

The Space Between

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The Space Between

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Summary

It is the year 2409. The Federation has been at war with the Klingon Empire for four years. Admiral Yan Dooku is commanding officer of Starbase 24, one of the closest starbases to the neutral zone between Federation and Klingon Empire space, essential to the war effort.

But the biggest war he is fighting is with his own heart - the return of his old lover, assigned as his new chief medical officer.

(Star Wars/Star Trek fusion AU.)

Notes

[Originally posted on AO3.](#)

This work is set in an alternate universe timeline of the Star Trek: Online game, where the Klingons and Federation are at war in 2409. This is not compliant with the timeline of Star Trek: Picard or the Star Trek reboot.

Severin Yusanis is an alternate universe, alien version of Sören Sigurðsson, my OMC across the multiverse I write. Here he is El-Aurian (the same species as Guinan) instead of human. (He looks a great deal like Sören, but shorter.)

In this fic, Dooku is Betazoid, which explains his Force-sensitive like telepathic/empathic abilities. Dooku is not evil here. (I prefer to write a non-evil Dooku generally.)

Chapter 1

Commanding Officer's Log, Stardate 86932.08720192796

After the untimely death of Chief Medical Officer Saryi Neema, the starbase is finally receiving a new Chief Medical Officer today, transferred from the USS Aventine, who will be arriving in four hours. Doctor Severin Yusanis is an esteemed colleague of mine from our service together aboard the Melbourne and the Trident. In these troubled times, where our sickbay treats casualties from the Federation-Klingon war around the clock, I can think of fewer people more qualified and capable.

—

Commanding Officer's Personal Log, Stardate 86932.12081430739

If it were not unseemly to start my day with a very stiff drink, I'd be doing that right now. If I were a religious man, I would daresay this is the Four Deities' idea of a very cruel joke.

Admiral Yan Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. He still had another hour before he had to report to the command center, so he went about his usual morning routine of black coffee and meditation. As a Betazoid, he found regular meditation - once in the morning before starting his day, and once in the evening before retiring to bed - to be an important part of keeping himself calm, cool, and fit for command, as not to be overwhelmed by the thoughts and feelings of two hundred thousand personnel, and in wartime, no less.

But despite his best efforts to quiet his mind, he found himself thinking of the doctor...

...imzadi.

Their relationship had long since been over, long enough that when it was first mentioned Doctor Yusanis would be transferred to Starbase 24, Dooku didn't think it would be a problem.

It was already a problem and the man wasn't here yet. *He's going to be in sickbay*, Dooku told himself, searching for logic when his emotions were running high. *Your paths will rarely cross.*

His cat, Pelo, a silver tabby, brushed against his legs with an inquisitive chirp. Dooku found that Pelo was highly attuned to his emotional states, and knew when he needed comforting; Dooku scooped up the cat and held him on his lap. Immediately Pelo began to purr, and Dooku stroked the cat, focusing his attention on that. "That's a good cat," Dooku murmured, scratching Pelo behind the ears and under the chin; Pelo's purrs got louder.

After awhile, the act of holding and petting Pelo relaxed Dooku enough that he felt it was sufficient to start his day. He put Pelo down on the floor and produced cat food and fresh water from the replicator, bringing it to where Pelo's dishes were located. He stooped down to give Pelo a last set of pettings before heading off to take a sonic shower.

Of course, being naked made him think of the doctor all over again, even though it had been years since the last time they'd been intimate, and his body had changed a bit since then - he was trim rather than beefy these days, his hair, facial hair, and body hair all silver instead of dark brown. For a sixty-eight-year-old man, he was in prime physical condition, looking at many more decades in Starfleet if this war didn't kill him; he exercised regularly, and was particularly fond of sport fencing and anbo-jitsu. He'd had his share of male and female attention, though he didn't pursue it - there had been no one since the doctor, except for the occasional paid service on Risa, and it had been a good ten years since the last time he'd been there. He didn't want entanglements, complications. Life was already complicated enough.

As he soaped himself, his body twinged - thinking of the doctor reminded him of how starved for touch he was. He hardened as, despite himself, his mind went back to all the times they'd made love, all the ways they'd had each other.

That is the past. That is going to be left in the past.

Dooku pushed the thought out of his mind with the ultimate hard-on killer - the carnage he'd seen during the Dominion War... indeed, the very thing that had led him to terminate his relationship with the doctor, knowing that if he lost Severin to the war, he wouldn't survive, and Severin himself had already lost enough. *I'm doing you a favor*, Dooku had told him at the time, and tried to believe it. Dooku didn't like thinking about the Dominion War except when he had to, to draw comparisons between the war then and the war now, to avoid mistakes repeating themselves... and this was a mistake he didn't want repeating, also.

Dooku quickly got out of the shower, not wanting to be naked, reminded of the physical, any longer than necessary. He changed into his uniform. Pelo whined with protest, knowing what the uniform meant, and Dooku gave him some more pettings. "I'm sorry, little one," he said, scratching the cat's chin some more. "You know I have to go to work. I'll be back."

The nice thing about starting his shift earlier in the morning was that the way to the command center didn't have much traffic. He passed through the halls alone, rode the turbolift alone. When he entered the command center the officers stood in acknowledgment. "Report," Dooku said.

"The *Musashi* arrived at 0300 for triage and repairs," said Lieutenant Ahsoka Tano, chief operations officer. "The *Dewitt* is on schedule to leave at 0700, and the *Aventine* is still en route as scheduled for 0900."

"Splendid," Dooku said. He didn't mean it. "I'll be in my ready room."

In his ready room, his personal console had many updates from the last twenty-six hours - war correspondence, especially events that were happening within range of the starbase. The last day had been quiet... too quiet. That was the way of this war - the calm, and then the storm, everything happening all at once. Starbase 24 was one of the closest starbases to the neutral zone between the Federation and Klingon Empire space; a research team was developing new weapons, and the staff was constantly busy treating wounded and repairing battle-damaged ships, such as the *Dewitt* had been, and now the *Musashi*. Dooku had survived Wolf 359, and the Dominion War - he'd become captain of the *Trident* during the Dominion War, a field promotion after his captain had been killed, and he'd been one of the most heavily decorated officers of the battle, on an *Akira*-class warship. It still hadn't prepared him for what this war would be like, with the Klingons. They were possessed of a savagery that made the Dominion look peaceful.

At 0700, the *Musashi* arrived, and Dooku spent the next ninety minutes de-briefing the crew - or what crew members didn't need their immediate medical services. It was harrowing - he never got used to these stories, as a Betazoid, feeling the pain and fear of crews who had just been through hell. When the de-briefing was over, Dooku sat in his ready room alone; his hands were shaking. He took slow, deep breaths. *I should see Counselor Yoda this week.*

The door chimed. Dooku sighed. "Yes," he said.

The doors opened and his first officer, Commander Obi-Wan Kenobi, stepped in. "Pardon the interruption, Admiral," he said, "but the *Aventine* is docking."

"Thank you, Number One."

Kenobi raised an eyebrow. "Will you be greeting our new arrival?"

Dooku folded his hands. "Are you free? You can do it, if you'd like. I need some time to work on a report of my notes from the de-briefing."

"All right." Kenobi nodded, and left the ready room.

—

Doctor Severin Yusanis was waiting in the shipbay, wheeling a suitcase, with a cat carrier in one hand and a duffel bag slung over the other arm.

"Doctor Yusanis," Kenobi said as he approached. He took the new CMO's hand and shook it. "I'm Commander Obi-Wan Kenobi. Welcome to Starbase 24."

"Where's the Admiral?" Severin cocked his head to one side.

"He's working on a report," Kenobi said. "I'll show you to your quarters."

"Hm."

As they made their way there, the cat in the carrier started meowing. "Shhh," Severin soothed. "We're almost home, baby."

"What kind of cat is he? She?" Kenobi asked.

"Black and white," Severin said. "Male." He smiled. "His name is Sagan."

"After the ancient Earth scientist?"

"Yes."

Kenobi smiled and nodded. "I love cats. My husband Qui-Gon and I have two. We have quite a few cat lovers in our personnel, in fact; the Admiral owns a cat himself."

"Does he." Severin pursed his lips. "Hm."

Kenobi was fully human, but he nonetheless detected discomfort. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh..." Severin gave a sheepish smile. "I thought the Admiral would be coming to meet me himself. He and I go back a long time."

Kenobi narrowed his eyes. He thought about saying *I find that hard to believe* - the doctor didn't look to be any older than his early thirties. Not a grey hair on his head, a mane of nape-length dark curls, with a neatly trimmed dark mustache and beard. More pretty than handsome, with full lips. He wasn't very tall, maybe a good five-seven at most. Pale, lean, wiry. Sad dark eyes, that looked older than the rest of him.

Severin noticed his response and said, "I'm El-Aurian. I've been in Starfleet since the twenty-third century."

"I see." Kenobi couldn't resist the crack. "So you really do know the Admiral."

Severin's laugh rang out, echoing in the halls, making a few passerby stare; Kenobi found himself relieved he was amused rather than offended. "He's not *that* old, Commander."

As the odds would have it, the doctor's quarters were right across the hall from the Admiral's, and Kenobi told him this; as disappointed as Severin seemed that the Admiral hadn't personally greeted him, Severin seemed equally disappointed that the quarters were right across from the Admiral's. Kenobi was confused but didn't press it. "There you are," he said. "If you need anything, please let me know. You'll have the rest of today to unwind, and then..."

Severin shook his head. "We're in the middle of a war and I hear you had a ship come in that sustained a large amount of casualties. I intend to scrub into sickbay as soon as I drop this stuff off and see to my cat."

"Suit yourself." Kenobi nodded. "There will be a meeting of senior officers at 1800 today, Deck 8, room 9, if you want to get to work right away..."

"I'll be there." Severin nodded. "Thank you for the information, Commander."

Sagan meowed, and Severin punched in the access code to his quarters.

Chapter 2

Dooku felt him before he even saw him. And then when he saw him, Severin was almost late, sitting down just before the foot of the conference table. Their eyes met only for a second and then Severin looked away.

It was long enough that as Dooku briefed the crew on what he'd learned from the *Musashi's* latest arc of the war, and his opinions of what should be done next - the orders he'd give the regional fleet, and the scenarios he expected as outcomes, from best-case to worst-case, looking for feedback, flaws in the script that he might be overlooking, or enhancements that could make things go better - he felt almost as if his mouth was moving independently of the rest of his body, and he was caught in some kind of cloud where time stood still. As soon as the meeting was adjourned, Dooku walked to the replicator to make himself black coffee, hoping the heat and the bitterness would ground him.

The crew usually left the conference room quickly, but Dooku wasn't alone. "Hello," a familiar, soft voice spoke behind him.

Dooku turned around. "Doctor Yusanis," he said. He had almost a foot on the doctor, six-five to Severin's five-seven, but somehow felt shorter, caught off-guard.

Severin rolled his eyes. "Really, do you have to be so formal."

"I do." Dooku gave a curt nod.

Severin folded his arms. "Well then, Admiral Dooku, son of the Third House of Betazed, Holder of the Sacred Sword of Kaliu, and Heir to the Holy Keys of Betazed -"

"*Are you quite done.*" Severin could *still* push his buttons like nobody else.

Severin's lips quirked with the hint of a smile. "Am I ever done?"

Dooku turned back to the replicator. "Black coffee, hot."

A cup of coffee appeared, and he took it. Severin raised an eyebrow. "None for me? Rude."

"*You don't even like black coffee.*"

"No, I don't know how you can drink that shit. Would be better served to clean the rust off those rusty-ass keys that have been in your family a million years. 'Cos you still have those fucking things, right?" Severin stepped up to the replicator and said, "Ginger ale."

A glass of ginger ale appeared and Dooku snorted. "I don't know how you can drink *that*, either."

Severin raised his glass before sipping it.

They drank in silence for a moment and then Severin said, "It's nice to see you again, Yan. It's been what - thirty-five years?"

"Yes." They had not served together since 2374, right after the Battle of Betazed; Severin had received a transfer away from the *Trident* shortly after their breakup. And they had not seen each other since that time.

Severin nodded. "You look well. Very distinguished."

Dooku could sense his hurt, as well as the fact that Severin still found him attractive - even moreso now, than back then. Dooku felt his face flush and knew it wasn't just the hot coffee. "You haven't aged a day." Severin looked maddeningly delicious as ever.

"I haven't aged a day in a very long time," Severin said, nodding. "That's just how it is with us."

"Is there something I can do for you, Doctor?" Dooku was feeling increasingly awkward, not able to take his eyes off Severin, trying to fight his mind from going in a lustful direction.

"We should catch up sometime."

Dooku sipped his coffee. "Perhaps."

Severin finally gave him a nasty look, and Dooku feigned nonchalance that he did not feel. Severin quickly finished his ginger ale, returned the cup to the replicator, and walked out of the conference room, not looking at him, not saying a word. Dooku sensed he felt stung, and he felt terrible about that - he had loved Severin very much, once, and on some level he still did, if he was being truly honest with himself. But he was afraid that warming to Severin at all would start them down the slippery slope of complications he'd rather avoid - that he desperately *needed* to avoid, in this war.

Two hours past his usual bedtime, Dooku still couldn't sleep.

It wasn't the coffee - he hadn't exceeded his usual daily intake of caffeine. He knew perfectly damn well what it was. It was Severin.

I should have declined him as my chief medical officer. Of course, that would have looked bad, considering Severin was eminently qualified, with a prestigious Starfleet career even longer than his own; he would have gotten lectured about professionalism and needing to put aside history done for thirty-five years, in wartime. Indeed, that was what Dooku had told himself, when he received news that was who Starfleet Command was sending him.

He didn't realize how much it would hurt to see him again - how much he'd truly missed Severin, how he had often regretted what he felt needed to be done, for both their sakes.

Pelo chirped and hopped up on the bed, and crawled over Dooku. He settled on Dooku's chest, kneading and purring. Dooku stroked the cat, and tried to meditate. Sometimes, when he had trouble completely clearing his mind, he'd focus on a visualization. One of his favorite visualizations was a lake in a forest, on a spring day - a place he'd frequented on Betazed in his younger years.

After a few minutes he realized the Battle of Betazed meant that place was probably destroyed. This wouldn't do at all. Especially when that train of thought led him to remember the news of the Battle of Betazed, seeing footage of the wreckage and the carnage the Dominion had wrought in the invasion of his homeworld. The way he'd broken down and cried, falling apart in Severin's arms, and Severin had cried with him, for him, and then the crying turned into screaming, at last shattering with the memory of what had happened to his own homeworld, his people...

Dooku sat up, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Lights," he said.

The lights came on in his bedroom. Dooku picked Pelo up and put the cat to the side of him, so he could climb off the bed. He went to the bathroom and ran cold water, splashing his face.

"Pull yourself together," Dooku told himself in the mirror.

He thought about going down a few floors to see Counselor Yoda, but knew that even though the counselor would gladly open his doors for a crewman in need, Yoda retired earlier than he did, and he didn't want to inconvenience the poor little green man, who was already taking a lot of appointments during the day from starbase residents - officers and civilians both - feeling the burden of a war that had been going on for five years now. The Dominion War had only lasted two years, by comparison. It was hell.

What he really needed to do was exhaust himself enough to be able to sleep. There was a gymnasium near the promenade, and he could also use the holodeck for running or something similar. He decided he was less likely to be disturbed with the holodeck, so he went there first, but all of the holodecks were in use, which aggravated him. He went to the gymnasium, and of course, Severin had to be in there, kickboxing with a heavy bag. Shirtless, in tight-fitting blue shorts. Sweaty.

"Dammit," Dooku huffed, ready to leave.

"No," Severin said, "if this gym isn't big enough for both of us, I've been here awhile, I'll go."

Dooku shook his head. "That's not fair to you, you were here first. And..." He looked around, feeling sheepish. "This is a large gymnasium."

"Indeed it is. This is a large starbase, in general. You know I got lost three times trying to find this place?" Severin chuckled. "I can do surgery on preganglionic fibers, I can't find my way around a fucking starbase."

"Large would be an understatement. I recall I was fairly overwhelmed when I arrived here, also."

"Yeah." Severin nodded. "This entire day has been... overwhelming. Hence why I'm here." Severin resumed punching the heavy bag.

"Yes, my first officer tells me that you immediately went to work in sickbay instead of taking a day to rest from your trip."

"I was sent here to do a job. That job needed doing." Severin shook his head, continuing to punch the bag. "It isn't like I'm not accustomed to flying around from place to place."

"No, but any new adjustment can be unsettling, and in times like these, that feeling of being unsettled gets amplified." Dooku folded his arms. "You do need to take care of yourself."

"I don't need you to tell me that, Yan." Severin gave the heavy bag a very hard kick; Dooku could feel the frustration Severin let out in that move. "That's what I'm doing right now. I'm probably here for the same exact reason you are."

He was always observant like that, but that was one reason why they had always suited each other so well, Betazoid and El-Aurian. Dooku gave a curt nod and climbed onto the rowing machine.

Dooku tried to ignore Severin as he rowed, but he couldn't help stealing glances at him, shirtless and sweaty, beating the hell out of the heavy bag - for such a soft-spoken, mild-mannered, gentle-hearted doctor, seeing the occasional glimpses of wild ferocity were arousing. Dooku's mind briefly flashed back to the days when he would pound Severin into the mattress and Severin would claw his back, biting his neck and shoulder, and he loved it. *Dammit.* He rowed harder.

Eventually he did hit the zone, where he stopped thinking and was just in that place of mindless motion, which was soothing to him. After he'd been there for awhile, he became aware of silence in the gym - Severin had stopped punching and kicking the heavy bag. And then he felt Severin standing near him, holding out a bottle of water. Dooku took it; he was surprisingly thirsty.

"How did you know -?"

"I always know." Severin nodded.

Indeed he did, and Dooku had almost forgotten about it. Being reminded of that, now, hurt, rubbing an already raw nerve.

Dooku drank the water, with Severin sitting at the edge of the rowing machine across from him, a towel wrapped around his shoulders. Severin drank too; the sight of those full, luscious lips wrapped around the water bottle reminded Dooku of Severin's lips wrapped around his cock, once upon a time, and his face burned. He could feel his cock stirring in his shorts, and he knew if he tented even just a little Severin would notice. Severin probably already knew what he was thinking.

But Severin also picked up on his discomfort. After a few minutes of just drinking water and staring, Severin finally got up from where he'd been sitting at the edge of the rowing machine. He gave a little wave. "Goodnight, Yan."

Dooku didn't say it back. When the doors chimed shut, he let out a deep sigh.

Chapter 3

2265

The city sirens - the planet-wide sirens - had been shrieking for close to an hour. The cube had managed to take out the planetary shield, and Severin pushed his wife under the table with him just before the flash. They had made it, somehow, to the spaceport, where people were boarding ships and taking off, hoping to be able to outrun whatever the hell that thing was. *Resistance is futile*, the cube had told them, and the smoke and ash from their bombs was proof of that.

Severin was waiting in line to board one of the ships, with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder - it didn't have much, only what he needed to survive, and a few personal affects. He saw his youngest son, Medri, getting onto another ship with his own wife and husband and their young children, Severin's grandchildren. Medri was their only child to have remained on El-Auria, with the rest of Severin and Sarenya's children having left the nest and gone exploring the galaxy a long time ago. Their eyes locked and Medri gave a small wave just before the loading dock went up. Severin then looked back at his wife, General Sarenya Nasir. They had been married for just over four hundred years; Sarenya was one of the highest-ranking military officers of El-Auria.

"Come with me," Severin pleaded. He reached out to stroke her face, twine a lock of her long auburn hair around his fingers.

She shook her head. "I have to go to the orbital cannons. It'll buy you all some time. There's a vessel there at the base, I'll get on it as soon as I launch the strike." She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss, squeezing him tight. "I love you. I'll see you soon."

"I love you," Severin choked out through his tears.

Sarenya took his hands, holding them for a moment, their fingers brushing as they slowly let go. Severin felt the urge to start after her, to physically drag her onto the ship - later on he would reflect on this being a manifestation of the El-Aurian prescience, and that he should have listened to it; he would blame himself for not acting on it for the rest of his days. Severin was being pushed forward now, shoved along closer to the loading dock where people were boarding. He continued to watch his wife run towards their speeder bike, and then she hopped on it, flying the short distance to the military base.

The ground shook again - the cube was firing on them, some distance away or they'd all be dead, but close enough for them to feel the impact.

There was a commotion in the queue - a silver-haired man was pushing forward, ahead of others, screaming, "Where is my wife? My wife was supposed to meet me here!"

The man pushed past Severin, and before he could get to the front of the queue, a tall woman with short silver-blond hair - much taller than him, or most of them - put her hands on his shoulders, stopping him, and said, "You can't cut ahead of everyone else."

"I need to see if my wife is here," the man panted.

"Doctor Soran," said a short, dark-skinned man behind the tall woman, "I saw your wife just a few moments ago. She's aboard that vessel." He pointed to the ship that Medri had boarded, which was now beginning its launch sequence.

Soran broke down sobbing. The woman nudged him back. When he got to where Severin was standing, Severin didn't feel like pushing him all the way to the back of the line. He reached in his pocket for a handkerchief and simply passed it over, without words. He patted Soran's shoulder, trying to be reassuring, though he didn't feel reassurance himself.

"It will be all right," Severin said.

Soran looked him in the eyes and said, "It will never be all right."

Severin didn't like space flight - he'd only left the planet twice in his lifetime, usually getting spacesick at takeoff and landing. He was so keyed up from the attack and the mad rush to the spaceport that the g-force rush of takeoff barely registered with him, and he didn't hide his eyes this time, looking out the window near where he was seated.

The cube was continuing to fire. It locked a tractor beam on their ship, and Medri's ship, and Severin watched as torpedos launched from El-Auria's surface - the orbital cannon - and immediately disengaged the tractor beam. Severin heard the bridge crew talking; they were preparing to go to warp.

Come on, Sarre. Get your ass out of there.

The cube fired on Medri's ship in retaliation - the ship closest to them. Severin's jaw dropped as he watched the ship explode; he felt as if his intestines and heart had switched places. The voices in the bridge now sounded like meaningless garble.

The orbital cannons fired at the cube again, giving everything they had, a full spread. It didn't even make a dent, and Severin watched helplessly as the cube returned a full spread... the planet itself exploding now.

Warning klaxons screamed, with shields up, preparing for impact of planetary debris. "We have to get out of here *fucking now*," the bridge commander yelled.

"We need another minute," a voice from engineering yelled back.

"We don't have another minute." The bridge commander motioned to the navigator. "Engage."

Just as they jumped to warp, the cube fired on them.

—

They had only gotten grazed by the cube's phasers, but it was just enough to start to cause a widespread array of problems and necessitate jumping out of warp four hours later.

The bridge crew talked about where to go now. They decided, initially, to try to seek refuge with El-Auria's few allies, but a quick jaunt to the nearest solar system found a graveyard... at least one planet taken out, the other inhabited planets not registering any life signs.

A meeting was held, where the bridge commander asked the opinion of the refugees about further course of action. However, this came off less like asking for opinion and more like telling them what to do - the bridge crew seemed to feel it was best to continue to visit the other solar systems of their allies and see if there was someone, anyone.

Most of the refugees disagreed, having a bad feeling about it after what they'd seen. Soran spoke, visibly agitated. "We need to get as far away from here as we possibly can," he said. "Far away from... *that*."

Severin nodded in agreement with Soran. "Even if we're lucky enough to find a place where the Borg didn't attack them... it's only a matter of time before they do. We need to go in the *opposite* direction."

The bridge commander disagreed. "We're going to the Selandrin system."

Severin quietly pulled out his phaser and shot the bridge commander - not enough to be lethal, just enough to drop him. He was haunted by it, looking at his hand in disbelief, but *if I'd listened to my instinct, Sarenya would still be alive. I am saving everyone aboard this ship.*

He stood; Soran stood next to him, aiming a blaster rifle at anyone in the crew who would dissent.

"We're getting the hell out of here," Severin said.

—

The ship had taken enough damage from the Borg cube that they didn't get very far, having to park on an asteroid as repairs were made. Supplies began to run out over the following weeks, and Severin had to help instate a ration system and a form of martial law.

When Severin found that two survivors - young, able-bodied men, without a family to feed - had killed an elderly woman for her rations, he ejected them into space, publicly. "Anyone who looks away gets their eyes shot out," he warned. "You will look at this, and let it be an example to you, of what will happen if you think this is a good idea. Live together, die alone."

I am doing what I have to do, so we all survive.

—

The ship was repaired enough to keep moving, but never what it once was. They eventually made contact with Debrovia - a world the El-Aurians had traded with but never allied with - which was far enough away for Severin to deem they were safe *for now*, not necessarily for good. They stopped there to try to re-stock supplies, and take a rest after their ordeal.

But they didn't stay long. They were settled into a refugee camp, and then they began disappearing. First one, then two, then five. Severin had it investigated and it became clear some sort of trafficking was going on, the Debrovians selling them into slavery. When a large group of slavers came for the rest of them, they fought back, hard enough that on their way out they took a slaver's ship.

They roamed for a time after that, stopping here, stopping there, the weaponry of the ship and now armed on their persons making their host worlds think twice about treating them with anything but courtesy. But they were also not truly welcome, and most of the El-Aurians decided to keep moving on, save the odd one who decided they were tired of moving around and would take what they could get, electing to stay behind on a world.

One of the strange new worlds they visited had a few El-Aurians on it, who had been there for awhile for other reasons. One of them, a woman named Guinan, had been married to Severin's eldest son Tegan for a time; she had compassion on the refugees - indeed, Severin was the closest thing to family Guinan had, now, and vice versa - and she joined them. Guinan told them they should go to Earth, a place where she had been a long time ago. Severin had no reason not to believe her, so Earth it was.

2293

On their way to Earth, the top-of-the-line ex-slaving ship began to break down - they had been on it for close to two decades now. There was talk of what they should do. They were within range of two other ships, and the decision was made to put out a distress call.

The *SS Lakul* and *SS Robert Fox* replied to the distress signal. The El-Aurian survivors were beamed aboard their ships, continuing towards Earth. On the way there, they were trapped in the Nexus.

Within the Nexus, Severin was reunited with Sarenya, and Medri, and his grandchildren. When he was ripped apart from the Nexus, finding himself on another ship, he panicked, even trying to attack the strangers, pleading to be brought back to the Nexus. He was sedated. A man with a heavy accent told him: "Ve vill bring you to Earth, don't vorry."

"What the hell does 'vorry' mean," Severin muttered before he went under.

Severin's first year on Earth had been hell - focusing on survival for himself and what remained of his people had been his concern for the last three decades. But now that he was safe on Earth - now that he had experienced the Nexus, that brief reunion with the woman he loved, the child they'd made in love, their grandchildren - he felt increasingly despondent. He had been in a mental hospital in San Francisco initially, on a suicide watch.

One of the El-Aurian survivors, a woman named Delia, was far worse off than he was, and one day, she took a wing of the hospital hostage, attacking multiple patients and staff. Severin had been a doctor on El-Auria, and his old medical instincts kicked into action, taking a medkit from the wall, working on treating the wounded, keeping them alive as best as he could. When the crisis was over, Severin was commended, and when he talked to one of the counselors about it, who had been trying to get him to find some sort of meaning in his new life, he said he had a moment of clarity. He was discharged two weeks later, on a work program, to start working at a clinic in San Francisco.

After he'd been working as a doctor at the clinic for six months, a Starfleet recruiter came by, offering him a job. Severin agreed to meet him at a coffee shop.

"I'm going to be really honest with you," Severin told him. "I was in a mental hospital when I first got here, hospitalized for suicidal depression, after what I'd been through."

The recruiter, Captain Edwin Alvarez, just smiled at him. "I already know that, my friend. We don't recruit people without running background checks."

Severin folded his arms.

Alvarez went on. "I'm here because I heard about the hostage crisis at the hospital, and how you helped save lives that day even when all hell was breaking loose, you kept calm, got things done. I talked to your counselor and she told me you helped keep your people alive for the last three decades, after your homeworld was destroyed. These are the kind of skills Starfleet needs. We would ask that because of your psych history, you have weekly counseling sessions and submit to an eval every four years or so. But I also know you are very old, and your time of trouble was an anomaly in many years of a healthy, well-adjusted life, so other than that? If you're not a danger to yourself or others now, I see no reason why you shouldn't come fly with us."

"It's tempting," Severin said. Though he'd developed a fondness for humans, Earth cuisines, and Earth's historical pop culture, he didn't quite feel at home on Earth - he didn't really feel at home anywhere, anymore.

"Think about it." Alvarez got up, and handed him a business card, that contained a chip that was a direct link to the comm console in his office. "Get in touch."

Three weeks later, Severin entered Starfleet Academy.

2366

Severin graduated Starfleet Academy in 2297 and was assigned to the *USS Callahan*. He spent forty years aboard the *Callahan* before being transferred to the *Excalibur* in 2337, and then he was assigned to the *Melbourne* as chief medical officer in 2360.

He had been chief medical officer of the *Melbourne* for six years when Lieutenant Commander Yan Dooku arrived on his ship.

Since he'd joined Starfleet over sixty years ago, Severin had the policy of adopting his crew members as friends and family - his people were listeners, and something about him made crewmen feel at ease around him, confiding in him, and Severin found making connections with others to be therapeutic. Dooku was the first officer Severin had ever met who didn't warm up to him right away, made more interesting by the fact that he was Betazoid, a race of telepaths and empaths, so surely Dooku knew Severin had good intentions. But Dooku had been first in his class at Starfleet Academy, came from the *El Dorado* with a glowing recommendation by Captain Gloria Ramirez, wanted to command his own starship someday, and in the meantime took his job as operations management officer very seriously - much too seriously, Severin thought, who thought he needed to lighten up and make a friend, and thus frequently invited Dooku to have a drink with him or come to crew poker night with him. He was always rebuffed. Dooku kept to himself, and the crew began calling him "the Iceman" behind his back, though Severin knew that you couldn't really keep those things from a Betazoid; Dooku definitely knew what was being said about him, and it just made him even frostier.

After four months, Severin wrote befriending the young lieutenant commander off as a lost cause. And then, the unthinkable happened.

On stardate 44002.3, a Borg cube headed for the Sol system. Admiral Hanson and Starfleet Command had assembled a fleet of forty starships to intercept and engage the cube before it got there; Admiral Hanson assumed command of the *USS Bellerophon*, *Saratoga*, *Melbourne*, *Virago* and *Powhattan*. Hanson began familiarization with forces present, and spent the next five hours strategizing with all present senior officers.

In the Wolf system, Locutus hailed the assembled fleet.

Resistance is futile. You will disarm your weapons and escort us to Sector 001. If you attempt to intervene, we will destroy you.

The *Melbourne* made a valiant attempt at attacking the cube, but took heavy damage, enough that the captain ordered the crew to abandon ship.

For an instant, when he was in the escape pod, watching the explosions as starship after starship was destroyed - watching escape pods destroyed - his mind went back to that day on El-Auria, remembering the sacrifice Sarenia had made, giving the Borg enough of a distraction

to let a few ships get away. He had tried, once, back in San Francisco, to talk about that day, and it had been dismissed as nonsense - of course it had, the Borg cube sounded like something out of an insane hallucination. He'd had a bad feeling about taking a stand against them, here and now, and had privately voiced concerns to Hanson himself, mentioning the destruction of his homeworld, but Hanson thought the Borg would fall with a fleet of forty attacking them. Of course, they did not.

The old feeling of hopelessness returned, a yearning to just die here in his pod, to go to the Summerland where Sarenya was at peace, and would be waiting for him.

But as Severin thought of Sarenya, he knew she would want him to fight - to make a stand for others, as she had made a stand for him. She had died so he would live, and craving death felt like an insult to her memory, the sacrifice she had made. He reached for the wedding ring he kept on a small chain around his neck - normally Starfleet personnel were not allowed jewelry, but he'd managed to finagle the authorization for this.

Gripping it tight, silently weeping, he felt something brush his forehead, even though there was nobody else in the tiny escape pod with him. A deep, familiar voice spoke into his mind.

If we make it out of here, you can buy me that drink.

Chapter 4

2367

After Wolf 359, Lieutenant Commander Yan Dooku's escape pod was towed by a Klingon vessel to a nearby starbase. He waited there until he was re-assigned as chief operations officer of the *Trident*, a newly-commissioned *Akira*-class starship.

Three months into his stay on the *Trident*, the chief medical officer, the Vulcan Doctor T'rai, became pregnant, and elected to return to Vulcan for the duration of her pregnancy and the first two years of the child's life. She was welcome to rejoin Starfleet at any time, but the chief medical officer of the *Trident* would need a permanent replacement.

When Dooku heard it was Severin Yusanis, the doctor from the *Melbourne*, he found himself having an unexpected perking up. He hadn't seen the El-Aurian since Wolf 359, he only knew that the doctor had made it out alive, because he could sense the intense emotions from him as their respective escape pods drifted away from the battle. Dooku was the only member of the *Trident* who had been in Wolf 359 - there were few enough survivors - and though he had undergone mandatory counseling due to the trauma of the event, he still felt like the experience further isolated him from others, so having the doctor around, who had always been friendly to him, was a small comfort.

After the doctor had been in sickbay for a few hours, Dooku took a little detour from his daily supervision walkabout, to pay him a visit. Severin was sitting at his desk, reviewing a PADD, frowning with concentration. Dooku cleared his throat, and Severin looked up.

"You grew a beard," Severin said.

A week in an escape pod had left Dooku without the opportunity to shave, and once he was on a starbase and had access to a shaving kit, he decided not to, feeling like it made some sort of private, symbolic statement of what he'd endured and survived with the battle. He also felt it made him look more mature - he got tired of being assumed to be younger than twenty-seven. He certainly felt much older than twenty-seven.

"I did." Dooku nodded.

"It suits you," Severin said; he had facial hair himself. "Looks distinguished." He went back to looking at his PADD.

Dooku felt his cheeks flush at that, the slightest flutter, and then a wave of self-consciousness at his reaction - why should he care what the doctor thought of something so trivial as his appearance? Dooku put his hands behind his back and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, feeling slightly awkward. "So. Er."

Severin put the PADD down on his desk and folded his hands, leaning forward. "What can I do for you, Commander?"

"When we were... escaping the wreckage, I reached out to you. I could feel your distress, and I... told you I'd be willing to have that drink with you, that you kept offering. That offer still stands."

Severin nodded. "My shift ends in four hours, if you want to meet me at the cantina?"

"Yes. Thank you." Dooku turned on his heel and took a few steps, and then before he could leave sickbay, he decided to follow up with, "It's good to see you again, Doctor Yusanis."

"You too, Commander."

"I'm... glad you're alive."

Severin smiled. "I'm glad you're alive too."

Dooku felt inexplicably nervous about meeting Severin at the cantina, but he already had a table when Severin showed up four hours later. Severin walked right over and took a seat. One of the waiters came over to take their order; Dooku went with an Earth food, tandoori chicken, and Severin surprised him by also ordering Earth cuisine, a lamb gyro and Greek salad. They also ordered Saurian brandy.

Though the ship had replicators, the cantina had a few chefs that cooked. This was a treat for the crewmen, many of whom said they noticed a difference between real food and replicator food. Dooku didn't go to the cantina because of how busy it was; this was in fact his first trip there since he'd been assigned to the *Trident*.

Severin, observant as El-Aurians were, noticed the discomfort as they sipped on Saurian brandy, waiting for their meal. "Are you all right?"

Dooku nodded. He looked into Severin's warm dark eyes and sighed. The doctor had been kind to him back on the *Melbourne*, and he had always been cold, and he felt that now he owed some sort of explanation. "Back on the *Melbourne*, when I always turned down invites to do things... I'm sorry."

Severin waited.

Dooku went on, "As a telepath and empath, being around a lot of other people is sometimes difficult for me. A lot of noise. Especially when under stress. It's one thing when I'm on duty, another thing in my spare time."

Severin's eyebrows went up and he nodded. "I'm sorry too. I should have realized."

"It's not something I expect non-Betazoids to understand." Dooku snorted. "The crew of the *Melbourne* certainly didn't."

"No, they didn't." Severin gave a small, sad smile. "You know they called you -"

"The Iceman." Dooku nodded. "Ensign Branson was fond of mocking me with that 20th century Earth song, what's it called..."

"*Ice, Ice Baby.*"

"That one." Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. He swirled the liquor around in his glass and said, "If only they knew how I'd cried, and mourned, after. I never hated them, and regardless of my personal feelings, they were fine officers, and nobody deserves to die like that."

"No, they don't." Severin raised his glass, and knocked it back.

There was an awkward silence until their food was served. Dooku's plate of tandoori chicken was steaming hot, so he let it cool; Severin started on his salad.

"They didn't just call you the Iceman because you kept to yourself, though," Severin said. "You're always so damn serious."

"I'm driven," Dooku said. "Though, having a brush with death has made me think perhaps I need to live just a little."

"Just a little." Severin held his thumb and forefinger a centimeter apart. "A wee bit."

Dooku looked into Severin's eyes again - for some reason he felt himself relaxing a little around the doctor, being willing to confide in him, as he would a friend. "I'm a Starfleet brat," Dooku said. "I spent the first fourteen years of my life going back and forth between Betazed and Earth, where my mother had a job at the Kelvin Memorial Archive, in London."

"That explains your accent," Severin said.

Dooku nodded and continued, "When I was fifteen, I went with my father aboard the *USS De Ruyter*. I stayed there until I was old enough for the Academy. Going into any other line of work never even occurred to me. I wanted to be a captain like my father. I still do."

"He must be proud of you."

"He's dead." Dooku sipped his brandy. "Killed by Romulans, just before I graduated the Academy."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

A few moments of silence, and Severin asked, "Does your mother still work at the Kelvin Memorial Archive?"

"She does. It's been awhile since I last saw her, though we did talk after Wolf 359 so she could see I... made it."

Severin nodded.

Dooku sighed. "So it's not simply that I'm driven, and not simply that I find crowds uncomfortable because of the noise, but spending half my life away from Betazed. When you grow up and you're not like the others, when you're a bit sensitive because you know what people are thinking and feeling, you know when they're lying... when you're used to being brutally honest with people because your own people don't censor themselves, and that means, to non-Betazoids, that you're too blunt and have a habit of saying the wrong thing... that doesn't win popularity contests. I've always been a bit closed off."

"That's understandable," Severin said. "But consider that if you want to be a great captain someday, that means having your crew back you up when you need to make tough decisions. And that's easier to do if you have a good rapport with your crew. If you come off like a standoffish asshole all the time..."

"Point taken. But I'll never be a social butterfly."

"No. But there's a happy medium between social butterfly and the Iceman. It starts with small steps. Like making a friend." Severin smiled.

"We could be friends." Dooku nodded. "You're a good listener."

"It's an El-Aurian thing."

—

Their second meeting at the cantina came three nights later. Dooku ordered Earth food again - this time, paella. Severin ordered the same thing. As they started on their Saurian brandy, Dooku said, "I realize you went to the Academy, but... a fondness for Earth cuisine would mean

spending more time there than that, yes?"

"I came to Earth after my homeworld was destroyed," Severin said. Dooku sensed that it was more complicated than that, but Severin wasn't going to get into it, and he respected that. "And then, I was there more recently."

"You mean before you were transferred here?"

Severin nodded. "Due to, uh, the aforementioned trauma, after Wolf 359 Starfleet Medical made me take three months mandatory shore leave before taking another assignment. So I went back to Earth. Spent a lot of time in the Mediterranean. It was very relaxing."

Dooku nodded at that, with a small smile. "It's a beautiful part of the planet."

"I especially appreciate how well-preserved the history is there. So many artists. It was inspiring."

Dooku raised an eyebrow. "You're an artist?"

Severin suddenly looked sheepish, flushing pink - Dooku found his reaction fascinating and rather adorable, feeling a flush in his own cheeks. Severin stammered, "It's, uh, a hobby."

"I'd like to see your work. I have a fondness for art and poetry myself."

After their meal, Severin took Dooku to his quarters for the first time. He made them hot chocolate from the replicator and showed Dooku his small collection of paintings and sketches, including a sketchbook and two small canvasses that he'd had in the duffel bag he took when fleeing El-Auria.

"You do beautiful work."

"I had a beautiful homeworld," Severin replied. "That painting in particular, the one with the swing in the flowering tree by the pond, was my backyard."

"How long ago was that?"

"Early twenty-two hundreds, I think."

Dooku almost dropped the canvas he was holding. He didn't know much about Severin's species, and Severin didn't look any older than he did. "You're that old?"

"Older." Severin smiled. "I'm approximately six hundred years old. Give or take."

Dooku let that sink in for a minute. He couldn't fathom anyone being that old, let alone being that old and looking so young. He knew Severin wasn't lying to him.

Before he could stop himself, Dooku asked, "What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Being as old as you are. You must be so wise."

Severin snorted. "Honestly, Commander, the older I get, the more I am sure of exactly one thing - that I know nothing. The universe is vast, and I have barely skimmed the surface of experiencing life in all its totality."

Severin took the painting from Dooku and hung it back up on the mantle. He took a step back to admire it, and Dooku stood to join him, looking at it from a different perspective. Then Dooku noticed what the painting of Severin's old backyard was sitting next to - there was a framed picture of Severin with a lovely young-looking woman, long auburn hair, both of them smiling.

"Who's that?" Dooku asked.

Severin let out a barely audible sigh. "That... is my late wife. Sarenia."

Oh, he likes women. Dooku wanted to smack himself for feeling a surge of disappointment at that. "Ah. I'm sorry."

Severin nodded. "Not a day goes by that I don't miss her." He leaned in to stroke the frame of the portrait, as if he were stroking her face. "We were married for four hundred years. We had eight children, and many grandchildren."

"I take it -"

Severin nodded again. "One of them I can say for sure was killed by the Borg. I can't be sure that all of them are dead, since most of my kids left El-Auria when they were old enough to strike out on our own - our people are pretty widely traveled - but when the Borg destroyed my homeworld, they also went for neighboring systems, so unless my kids got out of there..."

This was something Dooku hadn't realized. "The Borg... destroyed... your homeworld?"

"Yeah."

Dooku instinctively put a hand on Severin's shoulder. Severin let it rest there for a moment. It now made more sense to Dooku why Starfleet Medical had made Severin take three months shore leave before returning to duty; Wolf 359 was especially traumatic for him.

They sat back on the couch, drinking hot cocoa in silence. "You're very resilient," Dooku said, and immediately wished he hadn't said that, feeling like it sounded trite or dismissive.

But Severin wasn't offended. "I wasn't always." His voice was husky with the vulnerability of letting his guard down a little, being the speaker for once instead of the listener. "I shut down after my wife died. I lived to keep what was left of our people alive, but I couldn't let myself get close to anyone. Eventually, I understood that was a really shit way to live. And with the *Melbourne* gone, a lot of my friends are dead." He smiled and raised his cup of hot cocoa. "We both need a friend."

"We'll have to do this again," Dooku said, stretching.

"We will." Severin nodded. "It's nice to have company."

Dooku looked at the time. "It is getting late, and I have an early shift tomorrow, so I should leave shortly."

"I understand." Severin raised an eyebrow. "You have any hobbies?"

"I do some activities in the holodeck," Dooku said. "Sport fencing, anbo-jitsu."

"I've never done either," Severin said, "but back to that thing about knowing nothing, and wanting to experience more of life... I'd be willing to learn."

"That could be interesting."

"You play chess, Commander?"

"Not in a long time."

Severin grinned. "*That* could be interesting."

"Well then. Would you like to play chess this weekend?"

"You're on." Severin walked him to the door. "Good night, Commander."

"You can call me Yan." Dooku had never been on a first-name basis with any of his fellow officers; even at the Academy he'd insisted on going by his surname.

"You can call me Sev." Severin took his hand for a moment, not shaking it, just holding it. Their eyes met, and held.

"Good night, Sev." Dooku waved, and went on his way back to his quarters.

Chapter 5

2367

Over the next several months, Dooku and Severin got together at least three times a week, to share a meal together, and engage in some sort of activity. Chess was a favorite; Severin and Dooku also liked watching old motion pictures from Earth - Dooku was a fan of the Hammer Horror films in particular - and Dooku taught Severin fencing and *anbo-jitsu*.

One evening, Severin took out his art supplies, and encouraged Dooku to draw and paint with him. Dooku looked at the supplies on the table and stammered, "I-I'm not an artist. I can't draw..."

"Everyone can make art," Severin said. "It's not about whether or not you're good at it, it's about expressing yourself."

So Dooku found himself sitting at the table across from Severin, and attempting to sketch the rose garden he remembered of his home on Betazed. When Severin looked at it, he said, "That's very nice."

Dooku knew Severin was being sincere, and not just saying that to be encouraging - Severin knew better. Dooku felt a warm flush of pride, and then a tingle of surprise when Severin asked, "May I have it?"

When Dooku hesitated, Severin said, "I don't have too many things to remember people by... nothing for my friends on the *Melbourne*. If something ever happens to you..."

Dooku felt strangely touched by that, and then he said, "Well, you may, but... if you want something like that, maybe it should be more permanent than a piece of paper."

"Hm, perhaps. Something like wood, or clay?"

It was how Dooku found himself getting into wood sculpting, making a plaque that would be the lid of a wooden box, for Severin. Dooku found the act of whittling to be soothing, and he remarked on it one evening when Severin was working with watercolors and he was whittling nearby, feeling Severin watching him now and again.

"See, it's good to expand your horizons and try new things," Severin said. "As old as I am, I find there's still so much to see and do."

Dooku laughed. "As old as you are, you're like a big kid wanting to play."

"Damn straight. And as young as you are, you're like a little old man. You never really got to play much as a kid, did you?"

Dooku snorted. "I'm the child of two Starfleet officers and I knew by the time I was four I wanted to be a starship captain. My childhood was spent studying."

"Well then." Severin gave a small smile. "We're gonna have to fix that."

Dooku gave Severin a look; Severin gave him a look back.

The next time Dooku arrived at Severin's quarters, Severin was in civilian clothing, carrying a wicker basket. He marched Dooku to the holodeck, where he had a program running of autumn in a park in London, something familiar to Dooku. In the wicker basket, Severin had a picnic, with sandwiches, cubed cheese, different kinds of salads, raw fruit and vegetables and assorted dip. He spread out a blanket on the ground and they ate; Dooku was amused that the program had geese, harassing them for food.

After their meal, Severin took Dooku on a walk through the park, the two admiring the autumn leaves together. Enough leaves had fallen to make piles on the ground, and Severin decided to jump in a pile of leaves. Dooku thought Severin looked utterly ludicrous - and adorable - rolling around in the leaves. Then Severin said, "Come on, try it!"

Dooku laughed and shook his head no.

Severin blew a raspberry. "What are you, scared?"

Dooku's response was to jump in the pile of leaves next to Severin; enough leaves scattered that Severin got a faceful, and Severin just laughed before scooping up a handful of leaves and throwing it in Dooku's face.

The two spent the next while jumping in every leaf pile, throwing leaves at each other. When they had exhausted the leaf piles, they resumed walking through the park, until they came to a children's playground. Severin climbed up the slide and went down, and then again, and after the second time, took Dooku's hand and dragged him to the slide. Dooku climbed the steps and slid down, feeling ridiculous, but Severin's joy was infectious. They went down the slide another three times before Severin pulled him to the swing set. Severin sat on a swing, and began kicking the ground and pumping his legs, soaring higher and higher. "Bet you can't go higher," Severin called to him.

Dooku accepted the challenge, sitting on the swing next to him. As he pushed out, Severin swung back; as Severin swung out, Dooku sailed back. Dooku eventually got higher in the air than Severin, and Severin leaned back in the swing so he was almost upside down, yelling, "Wheeee!"

At last they stopped, and Severin walked Dooku back to his quarters, calling it an early night since Dooku had an early shift the next day. "I had fun," Dooku admitted. "Thank you."

Severin's response was to hug him, and when Severin pulled back, looking into his eyes and smiling, Dooku's breath caught.

Before this, he knew he found the doctor attractive, and enjoyed spending time with him, looking forward to his company. But now, he realized he'd fallen in love with Severin. There was no prohibition in Starfleet about getting involved with one's crewmates, but Dooku had always thought of the notion of crew fraternization as unprofessional. He quietly chastised himself as he got into his pajamas, *this cannot and should not be*.

That didn't keep him from masturbating to a fantasy of Severin before falling asleep, however.

The next time they saw each other, they watched a movie together, something different from their usual fare - *Titanic*, which had been wildly popular on Earth in the late 20th century. By the end of the movie, Dooku could feel Severin's pang of melancholy as he thought about his late wife and the destruction of his homeworld, though Severin was trying to keep himself together.

"I know," Dooku said, simply.

"Something I've been curious about, Yan... why aren't you married? The Betazoids have a custom where you should already be married by now, yeah?"

Dooku laughed into his tea. "Well... there is a custom of arranged marriage, yes. I was arranged to be married to the daughter of family friends, a Betazoid named Jocasta Nu."

Severin's eyebrow went up. "What happened?"

"I'm gay," Dooku said.

"Hi Gay, I'm Sev."

Dooku shot Severin a look; Severin wrinkled his nose and stuck out his tongue. Dooku rolled his eyes, and Severin said, "So, you prefer the company of men?"

"Theoretically. I've never had a relationship, only a bit of experimentation when I came of age. Enough to know where I stand."

Severin nodded. "So the marriage was called off, I take it?"

Dooku nodded. "She was relieved - she was in love with someone else. And my family and hers took it well."

"That's good, at least."

Dooku smirked. "Now my mother just nags me to find a boyfriend whenever I talk to her."

"Oh, dear." Severin chuckled.

"Your marriage wasn't arranged, was it?"

"No." Severin shook his head. "Our people don't do that, considering how long we live, no use being stuck with someone you don't really want to be with for the sake of producing offspring. Sarenya and I married out of love."

"What was she like?"

"Tough as nails. Strong. Fierce. She became one of the highest-ranked officers of El-Auria's military. All our medical doctors were trained as combat medics, which is how she and I met, I had to spar with her... I realized I was in love with her when she kicked my ass." Severin smiled fondly, remembering. "She was a real mama bear when it came to our kids - even after they were grown and could take care of themselves. And she was protective of me, too. I always felt safe with her. It was nice. But she wasn't all brawn - she was also very well-educated, very well-read. Intelligent, insightful. She had a good sense of humor... she'd have to have a sense of humor to put up with me that long. We made each other laugh. We weren't just partners, we were best friends."

"I can sense how much you loved her," Dooku said, "and you don't have to be a Betazoid to understand four hundred years with one person must be love."

"We loved each other very much, we never got tired of each other, for sure. But our people understand marriage differently than some other cultures - our marriage was open. We were strongly committed to each other, but we had lovers... sometimes we'd share them."

"There was never any jealousy?"

"Nah." Severin laughed. "Sarenya found it quite arousing to watch me with other men and women - and likewise."

Dooku almost spat his tea. He'd assumed Severin was heterosexual; here was an admission that Severin was bisexual. He felt a strange sense

of relief at this, once again mentally cautioning himself *this is not going to be a thing. He isn't even interested in me.*

And then the latter thought was challenged as he drank the rest of his tea, and Severin showed him the watercolor painting he'd been working on lately - a painting of him. Dooku felt touched enough he had difficulty making words; Severin put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm glad you like it," Severin said.

"I'm glad you know I like it," Dooku said.

"Our people have a small amount of empathic ability, but not like yours," Severin said. "We're listeners, though. Listening isn't just about hearing what was said, but observing what is unsaid. The space between the words."

Their eyes met.

"I like to draw and paint things I find beautiful." Severin gave a small smile, and Dooku felt it then - it was an admission of attraction on Severin's end, something he'd been tightly shielding from Dooku's mind-reading capabilities until now... but he was placing the ball firmly in Dooku's court, leaving it up to him what to do with that information.

Dooku didn't do anything with it, still feeling like he'd be making a mistake to get involved with a crewmate, and he didn't want to jeopardize the only real friendship he had. So that night he went back to his quarters at his usual time, and over the next few weeks they continued to spend time together like nothing had changed.

—

The one-year anniversary of Wolf 359 came. Dooku felt inexplicably testy all day, having to stop himself from snapping at a lieutenant and the security chief for no good reason more than once. Though he was busy with his usual duties, his mind kept traveling back to that day aboard the *Melbourne*, facing down the Borg cube - the damage, the injuries, the captain screaming aboard the all-call to abandon ship.

