

Dark Blade

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Dark Blade

by [TunaFishChris](#)

Summary

Pavel Chekov is just the navigator. A distant young man who gets excited over science. Really the only thing noteworthy about him is his age, him having just turned 18.

Then the crew finds the truth.

(trigger warnings for child abuse and domestic violence)

Notes

We don't have nearly enough BAMF!Chekov fics, and this plotline, for whatever reason, has been bouncing around in my head for ages. So I'm purging it. Enjoy! :)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

I

The Sagacitans were assholes.

They were a newly-discovered race of powerful telepaths who'd been doing space exploration for about eight hundred years now. That was all Spock had been able to tell them before the entire bridge crew had been zapped onto their planet.

Not cool.

Spock, Uhura, Sulu, Bones, Chekov, and Jim were all chained to the wall of some sort of ceremonial room, more of a coliseum, really, with an open ceiling. Only their ankles and their wrists were pinned down by the stone-and-metal chains, but that was enough. Not even Spock could break out of them, and he had tried. Uhura had already picked up bits and pieces of their language and was using it to talk to the three Sagacitans in the room, their blue skin and massive heads almost glowing in the starlight. Bones was grumbling about how he should visit the bridge less often if this shit kept happening. Jim half agreed, because he didn't want Bones in this situation, but at the same time Bones made these horrifying situations a lot less scary. Sulu and Spock were quietly talking, probably strategizing--they couldn't do that with Jim because they were chained all the way on the other side of the room. Chekov was...quiet.

He was completely still, looking up at the sky, and pressed as close to the wall as possible. Given that he was already the smallest member of the crew (and the youngest; he'd turned eighteen right after the Khan fiasco), he was already the smallest target. Yet one of the Sagacitans, the tallest male, had been staring at him since they arrived.

He was chained right next to Jim, so Jim leaned over as far as he could and asked quietly, "Are you okay?"

Chekov looked at him, startled. "I'm fine, Keptain. I'm trying to figure out where we are."

"Sagacita," Jim offered with a sarcastic twitch of his lips. He couldn't offer anything else; they hadn't had time to study the maps, terrain, nations, anything.

Chekov shook his head and motioned to the sky. "Given the positions of the stars, which ones are visible and which aren't, we're on the northern hemisphere of the planet." His voice started to get fast the more he talked, given away his excitement about solving a scientific problem, despite the situation around it. "Enterprise was over the twenty-seventh parallel when we left, moving with the rotation of the planet at 28,000 kilometers an hour, right over the equator. Assuming that hasn't changed, she's now over the thirty-third parallel. Also when we were taken, parallels four through nineteen were in night. It was very dark when we arrived an hour ago, so that cancels seventeen through nineteen. It's still dark, so that cancels four through six. So, we are on the northern hemisphere of the planet between the seventh and seventeenth parallels, and Enterprise is almost directly on the other side of the planet from us and, considering the chill, a bit south."

Jim blinked at him. "Um..."

Chekov rolled his eyes, giving a bashful smile. There was even a slight blush to his cheeks. "I'm the navigator, Keptain. This is my job."

"Sorry, I forgot you were a genius," Jim said honestly. "Not bad for your first away mission, kiddo."

"Does this count?" Chekov asked.

"Well, I was hoping to start you off with a milk run, something like collecting samples with Spock. But hey, I can improvise."

Chekov chuckled, then suddenly stopped, as if any loud noises were forbidden. He flicked his eyes to the hostiles. "The big one keeps staring at me."

Jim swallowed. He didn't want to think what powerful telepaths could do to any of them, and he definitely didn't want to think about what they could do to Chekov. Legal adult or not, he was still a kid, and all of Jim's protective instincts sharpened just looking at him. The last thing Jim wanted was shy, small, brilliant Chekov turned into a vegetable because some alien asshole decided to poke around his brain.

"Maybe he's picking his team for karaoke night," Jim suggested.

That brought back Chekov's blush. Jim bit his tongue to keep from smiling. Very few people had ever heard the kid sing, and they swore he had the voice of an angel. Jim had only ever heard him hum and very quietly sing under his breath while he worked, if it was a good day and a fun project. It became something of a mission for him, and therefore the rest of the crew, to get Chekov to actually sing, preferably in front of an audience. But the kid would always blush and swear he was terrible at it, and anyway didn't they have more important things to do than karaoke, like work...?

Okay. Priorities, Jim. Step One: get the crew out of this situation and back on the ship. Step Two: try to convince Chekov to lead them in a celebratory song, or something.

A door opened, and two more Sagacitans walked into the room, bringing it to a total of five. One of them was obviously in charge, wearing a violet robe instead of the others' green. It scanned each of the crewmember's faces, black eyes blinking at them.

"Care to explain why you've just kidnapped the senior officers of a Federation flagship?" Jim challenged.

"Strength," the leader replied simply, in perfect Standard. (Right. Telepath.) "We need strength."

"Well, there are better ways to do it than kidnapping. Say, by talking to us and coming up with some sort of alliance..."

"You misunderstand me, Captain Kirk," it said. "We don't need the strength of your bodies or your ships. We need the strength of your minds."

"Again, an alliance...?" Jim strayed off.

"You mean to harness our mental capacities," Spock said.

The head Sagacitan smiled.

"Oh, fantastic," Bones grumbled.

"Quiet," the head Sagacitan ordered. Its blue skin pulsed, and the restraints around the crew's wrists tightened. Jim hissed in pain. Great. Not only telepaths. Telekinetics.

"Intellectual integrity is the first thing we look for," the Sagacitan said, stepping forward.

"You all caught our attention in that department. But there is another factor, something that can only be determined up close. The strength to endure, to thrive in adversity."

It was standing right in front of Chekov.

"Don't touch him," Sulu ordered. Jim wished the pilot had his sword with him. He would've loved to see some ninja badassery.

Chekov, to his credit, didn't look scared. Didn't look...anything, really. He stared right back at the Sagacitan.

The Sagacitan reached a three-fingered hand out to Chekov's face.

"Don't," Chekov warned.

Jim blinked. He had never heard that tone from the young navigator before. Chekov never sounded so...dark. Threatening. There was a part in Jim's mind--a small, primal part--that said that if the Sagacitan touched Chekov, it would die.

The Sagacitan just smiled, and moved forward.

One of the other Sagacitans shouted, "Priest, don't!"

Chekov's arm moved in a blur.

The Sagacitan touched his face.

II

Chapter Notes

Quick note: this thing takes place after Into Darkness and ignores Beyond.

Also, I totally stole the last scene from "Pan's Labyrinth."

Papa was drinking again.

Pavel scrunched up, keeping his head down as he finished making the stroganoff. The kitchen was tiny, like the rest of the house, tucked away in a little corner of an unnamed village in northern Russia. Pavel filled up their plates and wordlessly left Papa's on the table.

"This smells like shit," Papa growled, sitting at the table. "Your mother could make stroganoff right. Why'd you have to kill her on your way into this world, hm?"

"Sorry," Pavel mumbled. His stomach was twisting so much he didn't think he could eat. No wonder he was so skinny.

"Got a call from a...Starfleet today."

Pavel shrank even further into himself. "Vrong number?"

The smack deafened him in his left ear. When his brain stopped rattling he could make out Papa's words: "...not joining some prissy-ass 'Fleet that's not even military. They must be getting low in recruitment to be looking at a twelve-year-old who isn't even out of high school yet..."

Pavel wisely didn't mention the diploma stuffed under his mattress. He'd changed the school's contact info so they couldn't call, mail, or speak to Papa in any way.

"...some genius. You're an idiot. Can't even make a damn stroganoff."

"Uh-huh," Pavel agreed, testing the fresh bruise on the side of his face. "Sorry."

They ate their dinner in silence.

--

Pavel took the Starfleet entrance exams on a PADD, at 2am under his blanket. Papa snored in the next room. Pavel kept one ear on that gentle roar, ready to shut everything down and hide it away the second it stopped.

When that was done, the hard part started: waiting.

--

Pavel spent as much time at his uncle's house as he could.

Uncle Vadim was Mama's younger brother. He was a farmer. Pavel helped him on the farm when he could, which, now that he'd graduated school at age 12.5, was a lot more often. It was hard work, but Pavel had never shied away from that.

It was Friday night. A danger night. Papa always, always got drunk and violent tonight. Pavel was staying at Uncle Vadim's.

They sat on the roof of the house. Vadim had allowed Pavel half a shot of vodka with his juice while they talked, the same amount he'd had when he'd graduated last week. Vadim had been there with a grin and a camera. The picture was in Pavel's PADD. The stars were out, a dazzling display over the Russian countryside.

"Tell me the stories?" Pavel asked hopefully.

"A mind like yours had them memorized when you were a baby," Vadim scoffed, but his eyes were sparkling.

"Please?"

Vadim gave an exaggerated sigh. "Well, since you worked so hard today, let's talk about the Big Dipper..."

Three stories later, they were quiet. Pavel said, "I got accepted to Starfleet."

Vadim blinked at him, then grinned. He pulled Pavel in a half-hug. "Good for you, Pascha. Do you need a signature?"

"I forged it," Pavel admitted.

Vadim barked a laugh. "Good boy. When do you leave?"

"The semester doesn't start until fall, and I can't get into the dorms until that week. So...three months."

Vadim nodded, looking back up. "You can make it."

Pavel swallowed. "I don't know if I can," he whispered.

