Now, Kat is facing away from Emony, but drops into the plié in time with her.

"Then if anything unexpected happens, you're ready to adapt."

Katrina switches to second position without prompting, and settles into a routine clearly remembered from childhood. With a smile, Emony steps out and places a hand on her back to aid posture.

"Kat, relax."

The ballet had worked to calm her mind so she'd moved on to T'Pol's next advice— get something to eat— and met her two best girlfriends at the campus cafe. Unfortunately, the longer she sits still, the faster the anxiety is creeping back in. The three cups of coffee probably don't help, either. It's unlikely her Vulcan mentor meant to suggest Caffè Americano, or would actually consider it food, but the idea of eating something more solid makes Katrina's stomach turn. *I'll get breakfast in the morning, before the exam. It will be fine*, she tells the T'Pol in her head, and tries to focus on what Philippa is saying. 'Kat, relax.'

Ugh.

"Everyone keeps saying that," she complains, "and it only increases the pressure."

"Try to think about something else," Afsaneh suggests.

"Our trip!" Pippa offers. They're all headed to Gabriel's family cabin for a long weekend once Kat's command debriefing is complete. She's the last of the five to take the exam, something she takes to heart despite all evidence the order is random, and they intend to celebrate.

Kat picks up her drink to hide a sour expression. She's not in the mood for any of this.

"Are you packed?"

"Of course," she answers, shortly, over the rim of her mug. Her friends share a worried look.

Afsaneh purses her lips. "Well, I'm not— what kind of weather should we expect?" Katrina has been to the cabin, but the others had only seen images.

"I don't know." The coasts regulate the weather, but the middle of the country prefers to keep things natural. As a kid, visiting her grandfather's farm, she loved being surprised by snow and rainstorms, but right now it's just more unpredictability. "Bring layers."

"And cute pajamas?"

"What?"

"I'm trying to distract you." Kat frowns at Pippa's twinkling eyes as she gently touches her hand in an expression of comfort. "You've got this."

Kat pulls her hand away. "It's easy for you to say." They came to Command with normal majors and related specializations. Counselors aren't captains. They're not even standard to every crew.

"We know what we're talking about," Afsaneh counters. They'd both been through it— Philippa just a few weeks back, and she was still smarting from the experience. If Katrina wasn't so wrapped up in herself she'd be the first to notice, but she hadn't and it bothers Afsaneh more than she likes. Kat, and Pippa, too, are much better with feelings than Afsaneh is, or certainly the boys are, which is probably why they are more affected by an exam set up to antagonize emotions. Afsaneh tries to be understanding, but it's becoming increasingly difficult.

"It's not the same," Kat argues, providing a perfect example of *why* it's becoming increasingly difficult. *It's exactly the same*. Literally, that's the whole point, and Kat going last actually gives her an advantage. But if Afsaneh said so, she's sure to take it as an insult, so she bites her tongue.

Katrina takes in their expressions with a sigh. Pippa's eyes are pools of concern. Afsaneh is clearly fed up.

"I'm sorry." Both have been walking on eggshells all evening, really all week, and she hates it. And feels terrible, and hates that, too. "I'm sorry." She pushes her coffee cup away and stands to go.

"Kat..." Pippa reaches out but she pulls back.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"I can't sleep," she offers as explanation, though he doesn't need one. He's expecting her. They didn't plan it— they never do— but he knows how stressed she's been, and she'd kept him company the night before his test. He steers her into a chair, and dials a hot chocolate with cinnamon.

"T'Pol told me to sleep," she murmurs as he places the drink in her hands. Gabriel smiles at the familiarity. She must be tired, or distracted, if she's forgotten to pretend she doesn't know the admiral outside of class.

"This should help. Special family recipe."

Kat sips slowly. "How do I prepare for the impossible?"

"You don't."

She frowns. He shrugs.

"You just are."

Katrina sits back to consider, still sipping, a thoughtful expression across her face. Everyone she'd spoken to had said basically the same thing — either she's ready or she's not. Intellectually, she knows she's had seven years of training at the Academy, and a childhood of observation to fall back on. If only she could *feel* it.

"I just am."

Gabriel nods encouragement. "I think that's the point."

"The point of what?" she asks, setting her cup aside.

"Starfleet."

She meets his eyes, bright and confident. Normally a reflection of her own. She hates feeling so vulnerable.

"You're prepared, Kat."