It was worse when Captain Douglas Faraday called all the senior officers to assemble for a memorial - a protocol issued by Starfleet Command itself. The names of the dead aboard each of the forty vessels were recited by the computer, and then there was a moment of silence, to last for five minutes. Severin and Dooku were still the only two officers aboard the *Trident* who'd been in Wolf 359, and Severin discretely took his hand during the moment of silence, when the crew bowed their heads and closed their eyes to pay respects, whether to remember or offer prayers to whatever deities they believed in. Lieutenant Commander Yusuf Hamad, the ship's security chief, said softly, "*As-salāmu 'alaykum.*"

When the moment of silence was over, Hamad came up to Dooku and Severin and put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Peace be with you as well," he said. "I pray you continue to find healing after what you've been through." He took Severin's hand and shook it, and then took Dooku's hand and shook it, before walking off.

It was the first time anyone in the crew of the *Trident* other than Severin had offered kindness to him beyond professional courtesy, made more potent by the fact that Dooku had been cranky and abrupt with the security chief earlier that day - Dooku could feel the compassion and forgiveness in that gesture, and he found himself getting choked up. Severin, noticing his eyes were too bright, walked him out of the bridge; their shift was over now.

"I don't feel like going to the cantina tonight," Severin told him, "but I don't want to be alone tonight, either. You want to join me for dinner in my quarters?"

They picked at their food, both feeling too upset to eat. They did drink Saurian brandy together - one glass became two, and then three, and then four. When Dooku was into his cups, he stood up to go to the bathroom, and walking there, almost fell over - Severin caught him just before he could crash to the floor. "Whoa, easy there," Severin slurred.

Severin helped him to the bathroom, and then back to the couch, and once Dooku was sitting on the couch, he finally let out the tears he'd been holding in all day. Realizing this was the first time he'd let anyone see him cry since he was a child, he cried harder, and Severin held him close. When Dooku noticed Severin was crying too, Severin's pain amplifying his own, he cried harder still; the two of them held each other tight and rocked together, sobbing, letting out the grief and the rage, the fear that had followed them since that day, and the feeling of loneliness as two survivors, permanently scarred by something nobody else on the ship could understand.

After they'd been rocking each other for awhile, and were exhausted from the intense sobbing so the tears were subsiding some, Severin took a tissue from the box and wiped Dooku's tears. The tender gesture - something Dooku only had experienced as a child, from his own mother - made Dooku fall apart again. "Oh, Yan," Severin husked. He wiped the tears some more, and when that became a lost cause, the tissue falling apart from being soaked, Severin leaned in, and to Dooku's surprise, Severin began kissing his tears. Severin nuzzled him, their foreheads close, and their lips brushed.

Caught off-guard, Dooku stopped crying, and found himself responding, his lips parting. When their tongues met, they both groaned, and moaned again as the kiss deepened.

In what limited experience Dooku had, years ago, kissing had never been like *that*, where Dooku felt on the edge of coming just from kissing, the two kissing again and again. Severin's tongue swirling, rubbing his, made Dooku's mind wander with what else he could do with that tongue, and when Severin's kisses trailed down to Dooku's neck, Dooku's mind stopped wandering, not able to think at all, just *want*.

Severin's hand reached to gently rub the bulge in his uniform's trousers, and Dooku moaned, louder when Severin just licked his neck, up to his jaw. "We almost died, then," Severin whispered, "but we're still here. Let's live."

Dooku took Severin's face and kissed him hard and hungry, his own hand reaching to Severin's erection, then up Severin's torso, to rest on his heart. Severin took his hand and they helped each other stand up, and then, somehow, made it to the bedroom, kissing all the way. They feverishly undressed each other and once naked, took a moment to admire each other before coming close again, hard cocks rubbing together as they kissed and their hands roamed over each other's bodies, exploring, caressing, teasing.

They walked to the bed, still kissing, still keeping their bodies close, and climbed onto the bed together. They couldn't stop kissing, until at last they needed air. They looked into each other's eyes and Dooku said, "It's been a long time for me."

"It's been longer for me," Severin said. "Not since Sarenya..."

Dooku didn't let him finish that sentence. "Hush," he said, before kissing Severin deeply, wanting to take away his pain, wanting to soothe that terrible feeling of *alone* he'd carried with him for over a century.

Dooku had no small amount of skin hunger, having been celibate for a few years, but it was nothing compared to the way Severin was starved for touch. Dooku wanted to take his time and savor exploring Severin's body, give him all the touch he deserved, but there was too much *need*, their cocks already leaking precum, their balls aching for relief. When Severin stuck his precum-slick fingers in Dooku's mouth between kisses, something inside Dooku snapped - he needed more. He found himself on his knees to the side of Severin, quickly kissing and licking his way down Severin's sculpted body, before putting his head between Severin's legs, taking Severin's cock into his mouth. His own legs were over Severin's shoulders now, and he felt Severin pulling his hips, Severin's mouth swallowing down his cock. Dooku moaned approvingly with his mouth full, and Severin replied with "mmmmmm".

Dooku sucked Severin slowly, but the way Severin was sucking him hard and fast - the way Severin worked his tongue as he sucked - soon drove Dooku out of his mind with sensation, and lust for the beautiful cock he had in his mouth. He gave Severin the same treatment, and feeling Severin's pleasure intensified his own. When he felt Severin on that edge, his balls tightening, Dooku couldn't resist teasing just a little, taking Severin's cock out of his mouth to lick and suck Severin's balls, making Severin cry out. When he resumed sucking Severin's cock he gently rubbed Severin's balls, and then he felt Severin rubbing him the same way; Dooku started thrusting into Severin's mouth, not able to help himself. The pleasure was exquisite, almost unbearable. Severin sucked him even more eagerly than before, massaging his balls with one hand, rubbing the sensitive place between his balls and ass with the fingers of the other. Dooku's mouth took Severin's cock to the hilt, demonstrating his lack of gag reflex, and after a moment of deep-throating him he focused his attention on the head, kissing, licking, sucking, tongue playing with the foreskin and rubbing the frenum, Severin whimpering and writhing underneath him.

Dooku pushed into Severin's mind. *I want to taste you.*

With that, he concentrated on sucking down the shaft again, and Severin continued the sweet magic of rubbing his tongue as he sucked; Dooku trembled, his thighs quivering. The next few minutes felt like an eternity as they kept on that edge, needing to come, but not wanting to give in just yet, wanting more of the perfect pleasure, and the worship of each other's cocks.

And then, finally, it happened - Severin made a high-pitched moan of warning, and Dooku's mouth was flooded with salty sweetness. He took Severin's hands and shuddered as he let go, Severin moaning as Dooku filled his mouth, shooting again and again; he heard Severin splutter, there was so much of it, and then Dooku groaned as he felt Severin's tongue lap up what he couldn't get in his mouth, the licking giving him aftershocks. Dooku took a few last licks at Severin's cock, giving him aftershocks as well. Their mutual climax was the most erotic experience of Dooku's young life, and he almost got hard again thinking about it, but was too spent from the shattering intensity of it all.

So shattered was he, that when he came up to kiss Severin, sharing their combined flavor between them, he broke down crying again. It wasn't just the best blowjob he'd ever had, the most intense orgasm he'd had thus far, but it was the first time Dooku had sex where it wasn't just sex, there were feelings involved. He had tried to fight his feelings, but the alcohol had taken away that resolve to stay professional, and here they were in each other's arms, and he could feel Severin's feelings. They had acted in lust and hunger, but it was also tender and sweet - they'd taken care of each other. They were careful with each other.

Severin pulled him close, cradled Dooku's head to his chest, rocking him again, and pet his hair, pet his beard. "Shhhhh," he whispered. "Rest now." Their legs braided together.

After a few minutes of Severin's gentle touch, the rocking and soothing snuggles, listening to the beating of Severin's heart, Dooku felt himself drift off to sleep.

Chapter 6

2367

Dooku woke up to the sound of a wake-up alarm chiming, with his head throbbing, pounding. He groaned in pain and ground out, "Computer, lights."

The lights went on, and as Dooku sat up, he realized he wasn't in his own bed, and he was naked.

It came back to him - he'd had a lot of Saurian brandy last night, and ended up having sex with Severin. Heat flooded his cheeks, and then his whole body, as he remembered the way he and Severin kissed, the way they'd sucked each other, come in each other's mouths, how good Severin had tasted to him... and the sweetness of being held, afterward, feeling safe and content enough to fall asleep in Severin's arms.

He was disappointed that Severin wasn't in bed with him, though he wasn't feeling up to a second round with his hangover being this bad. As Dooku got up and went to the bathroom, he noticed Severin had already left for his shift in sickbay. He knew Severin let him sleep instead of waking him up to say goodbye, and simply set the alarm to wake him up in time for his shift, which he was grateful for with the hangover. Dooku groggily pulled his uniform back on, just to go back to his quarters, wash up, and put on a fresh uniform.

The sonic shower didn't help, and neither did coffee. An hour into his shift, Dooku took a detour to sickbay. He saw through the window of the ICU doors that Severin was making his rounds, reviewing cases and taking notes. Their eyes met, and Dooku waited. After he'd been waiting a few minutes, Nurse Rita Velasquez smiled and said, "Can I help you, Commander?"

"I need to talk to Doctor Yusanis about something," he said.

"All right." She nodded and walked off.

After a few more minutes of waiting, Severin came out of the ICU. He saw Dooku waiting at his desk. "Hi," Severin said.

"Hello." Dooku shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"You need something for the hangover, right?"

Dooku chuckled ruefully and nodded.

Severin replicated a prescription for headache medicine, which Dooku took in front of him with a glass of water. "I had to take this as soon as I got in," Severin said. "It will kick in very quickly."

"Good." Then Dooku involuntarily sighed with relief, blinking as the medicine started working. "Thank you."

"No problem." Severin nodded. He sat down at his desk and pulled up a second PADD, transferring information from one PADD to another, while he also reviewed images on a screen.

"I see you're busy, so I shan't keep you."

Severin put up his index finger, indicating Dooku should wait, and after he typed something into his PADD, he looked up at Dooku. "I have a minute."

"I, uh." Dooku rubbed his hand through his hair, feeling a bit sheepish. "Er."

"Er, indeed." Severin pursed his lips. "You remember what we did last night."

Dooku nodded. "I do."

Severin raised an eyebrow. "Do you regret it?"

Dooku answered truthfully. "No. But we should talk."

"I agree we should talk," Severin said, "and I think due to the circumstances of us working together, we should probably talk about it sooner rather than later, so... at 1900, meet me at my quarters? We can have dinner there and talk."

"That works for me." Dooku nodded.

Severin smiled. "Good." A pause, and Severin said, "Looking forward to it."

Dooku found himself smiling back, and noticed a little spring in his step as he left sickbay.

But as the hours passed, Dooku grew more tense and anxious. He knew without being told that Severin was now considering a relationship with him. And while he could no longer deny his feelings for Severin, and the power of his attraction, this was new and scary territory for him.

When he showed up at Severin's quarters at 1900, two hours after his shift ended, and an hour after Severin's shift ended, he saw that Severin was wearing a silk robe, and had showered recently - his hair was still damp, and Dooku detected a faint whiff of the Starfleet-issue body wash, which somehow managed to smell sexual on Severin. "Come in," Severin said.

Dooku walked in, and saw Severin's quarters were lit by battery-powered lanterns - open flame was prohibited on starships. Lanterns on the mantle, lanterns on the eating table. It created a soft, ambient golden glow, and whatever Severin had made for dinner smelled delicious. When Dooku got to the table he saw a Betazoid casserole dish, seafood with roasted root vegetables and greens, something that had been his favorite in his younger years - someone had been poking his psychological profile, and the chief medical officer would in fact have access to that. Dooku raised an eyebrow, and then both of them when he saw the chocolate cherries, his favorite dessert; Severin had definitely been looking for ways to impress him.

"Wine?" Severin gestured to a bottle of a very expensive white wine. "From France, when I was there last year."

"Just one glass." Dooku nodded.

"That's fair." Severin nodded, and poured them each a glass.

They ate in companionable silence, savoring the meal. Dooku finally observed as they started on dessert, "This is too good to be replicator food."

"It's not." Severin smirked. "I bribed the cantina cooks to have this ready for me."

"You went to a lot of trouble," Dooku said. "Did some research, I see."

"I did." Severin sipped his wine.

"It's appreciated."

"Good." Severin's smirk became a smile, and Dooku's breath caught a little - he was even more arresting in the glow of the lanterns.

When they finished their dessert, Dooku sat with Severin on the couch, and Severin said, "Computer, play 'Quiet Storm'."

"Caught Up in the Rapture" by Anita Baker started playing. Dooku's face flushed, and he looked down for a minute before meeting Severin's eyes.

"Where do we go from here?" Severin asked.

"Well." Dooku leaned back. "I would be lying if I said I didn't want you, and haven't wanted you for some time."

"But." Severin knew there was a "but".

Dooku took a deep breath. "Up until now, I've always had the opinion that relationships between crewmates is unprofessional. As you know, such things are not prohibited by Starfleet, but just because they're not forbidden doesn't mean that they should be done, either."

"Why?"

"Have you ever taken the Bridge Officer's test?"

Severin nodded. "Back in my day it was the Kobayashi Maru. They still do that at the Academy?"

"No. They have something worse now, where your sim makes you order an officer to an assignment that will result in their death, or the death of many others, and based on your personnel profile that officer will be someone close to you - a classmate, a teacher, one of your parents, anyone that will elicit an emotional response. Even if you come into the sim knowing it's a holosimulation it *always* upsets the one taking it. That test helped form the basis of my opinion. All of the death I saw at Wolf 359 just reinforced that opinion - I didn't even *like* the crew I served with, who made fun of me, and I still mourned their deaths. *I am going to be a starship captain someday*. I *do not* want my attachment to get in the way of doing my duty - if I needed to order you to a mission where I know you would die, but it would save the crew, it would hurt me, deeply. And if my feelings clouded my judgment enough that I made a decision to protect you, but one that put others at risk, or even at harm, or death..." Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose.

"That's valid, Yan. But... well... I didn't tell you how Sarenia died, did I?"

"The Borg destroyed your homeworld."

"It's more complicated than that." Severin folded his arms.

Dooku made the gesture for him to go on. Severin continued, "When the Borg attacked El-Auria, there was a planet-wide alarm, and a warning issued from our government that we needed to evacuate. The kind of weapons they were using... population centers reduced to canyons and ash, supplies and resources gone, fallout raining everywhere, temperature dropping by the minute, and the bombs triggered seismic activity off the charts. Even if the Borg had stopped the attack, we wouldn't have been able to survive on what was left of the planet. Sarenia and I had one vehicle between us; she saw me to the nearest spaceport, and then she took off for the base, because she had the launch codes to our planet's biggest weapons array. The ships had coordinates to warp to and rendezvous, and she said she'd get on a vessel at the base and see me

soon. But she didn't. Because staying on the planet to launch the cannons bought us some time - it broke a tractor beam they had on the ship I was on, in fact - but it also meant she sacrificed herself, she didn't get out of there quickly enough. She knew, when she took off, that was a risk she was taking, and she still took it. And every. Fucking. Day. I blame myself for that. I revisit that scenario in my head, would things be different if I'd physically stopped her, made her come with me on that ship, would she still be alive, or would the lack of the cannon mean me and her and all of my people were dead. I still, over a hundred years later, don't have answers for this. And the other part of my daily inquisition - she was one of the highest-ranked officers on the planet, had to be to have those launch codes. She took her duty very damn seriously. If I'd physically stopped her from that duty, and dragged her on board the ship with me... if we were both still alive, would she have forgiven me, especially if it meant we got out of there but perhaps others didn't? I don't have the answer for that, either."

Dooku sighed. So did Severin.

"What I'm trying to say, Yan," Severin said, running a hand through his damp curls, "is that I get it. And one of the things I respect about you - one of the things I *love* about you, in fact, is that you have the same kind of commitment to your duty, your people, to doing the right thing, that she had. So I understand if that means what happened last night won't happen again."

Dooku frowned; he wasn't expecting that response, and he found himself disappointed by that - he would have liked at least a little more fight from Severin about it. He felt a tingle of relief when Severin said, "But."

"But."

"Are you going to spend the rest of your life alone? Because that's what you're setting yourself up for. If you get involved with a civilian, you're not necessarily going to have fewer problems - you might still be in a position where you're responsible for their death, or you have to make the tough decision between saving them and other people dying, or triggering a war, or *something*. And with a civilian, they're not going to understand the way that someone in Starfleet will understand. If you ordered me on a medical mission where I was probably not going to come back alive... when I put on this uniform I understood I will probably die in this uniform."

Dooku cringed at that; the thought of Severin dead bothered him, a lot.

Severin wasn't done. "But if we cut ourselves off to the support and companionship that we need, the comfort that we need, the *passion* that we need to make life worth living... we're already dead. And then, what the hell are we fighting for? What are we exploring for?"

Dooku opened his mouth to speak, and Severin held up a finger. "I've been mentally rehearsing this speech all day, Yan."

Dooku couldn't help but laugh at that, and let Severin go on.

"Wolf 359, there were a number of non-humans in that fleet, you and myself included - we went out to defend people of Earth not simply because Earth is strategically important but because we were defending people's partners, children, parents, siblings, friends - everybody is family to someone somewhere, and it's the loss of those bonds that creates the kind of wounds in the galaxy that create instability and chaos and brings even more suffering. It's universal. Even the fucking *Romulans* were willing to put their hostilities aside for a hot minute to help, because they understand that. When you stop being able to relate to that need to protect what you love, to help people protect what they love, and everything is just the idea of doing the right thing rather than the reality of why it's the right thing, that's when you become more cut off to suffering, and less likely to act appropriately when actions need to be taken. When you're not living, when you're already dead inside, you don't know how to respond to the needs of people who are still alive. There's just as many bad decisions made in the pain of loneliness and lack of connection, as there are from the pain of attachment and trying to protect the people you love."

Severin had some points; Dooku hated that he was right. He hated that the wisdom from this old soul was making him love Severin even more.

Severin took Dooku's hands in his. "I've spent over a century alone. It wasn't just that I couldn't get over Sarre, but I couldn't let myself take the risk of loving and losing again. Even when I found meaning and purpose to my life again, to help others, after losing her, it was still so cold. And last night..." Severin closed his eyes, and when he opened them, Dooku saw they were shining with unshed tears. "I finally let you in. There was finally warmth, like the sun coming back after years of winter."

Dooku found himself stroking Severin's hands.

"I don't know what the future holds, Yan. I don't know that someday, you won't have to make a decision between saving me and saving others. I don't know that someday, I as a chief medical officer won't have to make that same decision for you, if you're in my triage during wartime and we have not enough staff to go around. We just don't know. It may happen - and it may never happen. All I know is that until and unless that day comes, we have to live, and if we have to die, I don't want to regret never tasting you again. What we shared, last night, was beautiful, and we both badly needed it. And I'd like to share more with you. I'd like to share my life with you, if you'd let me."

Dooku sat for a moment, letting the weight of Severin's words sink in - letting the *emotion* of those words sink in. Then, with tears in his own eyes, he said simply, "Yes."

Severin giggled happily and threw his arms around Dooku, squeezing him tight. Dooku pulled Severin close, nuzzling his beard, inhaling the scent of his damp curls. Then, the "Quiet Storm" playlist started playing "Night and Day" by Al B. Sure. After the first drumbeat, Severin spoke along with the opening lines. "*Ah, can you feel it baby? I can. Excuse me, do you think that I might be able to... touch you?*"

Then Severin wiggled his eyebrows.

Dooku rolled his eyes and laughed - the six-hundred-year-old man holding him could go from the wisest person he'd ever met, to the silliest, in a matter of seconds, and he loved him for it. He kissed Severin deeply, still laughing between kisses.

Severin knew why he was laughing, and played it up some more. "What?" He pretended to look offended. "I am suave *as fuck*." He licked his thumb and index finger, and smoothed both his eyebrows before wiggling them some more.

"You are ridiculous *as fuck*, and I'm not even sure that *as fuck* is proper English."

"To hell with being proper." Severin kissed him hard. "I had to stop myself from throwing you down on my desk when you visited sickbay this morning."

The delicious mental image of what that would have entailed blazed through Dooku's mind and he found himself pulling Severin up from the couch with him, and then he picked Severin up off the floor and carried him to the bedroom. When he stopped in the bedroom door, it was then he noticed there were lanterns lit in the bedroom also, and a trail of rose petals leading from the bedroom door to the bed, sprinkled over the bed with the sheets turned down.

Dooku gave Severin an amused look. "You assumed I was so easy to seduce?"

"More like hoping."

They kissed again, and then Dooku lowered Severin onto the bed. He began to take off his uniform, and Severin slipped off the robe, revealing nothing underneath. Dooku climbed on the bed, over Severin, and Severin wrapped his arms and legs around him, kissing him passionately.

When they pulled apart, they looked into each other's eyes for a minute, and Severin reached to stroke his face, pet his beard. "I need you inside me," he husked.

Dooku's cock throbbed at that; he'd had less intercourse than other activities - he'd given anal sex exactly twice in his lifetime, but his body remembered what it felt like, and the thought of feeling it with Severin... he shivered. Then he kissed Severin back, and trailed little kisses over his beard, along his jaw. "I will. But I need all of you." He started kissing Severin's neck. "You're so beautiful."

They spent a long time just kissing, their hard cocks rubbing together, cock dripping on cock - an erotic sight. When Severin stuck his precum-slick fingers in Dooku's mouth, he groaned, and began kissing Severin's neck again. He groaned again at the sight of Severin rubbing precum onto his own nipple, an invitation to feast. Dooku took that invitation, suckling Severin's nipple hard, making Severin gasp and shudder, his nails digging into Dooku's lower back. "Yan," he panted.

"Mmmmmmm." Dooku took a few licks, rubbing his tongue fast and hard, smiling as the nipple pebbled. He licked more slowly, and brushed his tongue around the areole, teasing, before drawing the nipple back into his mouth. Feeling how sensitive Severin was there, Dooku savored the response and continued to lick and suck the nipple, alternating between fast and slow strokes of his tongue, watching it grow more swollen, until he couldn't resist nibbling on it. Severin cried out, and again when Dooku soothed it with his tongue. Severin moaned and clutched his head when Dooku sucked on it again.

Dooku kissed and licked across Severin's chest, nuzzling the smooth, silky skin - he liked that Severin didn't have chest hair - and he turned his attention to the other nipple, licking fast and slow, sucking hard, nibbling, blowing on it and licking some more. His fingers strayed to the nipple he'd been working on previously, rubbing it in lazy circles, pinching and rolling and plucking it, making Severin whine and whimper. When Dooku came back to that nipple, his hand working on the other one, the sounds Severin produced made his cock throb, aching for relief.

But he meant what he said - he needed to make love to Severin, to explore him, worship him. He kissed and licked down to Severin's stomach, tracing the muscle definition in his abs with fingers and tongue. He nibbled and licked Severin's navel, then down to Severin's right thigh, kissing, licking, giving little love bites, cock continuing to twinge at Severin panting and moaning, feeling the pleasure Severin felt. He kissed Severin behind the knee, and kissed and licked his calves, even his foot. He kissed his way back up the calf, and thigh, to the hip, groaning as Severin howled, especially sensitive there. He kissed back across Severin's washboard stomach to the other side, teasing his thigh and leg and foot, down and back up. When he came close to Severin's cock, he spent a moment just nuzzling the bush, breathing in the way Severin's musk combined with the clean scent of his shower gel, intoxicating. His eyes locked with Severin's as he took Severin's cock into his mouth, slowly, inch by inch, and then sucked slowly, deliberately, smiling a little around the cock in his mouth as he watched Severin writhe and moan and gasp and pant and whimper. When Severin began to buck his hips, thrusting into Dooku's mouth, Dooku pulled Severin's cock out of his mouth and just started licking it, teasing him even more mercilessly than before, especially when his tongue swirled around the head.

At last Severin screamed with frustration, and gave Dooku a look that was almost angry. "Yan..."

"Yes?" Dooku took a few laps at the slit in the head of his cock, savoring the precum.

"If you're not gonna fuck me just yet, let me touch you. I've been dying to get my hands on that gorgeous body of yours all day."

Dooku relented, coming up to kiss Severin, who rolled him onto his back a bit roughly. Dooku grinned at Severin and nipped his lower lip, before Severin kissed him harder, deeper. Then Severin gave him the same treatment, kissing and licking him all over, paying special attention to his nipples - Dooku's nipples were a direct line to his cock, almost coming from the way Severin licked and sucked and nibbled them. Severin licked Dooku's chest hair with his tongue, grooming it as if he were an animal, and ran his fingers through it. "You're so fucking sexy," Severin growled.

Dooku had always been a bit self-conscious about how hairy he was, but Severin loved it, and he appreciated that. Severin went as far as to lick the hair on his arms and legs, even groomed his armpits and pubic bush with his tongue. Severin seemed to know everywhere Dooku was sensitive, without being told - stomach, thighs, and especially his neck. When Severin came up to kiss him, he spent a long time just kissing and licking Dooku's neck, continuing to run his hands over the rest of Dooku's body, his hands trembling at the feel of his muscles, his body

hair, his skin. Dooku was now getting a taste of how he'd driven Severin right to that edge, bucking, panting, feverish with need. They could be in a war and he wouldn't want Severin to stop.

But then he did, kissing his way back down to Dooku's cock, before taking it in his mouth. Unlike Dooku's slow sucking, Severin sucked hard and fast, massaging the balls as he sucked. Dooku grabbed Severin's curls and groaned, almost ready to come in his mouth. Before he could, Severin let the cock slip out and licked it, even more slowly and deliberately than Dooku had licked his cock. Dooku laughed softly. "Tease," he said.

"You deserve it." Severin then started licking his balls.

The handful of times Dooku had ever had sex, he'd never had his balls licked and sucked, and he was almost embarrassed by how loudly he was moaning now, as Severin worked on him, licking slow and fast, sucking hungrily. He cried out when Severin's tongue brushed the between his balls and ass - he'd never been touched there, either, didn't now how good that could feel. Severin kissed there, before licking and sucking his balls some more, and then licking and licking and licking his cock, from the head down the shaft to the root and back up, kissing the head, sucking just the head, teasing the slit with his tongue. Dooku had never leaked more precum in his life, and Severin smiled at it, before making a show of collecting it with his tongue, enjoying the flavor.

"About being inside you," Dooku rasped.

"Yes?" Severin raised an eyebrow, with a smug, self-satisfied smirk.

"Now, please."

Severin grinned, and came up to kiss him, hard. As they kissed, Severin reached across him and Dooku felt Severin fumbling around in his bedtable drawer. Severin put a jar of lubricant in his hand.

Noticing Dooku's surprise to why he'd have lube if he'd been celibate since his wife's death, Severin said, "I haven't been with anybody, no, that doesn't mean I haven't, uh, taken care of myself with toys."

The thought of Severin fucking himself with a dildo made Dooku want to come right then and there. He groaned as Severin opened the lid of the jar of lube, and then again when Severin got to work rubbing copious amounts of lube over his cock, making it glisten. "Fuck, that looks so hot," Severin husked.

Severin then poured some lube onto Dooku's hand, crawling up so that his hips were near Dooku's shoulders. Dooku knew the drill, and stuck a finger inside Severin. He found the prostate right away, making Severin throw his head back and cry out, arching to him. One finger became two, then three, fucking slowly, then faster. When Severin was riding his fingers, fucking them back, panting, Dooku knew Severin was ready... and he was more than ready, his cock aching for Severin to ride it the way he was riding his fingers.

Severin scooted back to straddle Dooku's hips, and Dooku watched as Severin sank down on his cock, taking it in a little at a time. Through his empathy, Dooku could feel there was a little discomfort - even though he'd toyed himself, Severin hadn't taken a real cock in a long time, and Dooku could feel how tight Severin was. Severin pushed out as Dooku pushed in, and at last, Dooku was buried in him to the hilt. They rested like that for a moment, Dooku gasping at the wonderful feel of silken heat wrapped around him - the feel of the man he'd grown to love.

Severin put his hands on Dooku's shoulders and started riding him slowly. Dooku groaned at the sensation of Severin's inner muscles rippling one way on the way up, and another on the way back down, gripping him just right. He could feel Severin's pleasure as the curve of his cock hit his prostate - there was no pain now, only passion. Dooku gripped Severin's hips and matched his rhythm; every time he hit Severin's prostate, they moaned together, loving it. Just as much as the feel of Severin's insides, he loved the feeling of intimacy, connection, made one flesh. And he loved watching Severin ride him, hips rolling, the fluidity and grace of Severin's beautiful body, the look of ecstasy on Severin's face. His hands roamed from Severin's hips over his thighs, up his stomach and chest, and back down. One hand took Severin's cock, stroking it in time with the thrusts, as the other continued to caress Severin's body, expressing his admiration for how elegantly sculpted he was with each brush of his fingers and palm.

Soon Severin was running his hands over Dooku as well, and Dooku relished Severin's touch, and all the love he felt behind it. The haze of sensuality they floated in as they touched and teased and played, Dooku never wanted to end, lost in Severin's beauty, lost in pleasure, lost in love. The slow, gentle lovemaking was like coming home, and there was nothing sweeter than that feeling of belonging.

Caught up in emotion, Severin and Dooku took each other's hands, and their eyes met. Severin's hand pulled away from Dooku's to stroke his face; the look of love in Severin's eyes took his breath away. Severin leaned down to kiss him, and whispered, "I love you," before kissing him again.

That set Dooku off, his hands reaching to grip Severin's ass, and he drove into him with abandon. Severin cried out and grabbed Dooku's shoulders. "Yes, yes, *yesyesyes*," Severin gasped, riding harder.

Dooku's hands rubbed Severin's firm, shapely ass, kneading, enjoying the feel. Severin leaned back and rode as hard as he could, grabbing onto Dooku for dear life, white-knuckled, his moans louder and louder. Soon his moans were punctuated by Dooku's balls slapping his ass, and the wet suctioning of their fuck - the lewd, filthy sound of it made it that much hotter, Dooku groaning, losing himself even more deeply in the primal heat. They were both working up a sweat now, and the sight of Severin's body glistening threatened to drive him over the edge, but Dooku held back, gritting his teeth as he pounded into Severin, wanting him as badly as he'd ever wanted anything. His hand sped up on Severin's cock until it was a blur.

"Oh shit..." Severin shuddered. "Yan, I'm gonna..."

Before he could finish the sentence, Severin climaxed, shooting cum all over Dooku's chest and stomach. The sight and feel of Severin marking him with cum, the sound of Severin moaning, the sensation of Severin clenching and pulsing around him, sent Dooku over the edge, two thrusts and he came too. "Sev. Oh, *fuck*." He closed his eyes, feeling like he was falling, then flying. He felt Severin collapse on top of him, and holding Severin against him just intensified the joy, the contentment, the bliss. Dooku sighed deeply, and opened his eyes. Their eyes met, and Severin pulled him into a soft, gentle kiss.

"That," Severin said between kisses, "was fucking. Awesome."

Dooku rested inside Severin and stroked his face, his curls. He kissed Severin's hand and pressed it to his heart. "Thank you," he said, "for sharing this with me." He claimed Severin's mouth again, kissing him harder, wanting Severin to feel all of his passion, even with his cock spent. "For sharing yourself with me. For being you."

"You've got me." Severin kissed his forehead. "As long as you want me, I'm yours."

"I will want you for the rest of my life." Dooku meant that - he'd gone from hesitation about involvement with a crewman, to feeling even more sure of this than he was sure of wanting to be a starship captain. They belonged together.

They kissed again, and again, and Dooku's cock stirred inside him. Severin grinned and made a purring sound at the feel of it, giggling when Dooku rolled him onto his back. "Love me," Severin whispered. Dooku began to thrust slowly, his eyes riveted on Severin's, their hands clasped together once again, fingers linked.

Chapter 7

2367

After they had been together for two weeks, Severin and Dooku mutually decided they wanted to share quarters, rather than going back and forth between each other's spaces. While it was soon, they both felt very sure about it. The request was submitted to Captain Faraday, and three days later, he gave the approval, and after their shifts ended, Dooku packed his clothing and belongings into a utility cart and wheeled it down the hall to Severin's quarters. Dooku preferred the idea of moving in with Severin rather than Severin moving in with him, even though he'd been on the *Trident* longer, because Severin's quarters were more decorated and lived in.

As a Starfleet brat who'd traveled back and forth between Betazed and Earth as a child, and then on a starship from place to place as a teenager, Dooku lived a rather austere existence, the necessity of being able to pack and leave on a moment's notice. It was something Severin understood - he'd fled El-Auria with only what he could carry, and spent close to three decades as a refugee, though since his Starfleet career had started sixty years ago he had begun to allow himself to rebuild possessions and creature comforts for his mental health. And though Dooku traveled light, there were nonetheless some items among his few belongings that were of sentimental value - most importantly, a floppy, worn, well-loved stuffed grey tabby cat he'd slept with since he was a child, named Teffi, and a box of seashells and driftwood from different worlds that he'd had assembled on a shelf near his bed, that Severin helped him arrange now.

There was also a curious bundle of cloth, brown, velvet-like. Dooku was rather protective of it, but Severin said, "Anything that's being homed in my space, I want to know what it is." He put his hand on Dooku's shoulder. "Relax. You can trust me."

The cloth was actually a cape, and the cape wrapped up and preserved two artifacts. The first was a set of seven keys on a large, ornate knotwork metal ring - the keys and ring were badly rusted. There was also a blade too big to be called a knife but shorter than Dooku's fencing rapier, the hilt curved and with the same knotwork pattern as the key ring, the blade itself made of an opaque black glass with an iridescent sheen resembling obsidian.

Sensing Severin's interest, Dooku took a deep breath. "Those are... er." He ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Some family heirlooms."

"Oh?" Severin thought about letting it go, but Dooku's aversion to get into it made him even more intrigued, and he felt that making Dooku talk about it would be an important step in what Severin had privately come to term The Great Dethawing. Severin folded his arms and waited.

"The cape belonged to my great-grandfather, my namesake, also Yan Dooku. The capes were traditionally worn by Betazoid aristocracy until about a generation ago. Brown is the color of House Dooku, the Third House of Betazed." Dooku fingered the key ring. "Those are the Holy Keys of Betazed..." He touched the curved hilt of the not-a-knife. "The Sacred Sword of Kaliu. The sword and the keys are both thousands of years old."

"So... you're not just the son of two Starfleet officers, you're also..."

"The heir to one of Betazed's noble houses." Dooku nodded, and pinched the bridge of his nose, further indicating discomfort with the subject.

Dooku wrapped the items back up in the cape. "This should go in a safe place."

Severin's idea of a safe place was his sock drawer - their sock drawer, now. Dooku rolled his eyes, chuckling at it. "My ancestors would roll in their grave if they could see this now," Dooku said.

"Your ancestors would probably roll in their grave even more if they could see how much this subject irritates you," Severin said, pursing his lips.

He could tell from the face Dooku made that he'd hit a nerve, and it was one that needed to be hit. "Yes." Dooku sighed.

Severin went to the replicator to make them both tea, and they sat down on the couch together, spending a contemplative moment of silence drinking tea before Dooku relented. "When I was at the Academy," Dooku said, "there was someone I was sleeping with casually, a friend with benefits, I suppose you could call it, and I made the mistake of mentioning it to him, and when he got bored of me he decided to bring it up to other people in our class to make fun of me, because that was the cool thing to do. I was already disliked because I was first in my class and seen as an overachiever and a bit of a showoff. This information made it worse. I got the nickname Special Snowflake, which got shortened to just Snow."

"Oh, so all of the Iceman snark on the *Melbourne* must have *really* bothered you."

Dooku nodded.

Severin took his hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry, Yan."

"But it's also..." Dooku sighed. "Betazed's history is quite different - as a race of telepaths, our nobility was and is the most powerful among us, the people who shaped Betazed, and their descendants. When my father announced that he was *son of the Third House of Betazed, Holder of the Sacred Sword of Kaliu, and Heir to the Holy Keys of Betazed*, he was making a statement about the kind of power he held, the kind of power that runs in our particular bloodline. It was, in fact, a battle cry, a threat, to our enemies. My telepathy and empathy is considered strong even by Betazoid standards. And it's something that, among non-Betazoids, is yet one more thing that makes me different, makes me stick out like a sore thumb. It gets tiring. Not to mention that spending time on Earth, especially England, and learning about the way class systems and

privilege caused suffering to many people throughout Earth's history, has made me painfully self-conscious of the concept of aristocracy on Betazed... and then there's the expectation that someday I will have an heir so the line doesn't die with me - my family accepts that I'm gay, some people are and that's just the way it is, but this means that at some point, I need to find a surrogate mother to pass down the line. Probably a lesbian from my homeworld, who also needs an heir for her line, and a sperm donor."

"I wouldn't mind more kids," Severin said. "I've had eight of them. I love children."

"I might mind," Dooku said. "I'm not ready for that now, I don't know if I will *ever* be ready to bring a child into this galaxy."

"Well, that's fair, you're only twenty-seven. I didn't even have my first child until I was over a hundred."

"My people may live longer than humans - two hundred, sometimes three hundred, years old - but I am *not* fathering a child for the first time when I am over a hundred, Sev. That's still old by our standards."

Severin shrugged. "We don't need to talk about that right now, then." He patted Dooku again. "It's enough that you told me about where you came from."

"Thank you for not judging me."

Severin nodded. "I admit that I find the concept of nobility distasteful - on El-Auria you weren't any better or worse than anybody because of who your parents were. Beyond a basic guaranteed income for all citizens, which ensured our standard of living was high and our crime rate was low, people got what they earned - the respect afforded you, or lack thereof, was based on your deeds, especially what you did for others, to give back to the community. But no, I don't judge you for being what you are, you didn't ask for it, and you *don't* think it makes you better than anyone else."

"My father didn't either. He was an idealist, and I get much of my values from him."

"He was your hero."

"He was." Dooku nodded, frowning. "I miss him very much."

Severin put down his tea and just held him for a minute. Dooku rested his head on Severin's shoulder and Severin pet him. When they pulled apart, their eyes met, and Severin stroked his face. "Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me all of that," he said.

"I feel safe with you," Dooku said, taking Severin's hands and squeezing them.

"I want you to feel safe with me." Severin nodded. "I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. I love you, Yan."

In the two weeks that they'd been together, Severin had said "I love you" more than once, and Dooku hadn't said it back to him. Severin knew Dooku was committed enough to want to live with him, and be open about their relationship while also discrete and professional, but Severin was getting concerned Dooku hadn't spoken those words in kind.

Dooku took Severin's face in his hands and said, "I love you." He kissed Severin deeply.

Severin hadn't expected the relief at those words finally being said to make him cry, but he started crying. Dooku kissed his tears, and it was his turn to hold Severin and rock him and pet him. When Severin calmed down, Dooku cupped Severin's chin and tilted his face up, for their eyes to meet again. "I haven't said it back before now because..." Dooku sighed. "What I feel for you isn't just love. It goes deeper than love, deep enough that calling it something simple as 'love' feels trite, feels like an insult. I'll use that word with you, of course... but know it's so much more than that for me."

Severin kissed him hard, and they groaned as the kiss heated, their hands starting to roam. They hadn't eaten dinner yet, and Severin was feeling like *to hell with dinner, we can have it later*, his cock already tenting his uniform trousers.

Dooku pulled away, breathing heavily; Severin looked down and saw he was just as hard. Before Severin could do something about that, Dooku said, "We have a word in the Betazoid language. *Imzadi*. It's usually translated as 'first love', but the root of the word is *imza*, to open - *imzatexin* means 'surrender' in our language. *Imzadi* is the first person that you are truly vulnerable with, truly intimate with, the first person you fully let down your guard with, surrender to. That would be you."

Touched as he was, Severin did what he often did when he was overcome by emotion - resort to humor. "I'd sure like to open right now."

Dooku laughed and rolled his eyes. "I couldn't tell. Truly. Your inner workings are a mystery."

"Mmmmm, that means you might have to explore those inner workings." Severin took Dooku's hand and pulled him up off the couch.

"Not tonight." Dooku stopped before they could go to the bedroom, putting his arms around Severin's waist. "Tonight, I want to give myself to you."

"You mean you want to bottom for me?"

Dooku nodded. Over the last two weeks they'd been together, he'd fucked Severin plenty of times, and they'd sucked each other, but Severin hadn't penetrated him. Severin wasn't strictly a bottom, and he'd hinted his versatility more than once, but he didn't want to pressure Dooku

into doing anything he didn't want to do, so he didn't press it, letting Dooku decide that or not - Severin didn't mind being the one who got fucked if that was what Dooku wanted to do, he still loved bottoming; any way he got it was good. Severin smiled now, hoping he didn't come off too much like an eager puppy, not wanting Dooku to feel guilty about it.

Then Dooku explained, "I've never..."

He didn't need to finish that sentence. "You've never bottomed?"

"No. Not once." Dooku flushed, looking a bit sheepish. "I've had fairly limited experience, and I've always been a bit guarded. But with you..." He reached up to stroke Severin's face, pet his curls. "I trust you."

Severin kissed him again, sweet and lingering, and then he took Dooku's hands once more and walked him to the bedroom.

Dooku knew the drill for Severin preparing to be penetrated, and after he finished in the bathroom he came back in the bedroom and they feverishly helped each other undress, and Dooku walked back into the bathroom, kissing Severin all the way there. They got into the shower, and sensually lathered each other, at last holding each other under the water, kissing hungrily, hard cocks rubbing together.

Severin and Dooku made their way to the bed, continuing to kiss and caress each other. After they climbed onto the bed they spent a moment just holding each other, looking into each other's eyes. Severin stroked Dooku's face. "I love you," he husked.

"I love you." Dooku nuzzled him.

"I want to make this good for you." Severin started kissing Dooku's neck, and he groaned in response; Severin smiled, knowing how sensitive Dooku was there. "I'm going to get you very, very ready... I want to make you come harder than you've ever come in your life."

Dooku shuddered, and clutched Severin's head, tugged lightly at the curls. He tugged harder when Severin kissed down to a nipple, rubbing his tongue hard and fast. Severin's cock throbbed at the sight and feel of the nipple pebbling, and again when he drew the nipple into his mouth, sucking hard, and Dooku arched to him and moaned.

Severin went back and forth between Dooku's nipples, licking, sucking, nibbling, rubbing his hard cock against Dooku's hairy thigh as he got more and more worked up, and Dooku himself was going crazy, writhing, panting, whimpering; Severin looked down to see the precum already leaking from Dooku's cock, and teasingly swirled his finger around the slit, playing with the precum. He brought his finger to his lips to taste, and then kissed Dooku to share his own taste with him; his finger resumed collecting precum and he anointed Dooku's nipples with it, sucking even more hungrily than before. Severin then groomed the chest hair with his tongue, nuzzled it, ran his fingers through it. "You are so delicious," Severin rasped. "I love all that fur."

"I hadn't noticed." Dooku smirked.

Severin playfully nibbled his shoulder, making Dooku cry out, and again when Severin licked where his teeth had been. Then he nibbled and licked his way back down to a nipple, tugging it with his teeth before laving it; Dooku groaned and gripped Severin's hips, nails digging in. "Sev..."

"Mmmmm?"

"Fuck me."

"Not yet." Severin kissed his heart. "I told you, I want to make you nice and ready."

Dooku *whined*. Severin's cock twinged, getting even harder. *Oh yeah, I am gonna wreck you..* Severin started kissing his neck again, the fingers of one hand playing with a nipple while his other hand stroked Dooku's cock, then after a few minutes he played with the other nipple, licking and nibbling Dooku's neck between kisses. Soon Severin was feasting on his nipples again, sucking them hard, tugging them with his teeth, lapping fast and furious, tracing the areole with slow, deliberate strokes of his tongue. Finally Severin began to work his way down, kissing and licking and nibbling Dooku's stomach, one hand swirling Dooku's chest hair, the other caressing his thighs. When the hand on Dooku's thighs was replaced by Severin's mouth, lots of licking, Dooku grabbed Severin's hair, gasping, begging "Please..."

"Mmmmmmm. Patience, love." Severin grinned up at him, and then his finger traced around the rim of Dooku's hole, laughing softly as Dooku let out another whimper.

Severin continued to trace his finger around the rim as he tongue-bathed Dooku's cock, licking and licking and licking around the head, then down the shaft, tracing the veins with his tongue, and back up, paying special attention to the frenum. Severin took just the head of the cock into his mouth, swirling his tongue, and when his tongue began to play with Dooku's foreskin, snaking inside, Dooku cried out; Severin moaned around Dooku's cock as he tasted more precum.

Severin sucked just the head of Dooku's cock for a long time, rubbing his tongue as he sucked; he loved listening to Dooku moan, watching his facial expressions, the heat and need in his eyes. As badly as his own cock was aching for relief, he meant what he said about wanting his lover to be ready, knowing from personal experience he would need to be very ready to be penetrated for the first time; despite his small stature, Severin was a good eight inches long when erect, and his cock was thick as well. And Severin liked teasing him, just as much as he liked being teased himself.

Eventually, Severin took all of Dooku's cock in his mouth, sucking slowly, his eyes meeting Dooku's and holding his gaze. Dooku stroked Severin's face, moaning, panting, arching to him. After Severin had been sucking him for a few minutes, Severin stopped tracing the outside of

Dooku's opening with his finger, and pushed the finger inside. He found the nub right away, rubbing in slow, lazy circles.

"*Fuck!*" Dooku gasped, and shivered.

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm." Severin took the cock out of his mouth and asked, "Like that?" He already knew the answer, but he loved hearing it.

"*Yes.*"

Severin took Dooku's cock back into his mouth and sucked slowly, continuing to finger him slowly. One finger became two, pressing harder, rubbing a little faster; Severin sucked a little faster, working his tongue again as he sucked. Dooku's moans were getting louder, his hands trembling as he pet Severin's hair, sometimes grabbing it, not able to help himself.

Severin started licking his cock again, lapping up the precum that flowed; soon his tongue was on Dooku's balls, licking feverishly, and when he began sucking the balls, the sound Dooku made drove Severin mad with lust. Severin sucked and licked the balls some more before his tongue brushed the sensitive place between balls and ass. And then he took his fingers out of Dooku's channel and replaced them with his tongue.

The sounds Dooku made, and the way he trembled - his thighs quivering - made Severin want to take him right then and there and drive into him hard, but he held back, stroking himself as he worked his tongue. Dooku was begging now, "Please... please..." as he thrashed about, panting, finally rolling his hips, thrusting against Severin's face, fucking himself on Severin's tongue. Severin laughed softly and slowed down, and Dooku howled with frustration, whimpering as Severin's slow licking intensified his pleasure, bringing him close to the brink.

"I never knew anything could feel this good," Dooku gasped.

"Mmmmmmm." Severin stopped licking for a moment. "I love using my tongue. Eating pussy, eating ass... so fucking hot." He put his tongue back inside Dooku, resuming the slow licking of his prostate. Dooku cried out, and again when Severin reached to cup and gently rub his balls, teasing even more.

Severin continued the slow licking a few minutes longer, and then sped up, until he was working his tongue like a hurricane and Dooku was fucking his mouth again. Severin could feel Dooku's balls tightening underneath his hand, and he knew he could bring Dooku off just like this... but he wanted Dooku to come from his cock. He pulled out his tongue, making Dooku whine with frustration, and again when he lapped up more precum from the head down the shaft.

Severin came up to kiss Dooku, and his fingers went back inside, playing slowly. "How do you want it?" he whispered.

"I want to look into your eyes," Dooku said, stroking Severin's face.

Severin took out their lubricant, slicked his fingers, and put them back inside Dooku; Dooku coated his hand and worked Severin's cock, which was already completely wet with precum. Dooku groaned at the sight of Severin's cock glistening, and Severin smiled.

"You want this?" he husked.

"More than anything."

"All right." Severin nodded. He took a pillow from next to Dooku's head, and slid it under Dooku's hips. He parted Dooku's thighs some more and straddled them. "When I start pushing in, push out. If it hurts too much and you need me to stop, tell me to stop and I will, OK?"

Dooku nodded.

Severin guided the head of his cock to Dooku's opening and said, "Here we go."

He put in just the tip. When he was in a couple of inches he could tell from the sharp gasp Dooku made that there was that initial pinch, but then he felt Dooku's inner muscles working, pushing out to welcome him in. "Just breathe." Severin took his hands. "Deep breaths."

Severin continued to push in slowly, as Dooku pushed out. Dooku gasped again. "Do you need me to stop?" Severin asked, concerned.

"Don't stop." Dooku squeezed Severin's hands. "I can take it."

Severin kept pushing, and at last he was all the way in. He just rested inside Dooku for a moment, letting Dooku adjust to the length and fullness of him. Finally, he began to move. He pulled back, slowly, and pushed back in, slowly. Out again, then in. Dooku moaned, and Severin smiled. *Got it.*

After a few more thrusts in and out, Dooku moaned again, more loudly this time.

"Good?" Severin bit his lower lip.

"Incredible." Dooku smiled, and moaned again as Severin went in and out again.

Severin kept the pace slow, not simply to avoid hurting Dooku his first time, but to savor the tightness, the silken heat. It had been over a century since Severin had penetrated anyone, and he'd almost forgotten how good it could be. Dooku's channel gripped him like a vise, and it

was delicious. Just as delicious was watching and hearing Dooku's pleasure as Severin's cock hit his prostate the right way; Severin savored it. Each moan, each look of ecstasy, was intensifying Severin's lust, but he held back from pounding away, knowing it would pay off for both of them if he went slow.

When Dooku was rolling his hips, pushing after Severin pulled, pulling after Severin pushed, Severin knew he could go a little faster, but just a little. Dooku's gasp of "Yes" as Severin went faster let him know so far, so good. Severin shuddered at the feel of Dooku's ass gripping his cock, rubbing it; he willed himself to not lose control... not just yet.

Soon enough they were going faster, and Dooku's cries of "Just like that, love... more, oh *gods*, more..." made Severin lose his mind with desire. He ran his hands over Dooku's body, played with the nipples and chest hair, teasing him until Dooku gripped Severin's hips and rocked against him, urging him on faster, and Severin at last relented, slamming into him. His fear of hurting Dooku went away at the sound of his moans, "yes, yes," the sweet sting of Dooku's nails digging into his hips, pure primal passion, rutting fever. At the sound and feel of Severin's balls slapping his ass, they both cried out. The sensation, the sight of Dooku's body and his ecstasy, the lewd, obscene wet suctioning and slapping of their fuck, took Severin right to that edge, but he needed Dooku to come first. He reached and began to stroke Dooku's cock in time with his thrusts; soon his hand was a blur, and Dooku went from moaning loudly to just gasping, shuddering, the occasional whimper. Severin could tell he was close, desperate to come, but wanting all of the exquisite pleasure to keep going.

"I'm right there with you," Severin rasped.

Their eyes met. Dooku reached up to touch him. "So good... please..."

Severin bit his lower lip and made a hissing sound. "I want you to come first. Then I can come deep inside that hot ass of yours..."

Dooku let out a little cry, and Severin knew he loved that. "Want you to come all over me," Severin growled. "Come for me, love. Show me how hard you can come for this cock..."

"*Imzadi*."

Dooku let go, screaming "*imzadi*" over and over again as he shot cum all over Severin's chest and stomach. Three thrusts and Severin was right there with him, spending inside him, toes curling. He collapsed into Dooku's chest with a shout and a whimper, and Dooku's arms tightened around him; Severin heard Dooku moan again as his inner muscles clenched, pulsing around him. Severin groaned, shaking violently as that clenching and pulsing set off an aftershock.

They gasped for breath, Dooku holding him and petting him as Severin continued to shake, toes curling again and again, shattered, and when they came down, they kissed deeply.

"How was that?" Severin asked, stroking Dooku's face, his whiskers, his hair.

"Better than I imagined. Better than my fantasies of you." Dooku smiled and kissed him softly. "You did, indeed, make me come harder than I've ever come before."

"And that was just your first time." Severin kissed the tip of his nose. "Wait until we've been doing that awhile, you'll love it even more."

Dooku laughed aloud, a sound that did Severin's heart good, considering how reserved he was most of the time. "You'll kill me."

"I hope not." Severin kissed his hand, and pressed it to his heart. "I want a long, happy life with you, Yan."

"I do too." Dooku looked into his eyes, and the look of adoration in Dooku's eyes took Severin's breath away. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

It was Severin's turn to pull Dooku close, and hold him. Tears came to his eyes. He'd lost so much, and tried so hard to put the broken pieces of his life back together... and it was coming together, now. He could feel Sarenya smile at him from the Summerland, and he smiled back through his tears, never taking this moment of quiet joy for granted, preserving it in his memory for all time.

Chapter 8

2374

Captain Yan Dooku woke up before his alarm went off; in the glow of the nightlight, he smiled at how peaceful Severin looked when he slept, curled up on his chest. He pet Severin's curls, and when Severin stretched and made a murmur of contentment, he began to pepper Severin's face with kisses, eventually kissing down to his bare shoulders. Severin's eyes opened, and he rubbed Dooku's chest hair, and gave a lazy grin as his other hand strayed lower to rub the hard cock that had been grinding against his thigh.