Vadim looked at him in alarm. Pavel said, "He's getting worse. So much worse."

Vadim didn't say anything. Pavel tugged at his long sleeves. He had to wear them more and more often to hide the bruises. Just two months ago he'd gone to the hospital for a broken arm, due to "falling out of a tree."

Twenty-three times Pavel had gone to the hospital, seven of them just this year--an exponential increase. Not once, not ever had the doctors or nurses questioned Papa's lies. Pavel didn't know if they were truly that dim or if they were willfully ignorant. You had to be smart to get a medical degree, didn't you?

"Then I have something to give you. I pray you don't have to use it." Vadim fumbled around in his pockets for a while, before pulling out a butterfly knife.

Pavel reached for it. Vadim held it back. "This is no toy," he warned. "This is a weapon. It's designed to hurt and kill people. Use it *only* when your life is in danger. Understand?"

Pavel nodded. Vadim gave him the knife.

It was beautiful. Brand new and sharp enough to cut air, it glittered in the starlight. "How did you afford this?"

"I won it," Vadim said around a shot of vodka. "Poker's a great skill. You'll pick it up easy with that brain of yours."

Pavel swallowed, looking back at the knife. He imagined himself plunging it into Papa's chest. The idea terrified, grieved, and thrilled him. He didn't have to be a mathematical genius to know that that scenario was very likely. He held it up. "Show me how to use it?"

--

The summer months passed. Pavel didn't have to spend as much time away from home once school was out, but he still spent as much time away as he could. He did odd jobs around the village: fixing roofs, weeding gardens, and (very privately) tutoring children. He barely got ten credits for each job, but he tucked them all away in a bank account Papa didn't know about. Over the years, the numbers had trickled into the hundreds.

He also helped Vadim at the farm, of course. He uncle paid him way too much; Pavel always protested the amount. Vadim had to eat and pay mortgage, and besides, Pavel had other forms of income. More often than not, Pavel lost the argument, or Vadim agreed to pay a lesser amount but loaded Pavel with canned and unperishable foodstuffs. They also spent hours practicing with the knife.

Slowly but surely, Pavel's escape pack was prepared. It was a backpack hidden beneath the porch. It held his credit card and bank information, his PADD, his communicator, the chargers for both, a change of clothes, his Sunday finest in a plastic bag, and a bit of food, as much as he could carry without being slowed down. He planned to leave a week and a half before classes at Starfleet began. It would take days for him to get there. If he took a bus to the city and a single shuttle, it would only take hours. But Papa, while a drunkard, was smart enough to track that. Pavel's twisted route of buses, shuttles, and light-speed rails guaranteed that his trail could not be followed. If nothing else, he could hitchhike for a few miles.

"I need you at the shop tomorrow," Papa said, two weeks before Pavel's planned escape date. "All day. No lazing off at Vadim's. And if I hear you go to his house one more time, you'll regret it."

Pavel nodded. The next day saw him covered in animal blood, pig and goat and cow and chicken. His father ran a butcher's shop, which had been run by his father, and his father before him. Pavel was supposed to inherit it when Papa died, and his son after him.

Pavel had no intention of working in a smelly butcher's shop for the rest of his life. His life belonged to the stars.

--

One of his old teachers saw the hideous bruises over his chest one day, when Pavel had made the mistake of wiping his sweaty face with the hem of his shirt during another job.

"Are those bullies still after you?" she asked, concerned.

Same bully that's always been in my life, Pavel thought. Of course, what had kept the teachers and school administrators (and therefore, the cops) from ever finding out about his home situation was because half of his bruises came from schoolyard bullies. Teenagers didn't like it when a twelve-year-old was smarter than them. Who knew?

Pavel gave a cheery smile, the one he'd perfected ages ago. "Don't worry about it."

--

Papa's stepbrother Viktor was a cop. They drank together every Friday.

Viktor knew about the abuse. He didn't do anything.

Cops were not an option.

--

Four days before Pavel was scheduled to leave, his father came storming in, his face red with rage. There was blood on his shirt.

He shoved Pavel against the wall, vodka thick in his breath, and rubbed Pavel's diploma in his face. "Did you think I wouldn't find out about this?!"

Pavel swallowed and kept his mouth shut.

"Do you think you're smarter than me? Better than me?!"

"No," Pavel whimpered.

Papa shoved him against the wall and threw him to the floor. "What did we talk about, Pavel? You *don't leave*! You stay in the shop with me, you do as I say, and I told you to *stay away from Vadim*!"

Pavel stared at him. He swallowed. "Whose b-blood is that?"

Papa's sneered. "You're so smart, despite the stupid lisp. It's *whose* blood, you idiot."

Pavel got up on shaking legs, his breathing harsh. "Vhat did you do to Uncle Wadim?"

"You're the genius. Take a guess."

"Vhat did you do?"

"Guess."

"VHAT DID YOU DO?!"

Papa punched him.

Pavel rolled with the force, staggering but staying on his feet. He wiped the blood from his lips.

Papa stepped toward him.

Pavel turned and sprinted out of the room and out of the house, all the way to Vadim's farm.

The door was open. Pavel slowed as he approached it, his heart pounding in his ears. "Uncle Wadim?" he called, stepping inside. The living room was a mess, furniture overturned and pictures smashed. Pavel swallowed. "Uncle?"

He found Vadim in the bedroom, on the floor, with four kitchen knives in his chest.

"Uncle!"

Pavel rushed to Vadim, looking for a pulse, a breath, any sign of life. "Uncle?"

Nothing.

"Uncle...please wake up. Come on." Pavel shook him. "This isn't funny. Come on, tell me a story. Uncle!"

--

Morning woke Pavel. His eyes were gritty and red. Vadim's body was cold, no matter how closely Pavel curled up next to it.

Pavel pushed himself to his hands and knees. All of his muscles hurt. Emotionally, he was nothing but a void. Nothing but numbness.

No, scratch that. He could feel it. Buried deep beneath that numbness was anger. Almost thirteen years' worth, rolled up in a tiny ball in his chest.

Pavel kissed Uncle Vadim's cheek. "I'm leawing," he said.

--

Pavel crept back into his house through the bedroom window to change his blood-stained clothes. He crept back out and went to the porch.

His hand was on the backpack when Papa--no, Andrei--grabbed his arm. "Where the hell have you--"

Pavel whipped out his butterfly knife just the way Vadim had taught him and buried it in Andrei's belly. Andrei gasped when Pavel ripped it out and fell to his knees. Pavel put the blade in his mouth, tugging on his cheek.

"I should gut you," Pavel said. His voice had no inflection, a dead tone. His anger was smoldering beneath his skin.

For the first time in his life, Pavel saw fear in Andrei's eyes.

It exhilarated him.

It sickened him. Because he knew he'd looked at his father like that hundreds of times.

"I should kill you the way you killed Uncle Wadim," Pavel said. "It was four knives, right? I only have one, but I can make do."

Andrei tried to say something, but couldn't with the blade in his mouth.

Pavel wanted to. He really, really wanted to.

But...he couldn't.

"Fuck you," Pavel spat, and slashed. The blade ripped through Andrei's cheek, extending Andrei's mouth to at least twice its size. He keeled over, moaning in pain. Pavel wondered if he'd already dealt a killing blow with that first stab to the abdomen, and decided he didn't care. He gave Andrei a kick in the gut for good measure, before grabbing his backpack. He walked away from the house and didn't look back.

III

When Pavel was younger, maybe eight or nine, he used to sing. Nothing special, just singing or humming a tune while doing homework, or washing the dishes, or working on his uncle's farm, often with the radio on. Uncle Vadim always got a sad smile when Pavel did that.

Then Andrei punched him in the mouth when he was singing a Christmas carol and told him never to do it again. He sounded stupid, anyway.

Vadim explained that Pavel's mother used to sing, and he sounded a lot like her.

Pavel stopped singing after that, even at Vadim's farm. In part for fear of Andrei, in part because he didn't want to see Vadim sad.

He tried picking it up on the road to Starfleet, in between bouts of hitchhiking and bus rides, but the sound stuck in his throat.

Pavel shook his head and got on the next bus. Baby steps.

--

He spent his thirteenth birthday in a homeless shelter.

Due to the early departure, Pavel's plan needed some augmentation. Between traveling tickets, his passport, the bribe to get the passport without a parent around, and food, he didn't have money for hotels. Plan A had been scheduled so Pavel could sleep en route, on whatever mode of transportation he was on at the time. (The upside to being small: he could comfortably fold himself into those tiny shuttle seats and sleep like a baby.) But since he had to leave early, it was either shelters or the sidewalk. By Day Three he'd experienced both, and had spent a bit of credits on a sleeping bag. He had only two meals a day, and they were light as he rationed the rest of his money and food over the journey. Someone had tried to steal his bag on two different occasions, one of them while Pavel had been sleeping. The rude awakening had ended with Pavel's knife at their throat until they backed off. The other had taken a punch to the nose.

And yet, Pavel was less afraid than he'd ever been. Sure, he got scared when he got lost in southern India and nobody spoke Standard or Russian, and during the attempted thefts, and the first time he'd realized he had to sleep on the street. But those situations had nothing on a drunk and angry Andrei Chekov.

Plus: traveling the globe. Without adult supervision.

Plus plus: Starfleet was at the end of this, and with that, space. There was literally no possible way to get farther from Andrei than leaving the planet.