She bites her lip, trying to figure how to respond. How to explain.

He takes her hand, comforting, but also playful.

"Did you really come to me to *talk* about this?"

She drops her eyes, a soft smile tugging at her lips, and allows him to lead her to bed. Eventually, she sleeps.

Today

"We're receiving a distress signal from a civilian freighter, the *Kobayashi Maru*. The ship has lost power and is stranded in the Neutral Zone."

"Yellow alert," Katrina orders calmly. "Set a course to intercept." The navigator punches in the coordinates. "Advise Starfleet Command we are crossing into the Neutral Zone." The cadet at communications nods. Kat presses a button on her chair's arm. "Medical, prepare for heavy casualties."

She watches the progress of her ship on the viewscreen. Enemy ships could appear at any moment. While the simulation always includes a rescue interrupted by an attack, the details vary.

"We've lost contact with the *Maru*," her communications officer reports as they cross the boundary into the Neutral Zone. Katrina frowns. *That's unexpected.*

"Sir!" Tactical calls out. "Two Klingon vessels have entered the neutral zone."

That's not. "Red alert." Katrina turns to Communications. "Hail them."

The cadet shakes her head. "No response."

"Wideband," she orders and when the officer nods, "This is Captain Katrina Cornwell, a representative of Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets. We are engaging in a rescue mission. Please stand down and open communications."

"Still no response, sir."

"They're powering weapons," Tactical adds.

"Full power to shields." As Engineering answers affirmatively, she leans forward to address her pilot directly. "Una get us over that ship."

"They're firing!"

"Evasive pattern Delta."

The bridge shudders. Kat starts to count.

"Shields at ninety percent," Tactical reports.

Kat nods acknowledgement, focused on her counting. Another shudder.

"Direct hit. Shields to seventy-five." She nods again. The cadet frowns. "Do you want to fire?"

Katrina shakes her head once, holding out a hand for Tactical to wait. Weapons drain too much energy. "Reroute power to shields," she tells Engineering before turning back to conn. "Chin-Riley!" The pilot looks up. "We need to go faster. Now."

"Yes, ma'am." Her fingers fly over the board.

The room shudders with another hit.

"Shields at sixty, Captain."

She flicks two switches on her chair's com panel. "Transport team— we're approaching the *Maru*. Prepare to transport every life sign on the ship to shuttle bay two. Wide beam. You will have less than seven seconds."

"Aye, Captain," someone answers from an imaginary transporter room. The room shudders, and a panel explodes near the communication station.

"Shields to thirty-eight percent."

"Two more cruisers are dropping out of warp," the navigator reports.

"Set a return course." He nods and punches in the coordinates. Katrina rises and moves to stand behind conn. "Una, as soon as the transport is complete you need to go to warp, do you understand?"

Una meets her eyes. "I understand."

Kat turns to Engineering. "Reroute all power to the warp engine. Including life support."

She feels the floor shudder beneath her.

"Shields are at twenty percent," Tactical shouts. "We will lose them with the next hit."

Kat purses her lips. "Prepare to fire torpedoes simultaneous with transporter."

"Transport reports we're in range," Communications announces excitedly.

Six. Seven. The room shudders. "Now," she calls, loudly and clearly to Tactical and Transport.

An array of torpedoes shoots out on the screen.

"Transport complete."

"Go!" Kat orders. Una presses her board but the room shudders and another panel explodes behind them.

"Engines were hit, Captain," Engineering explains. "Warp drive is offline."

"Full impulse," Kat shouts.

Una hits a succession of buttons, shakes her head and tries again. "No response!" she cries, in a panic.

Five. Six.

Katrina raises her eyes to the viewscreen, four Klingon cruisers bearing down on them, two more popping into view behind them.

Seven.

The on screen image explodes and the room goes dark.

Peer review is an essential part of the Kobayashi Maru Exam. Katrina is uniquely qualified to provide in depth psychological observations of her classmates, and had enjoyed the process when participating as a reviewer. But now she's the protagonist.

First, they watch the recording together. Katrina and the admiral at opposite ends of a table, with Gabriel, Philippa, Afsaneh, and Christopher Pike seated in between. The five younger cadets who made up her bridge crew are seated behind them, to observe. They will both provide and receive short evaluations as part of their own training, but do not participate in the discussion.