"Good morning to you too," Severin said.

Dooku kissed the tip of Severin's nose, and then claimed his mouth. "It's always a good morning when I wake up next to you."

Severin was visibly touched by those words, tears misting in his dark eyes. He kissed Dooku back, letting his body speak for him.

The *Trident* was part of the Second Fleet, which had been reduced by one third since the Dominion War started. Despite surviving this long, crew morale was at an all-time low; the war had been very hard on them. Severin and Dooku had been together seven years now, getting closer to eight, and their love had only deepened in that time. Their bond was a source of strength for both of them, especially when as recently as three months prior, Captain Douglas Faraday had been killed on a rescue mission, and Dooku as the ship's first officer had to assume command, a week later being given a full promotion to captain by Starfleet Command. Dooku had wanted to be a starship captain since he was four, but not like this - the victory at finally achieving his lifelong goal, thirty years later, rang hollow. Faraday had been a good captain, and he was missed.

This was true even when his mother said she was proud of him, in the same conversation where she announced she was retiring from the Kelvin Memorial Archive and moving back to Betazed for good. She also got on Dooku's case about visiting once the war was over - she'd met Severin for the first time approximately a year into their relationship, and they'd gone to see his mother four times after that. She approved of the El-Aurian doctor, enough that she nagged them to get married, and Dooku knew she had extended the invitation to Betazed for them to do just that.

As Severin and Dooku lay at each other's sides in the darkness now, sucking each other, the edge of mortality intensifying their passion, their hunger to feel alive, Dooku decided he was finally going to stop waiting. He was thirty-four now, and much more comfortable with the thought of a traditional spouse-and-children life than he'd been at twenty-seven. But also, though he was not a religious man himself, he respected Severin's beliefs, which included a belief that a marriage ceremony tied two people's souls together and should they die in this war, they would be reunited in the Summerland, the El-Aurian afterlife; Severin believed Sarenaya was there, and he would see her again someday.

The two men climaxed together, as they so often did, taking each other's hands as they came, both moaning "mmmmm" as their mouths were filled with cum. And instead of swallowing it down right away, they sat up to kiss each other, moaning again at the taste of their cum mixed together, a sweet ambrosia. They shared the cum between their mouths for a moment before swallowing it down and then kissing again, savoring the lingering taste of their sex; the kiss made them both harden up again, and Dooku gasped as he felt Severin take them both into his fist, stroking them slowly.

Severin started to kiss his neck, and Dooku groaned. Before he could lose himself too much, though, he felt now was as good a time as any. "Sev." He cupped Severin's chin and tilted his face to look at him; Severin pouted a little at being made to stop what he was doing, and Dooku wanted to laugh at the adorable look of frustration. But now was a serious moment, despite the twinkle in his eye. "I need to ask you something."

"What, how do I want it?" Severin raised an eyebrow. "On my back, looking into those beautiful eyes of yours as you fill me up."

Dooku smiled, and stroked Severin's face. "That wasn't it, love."

"Oh boy." Severin stopped playing with their cocks and folded his arms.

Dooku cleared his throat, and came out with it. "Will you marry me?"

Severin's jaw dropped - he wasn't expecting that question right now - and then he threw his arms around Dooku's neck and kissed him hard. "Yes," he said, and kissed him again. Then he stopped kissing him and said, "Uh... do we have to have a Betazoid wedding?"

"I'd prefer that, if you don't mind."

"So we'd be all... naked... and stuff."

Dooku just nodded.

Dooku laughed as Severin's response to that was to push Dooku onto his back. "I changed my mind," Severin said, kissing his neck again. "I don't want to be on my back, I want to ride you like a wild bull." Through their telepathic bond, Dooku could see the mental images Severin was having of the two naked at their wedding, hard for each other, not able to keep from ravishing each other at the end. Dooku groaned, enjoying those thoughts as much as Severin was enjoying them, and then he moaned into a kiss, moaning louder as he felt Severin pour lube over his cock.

"This is a very good morning indeed," Dooku said, gripping Severin's hips as Severin sank down on his cock.

—
Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 51684.63308599712

This has been one of the worst days of my life.

It was off to a great start - I'd proposed to Sev and he accepted. Later that day, over lunch, we'd discussed me possibly finding a surrogate after the war is over, and the two of us raising a child together. I felt something like hope again for the first time in over a year.

Then the news came.

The reports from the Federation are always disheartening - so many ships lost, so many Starfleet officers dead. It sometimes feels that we are losing this war on every front, and soon the Dominion will conquer the galaxy. Yet we keep fighting. We keep trying, because this must not happen. I was bracing myself for more of the same news, but it was far, far worse this time.

Today, my homeworld, Betazed, fell to the Dominion, after a ten-hour battle. We still don't know how many casualties were sustained, though survivors of the Tenth Fleet report that the planet sustained heavy damage and particularly the capital. I fear the worst for my mother, who lives in the capital. I of course have no way of getting in contact with her or relatives with the planetary communications under Dominion control.

Not only is this a very bad loss for intensely personal reasons, but this marks a turning point in the war. Betazed is a gateway to the Alpha Quadrant. Many planets are in danger now - Vulcan, Alpha Centauri, Andor among others.

Captain's Log, supplemental

The Second Fleet is awaiting orders from Starfleet Command.

The doors of Dooku's ready room chimed. "Yes," he said.

Commander Yusuf Hamad, who'd started as the ship's security chief and was promoted to first officer after Dooku was promoted to captain, stepped in. "Sir, your shift has been over for three hours and you're still here, I wanted to check and make sure you're all right."

Dooku gave him a look. "I'm alive, if that's what you're asking."

Hamad took a deep breath, and nodded. "Permission to speak freely, Captain."

"Granted."

"I have no words for how sorry I am at the invasion of your homeworld. It is a tragedy, and one with very disturbing implications. If you need to take smaller shifts to deal with stress, I would be happy working some extra hours to help carry the load."

Dooku shook his head. "I appreciate the offer but I won't burden you. I would not have been given command of a starship if I didn't understand how to deal with the stress somehow, and now more than ever it is important for me to keep my emotions under control. Not simply because I don't feel it would be fair to make extra work for you in a time of stress, but also because it sets a bad example for the crew if their captain is visibly in distress. Morale is already bad enough."

"I understand, Sir. It was just an offer." Hamad looked down for a moment; Dooku could sense a small amount of anxiety, Hamad was afraid he'd offended him. "I will pray for you and your family with my evening prayers."

"Thank you. As you know I am not a religious man at all, but I appreciate that you care enough to put in a good word for me with your deity."

Hamad nodded. "You are a righteous man, Captain, who seeks to restore peace to the galaxy. It is an honor to serve with you and I consider you not simply my commanding officer but a friend. As a friend, my door is open if you ever need to talk."

"I may take you up on that. I know you've had some difficulties yourself, recently sending your wife and children back to Earth for their own safety."

"I miss having them around, but a gunship is not a safe place for them in a time of war." Hamad frowned. "I worry that if the Dominion gets to Vulcan, it will be a matter of time before they -"

"Attack Earth." Dooku nodded. "We all share that concern, Commander. We are going to try very hard to keep that from ever happening."

"I'll be going back to the bridge now... you should probably get to your quarters. Eat something. Hot tea might help."

"Dismissed, Commander."

Hamad left the ready room and Dooku leaned back in his chair, covered his face with his hands, and sighed. He turned the news back on, which he'd been watching for the last three hours, except he wasn't really watching it, sort of blanking out to voices and visuals. He felt a little nauseated, and knew he should probably go back to his quarters and eat. But he also felt like he couldn't move his body, like he was made out of lead, and the thought of having to pass by the bridge and feel all the shock and anger at what had happened to his homeworld and all the fear for what could now happen to the core Federation worlds and all that *fucking sorriness* and getting even more inquiries of "are you all right, Sir" on his way out made him even less inclined to want to go anywhere right now.

He closed his eyes and tried to meditate, his preferred method of emotional regulation when he was on duty, but he kept getting mental images of footage from what was left of the Tenth Fleet, of the Dominion's orbital bombardment of Betazed, and a Betazoid citizen's recording of Betazed's capital mostly leveled, on fire - the final transmission sent from Betazed before the communications grid went offline.

The ready room doors chimed again. "What."

They opened and Severin walked in with his hands on his hips. "What do you mean, what."

Dooku groaned; he'd been so lost in his mind replaying the horrors that he hadn't even been able to sense it was him. "Fuck."

"Yeah, fuck is right." Severin walked over. "Get up, time to go to our quarters now."

Dooku just blinked slowly, as if Severin had said something in a foreign language, even though Severin could speak perfect English without a universal translator.

Severin sighed. "Right."

Dooku watched as Severin put a med kit down on his desk - he usually didn't leave sickbay to walk around the ship with more than a tricorder on his belt unless there was an emergency, and as far as he knew there had been no emergencies on the ship today. His eyes widened, realizing what was happening just as Severin opened the kit and produced a hypospray. Severin came around the desk and put the hypospray to his neck.

"Yan, this is two ccs of ambizine," Severin said.

After the ambizine was administered, Dooku and Severin spent a minute just looking at each other. Then Severin put the hypospray back in his med kit, clipped the kit back to his belt, and took Dooku's hands, pulling him out of his chair.

Even though the crew was well aware of the relationship between the ship's captain and chief medical officer, Dooku still frowned upon public displays of affection, but here and now he didn't complain as Severin led him by the hand through the bridge into the turbolift. Once they were in the turbolift, the ambizine began to kick in, and the leaden feeling in Dooku's body subsided; he heard himself start to breathe, almost as if he'd been holding it all day, which he hadn't, but it sure felt like that.

"That's why I gave you the ambizine," Severin said, nodding as he observed the response. "It was only two ccs, just enough to stabilize you and help you sleep later."

"What did you hear, exactly?"

"Well, when you didn't come home right away I figured you needed some space, considering today's news, which is understandable. But then Commander Hamad messaged me and told me he checked in on you when you'd been in your ready room three hours after your shift ended and said you had 'the thousand-yard stare'."

"Fuck." Dooku facepalmed. "I don't want my crew to think I'm falling apart."

"Yan, nobody expects you to be 100% OK, smiling and saying 'FUCK YEAH, I FEEL GREAT!' after your homeworld was taken over by Dominion forces. If you were doing that, we'd all have more cause for concern." Severin patted him. "There's nothing wrong with needing to take a little of the edge off, and that's what we're doing. I'm writing you a prescription for 1 cc a day of formazine in the morning, and 1cc of improvaline in the evening, to be reviewed in two weeks and renewed or changed if necessary. Nothing that will impair you, it'll help with turning down the volume on the depression and anxiety, which in turn will help your command of this ship."

Dooku squeezed Severin's hand. "Thank you."

"I'm just doing my job, as your doctor, and your partner."

Dooku turned to Severin, and put his arms around him. Severin pulled him close, letting Dooku rest his head on his shoulder, and when the turbolift doors opened to their deck, they lingered, holding each other before Severin pulled him along to their quarters.

Severin threw Dooku's pajamas and robe at him, making Dooku laugh and shake his head. "What do you want for dinner?" Severin asked. "I can go to the cantina and get us something, it'll taste better than replicator food."

"I'm not picky."

"Yan, you are the very definition of picky." Severin put his hands on his hips.

"I honestly don't know." Dooku rubbed his face.

"Hmm, OK, well, I have an idea of what you like, so I'll come back with one of those things."

Severin came back a few minutes later to find Dooku half-asleep on the couch, and hadn't gotten dressed yet. Severin put his tray down on the coffee table, shook Dooku gently, and knelt down in front of him to remove his boots and socks. Severin helped Dooku put on his pajamas and robe, and then Severin stepped into the bedroom to also get changed, came back in pajamas, and sat down next to Dooku to uncover two dishes of seafood paella.

Severin put on some smooth jazz while they ate, to keep the mood calm. Dooku didn't have much of an appetite, still feeling shaken underneath the numb medicated haze of the ambizine, but he made himself eat anyway. Severin replicated them both ice cream for dessert; Severin liked his with rainbow sprinkles, like a big kid, and Dooku chuckled at it.

After they ate, Severin gave Dooku a foot rub, which felt wonderful after a long, stressful day. After awhile, Severin changed positions, so he could rub Dooku's head and shoulders. Dooku found himself drifting off again, and felt Severin ushering him to the bedroom. Severin tucked him in and put Teffi in his arms, before climbing in next to him. Then Severin just held him.

A few minutes into being snuggled close to Severin's chest, listening to his heart beat as Severin pet him, Severin whispered, "Yan."

"Yes?"

"Did your mother ever sing to you?"

Dooku nodded. "She was fond of 20th-century Earth music, like you are. It amuses me that you do surgery to Led Zeppelin, because she was a big fan of them too."

Severin took a deep breath and in his husky tenor he began to sing:

*There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven
When she gets there she knows
If the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for*

He hummed, and continued *...and she's buying a stairway to heaven*

*There's a sign on the wall
But she wants to be sure
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings
In a tree by the brook
There's a songbird who sings
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiving*

*Ooh, it makes me wonder
Ooh, it makes me wonder*

*There's a feeling I get
When I look to the west
And my spirit is crying for leaving
In my thoughts I have seen
Rings of smoke through the trees
And the voices of those who stand looking*

Severin's voice broke with that line, the beginning of tears, but Dooku was already asleep.

—

In the middle of the night, Dooku woke up screaming. He'd had nightmares about the Dominion attack on Betazed, especially nightmares about his mother being killed in the explosions - he was certain now that she was dead, though he didn't have an official confirmation.

Severin wrapped his arms around Dooku, rocked him, pet him. "Shhhhhh, love. You're right here, on the *Trident*. I'm right here."

Dooku took several deep breaths; he was still shaking.

Severin put Teffi in Dooku's arms, got up, and went to the replicator. "Warm milk, with sugar," he said. He came back with the cup - Dooku had once told Severin that it was something his mother used to give him when he was a child and couldn't sleep at night; Severin had replicated it for him several times before, and it was always a comfort, a show of nurturing tenderness from the man he loved and trusted.

But tonight, it was a reminder of his mother, and something in him broke. Dooku started sobbing - tears he hadn't shed when the news of

Betazed came, tears he hadn't been able to cry all day yesterday. His own pain, amplified by the pain of everyone aboard the *Trident*, overcame him and he heard himself almost screaming, howling, as he wept like he had never wept before.

Severin's arms were back around him, holding him tight, holding him close, petting and rocking him. "Yan. Oh, my love." Severin wasn't going to tell him *it's all right* or *it will be all right* - it would feel like an insult, when both knew it wasn't all right now, and with the way the war was going neither of them knew if it would ever be all right. Severin just pet him and made soothing noises.

But Severin, too, had been under stress from the war, and seeing his partner in so much pain finally broke him too - Severin had been trying to stay strong, especially as the ship's chief medical officer, wanting to keep that calm bedside manner to help the crew feel safe. Now his own frailty was showing; the Battle of Betazed had triggered Severin's own memories of what happened to El-Auria. Dooku could see the mental images across their telepathic bond, could feel Severin's grief for him as well as for himself. Severin wept too, and once Dooku rubbed Severin's back, saying, "I know, love," Severin wept even harder; Dooku could feel how guilty he felt for not being able to stay strong in this moment, feeling like he failed to provide the comfort his partner needed.

"You didn't fail me," Dooku husked, meaning it, wanting to assure him right away. "As much as it's terrible that you endured the loss of your own homeworld... you understand better than anyone on this ship. I'm not facing this alone." He stroked Severin's face and beard and curls. "You're here for me, and I'm here for you."

Severin pressed his forehead to Dooku's and they cried together, nuzzling, kissing each other's tears. "I'm so sorry," Severin said, tightening his arms around Dooku. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry..."

He was apologizing as much to his dead wife's and dead son's ghosts, as expressing his grief at what had happened to Dooku's homeworld and people. Dooku ached for him, as he could feel Severin's ache for him. They continued to cry, like two wounded, frightened children, and then Severin pushed the cup of warm milk into his hand; Dooku was clutching Teffi with the other.

"Before this gets cold." Severin gave him a stern look.

Dooku drank, and then he put the cup down. "You have a milk mustache," Severin informed him, and playfully licked the milk from his whiskers, before kissing him. Dooku kissed him back, and they tumbled back onto the bed together.

Before Dooku could start necking Severin, wanting a distraction, Severin put his finger to Dooku's lips and said, "You need to try to get some more sleep." He frowned. "We both do."

Dooku sighed. "All right."

Severin pulled the blankets back up around them, and they curled up together. Dooku started crying again a few minutes later, and Severin started crying again too, and they rocked and cried, weeping to exhaustion, crying themselves to sleep.

Chapter 9

2374

Captain's Log, Stardate 51722.69174911207

Twice now the Second Fleet has tried to retake Betazed from occupation by the Dominion, and twice we have been beaten. They not only have taken over the planet's outdated defense grid and significantly upgraded it to Dominion standards, but they have brought in reinforcement, dramatically outnumbering us, culling another fraction of our fleet, forcing a retreat from the remainder.

We will not fail a third time.

Dooku stood rather than sat at the head of the conference table, looking at the faces of all his senior officers, feeling their frustration, their concern... the utter hopelessness and fear. He felt the exhaustion most acutely from Severin; the ship had been badly damaged in the second attempt at retaking Betazed, with many crewmen injured, and Severin had been working around the clock treating wounded. Severin was in fact nursing coffee, something he hated, to keep alert during the important meeting.

"We're going back out there a third time," Dooku told them.

"Captain," Commander Hamad spoke, "with all due respect, is that wise? They already outnumber us *and* they have an orbital defense system that they can and have used against us *and* they can call for even more reinforcement, and have. We've been giving it everything we have and I think we need to tell Starfleet Command this is a lost cause and ask to assist in the defense of the core Federation worlds, like Vulcan, which are now more vulnerable."

Dooku nodded. "I understand and hear your concern, Commander. But I have been reviewing everything, and I have a plan. Two plans... which I am reviewing here with you all for a vote."

Dooku finally sat down. "The first is that we engage the Dominion fleet patrolling Betazed once more. Prior to re-entry of the Betazed system, I would ask that all non-essential personnel abandon ship and be escorted to Vulcan to await further assignment and instructions. I would authorize a collision course with the largest Dominion dreadnought, and just before impact - a minute, maybe thirty seconds, jump to warp. We would not survive warping into another ship's warp explosion, but the explosion would be enough to take out not merely the dreadnought but the entire Dominion fleet in the area, giving the Second Fleet its opportunity to come in and retake the system."

Severin's eyes widened at this, and he felt the recoil, utter horror and revulsion at the idea. It wasn't an idea that thrilled Dooku either, but he felt that the time for some sort of sacrifice had come, like a game of chess - he was willing to give his life if it meant millions more, possibly billions, were saved.

The quiet in the room was such that a pin could be heard if it dropped; Dooku felt the shock and dread from the crew, steeled himself, nodded, and continued. "The second option is that as before, we evacuate all non-essential personnel, but here, we calibrate the photon torpedoes to be even stronger in their yield. Lieutenant Commander Chem," he said, addressing the Bolian chief engineer, "if you infused our current arsenal of torpedoes with some of the warp core - leaving us just enough warp capability to escape, with the need to be very particular about where we jump to as we will essentially be stuck there until and unless we can refuel... we could take out the entire fleet, same principle. There is of course a likelihood we won't survive detonation."

"It's quite a bit more than a likelihood, Captain," Chem said, frowning. He rubbed his chin. "There's more chance of survivability than the first option, but it would create quite an explosion that could potentially take us out too if we don't move out of the way fast, and then there's the matter of the radiation to worry about, even if we do survive."

"I see." Dooku nodded. "Some odds of survival are better than none, so I'm going to assume the consensus is in favor of the second option rather than the first option."

"I vote for neither," Hamad said.

"Neither is not a choice," Dooku said. "We were sent here to perform a duty. That duty is going to be performed."

"If we have to go through with this," Chem said, "we need something to deal with the radiation."

"Yes." Dooku nodded, and his eyes met Severin's. "I will need you to prepare one dose of arithrazine per personnel remaining on board after I order the evacuation, which would be approximately forty people." Then he looked at Chem. "How long will it take you to refit the torpedoes?"

Chem sighed; Dooku felt the reluctance. "A good eight hours, maybe."

"Make it six." Dooku headed for the conference door, not wanting to stay a moment longer and be further bombarded with the anxiety from the crew, as well as the anger he felt bristling from some of them. "You're dismissed," he said curtly over his shoulder before stepping out.

Though it was after hours for Dooku's shift and he intended on heading back to the Betazed system in seven hours once the torpedoes were ready, he didn't feel like he could go back to his quarters to rest yet, especially when he knew Severin wouldn't be there for awhile, working on the arithrazine. He went to his ready room, sat at his desk, and decided to replay the footage of the Battle of Betazed.

No matter how many times he'd seen it - and he'd seen it at least a dozen times over the last three weeks - it was like seeing it for the first time. He made himself watch instead of look away, and told himself *This is why this must be done. This is my homeworld's only hope.*

Dooku finally turned off the newsreel and buried his face in his hands. His hands were shaking. He took some deep breaths, and attempted to meditate to clear his mind. All he could feel was rage, the urge to throw the monitor off his desk, even though it was an inanimate object that had done nothing wrong, had only shown him something he probably needed to stop looking at so much, anyway. He wanted to utterly destroy the Dominion, bring them to their knees. If he had to die in this war, he would at least take out as many of them as he could, on the way.

Dooku felt Severin's presence outside the door just before it chimed. "Come in," he said.

Severin stepped forward, and Dooku felt apprehension - an emotion he expected, considering the gravity of the senior officer meeting. But there was something more, that he couldn't put his finger on quite yet.

"I assume you are here to tell me the arithrazine is ready," Dooku said.

"It's not," Severin said.

Dooku leaned back in his chair, annoyed. "We're going back to war in seven hours. We are doing this. Go back to sickbay and get the arithrazine ready. The survival of everyone who will remain on board depends on it."

"No, it does not." Severin looked him in the eye. "It depends on *you*."

Dooku folded his arms, and waited.

"Captain Dooku." Severin squared his shoulders; the formality from his lover rather than the use of his personal name was a warning. "I would like to cite you the following Starfleet protocols. Regulation 619: The commanding officer must relieve themselves of command if their current mission leaves them emotionally compromised and unable to make rational decisions. Starfleet Order 104: Section C – Should it be proven with admissible evidence that the flag officer who had assumed command was medically or psychologically unfit for command, the starship's ranking officer could relieve them on that basis. And finally, Regulation 121 (Section A): The chief medical officer has the power to relieve an officer or crewman of his or her duties (including one of superior rank) if, in the CMO's professional judgment, the individual is medically unfit, compromised by an alien intelligence, or otherwise exhibits behavior that indicates seriously impaired judgment. A Starfleet officer can face court martial for failing to submit to such a relief."

Dooku blinked. He was not expecting this.

"Now then," Severin said. "You have post-traumatic stress disorder, Captain Dooku, and as chief medical officer it is my professional judgment that it interferes with your capability to command this ship. As chief medical officer, and one who has passed the Bridge Officer's test, technically holds the rank of captain and thus can command this vessel if necessary... I am giving you one of two choices. The first choice is that you can stop this nonsense now, tell Starfleet Command that this particular part of the war is unwinnable because we are outnumbered and outgunned, which is something they will understand, and that you are taking the ship to Vulcan to await further instructions, and I will allow you to remain captain of this ship. The second choice is that you can dig in your heels, tell me to go back to sickbay and prepare the arithrazine, and I will have security escort you to the brig. I will then take command of this vessel myself, set a course for Earth, and *personally see to it* that you are court-martialed when the ship arrives on Earth. Do I make myself clear, Captain?"

Dooku could tell Severin wasn't bluffing. "Abundantly clear, Doctor."

Severin nodded. "I'll give you fifteen minutes to make your choice." He stepped out of the ready room.

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It didn't take fifteen minutes. Dooku opened a channel to Starfleet Command three minutes later, and after a short discussion with Admiral Serak, he came out of the ready room and told Ensign Patton, "Set a course for Vulcan, warp five."

Severin was waiting for him on the bridge, and they walked to the turbolift together and rode to their quarters in silence. As soon as they got inside their quarters, Dooku fell apart.

Severin led him to the couch, and gently put his arms around him, rocking him slowly. "It's all right, Yan." He smoothed Dooku's hair and kissed his forehead. "You did the right thing."

"I don't feel that way at all," Dooku said. "We're running away and letting the Dominion have Betazed -"

"We're going someplace we can regroup and take a different tactic." Severin put his hands on his shoulders and looked into Dooku's eyes. "Yan. I understand that what happened to your homeworld is traumatic for you. What happened to mine haunts me every day and will haunt

me for the rest of my life. But *this is bigger than you*, just like the Borg is bigger than me. Even if we followed your plan and destroyed the Dominion fleet in the Betazed system - they could take it back again. They would come back in even greater numbers and fight even harder, and how many Starfleet officers would die for that? And they might retaliate by just destroying Betazed to make a point, because *they're like that*. You would die - we would all die - *for nothing*. This is *not the way* to win the war."

"You told me once," Dooku choked out through his tears, "that you put on this uniform expecting that someday you would die in this uniform. We all must serve. That service may involve death."

"It may. But today is not that day." Severin got up. "Come to bed. *That's* an order from your chief medical officer."

They didn't make love - they were too exhausted for that, and Dooku could feel that, although Severin was trying to see things from a doctor's perspective and be understanding of the post-traumatic stress disorder - something Severin had experience with firsthand - he was still angry with him for even suggesting a suicide mission, so he wouldn't have been in the mood anyway.

And truthfully, Dooku was also angry; Severin had threatened to *court-martial* him. Dooku understood that in another situation, had this been another captain, Dooku would have agreed with Severin, even applauded his willingness to intervene. But this was all too close to home for Dooku to be too rational about it. He not only still felt guilty, like he was doing nothing for his homeworld, his people, and allowing the Dominion control of Betazed would mean they gained ground in the Alpha Quadrant sooner rather than later, but he felt *stung*. This was the risk that anyone took getting involved with a crewmate - that the lines of personal and professional would intersect and become uncomfortable in times of distress. He and Severin had chosen to take that risk and had made it work for seven years; this was not the first time Severin had disagreed with a command decision of his, but it was the first time Severin had felt it severe enough to threaten to relieve him of command if carried out. It felt almost like a rejection, even though Dooku knew Severin had put work aside as soon as they stepped in the door and took him into his arms, as he always did.

Nothing had changed, and yet everything had changed.

Lying awake, watching the rise and fall of Severin's chest, the sweet expression on his face as he slept, Dooku also realized that Severin's threat had *stung* for another reason - it nailed a painful truth. Dooku felt impassioned enough about what had happened to his homeworld that he had been willing to die for it, and send others to their death.

Dooku felt that much more strongly about the man laying next to him. He was not just willing to die for Severin, he was willing to kill for Severin. If Severin was being held hostage somewhere, he would sacrifice whatever he needed to, in order to get him back. He would send officers to their deaths to save him. Because the thought of losing this man was far worse than losing his homeworld, and what family he had on Betazed.

And he knew ethically this was a problem. He could save his mate, if it came to it, at the expense of how many other lives? Would he let entire fleets, worlds, systems fall, for the sake of his beloved?

The war with the Dominion was at a place where one false move would catalyse too many other disasters.

Severin opened an eye, as if he felt Dooku watching him - indeed, he probably did, observant as he was. "Yan. Why are you awake."

"I can't sleep," Dooku said.

Severin sat up. "Lights," he said. The lights came on, and he pulled his medkit from his bedtable.

"I don't need anything -"

Severin shot him a look. "You want me to remove you from command, or will you follow doctor's orders? Sleep is necessary for your functioning, and the safety of this entire ship. If you can't sleep, after having had the improvaline earlier, then you are getting something stronger to sleep."

Dooku sighed. "Fine."

Severin opened the medkit, surveyed the medicines inside, and loaded a hypospray. "1 cc of ambizine," he said, as he held the hypospray to Dooku's neck.

Severin sat up with him for a few minutes, until the ambizine started to do its work, having a visible effect on Dooku, who let out a deep sigh and involuntarily flexed his fingers and toes, releasing tension held there all day. "Lights off," Severin told the computer, and the lights went back off, to just the nightlight. Then Severin spooned Dooku, wrapping his arms around him, nuzzling his neck.

"I love you," Severin said.

Dooku took his hands and squeezed. "I love you. More than you know."

More than I should. More than is safe.

"You're breaking up with me?"

Dooku nodded. "It's for your own good. And mine. And everyone on board this ship."

Severin snorted. "You reacting out of wounded pride isn't for my own good, but tell yourself that if it helps."

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. He looked Severin in the eye, and the pain he saw in Severin's eyes - the as-yet unshed tears, burning bright - made him reflexively look away. "This isn't about my pride, but it is related to what you said yesterday. When you recited Starfleet regulations to me, one of them is Regulation 619: The commanding officer must relieve themselves of command if their current mission leaves them emotionally compromised and unable to make rational decisions. *You*, Doctor, are a source of emotional compromise for me. You are my greatest strength, and my greatest weakness. My homeworld was conquered by the Dominion, and I was ready to go on a suicide mission for that. How much more would I be willing to sacrifice for the man I love?"

"Yan, you and I both know that I wouldn't *let* you make stupid decisions for my sake."

"And if I had to, I wouldn't let you stand in my way. The reason why I went ahead and followed your ultimatum yesterday is because I need to be out there fighting the Dominion *somehow*, some way, and I can't do that from the brig, I can't do that if I'm court-martialed. But that was just with regards to my homeworld. If it came down to you... I don't know what I'd be capable of right now, experiencing acute traumatic stress. After the war is over, if it ever ends, that is another story. But for now, I can't lose you... and that means I *have* to let you go. For both our sakes."

There was a long silence. Dooku could tell Severin wanted to break down and cry, but he wouldn't; he was too proud for that.

"After all I've lost," Severin said, his voice shaking, "you would do this to me, you would break my heart like this, and you would do this to me *now*, when I need you the most."

"I'm sorry. Truly." Dooku nodded. "I'll miss what we had. But -"

Severin put up his hand. "Just... shut up." With that, he stormed out of the ready room.

Dooku was reluctant to go back to their quarters after their shift ended. He knew that this would be one of the last nights they'd share quarters, and they would need to discuss sleeping arrangements until one of them took a spare unit. But he didn't expect that living arrangement to change for a few days yet, and he was surprised to come in and find Severin packing.

"Hello," Dooku said.

"Yan, sit down."

Dooku sat, and Severin approached him calmly, with a PADD in his hand.

"What's this?" Dooku took the PADD.

At Vulcan, they were in rendezvous with other ships in the Second Fleet, as well as ships in the Ninth Fleet that were being resupplied; one of these Ninth Fleet vessels was the *USS Exeter*. The PADD contained a missive between Captain Elizabeth Shelby and Starfleet Command, with Shelby mentioning her ship's entire medical personnel had been killed following heavy casualties in a recent battle and they were running the EMH but "this is not ideal". The PADD then had a communiqué from Doctor Severin Yusanis, recommending that Doctor Tara O'Reilly be promoted to chief medical officer of the *Trident* and he was offering to become the *Exeter's* new CMO, if Captain Dooku granted permission for the transfer.

Dooku let out a deep breath and almost threw the PADD back at Severin. "I don't like it," he said.

"You don't have to like it." Severin frowned. "If it's over between us, I don't think we can work together without bad blood that may get in the way and cause problems, not for some time."

"So your answer to preventing me from going on a suicide mission... is to be assigned to one of the ships in the Ninth Fleet operating near Bajor, which is arguably more dangerous than anything we're doing here."

"If I'm such a compromise to you, then this is the answer to that compromise. They need a CMO. We don't have a whole lot of qualified doctors just... growing on trees, you know? And what happens to me from this point forward is *irrelevant to you*." Severin pursed his lips. "I technically don't need you to authorize the transfer - I can go above you to one of the admirals, but you won't like that because it'll necessitate bringing up some dirty laundry... like a recording I have of your recent suggestion that we go on a suicide mission. I'd rather not have to make that public, I'd like to just let it slide for the sake of your career, because I know it won't happen again."

"Are you... blackmailing me?"

"That's such a dirty word," Severin said. "Think of it more as 'enhanced negotiation'."

Dooku typed into the PADD and handed it back to Severin. "Your request has been authorized. You have a half-hour to evict yourself from my quarters."

Severin gave a curt nod, walking away from him to resume his packing. "On it."

—

Severin spent the night in sickbay rather than take an empty unit. The transfer was to be immediate, next-day, since getting the *Exeter* back to Bajor was a priority. Dooku had expected that night - where he did not sleep well in what had been their bed - to be the last he saw him, and surprised both Severin and himself by showing up at the transporter room when Severin was ready to beam aboard the *Exeter*.

"So I guess this is goodbye," Severin said, shifting his weight between feet awkwardly with a duffel bag over his shoulder, wheeling a suitcase back and forth.

Dooku nodded. "It is."

They looked at each other for a moment and then Dooku reached to take Severin's hands. He hugged him tight, as best as he could with the bag in the way.

I still love you, Dooku spoke into his mind. *I always will.*

I know. Severin pulled back and stroked his face.

They kissed one last time, and nuzzled, breathing each other's breath.

"I don't have to do this," Severin said.

"You do." Dooku was trying not to cry. "We both do."

Severin took a deep breath, fighting his own tears.

Dooku patted his shoulder, and then Severin walked to the transporter and stepped on.

"I wish you good fortune in the wars to come," Severin said.

Dooku nodded. "Energize," he told the transporter chief, and watched as his love beamed away.

Chapter 10

2376

"Welcome to Deep Space Nine, Doctor Yusanis."

Severin stepped off the transporter, wheeling his suitcase, duffel bag slung over one arm, and warmly shook the hand of Captain Kira Nerys. "It's a pleasure to see you again." As part of the Ninth Fleet patrolling Bajor during the Dominion War, their paths had crossed a few times.

"I'll show you to your quarters."

The stroll went through the promenade. "You hungry at all?" Kira asked him.

"I am, actually. Ah... I smell hasperat."

Kira smiled. "You like hasperat?"

"I love Bajoran cuisine, especially hasperat, the spicier the better."

Kira took his hand and practically dragged him to a kiosk. "Two hasperat," she said.

"Seven credits," said the bored-looking Bajoran at the kiosk.

Severin and Kira both reached into their pockets. "Here, let me treat you since you're my new doctor," she said.

"No, no... let me treat you."

"No, let me."

"No, let me."

"No, let me -"

"Ten credits," the Bajoran snapped, "you're keeping me waiting."

Kira glared at him. "You know, I could have you put in the brig for ripping off -"

Severin took advantage of the distraction and threw ten credits on the ledge of the kiosk. "Here."

Kira then glared at Severin, who smiled innocently.

They sat on a bench near one of the waterfalls that Kira had personally requisitioned for the station, to create ambiance. "Most days will probably be slow," Kira told him. "It isn't like the Dominion War where the sickbay was always busy."

"I figured as much." Severin nodded. "I need some peace and quiet for awhile, I think."

"We both do." Kira sighed. "The war was hell."

"It was."

"We may have won... but many of us lost so much."

"Yes."

There was a long silence; Severin thought immediately of Dooku, and wondered what he was doing right now, then wanted to slap himself for thinking about it. His eyes stung with tears, and Kira noticed. Severin choked out, "The hasperat is spicier than I thought it would be." He was lying, but he didn't want to explain the sudden mood shift to Kira, making a bad first impression.

"Eh, it could use a little more kick," Kira said.

When they were finished eating, they continued the walk to Severin's new quarters. "If you need anything just ask," Kira said.

"I will." Severin nodded. "Thank you."

The next two weeks were fairly uneventful, as Severin adjusted to his new home aboard Deep Space Nine, and having the slowest workload

he'd had in years. While he had, in fact, said he wanted more peace and quiet, he was starting to find that having peace and quiet left him alone with his thoughts more often, and this wasn't a good thing.

He decided, one night, to go to Quark's. He didn't drink often as a rule, but he was feeling sad, and being in a more social, lively atmosphere would get him out of his head for awhile. After a few minutes of contemplating the drink list, he settled on a Red Torian. As he left the bar and was ready to head for the dabo table, his eyes settled on Kira Nerys, sitting at a table by herself, quietly nursing a synthale, looking gloomy.

His doctor instincts kicked in - *I need to help* - and he found himself walking over to her table.

"Hey there," Severin said, pulling out a chair. "Mind if I join you?"

"Be my guest," Kira said, trying to smile, but her eyes were sad.

Severin sat down with his Red Torian and took a sip. "You OK, Captain?"

"I'm... fine."

"No you're not."

Kira frowned. "You ever really miss someone, Doctor?"

Severin thought of Dooku, and of Sarenya, and of his children. "All the time."

"I was... involved... with Odo, the chief of security here."

He was no longer chief of security. "What happened?"

"He was a Changeling. He went back to the Great Link to heal his people. He has to stay there."

"I see." Severin gave a sad sigh and reached out to pat her hand. "That was very noble of him."

"It was. It was very Odo. It's why I loved him. Well... still love him, even though I accept he's not coming back." Kira swirled her synthale. "Not a day goes by that I don't wish he hadn't gone, but it exemplified everything he was."

"The two great loves of my life both made sacrifices that... are why they're not in my life anymore," Severin said, nodding. "So I get it."

"Yeah." Kira nodded. "It sucks."

"It does. I came down here because I was thinking about it, tonight. Not much to do, except think about things, these days."

"Tell me about it."

"But it seems like crying into our drinks makes it worse. You want to play some dabo?"

Kira smirked. "I don't like dabo, Doctor."

"But you know how to play it, right?"

Kira rolled her eyes. "Are you going to nag me until I say yes?"

Several spins of the wheel later, they didn't win anything, and Severin observed on the way out, "I think it's rigged."

"You think. You clearly don't know Quark - it *is* rigged."

"Well, that isn't fair."

"Odo tried to shut him down numerous times over the years. But... he's Quark. He always finds a way through loopholes. And in any case, he's the only person remaining around here from the old days."

"I think I'm going to make it a point to figure out how to game the system and clean him out," Severin said.

"I'd like to see you try." Kira cackled.

"I come from a race of listeners. Listening is also watching. Paying attention to the little things that everyone else misses."

"Well then... if you do beat the system, you can buy me a drink."

Severin started to go to Quark's more often after that, with Kira accompanying him out of interest in his mission to beat Quark's game. Severin would always watch between five to seven games from across the bar before playing a few rounds himself. The dabo girls tried their best to distract him, and Severin wasn't blind or immune to their charms, but he made himself ignore them - Kira helped with that, giving them death glares and gently shoving them off if they got too close to her companion. Severin intently watched the wheel, and Rom's behavior in particular.

It was the kind of distraction he needed, and he looked forward to the nightly walk with Kira on the way back, where they'd stop at the observation window and look at Bajor, and she'd tell him stories about what her life on Bajor had been like - the good, the bad, the ugly. Once in awhile she'd ask him about El-Auria, and he'd give shorter answers than her stories, but enough to satisfy her. Once in awhile they'd talk about the Dominion War, from two different perspectives, Kira's aboard Deep Space Nine and the *Defiant*, Severin's aboard the *Trident* and then the *Exeter*. Though Severin had started going to Quark's to get out of his head and not think so much about the war, and what it had cost him personally, he found that talking with someone else who'd been through the war was helpful. And they opened up to each other about the personal side of the war - her relationships with Shakaar, and then with Odo, and his relationship with Dooku, and later on with Captain Elizabeth Shelby; the failure of his relationship with Shelby was why he was on Deep Space Nine now and not aboard the *Exeter*.

Three weeks of nightly visits, and Severin finally had observed enough to predict correctly and win dabo. Quark looked disgruntled as he took out the case of latinum, though less disgruntled when Severin said "Drinks on the house!" and he earned some of that back - just some, but enough to satisfy him.

Just before Severin and Kira could toast his victory, Quark came over and hissed, "You know, I could give you a very nice discount on a holosuite." He leered at Kira, and looked back at Severin. "The two of you could have a lot of fun there."

Severin's eyebrows raised at Quark's suggestion. He and Kira awkwardly looked at each other, and Severin's weight shifted in his chair. "Quark," Kira said, "we're... not..."

"Yeah, you said that about Odo too," Quark said. "Think about it." He walked off, snickering.

Severin's face burned - he definitely found Kira very attractive, and enjoyed her company. But he was hesitant to get involved with a crewmate again, especially a commanding officer for the third time in a row.

Shelby had been particularly disastrous. She was his rebound from Dooku, with the two getting drunk together after the Ninth Fleet took heavy casualties and they'd ended up in bed together, and then decided to see where it went. The two had enjoyed a very torrid, passionate relationship for two years. It was also, for all of Shelby's ambitions of eventually becoming an Admiral and being part of Starfleet Command, extremely indiscrete - she was highly sexed and Severin lost count of how many times he'd sat in her chair in her ready room as she rode him, or the times he'd had her doggy-style on his desk or hers, or he'd lain on her desk as she sat on his face. She was a bit of a screamer; the crew of the *Exeter* had taken to singing "Shelby comin' round the mountain when she comes" behind the captain's back, but within his earshot.

He had loved her, and she had loved him, but they butted heads frequently, as Shelby treated her crew as expendable and "the ends justifies the means" was a way of life for her, and this ultimately sank their relationship, with Severin being the one to end it in disgust for her lack of principles, though they'd had sex one last time a mere four hours before Severin set foot on Deep Space Nine.

And though he had loved her, she wasn't Dooku. What he felt for Dooku was like a supernova, and Shelby was pale moonlight in comparison. He wasn't ready to open his heart again, if ever. His body definitely had needs - after a century of imposed celibacy following the loss of his wife, he'd been getting used to regular sex again, first with Dooku, then with Shelby. But he didn't know if seeking out those needs with another live person was wise.

But here and now, he could see Kira considering it too, and he realized that her behavior at the dabo table hadn't just been protecting him from the allure of the dabo girls for the sake of him observing Rom's rigging and figuring how to beat it, there was subconscious jealousy there.

He sat with that realization and finished his drink. Kira accompanied him for the usual walk back to their respective quarters, but there was no stopping on the observation deck and chatting tonight, there was just silence.

Then they lingered at Severin's door.

"Good night," Kira said.

"Good night. Sleep well, Captain."

"You too." Kira smiled. "I had fun watching you win."

Severin patted the case of latinum slung over his shoulder. "I had fun beating those little shits."

"Don't spend it all in one place," Kira mock-admonished.

"Ha, I don't even know what I'd spend it on," Severin said.

There was a moment where they just looked at each other, and then Severin gave a little wave. "Night."

Two days later, Kira arrived in sickbay as a patient. Severin was surprised to see her, and even more surprised to see her with a dislocated shoulder, broken ribs, and multiple cuts and contusions.

"Who beat you up?" Severin asked, half-jokingly.

"Klingons," Kira said, all seriousness.

Severin raised an eyebrow. "They're being dealt with, I assume?"

"Yeah, I killed them."

Severin took a step back and stopped running his dermal regenerator for a minute. Then Kira snorted and laughed. "In the holosuite."

"Ah." Severin resumed running the dermal regenerator over the nasty gash on the shoulder Kira hadn't dislocated. "So you fight Klingons for fun?"

"I had a very dear friend... Jazzia Dax. Who was one of the casualties of the Dominion War. She was trained in Klingon martial arts. She recommended it as a stress reliever. After she died I took it up as a way of honoring her memory."

"And a form of stress relief."

"Yeah."

"Even though much hasn't been happening lately that you or I would consider stressful."

"No, but as you know, Doctor, there are always memories, and sometimes it gets to be a bit much."

Her use of the phrase "as you know" made Severin pause again - a phrase Dooku had frequently used. When their eyes met, Kira said, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Hm." Severin resumed running the dermal regenerator.

"You know," Kira said, "Quark offered you a discount on holosuite use. If you ever wanted to learn the bat'leth..."

"Are you offering to give me bat'leth lessons, Captain?"

"I am."

Severin nodded. "I'll think about it."

—

He was there the next day, in a leather suit that also served as light armor. Kira matched, and he tried to not notice the way the leather hugged her curves as they entered the holosuite together, each armed with a bat'leth.

They spent the first week on basic stances and technique, before Kira was willing to run the program. Severin found that his past experience with fencing was actually more of a hindrance than a help with learning the bat'leth; the bat'leth was much more like a staff than a sword. Kira got impatient with him more than once, but the impatience proved to be an asset in this case, fueling aggression. Fencing depended on being careful and precise; the dance of the bat'leth was raw and primal.

Severin insisted he was ready for the program before Kira thought he was, but she relented, though she in turn insisted they keep the program on easy mode to start. The two of them took down a Klingon warrior together, and just fighting two against one in easy mode sent Severin to sickbay, with Nurse Yeon clicking her tongue at him as she used the dermal regenerator.

He was back the next day for more. It was a challenge he relished, even with his injuries, especially proving to Kira that he was more capable than she thought. By the end of the second week, they now faced two warriors instead of one - program still in easy mode, but where each of them had to take down a warrior on their own.

When Kira ran the program in intermediate mode, they both got injured more heavily and more frequently, but continued to keep coming back. It was around this time that they would head to Quark's after going to sickbay and drink blood wine together, singing bawdy Klingon songs and taking a few spins at the dabo wheel.

A very tall, beefy Klingon man who happened to be visiting Deep Space Nine saw them together one night with their bat'leths, and told them to spar with a real Klingon instead of playing at battle, or they had no honor. Kira and Severin fought him right in Quark's, which became an all-out barroom brawl getting several other people involved who had been in the way and got offended at being bumped into or having their drinks spilled. Lieutenant Chad Deacon, the chief of security, was not thrilled about being called in to break it up, and threatened to send the three of them to the brig. But the Klingon warrior, Krogh, was pleased with the fight, and gave Kira and Severin an invitation to come with him that weekend, hunting, and he would return them to Deep Space Nine when the hunt was over.

Neither Kira nor Severin had a vacation in some time, and agreed to the offer. The hunt took place on the moon of Rhyllis - the moon had an overpopulation problem with wild targs, who were vicious and destructive, and Krogh had been en route to take care of a herd there, for which he would be handsomely paid. He offered to split his payment with his companions, though Kira and Severin weren't there for the money. They were to only hunt with their bat'leths and not phasers, though they still brought phasers with them to be on the safe side.

The first night of the hunt was successful, though all three had sustained a number of injuries. It was necessary for the three to strip to clean and treat the wounds, and Kira had to assist Severin with treating his own wounds, per instructions he gave her on how to use his medical equipment. Krogh looked on with interest. When they were sufficiently mended, Krogh gave them blood wine to toast. He poured blood wine on their healing wounds to help sterilize them, but also "for luck", and then surprised them both by licking the wine from Severin's bare skin, which led to the two men sharing a passionate kiss. Then Krogh poured wine over Kira's breasts and each man took a nipple into their mouths, Kira clutching their heads, moaning, panting, drawing Severin's hand between her legs so he could feel how hot and wet she was already.

The three ended up having an intense threesome. First, Kira sat on Krogh's face as Severin swallowed down his cock, then Kira rode Severin as Severin rode Krogh, Kira bucking wildly, scratching and biting him in animal heat, coming so hard she squirted all over them. Severin licked Kira's juices off Krogh's body and they rubbed their cocks together as they ate Kira together, Severin's tongue on her clit and Krogh's tongue inside her. When Krogh slept, Severin and Kira went at it by themselves, a slow, sensual fuck, kissing deeply, taking each other's hands as they climaxed together.

As they lay there under the stars in their makeshift shelter, Severin held her for awhile, and then she nuzzled him.

"Nerys," he husked. "Don't fall in love with me."

Kira nodded. "No strings."

"No strings. Just friends with benefits."

"Fuckbuddies."

"Yeah."

Kira smiled and stroked his face. "I can live with that."

"I'm glad you understand." Severin took her hand and kissed it. "I care about you a lot... and it's precisely that I care, that I think it would be supremely unwise for us to get serious. I've already done that twice with Dooku, with Shelby."

"My heart still grieves for Odo. It always will."

Severin's arms wrapped around her again, tighter this time. "We can take comfort from each other. As one friend to another."

Kira nuzzled his shoulder, and then his beard. "Best friends."

They kissed, and soon fell asleep, entwined.

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2384

Their friends-with-benefits arrangement served them well over the next eight years. They continued to maintain separate quarters, and only had sex with each other some days of the week, not sleeping together every night as Severin had done with Dooku and later Shelby. Krogh made it a point of visiting the station at least once every other month, to have a sparring match with Kira and Severin, and later a hot, wild threesome that would get loud enough to raise eyebrows in Quark's when they staggered in the next day.

Despite having fun with Kira, and the fact that it had now been ten years since the end of his relationship with Dooku, Severin still felt a pervasive sense of grief about losing him, in addition to his continued grief over Sarenia. Kira had been in his quarters enough times to see the framed picture of his dead wife, and finally one night asked him, "Have you ever mourned her? I take it there was never a funeral."

"No. There wasn't exactly time for that, with the destruction of my planet and having to keep refugees alive and all." Severin ran a nervous hand through his curls, frowning. "Then I got busy with Starfleet... which I felt she would have wanted me to do."

"I know we're from two different worlds, and two different faiths," Kira said, "but if you'd ever like to formally mourn her, I could help."

Severin patted her shoulder. "I appreciate that, Nerys."

Two days after that conversation, Kira took Severin to the temple maintained on Deep Space Nine. The Ranjen who owned the temple gave Severin a disdainful look, but nonetheless welcomed them in.

"Your Celestial Temple seems a lot like my Summerland," Severin said to Kira as she took incense from a supply shelf to bring over to the

altar.

Kira nodded. "It does, doesn't it. Maybe we're all praying to the same thing and we don't know it. One great... Force."

"I think so."

Kira lit the incense and then she took Severin's hand. The Bajoran death chant lasted two hours, and at the end of each verse, the Ranjen chimed a bell. As Kira chanted and the Ranjen chimed, Severin thought of Sarenaya, all of the centuries they'd spent together, and he let the tears flow, knowing he wouldn't be judged. He could feel her presence with him, and at one point during the ceremony, he saw a flash of white light in his mind's eye, heard only the beating of his own heart, and there she was. It was like being inside the Nexus again, and a part of him wanted to run in terror, knowing the Nexus was a world of illusion. He willed himself to stay there, and she took his hands.

People die, but real love is forever.

After the ceremony, Kira stayed with him that night. They didn't make love, but she held Severin as he continued to cry, letting it out, sobbing as brokenly as she'd ever heard a man weep. She rocked him until the morning, and then she gave him the day off, taking a day herself, with them finally sleeping well past noon. In the afternoon they went to a Bajoran restaurant on the promenade to eat together, and after a few moments of companionable silence Severin said, "Thank you."

Kira nodded.

"For the ceremony. For... after. For everything."

Kira bit into her food, looking sad.

Severin cocked his head to one side. "Did I do anything wrong?"

"No, Sev, you didn't."

"Odo?"

Kira chewed, and then leaned back in her chair. "Yes and no."

Severin waited; Kira sighed.

"Yesterday, when I performed the death chant and did the ritual." Kira's fingers strayed to her earring. "I've been feeling a sense of restlessness for a long time now. A sense of... emptiness. And some of it is missing Odo, but even when I had him, that feeling was there. I'm commanding officer of this station, I've been in Starfleet awhile and the Bajoran military a long time, and it just..."

Severin nodded. "You want a break."

"It's more than a break." Kira pursed her lips. "I understand that all this saving Bajor, saving the galaxy, business... that was the will of the Prophets. I don't question that. But when I was a child, what I really, *really* wanted to do, was dedicate my life to them, and I couldn't, because of the occupation. I had to fight. That was just how it was. I didn't have a choice. Now, many years later..."

"You have a gift, Nerys. She came to me yesterday. Your ritual touched something real. That's worth pursuing, if that's where your heart is."

"I ache to pursue that, Sev. You don't even *know* how long I have ached to pursue that. But this has been my life for so long."

"Nerys, I ever tell you how old I am?"

"I know you're pretty old, Sev."

"I'm over six hundred years old."

Kira almost spat her drink.

"I've been a doctor all my adult life, *but* I had to start my life over again in the twenty-third century, after my homeworld got destroyed. The job remains the same, the context is different." Severin raised his glass to her. "When I joined Starfleet Medical, it was something familiar, but it was also, truthfully, my way of finding meaning and purpose again. I put on this uniform to honor my dead wife's sacrifice - to protect and serve trillions of innocent lives. What I'm trying to say is, if I wasn't too old, back then, to start my life over, after five hundred years of living a certain way, to make a conscious choice about how I was going to spend my remaining years, neither are you. My way of finding that purpose was to put on this uniform... and it's perfectly all right if you are at a place where you need to take yours off."