Pavel was downright enjoying himself.

--

Pavel was in Rio, Brazil, and only four days from Starfleet. His next shuttle left in fourteen hours for Texas. After that it was one last ride to San Francisco.

He finished eating his shrimp stick while walking down the brightly colored streets, looking for a place to spend the night. He'd already passed two shelters already stuffed. He'd give it one more, then go to that bridge he'd scoped out earlier that looked warm and dry enough.

The long line at the shelter did not look promising. Pavel huffed a sigh, standing in the sidewalk.

"You're not gonna find any room in there," a man said, coming up behind him. He was in his twenties with shredded jeans and a stained t-shirt. "Their last bed filled up ten minutes ago."

Pavel shrugged. "I don't mind sleeping under the stars."

The man blinked at him. "You're Russian?"

"Uh-huh. I'm Pavel."

"Chaz." They shook hands. Chaz looked him up and down. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen," he replied honestly. He'd never lied about his age before. It was an old question.

"Where are your parents?"

"In Russia."

"What are you doing here?"

"Going to America."

"Why?"

Pavel stayed silent.

Chaz shrugged. "Fair enough. Listen, I used to be on the street, so I know how dangerous it is. But I have a shitty apartment now with a couch that's about two days from the scrap pile. Wanna spend the night?"

Pavel stared at him, then grinned. "Da, please!"

--

He really should've known better.

Pavel was taking his first shower in days when Chaz locked the door to the apartment. It felt so good to be *clean*. Pavel was never taking running water for granted again.

Chaz had two bottles of beer open when Pavel was dried and changed into clean clothes. He held one up. "Want a cold one?"

Just the thought of alcohol made his stomach clench. "Nyet, thanks."

He gave a wicked smile. "Come on, I won't tell."

Pavel shook his head. "I don't like the taste."

Chaz looked him up and down, the same way he'd done on the street. Pavel got the feeling he was being sized up. Chaz shrugged. "All right. Couch is that way."

"Thank you," Pavel said, putting his backpack by the couch.

He heard the sound of liquid going down a drain. Curious, Pavel tipped his head, so he could see into the kitchen. Chaz was dumping the beer he'd offered Pavel. But he was drinking the other one.

An uneasy knot twisted Pavel's stomach. He sat on the couch and looked out the window, at the stars. The window had a double purpose: he could see Chaz's reflection in the glass.

Chaz turned off the kitchen light and gave Pavel a tight smile. "Good night."

"Night." Pavel watched him disappear into the bedroom.

He took out his butterfly knife and studied the dual handle. The blade hadn't touched a drop of blood since Andrei. Other than that thief he'd threatened, Pavel had only used it to cut open food packages and wrappers.

Pavel put the knife under his pillow before he laid down.

An hour later, Chaz came out of his room. He stood in the doorway, watching. Pavel couldn't see his face in the darkness.

Chaz's footsteps were soft, but they sounded like thunder in the silent room. He sat on the edge of the couch, right in front of Pavel's chest. He reached out and touched Pavel's curls with the tips of his fingers. "You're such a beautiful boy, you know that?"

Pavel swallowed, his voice coming out small: "Don't."

"Shhh." Chaz put his hand on Pavel's cheek, his fingers sliding into his hair. "It's okay."

Pavel stiffened at his touch, his fingers curling around the knife. It felt like a battery, giving him strength. His voice came out stronger: "Stop it."

Chaz put both hands on Pavel, framing his face and forcing it up. He leaned down and kissed his lips, softly and with just a little tongue. Pavel wanted to throw up, to crawl out of his skin and run. He put his free hand on Chaz's chest and pushed.

When Chaz moved away, just a fraction of an inch, Pavel said: "Last varning. Get off."

Chaz smiled, rubbing Pavel's cheek with his thumb. "I can see it in your eyes: no one's ever loved you before." He pulled Pavel's hand away and pinned it above his head. Pavel squirmed, trying to get out of it, but it was an iron grip. Chaz repositioned himself so he was straddling Pavel, one hand around Pavel's wrist and the other on his cheek. "I can fix that," he whispered, leaning down to kiss him again.

Pavel's knife cut through moonlight and Chaz's jugular.

Blood poured out from the neck wound, showering Pavel. Chaz gurgled, eyes wide in shock. They were glazed over and dead in under four seconds.

Pavel rolled the body off of him, onto the floor, before jumping to his feet and running to the corner. Pressing himself against the wall, his shaking legs became too weak to support him. He crumpled to the floor, trembling. Chaz's blood covered him and it felt sick, like he was still violating Pavel.

Pavel grabbed the communicator to call the police.

...and he stopped, his overactive brain flashing through the scenarios.

He was the victim here and Chaz the perpetrator, no doubt about it. He wouldn't be surprised if that beer had been drugged and that there was a stash of roofies or whatever hidden in the kitchen. Pavel wouldn't get even a paperclip on his record for acting in self-defense.

But he'd have to tell the police why he was in Brazil, where he was going and where he was from. That would lead them straight to Andrei Chekov. If Andrei was dead, then Pavel probably would get jail time for murder, or manslaughter if he was lucky and had a good lawyer. If Andrei was alive, Pavel could get charged for assault with a deadly weapon. Or worse, end up back in his house.

That thought was the straw that broke the camel's back. Pavel barely made it to the toilet before he threw up.

He leaned against the bathtub, catching his breath. Blood was smeared over the pristine toilet bowl from his hands. He'd definitely be leaving some fingerprints, and DNA. But since he wasn't in the system, it wouldn't matter, so long as he didn't end up in any more Brazilian crime scenes.

Pavel flushed the toilet and sighed. His legs were still shaky, but they carried him from the bathroom to the living room. He pulled his knife out of Chaz's neck.

An hour and a half later saw Pavel showered (again), changed into clean clothes (his bloody ones in a trash bag that he'd take to a dump), and packed. He'd raided Chaz's cupboards for food and drawers for clothes. He'd almost taken the man's wallet, but they lived in a cashless society and the money trail would lead straight back to him. He didn't take any valuables, either. Pawn shops had cameras and kept records.

Pavel walked out of Chaz's apartment building and headed for that bridge he'd seen earlier. He didn't look back this time, either.

IV

Chapter Notes

Святое дерьмо = holy shit (according to Google Translate)

Captain Christopher Pike's office was bigger than the living room in Pavel's childhood home. Pavel sat hunched in his chair, his feet barely touching the floor. He was showered and dressed in his best clothes, which he'd had locked away in a plastic bag in his backpack for the journey, so he didn't look like he'd been living off the streets for the past couple of weeks. First impressions were important, after all.

Pike studied him from across his massive desk. "I thought you father would be here."

"He's sick," Pavel said. "Wery sick. Couldn't make it."

"Where is he?"

"In Russia. The willage doesn't have a name. He couldn't ewen get on the shuttle."

"Ah. Well, I suppose it doesn't really matter. You don't have to worry about paying a penny, thanks to your scholarship, and he already signed all the forms the administration threw at him. Still, I would like to meet him."

Pavel nodded, even as his brain furiously worked through possible plans to make sure that never happened. "I understand."

Pike stood with a sigh. "Well, then let's get you your cadet uniform and show you around. And from now on, be sure to call all the officers 'sir' or 'ma'am.'"

"Yessir."

"Where's your luggage?"

Pavel didn't even feel bad about lying. It wasn't like Pike would hear otherwise. "En route, sir."

--

The Academy was both vastly different and startlingly similar to living with Andrei.

It was similar in that there were strict rules and regulations, and swift punishment if they were broken. Dozens of cadets quit or were expelled in the first two weeks because they talked back to an officer or broke curfew too many times to party in the city. Pavel was

isolated from the rest of the cadets due to the age gap, just like at his village. And there was an instance where a twenty-something cadet decided to take out his frustrations on "that Russian whiz kid" behind one of the buildings. Pavel had managed to escape with only a couple of bruises, sprinting away from the bully after breaking his nose. And there were far more insults than compliments thrown around. All the professors wanted to make it very clear to Pavel that he wouldn't be able to "just slide by on intellect and talent, you're going to have to *work* for this, kid."

Like he hadn't already clawed his way through mud and blood just to get to the Academy.

But it was different where it mattered. When Pavel was in his dorm (now a single instead of a double; his roommate had been one of those who quit early), he knew he was safe. That no drunkard would storm in and drag him out of bed to beat on him. He could keep the lights on and study--actually study and read and do homework!--for as long as he wanted. In fact, that was encouraged. Demanded. The only reason he was here was because he was smart and good with numbers, and now he actually got to *be* smart and good with numbers. That alone was reason enough to want to stay here forever.

He still slept with his knife under his pillow, but that was more habit than necessity.

The only problem was money.

Pavel had run out. He'd spent the last of it on textbooks. Shelter obviously wasn't an issue, nor clothing, or food; two meals at the all-you-could-eat bistro were provided.

But he'd need at least 500 credits for spring's batch of textbooks.

He couldn't get a legal job; he was thirteen. Maybe he could do odd jobs around the city, but that would take too much time out of his packed schedule: four advanced classes and all of the homework that came with them, and for once Pavel actually had to bunker down and work at his homework, which was exhilarating but time-consuming. Besides, nobody in this massive city knew him. He had no references, no friends. Nobody outside of Starfleet knew that he was a genius and trustworthy and a hard worker. Who was going to let him fix their roof or tutor their kid?

That left extralegal means.