The action seems to go much quicker from the outside. Honestly, Kat is proud of how she kept her head. Someone might say she was too calm, that it is a sign of detachment, but T'Pol is a Vulcan. She made plenty of mistakes, however. *Everyone else lasted longer*, she thinks, *and did real damage*.

As the lights come up, everyone turns to look at her. Admiral T'Pol clasps her hands on the table and begins the discussion.

"Cadet Cornwell, is there anything you would like to have done differently?"

Katrina straightens. "The most obvious answer is I'd better protect the engines." She thinks. "Pin point shielding maybe... Order a more aggressive flight pattern." She pauses for a quick breath. "I should have been more aggressive in general." *Like the others*. Afsaneh had cut a path through the Klingons and nearly escaped. Gabriel had drawn the enemy ships in and blown up both Federation ships to take them all out. "I didn't fire until it was too late to affect the outcome."

Chris nods, but Pippa leans forward to speak.

"The purpose is not to defeat the enemy," she argues. "You successfully evacuated the freighter."

Kat shoots her a look of annoyed disbelief. "And then my ship immediately blew up."

"It's a rescue mission," Philippa explains, undaunted, "and you succeeded in rescuing the crew. I don't think that should be minimized."

It's a fair, and kind, point, one she would normally appreciate, but all Kat hears is her friend defending an error. Chris pipes up to make the argument before she can, however.

"It *appears* to be a rescue mission," he counters. "Once she lost contact with the *Maru* she should have focused on the attack. Not the freighter."

Chris had evaded the enemy longer than any of the others, and taken down all but one.

But Pippa remains unswayed. "The freighter *is* the focus."

He shakes his head. "The freighter is the catalyst. The attack directs the outcome. If she'd focused on the Klingons she might have saved her ship."

Philippa opens her mouth to respond but Afsaneh interrupts.

"No one saves either ship, that's the point." Everyone in the room knows 'Kobayashi Maru' is synonymous with 'No Win Scenario.'

Chris and Pippa sit back in their chairs, neither satisfied their argument was made.

T'Pol raises an eyebrow. "The point is to measure the cadet's readiness for command."

Katrina looks at the floor, taking this to mean she hadn't measured up. She's not ready. Pippa frowns. Gabriel sits up.

"She proved ready," he opines with assurance. "She had a solid plan and was let down in execution." A stir goes through the cadets observing from the bench. "It would have worked with someone more experienced at helm." Una was only a second year.

"Someone like you?" Chris suggests, under his breath, but loud enough to make the point. Gabriel is a conn officer. And an egomaniac.

"Maybe," he answers in a low growl.

Afsaneh closes her eyes. The only thing Kat dislikes more than Pippa jumping to her defense, is Gabriel jumping to her defense. And now there's some kind of ridiculous macho struggle going on, too.

Katrina stands, angry. "Don't blame my crew," she tells Gabriel, hands balled and eyes flashing. "And don't talk about me like I'm not right here."

Gabriel purses his lips, unable to formulate a response. The purpose of the exercise is to talk about her. As the silence grows awkward, Katrina feels her cheeks flush and squares her shoulders.

"As captain I'm responsible for the actions of my crew," she addresses the room. "And they all did the best they could. If any of them were slow to react it was because I was slow to give the order." Una frowns, thoughtful.

"It was a good plan," Gabriel states, squaring his own shoulders. Kat's eyes flicker to his.

"It failed."

"It's set up for you to fail."

"No, it's set up for me to learn."

The other cadets watch their back and forth in silence, it's not unusual for these two to engage in a verbal tennis match. T'Pol raises a hand, drawing everyone's attention.

"What have you learned?"

Katrina pulls her lips in over her teeth and crosses her arms defensively over her chest.

"That I wasn't thinking like a captain."

Tonight

Kat is in no mood for the planned holiday. She's tired, she's angry, she has a headache. Pippa tries to comfort her, Afsaneh encourages her to shake it off, but their efforts only make her more annoyed.

"I don't want to bring you all down," she argues.

As Pippa assures her she won't, Gabriel glances over their shoulder.

"Pike!" Chris looks back, curious. "We're all going away for the weekend. Want in?"

Kat narrows her eyes. "What are you doing?" she hisses. She's wanted to make Chris feel more included in their group, the rest of whom were already close when assigned to T'Pol for the final year, but Gabriel has always treated him as a rival.

"It's a celebration," Gabriel explains, "you should be there." He glances from Chris to Kat, a canny grin alighting his face. She purses her lips and turns to Chris.