Kira's eyes misted with tears. "I have a duty. I have responsibilities..."

"If the Dominion War were still happening," Severin said, reaching across the table to take her hands, "then I would understand having misgivings about leaving, and I'd probably encourage you to stay until the war was over. But the war's been over for awhile now. Bajor has entered the Federation just fine. We're in peacetime, there's not much to do here on Deep Space Nine, for better or worse... you've sacrificed enough that you should be entitled to retire and pursue a religious vocation, if that's what you want to do."

"You really think I should?" Kira sniffled.

"If that's where your heart is." Severin kissed her hands. "I will support whatever decision you make, but every time I see you talk about the Prophets, or other aspects of your faith, you come alive and it's beautiful."

"I feel so broken inside," Kira sobbed. "Damaged goods. Why would they want me?"

"Hey. *Hey*." Severin came around the table to sit next to her rather than across from her, pulling her close. He stroked her hair and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "When I lived in San Francisco, I read a lot of Earth poetry, because the way to understand a culture is through its poets. And something that stands out is from a guy named Leonard Cohen... *Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in.*" He kissed her forehead, and nuzzled her nose. He put his fingers on her heart. "There is a great light within you, Nerys, made all the more remarkable by the darkness you've known."

Kira cried harder, and the waiter came by to ask, "Is she all right?"

"She's gonna be just fine." Severin nodded. "Bring us dessert... tuwaly pie, yeah?"

Kira nodded through her tears.

—

A week later, Severin stopped by Kira's quarters to bring her to the holosuite for their usual bat'leth sparring, and instead she asked him to come in.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I heard back from the Vedek Assembly," Kira said. "They're willing to let me come to the Grand Temple and study."

"Excellent." Severin threw his arms around her and gave her a kiss in congratulations. "That's wonderful news."

"I'll... have to put in my resignation."

"I can help you with the letter if you need a second pair of eyes to look it over," Severin said, nodding.

"Are you going to stay here on Deep Space Nine?" Kira asked.

Severin sighed. "Honestly? I've been getting restless too, though not for leaving Starfleet. I knew when I was being transferred here that there wouldn't be much to do, and I thought I needed a break at the time, but..." He ran a hand through his curls and scratched his head. "If you're not going to be here, there's not much keeping me here. I should get back on a ship, see the galaxy some."

"I've been thinking about it, and I talked about you to a good friend," Kira said. "Ezri Dax."

"Dax... she related to Jadzia?"

"She has Jadzia's symbiont." Kira smiled. "Ezri is now captain of the *Aventine*. She had a bit of a falling out with her longtime partner, Julian Bashir, who had been chief medical officer, and he's going back to Earth. We've been talking about it recently. I could recommend you for a transfer to the *Aventine*."

"Reading between the lines here, Ezri probably isn't going to be in the mood to hook up with the next doctor."

"Which makes it safe for you," Kira said, "in terms of that recurring problem you have of getting involved with your commanding officers."

Severin threw his head back and laughed.

"Besides," Kira went on, "I've noticed you have a bit of a type. Strong, dominant personality, tough, stern... she's rather, er, not. She has enough of a backbone to command a starship, but she's more diplomatic than martial. She used to be the counselor here on Deep Space Nine, years ago."

"So the opposite of my type." Severin nodded. "If I didn't know better, Nerys, I'd say it wasn't just you wanting to make it safe for me, but safe for you to continue..."

"Yeah, I'd like to visit sometimes, continue our little arrangement, if you're fine with that."

"I am." Severin hugged her, and gave her a kiss.

Then Kira pulled back and husked, "I don't want to spar today." She licked his ear.

He kissed her again, hard, and they kissed their way to the bedroom, undressing each other, tumbling to the bed together.

Chapter 11

2409

Severin had been on Starbase 24 for a week now, and was starting to regret taking the assignment.

He hadn't had any illusions of some big reconciliation with Dooku when the job had been presented to him - it had been thirty-five years, and it was wartime, and the starbase was located *right* near the heat of the conflict, and the Admiral's thoughts would rightly be towards survival and strategy, not interpersonal drama. It had, indeed, been the thirty-five years that had made Severin's response to Starfleet Command's offer something other than "no" - he was otherwise content serving aboard the *Aventine* under Captain Dax, with whom he had a warmly platonic friendship, thinking of her as being like the little sister he'd never had.

What he hadn't expected was the coldness. The distance. The feeling that Dooku would rather flay his own skin off than be in the same room with him for longer than five minutes. He had assumed, perhaps wrongly, that their shared history would at least be a source of warmth, that somehow they could be friends again, not necessarily lovers. But it was very apparent they couldn't even be that, and it pained him.

Severin had more than enough work to keep him busy - Starfleet Command had not been exaggerating the severity of the war out here, with fleets regularly coming in needing repairs to their ships and crew above and beyond what their engineering and sickbay facilities were capable of. His days were filled with triage and surgery, and Severin frequently stayed at least two hours, sometimes more, past the end of his shift every day to tend to non-emergency patients and review and update case files of those in intensive care.

But Severin couldn't work non-stop, and though he was overwhelmed by the sheer size of Starbase 24 as compared to starships and even Deep Space Nine, he felt it was time to explore the new territory he called home. With the aid of the computer's maps, he found his way to one of the recreational areas, which had a small park and a mall with several stores and restaurants. The park made him miss being in nature, and Severin felt like crying as he sat on a bench, drinking lemonade.

Severin had reviewed crew medical files, and recognized the ship's counselor approaching him - a small green man with leathery skin, pointy ears and tridactyl hands, wearing a Starfleet uniform, blue like his own.

"Counselor Yoda," Severin said. "At last we finally meet."

Yoda shook his hand. "Good to meet you, it is."

Yoda was from a species otherwise unknown to Starfleet, and he was reported to be even older than Severin, and from the Delta Quadrant. He too had his homeworld destroyed by the Borg, and even without knowing that in his file, Severin could look into his eyes and see the ancient sadness there. And much like Severin had found the strength to go on in tending to the living, so did Yoda, and even though it seemed like Yoda was here to relax also, he was still the counselor. "How like you, this starbase?" Yoda asked.

Severin nodded. "It's different," he said truthfully.

"Hmmm. One way to phrase that, it is." Yoda nodded slowly. "Still settling in, are you?"

"Yeah. Sickbay keeps me pretty busy."

"Important to take breaks, it is. Soothes the soul, this park does."

"It's a nice park," Severin said. "A bit small, but nice."

"Hmmm. Seen the arboretum, have you? Larger than this park, it is."

"Oh." Severin raised his eyebrows. "I didn't know."

"Deck 28, Suite 10. Very large. Like a forest, in space."

Deck 28 was a bit of a journey, forty-eight decks up, and a Suite 10 was a good hike from where the park was located on Suite 84. Severin had a long day on his feet and wasn't up for that kind of ride in the turbolift and walk across the station right now, even with moving sidewalks, but he made a mental note to visit the arboretum tomorrow. "Thank you for that information, Counselor."

"My best to help others, I do." Yoda's ears twitched. "An appointment you should schedule soon, Doctor. Help, talking does."

"I'll consider that." Severin didn't exactly feel like telling Yoda about his past with Dooku, even though he knew Starfleet counselors were employed specifically not to judge.

"More than consider, you should. Important, mental health is. Know that, do you."

"*Yes, Counselor.*" Severin rolled his eyes and gave Yoda a disarming smile. Yoda smiled back, but in a way that indicated *you're not getting out of this so easily.*

"A good rest of the evening, have you," Yoda said, before shuffling off to a kiosk across from the park.

Sagan meowed as soon as Severin got in the door. "Yes, yes," Severin said, bending down to scratch him, and then headed to the replicator, first to get Sagan's cat food, then to replicate a meal for himself. He decided on hasperat, and thought of Kira as he sat down with it. Replicated hasperat was definitely not as good as the real thing made from scratch - not enough spice. But he was hungry and tired, and didn't know where was good to eat at the mall, which was why he hadn't stopped at a restaurant.

Severin put on his viewscreen as he ate, and after watching Federation news, which didn't tell him much he didn't already know about the current state of the war, he opted for a 20th-century Earth television program called *Perfect Strangers*; he loved Balki and Larry. Sagan hopped up on the couch and climbed on Severin, purring, and soon, Severin fell asleep on the couch in his Starfleet uniform, his cat in his arms.

—

"Oh, *shit*." Severin woke up a few hours later to see he had fallen asleep with the lights on, in his uniform. Sagan was sleeping in a ball on the coffee table next to him, and woke up at the sound of Severin's voice, as he sat up, his mouth feeling like it was made out of cardboard.

He'd dreamed about Dooku. It was a sexual dream, yes, but it had also involved happier times, except they were set in the present or near future, with a silver-haired Dooku - *damn him for being even more attractive now that he's older* - and it felt so *real*. Severin spent a few minutes just crying, feeling the ache he'd been trying to deny, that he'd *missed* Dooku so damn much, thirty-five years didn't change his feelings so much.

Severin bowed his head, taking a few deep breaths, willing himself to pull it together so he could get back to sleep, and not be a complete wreck tomorrow. He walked over to the framed picture of Sarenia and spent a moment looking at it, fingers caressing the frame as he remembered touching her face. The other great love of his life, who he missed terribly.

...real love is forever.

"Dammit, Sarre." He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

In his mind's eye he saw her, and out of nowhere recalled something she was fond of saying, especially when lecturing him when he was having a time of self-doubt. *There is no such thing as a coincidence*. It was a commonly held El-Aurian belief, and even in Starfleet as a doctor, a man of science, it was still one he hadn't discarded completely.

He didn't know, at first, why that was coming to him now, and then he understood why. He nodded to himself and said aloud, "Ancestors... Prophets... Force... whatever the *fuck* You are... if I'm supposed to be here on this starbase, if this wasn't a mistake, give me a sign."

Severin replicated a glass of ice water, then after he drank, pulled on his pajamas and climbed into bed. Sagan hopped on the bed with a chirp and climbed onto Severin's back, kneading and purring him back to sleep.

—

When Severin woke to his alarm, he still didn't feel entirely rested, but he'd manage somehow. He stumbled into the sonic shower, and then made himself drink coffee - something he otherwise hated - to help wake up. He ate steak and eggs for breakfast, and after feeding Sagan and giving him pettings, and talking baby talk to assure the cat he'd be back later, who was already protesting his departure, he made the journey to sickbay for another day.

Today was the day the Third Fleet arrived, badly battered from their latest encounter with the Klingons. The *Abernathy* had sustained particularly heavy damage, and several crew members had bad plasma burns, with two having lost limbs in an explosion. It was harrowing to work on them, especially when one of the amputees woke up just before given anaesthetic and grabbed at Severin with his free arm, screaming in horror, and had to be additionally sedated.

By the end of the day, Severin was on the verge of tears. He kept himself together for the sake of his patients and his staff, but he was starting to have flashbacks of the Dominion War. Before he left sickbay he visited the lavatory to splash cold water on his face and pull himself together, taking deep breaths, and he decided to give himself 1 cc of improvaline as a PRN, watching himself in the mirror as he used the hypospray.

The improvaline did its job, and by the time Severin was two meters away from sickbay his breathing noticeably changed. He thought about going straight to his quarters and making himself watch something stupid like an Adam Sandler movie to get his mind off things, but then he remembered his mental note to visit the arboretum. It had been so long since he'd been in anything like an actual forest, and he *ached* for that to his very core, remembering the wilds of El-Auria. Even though an arboretum on a space station wasn't remotely the same thing, it was bloody well good enough for what he needed right now.

The entrance to the arboretum had two sets of doors. After he stepped through the first doors, he noticed the next set were blast doors, and a split second after he noticed, the starbase's computer intoned, "Decontamination sequence in five seconds."

The first doors locked behind him, and Severin was sprayed down with a fine mist, which as a doctor he realized would be necessary for anyone entering or leaving the arboretum, to protect the life contained therein from foreign bacteria or spores that could grow invasive parasites. When the blast doors opened, Severin's breath caught at the sight of an actual babbling brook, trees for at least a kilometer, grass and wildflowers. "Fuck," he said, and then immediately felt sheepish about profanity in the presence of sacredness, but it was what it was.

There was a map a few paces into the arboretum that showed a hiking trail, but Severin was too tired to take it today. He opted for the path to the gardens, where he was rewarded with rows of exotic blooms, and dancing butterflies. He sighed happily as a butterfly perched on his finger for a moment, before fluttering off.

"Lovely, isn't it?" came an unfamiliar voice.

Severin turned and saw a very tall man, about Dooku's height, with long silvering brown hair, some of it tied back into a ponytail with the rest

down, a brown beard framing a smile, and bright blue eyes. He was wearing brown civilian clothes, loose-fitting, but carried tools on his belt.

"It's beautiful," Severin said.

The man nodded, and approached to shake his hand. "I'm Doctor Qui-Gon Jinn, the starbase's botanist."

"Doctor Severin Yusanis, chief medical officer. So you're responsible for this little piece of paradise? My compliments."

"Thank you. I also look after the parks, and there's a greenhouse for growing food on Deck 94 that I oversee as well."

"Oh good, so this starbase is mostly self-sustaining with food resources?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Thankfully, in case a supply line gets disrupted in the war, we won't be forced to eat each other."

Severin laughed. "That's good news, at least." Severin gestured to the blue roses in front of them. "These are gorgeous."

"They're from my homeworld, Alpha Eridani II."

"Ah." Severin nodded. "I've never met anyone from there."

"Actually, you have. My husband, Obi-Wan Kenobi, is the first officer, and he's from there as well." Qui-Gon smiled. "Our names are from Eridani naming conventions."

"One of the Terran colonies to have done well."

"Indeed. I miss my homeworld very much, but at least I have a piece of it here." Qui-Gon then cocked his head to one side. "I've been hoping you'd stop by at some point."

"Oh really? Do you need something looked at? You can always drop by sickbay, please don't feel like you can't just because we're doing so much triage."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "It isn't that." He sighed. "You had a very brief conversation with my husband, where you mentioned your age, and that you're El-Aurian."

"Yes, I did." Severin was curious now. "I'm surprised he'd mention something so trivial to you."

"It's because it's not trivial, Doctor. I'm a quarter El-Aurian."

"Really." Severin's eyebrows went up at that.

Qui-Gon nodded solemnly. "My mother was half El-Aurian; her mother was El-Aurian."

"Did you ever meet your grandmother?"

"Yes. Her name is Temyra. She had left El-Auria when she was fairly young, wanting to explore the galaxy, and ended up on Eridani."

"Temyra, you say?" Severin felt a frisson up his spine, and he could feel himself break into gooseflesh; the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. "Doctor Jinn -"

"Please, call me Qui-Gon."

"Qui-Gon... would you care to come with me to my quarters for a moment? There's something I need to show you."

"All right."

They exited the blast doors, spent a moment in the decontamination field, and then Qui-Gon and Severin went to Severin's quarters in an almost reverent silence. Once they arrived, Qui-Gon began to fuss over Sagan, until Severin cleared his throat and gestured for Qui-Gon to come to the mantle. "Did she bear a resemblance to this woman at all?"

"She looks a great deal similar."

Severin opened a box on his kitchen table, which kept a tablet of images. He scanned through them until he found the right one. "Does she look like this?"

Qui-Gon's mouth opened and he nodded. "That's her."

"That's my daughter."

Qui-Gon's eyes shone brighter, with unshed tears. Severin felt the tears burning his own eyes, and he took a few deep breaths, his hands shaking as he put the tablet down. "I mean, the only way to prove for sure is DNA, but..."

"We can test DNA," Qui-Gon said, "but that's her."

Severin grabbed his medkit, and took a blood sample from Qui-Gon. He then accessed his own medical chart where his DNA was on file, and a few minutes later the computer confirmed that Qui-Gon was a match.

They sat on the couch together, just staring at the helix on the computer screen. "Unbelievable," Qui-Gon said.

"So..." Severin's hands were still shaking, and the tears were flowing now, though quietly. "Your grandmother... my daughter... is she still alive?"

"Oh yes." Qui-Gon nodded. "I talk to her once in awhile. Would you... like me to send a subspace transmission? We're both close enough to a relay to be able to talk in real time."

Severin found himself hugging Qui-Gon and squeezing him tight; Qui-Gon made a little squeak, but returned the hug, also tightly wrapping his arms around Severin, rocking him a little.

Qui-Gon brought Severin to the quarters he and Obi-Wan shared to make the call. Severin waited, and when the channel was open and went to visual, Qui-Gon said, "Grandmother! Hello!"

Temyra was in her kitchen, with a flowerbox on the windowsill; she was wearing a purple shawl over a dark blue blouse, and her auburn hair was in elaborate braids with some hanging loose, much like Sarenia had worn her hair a long time ago. "Hello, Qui-Gon," Temyra said, smiling warmly. "How is life treating you out there?"

"The same as usual."

"I hear the war with the Klingons is still going." She frowned. "You and Obi-Wan are all right, yes?"

"For now, yes." Qui-Gon nodded.

"Where is my grandson-in-law?" She looked around Qui's quarters.

"I'm in the bathroom, Grandma," Obi-Wan yelled from the lav.

Temyra laughed, shaking her head. "Thanks for sharing."

"You're welcome," Obi-Wan fired back.

"I have someone else here with me who wants to talk to you, Grandmother," Qui-Gon said.

Severin stood up, and approached the screen. Temyra's jaw dropped, her eyes wide.

"Father," she gasped.

"Hi," Severin said, and then at last broke down, crying hard, relieved to see her again... heartbroken that her mother wasn't here to see this moment. His heart seared with fire, intense love for the life he'd brought into the universe, pain and regret and grief at all the years without her, hope for the future.

Temyra started to cry too. "Father... that's you?" She shook her head. "I can't... I can't believe it."

"It's really me, *nessi*."

"I'd heard about the destruction of our planet and I feared the worst..."

"Your mother's gone." Severin nodded, sobbing again at the mention of her. "Medri's gone. I managed to escape. Made it all the way to Earth. Took me a few decades to get out of the Delta Quadrant, of course, but..."

"That's amazing." Temyra shook her head again. "This can't be real. I'm in utter shock."

"Hi In Utter Shock... I'm Dad." He had to; levity was how he coped with things.

Temyra glared, and then she rolled her eyes and laughed through her tears. "It really is you."

Obi-Wan came out of the bathroom and asked Severin, "Would you like to have dinner with us?"

"I... I don't want to impose," Severin said, feeling grateful and nervous and overwhelmed all at once.

"You're family, you're not imposing," Qui-Gon said, patting his back.

"Yes, make sure he eats," Temyra said. "He has a tendency of not eating much when he's stressed out, and I imagine it must be very stressful for you... you're still a doctor, yes?"

"Yes." Severin nodded. "Medicine is my life."

"I'm glad to hear that you're keeping out of trouble."

"Hi Glad To Hear That You're Keeping Out Of Trouble -"

"This is why I left El-Auria, Qui-Gon."

"I hope it was worth it," Severin said. "I saw some of the ship's arboretum and there's a rose species from where you are."

"He got the cultivars from my very own backyard," Temyra said, smiling proudly. "Alpha Eridani II is beautiful. You *must* come visit when you have free time."

"I will definitely do that. It's been *ages*."

"I'd tell you to meet my husband, Rae-Thon, but he's been dead for awhile now."

"My condolences." Severin nodded. "It's terrible to lose the one you love."

"I've been trying to move on. I started seeing someone, actually... not sure if it will become permanent or not. You shouldn't be alone forever either, Father."

"I, uh." Severin ran a nervous hand through his hair. "We'll talk about my love life some other time, *nessi*."

"I understand." Temyra's jaw quivered again, and she sobbed, "I've missed you so much, Father."

"I've missed you too, *nessira*. You don't know how much."

Severin closed his eyes for an instant, and there she was again. *There is no such thing as a coincidence.*

Followed by *There's your sign.*

Chapter 12

Dooku was in his ready room analyzing reports from the heavily-damaged Third Fleet, now smaller by one fourth - arguably well past the time when his shift should have ended, but he was keeping longer hours in this war - when he felt the sudden surge of emotion from Severin. It was so strong he almost dropped his cup of coffee, and quickly put it down with shaking hands. It was a feeling that was hard to describe - a mix of several emotions at once, including joy, but the joy was tinged heavily with pain... a combination of grief and rage.

Dooku closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and willed himself to re-focus on the reports. This was not the first or the last time that he'd picked up on something elsewhere on the starbase enough to distract him, but he'd never get anything done if he hadn't learned how to ground and center, adjusting the volume of others' emotions like he was using a volume control.

When at last he left his ready room and headed down to his quarters, the feeling returned, and it was enough that for a moment Dooku hesitated and thought about going across the hall to where Severin's quarters were located - *why did he even have to be put there* - and asking if he was all right. And once again there was that return of the knowledge that he did, in fact, still love Severin, and still cared. He pinched the bridge of his nose with a small sigh of irritation as he stepped into his own quarters. *It was a bad idea then, and it would be an even worse idea now. This war with the Klingons makes the Dominion War look like child's play.*

His cat, Pelo, greeted him at the door, and Dooku distracted himself by getting food for the cat, then seeing about a meal for himself. The feeling continued to persist, so after Dooku ate, he took a sonic shower to try to ground himself further. It only helped somewhat, and when Dooku went to bed, he lay awake for awhile, thinking about what he and Severin had shared, and feeling that pang of guilt he'd felt often over the last thirty-five years for breaking the man's heart; often he had regretted what he'd done. His life had been cold and lonely since Severin's departure, and he'd tried to justify it with all he'd accomplished in Starfleet, how many lives he'd gone on to save in the Dominion War... but sometimes, *often* as of late, it felt like a hollow victory.

Pelo hopped on the bed and lay next to Dooku, reaching out to knead him, purring. Dooku pet and skritch'd the cat, and at last was soothed to sleep, but his dreams were far from soothing, recalling the Battle of Betazed, and when the Dominion War had ended, Dooku personally attending the opening of the memorial built to those lost, which included his own mother. How he had grieved then, and wished Severin were there to comfort him. This time, in his dreams, Severin showed up and he reached out, and Severin slapped him in the face and spat, "You had your chance," before walking away.

When he woke up, he felt like he hadn't slept at all. He ached all over; he ached to be *held*.

—

Dooku was in a foul mood all day, the consequence of not sleeping well. The one good thing he could say about being this worn out was that it put a bit of a damper on the thoughts and emotions of others, allowing him to focus more on his various duties.

One of those duties involved meeting with his first officer to go over his latest strategies for the Third Fleet when they went back out into the war, based on the reports that he'd read, where the Third Fleet had been weak and the Klingons strong, and what the Third Fleet had gotten right, which was why they had only sustained one fourth loss instead of much greater.

"I think it's time to equip the Third Fleet with its cloaking devices," Dooku said.

Up until this year, the Federation had been staunchly opposed to the use of cloaking devices. After being at war with the Klingons for five years, and experiencing casualties above and beyond any previous war the Federation had experienced, a council had been held earlier in the year - which Dooku attended - to vote on re-evaluating this position; Dooku had voted strongly in favor of ending the ban on cloaking devices, and was pleased the ban had been overturned.

One of the problems with cloaking devices had been that deflector shields could not be used when a vessel was cloaked. There were also ways that cloaking devices could be detected, such as a blip on a motion sensor, or using a metaphasic sweep, a tachyon scan, or a gravitic sensor net. There were scientists stationed aboard Starbase 24 who had been working diligently to modify the Romulan cloaks so that shields could be used and the traditional methods of detecting cloaks would not work. The most recent batch of their cloaking devices was done and in testing, and while the Daystrom Institute typically cautioned for at least two more test cycles, this policy had been issued in peacetime and Dooku felt they didn't have the luxury of testing endlessly - so far in the tests carried out, the cloaking devices had performed well.

Obi-Wan nodded. "I agree, Sir."

"Good. We'll send them to the Kharamis supply line - if they can make an impact, it will be a big enough dent to start causing chain reactions we can take advantage of. They just need to be fast, and very careful."

"And hope that it's a typical day on the line and they're not dealing with twice the usual numbers."

"If they are, they will retreat. They'll be cloaked, they're not in danger until they decloak."

"Sounds very good. I look forward to seeing the results."

"As do I."

Before Dooku could dismiss his first officer, Obi-Wan said, "Permission to speak freely, Admiral."

"Granted."

"You look like hell."

Dooku gave a thin smile. "I'm tired, Number One. I didn't sleep well last night. I shall manage."

"Is something bothering you?"

"Everything bothers me. We're at war. Thank you for your concern."

"All right."

"Is there anything else?"

"Well there is, but it's not important."

"Number One, over the last forty-odd years of my Starfleet career, I've found that all too often when one thinks something isn't important, it turns out to be very important, so please, by all means."

"I don't know if this is something you'd exactly consider important, but... you and the doctor go back awhile, yes?"

Dooku frowned into his coffee. "We served together aboard the *Melbourne*, and then the *Trident*. We survived Wolf 359 and saw most of the Dominion War together. Why do you ask?"

"He's apparently my husband's great-grandfather. Qui-Gon is a quarter El-Aurian, and they did a DNA test to confirm a match. Qui-Gon's grandmother is still living on Alpha Eridani II, and he sent a transmission yesterday so she and Doctor Yusanis could talk."

That explained the surge of emotion Dooku had felt from him last night; Severin hadn't known if any of his children were still alive, and it had haunted him for a long time. Dooku felt a wave of his own emotion rising, hair on his arms standing on end, aching for his *imzadi*. He saw his coffee cup shake in his hand, and hoped Obi-Wan didn't notice; he didn't want to show weakness in front of his officers.

"I see," Dooku said simply.

"I thought you might like to know, considering you've known the doctor for some time. The doctor might tell you himself, of course, but Qui-Gon is *delighted* to have a family member so close, and has been talking about wanting to hold a family reunion celebration - something that will liven up the atmosphere around here - and I know you don't like parties, so I'm warning you before my husband gets it into his head to invite you, so you don't automatically say no."

Dooku snorted. "Thank you for the heads up, Number One."

Obi-Wan smiled. "You're welcome, Sir."

"If that's all, you're dismissed. I don't want to keep you."

Obi-Wan stood up, and then he lingered for a moment. "We haven't fenced in awhile. Maybe later this week, you could meet me in the holodeck to spar. I know that practicing helps me work out some of my frustrations, though it's not as rewarding with a hologram for an opponent."

Dooku gave a curt nod. "That sounds good. Tomorrow at 1930 perhaps?"

"Yes, thank you." Obi-Wan nodded in return, and headed for the door. "Have a good evening, Sir."

"Same to you."

Fifteen minutes after Obi-Wan left the ready room, Dooku buried his face in his hands and sighed. His thoughts once again went to Severin, who he could sense was still shaken up by the revelation that one of his children was alive, and he had blood family on the same starbase. He could sense that in addition to the relief Severin felt, there was also anguish with wondering about how the rest of them had fared, and that terrible reminder of being otherwise very, very alone in the universe.

The same as he felt, often.

When Dooku was a few steps from his quarters, he paused. On instinct, he walked across the hall to the door of Severin's quarters. The doors chimed and he heard Severin call, "Who is it?"

Dooku swallowed hard and promptly backed away, into his own quarters. He was breathing hard, and his hands were shaking. After taking care of Pelo's food, he sat and tried to calm himself. But he couldn't.

He left his quarters again, but instead of going back across the hall to Severin's quarters, he went in the opposite direction - down to Counselor

Yoda.

It was after hours, though Dooku knew from prior experience that if an officer was having a particularly hard time, Yoda didn't mind seeing them; Dooku had seen Yoda after hours a few times during massive losses of the war, to receive the words of assurance and encouragement he needed when all felt lost.

This was much more personal. This was a war of the heart.

Dooku had, before now, not shared much of his private life with the counselor, or anyone - there hadn't been much to speak of after Severin, no relationships, very little sex. His life was his Starfleet career, and beyond that, what hobbies he had. He was cordial enough with his first officer to fence with him or play the occasional game of chess, but he was professional rather than warm with the rest of his crew, and felt it was necessary in this time of war, not to get too attached - though he did care about the well-being of those serving under him - and he didn't want to show any vulnerabilities around them, his moments of hopelessness and despair as the war raged on, not wanting the morale of the crew to drop as they saw their commanding officer crumble.

But this, now, had come to a critical point, one that was starting to interfere with his job. So despite his reservations, and truthfully despite his *pride*, not wanting to admit that his younger self might have made some mistakes... he stood outside Yoda's door and waited.

Rather than ask who it was, Yoda just came to the door. When he saw it was Dooku, he simply muttered "hrmmmm", nodded, and gestured for Dooku to follow him inside.

"Why visit do you, at this hour?" Yoda asked, as Dooku sat in a chair across from him.

"I... I'm sorry to bother you, Counselor."

"Bother, you are not. Concerned, I am. Important it must be, if here, you are."

Dooku took a deep breath. "You have access to my Starfleet records, yes? So you know the chief medical officer and I served together."

Yoda nodded. "History between you, there is."

"It's a rather, er... personal history."

"Surprised, I am not."

Dooku nodded. "I'm the reason he transferred from the *Trident* to the *Exeter* during the Dominion War."

"Hmmm." Yoda's ears twitched. "Served there long, he did not."

"No. I saw that in his personnel files." *And wondered if it was for the same reason he'd left the Trident.* "So then he went to Deep Space Nine, then the *Aventine*, where he'd been the last twenty-five years... now he's here."

"Answered my question about why you came, you have not."

"That's... why." Dooku leaned back in his chair, looked down at his feet, and back at Yoda. "It's about my past history with the doctor, and his arrival on the station."

Yoda waited; it was his job to just listen now.

Dooku took a deep breath again, pinched the bridge of his nose, and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Doctor Yusanis - Severin - and I were together for seven years. We were very happy together. We were going to marry, actually, and have children. But the Dominion War was exceedingly difficult. After the Battle of Betazed, I almost made an unfortunate command decision that the doctor talked me out of. But I realized at that point that if my personal feelings were clouding my judgment enough with regards to my homeworld and potentially going to endanger my crew, it would be even worse if the life of my partner was at stake. So I did what I felt I had to do... I ended the relationship."

Yoda nodded in acknowledgment of what he'd heard, and gestured for Dooku to go on.

"I have a lot of regrets." Dooku finally met his eyes. "It's been difficult to be around him since he arrived on the station. I know he feels stung because I've been very aloof towards him. But I still care for him. It's been thirty-five years, so I don't expect a reconciliation. I do feel that even rekindling a friendship might potentially be a mistake."

"So, my advice you are asking, about how to proceed."

"With the caveat that I will ultimately do as I see fit. But I have come to a place of feeling conflicted enough that I felt I ought to ask a second opinion."

"Why feel you, that friends you cannot be?"

"I feel as if it might become a slippery slope. Awaken old feelings in one or both of us that would inevitably lead to heartache. Now, in the middle of a very intense war, is not the time for me to get involved with someone and make errors of judgment."

"Thirty-five years ago, was the command mistake you almost made, was it not?"

"Yes but -"

"People change, yes? Who you are now, was not who you were then. More rational now, with time, you are."

"Perhaps. And perhaps not." Dooku frowned. "I'd rather not test that premise and come to find out it's wrong."

"Say, you do, that friendship is unwise, because of feelings. But already interfering with your job, is this not? Here you are, long after hours, because conflicted, feel you. Helping not, being cold to him is."

"So you're suggesting that I should perhaps give friendship with him a try."

"Yes. And as well... support, need you. Too isolated, you are. Good for your mental health, friendship is."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"And yet, came here anyway, did you. Knowing what I might say. Not as conflicted as you think you are, are you. Deep down inside, what you want, you know."

"I don't want to hurt him. Or myself."

"Already hurting, are both of you."

Dooku looked down again. He wished Yoda had told him to either continue on his trajectory of avoiding Severin as much as possible, or have Severin transferred elsewhere - which yes, would look bad with just over a week served here. But yes, if he was honest with himself, he knew that he had come here with the possibility of Yoda telling him to stop being such a stranger with the one person aboard this starbase who truly knew him and had shared a not-insignificant portion of his life, and maybe the green troll was right.

"All right. I'll take it under advisement." Dooku got up and gave Yoda a curt nod. "Thank you, Counselor."

"Take care, Admiral."

Dooku headed back to his quarters. He had a lot to think about. Although truthfully, he knew he had already thought too much. When he arrived in his quarters, and proceeded to replicate himself something to eat, he felt very tired and very old. Not long after he ate, he went to bed, and this time didn't lie awake, as if there had already been some sort of resolution.

Chapter 13

It was another long day in sickbay, with Severin staying three hours past the end of his shift to tend to patients and review and update case files. He was exhausted, and just the journey back to his quarters felt endless.

As he made his way down the hall where his quarters were located, he saw Dooku coming in the opposite direction, dressed in fencing gear, carrying his rapier. *Oh, shit.* Severin slowed down, reluctant to cross paths with him, since they were right across from each other.

Dooku stopped in his tracks and said, "Doctor Yusanis."

"Admiral." Severin gave a curt nod. "Good evening."

Severin felt the tension bristling, and he wanted to just be done with it, pressing on towards his door. But before he could punch in the access code, Dooku's hand was on his shoulder.

Severin just looked up at him, feeling like he couldn't breathe. Dooku removed his fencing mask and said, "I haven't eaten yet. Would you care to join me for dinner? It's been awhile since we've talked."

It took a moment for Dooku's words to really register - he'd been so aloof since the arrival, that Severin couldn't believe he was asking this. Severin thought about saying no, still feeling stung about it, but then the rebuff of friendship would be on him. This was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? To be friends again?

Severin blinked and nodded slowly. "All... all right."

"Do you mind if I freshen up first? As you know, I've been fencing -"

Thank you, Admiral Obvious. The more things change, the more things stay the same. Severin rolled his eyes.

"- and I'm a bit sweaty under the gear."

The mental image of Dooku's naked body glistening with sweat made Severin tingle. That was *not* the reaction he wanted to have right now, and he knew perfectly damn well Dooku would pick up on it through his Betazoid telepathy. Severin looked away even though he hadn't seen anything scandalous, his face burning, and he just nodded. "Yeah, I'll be in my quarters feeding my cat and putting my feet up for a few, so when you're ready just come." And then Severin immediately wanted to smack himself as the word "come" made him think of all the times he'd made Dooku climax, and what it would be like now, if Dooku just skipped the freshening up and let Severin clean off the sweat with his tongue.

Thirty-five years hadn't changed a *thing* except that Dooku had, somehow, become even more attractive to him with that distinguished silver hair. Severin could just imagine his chest hair and pubic hair being like that too, like a white wolf. A wolf that needed to be groomed with his mate's tongue. *Fuck.*

Judging by the blushing, Severin knew Dooku *definitely* saw those mental images, and for a brief instant Severin wondered if that would make him say "forget about it", but instead Dooku just nodded and said, "Approximately fifteen, twenty minutes."

"Sounds good." Severin quickly punched in the access code and rushed into his quarters, heart pounding.

Severin fed Sagan and after the cat ate, he climbed up on the couch and onto Severin. The doctor held him like a baby, stroking him and talking baby talk, as Sagan kneaded and purred. The cat was a welcome distraction, though occasionally Severin's thoughts strayed to stroking Dooku's fur, and it made him want to hide under the bed and scream, knowing Dooku had to know about these thoughts.

When the door chimed, Severin felt his heart skip a beat again, but he simply said, "Come in," and watched as Dooku stepped into his quarters for the first time. Dooku was dressed in his usual uniform, his hair slightly damp from the shower. He paused near the doorway and Severin said, "I said you can actually come in, you don't have to stand there."

"All right." Dooku took a few paces in, quietly surveying Severin's quarters. Severin still had many of the paintings and sculptures that had been in his quarters on the *Trident* - Severin saw him noticing Sarenia's framed portrait was still on his mantle. There was a small shrine to the Bajoran Prophets, which Severin noticed Dooku double-taking at, and Severin said simply, "It's something I kinda picked up when I was stationed on Deep Space Nine." He didn't get into *how*, because that would create more awkwardness than Severin felt like dealing with right now - things were already awkward enough.

"I see." Dooku's eyes then focused on the cat. "What's his name?"

"Sagan. After the ancient Earth scientist."

Dooku nodded. "I also have a cat. His name is Pelo."

"Oh!" Severin couldn't help smiling. "I love cats, I'd like to meet yours sometime."

"That can be arranged."

Severin then couldn't resist. "Speaking of cats, you still have Teffi?"

Dooku took a deep breath, and nodded sheepishly. "I'm surprised you still remember that."

"I remember everything, Yan."

"Well, on that note, shall we?"

Severin nodded and got up off the couch.

They walked together side by side. "I assume you have a place in mind," Severin said.

"There's several choices of eating establishments here but there's one I prefer over the others, yes."

"You'll have to tell me what's good. I didn't really get the whole 'Starbase 24 For Newbies' memo when I got here."

"Yes, I apologize for that - as you know, we're in the middle of a war and it's been a bit hectic to give a tour to new staff."

"As you know, we're in the middle of a war." Really? Wow. Severin shook his head and decided not to comment, but Dooku could tell he was internally snarking and gave him a disapproving look.

Severin took deep breaths in the turbolift - he'd always been a bit claustrophobic, over a century in Starfleet riding in turbolifts hadn't changed that. When they'd been together, Dooku's presence had been comforting and familiar - Dooku would pick up on the anxiety and take his hand. But they couldn't do that now. Severin distracted himself from the anxiety by just looking at Dooku, and since they were in close enough proximity, smelling him. Severin felt himself tingle again, and he felt anxiety for more reasons than just the turbolift.

They got off on Deck 42, which was essentially a mall, several stores, restaurants, and kiosks for snacks and beverages. There was another small park, this one with a playground. Severin knew there were children aboard the starbase - he'd given some of them checkups and inoculations recently - but it was still strange to see children at play in a playground, as if there wasn't a war happening. He paused a moment to watch, smiling... and then felt a surge of pain as he remembered his own children when they were small. He thought of Temyra again, grateful that at least one of his children had made it.

Dooku ushered him into a restaurant that had soft gold lighting. There was an opaque bamboo screen behind the podium where the Trill maitre d' waited. "Two?" the maitre d' asked. Dooku nodded. "Right this way." They followed him into the restaurant, where each table was in its own bamboo cubicle, the cubicles hung with tapestries, the tables underneath Tiffany-style lamps, with lanterns glowing on the tables. It was a nice ambiance, and Severin relaxed a little.

They were each given a menu, but Dooku knew right away what he wanted, when the waiter approached for their drinks. "My usual," Dooku said.

"I'll have a Shirley Temple," Severin said, "and I need some time to review the menu."

The waiter nodded and walked off; Severin began reading the menu.

"I recommend anything Greek or Indian from their selections of Earth cuisine," Dooku said, "and if you're looking for something else, you'll like the Bajoran food."

"Do they spice it adequately? I was on Deep Space Nine for eight years, I know what Bajorans taste like." Severin facepalmed at the slip of his tongue, and quickly corrected himself, "I mean, what Bajoran food is supposed to taste like. Most non-Bajorans get it wrong."

Dooku kept a poker face, not visibly reacting to the slip. "They adjust the heat to taste, so you can tell them you like it very hot."

Severin's mind went immediately in the gutter, and he briefly wondered if the innuendo had been intentional or not, especially in light of the slip. Severin willed himself to refocus on the menu, and when the waiter came back with Irish coffee for Dooku and a Shirley Temple for Severin, the doctor decided to not rise to potential bait and said, "I'll have the chicken souvlaki with salad and a side of shrimp cocktail, thanks."

Severin fished out the cherry from his Shirley Temple and popped it in his mouth; he saw Dooku watching him with interest, and noticed him blush again. Severin sucked on the straw and Dooku looked into his coffee, stirring it before sipping it, eyes trying to look away from Severin but he kept looking back. Severin resisted the urge to smile around the straw in his lips.

A few moments of awkward silence passed and then Severin sat up straighter, squared his shoulders, and said, looking Dooku in the eye, "Thank you for asking me to have dinner with you."

Dooku nodded. "I'm sorry that I've been so distant since you arrived."

Though Dooku kept his expression neutral, Severin could hear the regret in his voice, and it felt like a punch in the chest, a confirmation that he still cared, somehow. Severin fell back to what he often did when emotions got too high, making wisecracks. "Hi Sorry That I've Been So Distant Since You Arrived, I'm Sev."

Dooku huffed. "You know..."

Severin grinned into his drink. "I know."

"I see thirty-five years hasn't changed much."

"I assume the same about you."

"Probably." Dooku nodded. "The length of time has made me hesitant to try to talk to you, not knowing where or how to begin."

"I understand, Yan. I just..." Severin took a deep breath. "I'd like us to not be strangers. Especially now, with all of this going on."

"I feel the same way."

"Good. So long as we're on the same page, we can proceed from there."

There was more silence, as they worked on their drinks, and then the waiter came with their food and refills. Dooku had ordered Betazoid dishes - herbed and lightly breaded fish served over pancakes made from spiced root vegetables with a savory brown sauce, a salad of different greens and fruits and nuts, and a grain dish resembling rice or quinoa, with edible fungi and chunks of natrixi, a ferocious deer-like game animal that had once been endangered and had made a strong comeback following the liberation of Betazed, almost into overpopulation.

"Oh that looks so good," Severin said, eyeing the bowl of grain. "I should have ordered that too."

Dooku flagged the waiter over. "Can you bring another natrixi galamix over for him?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you," Severin said. He started with his salad. "Oh, this is awesome."

"I told you." Dooku gave a small smile that would have been a grin on anyone else.

"Qui-Gon tells me the starbase has a greenhouse so most of the food supply here is fresh."

"Yes." Dooku nodded. "There's also a lab for cultured meat, though the natrixi is shipped from Betazed so they don't overrun the entire planet."

"That's pretty amazing. Again, I didn't get the tour when I was here, so I'm still figuring out what was what. I only knew about the arboretum because I happened to run into the counselor one evening and he told me I should check it out."

"Which is how you met Qui-Gon."

"Yes. I didn't get to stay as long as I'd have liked in the arboretum; one of these days when I'm less busy and tired I'd like to hike the trail there. Maybe you could join me."

"I'd like that, yes. We do get a day off once every three weeks and I believe you and I are synced on the same schedule, so perhaps next day off, in ten days?"

"Works for me." Severin nodded, trying to contain his excitement. "And man, a whole day off."

"Lately, something usually comes up to cut that a bit short." Dooku sighed. "Though I remain cautiously optimistic - we just sent the Third Fleet back out this morning, with their new cloaking devices."

"Oh boy. Let the games begin."

"Indeed." Dooku gave a small, predatory smile; that look always got Severin going. Even now.

Severin once again tried to pretend to not care about his commanding officer's attractiveness. "What do you do on your days off, most of the time?"

"Try to catch up on sleep." They both laughed. "Read. Work out. Sometimes I practice fencing in the holodeck."

"You were doing that a little while ago, yeah?"

"I had a real opponent this time, my first officer."

"I see. He any good?"

"He's adequate."

Severin snorted into his Shirley Temple. "Marginally acceptable, would you say?"

"Yes."

Severin laughed out loud. He'd missed that dry, snarky sense of humor, the damnation with faint praise. "Wow, Yan."

Dooku laughed too. Then he said, "We haven't sparred in some time, you and I."

"No shit, my dude. We haven't even seen each other for thirty-five years."

"Have you still kept up with fencing?"

"To be honest, no. After... um. That. It reminded me of you too much, so I couldn't."

Dooku's poker face again, but his eyes were sad. He said nothing, just eating his food. After a few bites, he did finally respond. "You should get back into it. You had talent."

"I guess."

"You could also spar with Commander Kenobi. I imagine you'd like to get to know him better anyway, considering..."

"Ah." There it was. "I see somebody told you about..."

"Yes." Dooku's voice softened. "I'm glad one of your children is still alive, Sev. I'm glad you've found blood family so close after everything."

Sev closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then just nodded. He would *not* cry in front of Dooku. Not now. This first stab at renewed friendship was awkward enough. "I'm glad too. Temyra is my oldest daughter, and it's been too long since the last time I saw her. When my shore leave comes up, which won't be for awhile but I'd like to plan for it now, I intend on going to Alpha Eridani II to visit her." *Meet whatever of my grandchildren are still around. Threaten to beat whoever my girl is dating now within a centimeter of his or her life if they break her heart. That sort of thing.*

"Good." Dooku nodded, and then he reached across the table to pat Severin's hands. "You deserve happiness."

The touch was like an electric shock; Severin couldn't chew the food in his mouth, couldn't swallow, couldn't breathe. Severin could feel himself break out in gooseflesh, and his cock was starting to wake up. He couldn't believe that just Dooku's hands on his was arousing him, though considering those hands had been all over his body years ago, knowing how to play him like a master playing a violin...

Severin forced himself to swallow the food, slipped his hands out from underneath Dooku's hands, grabbed his drink, chugged a few sips as his head spun, and then he husked, "You deserve to be happy too, Yan."

Dooku gave a small, sad smile; his eyes showed his pain. "I haven't been happy in a very long time."

Severin gave a bitter smile of his own. "Neither have I." He reached out to take Dooku's hand and squeezed it, surprising himself. "But that's what friends are for, yes?"

"Friends. Yes."

After their meal, they went back to their quarters. They lingered outside their respective doors, not touching, just looking at each other.

"Well," Severin said finally, "it's getting late and I have an early shift tomorrow."

"As do I." Dooku nodded.

"Thanks again for dinner." Severin smiled. "We should do that again."

"We should. Perhaps three days from now, at 1700?"

"Works for me. I usually stay late in sickbay with everything going on but I'll make myself check out on time for the occasion."

"Also..." Dooku put up his index finger, a sign that Severin shouldn't walk away just yet. "About that tour. I can be a bit of a guide before we go to dinner, if you still want to be shown around."

"Please. Yes."

"Good." Dooku patted Severin's shoulder; again the touch was like electricity, and Severin felt his nipples hardening, aching for more. *Dammit*, Severin cursed inside. "Have a good rest of the evening, Sev."

"You too. Sleep well when you get there."

After fussing over Sagan, who pretended that he'd been neglected for days, yowling and demanding affection, Severin made himself take a cool sonic shower, hoping that would fix the arousal stirring. But he just thought of the times he and Dooku had showered together, getting handsy under the water, even having shower sex on occasion. *History is not going to repeat itself*, Severin told himself as he toweled off. *I am not getting my heart broken a second time by that man. Friends, yes. More than friends? Not a good idea. He's shown no indication he even wants to go there, besides.*

But his cock had a mind of its own, hardening again as he slipped on pajamas. Severin grumbled as he put on his viewing screen, determined to push away his lustful thoughts by watching something other than his perverted mental movies. He decided on *I Love Lucy*, and eventually dozed off on the couch, woken up by the sound of Sagan digging in his litter box. He peeled himself off the couch and climbed into bed, laying awake for a few minutes, thinking about what his daughter was doing right now, missing his other children, which turned into missing Sarenia... missing having someone next to him at night. Missing Dooku.

No. Bad.

Severin chanted a Bajoran mantra Kira had taught him for peace, and that helped. Soon he was asleep, and then had a dream where he was Lucy and Dooku was Ricky, and Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were Fred and Ethel, and he and Qui were working at a candy factory, except the candy was somehow made out of tree sap. When Severin woke up to his alarm he felt like he was hungover even though he hadn't had any alcohol the night previous; he grumbled at the dream he had.

Your feelings are like that candy coming down the conveyor belt. You need to get it under control. Now.

For once, Severin was grateful to have another busy work day ahead of him.

Chapter 14

Dooku knew Severin was still attracted to him, and if he was being completely honest with himself, he was still attracted to Severin.

He spent the next three days trying to suppress those thoughts - and his awareness of Severin's thoughts - as much as possible. He succeeded somewhat, because the Third Fleet engaged the Klingon forces on the Kharamis supply line, using their new cloaking devices to take the Klingons by surprise, and cause a disruption to the flow of goods, including ship repair and new ships. The Third Fleet was now in a blockade of the system and its bases, to make sure the line stayed out of Klingon control. It was time to outfit the Second Fleet with cloaking devices, and send them to intercept the Klingon forces closest to the Federation core worlds.

Dooku knew that even if the Second Fleet was able to beat the Klingons back, the war was far from over. Soon they would have to fight the Klingons closer to home. With the loss of the Kharamis supply line and the blow about to be delivered near Federation space, the Klingons would be far from demoralized - they would be insulted, and fight that much harder. Starbase 24 was always at risk, being the closest Federation starbase to the neutral zone, but now so more than ever, and in addition to forming strategy and discussions with the Third Fleet and Second Fleet, Dooku had to formulate a plan to protect the starbase.

When it was time to meet with the doctor to give him the grand tour of the base before dinner, Dooku was actually glad to see him, despite the struggle with his feelings. It was a welcome respite from all of the planning and the worrying.

Severin was the one to arrive at his quarters this time. "Come in," Dooku said when the doors chimed.

Pelo greeted Severin at the door with an inquisitive chirp; Severin leaned down and immediately began to talk to the cat in a singsong babytalk voice while petting and skritchng him, while Dooku smiled fondly. "Who's a pretty boy, yes you are, yes you are," Severin cooed. "That's a good baby, a good pretty baby boy, oooh you're so fluffy, yes that's a good boy -"

Dooku cleared his throat, not wanting to disturb the moment, finding Severin adorable, *damn him*, but also wanting to get on with it so they could eat in a timely manner.

Severin looked up and then away - Dooku could tell he felt sheepish - and Dooku chuckled. "It's all right," he said. "Shall we proceed?"

The tour was of the recreational decks on the starbase - the different parks and plazas, with Dooku telling him about the shopping establishments, or places designated for entertainment, such as a concert hall. He could once again feel Severin's awe at the size of the starbase, which was literally a city in space, the biggest base in the Federation. "Deep Space Nine was only a fraction of this size," Severin said, on their way to the restaurant they'd been a few days prior.

"It's a big job, commanding this base," Dooku said, nodding as they waited in the small queue that had formed with other people about to have dinner.

"How did you get assigned here, if you don't mind me asking?" Severin asked.

"Well..." Dooku folded his arms. "I continued to command the *Trident* for another ten years after the Dominion War ended. Then I went to Earth and worked for Starfleet Command directly - a bit of a glorified desk job."

"You must have hated that."

"I did." Dooku smiled. "Even with the promotion to Admiral. I felt useless."

"You'd dreamed of being a starship captain your entire life. Being bound to an administrative position like that sounds like your worst nightmare."

"I didn't like it at all, and insult was added to injury by seeming to be the only one out of my colleagues who didn't enjoy it. Admiral Shelby, for example, relished her job, and criticized me for having 'an attitude'."

Severin's lips quirked. "In fairness to you, she's critical in general."

"You served under her after the *Trident*, so I gather you'd know."

They stepped forward, next in line for a table. Dooku looked over at Severin, and Severin would not meet his eyes. "Yeah," Severin said, "I knew Shelby pretty well."

Dooku had wondered, when reviewing the doctor's personnel file, if his relatively short time aboard the *Exeter* - just under three years - was a departure for the same reason he'd left the *Trident*. What he picked up on just now silently confirmed that suspicion, and he didn't like it at all.

There was a long moment of painfully awkward silence - Dooku knew Severin knew that he knew - and when Severin finally looked at him, Dooku opened his mouth, about to continue the story, but it was time for them to be seated. So Dooku waited until they were sitting and Severin was perusing the menu. "My usual," he told the waiter, and then he said to Severin, "So... there I was at Starfleet Command, feeling useless. But after the destruction of Romulus, the neutral zone began to get a bit unsettled, and it was decided someone with war experience needed to command Starbase 24, a strategically important base. I applied for the job, and I was assigned here eight years ago, three years before the war with the Klingons started. Right around the time the Federation was voting to reconsider its position on the Klingon-Gorn

conflict, and it was necessary to keep a closer eye on them."

Severin nodded. "Captain Dax was one of those who urged the Federation to reconsider that position. I remember it was of great concern to her."

Dooku did not detect the same undercurrent of emotion he had from the mention of Shelby, and breathed a small sigh of relief. Then he immediately felt a stab of irritation at feeling relief that the doctor and Dax had not been involved. "It's unfortunate the Federation Council didn't listen to her, or the others who voted in favor. We are paying the price now."

"No doubt."

Severin ordered a gyro and a shawarma, with rice pilaf and a lemon chicken soup. They waited in somewhat awkward silence - Dooku was sheepish about feeling in any way possessive about Severin, and didn't want his words or tone to betray him somehow. *This cannot resume*, he kept telling himself.