He considered his options carefully, late at night when the Academy slept. Prostitution was one of the first things that came to mind. There was a high demand for boys like him. But Pavel only had to remember Chaz to know that he wouldn't be able to do that.

Theft wasn't going to happen, either. He couldn't take someone else's hard-earned money, not when they needed it to feed their children or keep a roof over their heads. Vadim had taught him better than that.

That left the fighting pit.

It only took a week to find a couple arenas. It wouldn't be the first time, either. In Qatar, Pavel had stumbled into one by accident. In England, he'd participated. Only for one fight,

against a man with the same build and style as Andrei and no reservations about fighting a boy half his size and a quarter his age. Pavel did it for free passage to South America. He didn't kill the man; no weapons were allowed, anyway. He'd just danced around him until he'd grown exhausted, broke his nose, and knocked him down. It'd taken a couple kicks to the ribs to keep him down, which Pavel wasn't exactly proud about, but it'd worked.

"Sorry, kid," the first San Francisco pit worker said. "Our customers may be criminals, but they're not monsters. You gotta at least *look* like an adult when you're getting pounded on."

The other pit had laughed at him, and invited him over. They probably figured he'd be out that night.

They were wrong. Pavel won 300 credits in his first fight.

He hit the pits about once a week as midterms approached and the leaves changed colors. He lost maybe 1 in 4, when someone was faster than him. He was lucky he didn't get anything worse than a concussion and some broken ribs. Cuts and bruises were easily healed; he earned enough credits to get a mega-sized med kit, basically buying a regular med kit and then buying the good stuff off the black market. Dermal regenerators, hypos, painkillers, you name it, Pavel had it. And had probably used it. The times he did go to class with bruises didn't raise too many eyebrows, except Pike's.

"What happened to you?" Pike asked as soon as Pavel walked into his office for their second meeting. All first-year students were required to meet with their advisors before midterms.

Pavel self-consciously put a hand on his half-healed black eye and shrugged. "Some people are insecure about someone half their age being smarter than them, sir. Who knew?"

Not a lie, just not the whole truth. In fact, Pavel had a fist-shaped bruise on his stomach from a Cadet Rogers in his astrophysics class. The black eye, however, had come from the pits.

Pike's eyes narrowed. "I want their names. Now."

Pavel blinked. "Huh?"

"Bullying is not tolerated in this Academy, especially not that of a child," Pike said with more iron in his voice than Pavel had ever heard. "Their names. Now."

Pavel sighed and sat in his chair. "Vith all due respect, sir, I've heard that before. It doesn't do anything."

"You haven't been at Starfleet Academy before. Names. Now."

Pavel shrugged and gave him Rogers' name, as well as a few others.

They were suspended for the rest of the semester.

Pavel was floored when he heard the news. The worst thing that'd ever happened to one of his bullies back in the village was suspension for the rest of that *day*. The whole semester?
Святое дерьмо!

It posed a problem: Pavel didn't have an easy explanation for his bruises anymore. And he'd already registered for spring classes and looked at the bill. He needed another 75 credits.

He was thinking he'd have to wait until holiday break in winter, and then hope he didn't lose the fight or break anything important, or maybe find a gambling den (he was very good with numbers), when he was called into Pike's office three weeks before finals.

A woman in professional civilian clothes was in the office with him.

"Sir? Is there something wrong?" Pavel asked, his stomach churning.

Pike was sitting at his desk, the woman in the opposite chair. Pike was holding a PADD, and he looked somewhere between sick and stone-cold anger as he read whatever it said.

"I'm Amanda," the woman said, standing and greeting Pavel with a smile. "I'm with Child Protective Services."

Pavel did his best not to panic. "Ooookay. Nice to meet you. May I ask why you're here, ma'am?"

"Because you stabbed your son of a bitch father before running away," Pike said, his words sending ice down Pavel's spine. "Don't get me wrong: I approve that action whole-heartedly--"

"Captain," Amanda scolded.

"--given what he did to your uncle, but it does pose a problem."

Pavel swallowed. It tasted like gravel. His accent and lisp got worse the more panicked he got. "What do you mean? Am I going to have to go back to Russia?"

"No!" both Amanda and Pike said at the same time.

Amanda regained her composure first. "No. That's not going to happen. Your father was arrested at the hospital when your uncle's body was found and confessed to the murder. He's serving a twelve-year sentence. He survived the wounds you gave him, obviously, but he won't be able to hurt you or go anywhere near you ever again."

Relief hit Pavel like a tidal wave. Amanda quickly took his shoulders and pushed him onto her chair. Probably for the best; his legs felt like they would give out.

"However, you have no other next of kin," Amanda said. "And Starfleet cannot have a minor enrolled without a legal guardian."

The panic was back. Pavel swallowed. "So...what do I do?"

"Amanda here is going to find you a foster home in San Francisco," Pike explained. "You can still be a student here and you'll still have the full scholarship. But you'll have some legal guardians in the city who'll be responsible for you."

For a second, it was as if Pavel had forgotten all of his English, the words coming to him like a foreign language. He blinked. "So...I'm still in the Academy?"

Pike nodded. "If you want to be, yes."

Pavel slumped in his chair and smiled. "Thank you, sir."

"Legally speaking, I can't allow you to stay in the dorms while we find you a foster family," Amanda said. "But you have a couple of choices: you can come with me and spend the days in a foster care facility until a family is located, or you can stay with Captain Pike. He's offered to share his rooms with you and I've deemed him fit to look after you for a brief period of time."

Pavel hesitated. On one hand, foster care facilities were crowded and probably operated like shelters, with a high chance of his things being stolen, and getting to and from the Academy would be a hassle.

On the other hand, the last time someone had offered to share his home, Pavel had had to slit his throat.

But this was Pike.

But Pavel had only spent a handful of hours with Pike, hardly enough time to get an accurate judge of character.

But he'd sent all those bullies away without a second thought. Obviously he cared about Pavel's physical wellbeing, if not his emotional state.

"I'll stay with the Captain," Pavel decided. "If that's okay with you, sir?"

"I offered," Pike said, sliding the PADD back to Amanda. "We'll be in touch."

She nodded and gave Pavel her card before leaving.

--

Pike lived in the faculty housing on the edge of campus, in a very large apartment that was a quarter of the 8th floor. Pavel tightened his grip on his backpack and scanned the space, noting the placement of the furniture that could be used as obstacles or escape routes. Roughly ten steps from the couch to the door, sixteen from the master bedroom to the loveseat...

"Spare bedroom's that way," Pike said, pointing. "There's a lock on the door."

Pavel paused, and saw that Pike was right. He felt guilty because he knew he'd probably use it.

"Um...if you want, sir, I can make dinner," Pavel offered. "If you have ingredients for stroganoff or borscht..."

"You don't have to do that, son," Pike said gently. "You don't have to earn your keep here."

The way Pike said that word, "son," like he really meant it, almost broke Pavel. He swallowed and it tasted salty. "I'll just...I need to...okay." He disappeared into the bedroom and locked the door.

--

The next day was a bit better. There were classes and midterms to study for, plenty of brain food to keep Pavel occupied while his personal life was in upheaval. This was one of the reasons he liked math and science and numbers so much: they were solid. Stable. They always made sense. They always led to the same answers. They never changed even as they changed the world.

Pike made Italian spaghetti for dinner. Pavel insisted on helping with the sauce.

"How're midterms coming?" Pike asked. Pavel was grateful for the conversation, for stable common ground.

"I might get my first B ever," Pavel confessed.

"Uh-oh. Terrifying."

"It kind of is, sir."

"Hey, drop the sir. I check my work at the door," Pike grumbled.

"Yessi--I mean, okay."

--

The next day was a weekend. Pavel stayed at Pike's while the man ran errands. The boy sat on the couch, going through his notes and textbooks on his PADDs for finals. His butterfly knife was in his left hand, something for his fingers to do while his mind worked, the movements of the blade and handle so familiar it was basically muscle memory.

"Is that a butterfly knife?"

Pavel jumped, then cursed himself for letting his guard down like that. He gave Pike a guilty look. "Um...da."

Pike set his keys on the table and came into the living room. He sat on the chair next to Pavel's couch. They were exactly a step and a half apart. Pavel had mapped out the entire suite yesterday while Pike had been away. "Where did you get that?"

Pavel looked down. "My uncle gave it to me."

"Ah." Pike held out his hand. "May I?"

Pavel hesitated, his fingers curling over the handle, before he surrendered the knife. He immediately regretted it. He felt naked. He consoled himself by reminding himself that he was exactly twelve steps away from the guest bedroom (with the lock on the door) while Pike was fourteen steps away, and he was twenty-one steps away from the bathroom (which also had a lock on it) while Pike was twenty-seven, and he was ten steps from the knife rack in the kitchen while Pike was eleven.

Pike ran his finger over the blade. "My grandmother had one of these. Used it for so long it fell apart, but not before she showed me how to use it." Pike flicked his wrist, and the blade and half the handle did an elaborate dance around his fingers. "Been a few years, but I think I can still hit that spot over the mantle."

Pavel flicked his eyes to the mantle, and the dark spot in the wood.

The knife went flying. The blade embedded itself just outside that dark spot.

"Dammit. So close."

Pavel stared at Pike, before he stood and retrieved the knife. He looked up, smiling. "How did you do that?"

--

Unfortunately, knife-throwing lessons didn't count toward Academy credits.