"Please come."

"...Okay."

Kat smiles. Gabriel slaps his shoulder, and calls out again.

"Una!"

She turns, startled.

"You, too."

Una blinks.

"How many rooms are there?"

Kat glances over. "Hm?"

The cabin is over two hundred years old and is dressed up to appear even older. But it has all the modern amenities, plus a fireplace in the living room, and an open kitchen with a furnished alcove so they can keep each other company when cooking. Afsaneh immediately starts putting food in the cabinets while the others empty their shuttle of luggage, bedrolls, and various sports equipment.

"Bedrooms..." Una clarifies.

"Oh. Three."

Una glances around the room. There are six of them. Based on what she knows, Philippa and Afsaneh will share, and based on what she observed on the shuttle ride here, Katrina could room with either Gabriel or Christopher. But that leaves just one room for herself and whichever Kat doesn't choose.

"You can share with me," Kat says upon noticing her trapped expression. "C'mon, I'll show you." Shouldering her knapsack, she leads Una up the stairs.

Chris and Gabe look after, and then at each other. "You get the couch," Gabriel states, and tosses Chris a sleeping bag.

Dinner's a pick-up affair but Afsaneh is determined to start the holiday with a homemade mulled wine and the pleasant smell draws the rest to the kitchen. Pippa stirs a cauldron while Afsaneh measures the liquids and directs Gabriel and Una to chop various fruits. In the old-fashioned setting it's a scene out of a history book and watching, Kat feels almost okay.

Chris steps into her gaze. "May I join you?"

Kat nods, sliding over to make space on the loveseat. They watch the prep in silence a moment. Gabriel and Una have entered some kind of impromptu chopping contest. Philippa argues Gabriel has the home court advantage, but he counters it's actually a disadvantage since he's continually interrupted to get Afsaneh whatever she wants.

"Number One also has the advantage of everyone liking her more," Gabriel adds.

"Number One?" she repeats.

"Everybody gets a nickname eventually," Pippa explains.

"Except me," Afsaneh says, proudly.

"I don't like you," Gabriel quips. Laughter fills the room.

Chris smiles, starting to understand why the group is so close.

"Thank you," Kat murmurs, somewhat suddenly.

Chris glances over, his expression a question.

"For your honesty at the debriefing."

"Oh." She looks weary and he worries she's been replaying it all day. Maybe they're more alike than he realized. "You have good instincts. The counting was really smart."

This elicits a small smile and encouraged, he continues.

"The way I see it you've been conditioned to think like a doctor and sometimes, well, in a battle you need to think like a soldier." She pulls her lips in over her teeth and nods. A stray hair falls across her forehead. "But that's what I'm good at so maybe." He shrugs. "I don't know."

She raises her eyes to his. "You don't know...?"

He gently brushes the hair off her face.

"Maybe I've been conditioned, too."

The wine has about forty ingredients and takes at least as many minutes to steep. Quiet conversation continues, centered mainly on what to do the rest of the night. Half an hour in, Chris excuses himself and Katrina wanders over to help set up a game table by the fireplace.

"You two seem cozy," Gabriel leans over her shoulder to accuse, as if he wasn't the one to invite Chris, and he hadn't been chatting up Una for the past hour.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

She rolls her eyes. "If you have a question, ask it," she says, meeting his expression over crossed arms.

He presses his lips into a line. She raises an eyebrow.

"What were you talking about?"

"Battle strategy."

He frowns.

"Gabe," Afsaneh calls from the kitchen, "where's the wine glasses?"

"I'll show you," Kat calls back. Gabriel's frown deepens as he watches her walk away.

Afsaneh hopes the wine will calm everyone down, the fire will warm everyone up, and a game will be a good distraction. It's been a long day, and a stressful shuttle ride, but so far the cabin itself has been the respite promised. Of course, it's too good to last.

"We have a plan," Gabriel announces, indicating himself and Chris—the first sign everything was about to blow up. The second is the reveal of their plan. The table is lit up with a holograph of space intercut with brightly lit lines, the word 'Risk' blinking in and out in a variety of languages.

"War games?" Kat asks in disbelief.

Gabriel flashes a wolfish grin. "Six players. Battle strategy. It's perfect."

Kat glares at him over her wine but takes a seat and the others follow her lead.