As they ate, conversation gradually resumed, onto the small talk that wasn't really small, their respective duties over the last few days. They were both stressed out from the long hours and much to do, and having an evening to just relax was pleasant, enough that when they finished their meal and Severin suggested they sit in the park across from the restaurant for awhile, Dooku didn't object.

He did, however, raise an eyebrow when Severin went over to the empty playground, climbed on the swing set, and began to swing, like a big kid. "Come on," Severin said, after a few minutes of swinging by himself. "You should try it."

"I should not."

"Yes, you should."

"I am a Starfleet Admiral."

A pause, then "Hi A Starfleet Admiral, I'm Sev."

"You know..."

Severin grinned. "I know." He kicked his feet and pumped higher, leaning back so he was partly upside down, his curls flowing with each rise.

"You look ridiculous."

"Which is all the more reason for you to try it. Don't you get tired of being all serious business all the time?"

"No."

Severin laughed at him, and Dooku felt a pang. How he'd missed that laugh... his radiant smile that lit up the whole world, the silly playfulness. He was reminded of a vacation he and Severin had taken to Risa forty years ago, where after a few drinks, Severin had gotten him to dance, and they'd won a dance contest. Dooku closed his eyes, trying to push the memory away.

"I should probably get back to my quarters," Dooku said.

Severin let the swing drop back, and planted his feet on the ground to keep it from going up again. "All right." He couldn't hide the disappointment in his voice, and he definitely didn't hide the disappointment he felt. Dooku felt guilty about that, but also a jab of annoyance. *What is he expecting from this, exactly?*

They walked back to the crew dorms together, with Severin stopping at a kiosk on the way to get an ice cream cone - sweet cream with rainbow sprinkles. As Severin licked the ice cream Dooku found himself disconcerted, watching Severin's tongue, not able to keep from thinking about what Severin could do with that tongue - what Severin *had* done to him with that tongue, long ago. He felt a frisson down his spine, and a surge in his loins. He walked a little faster, and Severin matched his pace, seemingly unaware that the innocent act of eating ice cream was coming off as anything but.

They lingered in the space between their quarters, looking at each other for a moment. Finally Severin broke the silence, asking, "Are we still on for a hike in the arboretum in a week?"

"We are." Dooku nodded.

Severin reached up to pat his shoulder - having to stand on tiptoes, since Dooku had almost a foot on him. The touch was like being shocked with a live wire; Dooku was half-hard now, and hoping Severin wouldn't look down. "Thank you for dinner. It's nice catching up with you."

"It is." Dooku smiled.

"What time should we do the hike?"

"How does 1300 sound?"

"That works for me." Severin gave a little wave before turning to punch in the access code to his quarters. "Have a good rest of the evening,

Yan."

"You too."

Later, as Dooku climbed into bed for the night, he lay awake, thinking about Severin. And then his thoughts turned to watching Severin lick the ice cream cone... memories of Severin's tongue all over his body, his cock, *in* him, licking that sweet spot inside him, making him feel things he'd never felt before or since then. He thought about the times he'd given Severin the same treatment, kissing, licking, caressing every inch of his body, sucking his cock, tonguing his ass. The way they'd sixty-nined each other, coming in each other's mouths.

He was hard, and could hear himself breathing heavily. He tried to push the thoughts away, tried to meditate to quiet his mind, but again and again his thoughts returned to Severin's body, the way Severin moaned and screamed when they made love, the way Severin felt wrapped around him, or inside him...

Dooku started stroking himself to a fantasy of he and Severin rimming and sucking each other before pushing the doctor onto his back and taking him, in his fantasy stroking Severin's cock in the same rhythm that he was stroking his own cock now. He didn't last long - it had been awhile for him, and his lust was too strong. When he climaxed, coating his hand, shooting his seed over his stomach and into the sheets, he moaned, "Sev... *imzadi*."

Even in the endorphin rush of his release, there was that sting of bitterness. He had crossed a line - a line he'd feared crossing inviting Severin back into his life even as just a friend - and this *could not* happen, they did not need a repeat of what happened on the *Trident*, not now, not ever.

But all the logic in the galaxy, attempting to reason with himself, couldn't change his feelings. And right now, he felt more alone than he'd ever felt in his entire life.

Dooku rolled onto his side and quietly cried himself to sleep.

—

Dooku managed to avoid Severin for most of the next seven days, barring the usual weekly senior officers' meeting, where he was back to his usual aloof self. Severin noticed the change, but didn't remark on it except to ask after the meeting, "We still on for our hike?"

"Yes, of course." Dooku nodded. He wasn't looking forward to it now, but he had a feeling that canceling it would cause more problems than just going through with it - canceling would inevitably bring about a confrontation, and having to confess his feelings, and he was not up for that anytime soon, if ever.

Severin's eyes searched his. "Are you all right?"

Dooku closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm fine. I've had a lot on my mind with the war." *Especially the war inside my own heart.*

Severin reached and patted his shoulder. "OK. If you need to talk, you know where to find me."

Dooku opened his eyes and gave him a weak smile, feeling that sharp pang at Severin's touch. "Thank you."

True to his word, two days later Dooku was at Severin's quarters at 1300. Even though it was Dooku's day off, he was still dressed in his uniform - he'd found from past experience that his days off were interrupted enough to necessitate wearing his uniform all the time. Severin, meanwhile, was wearing khakis and an open white cardigan sweater over a white T-shirt. Dooku knew that Severin wore his wedding ring on a chain under his uniform most of the time, but today it was on display, a quiet statement that even though she had been gone almost two hundred years, he still loved his late wife.

Dooku's eyes wandered up from the ring to Severin's eyes - Severin knew he'd been looking at the ring. There was no question, as their eyes met, that Severin still loved him, as well. But Dooku could feel the hesitancy there.

"Shall we?" Dooku asked.

They walked to the arboretum in silence. Severin giggled as Dooku cringed in the decontamination chamber, his face getting a fine mist. In the arboretum, Qui-Gon was pattering around the gardens, and waved to them as they walked in.

The arboretum had weather controls, and judging from the drops that clung to leaves and blades of grass, had a bit of a rain shower a few hours ago. The arboretum had soil and mycellium that ran dozens of decks deep; Qui-Gon had personally overseen the construction of the foundations of the arboretum, knowing the health of a forest was a delicate balance. The decontamination field was necessary to protect not just the flora, but the birds and insects that lived in the arboretum, including a butterfly colony.

The butterflies were out now, with Dooku catching an occasional glimpse here and there down the trail. At last, a butterfly landed on Severin's nose. Severin laughed, and Dooku couldn't help but smile, finding it adorable. The butterfly flitted off to land on Dooku's finger, and then back into the trees.

A while later, they spotted a few butterflies, dancing in a patch of purple-gold wildflowers. They smelled sweet, and Severin had them stop a

moment to watch, and savor the moment. When the butterflies went off on their way, Severin got on his knees and lowered his face to smell the flowers more closely.

"You look ridiculous," Dooku told him.

"I *am* ridiculous." Severin smiled. "But you already knew this."

"Yes." Dooku nodded, smiling. "I knew that quite well."

"You should smell these. It's amazing."

"I don't want to get grass on my uniform."

"Smell the fucking flowers, Yan."

A moment later Dooku was kneeling beside Severin, feeling utterly ludicrous as he lowered his face to breathe in the scent of the wildflowers. But the smell was even more wonderful up close, and he couldn't say he regretted it, even though he knew he'd have grass stains on his uniform now, before the decontamination chamber.

Then Severin rolled, laying on his back, looking up at the canopy of trees. As if on cue, a bird came out, hopping along a branch.

"Remember when we used to go on shore leave and I'd make you lay in the grass or on a beach with me, and we'd watch the clouds?" Severin asked, tilting his face to look at Dooku.

"I remember." Dooku nodded. He sighed, and decided to say something very true, feeling almost compelled in the near-sacredness of the moment, amid the miracles of nature in the middle of space. "You always had a way of helping me keep balanced, to slow down and appreciate the little things."

"Yeah." Severin looked away, and back up at the trees; Dooku knew he wasn't just watching the bird.

"I've missed that." He found himself pulling Severin to sit up then, facing him. "I've missed you."

"I..." Severin swallowed hard. "I've missed you too."

The moment hung between them, looking into each other's eyes. Severin's full lips were slightly parted, as if an invitation to a kiss. Dooku could feel himself moving closer, wanting to claim it, aching...

The red alert klaxon began to sound, and Dooku's comm badge beeped. "Admiral," came the voice of Lieutenant Ahsoka Tano. "A Klingon fleet has just dropped out of warp and is moving into position."

"*Shit.*" Dooku tapped his badge to reply, "I'm on my way."

Chapter 15

When Dooku arrived on the bridge, the other officers stood in acknowledgment. He waved for them to sit back down. "Report."

"The Klingon fleet is heading our way," Lieutenant Tano said.

"On screen."

It was worse than Dooku imagined. Forty Klingon warbirds in an attack formation. Dooku sighed deeply. "Open a channel."

The hailing frequency chimed, and Dooku said, "Klingon fleet, this is Admiral Yan Dooku, commanding officer of Starbase 24. Unless you are here to negotiate or surrender, and state such purpose explicitly within the next thirty seconds, we will have no choice but to interpret your position as an act of aggression -"

The Klingons responded to that by firing photon torpedoes at the starbase.

"Shields reduced by ten percent," Lieutenant Tano said.

"All right." Dooku took a deep breath. "How far away is the Fourth Fleet?"

"At warp 9, they can be here in twenty minutes," Lieutenant Tano replied.

Shit. "That means we will have to stand off with the Klingons for at least fifteen." Dooku sat down, finally. "Send a distress call to the Fourth Fleet. We'll hold back on using our strongest weapons until they're in range to be most effective, which means we're going to take a bit of a beating in the meantime." He looked over at Commander Kenobi, who looked as nervous as he felt. "Number One. We have scientists working on things that could make or break this war, and *must be* kept out of the wrong hands. I need you to start coordinating an escape for them, if one is needed." There was a ship specifically for that purpose, to only be used in a time such as this.

"Understood." Kenobi nodded, and left the bridge.

The Klingons fired at the starbase again. "Shields at eighty percent," Tano said.

"On my mark, fire photon torpedoes, full spread." Dooku watched the screen and counted internally to ten. "Mark."

A volley of torpedoes went forth. "Their shields are down to seventy percent," Tano reported.

"Good. On my mark, fire again." Dooku counted to five. "Mark."

Dooku watched as the torpedoes hit each ship, and the shielding flickered.

"Their shields are down to forty percent," Tano said.

That was when they fired back, this time using disruptor cannons. "Shields at sixty percent," Tano said. The Klingon fleet was still approaching.

Tano's console beeped, and she looked over her shoulder and said, "Admiral, we have confirmation from the Fourth Fleet. They're on their way."

Dooku nodded. It was, however, cold comfort; the Klingons likely anticipated they would be calling for reinforcements, and might be sending reinforcements of their own. "Hail the Eighth Fleet and tell them we may need them here, depending on how things go."

"It would take them an hour at warp 9."

"Yes well... better late than never, if we need it. Send the hail." Dooku leaned back in his seat.

The Klingons fired again. "Shields at forty percent."

"Fire photon torpedoes."

While most of the torpedoes hit their targets, five ships sent out reflectors to return the remaining torpedoes back to the starbase. "Direct hit, main deflector shield. Hull breach, decks 45, 46, 47."

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. He had *not* seen that coming. "I see our friends have some new toys to play with. Scan for the source of those reflectors, lock phasers, and blast the hell out of them."

"Aye, sir."

"I want to know where in the hell they got that technology," said Lieutenant Commander Mace Windu, security chief, from behind the weapons array.

"I do as well," Dooku said. "It may be worth keeping one of those ships alive to investigate further."

A few seconds later Tano's scan determined the source of the reflectors, and Windu fired the phaser banks at them. The Klingons responded by firing more torpedoes. The fleet of forty was also now splitting into four formations of ten ships each, to surround the starbase on all sides. The starbase fired phasers as the ships came into closer range, slicing into them, but they still kept moving, firing on the starbase as they got in position. "Hull breach, decks 4 through 12."

That included engineering. The frantic voice of Lieutenant Commander Kit Fisto came over the comm. "We just had a bunch of consoles explode. We're trying to reinforce the shields around engineering but if this keeps up we're going to lose major systems."

"Understood, Commander." It was time. Dooku steepled his hands. "Fire the orbital cannon, full rotation."

The orbital cannon was most devastating at close range, and the ships were close enough now that anything with less than full shields would take heavy damage. One of the ships exploded right away.

The Klingons fired on them again. Dooku's ears were ringing; he could hear voices, but the words all seemed meaningless, and had the same meaning anyway - damage everywhere. They were taking casualties; he could feel it. He could feel the anxiety from his crew, intensifying his own panic. Every move felt like the wrong one. He could *feel* the screaming, the crying, from injured crewmen and civilians, the burns, the burning eyes of the face of death.

He thought of the last conversation he ever had with his mother, during the Dominion War, just before the Battle of Betazed, when he admitted to her how terrified he was. *Fear is the mind-killer*, she told him.

He kept himself together as best as he could, breathing slow and deep, trying to be the calm center in the storm. He wondered if his mother had been this afraid just before she died in the orbital bombardment.

One of the ships was now on a collision course with the starbase. If it made a hit, it would be devastating, particularly with the ship's warp core exploding into them. It was also one of the ships that had used the reflector weapon. Dooku's eyebrows raised in alarm, and then he knew what he had to do. "Fire, and then lock a tractor beam onto that ship," he said. He got up and turned around to face Windu. "Commander. Assemble a security team to greet our friends when they arrive."

Windu nodded and left; Lieutenant Sara Meyer got behind the weapons array in his place.

"Fire the orbital cannon again on my mark." He counted to five. "Mark."

The orbital cannon fired. Amazingly, though the reflectors had been taken out, they were back online, and returned fire at the starbase. Dooku heard the numbers of the decks hit, seemingly infinite, and he considered giving the command to abandon the station, but he knew that the Klingons would fire on escape pods, and the Fourth Fleet would be here soon.

"Take out their reflectors and as soon as they're off, give them everything we've got."

"Admiral," came Commander Windu's voice. "The Klingon vessel is in custody. Most of their crew is already dead, the survivors have a lot of injuries and are en route to sickbay."

I'm sorry, Severin, I know this wasn't how you wanted to spend your day. "Thank you for the update, Commander."

The reflectors went down again, and phasers, torpedoes, and the orbital cannon were all fired at once. Dooku watched as ships exploded, over half the Klingon fleet; the remaining ships took more heavy damage, a few of them being knocked out of the attack pattern and set adrift.

The remaining ships that were closest in range to their bridge advanced forward, a suicide charge. "Get as much power into our shields as possible. Shut down whatever you have to, so long as you leave us with some weapons," Dooku told engineering. He turned to Meyer and said, "Lock phasers and fire."

Just then, another twenty Klingon ships dropped out of warp and assembled into attack formations. Dooku once again considered giving the order to abandon the station, but they still had a chance - even a small chance, he would take, rather than risk escape pods destroyed by ruthless Klingons. "Scan to see if they have any of those reflectors and whatever does not, fire photon torpedoes."

But just before they could fire, the Fourth Fleet arrived, immediately firing on the newly arrived Klingons. Though a few of the Klingon ships did indeed have reflectors, they were outnumbered by the Fourth Fleet, and quickly outgunned between the Fourth Fleet and what the starbase had on tap. Most of the Klingon forces were destroyed within minutes, and three ships broke off to escape. Dooku commanded the Fourth Fleet to fire on them, as well; he didn't want the Klingons informed of how vulnerable the starbase was, now, and would be until repairs, which would take days.

Captain Daniel Pearce of the USS *Manitoba* hailed him for a briefing. "Give me twenty minutes to compose myself," Dooku told him, and Pearce nodded. "Understandable, Admiral," he said.

Dooku got up from his chair, and took a deep breath. "I'll be in my ready room if anyone needs me." *Having a stiff drink.*

Chapter 16

Severin Yusanis was not in the mood for this shit.

In his entire Starfleet career, he could not remember sickbay ever being so crowded. He'd gotten somewhat used to the heavier workloads of Starbase 24, but this was above and beyond a normal day's work - injured starbase crewmen and civilians, injured Fourth Fleet officers, injured Klingons from the ship they captured. Even with medical personnel on loan from the Fourth Fleet, Severin still had to activate the EMH for an extra set of hands, and it still wasn't quite enough.

Three of the twelve surviving Klingons from the enemy vessel died, the extent of their injuries too severe. One of the Klingons seemed barely injured at all, though he was kept in sickbay for observation anyway, under sedation until Severin got the go-ahead to release him to the brig. It was this particular Klingon that gave Severin an uneasy feeling, and after what felt like an endless number of hours but was only twelve, Severin finally got a break - which he spent giving the Klingon a closer look.

He opted for a microcellular scan, at which point his scanner showed DNA results matching Species 8472.

Severin raised an eyebrow. He knew the starbase had taken some heavy damage, and it was possible the sickbay's equipment was malfunctioning. He decided to contact engineering. "Commander Fisto, this is Doctor Yusanis."

"Doctor, what can I do for you?" Fisto sounded very tired, and about as done as he was.

"Can you run a diagnostic on sickbay and let me know if everything is copacetic? Anything malfunctioning?"

Fisto chuckled. "The EMH isn't malfunctioning, he's just like that -"

"It's not the EMH. Just... let me know if we're all good here, OK?"

Five minutes later, Severin's comm badge beeped again. "Everything in sickbay is working as it should," Fisto said.

"Thank you. Yusanis out." Severin's heart began to race. "*Shit.*"

Right then, the Klingon he'd been observing got up from the table. Severin watched in horror as the Klingon's arm rippled, and a bat'leth grew out of his hand. The two security officers close by reached for their phasers, and were quickly disemboweled in one sweep of the bat'leth before they could fire. Two other security officers approached, and were taken down.

Severin pressed his comm badge again. "Yusanis to security, we have a security breach in sickbay." Severin normally didn't wear a phaser in sickbay but he'd been advised to with the Klingon patients, and now he grabbed it and fired. It was as if he'd done nothing - the Klingon... or whatever the hell he was... kept charging towards him, unaffected by the phaser.

When Severin had been briefed on Starbase 24, he thought it was a good idea to keep his bat'leth in sickbay in case the base was ever invaded by Klingons, but he also didn't think he'd ever have to use it. Now, he took his bat'leth out of its safe, and marched forward.

"All right, *petaQ*," he snarled. "Come and get it."

He wasn't nearly as confident as he sounded - this was different from the times he'd sparred for fun in the holodeck against holographic Klingons, or against Kira who knew how to avoid killing him, or even against Krogh. He'd just seen two trained security officers ripped in half, and two more who were already dying. He knew there was a very good chance he would die today, and he was as afraid as he'd ever been in his life.

But until more security officers showed up, he was going to defend his sickbay.

He was going to defend his territory. He was furious, enough that his hands shook as he and the Klingon-imposter circled each other. A lot of people had died, a lot more were injured, because of *this fuck* and the people he was working with. It was going to stop here and now, or he was going to die trying.

Severin lunged, screaming as he swung the bat'leth.

The Klingon-impostor laughed at him, and swung back; Severin dodged.

Severin came closer and swung again. Dodge. Severin dodged another swing. Then he swung again, and was dodged. As he came closer still, he narrowly missed being hit. For his next move, he made a grab with one hand to try to take the impostor's weapon, and as he was being distracted by that, Severin cut off the other arm at the shoulder. The impostor howled with pain, and then Severin dodged another too-close swing of the bat'leth.

It was time to fight dirty. Severin practiced one of his kickboxing kicks, aiming for the fresh, bleeding wound at the impostor's shoulder. The impostor grabbed his leg just before his foot could connect, and threw Severin hard. Severin landed with a thud and felt a crunch as he went down. The impostor stood over him, about to swing the bat'leth and make a kill; Severin rolled out of the way just in time, and then, from the ground, swung his bat'leth to take the impostor's knee off. The impostor fell, and Severin grabbed his bat'leth away, then cut off the other arm so he couldn't grow another bat'leth out of his hand, and held his bat'leth to the impostor's throat.

Severin heard Dooku's voice. "What in the world..."

—

Dooku had been making the rounds of the starbase, surveying the damage, mobilizing the crewmen who could be mobilized to start fixing things. When he was a few decks from sickbay, he felt the sudden surge of fear, then anger, from Severin, and without thinking about it, suddenly he was in the turbolift, on his way down.

He hadn't expected to see Severin holding a bat'leth to a Klingon missing two arms and half a leg, or to see a second bat'leth a meter away from the Klingon's body. The security officers taking in the captured Klingons would have confiscated their weapons, and the bat'leth was downright impossible to conceal.

Mace Windu also arrived a minute later, and yelled "*Motherfucker*" at the sight of the blood all over the sickbay floor, two of his security officers with their guts spilled everywhere.

Mace and the officers brought with him carried the Klingon back to a medical table, standing guard as Severin began to treat his wounds. Dooku just watched, his mouth hanging open until Severin shot him an annoyed look.

Then Severin told him, "You might want to stick around."

"I imagine you have a bit of a story for me," Dooku said.

"*Yeah.*"

—

When the Klingon had been treated, he was put back under sedation - a heavier dose this time, though Severin had concerns about whether that would even work - and a force field was erected around his cot. More guards were added to sickbay just to be on the safe side.

"You haven't eaten," Dooku criticized; he could feel it.

"You think I fucking want to eat, after the shit I've seen all day?"

Dooku glared. Severin glared back.

"As you know, *being a physician*, low blood sugar is not going to help right now. *You*," Dooku said, not able to keep the edge out of his voice, "are going to have *something* to eat in my ready room, and we are going to talk about... that."

"Fine."

In Dooku's ready room, Severin washed up in the bathroom, and then he replicated Severin some toast to start with. He made them both tea. Once he sat, he gestured for Severin to speak.

"That Klingon," Severin said, "is not Klingon."

"...He sure knew how to fight like one, it seems." Dooku raised an eyebrow. "Where the hell did you learn how to fight with a bat'leth, anyway?"

"Deep Space Nine."

"Where you also picked up... that shrine to the Prophets." Dooku gave Severin a confused look over his tea.

"It makes about as much sense in context, and you don't want that context right now."

That meant it involved sex. Sex with someone who wasn't him. Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose and made an exasperated noise. "Right. So. As you were saying."

"He wasn't hurt like the others were, which I found strange in and of itself. Strange enough to run a microcellular scan. His DNA matches Species 8472."

Dooku put his teacup down. He and Severin just looked at each other for a long moment; Dooku was absolutely stunned.

"Say that again, please," Dooku said.

"Species 8472." Severin leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "I had Fisto run a diagnostic on sickbay. Nothing is malfunctioning. This is legit."

"That's... disturbing."

"Disturbing is *a very mild way of putting it.*"

"As you know, that adds... a whole new level of complications to the mess we're in."

"No shit."

"Eat your toast."

Severin ripped off a piece of toast with his teeth; Dooku found himself strangely aroused by that, his arousal intensifying as he thought of the sight of Severin wielding a bat'leth like a barbarian, covered in blood. He entertained a fantasy of Severin shirtless in the jungle, looking like that, just before throwing Dooku down, tearing his clothes off and riding him there on the ground, rutting like animals, in celebration of the battle. *Get a fucking hold of yourself.*

"So," Severin said after he finished his toast, "the bat'leth he had... it just came out of his hand. Like spontaneously growing a limb, or conjuring magic, or something."

"Further proof it's Species 8472, and he was pulling something in with fluidic space."

"That's not good."

"No. It's not good at all." Dooku leaned back in his chair. "I'm going to have to call an emergency senior officer meeting, much as I'd rather not overwork everyone."

"We're all wound up anyway, at least if we have a serious discussion we can try to find some answers."

"Indeed. But you should have a little break first."

Severin shrugged. "I don't care."

Their eyes met. "I care."

The words hung there. As arousing as it was to Dooku to see Severin fighting, he also knew Severin could have lost that fight, could have been disemboweled just like those security officers, or worse. And what would he do if Severin died? What kind of regrets would he have if -

Severin got up and reflexively brushed himself off; Dooku could feel his discomfort. "When is the meeting?"

"An hour."

"I'll see you then." Severin turned around and quickly walked out.

Dooku buried his face in his hands, feeling as if he'd taken a bat'leth to the gut.

Chapter 17

Severin was the last to arrive at the senior officers' meeting, looking exhausted. He quietly shuffled in to take his position towards the foot of the conference table, while Dooku paced before sitting down at the head.

"All right," he said. "We have a situation." He gestured to Severin. "Doctor Yusanis can elaborate."

All eyes were on him now, and Severin shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well. We captured a Klingon ship, that was damaged enough that most of its crew - a skeleton crew used to man an experimental warbird - were dead. And then of the survivors we brought in, three of them died from the severity of their injuries. But one of them... had barely a scratch. This didn't sit right with me, so I did a microcellular scan."

Dooku clicked on the screen, that showed the results of the scan. "Species 8472," Severin said. "From the case file we have compiled by *Voyager*, they are so lethal even the Borg had problems with them. They are adepts at genetic engineering, which is why we couldn't detect there was an infiltrator right away. And they can manipulate fluidic space, which is how I wound up being *attacked with a bat'leth in my sickbay*."

"Where did yours come from?" Commander Kenobi asked, his head tilted to one side in curiosity.

Severin smiled. "Deep Space Nine."

"I mean..."

"Yes. You mean why did I have one in my sickbay. When I was stationed here I had concerns about a possible Klingon invasion of the station, so I figured it was better safe than sorry to keep one in a safe near my desk. Turns out I was right, but for the wrong reasons."

"I still can't believe you learned how to fight with a bat'leth," Dooku muttered.

"I learned a lot of things over the last thirty-five years, Admiral," Severin said dryly.

Kenobi raised an eyebrow, looking at Dooku then looking at Severin, but wisely did not comment, just sipping tea.

Mace Windu scowled. "Is that the only one of them?" he asked.

Severin nodded. "I ran microcellular scans on the others before I came down here." At the *you were supposed to be on break* look that Dooku shot him, Severin shot an annoyed look back. "There are no other Species 8472 among the rest of the Klingon survivors. They're all Klingon."

"It's probable that they didn't know," Dooku said, "and when they're under interrogation, I'd like to sit in to confirm that knowledge."

Windu nodded. "I agree, we'll let you be a living lie detector."

"If one Klingon was really an impostor," Kenobi said, "I wonder if there's any others."

"Indeed," Dooku said. "Which has concerning implications."

"The worst of which is," Windu said, "what if this war was started by Species 8472 to turn the Klingon Empire and Federation against each other. And what reason would they have for doing that."

"That's not the worst," Severin said. "The worst would be if Species 8472 had also infiltrated the Federation to make decisions on behalf of the Federation that would make for an unwinnable, protracted Klingon-Federation war."

For a moment, you could hear a pin drop in the conference room.

Finally, Dooku broke the silence. "Until we know precisely what's going on, we cannot assume the worst case scenarios. But we should operate on the assumption that there is at least some level of infiltration happening *somewhere*, and we need to decide what we're going to do with the information we currently have."

"Starfleet Command should be notified as soon as possible," Kenobi said.

"Ordinarily I would agree with you," Dooku said, "but I worked for Starfleet Command before I was assigned here. They are bureaucratic, and have some severe blind spots in their judgment. As a notorious example of this, their decision against intervention in the Klingon-Gorn conflict helped lead us to the mess we're in now."

"So you're saying we shouldn't talk to Starfleet Command and act of our own accord? That will go over splendidly."

"I didn't say that."

Kenobi waited, and Dooku went on, "If we're going to bring this to Starfleet Command's attention, it would also be helpful if we had a plan already formulated, so Starfleet Command doesn't take the next three months to get back to us while they think of something of theirs. And in presenting this plan to them, it would be most helpful if we had allies who co-signed on the plan as a good idea, perhaps even co-authoring the

plan with us. Allies who are high-ranked, and have experience with the kind of things we're dealing with presently." Dooku leaned back in his chair with a small sigh. "Unfortunately, they are in short supply these days."

"Most of *Voyager* is retired," Kenobi said. "They would be the ones who have the most experience dealing with Species 8472."

"And as far as the kind of war we're in... the last conflict of this scale was the Dominion War, which was over thirty-four years ago. Doctor Yusanis and I are the only two officers in this entire sector to have seen the Dominion War. It would be useful to get someone who had command experience during that war, to help us determine our next step, and present it to Starfleet. I can get in touch with Admiral Riker, but it would help if we have more than one co-signer."

"Perhaps a meeting to present our information and discuss a plan," Kenobi said.

Dooku nodded. "Yes."

"There's Captain Dax, who I served under aboard the *Aventine*," Severin said.

"What was her rank during the Dominion War?"

"Er, Counselor."

Dooku snorted. "As I said, *command experience*."

Severin's nostrils flared. "Why is her experience considered not good enough for this meeting? You're a telepath and empath, you must have some appreciation of how difficult it would be for a counselor during something like the Dominion War."

"Which is still different than a command position, deciding military strategy and potentially making life decisions, whilst that war was taking place." Dooku set his jaw. "My point stands."

"Fine."

Obi-Wan sipped his tea again, clearly intrigued by the exchange.

Severin let out a small sigh. "Well..." He ran a nervous hand through his curls. "There is someone who has that kind of command experience, as well as war experience *before that*, but they've been retired for awhile. Still, they're an old friend, and if I ask they might be willing to come out here and help advise us."

"And that would be...?" Dooku was dreading the answer being "Elizabeth Shelby", both because he personally disliked her when they served together in Starfleet Command, and also due to what had been implied with Severin's history.

"Kai Kira."

"The current Kai of Bajor."

"Yes."

"If you think you can persuade her to meet with us..."

"She'll come. Who else is coming to this thing? And when?"

Dooku looked at Kenobi, and Kenobi said, "The sooner we have this meeting, the better."

Dooku nodded. "I agree. Five days from now would be enough for Admiral Riker and Kai Kira to get here if we stressed it was a priority and they left tomorrow at warp 9. As far as anyone else..." He reached for a PADD, and began to scan for active members of Starfleet who'd served aboard *Voyager*. Admiral Tuvok was flag officer of the First Fleet, the first line of defense for Earth and core worlds like Vulcan, Betazed, and Alpha Centauri II against the Klingons, if they got to be so bold. "I'll get in touch with Admiral Tuvok. It's a pity Ambassador B'Elanna Torres was killed when this conflict started, she would have been invaluable."

"What about Worf?" Kenobi asked; the first Klingon member of Starfleet was famous even to his generation.

"From reports, Worf went into exile when the conflict started," Dooku said. "He, too, would have been of great help."

"So," Severin said, "Admiral Tuvok, then?"

Dooku nodded. "If he agrees to it."

"I'll open a channel to Bajor once I get back to my quarters."

"You had better eat something," Dooku muttered.

Kenobi looked at Dooku again, and then at Severin, and took another sip of his tea.

"Commander Fisto," Dooku said, turning attention to the chief engineer. "How is progress coming with analyzing the weapons systems of the warbird we captured?"

Fisto nodded. "It's coming along. The reflectors are advanced, but our engineers and scientists are confident we can replicate them and upon Starfleet approval, start refitting our fleets with them... and the station itself."

"Excellent." Dooku nodded. "Let's hope we can get that done before the Klingons come back."

"So speaking of the Klingons coming back," Kenobi said, "we may want to consider calling one of the fleets to patrol the starbase, not leave us open a second time."

"I agree," Dooku said. "We should have already had a damn fleet guarding us, but Starfleet is stretched thin with the war having gone on so long. And unfortunately, calling in any of the fleets from their current position leaves it vulnerable. We will either have to assemble a new fleet, or determine which location is least essential. The former would take some time but is the safer option."

"We can discuss that later, perhaps."

"Yes. Tomorrow morning would be best, after we've all had a chance to rest." Dooku looked around the conference table. "If there is nothing else, this meeting is adjourned."

—

Qui-Gon Jinn was waiting for his husband near the conference room; Obi-Wan's face lit up at the sight of him and they embraced. Then Qui smiled and waved to Severin, who managed a weak, tired smile in response.

"You look like hell, Grandfather," Qui said.

"Thanks." Severin chuckled as he ran a hand through his curls. "I feel worse than hell, so I'll take that as a compliment."

Just then Severin's stomach growled loudly, and Dooku shot him an annoyed look as he passed by.

"Why don't you come have dinner with us?" Qui asked.

"I don't want to impose," Severin said.

Qui waved a dismissive hand. "You wouldn't be imposing."

"All right." Severin sighed and nodded. "I have to feed my cat first."

They stopped at Severin's quarters first so he could feed his cat, who Qui and Obi fussed over while Severin used the bathroom, and then he accompanied them to his quarters. Qui replicated a meat dumpling dish popular on Alpha Eridani II, with stuffed Eridani cabbage leaves and a gourd soup on the side. As they ate, Qui talked about programming the recipes into the replicator, which he learned from his grandmother Temyra. Severin listened fondly as Qui talked about spending a lot of time with his grandmother, who fostered his love of working with plants.

"She spent a lot of time outdoors as a child," Severin said, "helping me and her mother in the garden. I also built a treehouse for the kids, and we had a pond on our property."

"She likes fishing too," Qui said, nodding.

"Yeah." Severin sighed, recollecting taking a boat out on the pond and teaching his kids to fish. His memories of his daughter were happy, but also bittersweet since her mother was dead and the fate of most of her siblings was unknown.

Qui frowned; Severin had been picking at his food. "You don't like it?"

"I like it," Severin said honestly, and shoveled food into his mouth. "I've had a very stressful day."

"Ah." Qui nodded. "I remember Grandmother mentioned you have a tendency of not eating under stress."

Obi-Wan snorted. "The Admiral commented on that during our meeting."

Severin shoved more food in his mouth. *Ah shit, here it comes.*

Obi raised an eyebrow as he sipped wine. "What's the deal with the two of you, anyway?"

Severin swallowed nervously. "Well, like he and I have mentioned, we go a way back - we served aboard the *Trident* in the Dominion War, and we both survived Wolf 359 when most of the *Melbourne* didn't."

"There seems a familiarity there that the Admiral usually doesn't allow himself with others," Obi-Wan said, "so I was curious."

Severin had some of the wine being served with the meal. There was a long pause, and Severin said, "We served together for seven years."

Qui-Gon's eyes locked with his - even though his great-grandson was only a quarter El-Aurian, Severin knew that was just enough to inherit the El-Aurian gifts of listening and observation - including and especially to what was unsaid. Severin didn't feel like getting into his history right then, however, especially not in front of Dooku's first officer. So he just raised his eyebrows slightly at his great-grandson before polishing off his drink. "This is good wine," Severin said.

"Another glass?" Qui gestured to the bottle.

"Please."

Qui and Obi's cats came over to the table, begging with loud meows. Severin reached down and skritch the cats, thinking of Sagan, and then Dooku's cat Pelo. He wondered what Dooku was doing right about now, feeling a pang of concern since he knew Dooku had to be even more stressed out, empathically flooded by the emotions of the starbase's officers and civilians after the harrowing attack from the Klingons, in addition to his own anxiety, and how close to home it would hit after his experiences with other wars.

On his way back from Qui and Obi's, he saw Dooku coming down the hall, in his fencing gear, carrying a rapier. He had clearly been in the holodeck working out his frustrations with duelling.

"Yan." Severin paused before entering his quarters, giving a nod of acknowledgment, cursing internally at how attractive Dooku was when he lifted his helmet.

"Severin." Dooku raised an eyebrow. "You've eaten. Good."

Severin rolled his eyes. "Yes, *Mother*."

Dooku glared. Severin gave him a faux innocent grin.

"I have in fact eaten," Severin said. "My great-grandson and his husband made sure of that. Have *you* eaten?"

Dooku nodded. "I was thinking about having a glass of wine to relax before I sleep, now that I've worked the adrenaline out of my system." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and said, "Would you care to join me?"

Severin was surprised by the offer, considering the tension at the senior officer's meeting, but then, just before the Klingon attack they'd been hiking together in the arboretum. He took a moment to consider and then he nodded and said, "I've had two glasses of wine, but a third probably wouldn't hurt. Let me see to my cat and I'll be over in five minutes, if that works for you?"

"It does."

When Severin entered his quarters, Sagan came right to the door, rubbing up against his legs, meowing plaintively as if he'd been left alone for two days rather than two hours. Severin stooped to pet and skritch him, and Sagan followed him to the bathroom. Sometimes Severin didn't like the cat coming in there with him but he knew Sagan would paw at the door and cry, so he let the cat come in; after years of owning a cat, Severin still felt self-conscious when Sagan watched him use the "people litterbox".

After washing up, Severin gave Sagan some more attention, sitting down for a moment to hold the cat and pet him and make reassuring noises. "I'm going back out," he explained, as if Sagan could actually understand him, "but I'll be back, OK, baby?"

Sagan kneaded and purred.

Severin continued to hold Sagan for a couple of minutes, then gently placed him down on the floor and stood up, grabbing a device used for cleaning pet hair and lint off clothing and seeing to his uniform, even though he knew Dooku's cat would probably shed on him as well.

Dooku was quick to answer his door, showing up in a pair of silky black pajamas. They were V-neck, and Severin swallowed hard at the sight of the white chest hair peeking out, his face burning as he felt that thrust in his loins. *Damn him*.

Severin sat on the couch, with Pelo coming over to sniff, and he climbed on Severin's lap just as Dooku brought over a wine bottle and two glasses. He sat down next to him on the couch to pour.

It was white wine, in contrast with the red Severin had with dinner. Severin saw the vintage - it was from France, a Muscat Blanc. He smiled fondly as he swirled the wine in his glass, inhaling deeply. "I've been to the vineyard where this was made."

"I know." Dooku also smiled. "I remember you telling me, years ago. I own a number of different wines and I chose this one carefully, since you were coming."

"Well, thank you." Their eyes met.

Dooku raised his glass and said, "To our continued survival."

"À *votre santé*."

They clinked glasses, and Pelo climbed between them, resting partially on Severin and partially on Dooku; as they pet him together, their fingers accidentally brushed. In Severin's other hand, his glass shook, feeling the small jolt at his touch.

Dooku didn't react, only sipping his wine, and a moment later, reached for the remote on the coffee table. "Would you like to watch something with me?"

"Like old times." Severin remembered when they used to watch movies together, before they became a couple, and continued to do so afterwards.

"Yes."

"I hadn't banked on staying more than a little while, but I suppose my cat will forgive me if I'm gone another two hours."

"Good."

—

Halfway through *Die Hard*, Severin fell asleep.

Dooku knew it wasn't boredom - Severin's three glasses of wine had become four, and the alcohol combined with exhaustion from a long day hit Severin harder than either of them thought it would. Dooku thought about waking Severin up and sending him back to his quarters, but he looked so peaceful resting there that he was reluctant to do so.

Peaceful and beautiful.

It had been thirty-five years since the last time he'd seen Severin sleeping. Sometimes, if Severin would fall asleep first, or he'd wake up first, he'd lay there awhile to watch him sleep, admiring his beauty. And despite his better judgment and his continued resolve to not let himself fall back in love and attempt to rekindle a relationship, he couldn't take his eyes off the doctor now, hearing himself sigh.

He waited until the movie was over, though he was only half paying attention now as he kept stealing glances at Severin, who was leaning against him, snoring softly. When the movie was over he gently shook Severin's shoulder. "Sev," he said.

Severin, normally a light sleeper, continued to snore.

"Sev."

Severin still slept.

Dooku began tapping his shoulders, cleared his throat, and raised his voice. "*Doctor Yusanis.*"

Severin picked his head up and blinked, looking dazed. "Wha?"

"Sev, you fell asleep during the movie. You should go back to your quarters now."

"Oh." Severin blinked again. "OK." Then, as if Dooku hadn't said anything at all, he leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes, falling back asleep.

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. He considered waking him up again, but decided he could let Severin sleep there. He got up, went to the linen closet, and came back with a blanket, which he gently draped over Severin. The sight of him wrapped in a fuzzy blue blanket just made him even more deliciously adorable - *damn him* - and Dooku frowned, frustrated with himself for reacting this way. His frustration intensified when Pelo hopped back on the couch and proceeded to curl up on Severin once more, snuggling into the blanket, kneading and purring loudly.

Dooku got ready for bed, brushing his teeth, and then sat on a cushion in the walk-in closet he'd turned into a meditation space, clearing his mind, tuning out the ever-present white noise of the starbase. His thoughts kept returning to Severin cuddling the blanket and his cat, and then, all of the nights Severin had fallen asleep in his arms, nuzzling his chest hair, the weight and shape of Severin's body warm and cozy against him, his solace at the end of each day, his gratitude each morning. As he climbed into his bed, he was painfully aware of sleeping alone, as he'd done every night since Severin had left for the *Exeter* so long ago. He'd learned, somewhere along the line, to tolerate it, to just deal, to harden his heart to survive. But now, it was almost unbearably lonely, aching into his bones for touch, for warmth.

Somehow, Dooku managed to get to sleep.

—

There was a scream, and tortured, broken sobbing. Dooku was up and running before he was even aware of what he was doing. "Computer, *lights,*" he commanded, with the lights in his quarters going on as he made his way to the couch.

Severin was curled up in the fetal position, weeping hysterically. Dooku could feel the anguish, could even see in his mind's eye the remnants of Severin's nightmare - the Borg attack on El-Auria, seeing his wife and son for the last time. The Borg attack morphed into Wolf 359 and escaping on the *Melbourne* as most of the ship died, and then it morphed into Klingons attacking the starbase... a nightmare about seeing Dooku, and Qui-Gon, killed right before his eyes.

"Sev." Dooku was sitting beside him now, and without thinking about it, pulled Severin into his arms, holding him close, rocking him gently. "Sev, it's all right. You had a bad dream..."

Severin looked up at him and blinked through his tears. "Did I fall asleep here?"

He didn't even remember being woken up. "Yes. You fell asleep during the movie. I tried to get you to wake up and go back to your quarters but you just fell asleep, so..." He gestured to the blanket. "I tried to make sure you'd be comfortable."

"I'm sorry." Severin sniffled. "I know you were just trying to relax, and didn't count on having an unexpected overnight guest, let alone one who would wake you up screaming..."

"It's all right." His arms instinctively tightened around Severin, and he stroked the doctor's mop of dark curls, much as he'd done years ago. *Gods*, he'd missed doing that, savoring the texture around his fingers, even as his internal logic alarm was sounding *no no no NO*.

"I'm so sorry," Severin sobbed; Dooku realized he was apologizing just as much to his dead wife and son, and the crew of the *Melbourne*, as to him. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry..."

The memory of the *Melbourne* clawed at Dooku as well, something that had plagued his own dreams over the years. "Shhhhh. It's all right."

Severin continued to cry into him for the next few minutes, and Dooku let him. At last, Dooku asked, "Would you like a glass of water?"

Severin nodded. Dooku got up - Severin let out a little cry of protest as he did, with the comfort of contact taken away. Dooku got a glass of ice water from the replicator as quickly as he could, and sat back down, letting Severin lean on him as he drank. He continued petting Severin's curls, not thinking about it.

When Severin finished the glass of water, he said, "I should probably go back to my quarters."

Dooku could feel the reluctance to pull away from him - a reluctance that he shared. They looked into each other's eyes; the raw pain in Severin's dark eyes made Dooku feel like crying. "You don't have to," he said. "If you don't want to be alone tonight, you can..." He swallowed hard. "Sleep next to me."

"Sleep...?"

"Yes, *sleep*." The word came out more forcefully than Dooku intended - gods, how he ached for them to seek comfort the way they used to during the Dominion War, fucking the pain away - but he was trying, with every ounce of his strength, to not give in. This was already too close to the line, and yet, Severin *needed* it. He could feel it. He needed it too.

Severin didn't protest. He was still in his uniform, and Dooku thought about replicating him a pair of pajamas in his size to change into, but Severin looked and *felt* exhausted - Severin's exhaustion was like a lead apron on his mind - and Dooku wanted him to be able to get back to sleep as possible. So Severin climbed into bed next to him. Dooku pulled up the covers around him and said, "Computer, lights out."

—

At the sound of the wake-up alarm, they stirred. Severin gave a little gasp in shock as he felt Dooku spooning him from behind, Dooku's arms wrapped around him.

He remembered the nightmare, and Dooku comforting him. He remembered getting in bed next to him, and the two of them falling back asleep on opposite sides of the bed. Apparently, they had rolled together at some point, and here they were, spooning like old times.

And just like old times, Dooku didn't let him go right away. He nuzzled Severin's curls - Severin heard the soft sigh. Part of Severin wanted to break loose, scream "what the hell are you playing at"... and part of him never wanted to leave. Laying there in his arms felt incredibly *right*, like a missing piece had been restored.

It was so right... and that was precisely why it was so wrong. They could not walk this path again. Severin *would not* allow his heart to be broken a second time.

Severin sat up. "Shit," he said.

Dooku sat up. They looked at each other for an awkward moment - Severin could see the disappointment in his eyes. "I gotta, uh." Severin ran a hand through his hair. "Feed my cat, take a shower, change, get ready for work."

"Do you want to stay for breakfast?" Dooku sounded almost sad.

"Maybe some other time." Severin didn't mean to be so abrupt, as he got out of bed, but he couldn't help it. Even though nothing had happened, they'd just slept, there was still *emotional* intimacy, and that made him feel as if he might as well be naked.

Just before Severin could leave his quarters, Dooku said, "Have a good day, Sev."

Severin looked over his shoulder and nodded. "You too, Yan."

As soon as he stepped into his own quarters, Severin leaned against the wall, fighting back the urge to cry once more. The nightmare had been so bloody awful, and Dooku's comfort had been wonderful. Too wonderful. He didn't want to relive the nightmare but *oh* to relive that moment of being held, petted...

"I can't do this," Severin heard himself say aloud. "I can't do this..."

Just before he could cry, Sagan meowed, and Severin distracted himself by tending to the cat's physical and emotional needs, before he climbed into the shower and proceeded to wash away the funk of yesterday's work, the nightmare, and the scent of the man he still loved.

Chapter 18

After a busy morning, Severin took his afternoon break at the usual time. He spent the first few minutes of his break just sitting at his desk with his face in his hands, thinking about the can of worms he'd opened last night, and feeling very sad - missing what he had with Dooku, but also being afraid to go there a second time.

He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't notice when Qui-Gon Jinn arrived at his desk, and jumped a little in his seat when he looked up and saw him standing there.

"Qui-Gon," Severin said, quickly composing himself, reaching for the water at his desk. "How may I help you?"

"Hello, Grandfather," Qui-Gon said, smiling warmly. He held out a box like the kind restaurants use to take food home. "I brought you lunch."

"Oh." Severin raised his eyebrows and sat back in his chair. "*Oh*. I see. That's very nice of you, but I have a replicator right there..." He gestured behind him.

"And you haven't used it."

Severin gave him an annoyed look, and Qui-Gon's smile got broader.

"Grandmother did say you tend to not eat when you're stressed out," Qui-Gon said, "and I can see that's true."

Severin let out a small huff as he accepted the container and opened it. It was a salad of smoked fish and leafy vegetables, gourds, and nightshades, dressed with a dry spice rub, a combination of heat and cool crispness; it reminded Severin of his favorite dish back on El-Auria even though the exact ingredients were no longer available and these were the closest approximate. "Wow," he said. "You did your research?"

"Grandmother told me a few things that you like." Qui-Gon nodded.

Severin gestured to the chair on the other side of his desk. "Do you want to stay and join me?"

"Unfortunately I'm running some errands, so I can't, but another time perhaps?" Then he gave Severin a stern look. "Just make sure you eat that. Nobody should have to remind a doctor to take care of himself and fuel properly."

Severin rolled his eyes. It was like being nagged by Temyra, and Sarenya before her. But then he smiled. "Thank you," he said. "I appreciate it. It looks delicious."

"Let me know how you like it," Qui-Gon said. "Grandmother has some El-Aurian recipes that she translated to Eridani ingredients, so there's more where this came from."

Severin felt himself get choked up, and before he could get emotional, Qui-Gon waved and was off. Not wanting to break down crying, Severin distracted himself by making himself eat - the meal wasn't an exact match for what he remembered but it was close enough to feel like a piece of home.

Home. Where he hadn't been last night. He had planned on contacting Kira last night and that didn't happen, and time was of the essence if she was going to make this meeting. He opened a channel to the Bajoran government, and after waiting a moment, a bored-looking man showed up on screen. "Please state the order of your business," he said.

"I have urgent need to speak with Kai Kira on behalf of the Federation," Severin said.

"One moment, I will transfer you."

The emblem of Bajor's government winked back on screen, and then was replaced with the emblem of the Great Temple. A few minutes later, a ranjen appeared, old and wizened and more sour-looking than Dooku in his foulest mood. "Blessings," he said, sounding like he didn't mean it. "Kai Kira is in prayer. I can take a message and she will respond at her earliest convenience."

"As you may have been told, this is urgent. As in an emergency. I need to talk to her now."

"I am not sure that we would agree," the ranjen said.

Severin glared. "With all due respect, *your Grace*, you don't get to decide what the United Federation of Planets considers to be an emergency or not."

"May I ask to the nature of this emergency?"

"I would rather speak to her Eminence myself, as the information is sensitive."

"*Her Eminence is in prayer*." The ranjen doubled down. "Surely it can wait a half-hour?"

"No. *It cannot*." Severin sighed. "Look. Tell her Eminence the message is from Severin Yusanis. She knows who I am."

"She will not appreciate being interrupted."

"She can take that out on me." Severin grinned.

The ranjen considered, and then with a slight roll of his eyes and a curt nod, he said, "Please wait."

The emblem of the Great Temple came back on screen, now with some chime music, and at last, Kira showed up on screen. She wore royal purple robes with a matching cap, and her earring was long and had many dangling attachments. Age had been kind to her; she was sixty-six now, and her short hair was silver under the cap, she had a few wrinkles, most notably the crow's feet at her eyes, but Severin still found her beautiful, even moreso as her face lit up at the sight of him on-screen - it had been a few months since they'd last talked, due to both of them being busy. It had, indeed, been a few years since they'd seen each other in-person, due to Severin's Starfleet duties and Kira's duties as Kai. "Sev! What's going on?"

"Nerys," Severin said, smiling fondly at her. "You look radiant."

Kira snickered. "Don't tell me the 'emergency' here is you need to get laid."

"Would I do that?" Severin's smile became a big, cheesy grin.

Kira raised an eyebrow and gave him an accusatory look.

They laughed together, and then Severin said, "There is actually a serious matter at hand. We have a piece of evidence that could be a gamechanger in the war against the Klingons, and we are having a meeting here on Starbase 24 with a few officers who were around back in the old days, on what we should do with this piece of information. Your presence is requested... extracurricular activities would be an added bonus but not the nature of the emergency itself."

"'Extracurricular activities.' You haven't changed at all."

"No." Severin leered.

Kira chuckled, and then she sobered up. "Sev. As much as I'd love to see you again, I'm retired from Starfleet. This is my life now. You know this."

"I do know this," Severin said. "I also know that we don't have too many of the old guard around anymore, who commanded in the Dominion War, and we need the expertise of those who did, weighing in on this subject. Like I said, the fate of this war hangs in the balance. *Please.*"

"I take it it's something too sensitive to discuss from here, and I would have to travel?"

Severin nodded. "Actually, you'd need to leave no later than, uh, four hours from now, if not sooner. Warp 9. The Admiral already has coordinated transport for you from Deep Space Nine."

Then Kira realized, blinking as it registered. "Oh... you're not on the *Aventine* anymore."

"No. I've been here on Starbase 24 for approximately a month. We're very close to the neutral zone, this is where the action is."

"No wonder you sound exhausted."

Severin frowned. "I'm fine, Nerys."

"No you're not."

Severin sighed.

Kira also sighed. "I'll be there. I can't believe I'm doing this, but -"

"It's for the greater good."

Kira nodded. "If that's all, I need to make some arrangements to take care of things in my absence."

"That's fine." Severin managed one last smile. "I'm looking forward to seeing you again."

Kira laughed. "I bet you are."

Severin blew her a kiss, Kira winked, and then the transmission ended.

Severin sat for a moment, feeling nervous and excited all at once about seeing Kira again. He also knew it had the potential to be awkward with Dooku... but they'd cross that bridge when they came to it. Severin looked at the empty food box sitting in front of him, and he got up to put it in the waste receptacle, and then, recalling the meal, he decided it was time to make another call.

He didn't know what time it was where his daughter lived, and if she'd be awake or available right now, but he thought it was worth a shot,

anyway. After waiting a few moments as the relay went through, the connection was finally established on Alpha Eridani II, and Temyra appeared on-screen.