Which was a shame, because Pavel did it as diligently as he did his homework. Even when Amanda called saying she found a foster family.

V

Chapter Notes

Short chapter! Sorry. Next one will be longer (as Pavel starts meeting his future crew).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the early 21st Century, domestic abuse was bad. Practically epidemic levels. One in five children were exposed to it.* These days, that number was down to 5% world-wide (5.1% in America and 5.7% in Russia; Canada had the all-time low at 1.9%).

In the early 21st Century, foster care homes found that children in the system were much, much more likely to be abused or neglected than those living in the general population. But due to a massive reboot of the system and the general change of societal values and customs, instead of being 10 times more likely to be hurt in the system,* foster care kids were actually 7% less likely to face abuse or neglect in state-sponsored households. Those kind of households just weren't a thing anymore.

So of course, Pavel ended up in one of them.

--

Joshua and Nancy Sherman lived twenty minutes from the Academy by car. They had six other foster children.

Everyone was all smiles and cheer when Amanda showed up with Pavel. Nancy even hugged him, which startled a gasp out of him. When was the last time he'd been hugged? Amanda explained that Pavel was a student in Starfleet and could live on campus, and Pavel got complimented for being "a big brain" by Joshua.

Then Amanda left.

Joshua disappeared into his office. Nancy rolled her eyes and turned to Pavel. "Dinner's in the fridge, heat it up when you get hungry. Don't bother Joshua, especially when he's working. Don't bother me, either."

"How am I getting back to the Academy?" Pavel asked.

Nancy shrugged. "I'll give you money for the bus."

Pavel crunched the numbers: it'd take him an hour and a half to get there.

"Can I stay there?" he asked. "I have a dorm."

"Sure, whatever."

Pavel breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

In short: Joshua worked and Nancy watched TV, and nothing short of a Klingon invasion would stop them. They didn't even notice that their newest addition was practicing his knife-throwing in the back yard on the skinny tree.

The oldest foster kid was a fifteen-year-old girl named Judy with dark skin and curly hair. She munched on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while she explained: "If you want something done around here, you've got to do it yourself. They're not going to bathe you, feed you, drive you anywhere, nothing. They just buy the food and pay the mortgage. Which, hey, better than what Mark had." She tipped her head to a dark-haired boy reading on the porch. "They like pocketing the government checks, too, so I wouldn't ask for anything major for Christmas."

Pavel nodded and thanked her for explaining the rules. He pulled each of the kids aside and explained that he had a dorm at the Academy, so if things got bad or they needed a place to stay, they could crash with him for a few nights. Most of them shrugged it away. A couple, like Mark, stared at him wide-eyed. One looked at him with nothing but suspicion.

The pang of disappointment in Pavel's chest surprised him. Had he really been hoping for something better? Sure, it wasn't ideal (wasn't like living with Pike), but he wasn't going to get smacked around here. He was still going to the Academy. This was perfect.

(Deep down, he knew. He'd wanted an actual family, the kind he'd never had, might have had if he hadn't been born prematurely and caused complications that killed his mother. He'd wanted two kind and loving parents who took care of him, helped him solve his problems, kissed him goodnight and hugged him when he was sad. Maybe he'd wanted a sibling or two, as well. An older one to tease him and help him navigate the world, or a younger one to teach and guide.

But he wasn't going to get that. So Pavel folded up that wish, put it in a box, and buried it deep in the darkest recesses of his mind so he wouldn't have to look at it again.)

The good news? While the Shermans did gobble most of the state money they got for raising the seven kids, they did give Pavel those 75 credits he needed for next semester's textbooks.

Chapter End Notes

*these are true facts and statistics

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-facts-statistics/>

<http://www.liftingtheveil.org/foster04.htm>

VI

Pavel turned fourteen before his second year of the Academy with no fanfare. It was a blessing. Usually today brought a vicious beating. But Andrei was locked away and Pavel was on the other side of the planet. He'd gladly take more of the Shermans' and other cadets' neglect if this was the result.

This semester he had a political class of sorts: Intergalactic Cultural Diversity: Peace and War in Starflett. A class like this was mandatory; they had to make sure all the cadets understood that not everyone they were going to meet would be a human with the same type of background and values, as if that wasn't obvious.

It was taught by Commander Spock.

Pavel had never met a Vulcan before. He decided he liked this one: crisp, clear, no-nonsense, stick to the facts.

It helped that the commander had written two of the articles Pavel had used for his paper last semester, which had gotten a 92, thank you very much, so he knew this man was a scientific genius who was basically a living encyclopedia of the known universe. Pavel may or may not have worshipped the ground he walked on, a little.

It took Pavel a month to get the nerve to approach him after a lecture. His lisp and accent were coming on thick. "Commander Spock? I have a question."

Commander Spock didn't look up the PADD he was skimming. "As I explained in the lecture, I cannot divulge any more information on what will be on the midterms."

"This isn't about the midterms, sir. This is about the article you wrote on how varp theory affects matter transportation, or beaming."

Spock paused, and looked up from his PADD.

Pavel swallowed, holding his PADDs tighter to his chest. "They did an experiment in Moscow a while back, shortly after you wrote this article, beaming objects and animals on and off of a light-speed rail, and it vorked, completely. It ewen vorks between planets if they're close enough, from one to the other ewen when traweling at light speed. But ewen though ve can calculate exactly vhere a ship mowing at light speed vill be to the nano-second, ve still can't beam anything on or off of it vwhile it's at varp. Vhy not?"

Spock raised one eyebrow at him before putting his PADD away in his bag. "I was aware of that experiment and its results, and I'm afraid nobody has found the answer as of yet. Since planetary beaming appears to work but space beaming does not, it would seem to have something to do with the ship being in space."

"But there's nothing *in* space that could corrupt a beaming signal. That's the vhole point of space!" Pavel objected.

"There is one possibility that has yet to be popularly theorized or proven." Spock grabbed his bag. "I have another lecture across campus. Walk with me?"

Pavel eagerly followed Spock and listened to his hypothesis, of how perhaps space itself was the object that was moving that they hadn't factored into their equations. Pavel objected: how could the entire universe be moving if there was nothing larger than the universe itself, no place for it to *go*? And then Spock said...

The end of the semester found Pavel and Spock deep in scientific discussion almost every day. Pavel chose the next semester's geology course that was taught by Spock, even though geology was not a mandatory class for him.

--

Pavel still did pit fights, to supplement the money the Shermans wouldn't give him. What they did provide covered only about half the textbooks. He was getting good at it, too. He won 5 times out of 6, usually in under a minute--speed was his friend. Starfleet required all cadets to do basic combat training and that was like being in high school again: Pavel did it with his eyes closed.

Cadet Rogers was back and being a jackass, and decided Pavel was still his favorite target. They shared a xenobiology class and Rogers snagged him aside afterwards to beat on him. The first time, Pavel was able to escape. The second time he wasn't, already bruised and banged up and therefore slower than usual due to the previous night's fight. Pavel got bruised ribs and a split lip from that.

He considered going to Pike, whom he spent almost as much time with as Spock. But while the Captain was effective, it was clearly only a temporary fix. Pavel had to do this one himself.

The next Friday, Rogers snatched him from the student body right after class. Pavel waited until they were behind the building and away from everyone else before grabbing Rogers' hand and twisting.

Rogers yelped and raised his fist. Pavel punched him in the kidneys, dropping him to his knees. Pavel pulled out his butterfly knife and put it to Rogers' throat.

"I have enough shit to deal with without having to put up with you," Pavel said, his voice deceptively flat despite the rage and vicious satisfaction at seeing Rogers' eyes widen in fear. "No more of this. Da?"

Rogers swallowed. The movement pressed his throat against the blade. Pavel watched the thin line of blood dribble down Rogers' neck with disinterest.

"N-No more," Rogers agreed.

"Good. And I don't want to have to deal with any of your friends, either."

"I-I'll tell them to back off."

Pavel beamed. "Good! Then we're done." He let go of Rogers' hand and stepped back, allowing him to crumple to the ground. Pavel cleaned off his knife on his sleeve. "Oh, and Rogers? You already have a record of beating on me, so if you decide that this was a fluke and you'd like to do this again, remember that I won't face charges for killing you in self-defense."

Rogers went pasty white.

Pavel put his knife away, picked up his backpack where he'd dropped it, and walked away.

He didn't have to deal with any more bullies at the Academy after that.

VII

Chapter Summary

We finally get to the movies...

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the lovely comments. Seriously, they really help. They just make my day. :)

Most people graduated college or academies with a dozen friends, a degree, and a big smile.

Pavel graduated with no friends, a guilt-ridden conscience, and the fake cheer he'd learned and perfected.

--

Pavel was terrified when he boarded the Enterprise to answer Vulcan's distress signal. He was *seventeen*, for God's sake! And he was supposed to navigate this thing? Oh, and of course the two men he admired and respected above all others were there on the bridge with him, Captain Pike directly over his shoulder and Commander Spock across the room. And the damn computer wouldn't take his accent or lisp.

Pavel was a bit grateful when the new guy, Sulu, screwed up first. It helped take the edge off.

"Well, that was embarrassing," Sulu muttered as they were en route.

Pavel smiled and said, "Don't worry. It can't get much worse, right?"

Of course it did. Pavel really should know not to trust his luck *at all*.