"Okay." Gabriel hands out game pads, starting with Chris. "Klingon. Romulan." Una accepts the controller. "Vulcan." Pippa nods. "Tellar." Afsaneh scrunches her nose. "Andor." Gabriel winks as he hands the game pad to Kat. She juts out her chin as she takes it. He places the last controller in front of himself. "And Earth."

The purpose of the game is explained as exploration but in practice it's more like colonialism, with each world swooping in to annex territory and battle it out when disputed. Afsaneh backs up her allies when requested, but mostly just goes through the motions. And keeps everyone's wine glass full. Pippa spends the game trying to be Vulcan, at least what she understands Vulcans to be, which extends to moving around and setting up negotiations. She only attacks when provoked. Chris and Gabe focus on each other pretty exclusively, and all but ignore the rest of the game and the rest of the gamers. As the only other representative of a non-Federation planet, Una chooses to back up Chris and eventually they become a much greater threat to the other four who are not really working at working together. At which point Kat's competitive streak kicks into high gear and she throws her forces fully behind Gabriel's. Vulcan and Tellar remain scattered and, at least in Afsaneh's case, bored, but even so they make the Federation a larger alliance and Gabriel sees an opening for a big move.

Kat frowns as his ships start to move into position. "What are you doing?"

"Winning the game."

"You'll be surrounded." She gestures to the board, to the Klingon and Romulan forces bearing down on Earth's diminished fleet.

"So will they," he points out.

Kat bites her lip. It's true, but. "You won't last past this round."

He shrugs. "Maybe. It depends on the rolls." Gabriel is always willing to gamble. "Maybe we'll get lucky," he adds with a sly smile.

Afsaneh closes her eyes against the storm she can see coming.

"Statistically—" Pippa interjects in her assumed role to promote both logic and peace. Gabriel rolls his eyes.

"But either way the Federation wins," he interrupts to explain to them both.

Kat glares and points to the small blue and green circle his fleet has abandoned with this move. "And Earth is destroyed."

He shrugs again. "I'm okay with that."

"We are *on* Earth!" she shouts.

Everyone jumps at the force and volume of her statement. Pippa glances worriedly around the table. Afsaneh's eyes are still closed. Chris is looking at his hands. Una is frozen, unable to decide where to look or what to do. Gabriel is watching Katrina.

"It's a game, Kat," he answers, calm and quiet.

"Yeah. Well." Her cheeks burn as her eyes flicker to glare at each of them. "I don't want to play." She storms off.

An awkward moment passes.

"It's late," Chris offers.

Philippa stands and moves to follow Katrina.

Afsaneh purses her lips. "She's not a child."

"She'd go after any of us," Pippa says, quietly, and walks away.

Afsaneh sighs. "Help me clean up the kitchen," she orders Una, who is more than willing to get out of the room and have something useful to do.

Gabriel and Chris share a look before silently starting to pack up the game.

"Kat?" Pippa calls quietly from the doorway. There's no response, but she takes Kat being in the room Philippa and Afsaneh were assigned instead of her own as indication she wants to be found. And being here instead of in Gabriel's room means she wants to talk. So she joins her on the bed.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm embarrassed."

Pippa puts her arms around her in comfort.

"What's wrong with me?" Kat asks, breathless.

"What do you mean?"

She shakes her head. "This isn't me. I can't stop..." She lifts eyes full of angry tears she can't seem to shed.

Pippa runs a soothing hand down her hair. "Everybody has a bad day sometimes."

"This was an important one to be good," is the sullen answer.

"Why?"

Kat shoots her an annoyed look.

"Really," Philippa presses. "Why was this so important to you?"

Katrina looks at the floor. A heavy silence fills the room.

"I lied," she answers, finally, barely more than a whisper.

"What?"

She pulls her lips in over her teeth and sits up. "At the debriefing," she explains. "I don't think I learned anything." She'd just said what she thought T'Pol wanted to hear.

"What do you mean?"

Her hands flutter with agitation. "It's not a fair test. On purpose," she acknowledges, "but... I wanted to learn something. I wanted..." She shakes her head again. "I don't know."

"Validation," Afsaneh says from the doorway. Both Philippa and Katrina turn, startled, at the noise.

Kat bites her lip. "I guess." Afsaneh moves to join them on the bed as Kat nods. "Yes. But I just feel empty." She looks at both her friends in turn. "How did I fail at being a failure?"

Pippa brushes her hand through her hair again, but Afsaneh turns away to hide her giggles.

"Are you laughing at me?" Kat accuses, sharply.