"I knew from the Federation logo it would either be you or Qui-Gon," Temyra said.

"Hello, *nessira*." Severin smiled, trying to not cry at the mere sight of his baby girl.

"Father. How are you?"

"Tired," Severin admitted. "Stressed."

"I can imagine." Temyra nodded.

"We were attacked recently," Severin said. "I would have called sooner, but I've been working non-stop."

"I understand." Temyra pursed her lips. "But you know I worry, Father."

"We're all worried around here." Severin sighed. "How have you been?"

"Well enough. It's springtime, and I was out planting my garden when I heard the hail. If this year is anything like last year, there will be plenty of berries and vegetables. I ought to send you a shipment of pickles and jam, I remember you liked jam on your toast." Temyra smirked. "That is, when you actually eat."

"Ha. Ha. You really do take after your mother. And Qui-Gon takes after you considerably."

"I assume he brought you lunch."

"He did. Thank you for giving him those recipes. That was a really nice treat today."

"Now imagine having that fresh, not from a replicator." Temyra folded her arms. "Instead of me sending you jam, you should really come visit."

"I want to very badly, *nessi*. It's been too long and I miss you *so* much." Severin felt another surge of emotion, and fought the tears blurring his eyes. "I can't exactly go on shore leave right now, with the war. It's been too crazy here."

"No, perhaps not. But..." Temyra sighed. "How many wars have you been in, Father?"

"Official Federation wars? With the Borg, then the Dominion War, and this one. Unofficially, I've been in a few scuffs on starships, and the decades I was with the other refugees from home was a constant battle for survival."

Temyra nodded, and gave Severin a disapproving look. "So three officially, then."

"Yes."

"Have you punished yourself enough?"

Severin's eyebrows went up at that, and his mouth dropped open. He blinked, taken aback, and when he was able to speak again, he heard himself saying, "Temyra. *Nessi*. I put on this uniform to find a purpose in life again, after I lost literally everything and everyone I loved."

"I *know* you've felt no small amount of guilt over surviving, when Mother did not. And dedicated your life to preserve as much life as possible... putting yourself in harm's way over and over again. But when is enough enough? When do you decide that you've expunged the guilt, you've paid off whatever debt that you *think* you have - even though there is none - and you do something else with your life? When do you stop fighting the war inside, and find peace?"

Severin blinked again, and leaned back in his chair. He didn't know what to say to that - he knew every argument he could make in response would seem hollow, somehow.

"Blood sings," Temyra said, quoting an ancient El-Aurian proverb. "Even across the galaxy, you can't hide the truth."

Severin looked away, feeling the sudden irrational urge to hide under his desk, but remained in his chair.

"Maybe instead of shore leave," Temyra said, "when this is all over... come to Alpha Eridani II to *live*. You can meet your grandchildren and other great-grandchildren. You would be welcomed here. There would be a lot of things for you to do." And then Temyra's voice sounded very small, like the little girl she'd once been, but weighted with a lifetime of sadness. "I need my father."

Severin fell apart at that, letting out a strangled sob. Temyra's jaw quivered, and she made no effort to hide the tears slowly rolling down her cheeks.

After taking a few minutes just to cry, Severin finally said, his voice shaking, "I've never been where you live, and I don't want to commit to spend the rest of my life someplace I've never been before. But I intend to visit, and we can... take it from there, maybe."

"So you'll consider getting out of Starfleet."

Severin pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'll consider not putting myself in harm's way for awhile. I'm not exactly keen on retiring completely, maybe Starfleet will have some sort of ambassador or liaison job for me or something, if Eridani needs one."

"You as an ambassador, hmm... you'd be a big hit at parties. Some of my fondest memories are of you having had a few drinks and belting out horrible pop songs and nobody could tell if you were dancing or having a seizure. Not that you need alcohol to look like a fool."

"*Hey now.*" Severin gave her a mock stern look. "Are you making fun of your old man?"

Temyra smiled. "Of course."

"You're grounded."

"I'm too old for you to ground."

"Hi Too Old For You To Ground... I'm Dad."

Temyra glared. "Don't make me regret asking you to come out here."

Severin grinned. "Too late."

Temyra gave a sigh of feigned annoyance, and then she said, "I still need my father."

Severin covered his face with his hands, the emotions surging again. "Ow."

"I'm sorry."

Severin looked out from between his hands. "Hi Sorry, I'm -"

"All right. I need to return to the garden." Temyra rolled her eyes. "*Please* consider the offer. It would be no trouble to give you a room here in my house, or find you a place in the city."

"I make no promises but I'll consider it." Severin nodded.

"In the meantime... don't be a stranger. I'd like to hear from you at least a few times every week."

"I can do that. I'm very busy, but I'll try."

Temyra smirked. "Hi Very Busy But I'll Try, I'm -"

"This is my proudest moment as a parent." Severin reached out then to touch the screen. "I love you."

Temyra also touched the screen, so it looked like their hands were touching. "I love you too."

When the transmission ended, Severin noticed his break had been over for ten minutes but he still wasn't quite ready to scrub in. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He had a lot to think about.

He had too much to feel.

Chapter 19

Over the next few days, Severin and Dooku managed to avoid each other as much as possible, both men feeling intensely awkward after their night of cuddling up together. Dooku was grateful that he had too much to do to dwell on it much, including assisting with the interrogations on the captured Klingons.

The night before the guests to the starbase were scheduled to arrive, Dooku went in for a counseling session with Yoda, speaking frankly about the stress caused by the Klingon attack on the base, and the stress of knowing there was at least one member of Species 8472 that had infiltrated the Klingons, and what this implied for the future of the war.

"I have not felt this powerless since the Dominion War," Dooku admitted.

"Hrmm." Yoda nodded, ears twitching slightly. "And cycles repeat themselves, feel you."

"Yes." Dooku sighed. "This is like the same bloody thing all over again."

"And with a certain doctor, no?"

Dooku gave Yoda a withering look. He should have expected that the topic of Severin would come up, but it still threw him off-guard. Dooku sat back on the couch in Yoda's quarters, not able to say anything in response.

"How goes it, your friendship with him?" Yoda inquired.

Dooku took a deep breath. "Awkward. Let's go with awkward."

"Hrmm? How so?"

"We slept together."

Yoda's eyes widened.

"No, *not like that.*" Dooku frowned. *Though I've been aching for it.* "He came to visit and fell asleep in my quarters. He had a rough day so I just let him sleep - then he had a nightmare and I invited him into bed with me. We woke up spooning."

"I see." Yoda nodded slowly. "And uncomfortable, you are?"

"He and I haven't talked to each other all week. It seems like we took three steps forward and five steps back."

"Avoiding him will help not. Talk to him, you should, if friendship, you continue to desire."

The problem is that it's more than friendship I desire, and I shouldn't. But Dooku wasn't going to speak those words out loud. Saying them made it inescapably real, not able to be swept back under the rug. "I suppose."

Though Yoda kept his expression neutral, and his species was difficult for Betazoids to read, Dooku nonetheless got the distinct sense Yoda already knew, but had too much tact to address it - or at least for now. "If steps backwards you take, steps forward, you walk. Otherwise, perhaps serve together, you should not."

Dooku cringed. "We're not exactly in a position to replace the chief medical officer considering *he* was a replacement." *And I don't want to go another thirty-five years without seeing him again.*

"That you had to replace him, I said not. Only that consider it, you may, if too awkward it is, and your duties, it interferes with. But again... accomplish that, you do, by moving forward."

"So just... talk to him?"

"When ready, you are. But put it off too long, you should not."

Dooku nodded. "Thank you, Counselor." He got up. "I'll take all of this under advisement."

He was definitely not ready to deal with it tonight, and went back to his quarters alone.

—

Dooku was in his ready room when the page came from Ahsoka Tano. "Admiral," she said, "the USS *MacArthur* is approaching."

"Splendid. I will be in the shipbay shortly."

On his way to the shipbay, he took a detour to sickbay. Severin was using a dermal regenerator on the face, neck, and arm of a small Cardassian girl who had the misfortune to be on one of the decks to sustain heavy damage during the Klingon attack, and had received a number of severe plasma burns. The worst was over, but the burns had to be treated in stages. The girl whined a little as she lay on the exam table; Dooku sensed she was uncomfortable and the dermal regenerator scared her. Severin's free hand took one of her hands, and Dooku couldn't help but smile as the girl instinctively wrapped her fist around Severin's index finger.

"You've been so good through this, Elia," Severin assured her. "You're very brave. Very strong."

"Yes," said her mother - a civilian scientist Dooku recognized as Doctor Keskali Bral, who worked for the Daystrom Institute developing weapons for the Federation here on Starbase 24, who was watching the procedure from a few meters away.

Elia beamed up at him, and Severin grinned back and slipped his finger out of her hand to boop her nose, making her giggle. Then he affectionately tousled her hair and said, "Almost done, sweetheart. But first..." He reached under the exam table and pulled out a stuffed red bunny wearing a bow on its head and around its neck, with a heart pattern on the paws. "This is for you for being such a trooper."

"Awww. He's cute!" Elia hugged the bunny, and Severin continued working the dermal regenerator on her arm.

"Almost done," he soothed. "Soon you'll never be able to tell anything happened."

Dooku knew from Severin's time as chief medical officer on the *Trident* that he had a kind, warm bedside manner, but nothing showed his heart quite like this. It was in those moments, Dooku saw what Severin was like as a parent - they had come so close to raising a child together, themselves - and it made his heart ache, making him fall in love with Severin all over again. He hated that, but he couldn't make himself leave.

A few minutes later, Severin patted her shoulder and said, "All done! Yayyyy!"

"Yay!" Elia grinned, and Dr. Bral came over to scoop her up, hug her tight, and twirl her around.

Then Dr. Bral turned to Severin and said, "Thank you, so much."

"No need to thank me, ma'am. Just doing my job." Severin smiled. "You both have a wonderful day." He reached into a compartment on his belt and produced a wrapped lollipop, which he put in Elia's hand, patting her again and waving.

Dr. Bral carried Elia out, and Dooku cleared his throat. Severin froze, startled, and then he turned around slowly. "How long have you been there?" Severin asked.

"Long enough," Dooku said.

Severin folded his arms. "So, what can I do for you?"

"The *MacArthur* is here, I thought you might like to come with me to greet your friend."

Severin looked at the clock, and then he nodded. "I can get away for a little while."

They said nothing on the way to the shipbay. They arrived just in time to see Kai Kira, clad in an emerald green robe with gold trim, a gold cloak, and a matching green-and-gold cap, a traveling bag made of traditional Bajoran tapestry slung over one shoulder, looking around cautiously. She walked faster when she saw Dooku and Severin walking towards her.

Dooku took her hand. "Your Eminence," he said. "I'm Admiral Yan Dooku, commanding officer here. Welcome to Starbase 24."

Kira's eyebrows went up slightly, as if in recognition, and then Dooku sensed that it was because she'd definitely heard the name... from Severin. He also sensed a very vague twinge of disapproval - she *knew* about their past history, somehow. Dooku was surprised by this, as Severin getting into that part of his past seemed rather intimate, especially for a commanding officer as she had been on Deep Space Nine.

Kira took his hand and shook it, and then with her right hand, she reached out and grabbed Dooku's ear with her thumb and forefinger; Dooku heard himself gasp with shock. A series of images flashed before his eyes: fire in a blacksmithing forge, two male bodies writhing together, a sword to his throat, three bright jewels like small suns, a frozen river and falling snow, a monstrous giant wearing a horned helm and wielding a large warhammer, facing the giant in single combat, bejeweled shield falling, forced to his knees, feeling himself die. In another place, another single combat, this one against a much younger man, each armed with glowing swords, forced to his knees before the death blow, an ominous voice calling out "DO IT" ...

Kira closed her eyes for a moment, and then she nodded. "You have a very strong *pagh*," she said.

Dooku didn't know whether or not saying "thank you" would be appropriate - and he was too shaken to make words, anyway, not knowing what the hell those mental images were, only that they felt like things that had happened to him, which was preposterous. So he said nothing. It was just as well, as Kira's attention immediately turned to Severin, her face lighting up with a brilliant smile as the two of them hugged each other tight. Severin also smiled, radiant and genuine.

"Nerys," Severin husked.

That, too, was more intimate than Dooku liked. And then, in the proximity of their embrace, Dooku sensed that it was because they were, in fact, intimate - something Severin had carefully shielded from him, holding the proverbial cards close to his chest until this moment. Dooku

now had the missing context on Severin's shrine to the Bajoran Prophets, and that slip of the tongue in the restaurant with "I know what Bajorans taste like". Severin Yusanis and Kira Nerys were lovers.

Dooku felt his blood boil. This was absolutely the last thing he wanted to deal with right now.

"When is the meeting, Admiral?" Kira asked.

Dooku tried to keep the edge out of his voice as he replied, "We'll be having an informal get-together at Ted's Place this evening at 2100, and then the meeting will be tomorrow at 0900, so everyone gets a chance to rest. No use discussing strategy when we're not fresh."

"All right." Kira nodded.

"I can show her to her quarters?" Severin asked.

Is that what you're calling it now. Dooku tried very hard to disguise the irritation, but he *knew* Severin knew he knew, now, and he could feel Severin's mixture of guilt, awkward discomfort, and... a little bit of smugness, as if he was flaunting that he'd managed to get on with his life, *you had your chance.* And underneath that smugness, he could sense Severin felt somewhat satisfied with the twinge of jealousy he picked up on... and Severin was also annoyed with himself that he liked knowing of the jealousy, that it proved he, too, still cared and hadn't *quite* moved on as well as he thought he did. Dooku's eyes locked with Severin's, and he gave a curt nod. "Yes."

"Right this way," Severin said, and the two of them walked out of the shipbay together.

"Dammit," Dooku growled under his breath.

—

When they were safely out of earshot, Kira turned to Severin and said, "So, that is *the* Dooku."

"That is, indeed, *the* Dooku."

Kira raised an eyebrow. "Are you two...?"

"*No.*" The word came out more sharply and forcefully than Severin intended, and he felt a twinge of self-consciousness about it. He gave a nervous laugh and said, "No. We're just friends."

"And...?" Kira cocked her head to one side. "It's not awkward, at all?"

"It's *super.* Fucking. Awkward." Severin sighed. "Especially after what happened a few nights ago."

"What happened?"

"We slept together."

Kira snorted.

Severin glared. "*Not like that.*"

Kira made the "OK" sign with her thumb and index finger, and Severin elbowed her playfully. "No. *Seriously.* It was just sleep. But it's made this entire week feel like walking on eggshells."

"Well." Kira frowned. "That's rough."

They got in the turbolift together; Severin closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to keep calm as the claustrophobia set in. Then Kira tapped his shoulder, and when he opened his eyes and looked into hers, Kira grabbed his head and kissed him hard.

Severin was definitely distracted now, kissing Kira back, the two of them moaning as their tongues swirled; Severin's hands slid down to cup Kira's still-shapely ass, rubbing gently. It took a few seconds for it to register with them that they were on the floor of their destination, and they pulled apart reluctantly; Severin took Kira's hand as they walked out of the turbolift together.

Once in Kira's quarters, they kissed again, and again. Kira's hands roamed over Severin's chest, and she nibbled on his neck, knowing the effect it had on him. "You got some time?" she purred.

Severin sighed. "Unfortunately, no. As it was, I wouldn't have left sickbay without Dooku coming by to escort me down to greet you. I have to get back, I've got patients to see." He stroked Kira's face. "But later? After the little soiree at Ted's?" He gave her a wicked grin. "I'll make it worth the wait."

Kira kissed his hand. "That sounds good." Then she took his hand and squeezed it. "I've missed you, Sev."

"I've missed you too." He hugged her again, and groaned at the feel of her body against his, her breasts pressing into his chest, internally

cursing that he had to go back to work. They kissed one more time, and then Severin strolled out, strutting just a little... but soon stopped, quickly deflated when he remembered the way Dooku looked in the shipbay. His reactions had been subtle, but he'd noticed them, skilled at reading others and his ex-partner in particular. Once again, he couldn't help feeling a little pride that Dooku was jealous, but then he chastised himself *why do you care?* and, on top of that, now he felt kind of bad for Dooku.

I shouldn't feel guilty. He and I have been done for thirty-five years. He was the one who ended it. He shouldn't expect me to have been celibate all this time.

But he didn't want to cause Dooku pain, either.

"Let me just get through the next hours," Severin said to himself as he got back in the turbolift to head to sickbay, and tried to push the conflictedness away, making himself "get in the zone" to scrub in again.

Chapter 20

Dooku was not an extravert and had difficulty socializing on his best days; it had made the office politics of Starfleet Command nigh unbearable. The get-together in Ted's had been Kenobi's idea, who raised his glass in acknowledgment as Dooku walked in, a few minutes late.

At least for once, Dooku was not the only six-four, silver-haired-and-bearded individual in the room - the seventy-five-year-old Admiral William Riker strode towards him, smiling warmly. "Admiral Dooku," he said, shaking Dooku's hand. Riker had been one of Dooku's few allies at Starfleet Command, no doubt influenced by past service on Betazed and being married to a Betazoid - Riker's wife, the seventy-four-year-old Deanna Troi, also smiled at Dooku, taking his hand.

Hello again, she spoke directly into his mind.

Hello. Dooku's small smile was genuine. *How is your mother?* It was a courtesy to the Ambassador of Betazed, who had known him since he was a small child.

Troi snorted. *The usual*.

That was all the answer Dooku needed, who affectionately rolled his eyes, making Troi's smile broaden, before turning back to Riker.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation to come out for this meeting," Dooku told both of them.

Riker nodded. "It's Shelby insurance. Speaking of... I didn't want to mention this in the transmission, but privately, for your information, she's going for head of Starfleet Command in a few months when Vernon retires."

Dooku wasn't surprised, but he found the news unpleasant nonetheless. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and had Riker and Troi follow him to the bar, where he had his first drink of the evening, a shot of Saurian brandy.

"I would prefer a moderate like Van Zant myself, who I hope gets the nod," Riker said. "I'm not looking forward to Shelby imposing even more unnecessary regulations, and especially not while this war is happening."

"Neither am I." Dooku downed his shot of brandy. The mention of Shelby made him look across the bar at Severin, who had Kira on his arm, with Qui-Gon showing them the assortment of hors d'oeuvres.

As if Severin could sense he was being watched, he looked over at Dooku, and their gaze just held for a moment. Dooku could feel Severin's guilt, as well as the tension of the continued awkwardness, and an undercurrent of sexual frustration. After hesitation, Severin leaned over and whispered something to Kira, and then the two of them approached.

"Ah," Dooku said. He gestured to both parties. "Admiral Riker, Admiral Troi, this is my chief medical officer, Severin Yusanis, and her Eminence, Kai Kira Nerys."

Kira looked at Riker as if she'd seen a ghost, and it took her a moment to accept their hands to shake. Severin gave Kira a confused look, noticing the reaction, and Kira forced a smile.

"A pleasure," Riker said, smiling back, unperturbed.

Severin ordered a glass of Red Torian at the bar, while Kira opted for a synthale. Ted, a cheery middle-aged Hispanic man, poured the drinks and then gave Dooku a second shot of brandy.

Severin and Dooku continued the awkwardness of looking at each other and saying nothing, until Riker decided to liven up the mood by producing his trombone and playing some jazz standards with Ted's house band; Severin and Kira danced together. Qui-Gon also dragged Obi-Wan out to dance, who looked sheepish about it, but went along to make his husband happy, and eventually had fun himself, laughing as they made fools of themselves.

Dooku walked to the observation window, where Admiral Tuvok was trying to blend into the scenery. "I'm normally not one for these things either," Dooku told him.

"No." Tuvok continued looking out at the towers and bridges and docks. "This is quite an impressive starbase. It's good to get the opportunity to see it for myself."

"I'll say to you what I've said to the others - thank you for accepting the invitation. Your counsel on this matter is extremely important."

His transmission with Tuvok about the meeting had been fairly curt - Tuvok had made him wait twenty minutes for a simple "yes, I'll be there" response. But now, Tuvok was ready to say something he wouldn't get into on a Federation channel, on-record. "Your choice to meet privately with a few of us rather than go directly to Starfleet Command is ill-advised," Tuvok said, "and we may all be subject to disciplinary review for even having this meeting. Nonetheless, I took the chance because if you need *my* help in particular, I have a few educated guesses about my areas of expertise, and all of them have ominous implications that make dealing with Starfleet Command a bit of a minefield."

"Yes." Dooku nodded. "It was very logical of you."

"It is my hope Starfleet Command will also understand we are trying to be logical and cautious, not misinterpret our actions as defiance." Tuvok's gaze focused on a *Galaxy*-class starship launching from the shipyard.

"Indeed." Dooku also watched the starship launch, which was an interesting sight no matter how many times he'd seen it. And then Dooku stopped talking, as uncomfortable with small talk as Tuvok was; he just nursed his Saurian brandy, counting the minutes until he could leave without seeming rude.

But then he stole another glance at Severin, who was joking and laughing with Kira as they played a skee ball game in the gaming section of Ted's. He sighed, and against his better judgment he went back to the bar to get a third shot of brandy. This had to be his last one for the evening. He noticed Troi watching him, who approached the bar on her own while Riker mingled. "I'll have a Samarian sunset," she told Ted.

Dooku watched the metamorphosis of the drink, swirling orange and gold. Troi tipped her glass to him and leaned back against the bar.

Dooku looked at Severin again, and let out a small sigh. He thought about going back to the observation window, but then he felt Troi looking at him, and then Troi's eyes were locked with his, and he waited for whatever she was going to say.

The doctor is your imzadi.

Dooku almost choked on his brandy. He knew he couldn't have been surprised that Troi would be able to sense that, but it was still not a conversation he'd been prepared to have.

Yes.

Troi gave a small nod. *As you know, Will is my imzadi. We were separated for a time, when he put his career first.* She raised an eyebrow. *Sound familiar?*

Dooku frowned. *You weren't separated for thirty-five years.*

No. But that doesn't mean it's too late for you.

Dooku rolled his eyes. *I'm not even sure it's a good idea to get re-involved.*

You still love him. He still loves you. How is being apart from him helping either of you?

Dooku set his jaw. *I don't recall asking for your counseling advice, Admiral Troi.*

You did call us here to ask us for help, and this is something else potentially impacting the war, because I can sense how much you and he are both hurting, and stress negatively affects performance. Troi sipped her drink, and then blew Riker a good-luck kiss just before he tossed his skee ball.

Dooku didn't respond, just let Troi sense his annoyance. Wisely, she let the subject go, and a few minutes later, Dooku bid everyone good night and went back to his quarters.

He felt too wound up from being around other people, so to relax he put on something mindless to watch and curled up on the couch with Pelo. When he started to get sleepy, he changed into his pajamas, brushed his teeth, and crawled into bed.

He lay awake for a little while, Troi's words intruding his thoughts. *I can sense how much you and he are both hurting, and stress negatively affects performance.*

"He has a funny way of showing how much he's hurting," Dooku grumbled, thinking of the way Severin danced with Kira, the way they were flirting, and that fucking *smugness* from him earlier.

And he thought of why they'd broken up to begin with - Dooku's concern that he'd make a fatal error of judgment trying to protect or save the man he loved. That was still a real and present danger, now moreso than ever.

"I am making this sacrifice for the greater good," Dooku told himself, petting Pelo. "I am doing the right thing."

But the words felt like lies. None of it felt right at all.

Dooku closed his eyes and meditated, and he kept thinking of Severin and the years they'd shared, happy memories, and all the lovemaking. He got increasingly annoyed with himself for it, but the thoughts of Severin were soothing enough to relax him further, and he fell asleep soon enough.

—

Kira pulled Severin into her guest quarters, and when the door was safely closed behind him, they kissed hard and hungry. Then they spent a moment nuzzling, their foreheads pressed together.

They looked into each other's eyes, and the sadness in Kira's eyes mirrored the sadness in Severin's own. Severin knew why he was sad - as much as he missed Kira and wanted to make love to her, he missed Dooku even more and a part of him wished he was kissing Dooku instead.

He observed Dooku's discomfort at Ted's, and he felt for him, even as he still couldn't help but think Dooku deserved it after being the one to end their relationship.

"What's wrong?" Severin asked Kira, stroking her face.

"It's nothing."

Severin frowned. "It's never nothing, Nerys."

Kira sighed.

Severin raised an eyebrow. "You gave Riker a funny look in Ted's. Was it something to do with him?"

"Yes and no."

Severin waited, and Kira said, "Years before I met you, I had a brief fling with Thomas Riker. Not a twin in the usual sense... there was a transporter accident that created him. But... seeing William Riker reminded me of all of that. Which then got me thinking about the other relationships I've had."

"Yeah." Severin nodded. "I get it."

Kira squeezed him. "Tonight, though, it's just me and you."

"You're goddamn right." Severin kissed her again. Aching for Dooku that he was, he would still enjoy what he had here in front of him. "So... shall we take this to your bedroom?"

"Give me a few minutes to freshen up?" Kira asked.

Severin nodded and waited on the couch, half hard and feeling impatient. When he heard Kira clear her throat, he turned his head, and felt as if his jaw could hit the floor. Kira's cap was off, revealing short-cropped, tousled white hair... and she was out of her Kai robes, clad in a black push-up bra, black lace panties, and thigh-high silk stockings with garters.

"*Fuck*," Severin gasped, his cock stiffening all the way.

Kira gave him a wicked grin. Severin leapt off the couch and charged at her, practically shoving her into the bedroom, kissing her all the way there. But when they crossed the threshold, Kira took charge, undressing Severin as quickly as she could. When he was completely naked, she smiled approvingly at his hard cock and took it into her hand, stroking it slowly as they kissed, and Kira's free hand wandered over his chest and abs.

"You have no right to look this good at your age," Kira said.

"And you." Severin kissed her again, undoing the front clasp of her bra, her breasts spilling into his hands. "You look good enough to eat." His thumbs rolled and plucked her nipples, and he bent his head to draw one into his mouth, eyes locked with hers as he sucked hard. Kira threw her head back and moaned; the hand that had been caressing his chest now grabbed a fistful of his curls, tugging as he suckled and lapped her nipple, pebbling it.

Severin kissed and licked his way up Kira's shoulder and neck, to claim her mouth once more. Then Kira took him by the hand - her other hand continuing to slowly stroke his cock - and led him to the bed. They rolled onto the bed together, kissing deeply, holding each other. When they came up for air they looked into each other's eyes, nuzzling, and smiled at each other.

Kira sat up to pull her bra all the way off, and Severin took that as his cue to resume work on her breasts, going for the nipple he hadn't loved yet and giving it the same attention he gave the first one, suckling, rubbing his tongue. He swirled his tongue around the areole, nibbled and sucked some more, and then pinched and rolled the nipple between his thumb and forefinger as his mouth latched onto the first one, sucking harder than before, licking faster, then more slowly. A playful tug between his teeth, suckling again, and then his fingers rubbed in lazy circles as he moved his head back to the other. This went on and on - Severin liked to take his time, worshiping Kira's beautiful breasts, enjoying the sight of her swollen, glistening nipples, and the sound of her moans and sighs as he pleased her.

But when he could smell her arousal, he was hungry for more. He kissed and licked his way down her stomach, nibbled and licked her navel, and then he took the waistband of her panties between his teeth with a growl. He began to peel them from her using just his teeth; his hands moved to her thighs to snap off the garters, though he kept her stockings on. When Kira's panties were down, exposing her pussy, Severin scooted up and lowered his face to take a few teasing licks - she was already dripping wet, and Severin groaned into her at the spicy-sweet taste. But before they could get too into it, Severin moved back down to take her panties into his mouth again, moving them down her thighs and calves, until they were all the way off. Then he came back up to finish what he started, spreading her folds with his fingers and diving in.

His tongue rubbed her clit fast and hard; Kira clutched his head and arched to him, moaning. "Fuck, I almost forgot how good you are with that tongue," she panted.

"Mmmmm." Severin drew her clit into his mouth, suckling, then kissed her clit, his lips wrapped around it, tongue swirling. Her juices were really flowing now and he sucked on one of her labia, then the other, with loud slurping noises, sipping her. "I love your sweet pussy."

"Fuuuuck..."

He went back to her clit, licking more slowly this time, then teasing by licking around it, and then he just brushed the tip of her clit with his tongue in feather-light strokes as he worked two fingers inside her, making wet sloppy suctioning noises. He teased and teased, until she was shaking, writhing, almost sobbing. He licked harder and faster, fucking her clit with his tongue, getting her right on that edge of climax, but before she could come he was licking slowly again, laughing at her whimpers of frustration.

He pulled his fingers out from inside her and dipped his tongue inside, finding the G-spot and working his tongue like a hurricane as his fingers strummed her clit. He continued to make slurping noises as he sipped her juices, and every time he let out a "mmmmmm" in appreciation, she cried out. Soon she was bucking against his face, feverish, not able to make words, only animal noises.

Again, before she could come that way, he stopped, pulling his tongue out of her, pushing his fingers back in, finger-fucking her as his tongue returned to her clit. When he drew her clit into his mouth he sucked it like he would a cock, moving his head as he did, and this time, he let her push over the edge, groaning as he felt her contract around his fingers, pulse in his mouth, against his lips. He gave a last few slow licks, watching her pussy continue to clench and throb with orgasmic pleasure.

He came up to kiss her, and she moaned at the taste of herself on him. He pulled her close, his own cock aching for release, but they would get to that in due time. Right now, he wanted to hold her and pet her, finding simple happiness in her blissed-out grin, the way she kneaded like a cat, looking like all was right with the world.

A few minutes later Kira came to, and his cock was in her hand again as she kissed him. "Whatever shall we do with this?" she purred.

"Whatever you want, your Eminence," Severin said, smiling.

"You know, only *you* can make 'your Eminence' sound kinky."

"Thank you."

Kira laughed, a full-bodied laugh that made Severin smile harder. "You're so bad," she teased.

"It would be worse if your religion wouldn't let you ever have sex again."

"That it would be. Though there are some conservative sects who still disapprove of such activity from one who wears the cloth."

"I like cloth," Severin said, wiggling his eyebrows. "It's good for tearing off with my teeth."

Kira facepalmed, laughing. Then she kissed the tip of his nose. "You."

Severin kissed her, and nibbled her lower lip. "So, you didn't answer my question. What would you like to do with this cock, *your Eminence?*"

"I," Kira said, rising up, "want to ride you."

"Please do."

With that, she straddled his hips, and Severin groaned appreciatively at the sight of her pussy lips swallowing down his cock. He rested in her for a moment, savoring her silken heat, and then she grabbed on for dear life and began to bounce on his cock. He loved the sight of his cock plunging in and out of her, slick with her juices, and the sight of her dripping. He loved watching her breasts sway and jiggle, reaching to cup them and play with the nipples. He loved the fluid grace of her hips and belly, like a dancer, and the wild look on her face as she moaned and whimpered and cried out.

He worked his hips, pounding into her, balls slapping against her. One hand left her breasts to rub her swollen clit, while the other hand continued to rub and tease her nipples. "Oh, fuck, Sev, just like that..." Kira moaned.

She rode harder, faster, and he matched her rhythm. The bed banged against the wall as the sound of sex got louder - their moans, the slap of their flesh, the wet sloppy sound of his cock in her cunt. He was so close, balls tight and ready to explode. It had been too long since he'd fucked, and it was all too delicious. And yet it was so delicious he made himself hold back, savoring, lost in Kira's beauty and her passion, loving how out of control they both were. He was going to make her come first, and he was going to make her come hard.

When Kira climaxed, screaming, the feel of her pussy gripping his cock, pulsing around him, milked his own release. He cried out as he spent inside her, and Kira groaned with the satisfaction of making him lose control. She fell onto him, still trembling from a powerful orgasm. Severin was shaking too, gasping for breath. They nuzzled as they caught their breath together and then they kissed deeply.

"Damn, we're good," Kira said, grinning.

Severin stroked her face, and smoothed her short hair, damp with sweat. He too was covered with a fine sheen of sweat.

In all these years that they'd been friends with benefits, they'd never said "I love you" to each other. There was love, in the way that close friends love each other, but they had never turned it into a proper romance. That was why they'd been able to keep it going this long, not getting bogged down by expectations and commitments. Some of Severin's motivation for telling Kira to not fall in love with him, all those years ago, was feeling like no good could come out of being formally involved with another Starfleet officer - that contrary to what he'd told Dooku when they first got together, Dooku and later Shelby had shown him love and duty would always conflict. Kira had now been out of Starfleet for some time, but they still hadn't crossed that line.

So what happened next, he was completely unprepared for.

Severin was half-asleep when he heard Kira say, "Sev?"

He blinked his eyes open. "Yeah?"

Kira propped herself up on one elbow, looking serious all of a sudden. "You know..." She looked up, with a sheepish smile like she knew she would regret what she was about to say, and then she looked at him, sobering once more. "When this war is over... well... you've been in Starfleet awhile. Two centuries, yes?"

"Yes." Then Severin raised an eyebrow. "Oh no, don't even tell me *you're* gonna start with the 'you should retire.'"

"Someone else get on you about it?"

Severin nodded. "My daughter."

Kira's eyebrows went up. "Your..."

"One of my kids made it to Alpha Eridani II. Her grandson - my great-grandson - is the botanist here."

"Sev." She took his shoulders. "That's great news." She hugged him tight. "I'm so glad at least some of your family is alive and OK."

"Me too." He squeezed her, and then when they pulled apart, he smirked. "So back to you joining the 'Let's Talk To This Old Fart Sev About Retiring Club'..."

"When you put it like that..." Kira snickered. And then she attempted seriousness once again. "I. Uh. We've been doing this for a few decades now, but we haven't seen as much of each other over the last few years, and tonight reminded me how much I missed it. How much I missed *you*. So what I'm trying to say is... there's a place for you on Bajor, as my consort, if you want it. I know it's not El-Auria, but it could become your home."

Severin's jaw dropped.

"I'm not expecting an answer now, and not even necessarily anytime soon. You can take days, weeks, months, if you need to," Kira said. "But just... think about it."

With that, she snuggled back up to him.

The gravity of such a proposition would normally be the sort of thing to keep Severin up all night, thinking about it. But he'd been close to falling asleep a few minutes ago, and the exertion and endorphins pulled him back there.

Chapter 21

Severin and Kira were the last two to make it to the meeting the next morning, arriving right at 0859. "Good," Dooku said as they sat down. "We can start now." He was annoyed that they waited until the last possible minute to show up, but he was even more annoyed at what it implied. A lifetime in Starfleet had given him a lot of practice with shielding out the knowledge of what his crew did behind closed doors, but it was harder to ignore with Severin, especially when the doctor was practically strutting.

Fuck this day in particular.

Dooku got up from his chair and stood behind his chair, looking around the conference table. "As you know, Starbase 24 was recently under heavy attack from Klingons. Some of their fleet had capabilities previously not seen before - a weapon capable of *reflecting* back the assault. It was not all of the vessels attacking us, but it was enough to make the battle much worse than we were ready for. We captured one of the vessels to analyze their weapons array and begin the process of replicating the reflector for Federation use, and thus even out the playing field, so we will be better prepared the next time this happens. We also wanted to question the survivors on board that vessel with regards to this weaponry, and any other defense capabilities they are now using or developing that we should know about."

He turned on the viewscreen, which showed the DNA profile in question. "As it turns out, one of the enemy combatants captured is not Klingon. They are Species 8472. The captive was less severely injured than the others, and the determination was made during a microcellular scan. We know that *obviously*, this information has ominous implications. What we do know for a fact is that the Klingons passed interrogation in terms of honesty with regards to having no knowledge of Species 8472, so this is neither a collaborative effort nor an infiltration that they are currently aware of. With that in mind, we must determine our next course of action fairly quickly. The reason why we did not go to Starfleet Command immediately is because they have already made some regrettable decisions that could have prevented the war outright, or barring that kept it from escalating this far, and they did not. We do intend to go to Starfleet Command with this information, but we want to go with a plan in hand - we are much more likely to get it approved with this 'panel of experts' with prior experience of war, and in the case of Admiral Tuvok, Species 8472. So, let us discuss a plan of action. Admiral Tuvok, the floor is yours." Dooku took his chair.

All eyes were on Tuvok now. "When *Voyager* dealt with Species 8472, they came to see humanity as a threat. They were determined to find a way to subjugate the Alpha Quadrant, and annihilate Earth. I have no reason to believe this is not their goal still."

"You're saying their endgame here is to destroy Earth," Dooku said.

"Yes. As far as how... it is safe to assume that if there is one, there are more, and even a few would be too many. They likely determined that it was the best use of their resources to send a small number of infiltrators rather than invade the Alpha Quadrant full force. It is thus probable that *Voyager* was being followed without us knowing - something that, in hindsight, we should have perhaps anticipated when we made an enemy of Species 8472. And it is probable that when *Voyager* returned home, using the same fluidic space conduits known to Species 8472, a number of Species 8472 representatives followed us, and then began observing. Looking for opportunities... the best way to make their move. It is likely that they decided the neutral zone was ripe territory to breed conflict, and the Klingons their best bet for infiltration. It is quite possible that the entire Klingon-Federation conflict was set into play by Species 8472, and the Klingons just went along with it, not knowing they were being used by hostile aliens pretending to be Klingon."

"That theory makes the most sense," Dooku said, nodding.

"It also means that my presence here... and that of everyone who returned from *Voyager*, has caused significant harm to the Federation. Guilt is counterproductive here, as we cannot alter the past, nor do I experience emotions the way non-Vulcans do. Nonetheless, I apologize." Tuvok frowned.

"There's no need to apologize," Riker said. "This situation didn't happen in a vacuum. They would have probably found their way here even if *Voyager* took seventy years to come home instead of seven."

"I agree," Dooku said. "Nobody here should blame you or the others who served aboard *Voyager*, for what we are dealing with now."

"But we need to fix it," Riker said. "So what do we do? What should we expect from Species 8472?"

"As I mentioned, they could have come here in full measure rather than sending a smaller group of infiltrators, and they clearly did not," Tuvok said. "Their success with this venture presupposes that the infiltration would not be discovered. Thus, the infiltration must be exposed, somehow. The Klingons should be informed they have enemies in their midst."

"You sure about that?" Kira raised an eyebrow. "Even if your theory is true, and this war was declared by Species 8472... it might have happened without their help."

"I do not dispute that," Tuvok said. "I had the honor of serving on the *Excelsior* under Hikaru Sulu. I heard many stories of the Klingons at odds with the Federation. And the *Excelsior* had a few tense encounters with them. It was only comparatively recently that relations between the Klingons and Federation had started to normalize, before they deteriorated again."

"So even if they're being used by Species 8472," Kira said, "it doesn't mean that they wouldn't continue to fight us on their own, even if they discovered the infiltrators and turned them out."

"Perhaps not," Riker said. "But I've worked with Klingons. I can tell you that in Klingon psychology... the suggestion that they are being manipulated and used is a powerful one. One that we could use in our favor. It would be worth it to at least *try* to convince them we have a

common enemy and would be better off fighting together."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend'," Kenobi quoted.

Dooku sat back in his chair. "It's going to be a hard sell."

"The Federation has trained diplomats and the Klingon Empire has not listened to them," Tuvok said. "Nonetheless, we should now defer this to Federation diplomacy."

"With all due respect, Admiral Tuvok," Riker said, "Klingon warriors won't listen to diplomats who talk peace for a living, especially when Federation diplomats are more like an aristocracy and most have never held a phaser."

Troi cleared her throat loudly, and gave her husband a disapproving look. Dooku also glared at Riker. "The Betazoid aristocrats in this room would like to have a word with you," Troi told Riker.

"Fair enough." Riker nodded. "My point still stands - sending a professional diplomat won't work with them."

"Then who do we send?" Tuvok asked.

"That's the question." Riker nodded. "The best candidate to negotiate on our behalf would be an actual Klingon, but all of the Klingons with Federation loyalties are indisposed. B'Elanna Torres - killed at the beginning of this war. Miral Paris - abducted around the same time, still missing in action. And Worf has been in exile for years. His son Alexander is fully loyal to the Klingons."

"Worf is from the House of Mogh, if I recall my history correctly?" Kenobi asked. "Is there someone we could possibly contact from within his house, who would either know of his whereabouts or would be willing to at least listen to our case?"

Riker smirked. "One does not simply contact the Klingons. If we don't already have a known sympathetic contact from the start, good luck in finding one."

"Well then." Dooku folded his arms. "It seems that unless anyone in this room knows a Klingon we can use as a point of contact, this plan is doomed."

Severin and Kira looked at each other then, gave a nod, and then Kira's arm went up hesitantly. Dooku got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, recalling that Severin had mentioned learning how to use a bat'leth on Deep Space Nine. "Kai Kira?" Dooku asked, trying to keep his tone neutral.

"Doctor Yusanis and I know someone," Kira said.

Dooku braced himself. "Ah."

"It's been *at least* six or seven years since the last time I was in any kind of contact with him," Severin said. "Before the war started."

"Same here." Kira nodded.

Dooku bristled; this would be a "friend" the same way Severin had described Kira as a "friend".

"But you would be able to contact him?" Riker asked.

Severin nodded. "Unless he's dead or something else happened, the contact info will be current. I make absolutely *no* guarantees that he'll help us, considering our people are at war. And even if past history is enough for me to be able to sweet-talk him, he's a mercenary by trade. He will absolutely insist on being paid for his help."

"He's also going to want to deal with the two of us, only," Kira said. "People he knows. He won't want to deal with Federation diplomats he doesn't know."

Severin's and Dooku's eyes met. Dooku could feel the tension - "I fucked a Klingon mercenary" wasn't a conversation Severin had been expecting to have with him, especially not now when it was clearly throwing fuel on the trash fire that was the revelation of Severin's intimate relationship with the Kai of Bajor. Dooku didn't like the idea of Severin getting in contact with this guy at all, and not just for the concerns to Severin's personal safety with the war happening. But, he also knew if he raised any objections at all, their dirty laundry was going to come out all over the conference table once and for all and that would not end well.

"You have my permission to contact him," Dooku said.

"Admiral Dooku," Severin said, "don't take this the wrong way, but I don't need *your* permission. As much as I understand the concerns present about going to Starfleet Command with this information, I am also *not* contacting this individual without prior authorization from Starfleet Command, because the very *last* thing I need is for my transmission to a Klingon vessel during *wartime with Klingons* to be traced without context. I'm not going to jail for you people."

Dooku nodded. He looked at Riker and Troi, then Tuvok. "All right. If this is the plan, then Admirals Riker, Troi, and Tuvok, I invite you to join me in my ready room for a conference call to Starfleet Command."

"It seems like the plan," Riker said.

Thanks. I hate it.

—

Later that afternoon, Severin was in sickbay, finishing up surgery as "Kashmir" by Led Zeppelin wound to a close. Once the surgery was complete, Severin scrubbed out, and took a breather before looking at his caseload to see what came next.

His comm badge beeped. Severin pressed it. "Yusanis here," he said.

"Please find the authorization codes from Starfleet Command for your eyes only at your station in sickbay," Dooku said crisply. "There is also a missive with some protocol for procedure, let me know if something needs to be clarified or explained."

"Will do. I'm on my way to look at it and then I'll be in touch with my contact."

Severin went out to his office, sat down, and activated his computer. He found the files from Starfleet Command, read them, and then used the security clearance code he was given to encrypt his transmission, though the transmission would still be recorded and reviewed by Starfleet Command.

He sent a hail to Krogh's ship, and waited.

About ten minutes later, when he started to give up hope that Krogh would respond - likely put off by the Federation signal - Krogh appeared on screen. He'd aged, his hair and beard now grey instead of black, but he still looked just as formidable as ever. He scowled at Severin and snapped, "*NuqneH*."

"*Wlj jup*," Severin replied.

Krogh snorted. "Why is this encrypted?"

"For your protection, and mine," Severin said. "I don't know what else is in your vicinity, didn't want you to get unnecessary shame for taking a Federation hail."

"I should not be taking this," Krogh said. "Even though I knew it was you. This better be good." He sneered. "You defecting?"

"No," Severin said. "But I need your help."

"*My help?*" Krogh snorted again.

Severin leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands. "What if I told you I have some evidence that there are traitors in the midst of the Klingon Empire?"

"There are always traitors," Krogh said. "Always cowards. Always the dishonorable."

"This is a special breed of traitor," Severin said.

"And how would it be helping you to tell me this?"

"It's an enemy our people have in common. It would be in our best interests to fight this enemy together instead of fighting each other. My people want to talk to your people about it, but your people won't listen to our diplomats. They might listen to another Klingon. Which means you, or someone you know, who can present this information to the appropriate parties, who might be then willing to meet with our people to discuss this further - how we go about working together."

"And I'm supposed to just believe you?" Krogh sneered. "How do I know it's not a trap?"

"Because you know me," Severin said. "We may be on opposite sides of this war, it doesn't change who we are, or what we've been to each other."

"Someone to fuck," Krogh said.

Severin hoped Shelby was getting an eyeful. "That still implies a certain amount of trust. I could have bitten it off years ago."

Krogh threw his head back and laughed. "I have missed you."

"I've thought of you a few times since this war started," Severin admitted. "Hoping you were still doing well. Still fighting."

"You're still a doctor?"

Severin nodded. "It's what I do."

Krogh rubbed his forehead ridges, and frowned. "You have evidence of these traitors? How would a doctor have that information?"

"I can't discuss it, except to say I'm prepared to show the evidence to whoever you can put me in touch with."

"You assume I am in a position to do that," Krogh said. "I am just a mercenary. I fight where, and who, I am paid to fight. I do not know anyone higher up in the Empire."

"No, but someone you do know probably does," Severin said. "I need at least a foot in the door, Krogh. It doesn't have to be a leader, but if anyone you work with, anyone who's hired you, anyone in your House, knows someone who knows someone... I want to talk to them."

"I could be in deep *baktag* for even talking to you," Krogh said.

"You could. Or you could be seen as the man who had enough courage to help expose traitors to the Empire. Regardless, my people are willing to make this worth the risk."

"You mean they would pay me?"

"They're willing to provide a small measure of compensation for the risk you're taking with these arrangements."

Krogh leaned back in his chair, and Severin could see he was thinking about it, weighing things in his head. Finally he gave a curt nod and said, "I will have information for you in one hour. I can contact you on this same channel, yes?"

"Yes. But I have other things to do, so don't be late. One hour."

"One hour." Krogh ended the transmission.

Severin scrubbed back in, keeping an eye on the time as he worked on patients. Five minutes before the hour was up, he went back to his desk, and waited. On time, Krogh's transmission came.

"I have a meeting for you," Krogh said. "My sister's husband works for a man who is on the council of the House of Konjah. My brother-in-law will be there, and if he believes you, he will tell his employer, who then *might* talk to the council."

"You should know I'm not traveling alone, I have someone coming with me." Severin had been explicitly instructed by Starfleet Command to not say it was Kira in the transmission, even though he knew Krogh would be happy to see her again.

"Not alone?" Krogh huffed. "He won't like that."

"That's the terms. He can either accept that I travel with a companion for safety, or you guys can forget finding out who the traitors are."

"I make no promises he won't fight with you about it."

"I'll bring my bat'leth," Severin said.

Krogh grinned.

Severin asked, "When, and where?"

"My ship. Tomorrow. I am sending coordinates and time."

Severin saw them in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. "I'll be there."

Krogh nodded, and then he paused for thought and said, "Don't go back right away, after the meeting. Have a drink with me, for old times' sake."

"A drink?" Severin leered, knowing the innuendo behind the words.

Krogh also leered. "We could mix business with pleasure for awhile, if you were willing."

"We'll see what I feel like," Severin said; he could just see the look on Shelby's face when she reviewed this later. Then he thought of how Dooku would react, and tried not to cringe in Krogh's line of sight. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Krogh nodded, and then he said, "*Qapla'*."

"*Qapla'*."

Chapter 22

At the appointed time, Kira and Severin's shuttlecraft met at the rendezvous point with Krogh's ship. Also waiting there was a bird-of-prey belonging to Krogh's brother-in-law. Kira and Severin beamed aboard Krogh's ship; Krogh and his brother-in-law met them at the transporter.

Kira was wearing a loose-fitting hooded grey cloak over red robes, and when she stepped off the transporter she took her hood down. Even though it had been years since they'd last seen each other and her hair was now white, Krogh recognized her right away. "Nerys," he said warmly, and embraced her. Then he also embraced Severin. He turned to face his brother-in-law, short and wiry where Krogh was tall and beefy. "This is my sister's husband, Makaal. Makaal, this is Severin Yusanis, and Kira Nerys."

"Federation scum," Makaal said, with a sneer.

"They are my guests," Krogh said, "and we've been over this, Makaal. They are not like most Starfleet."

"All Federation is the same to me," Makaal said. "*BIHnuch*."

Severin knew Klingon culture well enough from years of his association with Krogh to recognize a challenge when he saw one, and the need to respond accordingly, even though he knew his response wouldn't be Starfleet Command approved. "I don't have to be here," Severin said. "I'm doing *you* a favor by being here, and you can either treat me with a shred of respect or I can get back on my ship and go home."

"I'm doing *you* a favor by not killing you on sight," Makaal snapped.

Severin had a bat'leth slung over his shoulder, and he readied it now. "*Qab jIH nagil, petaQ*."

"*Mev'yap*," Krogh said, pointing at both men. "I do not want to clean blood off my floor."

"Too bad," Severin said.

Makaal smirked. "Indeed."

"Let us get down to business," Krogh said. He ushered everyone to a small recreational area. "Say what you came here to say, Sev."

"We captured a Klingon warbird recently," Severin said. "The survivors are in custody. One of them... is not Klingon."

"What do you mean, is not Klingon?" Makaal looked offended by that.

"I mean his DNA is different from theirs," Severin said. "His DNA was genetically altered."

"That's absurd." Makaal sat back in his chair.

Severin reached for the PADD on his belt and handed it to Makaal. He leaned forward and pushed a button, showing security camera footage recorded in sickbay the day he was attacked by the non-Klingon. Makaal watched the fight from start to finish, and then he looked up at Severin, blinking. "I don't understand," he said.

Severin went back to the part of the footage that showed his opponent seeming to grow a bat'leth out of his hand, from thin air, and replayed it. This time Makaal saw it, and his eyes widened. "That's... impossible. Nobody can do that," Makaal said.

"He did that," Severin said. He opened the sidebar to show the DNA profile, even though he knew Makaal wouldn't understand all of it. "Species 8472. They are from the Delta Quadrant. They have a history of using genetic engineering to impersonate and infiltrate other species. They managed to impersonate at least one Klingon, which means there are likely more of them. Enough that it is cause of concern - not just to my people, but should be cause of concern to yours. It would only take a small number of them to take over the Klingon government, to make decisions aligned with their best interests. Q'ono'S was on its way to becoming a Federation member state a decade ago. Suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, things started to change, back to the old hostilities. From where I sit, it looks like your people were manipulated into a war that has hurt your side as much as it has hurt ours. Unchecked, they stand to do a lot more damage."

Makaal frowned. He was quiet for a good few minutes, considering.

Finally he turned to Krogh and said, "And you vouch for this man."

"I have never known him to lie," Krogh said.

"Take this PADD back to your people," Severin said. "Show them. My people are willing to talk to yours - to help you find a way to expose the other traitors. We can help you figure out how deep the infiltration and corruption goes, and if in fact this war was something they brought about... then it's in your best interests to not go along with it, to not play into their hand, not let that corruption take root even stronger and deeper."

Makaal looked at Severin, then Kira, then Krogh. He replayed the footage of the infiltrator using fluidic space to produce a bat'leth in his hand as if growing an appendage, and he shook his head with disbelief. "I have never seen anything like this," he said.

"From all that we know about Species 8472, that's a small taste of what they can do," Severin said. "Which is why you'll need allies to fight them. We were allies once. We could be again."

"And then what?" Makaal asked.

Severin shrugged.

"It's why we'd need a formal audience with your people," Kira said. "To negotiate further."

"But right now," Severin said, "one thing at a time. Show this to the House of Konjah. Krogh will give you my contact information, that someone in the House of Konjah can use to get in touch with me, and we can set up a meeting and talk about *this*, and what we're going to do about it."

Krogh and Makaal looked at each other, and Krogh nodded.

"All right." Makaal stood up. He clapped Krogh on the back. "I will talk to them."

"Thank you," Krogh said.

Makaal turned to Severin then and looked him in the eye. He said nothing, but it was still a small gesture of respect. Nonetheless, Severin was relieved when Makaal beamed back to his own ship.

Krogh poured the three of them a glass of blood wine. "I would apologize for him," Krogh said, "but it could have gone much worse than that."

"It sure could have," Kira said. She raised her glass.