The man from the trial earlier that day, Kirk, burst onto the bridge with a doctor and communications officer, babbling about the lightning storm in space. Pavel made a mental note to look up Pike's dissertation on the U.S.S. Kelvin when the captain ordered shields up and red alert.

This, conversely, calmed Pavel down.

This was a crisis. This was a life-or-death situation. Hence, this was familiar.

They crashed through a ship graveyard and almost got blown up, and Pike offered to go on the enemy ship.

Pavel almost--almost--stood up when Pike asked for volunteers with advanced combat training. Pit fighting wasn't official training, but Pavel's success rate had gone up to 9 out of 10 fights over the last two years. That had to count for something. His butterfly knife was heavy in his pocket; he never left the dorm without it. He'd had to bring it out twice more on campus (once for each fresh wave of bullies) and a few times on the street. Most had ended...well, if not peacefully at least not bloodily. A couple had ended in corpses; one had ended up in the Bay as soon as Pavel's knife was out of his chest, since they'd been standing on a bridge, and the other had been a John Doe living on the streets and high as a kite.

Pavel was not adverse to violence, bloodshed, or combat. Pike knew that, even if he didn't know all of the details.

And the look Pike was giving Pavel told him that if he made so much as a peep, he was never going into space again.

So Sulu went instead. Spock became captain, which, after three years of calling him "Commander," was a bit difficult to get used to, and the drill was sabotaged. But something still got into Vulcan's core.

Pavel had to tell his mentor that his planet was about to be destroyed.

Spock took it...rather well.

And then Sulu and Kirk were falling and the crew couldn't beam them back...but Pavel could. Pavel could do that because he and Spock had talked about this last year right after midterms because all he had to do was calculate the gravitational pull on a falling object and voila! Sulu and Kirk landed on the pad, looking a little worse for wear, but still alive.

Sulu thanked Kirk.

"Clear the landing pad," Spock announced, stepping forward. "I'm going to the surface."

"The surface?" Kirk huffed. "The surface of what?"

Pavel was already punching in the coordinates Spock had given him. Kirk kept shouting.

"Energize," Spock ordered. Pavel obeyed.

"That idiot!" Kirk spat. "He's going to get himself killed!"

Pavel looked at Kirk and asked levelly: "If Earth was being destroyed, wouldn't you want to get your loved ones out?"

Kirk paused, then ran a hand over his face. "Ack...God dammit. Where is he?"

Pavel kept track of Spock and the other Vulcans, fingers hovering over the energize button. Spock was barely done speaking into the communicator to order a beam-up when Pavel

started bringing them back.

Then the rocks fell away. And the woman fell. And Pavel tried to save her, his fingers and brain working furiously, but it was too fast, too low of a drop, and she slipped away.

Pavel was responsible for Amanda Greyson's death.

--

Pavel kept his head down and his hands busy while Spock and Kirk figured out--well, argued over--a plan. When they realized that this was an alternate reality, that the Romulans had created an alternate timeline, Pavel couldn't help but wonder if there was another Pavel Chekov in the original universe. Had he gotten the family this Pavel didn't? Was that why Pavel was so screwed up, because all the blessings went to the original Pavel and there was nothing left for him?

The fight between Spock and Kirk--if you can even call it that, given how easily Spock took him down--jolted Pavel out of his thoughts. Kirk was taken off the ship, and Pavel found himself a little in awe of his mentor. He'd known, theoretically, that most Vulcans were taught nonviolent combat from a young age. But he'd never seen Spock do anything like that.

Pavel thought about asking him, after all of this was over and they'd all had time to gather their thoughts and get over the shock of it all, how to teach him some of that. Spock had already taught him so much about science, both in and out of the classroom. Why not some combat moves, too?

...no. That wasn't going to happen. Pavel had essentially killed his mother. He couldn't even ask forgiveness, never mind for combat lessons.

Any possibility of otherwise got shattered when Kirk came back on board.

--

A very, very small part of Pavel approved of Spock strangling Kirk. The man had beamed aboard a ship at warp speed and *wasn't* going to tell them how he did it? Pavel wanted to strangle the man himself!

But then Kirk goaded Spock into a fight, talking trash about his mother, and did the man have no sense of decency? Pavel was two seconds away from standing up and dragging Kirk out of the room by the ear when Spock attacked.

Kirk didn't even have a chance. Two hits and he was down and getting strangled. An old, familiar fear clutched Pavel's stomach, the same fear he had whenever Andrei started beating on him, when Spock didn't let up. And nobody was stopping it. Pavel couldn't get the plea for Spock to stop out of his throat, he was too shocked and terrified. His knife was out of his pocket before he knew what he was doing and he was going to target either the neck or the heart when--

"Spock!" Sarek barked.

Spock stopped.

He released Kirk and excused himself from the bridge.

Kirk became captain.

Pavel put the knife away before anyone could see, his hands shaking.

--

Pavel calculated the best way to get onto the ship, the science behind it complicated enough to take his mind off of things and psych himself up, even get him excited. So when Dr. McCoy asked, "Wait a minute, kid, how old are you?" Pavel wasn't as annoyed as he usually was.

"Seventeen, sir!" he replied proudly. If he had a nickel for every time he was asked that, he wouldn't have to do any more pit fights and could probably take care of the other Sherman foster kids himself.

"Oh, great," McCoy grumbled, turning to Kirk, "He's seventeen."

Pavel's age didn't matter. If they asked any other physicist on this ship they would confirm that the science was right, no matter who was revealing it--Scotty had already confirmed it!--and Pavel was about to challenge McCoy to do just that when a physicist stepped into the room.

Unfortunately, it was Spock.

Pavel felt all of his defenses go up: muscles tensed, feet shoulder-length apart, right hand by his pocket for easy access to his knife...he didn't think Spock was going to attack again, either him or Kirk. The Vulcan was calm and level-headed now, and there were too many witnesses. Pavel's reaction was instinct. Good instinct that had kept him alive for seventeen years.

Fortunately, nobody noticed. Everyone's attention was on Kirk and Spock.

Pavel almost offered to go onto the enemy ship again, when Kirk told Spock in no uncertain terms that he was going. Pike was on that ship.

But Pavel didn't offer, because he knew he'd just be laughed at. The advantage to being the youngest and smallest person in the room was also the disadvantage: everyone underestimated you.

He stayed on the ship while Kirk and Spock left. The entire bridge crew watched on their computer screens while the pair got beamed over, then disappeared into the complex framework of the enemy ship.

Almost everyone on the bridge fidgeted or gave other tells to their nervousness as the wait began. Pavel wanted to take out his butterfly knife; flicking the blade and handle around always made things easier. But he was pretty sure unauthorized weapons weren't allowed on the bridge.

So he stayed still and calm, watching and waiting. It was no different than staying silent in his bedroom while Andrei grew drunker and angrier in the next room, or staying hidden in a tiny alley while the local police looked for any homeless people sleeping on the streets, or sitting at a lunch table an hour after he'd already eaten so the Academy bullies wouldn't have time to drag him away and beat him up before they had to get to class.

Wow. Pavel was more suited to Starfleet than he'd thought.

"I have them!" Uhura shouted. "Spock's on the smaller spacecraft!"

Pavel plugged in the coordinates and Sulu blasted the Enterprise to Earth.

--

Everyone on the ship seemed to collectively lose their minds after they got planet-side. Near death experiences and tragedies would do that to you: stoic officers broke down in sobs when they reached their loved ones, or went completely limp and catatonic when their feet hit the ground, or started laughing maniacally at someone else's bad joke.

Pavel went to his dorm to change, and then went to a local café. He was starving.

--

"This...can't be right, sir," Pavel said, staring at the black letters on his PADD.

Admiral Pike raised an eyebrow at him. "What's not right about it?"

"Um...shouldn't this position go to someone more...qualified?" he asked.

"Saving the Earth doesn't count as qualified?"

Pavel lowered his eyes. "That wasn't me, sir. That was Kirk and Spock."

"That was the entire Enterprise crew," Pike corrected. "Including you. But if you want to completely disregard your contribution, then let me tell you something: Captain Kirk needs a navigator, and he specifically asked for you."

Pavel stared at him, uncomprehending.

"The youngest captain in Starfleet history asked for the youngest navigator," Pike added. "I'd say you two belong together."

Pavel looked back at the orders for him to stay on the Enterprise. Kirk had been right about the lightning storm in space, and how to stop Nero. Maybe he was right about Pavel. He nodded. "Okay."

"And Pavel," Pike called when he was at the door.

Pavel stopped and turned back. "Sir?"

"All Starfleet personnel are allowed to carry one weapon anywhere on their ship," Pike said.
"Doesn't even have to be issued by Starfleet."

Pavel's hand immediately went to his pocket. His smile was more genuine than it'd been in days. "Thank you, sir. I'll keep that in mind."

VIII

Pavel was not pleased when Spock became First Officer.

He was even less pleased when he found out he was dating Lieutenant Uhura.

Really, Uhura? The man almost killed someone in front of her and she thought that was good dating material? Pavel wondered if she came from a house like his. He knew the statistics. He'd done his research. People like him were much more likely to end up in an abusive relationship, either as the abused or the abuser.

Being Vulcan offered Spock no protection in Pavel's mind. A) he was only half Vulcan. B) Vulcan itself had had a domestic abuse problem before it'd gotten blown up (although their global rate had been 0.9%; point was, it'd still existed). And C) the man had just lost his planet, his mother, his friends...anyone would be emotionally unstable in that situation.