Afsaneh coughs. "I'm sorry."

"It's not funny!"

Afsaneh raises an eyebrow. "It's a little funny," she suggests. Katrina starts to move away but Philippa grabs her hands.

"Maybe you don't need the lesson. Maybe you already learned it."

Kat frowns. Pippa glances briefly at Afsaneh and takes a deep breath.

"You've taken a hundred classes on character and development and personality and how the brain works and why emotions matter. The rest of us don't have that background. Of course you react differently. Why's that a bad thing?"

They discuss it for an hour or so, until Kat catches Pippa hiding a yawn and realizes she's still using up all the oxygen in the room. She apologizes, again, and refuses the invitation to stay the night.

She knocks on Gabriel's door. He's awake. He's expecting her.

"I can't sleep."

He ushers her in. She sits at the end of the bed. He moves close.

"I'm sorry," they say at the same time.

He smiles. "Do you want to ta—"

"No." She pulls him down.

She's sitting on the stairs when he passes.

"Hi," Chris offers.

"Hi," Una responds.

"Everything okay?"

She glances up the stairs and back. "It was ... loud."

Chris hides a smile. "Do you want the sofa?"

"Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

He grabs his things from the living room and meets her in the bedroom she's—allegedly—sharing with Katrina. It's the middle room, with thin walls, and both can tell where Katrina's ended up.

"This isn't what I expected," Una murmurs.

"The cabin?"

"The evening." She gives him a shy smile. This may be an odd shared moment, but it's definitely something she'll remember.

"I don't know what I expected," he admits. He's been curious about his classmates, and their bond, and all of this is revelatory, but also not. And he really can't tell if he's included now. At least there's another outsider to share it with.

"Someday we're going to look back on this," he tells her. "And laugh." The wall shudders with whatever is going on next door, and it is not unlike the no-win scenario simulation. Chris grins. "A lot."

Gabriel pulls his hand through her hair. Gentle and soft, and she curls closer to his body. It's very late. Or very early.

"You shouldn't have called my crew inexperienced," she murmurs, finally ready to talk about it.

"I didn't."

She pushes up on her elbows to meet his eyes. "You implied it."

"No," he argues, gentle and soft. "I implied that if I was piloting you would have a better chance of success."

Kat sits up. "That's worse."

He frowns. "Why?"

"I can only succeed with you? That's like textbook emotional abuse."

Gabriel's eyes go wide. "That's not what I mean."

Katrina stands up and starts looking for her clothes.

"Kat, that's not what I mean," he repeats, louder and with more emphasis.

Fine. She straightens and crosses her arms over her chest. "What do you mean?"

He sits up in the bed, an expression she can't quite read on his face. He looks a bit like a lost puppy, which is nothing she's seen before. "We're a team. A good team, because... I know you, and I know what you—" He cuts off, doesn't want to say 'need' though she hears it anyway. "—what you're thinking," he finishes. "There's a shorthand." He meets her eyes. She's listening. He's emotional. "You don't need me for anything," he whispers. *I need you*, she hears. "But together... we're..." *Better. Complete.*

"We're a team," she says, and steps back into his orbit.

"Yes," he agrees, his voice breaking, and she presses her lips to his.

"Afsaneh," Philippa whispers into the dark.

No response. She pokes her partner.

"Afsaneh."

No response. Pippa draws closer and whispers louder.

"Are you really asleep?"

"Yes."

Pippa giggles, and lays on the pillow, her face inches from the other woman's.

"Do you ever think about the future?"

Afsaneh sighs and opens her eyes. "Of course."

They share a long look. Philippa twines her fingers in Afsaneh's hair.

"I'm going to miss this."

Afsaneh scrunches her nose. "Sniping at each other in the cold, dark, wilderness?"

Philippa cocks her head to consider. "...Yes."

Afsaneh leans in to brush her lips. "Me, too."

Pippa flashes a Gabriel-like grin and pulls her closer.

She slips quietly out of his arms and his room and makes her way next door. There's no way the others won't know where she spent most of the night, but she'll feel better making her way downstairs in her pajamas and her pajamas are in her room.

"...Katrina?"

She freezes in place, instead of the sleeping Una she expected is an awake Christopher blinking at her from the bed.

Blinking at her bare feet, and messy hair, and the fact she's wearing nothing but a strategically placed bed sheet.

"Are you... what are you doing here?" he asks, reasonably. Though she could ask the same.