"Truth be told," Krogh said, "I would like this war to be over, even though war is better for my pockets - mercenaries like me get used as enforcers in wartime, and there is much to enforce. Making sure suppliers do their jobs and aren't pilfering goods and counting a loss, is something I do often."

"Sounds like a headache," Severin said.

Krogh nodded. "Most of all when they have help covering their tracks. I take my life into my own hands every time I go on a run now."

"Things are pretty dangerous where I am too," Severin said.

"It is good our paths have crossed once more." Krogh leaned towards Severin. "I am glad you are still alive."

"Don't thank me yet," Severin said. "Here's hoping the House of Konjah doesn't give you any *baktag* for meeting with me."

"They would be fools to deny that footage," Krogh said. "Even Makaal is not that big of a fool."

Kira snorted. "I would have liked to see Sev hand his ass to him."

"I'm a little disappointed there wasn't a fight, yeah," Severin said, chuckling.

"This is why I like you," Krogh said, and cupped Severin's chin in his hand. He traced Severin's lips with his fingers, and Severin responded by taking Krogh's hand and nipping the palm with a growl, drawing blood with his teeth.

Krogh grabbed a fistful of Severin's curls and kissed him roughly, biting Severin's lower lip hard enough to draw blood. They kissed more sensually then, rubbing their tongues together, just breathing each other's breath before another deep, passionate kiss.

Kira got between them, kissing Severin first, then kissing Krogh. Krogh and Severin worked on tugging off Kira's cloak, and then she undid her robes, smiling as she exposed her breasts. Both men lowered their heads, suckling a nipple into their mouths, and Kira clutched their heads, gasping and moaning as they licked and sucked her nipples into taut peaks.

Soon Kira was laying on the table, with Severin and Krogh both kneeling between her legs. Severin's tongue lashed her clit, and Krogh's tongue fucked inside her. Every now and again, Severin and Krogh would stop licking her, and rub their tongues together with her watching, kissing, sharing her juices between them. Then they'd go back for more, devouring her. When Severin began sucking her clit, Krogh's tongue working inside her harder and faster, Kira bucked against them, grabbing their heads, swearing in Bajoran.

Just before she could come, they stopped to kiss some more, teasing her. Now it was Krogh's turn to lick her clit, and Severin moved his tongue inside her slowly, teasing her even more. Every now and again Severin would take his tongue out of her and rub it around Kira's clit, his tongue snaking up on Krogh's as he did. Soon Severin and Krogh had traded places, with Severin's tongue on Kira's clit once more, Krogh tongue-fucking her fast and furious. Severin sucked her hard, Kira fucking their faces; Severin pressed down hard on her pubic bone and rubbed, slurping as he suckled her clit, and sent her over the edge.

The two men took a few slow licks, giving her aftershocks, and shared her taste between them again. Krogh got up and removed his clothing, and then helped Severin out of his. Kira watched, touching herself as Severin and Krogh kissed and caressed each other; Krogh took their cocks into his hand and Severin moaned at the feel of the ridged Klingon cock rubbing against his.

Krogh came back over to Kira, who eagerly spread for him and guided his cock to her dripping pussy. Severin climbed over Kira, his cock in her mouth, and he leaned in to lick Kira's clit as Krogh fucked her. Every now and again he'd take licks at Krogh's cock, and when Kira and Krogh were getting close, Severin pushed his tongue into Kira, licking inside her, licking Krogh's cock at the same time. His fingers worked her clit in circles as he tongue-fucked them, and he reached with his free hand to play with Krogh's balls. Kira was so completely out of her mind with sensation and lust that she let Severin's cock fall out of her mouth, and Severin rubbed it between her breasts. He took her clit between his fingers, massaging hard, and licked inside her more slowly. It wasn't long before Kira climaxed again, and the contractions set off Krogh; Severin groaned as he watched the thick cream, lapping up as much of it as he could.

Severin hadn't come yet, and Kira and Krogh took turns kissing him, running their hands over him. Kira took a few licks at his cock, collecting precum with her tongue, then made a show of sharing it with Krogh, rubbing her tongue against his before kissing him hard. Kira helped them maneuver into place, the two men sitting with their shafts and balls pressed together. Kira knelt between them, sinking down slowly until both cocks were buried inside her.

Pent up as he was, the wet heat of Kira's pussy and the tight fit - the feel of Krogh's ridged cock against his - almost set Severin off right away. Krogh watched him shudder and laughed. "I bet you won't last," Krogh challenged.

Severin accepted the challenge and held back as long as he could as Kira rode them, and Krogh rubbed his cock against Severin's inside her. Within a few minutes Severin was trembling, whimpering, ready to explode, but still he held back. He focused his attention on pleasing Kira's clit, one of her breasts in his mouth, the other in Krogh's. Kira was as wet and sloppy as Severin had ever felt, and she loved watching Severin taste her from his fingers. When he rubbed her juices onto her nipple, before taking the nipple back into his mouth, Kira started riding harder, and the wet sloppy sound almost undid all three of them at once.

Severin tilted her face to his and kissed her hard, playing with her nipple with one hand, and her clit with the other. He pressed into her pussy harder and rubbed in circles. They nuzzled and their eyes met, and then they rubbed their tongues together before kissing again. Severin moved his fingers from Kira's clit to Krogh's mouth, and then after Krogh had licked and sucked his fingers clean, Severin's fingers traced down his neck and found their way to Krogh's nipple, rubbing, plucking, pinching it. Kira watched Severin playing with Krogh's nipple and it drove her wild, her riding them as fast and hard as she could now, shaking, gasping for breath. Severin moved in for the kill, using the hand that had been on Kira's nipple to work her clit, as he continued playing with Krogh's nipple. He rubbed some more of her pussy juices onto her nipple and sucked hard, and was rewarded by feeling Kira throb and clench around their cocks.

Krogh and Severin came within a split second of each other, and the feel of Krogh's cum shooting all over his cock made Severin's orgasm that much more intense, grunting and howling as Kira continued pulsing around them.

Somehow, Kira made it off them, a blissed-out smile on her face as she snuggled between them. She passed out, which was something Severin sometimes did post-orgasm, and Severin and Krogh looked at each other, chuckling.

The look in Krogh's eye told Severin that the Klingon wasn't finished yet, and before he could ask, Krogh picked up Kira and put her off to the side, and climbed over Severin. They kissed, and Severin dug his nails into Krogh's hips.

Krogh grabbed Severin by the hair, and roughly maneuvered him onto all fours. Severin waited as he heard Krogh get a container of lubricant, and Krogh lathered himself up.

It had been awhile since Severin had taken a cock that wasn't a toy. Krogh showed no mercy, pushing into him, and immediately began slamming into him. There was the initial burn as Krogh stretched his tightness, but soon Severin didn't care, fucking himself on Krogh's cock, the delicious ridges working their magic inside him. He felt needy, every animal instinct he had screaming out to fuck the pain away, so that there was nothing else, just this, just the hunger and passion and *life*.

Somehow, Severin began thinking of Dooku. Wishing that this were Dooku behind him instead of Krogh, fucking him hard. Severin immediately felt self-conscious about it - *I shouldn't want this, I shouldn't want him like I do* - but his body didn't lie, his hips rocking against Krogh even faster as feverish fantasies played out of Dooku grabbing his hair the way Krogh was grabbing it now, taking him, pounding into him, balls slapping against him, claiming him, dominating him.

"Mine," came Krogh's voice, but Severin could only hear Dooku. "Mine. *Mine*." Krogh slapped Severin's ass, and the thought of Dooku slapping his ass as he had his way with it drove Severin right to that edge, whimpering, trembling as he held there, trying to not give in to those feelings but the fantasies were too delicious and he didn't want it to stop...

Krogh's other hand reached around to stroke Severin's cock, which was dripping so much precum that his cock was completely slick with it and made an obscene slurping sound in Krogh's hand. Severin was still fucking himself on Krogh's cock, the fantasies intensifying, like he could almost feel Dooku's bush and the hair on his arm and thighs, could almost smell his sweat, his sex...

"That's right. I get to fuck this hole any time I want, you give it to me like an animal in heat..."

The thought of those words in Dooku's voice made Severin even hotter. "Yes, Yan, yes," Severin panted. He gasped in shock - he'd said his name. He was too far gone. But not gone enough. He fucked himself harder on Krogh's cock, as Krogh's hand worked him so hard his cock rattled in the Klingon's hand. "Yan... Yan..."

Krogh grabbed Severin's hair again, just before slapping his ass once more. "Come."

"*Yan!*" Severin gave in, screaming as his cock and prostate throbbed together, wave after wave of pleasure. "Yan... oh, *Yan*..."

Krogh gave a few last thrusts and then grunted his own release; fantasizing about Dooku coming inside him set Severin off again, another

burst of cum.

It took Severin everything he had to not start crying, feeling ashamed of himself for using Krogh like this, a substitute for the man he really wanted. Krogh either didn't notice or didn't care, and Severin was for once grateful that Krogh didn't really do the cuddling-after-sex thing as he hurriedly put his uniform back on.

"We have to head back," Severin said, and shook Kira awake. It wasn't a lie - if they stayed too long the starbase would assume something had gone wrong. But Severin needed to be out of there, as far away from the reminder of his forbidden fantasy, even as he was about to face the real thing and that made him even more nervous than being out here in the neutral zone.

Krogh led them back to the transporter. "It was good seeing you again," Krogh said.

Severin nodded. "Same here."

"I hope the House of Konjah contacts you soon."

He energized, and Severin and Kira were beamed back to their shuttlecraft. They set a course for Starbase 24, and when the shuttle jumped into warp, Severin closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

Kira rubbed his shoulder. "I'll have to head back to Bajor this evening," she said.

Severin nodded. "I know."

They looked into each other's eyes - Kira saw Severin was troubled, and she stroked his face, a look of worry on her own face. "My offer still stands," she said.

Severin just nodded.

And then Kira said, "But..." She took a deep breath. "I heard you, you know."

Severin's eyebrows went up at that.

Kira leaned back and folded her arms.

"I thought you were sleeping," Severin said.

"I was... till you got loud." Kira smirked.

Severin laughed and ran a nervous hand through his curls. Kira also laughed, but then gave him a serious look. "A long time ago," Kira said, "a wise man once told me that I should follow my heart. And it seems like now is a good time to pay it forward and recall that advice."

"That was a different situation," Severin said. "And you already know about my history -"

Kira put up her hand. "Sev. What I know is the way the two of you look at each other. The way you were crying out his name as someone else fucked you. Why can't you two try again?"

"We just can't."

"Bullshit, you just can't." Kira scowled. "Look. Sev. Talk to him. Bajor's an offer if it doesn't pan out. But at least *talk* to him."

Severin frowned. "Nerys," he said, "with all due respect... shut the fuck up."

Kira pursed her lips. "Welp."

Severin looked away, hearing the sting in her voice, not wanting to see the hurt in her eyes. He didn't mean to be so harsh, but right now was not the time for this.

No time was ever the time. Severin was dreading the return to the starbase.

Chapter 23

When Severin arrived back at Starbase 24, Dooku found himself breathing a small sigh of relief. He'd been concerned for the doctor's safety - it had weighed on his mind much more than he thought it would, much more than he wanted it to.

He was even more relieved to see Kira Nerys going back to Bajor, much the same as the other guests had left earlier that day after being called away on short notice, with jobs and lives to get back to, but he hadn't been as eager to see them leave. As a professional courtesy, he saw the Kai off in the shipbay, and hung back as he watched Severin and Kira embrace - he could feel their restraint, not wanting to make a scene with being more physical in the presence of Starfleet officers. He also sensed some tension between them, though there was still plenty of affection there, enough that they gave in to a quick nuzzle before Kira pulled away and waved before boarding her ship.

Dooku hated every moment of it.

Severin lingered for a moment, watching, before he walked towards Dooku. Dooku sensed Severin's sheepishness, knowing Dooku knew they'd been intimate, and though Dooku had tried to contain any visible outward sign of his discomfort he knew Severin still picked up on it, looking him in the eye. There was an awkward moment of silence, and then Dooku said, "You need to debrief."

There wasn't much to report, and indeed, Dooku wished there wasn't the need to follow protocol with a debriefing at all, because he could telepathically pick up that most of Severin's meeting with the Klingon had involved sex. Severin wouldn't say as much in the debrief - the information was going straight to Starfleet Command, for one thing - but he didn't need to. As much as Dooku had worried about Severin while he was gone and wanted badly to see him again, the doctor couldn't leave his ready room fast enough.

Dooku spent a few minutes sitting in his chair, his face in his hands, taking deep breaths. When it registered that he was shaken up, he almost threw the PADD that he'd taken notes on, irritated with himself for letting this bother him. He knew that some of his reaction was due to a long work day - he'd stayed on duty a few hours past the end of his shift to make sure Severin made it back, and handle the debriefing - but it couldn't entirely be blamed on that. He thought of Counselor Yoda's words: *If steps backwards you take, steps forward, you walk. Otherwise, perhaps serve together, you should not.*

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose, replying to those words in his mind. *There are not even steps right now. We are locked in this... holding pattern.*

He needed to get to his quarters and unwind.

But he also knew if he went directly to his quarters, feeling as riled up as he was, he wouldn't unwind - he'd just brood, his inner wheels continuing to spin and spin. He needed a distraction first. So after he left his ready room, bidding the bridge crew goodnight on his way out, he made a detour, taking the turbolift to Deck 42. He had dinner by himself in the restaurant where he and Severin had shared meals, and he tried to not think of the doctor as he ate, but it was hard not to. When he left the restaurant, he sat in the park for a little while, and then hit a kiosk to buy a mineral water.

Some meters away from the kiosk was the observation window, where people could look out at the outside of the starbase, and the sea of stars in space. Dooku noticed Lieutenant Ahsoka Tano standing there, sipping on a lemonade, still in her uniform as her own shift had ended not that long ago.

It was normal for Dooku to notice his crew when they were out and about on the station, and then turn his attention back to whatever he was doing. Dooku did just that, heading in the opposite direction to take the turbolift to his quarters, but before he could get too far, he felt an empathic surge of intense distress. He turned around and the source of the surge drew his gaze back to Tano, who had let out a gasp, and then began to cry silently. Dooku saw through the observation window that a Federation starship had just dropped out of warp, which was nothing out of the ordinary, but he sensed this had somehow set his lieutenant off.

She was having a full panic attack now, even though she was desperately trying to fight it, and he could feel her shame at losing control in such a public place. He approached her now and said softly, "Lieutenant. Are you all right?"

Tano looked down, and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She took a deep breath and said, "I'm fine." But her hands were shaking - she obviously wasn't fine.

Dooku lowered his voice even more. "You're having a panic attack. I can sense it."

Tano looked up, and then looked away, not wanting to meet his eyes. She sniffled, tears still running down her face. Dooku's paternal instincts were kicking in and he restrained the urge to give her a hug, which would have been exceedingly unprofessional, not to mention possibly be taken the wrong way.

"It's stupid," she said, her voice shaking.

"If it's upsetting you, it's not stupid," Dooku said.

Tano looked at him and then she broke down weeping - she had kept her crying silent to this point but now she was making gross sobbing noises, enough that passerby were stopping to look at her. Tano cried even more at the attention, and it was now making a larger scene. Dooku felt it was a good idea to get her out of the public eye as quickly as possible, and stabilize her as quickly as possible. "Come with me, please."

"Wh-where are we going?"

"To sickbay."

"I'm not sick -"

"That's an order, Lieutenant." Dooku's tone was firm, though he was still trying to be kind.

He marched Tano to the turbolift, and spoke "Sickbay." Tano was still crying and shaking next to him, and Dooku said, "Deep breaths." He demonstrated. "Slow, deep breaths."

Tano tried, but was having difficulty with it. Soon enough they were let out in front of sickbay, and Tano followed Dooku inside.

Severin was still there - Dooku was a bit annoyed by this, but it couldn't be helped. When Severin saw them, he came out and said, "Hi, what's going on?"

"Lieutenant Tano is having a panic attack," Dooku said.

Tano looked at Severin, tried to speak, and choked out a sob instead. Severin made a soothing noise as he led her to one of the exam tables. He did a basic scan with a tricorder - "Making sure your brain activity is normal," he explained. When the tricorder scan showed nothing out of the ordinary, Severin retrieved a hypospray. "I'm gonna give you 1 cc of improvaline, OK? It'll help calm your nerves."

He put the hypospray to Tano's neck, and after the injection, he pressed his comm badge. "Sickbay to Counselor Yoda," he said.

There was a pause and then, "Hrmmm. Of service, how may I be?"

"Lieutenant Ahsoka Tano is down here with a panic attack. Can you come talk to her about it?"

"Be there shortly, I will."

Tano started crying again. "You don't have to go to all this trouble -"

Severin patted her shoulder and looked into her eyes. "Yes, we do. Panic is an overwhelming feeling, one of the worst feelings there is. We take care of our crew, here, we don't want you to have to deal with this all by yourself."

"Indeed," Dooku said, alerting them both that he was still watching, from a distance. "It's a feeling the doctor and I have both experienced. We just want to help."

"Would you like a glass of ice water?" Severin asked her. "Or a cup of hot chocolate? I find drinking something is grounding."

"I had a lemonade on Deck 42 and it didn't help." Tano frowned.

"The improvaline will kick in momentarily and the water might help," Severin said.

Tano nodded. "All right. Water, then."

Severin went to the replicator - Dooku could tell it was as much about distancing himself from him a few meters as it was about giving the young lieutenant something to ground with. He came back with a glass of ice water, and she sipped at it until Yoda arrived.

Severin and Dooku stepped out of the exam room so Yoda could talk to Tano in private; Severin went through case files at his desk as they waited, while Dooku paced. Every now and again Severin shot Dooku a *you shouldn't be here* look but said nothing, until a few of those looks passed and finally Severin couldn't hold back.

"You should go home and get some rest," Severin scolded him. "We'll take it from here."

"As commanding officer I have a responsibility to the welfare of my crew," Dooku said. "I saw her have a panic attack, I brought her here, I want to make sure she's all right."

It was true - Dooku cared about what was happening, from the arm's length he held himself from his subordinates. But he would also be damned if he let Severin order him around, after...

After what? Dooku felt his own shame rising, as he realized he knew perfectly damn well what. *After he flaunted that woman and went off to fuck a Klingon.*

It was ridiculous - they'd been apart for thirty-five years, they both knew getting back together would be a bad idea while they were serving together, personal feelings interfering with duty. Dooku knew he couldn't very well expect Severin to have been celibate this entire time, even though Dooku himself had been close to it with a few brief, casual exceptions. Dooku knew he didn't own Severin and he had no right to insist that Severin not see other people.

But it *hurt*. He hated it. He felt powerless. When the Klingons attacked the starbase, he felt powerless then as well, even though they managed to survive the encounter. This was a new level of powerlessness, adding insult to injury. He felt like he had completely lost control of his life,

somehow. He sympathized with Tano's panic attack not simply because she was his lieutenant, but she had let out what he'd been keeping in for too long.

"Fine," Severin said, in a way that suggested it wasn't actually fine; Dooku could feel him bristling. "You might as well stick around for Yoda's report, since this will be relevant to command, *I guess.*"

"You guess."

Severin gave him a look, and then looked back down at his PADD.

Dooku continued to pace for the next couple of minutes until Severin looked back over his PADD and grumbled, "Will you sit down."

Dooku sat on the other side of Severin's desk. He was even harder to ignore now, and he could feel Severin's distraction. He took a small amount of smug satisfaction in it, as well as a fluster at Severin's unvoiced *Why do you have to be so fucking attractive.*

Severin's thoughts flashed back to the encounter with the Klingon earlier that day - Dooku restrained a visible cringe reaction at the thought of Severin with anyone else... and then he picked up on a memory Severin had been trying very hard to keep from him. "*Yan... Yan...*"

Dooku's eyebrows went up. Severin's PADD crashed down on the desk, and he facepalmed, groaning, knowing Dooku saw that.

Dooku leaned back in his chair, feeling his mouth quirk into the tiniest smile. And hating it. *I shouldn't be happy that he was fantasizing about me as he was being fucked by someone else. I shouldn't want this.*

Before things could get too awkward, the exam room doors opened, and Yoda stepped out. "Back to her quarters, Lieutenant Tano may go, if all right with you, it is," he said.

Severin and Dooku looked at each other, then quickly looked away - both feeling heat flush their faces - and they nodded. "That's fine," Severin said. He looked at Tano and said, "How you feeling? Do you think you can make it to your quarters by yourself? Should you have somebody go with you?"

Tano climbed off the exam table. The effect of the improvaline showed in her gait, slower than usual. She blinked, and said after a few paces, "I should probably have someone accompany me."

Severin got up and went into the general triage area, where several doctors and nurses were working. "Nurse Stral," he addressed a Bolian, "can you take Lieutenant Tano to her quarters?" The Bolian nodded and walked with the Togruta out of sickbay.

Yoda sat down next to Dooku, and folded his hands.

"So," Severin said, sitting back down at his desk, "what happened?"

"When a ship drops out of warp, panic she does. The Klingons coming back, she fears," Yoda explained.

"Ah. So basically, PTSD," Severin said.

Yoda nodded. "Nightmares, she has had. Occasional flashbacks."

"In your professional opinion," Dooku asked, "do you think she is still fit for duty?"

"Yes, though medication and counseling, she should have," Yoda said.

"I can prescribe a medication regimen," Severin said. "PTSD is something I have plenty of experience with pharmaceutically." He looked at Dooku then, with Dooku reminded of when they were both aboard the *Trident*.

"All right." Dooku nodded at Severin, and then Yoda. "I don't want to put her on leave unless absolutely necessary, not simply because we need our staff, but also I know from personal experience that having the usual routine can help. She would probably be further demoralized if she had to take medical leave."

"Yeah." Severin nodded. "But if she ends up needing it, she needs it and that's how it is."

"Keep an eye on her, we must," Yoda said. "But agree, I do - keeping life as normal as possible, is where to start."

"Thank you for your time, Counselor," Severin said, as Yoda got up from his chair. Dooku slowly rose and Severin said, "You too, Admiral."

Dooku and Yoda left sickbay together, and Yoda looked up at the much taller man. "Schedule counseling sessions of your own, you should," Yoda nagged.

Dooku sighed.

"Stressful, the Klingon attack was." Yoda frowned. "And other stressors, there have been."

Yoda didn't need to elaborate on what those "other stressors" were - they both knew. Dooku also frowned, now. "You win," was all he would

say.

Yoda's frown turned into a small smile. "Fighting with you, I am not. Trying to help, I am."

"I know." Dooku's frown deepened.

"Tomorrow?" Yoda cocked his head to one side.

"What time?"

"End of your shift?"

Dooku nodded. "I can do that." He didn't want to, but he would.

—

The next day passed fairly uneventfully, which Dooku was both grateful for and found unnerving all at once. It gave him too much time to think - too much time to brood, his mind replaying the brief memory of Severin's that he'd seen with telepathy. "*Yan... Yan...*" Feeling the way Severin had been wanting him, aching for him.

Just before Dooku could leave the bridge, Lieutenant Tano looked up from the conn and said, "Admiral, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Yes. My ready room."

Dooku went to his ready room instead of leaving the bridge, and a moment later Tano walked in, looking a bit nervous, and through his empathy Dooku could feel she definitely was nervous. She took a moment to find her words and then she said, "Thank you for... looking out for me yesterday."

"No need to thank me. It is quite literally my job."

Tano gave a sad smile. "I still feel like you went out of your way to make sure I was OK. I appreciate that."

"You're welcome." Dooku nodded acknowledgment. Then he asked, "I assume you've spoken with Counselor Yoda and Doctor Yusanis about therapy and medication?"

Tano nodded. "I'll be having two counseling sessions a week and taking medication in the morning and at night. But they said I'm still OK for duty, as, uh, you can see." She laughed nervously.

Dooku sat back in his chair - her anxiety in his presence was making him feel bad. "It's all right, Lieutenant. I am not angry or upset with you at all."

Tano's voice was small and childlike now as she said, "You..." She cleared her throat. "Permission to speak freely, Admiral."

"Granted."

"You don't think less of me?" Tano frowned. "I feel like I made an ass of myself out there yesterday."

"Lieutenant..." Dooku sighed. "Also speaking freely... shit happens."

Tano gave him a look of surprise, not expecting the strong language from him. Ordinarily Dooku would keep himself more in check than this, but he had been having one of those weeks. Dooku went on, "You didn't ask to have a panic attack. You didn't ask to have post-traumatic stress. Without getting too much into it, it's something I myself have experienced from Wolf 359 and the Dominion War. So no, I don't judge you at all. You're doing the best you can, and that's all anyone can ask of you."

"You don't think... I'm weak... for needing help?"

"Not at all. To use an analogy, if you were thrown into the middle of a jungle full of dangerous predators, it would be very difficult to survive with just your bare hands. Which is what living with trauma is like. Medication and therapy are tools. You're not weak for using the resources available to you. On the contrary, it will make you stronger - counseling in particular can help you learn about yourself, and what you need for your personal growth." *And I of course resent taking my own advice.*

"Thank... thank you. Sir." Tano swallowed hard, and Dooku could tell she was trying not to cry, touched by his approval. He knew from her personnel profile that she was an orphan, and though he knew she wouldn't go as far as to think of him as a father figure, there was nonetheless a void there that he sort of filled, and her being touched by his approval, touched him as well.

"You are a fine officer," Dooku said, "and you have a promising career ahead of you. As I said, I've also experienced post-traumatic stress and you see where I am now. I believe in you, that you can get through this."

Tano was really trying hard not to cry now. She nodded. "Thank you again, sir."

"Now," he said, "if there's nothing else... I have a counseling session of my own to go to."

"There's nothing else." Tano shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and then said, "Have a good evening, Admiral," over her shoulder as she walked out of the ready room.

Dooku took a detour to Yoda's quarters, going to Deck 42 again to sit in the park and have a mineral water from a kiosk. The distraction helped with his own anxiety, even though walking into the counselor's quarters was a reminder of why he was keyed up in the first place, and he felt the tension mounting as he quietly walked to the couch.

They spent the first half of the session talking about the Klingon attack on the station, and Dooku's feelings of helplessness and irritability. Tano came up, and Dooku related how her panic attack reminded him of his own battle with trauma.

And then Yoda said, "More there is, that bothers you."

Dooku sighed. "I'm not really in the mood to talk about it today."

"Helping you not, is keeping it inside." Yoda scowled. "Difficulties continue with Doctor Yusanis, yes?"

"Yes." Dooku saw no point in lying about it. "He..." Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. "He's seen other people since we..." He couldn't finish the sentence. "He's *seeing* other people. Here and now. I logically understand that's. Well. I have no right to protest."

"Hrmmmm." Yoda folded his arms. "Remember what I told you. If resolve this somehow you cannot, serve together you should not."

"*I know.*" The words came out more forcefully than Dooku intended, and Dooku was immediately annoyed with himself for snapping at the little green man. Then Dooku sighed again and said, "I'm not sure that we're quite at that point."

"Agree with you, I'm not sure I do. Stressed out, you are. Stressful times, these are. Piling up more and more, the stress is. An additional source of stress, this is. The proverbial straw, this might be."

Dooku didn't like that at all. He just glared at Yoda, not even able to articulate how much this displeased him, even though he knew that yes, the situation was causing him aggravation and the happenings as of late on Starbase 24 were aggravating enough.

Yoda smirked. "Shoot the messenger, you should not."

"Shooting you would just land me in the brig." Dooku then quickly explained, "That was. Er. A joke. In poor taste." He didn't want Yoda to think he was so stressed out he actually wanted to shoot him. But *dammit* if he was having less brain-to-mouth filter than usual today.

Then Dooku went on, feeling nervous and tense again. "As I said to you last time this subject came up... I understand your point of view. I have, myself, questioned my decision to bring him here as chief medical officer. But we are in wartime, and I'm not sure I could find a replacement for him on such short notice... and he's technically done nothing wrong. On the contrary, he has done a phenomenal job managing sickbay during this recent crisis."

"Question your command I will not," Yoda said. "But last forever, this war will not. And replace him, I said not." Yoda leaned forward. "Take this the wrong way, you should not -"

"Oh, here we go," Dooku muttered. Even though he had a harder time reading Yoda, it didn't take a Betazoid to know he was going to hate whatever was about to come out of the counselor's mouth.

"Advancing in years, you are."

Dooku was sixty-nine, on the cusp of seventy... and Yoda was even older than Severin. Betazoids also were a long-lived species, with most living well into their two hundreds and sometimes three hundreds; even with silver hair, seventy was only considered middle-aged by Betazoid standards, and some Betazoids even had children at this age. Dooku snorted. "I am not too old for Starfleet, and you of all people should know better than to suggest that."

"Ordinarily, hold this view, I would not. But three major wars, you have been in. With the Borg. The Dominion. Now this. After two, most Starfleet officers retire."

"So you're... suggesting... I retire." Dooku's glare intensified. "I am not going to abandon my duties in the middle of a fucking *war* -"

"Now, I said not. But when over, this war is, retirement, I strongly suggest. Enough of yourself and your life, you have given in service. Much easier for you it would be, to rest and relax after this."

"I... am a career officer. I have wanted to be in Starfleet since I was *four*. You've seen my personnel records, my psychological profile. *You know this*. This is my life. When the war is over, there won't be much worry about me burning out, now will there?"

"Until the next one comes." Yoda frowned, his ears twitching with annoyance he was trying to keep in check; even with Yoda being hard to read, Dooku could tell Yoda was thinking of him as being a petulant child. "That will be four wars. Too much for most people to handle on active duty, that is."

Dooku said nothing. He was too angry to speak. He knew, logically, Yoda was not trying to insult him, and was saying this out of what he thought was his best interests. But it stung. It felt like taking everything Dooku had stood for and believed in, his whole life, and stomping on it. Stomping on his dreams.

But what good are those dreams when I am alone and miserable.

"Decide now, you do not have to. Think about it, you should. Take time. But if duty and responsibility, you care about, understand that from an empty cup, you cannot give."

A few more moments of awkward silence passed, and Yoda finally said, "Over, the session is. Until next time."

Dooku got up, reflexively straightened his shirt, and gave a curt nod of acknowledgment. "Thank you, Counselor," he managed to ground out, not feeling grateful at all.

Back in his quarters, Dooku was alone again, and feeling very, very alone. The thought of Severin getting fucked, fantasizing about him, panting "Yan... Yan..." flooded into his mind once more, and Dooku found himself hard. Soon he was stroking himself, giving into a fantasy of fucking Severin, pounding him into the mattress.

Spanking Severin's ass. "Who does this belong to?"

"You... I'm yours..."

"That's right." Growling, nibbling Severin's neck. "You're mine."

Nails digging into his back as Severin moans and shudders. "Yan..."

Dooku's climax came quickly, and he heard himself cry out "Sev" as he let go, shooting a tremendous amount of cum at the thought of coming inside Severin, Severin coming all over him.

Dooku took a few minutes to recover, catching his breath, and then he felt like crying. He was also furious with himself for giving into those feelings - the proverbial worms were out of the can, or one big worm in particular. He commanded a starbase, he led fleets into battle, and he was losing this battle.

Never mind losing. I think I've already lost.

Chapter 24

On his lunch break, Severin sat down at his desk - even though he was supposed to be on break, he still reviewed case files on his PADD.

Or was trying to.

His thoughts kept drifting back to Dooku bringing in Lieutenant Ahsoka Tano, the warm caring side that managed to show beneath the frosty, professional exterior. He wasn't as much of the "Iceman" as he had once been, and seeing his concern and compassion for his crew was part of what Severin had loved about him.

Still loved. It was the worst possible timing for such an incident, to see one of the qualities Severin found so attractive, so loudly on display. Severin put down his PADD and facepalmed, trying to push away his feelings, regretting the day he took the offer to become chief medical officer of Starbase 24.

And then, a clearing of the throat. Severin startled, and when he opened his eyes he let out a sharp breath, relieved it wasn't Dooku.

Qui-Gon smiled at him, holding a food box that he set on Severin's desk and opened. "I brought you lunch again," he said.

It was the Eridani equivalent of another El-Aurian dish - meat dumplings, cabbage leaves stuffed with rice, and a spicy gourd and bean soup. Severin's face lit up and he impulsively took his great-grandson's hands and squeezed them. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome."

Severin had a spoonful of the soup and almost cried; it tasted virtually identical to the real thing. "This is so good."

"I'm glad you like it." Qui-Gon's smile broadened. Then he frowned, and Severin stopped before he could have another spoonful. Severin waited, and after a minute Qui said, "When I walked in you appeared... distressed. Is everything all right?"

"More or less," Severin said. "You know, the usual. Things are always kind of crazy around here." He shoved more soup in his mouth - he was hungry and it was incredible.

"Mmm. I haven't seen you at the arboretum in awhile, maybe you could take a little trip there and it might help you relax." A pause, and Qui added, "You and the Admiral. I know you went hiking together..."

Severin almost choked on the soup in his mouth. Qui gave him a concerned look. Severin quickly guzzled down some water.

"Too much heat?" Qui asked.

Severin tried to not splutter on the water - he knew Qui was asking about the soup, but his mind immediately thought of "heat" in a different sense... the lust he still felt for Dooku. "The amount of spice is fine," Severin told him. "Just... went down the wrong pipe." "*Went down.*" "*Pipe.*" Suddenly, Severin had the mental image of being down on his knees, Dooku's cock in his mouth; he tried to push that thought away.

"OK, good." Qui nodded. "Grandmother said you like your soup spicy, so I went with that. But back to the arboretum... you and the Admiral should plan another hiking date, I think. It would do you both some good."

"A... date." Severin felt himself scowling.

"An appointment to go hiking together. Or even just a stroll. Or sitting and appreciating nature. Both of you have busy schedules but I'm sure you could work something out -"

Severin still felt like Qui's choice of words wasn't so innocent, but he wasn't going to argue with him about it now. He simply nodded and said, "OK," and ate more soup.

Then Qui said, "Speaking of relaxing, and boosting morale... I had mentioned awhile back that I'd like to have a small celebration for us finding each other, especially when the odds of that happening are truly quite remarkable."

"Yes, you did mention that." Severin had another spoonful of soup.

"Obi-Wan and I were thinking - what about tomorrow night? At Ted's? You, the rest of the crew. Nothing major, but it would still be a fun get-together. Something the crew would enjoy, a nice little distraction. A reminder of hope, in these difficult times."

Severin felt awkward about the prospect of being in a social situation with Dooku for a couple hours, but he also knew that what his great-grandson was saying was true - it wouldn't be a bad pick-me-up for a crew that needed it right about now, still raw from the Klingon attack on the base.

Qui added, "I'll make a cake."

Severin couldn't help smiling at that. "I won't say no to cake, especially if you're making it."

The following evening, the senior officers and Qui-Gon gathered in Ted's. Qui had made a large sheet cake, chocolate with coconut pecan frosting. He'd also arranged for catering, with a table full of hors d'oeuvres and a punch bowl.

Dooku was the last to arrive - there was a stretch of time when Severin thought he might not make it at all - and tried to not make a scene as he entered, but it was hard for the six-four commanding officer of the starbase to go unnoticed.

"Good," Qui-Gon said. "Now that we're all here..."

Champagne was poured by a waiter for those who wanted it, and sparkling punch for those who didn't drink. Qui stood next to Severin, towering over him, and draped an arm around him. "I'd like to take a moment to express gratitude for finding a member of my blood family right here," Qui said. "I'm looking forward to continuing to get to know my great-grandfather, but so far what I have seen... I'm very proud to be descended from him."

Severin choked up, and patted Qui on the back. Then he cleared his throat and said, "I'm also grateful to find out I still have blood family around... not just Qui, but the discovery that his grandmother - my daughter - is alive and well on Alpha Eridani II. When this war is over, I'll be visiting her there." Severin swallowed hard then, feeling nervous about what he was about to say, but there was no point in hiding it. "I may possibly be going there to stay, if I like the planet well enough. But Qui, you're always welcome to visit, and in the meantime, I too am glad to get to know you, and am also very, very proud of you." He affectionately tousled his great-grandson's hair, making him laugh and blush, and then Severin raised his glass to the crew. Severin, Qui, and Obi-Wan clinked glasses, and the rest of the crew clinked glasses, and Severin knocked back champagne.

"You'd like it," Qui said quietly.

Severin didn't want to think that far ahead - indeed, he could barely predict what he'd be doing a day from now. He was getting antsy waiting for a return call from Krogh or his brother-in-law's contacts, wondering if the visit had been for nothing.

And he was especially antsy about Dooku, who was making an attempt to be social with the crew, though still noticeably awkward about it. Being around him was starting to feel like torture, with the intensity of the attraction that was still very much there, and which Severin knew Dooku no doubt knew about via his Betazoid empathy and telepathy.

But they'd been dancing around the issue because *of course* they would be. Severin bitterly remembered the way Dooku had ended things with him thirty-five years ago for the sake of duty. It was ridiculous entertaining any kind of fantasies or secret hopes. And yet there they were, and he hated it.

He hated *him*. Bringing him here after all this time, being so *fucking* handsome, and their attempt at friendship reminding him of why he'd fallen in love with him in the first place.

The house band at Ted's was playing Earth music from its 1980s, and their current song, "Waiting For A Star To Fall" by Boy Meets Girl, felt like a slap in the face.

*I can't love you this much baby
And love you from this far*

Severin took a deep breath and went over to the keyboardist, who he'd learned from the last get-together at Ted's would take requests and relay them to the band. He gave the keyboardist his request, and the man nodded and gave the thumbs up with his free hand. Severin then went to the bar for Ted to give him a refill on champagne.

When the song was over, Severin saw the keyboardist call the band over by the drum set and they talked among themselves. When the bassist, who was also the lead singer, got back to his mic, he said, "This one is for Doctor Yusanis. It's 'Shattered Dreams' by Johnny Hates Jazz."

The band started to play.

*So much for your promises
They died the day you let me go
Caught up in a web of lies
But it was just too late to know
I thought it was you
Who would stand by my side*

*And now you've given me, given me
Nothing but shattered dreams, shattered dreams
Feel like I could run away, run away
From this empty heart*

From across the room, Dooku gave Severin a withering look. Severin smiled and raised his glass.

Towards the end of the song, Severin went to the table of hors d'oeuvres and began to assemble a small plate of snacks - cheese, crackers, olives, stuffed mushrooms. He had finished his second glass of champagne and was keeping it at two. Dooku practically swooped down on

him at the punch bowl, and the two just stood and looked at each other for a moment. Then Severin calmly poured himself a glass of punch. Before he could walk away, Dooku grabbed his wrist, standing close by so the rest of the crew couldn't see.

"I don't know what kind of game you're playing," Dooku said quietly.

"Game? Why would you think that?" Severin blinked slowly, giving Dooku a faux innocent look as he used a free hand to shove an entire cracker in his mouth.

Dooku watched Severin chew, and swallow, their eyes firmly locked. Then Dooku moved closer and said, even more softly, "So tell me... *Doctor*... do you make it a habit of fucking every commanding officer you have?"

Severin restrained a grin - seeing him with Kira had hit a nerve, and it was finally coming out. He felt a pang of guilt, not wanting to hurt Dooku, but at the same time, felt vindicated - *serves you right, after breaking my heart*. And, with the champagne having loosened his tongue, he gave into that feeling of vindication some more. "No," Severin replied. "Sometimes I fuck Klingons, too."

Dooku glared at him in silence, and Severin thought he might drop it, but the grip on his wrist tightened. Severin knew he'd hit below the belt, and for a moment he could barely breathe, wondering what Dooku would do next.

Dooku let go of his wrist - Severin noticed him shaking slightly - and Dooku took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "I think we ought to have a talk," Dooku said, still keeping his voice down.

"Yes. We're definitely overdue for having... a talk." Severin nodded, and nibbled on a piece of cheese. He held out his plate of hors d'oeuvres to Dooku, a polite gesture. "Tomorrow, perhaps."

"No. Perhaps *now*." Dooku's nostrils flared, and he gently pushed the plate back.

"Not here, in front of all these people -"

"My ready room, then."

Severin was surprised Dooku wanted to discuss things there rather than in his own quarters or Severin's, but then, Severin supposed Dooku might think the talk would end badly, and there would be less potential for a scene with the bridge so close by. Severin nodded, and then he said, "OK, let's be discrete about this."

He went over to Qui and Obi, handed the plate of hors d'oeuvres to Obi, hugged Qui, and said, "Thank you for all of this, but I gotta leave early. Can you save some cake for me, bring it to my office tomorrow?"

Qui frowned slightly, but nodded and hugged Severin back. "I can do that."

"Thank you."

Severin left Ted's, and sat on a bench a few meters away, waiting nervously. Approximately ten minutes later Dooku stepped out of Ted's, and there was another moment when they just paused, looking at each other from down the hall, before Dooku strode towards him.

They rode in the turbolift to the bridge in silence. Severin closed his eyes, trying to take deep breaths to calm the claustrophobia, but his anxiety was mounting. When they arrived at the bridge, Severin saw that he was shaking now as he came out of the turbolift. He glanced over his shoulder at Dooku, who was stone-faced, but his eyes betrayed him.

The bridge crew at this hour was sparse - Dooku was on-call if needed. The crew acknowledged him and the doctor as they walked through, and stepped out to the small hall that contained Dooku's ready room, and a conference room.

Dooku put in the access code and walked in, with Severin following behind him. The lights automatically went on. Severin expected Dooku to go to his desk, while he sat on the other side, but Dooku turned around and they just stood there in the doorway, looking at each other again.

Then the unthinkable happened.

Dooku slammed Severin up against the wall, took his face in his hands, and leaned down to kiss him hard. For a few seconds it didn't register what was happening - Severin couldn't believe it - and then he responded to the kiss with thirty-five years of pent-up passion, standing on his tiptoes, his arms instinctively locking around Dooku.

The kiss deepened, their tongues swirling, both men groaning into the kiss... and then Dooku bit Severin's lower lip, hard enough to draw blood. He nibbled on Severin's neck, making Severin cry out, and he seized a fistful of Severin's curls before licking his neck and using his teeth again, harder. "Is this what you want?" Dooku rasped.

Severin knew he'd seen the mental images of him getting fucked by Krogh, and knew Dooku knew he'd been fantasizing about him while it happened. Severin saw the ache in his eyes, mirroring his own. Severin was already hard, and he could feel Dooku's own hard-on pressed against him. Severin looked into those dark, hurt eyes, and he said, simply, "Yes."

Dooku kissed him again, and Severin ran his hands over him, shivering at the feel of his lean, muscular body, the steel hidden by the fabric of his uniform. His hands roamed up to Dooku's face, stroking the beard, enjoying the feel of his whiskers, wishing he could run his fingers through Dooku's chest hair -

- Dooku definitely picked up on that with his telepathy. He *growled* again; the growl made Severin's cock throb, and Severin could feel himself start to leak precum. Dooku tugged on the handful of Severin's curls that he held, marched him over to his desk, and bent Severin over it. Severin cried out as he was pushed down, ass out, and moaned when Dooku yanked down his trousers and briefs, exposing his backside. Severin cried out again when Dooku slapped his ass, and began grinding against the desk, feeling like he was in heat.

"Do you want me to stop?" Dooku ground out.

"No," Severin said, truthfully, wiggling his ass at him.

Dooku groaned, and then Severin felt Dooku's hard cock rubbing in the crack of his ass. Severin almost came right then and there, pushing his ass out more, hoping Dooku would get the message that he wanted it *in him, now* -

Dooku grabbed Severin's hair again. "You're sure you want this?"

"Fuck *yes*."

Dooku spanked his ass again, and then Dooku stopped rubbing against him, making Severin whine in protest. Severin watched as Dooku came around the other side of his desk to the replicator behind it - an almost comical sight with Dooku's trousers around his ankles, but the sight of his hard cock made Severin even crazier. Dooku told the replicator, "Personal lubricant, warm," and they watched as a small cup of clear liquid appeared.

Dooku came back around the desk, behind Severin. He shoved two lubricated fingers in him, finding the prostate right away. "Oh, *fuck!*" Severin cried out, and as Dooku rubbed his fingers inside him, Severin worked his hips, fucking his fingers, wanting it as badly as he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

Two fingers became three, and then Severin felt the head of Dooku's cock at his opening. Dooku pushed in just the tip, and then went in slowly as Severin took deep breaths, adjusting to the length and thickness. Even though he'd taken Krogh's cock a few days ago, it had been the first real cock he'd had in some time, and Dooku was not small. Dooku could feel the tightness around him, moaning, and once he was all the way in, he gave a few shuddery gasps and observed, "You haven't been that active, have you?"

"Fuck me," was all Severin would say in response.

Dooku grabbed his hair again and showed him no mercy, taking him as hard as Krogh had fucked him - harder, even. Severin loved it, rocking his hips back at Dooku, fucking himself on Dooku's cock just as much as Dooku was fucking him. Dooku still fit perfectly inside him, hitting his prostate just right. Dooku's free hand came around to stroke Severin's cock, and Severin cried out again.

The hand that was in his hair slapped his ass, and Severin moaned. "Yes, yes, more..." he panted.

Dooku growled, and Severin felt his balls tightening, ready to explode, but *fuck* he needed to be fucked, needed to keep this going, needed to *feel him...*

"Yan..." It was his fantasies made flesh. "Yan... Yan... oh, fuck, Yan, fuck me..."

Dooku groaned, and fucked Severin even harder, pounding into him now, the slap of their flesh as loud as their moans. Dooku's balls slapped against Severin's, and Severin felt himself right on that edge, so close.

"Yan!" Severin grabbed the edge of the desk, white-knuckled. "Yan... *Yan!* Fuck me! Fuck me hard..."

Dooku was getting more vocal, deep grunts and groans as he continued slamming into Severin. Severin was whimpering now, and making sharp little cries, so ready, so needy, but wanting to completely drown in sensation, connection...

And then Dooku's thumb was rubbing his frenulum, and he couldn't hold back anymore, the rubbing of his prostate, frenulum, and the smacking against his sensitive balls too exquisite. "*Yan!*" Severin let out a howl as he climaxed, shooting all over Dooku's desk.

One, two, three jabs, and Dooku let out a wordless cry as he gave into his own release. Severin screamed as he felt Dooku shooting inside him, another surge of pleasure rocking him, more cum spurting out of him, his ass throbbing and clenching around Dooku's pulsing cock. It was one of the most intense orgasms Severin had ever experienced, if not *the* most intense.

Dooku moaned again, and his hands left Severin's cock and hair. He steadied himself against Severin, who could feel him trembling with the force of his release.

Severin buried his face in his arms, feeling like he was made of jelly and would fall on the floor any minute. When Dooku slid out of him, Severin heard himself whine, feeling empty. He continued to keep his eyes closed, everything spinning and floating, though he heard Dooku rummaging in his desk, and then he felt Dooku shove a towelette in his hand.

Severin leaned on the desk to stand up, and wiped at his cock, and then the cum mess in his ass, though he didn't get it all, and frankly didn't *want* to get it all. Dooku was already putting his briefs and trousers back on, and Severin did the same.

Dooku calmly sat at his desk and steepled his hands, frowning into them, looking too deep in thought. And as Severin stood there, before he too could attempt to sit down, the heat of passion gave way to clarity.

This man broke your heart thirty-five years ago. What makes you think he won't do it again, especially with the war being even worse this time around?

As badly as Severin had wanted - *needed* - that fuck... as good as it was, as hard as he'd come... looking into Dooku's eyes now, Severin felt like he'd made the biggest mistake of his life. He'd had a hard enough time dealing with that first breakup, letting himself love again after he'd lost everything. He wasn't prepared to go through that again.

Their eyes met, and Dooku opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word, Severin straightened his shirt and said, "This doesn't change anything."

And then he turned on his heel and walked out, regretting those words, regretting walking away, just as much as he regretted giving in.

This is just how it has to be.

Chapter 25

"Sev!"

Dooku cried out as he let go, coming into tissues he had ready, giving himself a last few slow strokes through his orgasm.

The momentary release and flood of pleasure gave quickly to a creeping despair, a feeling of emptiness, that he had truly hit rock bottom in his nearly seventy years of life.

Twenty-four hours ago, he had done the unthinkable. He had taken Severin to his ready room, both of them leaving the celebration early - a family reunion celebration that was, by rights, for Severin to enjoy; Dooku felt he had been exceedingly selfish in dragging him away. He'd had every intention to just *talk*, to finally clear the air about their feelings, and figure out where to go from here, because they had to go *somewhere* instead of being in this tense holding pattern.

But then his feelings got the better of him and he found himself kissing Severin. And feeling Severin's lust in return. They had both given in to what they'd been denying themselves, holding back. The minutes that Dooku pounded into Severin, bent over his desk, had been the most honest, real moments of his life. From the time he was four, painfully aware that he was not like the other children - too Betazoid to fit in around humans, too much time spent on Earth to fit in on Betazed - he'd wanted to be a starship captain. To him, following in the footsteps of his father meant respect. Going off into space meant not having to deal with the tricky issue of *not belonging anywhere*. And when he'd met Severin, when Severin had taken him into his bed, he belonged... to him. The seven years they'd spent together were precious, beautiful, enough that he still missed it thirty-five years later. He'd been hiding behind his Starfleet career, his prestige, his duty, and it wasn't that he didn't care about defending the Federation, preserving its ideals, upholding justice - it was that he'd absorbed himself so fully in *what* he was that he forgot *who* he was. And when he took Severin, in those moments of pure passion and hunger and need... he felt alive again.

For a brief instant, he hoped he would be welcomed home again.

Yet, as soon as it was over, he saw the hurt look in Severin's eyes. Felt him remembering the breakup, so long ago... feeling the sting all over again. Not wanting to go through that a second time. He couldn't blame Severin for that. But it hurt him, too, that Severin walked out without even giving him a chance to speak his mind, make some sort of reassurance that he wanted this, and what happened thirty-five years ago wouldn't happen a second time - he'd learned from the mistakes surrounding that event.

It had been twenty-four hours. He and Severin had avoided each other. They couldn't do so forever, but they had not seen each other at all today.

He'd also had the indiscretion to fuck Severin in his ready room, meters away from the bridge. The senior officers had been at the reunion party at Ted's, but the bridge hadn't been empty, and sure enough the junior officers had gossiped - nobody had come forward and told him, but he was a Betazoid. He *knew*. Commander Kenobi in particular had shot him a few curious looks during the day, though he had wisely not said anything. *Yet*.

The irony, of course, was that he and Severin had left the party within ten minutes of each other to be discrete. And now in hindsight, that just fueled the gossip fires that *something was going on*.

Dooku hated everything. He called it an early night.

After laying in his bed - alone, aching - for a few minutes, Pelo hopped on the bed with an inquisitive chirp. He walked over to Dooku and headbutted him, purring. Dooku skritch'd the cat, who flopped down next to him and allowed belly rubs. In the glow of the nightlight, Dooku saw Pelo kneading in the air, and smiled fondly at the purring growing louder. "My little friend," he said. "At least you like me."

One of Pelo's paws wrapped around Dooku's finger, and squeezed, almost as if the cat understood what he was saying and wanted to give reassurance. With his free hand, Dooku skritch'd Pelo's chin, before resuming the belly rubs. It wasn't long before Pelo fell asleep, and Dooku himself fell asleep petting the cat, his finger still held by the cat's paw.

—

Despite getting to bed early and having a full eight hours rest, Dooku felt like he had been hit by a torpedo when his wakeup alarm went off. He burrowed into the warmth of his covers, wanting just a few more minutes of sleep -

"Mrowr."

Pelo began to pull the "it's been days since I had food" routine, even though he'd been fed last night. After a few yowls, Dooku couldn't take it anymore and dragged himself out of bed. "All right, *all right*."

The silver tabby trotted ahead of Dooku into the kitchen, tail held high in the air. Dooku staggered to the food replicator, and once the cat food and fresh water was ready, he set it down and Pelo rubbed against his legs in a brief show of gratitude before heading to his bowl and gobbling; Dooku rolled his eyes as Pelo made a mess with crumbs of food on the mat for his dishes. At least there were cleaning droids for that.

Dooku showered, changed into his uniform, and after making himself eat a breakfast bar, he made his way to the bridge. Kenobi was already there, which was to be expected, but the feeling of alarm from him was not.

"Report," Dooku said.

"Sir," Kenobi said. "We have received word that the Twelfth Fleet was attacked at 0100."

The Twelfth Fleet had been assigned to begin patrol around Starbase 24, following the recent attack on the station, to prevent future attacks. Dooku's eyebrows went up at this - he knew the Klingons might try something again, but this was fairly soon.

"Casualties?"

"They lost a fourth of their fleet, and another fourth has been coming in for repairs and treatment of injured."