So, about a week into the Enterprise's first mission, Pavel hacked into Spock's records, and Uhura's just to be safe.

There had been no disturbances at his house. No police calls or anything like that. His father didn't have any of the tell-tale signs of an abuser and neither did Amanda Greyson (Pavel swallowed and felt guilt squeeze his lungs every time her name came up). Uhura's family was also clean, screaming normal and healthy and loving.

However, Spock's school records were littered with fights, usually labeled as "behavior unbecoming of a Vulcan" and "anger issues." They tapered off the older he got, but that didn't necessarily mean he'd grown less aggressive. He obviously liked being in control and was obsessed with rules; the number of times he'd gotten into an argument with Captain Kirk on the bridge for not doing things his way was monumental. Pavel found himself more and more wary of him, avoiding him as much as he could.

But there was no proof. Pavel saw Uhura every day and there were never any bruises. Her smile was always genuine. She never seemed scared or nervous, least of all around Spock.

Then again, Pavel had easily hidden his bruises with his med kit and she could use makeup. And lack of physical bruises didn't mean anything. It wouldn't be "logical" to leave any marks, anyway. No, if there was abuse going on, Pavel would put his money on emotional and psychological.

But again, there was no proof.

One day, Uhura mentioned a poker night in one of the rec rooms. Pavel's ears sharpened as she and Kirk talked.

"Bones has been bitching about it all day," Kirk said, grinning. "I can't believe you creamed him."

"Well, if you want to see for yourself, we're getting together again in a few days. We meet once a week."

"I can't. Stupid reports. But don't worry; I'll receive every detail about it the next day. Wipe him out for me, Nancy."

"That's not my name, and you know it. You actually know what my name is!"

"Yeah, but it doesn't count if *you* didn't tell me..."

Pavel thought about it throughout the entire shift. At the end of it, he met Uhura in the elevator. "Um...Lieutenant? Who do you spend Poker Night with?"

Uhura shrugged. "It depends on who's available. McCoy ducks in and out, but Gaila's a usual member, and so's Lieutenant Giotto. A few other friends of ours. Why? Wanna join?"

Pavel beamed and nodded. "Da, please!"

The fact that Uhura had no qualms about spending time around her friends--many of them men--without her boyfriend present, and that Spock didn't seem to mind, either, somewhat eased Pavel's suspicions. There wasn't any isolation going on.

Gaila constantly questioned Uhura about details to her and Spock's relationship, but Uhura kept her lips sealed. That was worrisome, even when Uhura explained that both she and Spock were very private people. Pavel wasn't expecting a blow-by-blow of the entire relationship, but everyone talked at least a little bit about their relationships. Uhura didn't say a word. Was she really that private, or was there something going on behind closed doors that she didn't want anyone to know about?

While Pavel kept watch, he earned a lot of money. Vadim had been right: he took to poker very well. To the point where McCoy accused him of cheating every other week. Pavel was never sure if it was an insult or a compliment.

Gaila flirted with him. A lot. She was an Orion, so she flirted with everybody, but she especially seemed to like Pavel. He never had any idea what to do when she called him "simply edible," or "sexily smart," or made any kind of innuendo. Usually he blushed and tried to focus back on the game, ignoring the way his pants got a bit too tight. McCoy and Uhura seemed to find this extremely amusing.

After one such poker night, Uhura pulled him aside. "Chekov, do you...like Gaila?"

Heat rushed up Pavel's face. "Um..."

"Because if you don't, you can tell her to back off," Uhura said. "Or I can do it for you."

"Nyet, that's not..." Pavel swallowed. "I just...don't know how to...I've never had a..."

Uhura nodded. "That's what I thought. Gaila probably thinks so, too, considering how young you are. So let me ask: do you like it when Gaila flirts with you?"

"I'd like it better if I knew how to flirt back," Pavel grumbled.

"Do you want to flirt back?"

Pavel looked up at Uhura like a deer in the headlights. "I don't think this is a conversation I should be having with my superior officer, ma'am."

Uhura laughed, and put a hand on Pavel's shoulder. "I'm not talking to you as your superior officer, Pavel. I'm talking to you as a friend."

The word slammed into Pavel's stomach, knocking his breath out. Friend?

"So, let me ask, and don't answer if you don't want to," Uhura continued, her hand warm on his shoulder, "are you interested in Gaila?"

Pavel blinked a few times to clear his head. He gave the question serious thought, like any scientist would. Gaila was gorgeous, and smart, and confident, and sexy, and seemed to like Pavel...and Pavel had never had that before with anyone, either a one-night stand like Kirk seemed to enjoy (and enjoy bragging about) or a soulmate of Vulcan ballads.

"...yes," he answered at length.

Uhura smiled. "Okay. Then what you need to do is tell her that. Privately. And communicate clearly. She won't know what you want if you don't tell her."

"Is she...I mean...is she expecting something long-term or short-term or...?"

Uhura shrugged. "You'd have to ask her. Just...talk to her and see where it leads."

--

It led to a night alone in Pavel's room.

He'd wanted it to be his room because he knew his way around it. He knew the bed was ten paces from the door and six from the bathroom. He knew the couch was four paces from the door and five from the bathroom. He knew where the knives were located in the kitchen.

Not that he thought anything like that would happen that required that kind of information, but Gaila had said she wanted to go where he was most comfortable, and he was most comfortable in his room.

He liked kissing Gaila. She was a very good kisser. Not that he knew what a bad kisser was, having never really done it before, but he enjoyed doing it with Gaila. For a while that's all they did on his couch, Pavel getting used to a soft, gentle kind of touch that had so rarely happened to him.

But then Gaila moved to straddle him, gently pushing him back, and cupped his face without breaking the kiss, and suddenly Pavel was back in Brazil and Chaz was on him and...

Pavel pulled back with a gasp. "Stop. Please stop."

Some of the panic must've bled out into his voice, because Gaila was gone in a flash. She sat on the other end of the couch, hands up and non-threatening, while Pavel scrambled to his feet and paced, trying to get his breath back.

"Sorry," he said, his hands in tight fists. "I'm sorry, that was...if you give me a minute..."

"Pavel," Gaila said. "It's fine."

"No, it's not!" Pavel swore in Russian, trying to get that bastard out of his head but all he felt was more suffocated and all he could smell was blood and...

"Pavel!"

Gaila was snapping her fingers at him. It was a bit ineffective, seeing as she was still on the couch while he was standing, but it got his attention. "What?"

"Who did it?" Gaila asked gently.

"Did what?" Pavel asked warily.

"I recognize sexual assault when I see it. Who did it?"

Pavel shook his head, going back to pacing. "It doesn't matter. He's dead."

He thought he heard her mutter, "Good," before she said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about," he insisted. "Nothing even happened! I stopped it before he could do anything but--"

"Pavel," Gaila called. She slowly stood from the couch and walked up to him. "Successful or not, it was still a traumatic experience. You're allowed to be affected by it."

Pavel swallowed. Gaila took his hand in hers and rubbed his fingers, one at a time. The contrast between his pale skin and her green skin was fascinating. "You don't have to push yourself into anything to try to 'get over it.' Or insist that everything's okay when it's not. It is completely up to you, and if anyone tries to tell you otherwise you should punch them in the face."

They stayed like that for a while, Gaila massaging the tension from his hands, until Pavel gently removed them. "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

"That's okay," Gaila said, with kind eyes and a gentle smile.

Pavel hesitated. "Or anything else really...romantic."

"That's fine, too." Gaila smirked. "You're still going to let me kick your ass in poker, though, right?"

"Nyet!" Pavel insisted. "You were distracting me with your flirting! No more!"

Gaila stuck her tongue out at him, giggling. Her expression softened. "I still want us to be friends, though. Is that okay?"

There was that word again. "Friend." Pavel actually had friends now. He nodded.

"Good." Gaila went back to the couch to collect her sweater. "Then as your friend, I feel obligated to warn you that when you do feel ready to show off that sweet little ass of yours..."

Pavel turned red, even knowing that there was no real meaning behind Gaila's flirting anymore.

"...I get dibs on all the dirty details."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Pavel asked, resigned but also strangely content.

Gaila grinned. She kissed his cheek before she left his room.

--

Despite the worries over Spock, and the revelation that a normal romantic relationship was a long ways off, and Gaila's continued flirting even though they were just friends and everyone knew it (it was her greatest weapon in poker, after all), Pavel realized that he was happy. He actually had people he could call friends. He was safer than he'd ever been, earning a legal salary, and earning extra in poker, so he didn't have to go into pit fights or live in abusive households. Life was...good.

Then Khan happened.

IX

Chapter Summary

Into Darkness

If Pavel had met Khan, he would have killed him.

It wouldn't have been in self-defense, or even self-defense in advance. It would have been vengeance, plain and simple. For Pike. And for Kirk.

As it was, Pavel never saw the man. He stayed in Engineering, helping Mr. Scott put the ship back together.

--

After Kirk was recovered, and the five-year mission assigned, and the crew rosters sent out, someone banged on Pavel's door.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Pavel called, pulling on some clothes. He, like all other Starfleet crew, had an apartment here at Starfleet HQ. His was tiny, as he was just an ensign, but he preferred it to the Shermans' place. Just five more months and he was eighteen, officially on his own. Any chance Andrei had of legally claiming him would be gone. If any of his previous crimes caught up with him, no one would be able to prosecute. He could not wait to turn eighteen.