"This is my room," she answers. "I mean. The room where I stay. Usually." Really she's only been here a handful of times and really she only keeps her clothes there to avoid the judgy looks from Gabriel's mothers, who think she should date him if she's going to sleep with him, but that's neither here nor there and Chris definitely doesn't care. "Um. I didn't know you were here."

"Oh," he answers in a way that makes her pause.

"Sorry."

He shrugs. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" She feels herself turning red again. "Of course not." She looks around. "I'll leave." Grabs her bag. "I'm leaving." She has no idea where to go. "I just. Um. Where's...?"

"She, uh. She wanted to sleep downstairs."

"Oh. Okay."

She hears Philippa and Afsaneh in the room next door. They're trying to be quiet but it's no use. And she and Gabriel didn't try at all. In the other room next door. She blushes deeply.

"I'll just. Go now."

She shuffles towards the door, doing her best to keep the sheet as er, appropriate, as possible.

"Katrina," he calls as she reaches the door, and she very nearly drops it.

"Yes?"

"This might not be the right... time... but..."

Honestly, she would like to melt through the floor right now.

"Look, I respect you."

She blinks. *What?*

"And so does everyone here."

Oh.

She gives him a genuine smile... he might not be able to see.

"Thank you."

It's still dark or honestly she would just stay up. Maybe go for a walk. If she was home she'd go for a walk anyway, but she doesn't know the area. Downstairs is taken. Well, the loveseat in the kitchen is open, but she wouldn't be able to stretch out. And she'd be sleeping in the kitchen.

She's pretty sure she'd be welcome in any of the three bedrooms in front of her. But Pippa and Afsaneh deserve some alone time. And Gabriel would be so disgustingly pleased with himself if she slipped back into his bedroom. And Chris ... well, she's not sure about that just yet.

Anyway, she's tired. She just wants to sleep.

Ugh. Why isn't it just morning already? Everybody else would get up and she could have a bed to herself.

Decisions, decisions.

Screw it.

She gathers her sheet, walks to the door and knocks.

Gabriel opens the door wearing his wolf grin and nothing else.

Chris purses his lips. "Una's on the couch and Kat wanted her bed," he explains.

"I see."

Chris averts his eyes. Too late. "Something about T'Pol's orders...?"

Gabriel thinks. *T'Pol told me to sleep*, he remembers. He shrugs and moves aside to let Chris in. He drops his bag.

"The floor's fine."

Gabriel shrugs again. "I don't mind sharing."

Chris looks over. Gabe's getting back into the bed, leaving the side closest open, should he want it. Still nude, though.

"No pajamas?"

"Didn't pack any."

Chris frowns. "Don't you live here?"

Gabriel shakes his head. "Summer home." He closes his eyes.

Chris looks from floor to bed.

Decisions, decisions.

Screw it.

He pulls back the blanket and slips into the bed.

Kat wakes to the sounds and smells of breakfast. She pulls on Academy sweats and walks down the stairs into a scene of harmony. Sunlight pours through the wall of windows in the main room, the fire crackles, classic music drifts in from the kitchen. The women are seated, talking amiably, their hands curled around mugs of fresh coffee. Philippa looks over at her approach.

"Hey, look who's finally awake."

Katrina blushes.

"Sorry."

Pippa shakes her head. "You needed the sleep."

"No." She pulls her lips in over her teeth and takes a moment to look at each in turn. "I'm sorry. For last night, and, the night before, and... I'm sorry."

Afsaneh opens a hand towards her. "We voted and you're forgiven."

Kat smiles. It feels good to laugh at herself a little. *Wait, if Afsaneh's here...* "Who's cooking?"

"Chris and Gabe."

Surprise covers her face. "Together?"

"We bonded," Gabriel says from behind, causing Kat to jump. He passes her a steaming cup of coffee with that wolfish grin. "That's what you wanted, right?"

She leans up to kiss his cheek.

"C'mon," he addresses the room, "food's ready."

Kat raises the mug to her lips as they all file into the kitchen. It's warm and fresh. A new day.

Tomorrow

Katrina meets T'Pol bright and early two mornings after their return. The admiral pulls up the final report and evaluation of her Kobayashi Maru exam and they go over the finer details together. She got high marks in preparation and temperament and scored well overall. Her crew evaluations are mostly glowing— tactical considers her dismissive, but that's not unexpected and she's already working on it. Her peer evaluations are solid, and constructive, she's relieved to see. All four of her classmates went into detail about the positives and negatives of her actions and command style. Even Gabriel's report was more than a page long, and without her help. Chris was right; they all respect her.