"So the Twelfth Fleet is down by half."

Kenobi simply nodded.

Shit. Half was better than none, but half was still vulnerable and could be picked off easily. Dooku knew what he had to do, straightening his shirt. "I'll be in my ready room," he said. "I need to have a chat with Starfleet Command."

Shelby was the one who answered his transmission - the last person he wanted to deal with, knowing now what he knew about Shelby's history with Severin - which wasn't much, but just enough to make him uncomfortable. Unfortunately, she would have to do.

"The Twelfth Fleet is down by half. One fourth destroyed, one fourth with heavy damage and casualties," Dooku said. "I am formally requesting that all exploratory vessels be reclaimed for the purpose of defense, so we can bolster the Twelfth Fleet and provide extra ships to the other fleets."

"Admiral, with all due respect, you realize that science vessels are not gunboats, right? I know you commanded the *Trident* for a long time and it's easy for commanding officers to think every ship in Starfleet is just like theirs, but it isn't so."

Dooku gave Shelby a withering look. Of all the years he'd been in Starfleet, he had never heard anything more condescending in his life. "*Admiral*," he addressed her, emphasizing they were of equal rank even if she sat behind a desk at Starfleet Command - as he once did - "I do in fact understand that, say, the *Newton* and the *Hawking* are not the *Trident*. My request still stands. A science vessel may not be on par with an *Akira*-class warship. It still has defense capabilities - phasers, photon torpedoes - that we need. It still has crew who have Starfleet training and know how to take orders."

"I'd rather that, if you need more numbers for the Twelfth Fleet, we pull extra from the other fleets. Like maybe the Ninth Fleet has ships they can spare -"

"*Admiral Shelby*. The Twelfth Fleet was *cut in half* last night. We need literally dozens of ships to replace them. None of the other fleets can spare those numbers, they are all stationed in strategic places and have *all* had skirmishes with the Klingons at one point or another during this war. This is the reason why I'm requesting we finally send the exploratory vessels back from their missions - we need the numbers. I would rather have four dozen science vessels patrolling with the Twelfth Fleet, than take a dozen here and a dozen there from four other fleets and that loss leaves them vulnerable to take bigger losses or even be picked off entirely, leaving that entire region exposed to Klingon invasion. This was the mistake we made during the Dominion War, and this war is even worse than the Dominion War. This war is even worse than Wolf 359, which you remember as well as I do."

"And sending ill-equipped, ill-trained vessels by the hundreds wouldn't have stopped the Borg any more than forty vessels did," Shelby spat.

"Perhaps not. But these aren't ill-equipped or ill-trained vessels at all. These ships still have weapons. And *everyone* in Starfleet Academy gets the same training, how to handle different scenarios including battle, even if they go on to specialize in different fields. Something is better than nothing, and if we prune the extant fleets we're left with a lot of nothing. So I fail to understand your logic here, Admiral."

Dooku and Shelby stared at each other for two solid minutes that felt much longer than that. Even from the distance, over the transmission Dooku could feel that Shelby had been digging in her heels for the sake of her pride, and being right, and was starting to concede that it was better to take a hit to her pride than the loss of thousands of lives. Shelby finally sighed and gave a curt nod. "You win, Admiral Dooku. I can get you more ships in twenty-four hours."

"Make it sixteen," Dooku said. "The Klingons know we're down half a fleet out here, and I expect them to strike again sooner rather than later."

"Admiral Dooku... it's a lot to even ask that I command all exploration vessels to cease their missions and be re-assigned. Some of these vessels are quite far away. The fastest I can get you *any* reinforcement is twenty-four hours. You'll have to live with that." Shelby pursed her lips. "Besides... what happened to that plan of yours, talking to the Klingons about Species 8472? Did that fall through?"

Dooku could feel that she was *waiting* for it, *hoping* that would be the case, and that bothered him. But he wasn't going to call her out and have something else to argue about, not here, not now. "We're still awaiting a response from our contacts in the Klingon Empire," Dooku said, honestly. "We *were* told it could take a few days."

"And it's been a few days."

"It has. But not so long that I would say it's fallen through. Just as you would have me wait twenty-four hours for Twelfth Fleet reinforcements... I would say give it another forty-eight to hear from the Klingons."

"Fair enough. If that's all, Admiral -"

"That's all."

"Shelby out." She ended the transmission, and Dooku's screen flipped to the blue and white logo of Starfleet Command.

—

The one fourth of the Twelfth Fleet that sustained heavy damages and casualties began to pour into Starbase 24 for repairs and triage shortly after Dooku's discussion with Shelby ended. Dooku spent the next five hours de-briefing the captains and those of their crew who were able to, about the attack, and closely monitoring the half of the Twelfth Fleet that was left, before going about his usual routine of making the rounds of the base and supervising, making sure that everything was as it should be.

The anxiety aboard the starbase was at an all-time high. The crews of the fleet that had come in were understandably distraught. Sickbay was once again stretched to the limit and under pressure. Dooku's own crew was anticipating another attack from the Klingons on the station, and even though they had adapted the reflector technology that was used, neither Dooku nor the rest of the crew had any idea if the Klingons had any new tricks to roll out when they came back.

Sensing the overwhelming levels of fear around the base, Dooku had to spend some time in his ready room just meditating, and doing what he could to shield himself so he didn't absorb too much. It was when he had this shielding in place, that there was a chime at his ready room door.

"Come in," Dooku said, not really wanting visitors, but knowing it might be important.

Kenobi was there, looking apologetic. He stepped forward, and stood on the other side of Dooku's desk. "We have word that the reinforcements are on their way at the expected time of arrival," he said.

"Good." Dooku nodded.

"Repairs are going more slowly. Some of these ships..." Kenobi shook his head. "It's going to take awhile for them to get running again if at all, from what engineering is telling me."

"That's unfortunate."

"Very much so." Kenobi frowned. "I have the full report from engineering here." He took out a PADD and gingerly placed it on Dooku's desk.

Dooku took it and did a cursory glance, he would look more in-depth later. Then he looked up at Kenobi. "Anything else?"

"Five of the injured Twelfth Fleet officers have died," Kenobi said.

Even through his shielding, and trying to block out Severin in particular, it accounted for some of the sadness the El-Aurian was feeling - doctors couldn't afford to take every loss to heart, or it would slowly destroy them, but nonetheless, Severin was upset by patients dying. And it was, indeed, tragic. Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose, cursing this entire war, and aching to comfort Severin in some way.

"Sir."

Dooku straightened his posture. "Yes."

Kenobi gave him a nervous look. "Permission to speak freely."

Dooku sighed. "Granted." He didn't really want candor, especially now, but he'd learned from past mistakes to always listen to the opinion of his first officer.

"You and the doctor." Kenobi looked away, then met his eyes. "There's a rumor going around that the two of you..." He coughed, and made an obscene hand gesture. "Some people claim they, er, heard you."

Dooku looked down at the PADD again. "No comment."

There was an awkward moment of silence, and then Kenobi said, "Well... I know things are really stressful right now, and I'm also here because Qui-Gon and I would like to invite you to have dinner with us."

Dooku looked up and raised an eyebrow. He and Kenobi had occasionally shared lunch together, or tea, as commanding officers and their first officers sometimes did. They also occasionally met for recreational activities such as fencing or chess. But this was the first time he'd ever been asked to have dinner in his first officer's quarters. He had gotten the impression from Qui-Gon that he was fairly nurturing - something that undoubtedly ran in his family - and Qui seemed to like feeding people, judging from the cake he'd made for the party. Part of him felt like arguing that he didn't need to be parented by a man his junior, but he recognized it as part of the "Iceman" behavior that he'd been trying to nip in the bud, be a commanding officer that inspired respect and loyalty rather than fear.

So he simply nodded and said, "I can do that."

"1900?"

"1900 is fine." That was three hours from now.

"I'll let Qui-Gon know. See you then." Kenobi gave a small wave before he walked out.

—

Three hours later, after communicating strategy with what was left of the Twelfth Fleet until their reinforcements came, and the always-unpleasant duty of contacting the families of the officers that had died on his base, Dooku was feeling famished - he hadn't eaten much today, in fact due to stress, a bad example to set for the crew but nonetheless here he was. While he had felt a bit awkward about Kenobi's offer, not feeling particularly social today, he found himself grateful that he wasn't going to be subjected to replicator food or having to awkwardly eat alone in a restaurant tonight.

He arrived at his first officer's quarters promptly, and was greeted at the door by Qui-Gon. "Come in, come in," Qui-Gon said, smiling broadly.

Something smelled delicious. The table was already set with several courses, and Dooku noticed, as he approached the table, that the lighting in the dining area was dim and only two places were set. Obi-Wan poured him a glass of Saurian brandy right after he sat down.

Then there was a chime at the door. Dooku immediately froze.

He'd made an effort to keep his mental shielding up all day - enough that he didn't detect any ulterior motives from Kenobi when asked to dinner.

Behind that door was Severin Yusanis. He could *feel* it.

That question about Dooku's involvement with the doctor hadn't been innocent curiosity - Qui-Gon wanted to do something nice for his great-grandfather, assuming that a "romantic dinner" with "his partner" would be just the thing, and Obi-Wan, concerned for his commanding officer's well-being, had agreed.

Severin stepped in just as Obi-Wan was lighting electric lanterns on the table. Qui had greeted him right at the door the same as Dooku, but with a hug this time, and when Severin pulled apart he said, "Wow, dinner smells great! Thank you so much for -" His voice trailed off when he saw Dooku sitting at the table. "Er."

Severin and Dooku just looked at each other from across the room.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged sly smiles, thinking they were clever. Having no clue that they had just created even more of an awkward mess.

Not wanting to be rude, Severin sat down across from Dooku, and Qui-Gon began to serve them.

"Aren't you joining us?" Dooku asked him.

"Obi and I ate a little while ago," Qui-Gon said. "This is all for you."

"Gee... *thanks*," Severin said.

Dooku drained his glass of Saurian brandy and Obi-Wan poured him another, also pouring a glass for Severin. "Bon appetit," Qui-Gon said, stepping away from the table.

"But first..." Obi-Wan raised his own glass of brandy. "It's about time, Admiral."

"Indeed." Qui-Gon also raised a glass. "I'm glad my great-grandfather has someone."

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon looked at them expectantly, and Severin held out his glass - Dooku sensed he wasn't up for correcting them and having more awkwardness right now. Dooku and Severin clinked glasses, and Severin knocked back his brandy, his eyes locked with Dooku's the entire time.

Dooku wanted to hide under the table, but politely took a bite of the squash casserole Qui-Gon made. *This is going to be a long night.*

Chapter 26

Somehow, Dooku and Severin managed to get through the dinner that Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan made for them without giving away how awkward the whole thing was. It was, indeed, *intensely* awkward for Severin, even moreso than the dinners where he'd been Shelby's "plus one" when she was schmoozing Starfleet Command higher-ups to try to get her way in. But he made himself focus on the food, and talk with Dooku about cats and literature, two fairly innocuous subjects.

When the meal was finished, Severin gave an exaggerated yawn and said, "Well, I think I should turn in early. *As you know*, the infirmary has had a lot of traffic lately..."

"Yes, indeed. I think I shall call it an early night myself. I need to keep my wits sharp," Dooku said, giving Qui-Gon a look as if to say *so I can impale both of you later, you idiots*.

Qui-Gon chuckled, and Severin realized immediately Qui-Gon thought they were talking about going to bed early for something other than sleep. He held back a facepalm. "All right, you crazy kids," Qui-Gon said, even though Severin was his great-grandfather. "*Sleep tight*."

Severin couldn't wait to be out of there. Unfortunately, now he and Dooku had quarters across the hall from each other, and going in the opposite direction would just prolong him getting back to his quarters and getting the hell away from everyone and everything. So he swallowed his pride and kept lockstep beside Dooku, heading for the turbolift.

There was a very awkward silence - even moreso than at the dinner - and Severin felt his anger starting to boil. As the turbolift doors opened on their deck, Severin opened his mouth, about to say something, and then Dooku turned and got in his path. Severin felt a frisson through him at the proximity of Dooku's body, feeling the heat... smelling a touch of his cologne. He looked into those rich dark chocolate eyes and he did not want to *want*, but he did.

"Sev... we need to talk," Dooku said.

"There is nothing to talk about."

"*As you know, I am your commanding officer*. This is getting to the point where it is affecting both of our job performances, and now has affected at least some members of the crew."

"Fine, I'll ask for a transfer." *Wouldn't be the first time*.

Severin tried to sidestep him and Dooku grabbed Severin's wrist. And while Severin would object, and probably punch, anyone else who handled him in such a manner, Dooku's grip on his wrist reminded him too much of the times they'd had sex, when Dooku had grabbed his wrists, dominating him, and Severin had loved it, bucking underneath him, writhing, begging for more. Severin swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry, and he *hated* that Dooku was an empath and a telepath and likely knew exactly what he was thinking... exactly how he was responding to that gesture, his cock stirring.

"You are not asking for a transfer." Their eyes met, and Dooku's eyes narrowed. His nostrils flared. "Dammit, Sev, I need you."

Severin's mouth dropped open.

"I need a competent chief medical officer with this war happening. You've seen it. This is the worst possible time for you to leave. But also... I need you." Dooku let go of Severin's wrist, and he reached out to stroke Severin's cheek, tenderly. "I love you, Sev. Thirty-five years hasn't changed that. It's only reinforced that. We're better together."

"What was it you told me thirty-five years ago?" Severin was even angrier now, because he so desperately wanted to say *yes, I need you too*, but there was his pride... and fear of getting hurt all over again. Fear of history repeating itself. "That I'm a source of emotional compromise for you. That was during the Dominion War, and *this* war that we're in now makes *that* war look like child's play. You really think it's a good idea for us to get re-involved when you said yourself that you'd be willing to do desperate things for the man you love?"

"I did say that," Dooku said, nodding, trying to not betray his hurt with his expression or his tone, but Severin could hear it anyway. His people were listeners, after all. "But that was then, this is now. I was wrong to push you away. Whether you're here or somewhere else, I will still love you. Yes, it is possible that I may make an improper command decision to try to protect you or rescue you. But I believe it was *you* who told me years before that, *There's just as many bad decisions made in the pain of loneliness and lack of connection, as there are from the pain of attachment and trying to protect the people you love*. You are my weakness, Sev, but you are also my *strength*. And I need that now."

Severin closed his eyes, not wanting to cry. Not wanting to give in. But he ached so much. He still loved Dooku, even more than he'd loved Sarenya, someone he'd shared hundreds of years with. Dooku and Severin got each other on a deeper level. They were both bound to a higher purpose, like two parts of a greater whole. The space between the time they'd broken up, and the time their paths had crossed once more, was like a raw wound. It felt as if fate itself had brought them back together to get it right this time...

...and he was still afraid.

Severin pushed Dooku aside, and walked on by, not looking back.

"Where are you going?" Dooku shouted after him.

Severin paused outside the door of his quarters, and ducked in without another word. And when he flopped down on his couch, with Sagan climbing all over him purring, it was then that Severin let himself weep.

—

Severin got no sleep that night. He still made himself go to the infirmary when his shift started, much as he knew that if any of his staff showed up this tired, he would order them back to their quarters, preferring to be short-staffed than have someone botch a procedure. But he wasn't just anyone, and he knew what his limits were. He replicated himself several cups of coffee.

Qui-Gon came in at his usual time to bring Severin homemade lunch. Severin would normally be grateful to see one of his own blood, but as soon as he started yawning, chugging more coffee, Qui-Gon gave him a pointed look, and Severin realized right away that looked incredibly bad in the context of last night.

"I take it you and the Admiral enjoyed yourselves?" Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow with a smirk.

Severin raised an eyebrow back. "That's a weird thing to ask about your great-grandfather. Just saying."

"All right, point taken. I suppose that's inappropriate. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"Hi Sorry If I Offended You," Severin said, before taking a bite of his sandwich.

Qui-Gon facepalmed. "I walked into that."

Then Severin chuckled and patted his arm. He looked around to make sure they were alone, and he leaned back in his chair. "Actually..." He took a deep breath. "My discomfort with the subject isn't so much because you're my great-grandson, we're both adults and we know people get up to adult activities. It's because..." Severin put down his sandwich and pinched the bridge of his nose. "The Admiral and I are old history. We're not back together, Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon's eyes widened with shock. Then he scowled. "Why the hell not?"

"What do you mean, why the hell not? Things didn't work out thirty-five years ago. The problems that caused our breakup then haven't resolved themselves."

"I know you're in love with him. I may only be a quarter El-Aurian, but I still have enough in me to hear it in your voice, hear it in his voice, listen and *observe* that the two of you are crazy about each other. Emphasis on the word *crazy*, because it is completely *mad* to me that you -"

Severin put up his hand and shook his head. "Going forward, please don't with the surprise dinners and... and... trying to intervene in my relationship with him. Or I should say, lack thereof. Because we are never, ever, ever getting back together."

Qui-Gon got up then, and gave Severin a withering look. "Keep telling yourself that, Grandfather. Sounds like you need a lot of convincing." He turned on his heel and started walking away.

"Where are you going?" Severin asked, realizing he sounded exactly like how Dooku did last night.

"Somewhere, before I *yell at you* about the mistake you're making. You are my elder, and you're acting like a stubborn child. I can't take it."

"Yeah, fuck you too," Severin muttered under his breath after Qui-Gon left.

He felt guilty, saying that in his great-grandson's general direction, but he also felt stung. Most of all because he knew Qui-Gon was right.

—

When Severin's shift was over, he dragged himself to his quarters. He took a long shower, replicated himself some food, but found himself picking at it. His mind was replaying the encounter with Dooku over and over again. Those words of love.

And once again, Severin found himself getting angry. The *nerve* of him, to say this now, after everything.

Severin got up, not thinking, just feeling. "Computer. Where is Admiral Dooku?"

The computer replied, "Admiral Dooku is in Holodeck 4."

"Computer, what program is running in Holodeck 4?"

"Fencing."

Of course. Severin realized he should have already known that, but he was running on fumes... and spite.

It had been decades since Severin last fenced with Dooku. He went over to the replicator. "Fencing outfit," Severin said. Once the replicator materialized the proper attire, Severin changed out of his pajamas and put it on.

Then he made a detour to the infirmary. He had something to pick up.

—

Severin used his security override to open Holodeck 4. Dooku was fencing with a computer-generated opponent, and Severin paused a moment, not able to keep from looking at the beauty and grace of Dooku moving, swinging his sword, almost like a dance.

Then Dooku stopped and yelled, "Computer, freeze program." He turned, lifted up his fencing mask, and gave Severin a look.

Severin gave a fencing salute with his bat'leth. "En garde, motherfucker."

Chapter 27

Dooku shook his head at Severin. "As you know, that's not a sword -"

"No shit. I said *en fucking garde*."

Dooku grit his teeth. He didn't know what kind of game Severin was playing, but he would see where it went. He gave a fencing salute with his rapier.

Dooku and Severin began to circle around each other, like each was the predator and each was prey. Then Dooku went on the offensive, thrusting. Severin parried, then made a riposte, going for Dooku's arm. Dooku blocked, and then he made a feint, getting Severin to block towards his hip, when Dooku went for the knee. Severin parried just in time... and then he swung at Dooku's head.

Dooku stepped back. *Now* he knew the kind of game Severin was playing. Severin had been pent up with anger since last night, and it was finally exploding. And though Dooku felt he should maybe walk away from the fight before he got hurt, the fire in Severin's eyes went right to his cock. Severin came forward, not letting him get away, and Dooku thrust at Severin's chest.

Severin's bat'leth pushed away the sword, and then he took a swing at Dooku's shoulder. Dooku made another riposte, and another feint, going for Severin's arm, and almost scoring a touch on Severin's stomach. That proved to be his fatal mistake - Severin's bat'leth came at Dooku's rapier and Dooku watched the Klingon weapon cleave his steel like it was made out of glass. The sword broke in two, and Dooku held half a sword now.

"Sev," Dooku said. "Sev, this is a bit out of hand -"

"No, you know what's out of hand? Your little speech last night after thirty-five *fucking* years. How *dare* you." With that, Severin swung for Dooku's sword arm. Dooku stepped back, and thrust at Severin again, to be blocked. Severin once again hacked at Dooku's sword, leaving him with just a stub. "This? This is how I *feel* right now, inside, after what you said to me. After what you *did*, all those years ago, and making me *love you* all over again. I never stopped. And I hate it. I hate *you*. You *bastard*."

"Sev." Dooku ached for him, longed for him, wanted to do something, anything to make it right.

"*Don't Sev me*." Severin's nostrils flared and he swung again. Dooku ducked. "You want to be professional, *Admiral*? Do you? How do I know that you won't end up rejecting me again because you'll *compromise your duty*... Admiral?"

Dooku shook his head. Even though he'd bristled at the suggestion from Counselor Yoda, now he knew Yoda was right in making it. "Because I am going to retire, as soon as I can. I have served through three major wars now. I am tired. Enough is enough."

"Well, hooray for you. What about me, huh? What about my career? What about the *purpose* I've had after my wife died, how this has been what's kept me going all these years without her? Till you came along and made me care even more about you than my job. Made me care more about *you* than *saving lives*. You... you... *fucking... usurper*."

"Sev." Dooku threw down the ruined sword and put his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Please. Let's calm down and talk about -"

And then Sev's bat'leth was at his throat. And yet, Dooku knew Sev wasn't going to hurt him. And he knew Sev knew how he felt... and Sev could tell that he was aroused rather than afraid. Dooku exhaled sharply.

Severin threw his bat'leth down, grabbed Dooku and kissed him.

Dooku kissed Severin back, deep and hungry. His hands slid over Severin's body, wanting to feel his flesh, not the fencing gear. But then Severin *tore* at Dooku's shirt, then his trousers, and tore again, letting the ruined garments fall to the floor of the holodeck. Dooku felt a bit awkward with a frozen computer-generated combatant just standing there looking awkward, so he said, "Computer, end program," and it was just them and the empty holodeck.

And that, too, was awkward... until Severin dropped to his knees, and seized the waistband of Dooku's briefs in his teeth, yanking them down with a feral look in his eyes, freeing Dooku's hard cock. Once the briefs slid down Dooku's thighs to his knees, Dooku stepped out of them, then Severin came closer and his eyes locked with Dooku's as he took the hard cock into his mouth, inch by inch.

Dooku shuddered and groaned, giving a gasp when Severin had swallowed him to the hilt. "Sev. Darling..."

"Mmmmmmm." Severin began to suck, fast and hard, like he was starving for it.

Soon Dooku was grabbing fistfuls of Severin's curls, pulling on his hair, gently thrusting into Severin's mouth. Nothing had ever felt so good as those full lips wrapped around him, the sweet hot grip of Severin's mouth, sucking him in a perfect rhythm, bringing him closer and closer to that edge. Dooku heard his moans getting louder, undignified, and soon he was shaking, right on that edge. "Oh gods. Don't stop..."

Of course, Severin stopped, giving him a wicked grin... and then a few teasing licks up and down the shaft, licking around and around the head, lapping at the slit, making a show of collecting the precum with his tongue. Dooku growled with frustrated need, and it didn't help that he could feel all that lust from Severin... that Severin wanted this just as much as he did.

Dooku grabbed Severin and pulled him up to his feet, kissed him roughly, and now it was Dooku's turn to tear the fencing gear from Severin's body. He also tore off Severin's briefs, groaning at the sight of Severin's hard cock, dripping precum onto the floor of the holodeck. He crushed Severin against him and kissed him harder, hands roaming over Severin's body, enjoying the petal-soft feel of his skin, the silken steel of him. "I want you," Dooku whispered, kissing Severin again, then kissing at his neck, licking, biting. "I need you. *Now.*"

"Computer, replicate personal lubricant, warm," Severin called out.

There was something hilarious about that command, but before Dooku could laugh too hard, Severin collected the bowl of lubricant from the floor, poured it over their cocks, and seized them into his fist, stroking them together as they kissed again. Dooku ran his hands over Severin's chest, thumbs rubbing the nipples, and Severin kissed him harder.

"Now," Dooku insisted, feeling like he was going to explode if he didn't fuck Severin, or get fucked.

Severin pushed Dooku down onto the holodeck floor and climbed atop him. Dooku moaned as Severin straddled his hips, and cried out as Severin sank down on his cock, impaling himself. Once Dooku was all the way inside, Severin cried out and clutched at him, nails digging into Dooku's flesh. Dooku trembled, loving the sweet sting.

Their eyes met. "*Imzadi,*" Dooku husked, the truest thing he'd ever spoken.

Severin kissed Dooku fiercely and began to ride. Dooku rose up slightly and the two of them held onto each other tight, Severin white-knuckled as he bounced feverishly. Dooku loved the sight of Severin's passage taking his cock again and again, his cock gliding in and out, and as he began to thrust into Severin, matching his rhythm, his balls smacked against Severin's ass. Severin threw his head back, moaning, a look of bliss on his face... bliss that Dooku could *feel*, electrifying him. He wanted to give Severin pleasure, and feeling Severin's wild, frenzied excitement, the way that place inside him was rubbed just right, intensified his own pleasure and lust.

"Yan," Severin rasped.

"Yes, *imzadi*. Ride me, darling." Dooku started kissing Severin's neck again, thrilling at the way Severin trembled, the way his breath hitched, the moan he let out, rocking his hips even harder and faster. Dooku slapped Severin's ass before his hands slid up the shapely back and around to rub his chest, his stomach... and back up to tease the nipples with his thumbs, rubbing, pinching, plucking. He kissed and licked Severin's throat.

"Yan. *Yan.*" Severin let out a plaintive little whine, and Dooku slapped Severin's ass again.

Then Dooku bit the place where Severin's neck and shoulder met, knowing how sensitive he was there. His hand gripped Severin's cock, stroking it in time with their hips, Severin fucking himself on Dooku's cock, Dooku driving into him. Severin's cries got louder, and more ragged, until at last Severin was just panting, gasping, making high-pitched noises. Dooku could feel Severin *right there*, and it sent him to that edge too.

Their eyes met again, and Dooku growled, "*Imzadi*, come with me."

Severin exploded, shooting all over Dooku's chest and stomach. "Yan! *Yan!* Oh, fuck, Yan!"

Two thrusts later and Dooku came too, giving a wordless, hoarse shout as he spent deep into Severin, pulsing together, the ecstasy throbbing through them, a sense of oneness. They kissed deeply, holding each other tight, rocking each other.

They kissed and kissed, and Severin's cock rose again. Dooku chuckled - Severin was just as insatiable as ever, it seemed - and he stopped laughing when Severin climbed off him and got on all fours, sticking his ass out. Dooku's cock stood at attention at the sight of Severin's passage dripping with his seed, and the lewd, wanton gesture... how much Severin really did want this. He got on his knees behind Severin and guided the tip of his cock to Severin's entrance.

"Yes, *yes*, take it, *take it*," Severin hissed.

Dooku pushed into him, and they both cried out when they were joined once more. Then Dooku grabbed Severin's hips and began to thrust, savage and punishing. He could take his time and go more slowly and sensually another round, right now they both needed too much.

But even in the wild frenzy of their fuck, there was still sensuality - Dooku's fingers walked up and down Severin's spine, knowing how sensitive he was there. Severin moaned, rocking his hips against Dooku's harder. Dooku reached to grab Severin's curls, but he also stroked Severin's scalp, tenderness even as he was fierce.

They both got there quickly, and Dooku never wanted to stop pounding into him, completely lost in the fuck, almost as good as an orgasm itself, the sensation intensifying with each thrust, more and more delicious. But he needed to come, and he could feel Severin's need even moreso. He reached around and began to stroke Severin's cock. Severin cried out and he covered Dooku's hand with his, guiding it. But not just guiding it... Severin's hand squeezed his, as if to say *I love you* with his touch.

Dooku felt himself hurtling towards that place of no return. "Sev. *Imzadi...*"

Severin came first, howling as his seed spilled over Dooku's hand, and Dooku watched puddles of seed on the floor. Dooku's own orgasm hit him like a lightning bolt and he collapsed on top of Severin's back, quivering, moaning, feeling like he was falling, flying, sinking, rising. They took each other's hands, and Dooku rubbed his nose in Severin's curls. "I love you," Dooku said softly. "I love you, darling. I love -"

There was a beep. "Infirmary to Doctor Yusanis," came a voice over the intercom.

Severin swore under his breath. "Go ahead."

"You have an incoming transmission, encrypted, for your eyes only."

Severin looked over his shoulder and his eyes met Dooku's. Dooku knew what he was thinking even without telepathy: it was the Klingon.

"On my way," Severin said.

Dooku pulled out, and they looked at their ruined fencing gear. Severin cracked up laughing, and Dooku did too. "Computer, replicate uniforms for Admiral Dooku and Doctor Yusanis," Dooku said. They watched as uniforms materialized on the floor.

Once they were dressed, Dooku came towards Severin and put his arms around Severin's waist. Severin looked up at him, all anxious brown eyes. Dooku's hand came up to stroke Severin's cheek, and his thumb traced Severin's lips.

"We can talk more later," Dooku said.

Severin nodded. "Or 'talk'." Severin made air quotes.

Dooku facepalmed, but couldn't help laughing. Severin grabbed the bat'leth off the floor and gave a sassy little butt wiggle as he strutted out of the holodeck, whistling.

Chapter 28

Head spinning, Severin took his seat at his desk in the infirmary and said, "On screen." Though he was still in shock from what just happened - he couldn't believe he fucked Dooku; he couldn't believe he was entertaining the possibility of being with him again - he had to put those thoughts aside and focus on the business at hand.

The logo of Starfleet Command faded out and was replaced by a very surly looking middle-aged Klingon who Severin didn't recognize.

"*Wlj jup*," Severin said, an attempt at politesse... or politesse by Klingon standards, anyway.

"You are Doctor Yusanis?" the Klingon said, his voice low and gruff.

"I am," Severin said. "And you are..."

"My name is Moqfar, I am head of the House of Konjah. I have reviewed the information that your contact gave me and I am interested in a meeting to discuss it further."

Severin sat back and steepled his hands. "We can arrange your safe passage to this station -"

"No," Moqfar said. "I will not be coming to your station. You will be coming here, to my ship. You and your commanding officer, no other people."

Severin raised an eyebrow. "Thaaaaat's the sort of thing my commanding officer and I would need to discuss first. I can't just barge in on him and tell him 'here's what we're going to do.' I -"

"I am already en route to your starbase and will be arriving in six hours," Moqfar said. "You will transport directly aboard my ship and we will discuss terms there. You *will* do this, or there will be *no* further discussion. Those are my terms." With that, Moqfar terminated the transmission.

Severin pinched the bridge of his nose. "He's gonna love that," he huffed under his breath, and then he tapped his communicator. "Yusanis to Dooku."

"Yes?"

"I have some news for you."

—

"It's a trap," Kenobi said.

"Perhaps." Dooku was afraid of that as well. "But it is also the only 'in' we have to discuss this matter with the Klingons. If we take the risk of assuming good faith, it may be that we can finally end this war. If we don't take the risk... we have not merely the Klingons, but Species 8472 to deal with."

"So what you're saying is you're going whether I advise against it or not," Kenobi said.

"As you know, I am the commanding officer." Dooku gave him a stern look. Then his expression softened, knowing that Kenobi was not trying to overstep his bounds, but merely offering concern, and indeed, that concern was founded. "My decision has already been made. This is our chance. We will very likely not get another."

Kenobi sighed.

"If I may," Windu offered, "as your chief of security I'd like to put a beacon on both of you before you go, so if you do go over there and there's any funny business, you can send a distress signal, then we can beam you right out."

"That would be prudent." Dooku nodded.

Severin also nodded. Their eyes met, and Dooku could feel Severin was just as nervous about this as he was, but was of the same mind - if they didn't take this shot, the war would continue indefinitely. Their forces had already been reduced dramatically, and though Dooku believed calling out the science and exploratory vessels to fill the gap was better than nothing, he knew it wasn't ideal. They would likely lose this war if things continued at their current trajectory.

"If you both come down to the security station after the meeting and hang around for a bit, I'll have devices ready for you as soon as possible," Windu said.

When the rest of the crew cleared the conference room, Severin lingered.

"I'm sorry," Severin said.

"It's not your fault," Dooku said. "It's not an arrangement I'm happy with, but... hopefully they will receive our evidence and make the right decision."

"I hope you're right." Severin looked away, and out through the window, into space. Dooku could see what he was thinking - all the difficult decisions Severin had to make when he was one of the leaders of the El-Aurian refugees fleeing the Borg attack, trying to find a new place to live. Dooku sensed Severin felt this choice was just as difficult as the ones he made back then, if not moreso.

But Dooku knew there was a difference between then and now, and he put a hand on Severin's arm to reassure him. "You're not alone this time."

Their eyes met again, and held.

Severin nodded. "I suppose it's a small comfort that we're doing this together."

Dooku felt somewhat damned by faint praise that his presence was only a "small" comfort, though he also understood the weight of what Severin was feeling - it was not dissimilar to the weight of what Dooku felt during the Dominion War - and there could really only be small comforts at times like this.

Nonetheless, as they walked to the turbolift together to head to the security station, Dooku's heart sank as he realized - he'd confessed his love to Severin several times within the last day, but Severin had yet to say "I love you" in return, apart from his angry speech while holding a bat'leth. It seemed like they weren't truly back together yet, but had merely slaked their thirst for one another and were in a truce.

Dammit. Dooku looked down as the turbolift began to move, suddenly wishing he were anywhere but here.

-

Moqfar's warbird approached Starbase 24 as promised, a single Klingon bird of prey, and as the shields were lowered, Severin and Dooku were directly beamed aboard the ship. Moqfar and three younger guards were waiting for them.

"Take their weapons," Moqfar said.

Immediately the guards surrounded them to remove their phasers. Severin glared. "That is dishonorable," Severin said, invoking the Klingon honor code to shame them. "If you would mean us harm, you know to fight against an unarmed opponent is without honor. And if others would mean us harm, we would not be able to fight alongside you -"

Moqfar cut him off with an ugly laugh. "Fools! Did you truly think that I wanted to negotiate with you, *petaQ*?" Moqfar sneered. "You are valuable hostages, I am sure Starfleet Command will pay a pretty price for you." He gestured to his guards. "Take them to the brig!"

Severin *didn't* think that Starfleet Command would be so generous with negotiating their release, especially if Shelby had anything to do with it - he'd been actively turned off by the way she treated others as expendable - but he wasn't about to tell Moqfar anything of the sort. Instead, as one of the guards seized him, he elbowed the guard in the gut, then punched the guard in the head and kneed him in the crotch. That got him shocked with a painstick by another guard, which sent him to his knees, shaking as the electricity coursed through him.

"Don't resist," Dooku said, of course, a little too late. He glared at Moqfar and said, "You are making a very serious mistake. You have *infiltrators* in your midst -"

Moqfar laughed harder. "Lies. We are not the fools you are, *petaQ*." He spat at Dooku as they were dragged off to the brig.

They were thrown in a single cell. The shock of the painstick wore off, but it left Severin aching all over, feeling exhausted. Dooku calmly tapped the beacon around his wrist. "The good news is, we should be transported out of here any moment now," Dooku said.

Severin nodded, and slumped against Dooku - even that little nod took what was left of his strength. As he lay his head on Dooku's shoulder he looked out a window in the hall across from their cell, and that was when he saw Klingon warbirds drop out of warp. Dooku noticed it too.

Since the starbase had to have its shields lowered in order to transport them back, they could either keep the shields lowered to transport them and be blown to bits by the warbirds, or they could raise the shields, protect the starbase, and then the Klingons could do whatever they were going to do with them.

Severin swallowed hard. Dooku took Severin's hand, and squeezed.

We're in this together, imzadi.

Severin fell asleep, and some time later Dooku gently shook him awake. A guard was coming down the hall to bring them food, and he was followed a few paces behind by two other guards, as if to ensure there would be no attempt to attack and escape. Each of the guards was armed with a holster carrying a disruptor, a bat'leth, and a painstick.

Should we try? Severin spoke into Dooku's mind, knowing Dooku could hear him.

Let's play it by ear. There are more of them than there are of us, but perhaps I can find the advantage... or even a non-violent solution.

The guard opened their cell and set down the food and drink.

"Thank you," Dooku said. "I know some people starve their prisoners, so we appreciate that you are not starving us -"

"Shut up," the guard said.

Dooku took the lid off their tray. It was *gagh*, and Severin almost laughed at Dooku instantly recoiling. Severin had eaten *gagh* before, on an outing with Krogh what seemed like ages ago now, so he leaned in to try to make an impression on the guard. "I hope this came with blood wine," Severin said. "Personally I prefer the heart of a targ, but -"

"Shut up," the guard said. "Now hurry up and eat, *petaQ*, so I can collect your dishes."

"You're not going to give us privacy to eat?" Dooku asked.

"And risk you making weapons out of your plate and cups?" The guard snorted. "Do I look like I am as big a fool as you?"

Though Dooku had said to play by ear, Severin wanted to goad the guard into attacking them so they could have a chance to overpower him and run. "*PuqloDpu' vIqaS*," Severin said. "You are a coward who would rather lock us away *unarmed* than hear the truth of how you were fools to trust the traitors in your own midst!"

With a roar, the guard overturned their plate of *gagh* and dumped their beverage on Severin, drenching him. Just before Severin could reach for the empty plate on the floor and use it as a weapon, the guard was shot with a disruptor and fell over on top of Severin, dead. Severin instinctively pushed the body off him, and looked at the guards behind him in disbelief, his heart skipping a beat. *Are they on our side?*

But then the guard who'd shot the one bringing them food continued to walk towards them, holding the disruptor, pointing it at them. "You are not the fools they think you are," the guard said. "Too bad you'll never get a chance to speak the truth."

Oh, shiiiiiiit. Severin's heart hammered in his ears, ice in the pit of his stomach.

Just as the guard was about to fire the disruptor, Dooku shoved Severin out of the way and got in front of him, shielding Severin with his body - and the third guard fired on the second guard. "We are under orders not to harm the prisoners, they are hostages, Starfleet will negotiate for their release -"

It was like the second guard had never been shot at all. He turned to the third guard, laughing, and Severin watched from the floor in horror as the second guard morphed barbed tentacles that wrapped around the third guard, squeezing him to a bloody death. The third guard screamed, and another guard came running down the hall, calling, "What's all this noise?" and then he let out a scream as he saw what was happening.

It was time to act. From the dead guard in the cell, Dooku pried off the disruptor and Severin grabbed the bat'leth. When the second guard saw what they were doing, more tentacles morphed and came at them, and Severin swung the bat'leth, chopping them off, making the second guard howl. The tentacles wrapped around the third guard relinquished and the guard fell to the floor, dead, as the second guard - Species 8472 - returned to a normal Klingon appearance.

With a fierce shout, Severin rushed towards him, swinging his bat'leth, ready to go for the head. But then more tentacles sprouted and pushed him to the floor. Dooku fired the disruptor - not that it did any good - and then the tentacles morphed, two of them each holding a bat'leth. Just before Dooku could dodge, a bat'leth stabbed him in the chest.

Dooku wasn't dead yet, but Severin knew he soon would be if not given medical treatment. And that filled Severin with a blinding, white-hot rage. It wasn't just his fury of seeing Dooku hurt, probably losing him, but all that Severin had lost so far - his wife, his kids, his planet, and the way he'd felt chained to the grand purpose of saving lives, living through multiple wars, to atone for the way he'd felt he'd failed them. This member of Species 8472 wasn't directly responsible for the Borg attack on El-Auria, but he was the most convenient outlet for all of the anger bottled up over centuries.

And he had attacked his *imzadi*. Severin couldn't deny it - he still loved Dooku. He still hoped for another chance with him, this time far away from Starfleet, living out their years in peace and quiet. That hope was dying, and *this* fuck was responsible.

Severin was tempted to rush him in full berserk mode, try to kill, or at least die trying... but his El-Aurian instincts kicked in, as he watched the smug look on the fake Klingon's face as he watched Dooku bleeding on the floor, listened to the laughter. The Species 8472 infiltrator was overly confident, and Severin knew that meant he could be careless, *if* Severin could figure out how to get one over on him.

Severin began to fake a heart attack, knowing the infiltrator would probably find it plausible that a "coward" would just drop dead in fear, and sure enough, the infiltrator began walking away, laughing harder.

As soon as the infiltrator was a safe distance down the hall, Severin got up, gripping the bat'leth white-knuckled. The painstick earlier had still done a number on him, but adrenaline was giving him a second wind, and now Severin walked faster and faster, and when the infiltrator paused, finally hearing footsteps, and began to morph barbed tentacles again, Severin shoved the bat'leth in his back, then cut the tentacles off, just in time for the fleeing guard to return with three more guards and Moqfar himself.

As the tentacled infiltrator fell, bleeding out, tentacles rolling onto the floor, the look on Moqfar's face was priceless - now he had firsthand

proof that Species 8472 was among them.

"You were right," Moqfar said.

Ordinarily Severin would be jubilant - the end of the war was nigh - but instead he pointed to Dooku. "I am a doctor. He needs treatment. Get me to your sickbay or get us back to our starbase. Now."

Moqfar opened a channel to the bridge. "Tell the warbirds to stand down and that the House of Konjah has declared a ceasefire with Starfleet. Tell Starbase 24 to transport these two directly to their sickbay."

Moments later Severin and Dooku were beamed into the infirmary. Dooku was already starting to fade in and out of consciousness as Severin scrubbed in and put on surgical garb over his uniform, and donned a mask. He rushed back over as soon as he could, blinking back tears at the space between each blip of the monitors recording his vital signs.

"Don't you fucking check out on me," Severin said. "Don't you dare die on me."

"*Imzadi*," Dooku said, his voice weak. He managed a small smile, but his breathing was labored. His uniform top had been cut away to reveal the grisly bat'leth wound in his chest. He was losing a lot of blood.

"You're not going to die, you hear me?" Tears burned Severin's eyes. And then he finally said it. "I love you."

Dooku's eyes closed, and his vitals began to crash.

Chapter 29

Dooku has not seen his mother in years - she died in the Battle of Betazed. Now she is here, and "here" is the Kelvin Memorial Archive in London. Dooku takes in all the old books and shelves of electronic files, and at last the sight of his mother herself, who looks young again. Dooku looks at his hands and realizes he is still sixty-nine years old.

"Mother. It is good to see you again."

They embrace and his mother kisses his cheek. Then she speaks directly into his mind, as many Betazoids eschew spoken communication when alone together. *But where is Severin? Why hasn't he come to see me?*

We broke up for awhile, Dooku says, but he realizes that although the answer is technically correct, it is also still the wrong answer.

And his mother knows it too. She raises an eyebrow. *Nothing is ever ended. Or at least, not with a love like yours. As you know, he is your imzadi.*

He is, Dooku admits. *He always was. I think we may be getting back together.*

His mother folds his arms and gives him a disapproving look. *So what are you doing here?*

And then an auburn-haired woman who Dooku has never seen before in his life - though he has seen photographs of her - walks into the Archive, but just stands at the door, holding it open.

Go on then, the woman says. *There are other worlds than these, and you and Sev deserve to find them.*

—

Dooku woke up, hearing blips and bleeps. He groaned as he stretched on a narrow cot that barely fit the length of his body. It felt like he'd been punched in the chest.

Severin came over, glassy-eyed, dark circles under his eyes. "Hi," Severin said.

"Hi," Dooku said back.

Severin reached for his hand and squeezed. Severin's eyes were bright with tears, but Severin was trying not to break down and cry... not yet. Severin also seemed unable to make words. "Hi," he repeated.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"As you know," Dooku rasped, "hi." Then he groaned again; his mouth felt like sandpaper. "Water," he said. He quickly added a "please", not wanting to be rude.

Severin laughed softly and went to a nearby replicator. He brought over a cup of water and hit a button so Dooku's infirmary bed inclined enough for him to drink. "Thank you," Dooku mumbled as Severin put the drink in his hands.

Severin took a seat next to him. "You survived," he said. "Do you remember any of it?"

After a few thirsty gulps, Dooku nodded. "The last thing I remember was getting hit by a bat'leth." And then their eyes met and Dooku said, "And you telling me you loved me."

Severin reached out to touch Dooku's face. "As you know..."

Dooku rolled his eyes but smiled fondly as he finished his water. He needed more; he felt like he hadn't drank in days. Severin got him more water. "How bad is it?" Dooku asked.

"You needed a transfusion but thankfully you didn't need a heart transplant, or a lung transplant. We were able to repair the damage with surgery. You'll need some time to heal and take it easy, but then you'll just have some scarring... nothing a dermal regenerator can't fix with time." Severin's tears spilled now. "You were lucky. I thought you wouldn't make it, at first."

Dooku's free hand took Severin's, stroking, squeezing again. Dooku downed his second cup of water and then he said, "Well, I suppose my question is twofold. I wasn't just inquiring as to how bad the extent of my injury was, but... the matter of the Klingons."

"We have a full ceasefire," Severin said. "Starfleet Command is beginning peace talks as we speak."

Dooku closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Of course," Severin said, scowling, "it's not over yet. Even if, best case scenario, the war with the Klingons is really and truly over... our war with Species 8472 has just begun."

"Indeed," Dooku said, nodding slightly. "But I shan't be around to see this war through. As you said, I'm going to need time to heal. I think after what I just endured, I am overdue for a vacation... perhaps retirement itself."

"I agree," Severin said, and passed over a PADD. "As soon as you're discharged, you are going on indefinite leave. Doctor's orders."

"And what about you?" Dooku pursed his lips as he passed the PADD back, having reviewed his medical leave, though he suspected he already knew the answer to that.

"I applied for medical discharge," Severin said. "Post-traumatic stress. Understandable with everything happening lately, and all."

Dooku had a feeling Severin would be leaving Starfleet but he didn't realize he was taking that route, which was a pretty full burning of bridges. Retiring left the option to be reinstated, as did indefinite medical leave. But this, declaring himself psychologically unfit for his position... "That's a lot, Sev." He wanted to fold his arms but everything ached too much, so he scowled instead. "And where are you going, then?"

"Alpha Eridani. To my daughter." Severin cocked his head to one side. "She'd like to meet you, too."

"I'd like to meet her." Dooku's scowl became a smile, his heart warmed. "I'd like... to build a life with you, Sev. No more war. No more command. Just us."

"That's good. I didn't want to have to kidnap you."

Dooku laughed - it hurt to laugh, and he still couldn't help it. "I think we both know who would *really* be the one tied up, here," Dooku said before he could stop himself.

Now Severin's laughter rang out, which made Dooku want to cry; it was *so good* to hear that laugh, see that smile. "Promises, promises."

"As soon as I recover, if we hadn't left Starfleet we would need to, just to make up for lost time." Dooku gave Severin a pointed look.

"You know you're a horrible bastard, sending my mind places when you're not in a position to do anything about it," Severin said, and kissed his cheek, then grabbed Dooku's nose and tweaked it.

But he was. Dooku looked into Severin's eyes. "Am I your *imzadi*?"

Severin nodded. "You're my *imzadi*, Yan."

Dooku closed his eyes, and reached into Severin's mind. Without using his hands, he touched Severin, the feel of fingers walking down Severin's spine. Their eyes met again, locked, and Dooku watched as Severin trembled and let out a moan.

May I continue? Dooku asked.

Oh, fuck... Severin nodded enthusiastically.

A moment later, touching Severin with just his mind, Dooku brought Severin to a panting, gasping orgasm. Severin slid down in his chair, shuddering, a look of bliss on his face. Dooku smirked, feeling proud of himself - but it wasn't mere showing off, it was also an act of love. Being able to make a partner climax just with one's mind was considered the most intimate act a Betazoid could perform, but it could only be with one's *imzadi*, the sort of "opening" the word implied. Dooku felt closer to Severin now. All the time they were together before Dooku had held back from this, out of that fear he would lose Severin someday. Now... there was no more fear.

"I love you," Severin said.

Dooku felt like his chest would explode, this time not from having been stabbed, but from the force of his love. Now he, too, had tears. "I love you, darling."

"Rest now." Severin brushed a kiss across Dooku's brow. "The more you rest, the faster you'll heal, the sooner we can... you know."

"Practice fencing?" Dooku couldn't resist.

"Yeah, something like that. Maybe I might teach you to use a bat'leth. As you saw some hours ago, it might come in handy."

"It was sexy when you put a bat'leth to my throat." Dooku's eyes were heavy now, and he had less of a brain-to-mouth filter.

Severin snorted. "I'd like to put something else in your throat, so go the fuck to sleep and get on resting and healing up, you."

Dooku closed his eyes with a small smile.

Chapter 30

Though Severin's daughter Tamyra had offered to let Severin and Dooku stay in her home as long as they wanted to, Severin didn't want to impose - nor did he want to have to keep his voice down when he and Dooku made love. After a few days in Tamyra's home, Severin and Dooku moved, with their two cats, into a lakeside villa with a garden near a patch of woods, which was everything they wanted.

Tamyra insisted on throwing them a housewarming celebration, and now it was time that they were going to meet Tamyra's partner. Though it was the norm for El-Aurians to be bisexual, Severin had only known Tamyra to be with men, so he was surprised when his daughter's plus-one was a human woman about Dooku's age - tall, short steel-grey hair, green eyes, handsome rather than pretty.

"Dad, Yan, this is Elaine Hewlett-Johnson," Tamyra said, as Elaine came forward to embrace both of them.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you," Elaine said, taking Severin's hand.

"Oh no," Tamyra hissed under her breath.

"Hi So Happy To Finally Meet You, I've Heard So Much About You," Severin said, not able to help himself.

Tamyra and Dooku facepalmed in unison, while Elaine laughed.

Severin replicated them all mojitos, a drink he'd enjoyed on Earth, and got to know more about Elaine. She was from London, and was a widower - her husband was on a supply ship that had been destroyed by Klingons during the war two years ago. Their only son had joined Starfleet because of his late uncle, a hero in the Dominion War, and was a scientist at the Daystrom Institute, working at the Alpha Eridani branch; he'd insisted she leave Earth and come stay with him, and she had met Tamyra. After some months as friends, they had become more than that, with her son's blessing.

"My son will be arriving shortly," Elaine said. "He also wants to meet you."

Anthony Hewlett-Johnson arrived twenty minutes later with a tree for Severin and Dooku to plant in their garden, a traditional Eridani gift. His eyes were as green as the leaves of the tree, and his smile took Severin's breath away. Anthony was young - about thirty-five - and boyishly handsome, with chiseled features, short dark hair, tall, slim and broad-shouldered. Severin liked looking at him, and listening to him, and he would have been more self-conscious about Dooku sensing that, except he could tell Dooku was also stealing glances at him.

Severin cornered Dooku at the replicator and spoke into his mind. *Remember that I told you way back when my wife and I used to share partners sometimes? You and I never got to have any threesomes while we were together. Might be fun to try.*

It was bold, and Severin knew Dooku was taken aback, but he knew the alternative was dancing around the interest for the next few months or maybe even years. Dooku's eyebrows shot up. *Are you proposing we... seduce him?*

Well, maybe not tonight, not in front of his mother, but... sometime soon. Unless you think he's not attracted, I don't want to scare him.

Oh, he's attracted to both of us. Dooku's face was pink. But what will your daughter think? And his mother -

Tamyra would just want us to be happy. It's not that weird, by El-Aurian standards. Severin shrugged. So anyway, let's make that our little project. A to-do list, if you will. Severin leered, putting the emphasis on "do" in "to-do list".

Dooku chuckled. *You're incorrigible.*

Thank you. Severin and Dooku wandered back into the living room with more drinks. Severin took a seat on the other side of Anthony, admiring his hands with their long, elegant fingers, wondering about what they would feel like... what they would look like, wandering over Dooku's body.

"The tree is really lovely," Severin told Anthony. "Thank you, again, that was thoughtful of you."

"If you like the tree, you should see the grove where it came from," Anthony said. "Maybe I can take the two of you sometime?"

Severin had a feeling "take the two of you" was loaded with innuendo. Severin smiled. "I'd like that. We've got a whole new world to explore."

Dooku almost choked on his drink, and Severin glanced over. "Are you all right, dear?"

Dooku nodded. "I'm fine. That just reminded me of something somebody told me once." Dooku raised his glass. "To new worlds. New lives."

"Seeing the groves of those kinds of trees isn't just aesthetic," Tamyra chimed in, "but after I moved here I learned about the history of this place. It's called Eridani after a translation of the name given by its original inhabitants... Arda. Those kinds of trees were sacred to them. They left poetry behind asking people to keep visiting the trees, and remember them."

A frisson went down Severin's spine. He didn't know what to make of it, but it felt like pieces were falling into place that he didn't even know were missing. "Well, here's to sacred spaces." He raised his glass too, and now so did Anthony.

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