T'Pol hands her a disc containing a copy of the full report, and the recording of her exam, for review.

"Thank you."

The Vulcan's eyes crinkle in what passes for a smile. "You performed well, Cadet."

"Thank you," Kat acknowledges and goes to leave. But she stops after a few steps and turns back to her mentor.

"T'Pol..."

"Yes?"

She takes a breath. "Permission to speak freely."

The admiral nods.

Another breath. "It's not a good test."

T'Pol raises an eyebrow. Katrina pulls her lips in over her teeth.

"Look." She walks back over to the viewscreen, where holo-portraits of herself and her four peers remain lit up. "I 'performed well' but— I didn't learn anything new about myself or captaining," she admits, and then points to her classmate. "I don't think Afsaneh did either. We went through the motions, we did what we were supposed to, but all it proves is we're good at taking tests." She looks at the disc in her hand. "I was so anxious because... I wanted it to be real and I knew it wasn't. So I thought I already failed." She raises her eyes to T'Pol's. "And it made me so angry. I'm still angry."

Katrina feels feels instantly better having said it aloud. Like a weight's lifted from her chest and she can breathe freely again. She turns back to the holos.

"But Pippa and Chris— they think they did something wrong. They think if they took the test again, tried a different strategy, the outcome would change." Both look at the exam, and the universe, as a riddle. Chris assumes there is a pattern that unlocks the secrets to winning. And Philippa has faith every question has an answer even if science hasn't found it quite yet.

Kat turns her focus on the last cadet, the holo in the middle. "And Gabriel— Gabriel thinks he won. Sure he lost all of our ships, but he took out all of theirs." She shakes her head and turns to look back at T'Pol. "So if the point is to accept failure— none of us did that."

The admiral's eyes are unreadable. "The point is to measure a cadet's readiness for command."

"But what does that mean?"

"What do you think it means?"

"That you don't want to tell me the truth." Katrina shakes her head in frustration. "And I know I'm only in this class because my grandfather asked you to take me, but," She glances back to the holos of her friends. "...they deserve better."

"I told you she'd figure it out."

Kat's head whips around at the voice, her eyes narrowing at the chuckle beneath it. Her grandfather steps next to his former first officer and oldest friend. He holds up a hand at her angry expression.

"You're right, I asked T'Pol to place you in this class, but not because you aren't good enough." Archer moves closer and waves at the holos behind her. "These four cadets scored the lowest on their command aptitude tests." Kat frowns as her grandfather points to Afsaneh's image. "Too cautious." Then Gabriel. "Too reckless." Christopher. "Too closed off." And finally, Philippa. "Head always in the clouds." He turns back to Katrina. "I bet T'Pol you'd turn them around."

The Vulcan raises an eyebrow towards him this time. "'Bet' suggests there was a wager, and that I disagreed with the principal arrangement. Neither is accurate."

Jonathan smiles. "Okay, I recommended you, and she agreed."

Katrina glances between the two of them. "I don't understand."

Archer nods and plants his feet, dropping into command and/or lecture mode effortlessly. "There are lots of different ways to command," he explains. "Some are good at moving pieces."

Then if anything unexpected happens you're ready to adapt.

"Some are natural leaders."

We voted and you're forgiven.

"Some are natural explorers."

You cannot prepare for Starfleet by memorizing all these books.

"And some," He places his hands on her shoulders, and looks directly in her eyes, "are especially good with people."

Of course you react differently. Why's that a bad thing?

"It's been my experience that misfits given a chance make the best officers." Jonathan's eyes twinkle, thinking of his crews over the years. Thinking of himself. "So I put all of you together and you proved me right."

Kat straightens her shoulders under his grip.

"We're a team."

He nods, and with a smile morphs back into Grandpa. "Permission to hug?" She drops forward and his arms close around her tightly. "That's my girl."

They pull apart, and the three make their way out of the room together. The holos blink away as T'Pol shuts off the viewer. Jonathan glances at his granddaughter.

"Gabriel's wrong, though." She frowns in confusion. "Mutual destruction is never a winning strategy. I'll tell him if you don't want to."

She smiles with her teeth, thinking of the wolf, and the puppy. "I think he's catching on."

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