Once Pavel was somewhat decent in sweatpants and a t-shirt, knife secured in his pocket, he opened the door. He immediately straightened. "Captain!"

He hadn't seen the man since pulling him and Mr. Scott over a railing while the ship hurtled to the Earth. Kirk opened his mouth to say something, then paused. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, sir."

"It's 1300 hours and it looks like you just got out of bed. Your hair's not even combed."

"I was up very late, checking the designs on the ship one more time," Pavel confessed, self-consciously running his fingers through his unruly curls. He and Mr. Scott had been updating and modifying the blueprints to the ship. Especially the warp core. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Kirk pushed his way into Pavel's room. He paused. "This place is spotless."

Pavel closed the door. "I like being neat." And not having any obstacles in his path to trip and stumble over if he had to make a speedy exit. Old habits.

Kirk turned back to Pavel and held up a PADD. "You mind explaining to me why you turned down a spot on my ship?"

Pavel blinked at him. "I thought the position should go to someone else, sir."

"Who? Who else?"

"Anyone with more experience."

"Experience? Jesus, Chekov! Has someone been giving you shit for your age?"

Pavel rolled his eyes. "Sir, I'm a seventeen-year-old officer on the flagship. *Everyone* gives me shit for my age."

"Well, you shouldn't listen to them!" Kirk insisted.

Pavel gave him a look. "Captain Kirk, if I ever once listened to them, I wouldn't have ever gotten here."

"Really? Because this rejection I'm holding says otherwise." Kirk tipped his head and gave him a second look. "Is this about that thing in Engineering?"

Pavel winced.

Kirk deflated a little, and shook his head. "Chekov, you know nobody blames you for that."

"They should," Pavel insisted. "If I had found it sooner--"

"Nobody could've found it sooner. Not Scotty, not even Spock."

"How do you know?" Pavel demanded. "They *veren't there!*"

"If Scotty wasn't on my roster, I'd make you the permanent Head of Engineering in a heartbeat."

"I...*vhat?!!*"

"You're smarter than half of the engineering crew put together and you know it almost as well as you know physics," Kirk continued. "Even Spock backed me up on this: if Scotty ever goes AWOL again, you're next in line."

Pavel stared at him. Kirk supporting him, he could sort of understand, even if Pavel's actions had gotten him killed: the man was an idiot, and insane. *Spock* supporting him? That sounded like a blatant lie.

"Look, Pavel," Kirk said, rubbing his eyes, and it was the use of his first name that really got the boy's attention. "I need you as my navigator, all right? I trust you, the bridge crew trusts

you, and it's just not the same without you."

Pavel hesitated.

"...you also never fail to take all of Bones' money in poker and that just makes my day. I cannot tell you how much that cheers me up."

That startled a giggle out of Pavel. Kirk grinned. "I'm serious. Uhura teases him about it relentlessly. It's my favorite day of the week."

Pavel wondered if Kirk would still feel that way if he knew Pavel had looked into the court records of McCoy's divorce. The fact that Ms. Jocelyn had demanded full custody of their daughter had set off the red flags that sent him searching. But there hadn't been a peep of any kind of abuse, not from Jocelyn or Joanna or any of the other witnesses. Jocelyn was just a possessive bitch.

So even if the Enterprise crew trusted Pavel, he did not--could not--trust them. And he didn't deserve their trust one bit.

Then again, Pavel didn't trust anyone and wouldn't be able to trust any other crew. And any other crew wouldn't have a place for a seventeen-year-old whiz kid. The Enterprise at least tried to make him feel welcome.

It was selfish. Absolutely selfish. But Pavel nodded. "Da. Okay. I'll...see you at launch."

Kirk's smile almost made it worth it.

--

Kirk was a liar when he said he trusted Pavel.

The five-year mission started out well enough. Pavel asked to continue to intern under Mr. Scott and was approved. He threw himself into his job, both as navigator and engineer. Nothing like Admiral Marcus's dirty trick was ever getting past him again. It was...it was really good. He was having fun. To the point where he'd catch himself humming or quietly singing a tune under his breath while he worked. He immediately stopped as soon as he realized, but nobody seemed to notice. Or if they did, they're weren't bothered by it. Not even Spock. Huzzah for being an overlooked teenager! Pavel was going to miss this when he was thirty.

Then one day, about two months into the mission, while working on his PADD alone in one of the smaller observation decks with the radio on, one of Pavel's favorite songs came up. Because nobody was around, Pavel started singing along with it. He didn't hear the door open and someone come in until after the song was over and Gaila said, "You *jerk*! You've been holding out on me!"

Pavel nearly jumped out of his skin, hand going straight to his pocket as he cursed himself for slipping. "Um...hi, Gaila."

Gaila was grinning. "We're doing karaoke tomorrow night. I want you there."

Pavel shook his head. "Nyet. It's not happening."

"Come *on*. Why not?"

"Because I'm bad at it."

Gaila looked at him like he'd grown another head. "Pavel, that was so far from bad singing it's not even funny."

Pavel stuck his head back in his work and didn't make another peep.

It was after that that Pavel began noticing Kirk's odd behavior around him. It had been going on for a while, but seemed to steadily increase. Pavel would give him the route to the next planet or a map of the new solar system, and Kirk would ask him to double-check his work. Which was fine; he was the captain and of course wanted to make sure the navigator was leading them in the right direction and left an accurate trail for the brass. Pavel never complained about it.

But then he noticed that he was the *only* person Kirk asked to double-check. He even counted how many times Kirk questioned a subordinate in a week just to make sure he wasn't projecting. Spock got questioned nine times--though Pavel was pretty sure seven of those were just to piss him off, which, hadn't Kirk learned *anything* about angering Vulcans?!--Sulu once, Uhura twice, Scotty twice, and McCoy five times, but that was the week Kirk broke his arm on an away mission and kept insisting that he was fine and didn't need medical attention, so that was probably a higher than usual rate for McCoy. Pavel was questioned, second-guessed, or asked to double-check his work by Kirk twenty-six times that week.

Pavel never brought it up. He understood completely. He'd screwed up in Engineering and Kirk, either subconsciously or consciously, wanted to make sure he didn't do it again. Pavel himself had been second-guessing and double-checking his own work without prompt, just to be on the safe side.

But it meant that Kirk didn't trust him nearly as much as he said he did. He'd lied to Pavel. And that...hurt.

X

The next couple of months went by insanely quickly. Pavel was one week away from turning eighteen, but his excitement was getting overshadowed by his exhaustion. He may or may not have been regularly working double shifts between navigation and engineering, but who cared? Pavel sure didn't; he loved this too much. The science, the exploring, the building...he was a part of something great, something beautiful, while living in the stars. Pavel was literally living his dream.

(Too bad his actual dreams were nightmares, between Andrei and Chaz and Amanda Greyson and Khan. But the human being could function just fine on an average of five hours of sleep, and the extra time awake let Pavel practice his knife-throwing skills on the dummy in his room.)

Pavel woke up one morning feeling like shit. His head was pounding, his muscles were whining, and the very thought of food made his stomach cower in the corner of his abdominal wall. Looking in the mirror, Pavel saw that he was pale, except for the black shadows under his eyes. Pike's disappointed ghost had paid him a visit last night, in an alternate universe where Kirk had stayed dead and it was all Pavel's fault no matter what the captain said and...

Pavel washed his face, jabbed himself with a painkiller and anti-nausea hypo from his personalized med kit, and went to work.

Sulu frowned when Pavel sat next to him at the consol. "Are you okay?"

Pavel forced a smile. "I'm fine. Just a cold."

He made it through his shift without curling up in a ball and falling asleep, which was exactly what he wanted to do. He wasn't in Engineering today, for which he was grateful, but it was poker night and that was always the best time to check up on Uhura, to make sure nothing rotten was happening between her and Spock. Intellectually, Pavel knew that if that relationship was going to be abusive, it would've happened long before now, but his gut continued to clench every time he laid eyes on Spock while his brain went into survival mode. Better safe than sorry.

Kirk pulled him aside in the hallway after shift, his brow knitted in concern. "Are you okay, Chekov? 'Cause you look like shit."

"I'm fine, sir," Pavel assured him. "Just didn't get enough sleep last night."

"I've seen you sleep-deprived, and this isn't it. You're sick, Pavel."

Pavel blinked, both at the use of his first name and the fact that, apparently, Kirk paid enough attention to him to know what he looked and acted like when running low on sleep.

"Look, I know how hard it can be to admit when you're at less than 100%," Kirk continued. "You've heard me argue enough with Bones about it. But none of us want you to hurt yourself. If you're still feeling under the weather tomorrow, use one of your sick days. You haven't taken any time off, so you have plenty of them stashed away."

"I'm fine," Pavel insisted.

"Ensign," Kirk warned. "I'll make it an order if I have to."

Pavel stifled a groan. Acting like a whiny teenager only ever made things worse, and he'd trained himself out of it before ever stepping foot in the Academy. "Yessir," he grumbled.

--

Kirk did not have to order him to call a sick day. Pavel called it himself, after throwing up in the bathroom the next morning.

He'd hoped that taking it easy the rest of the night--taking a nap, reading a good book, spending only an hour at poker night before going to bed early--would solve the problem. But it'd developed into a full-grown migraine. His head was pounding, anything brighter than very dim light made his eyeballs burn, and he was dry-heaving into the toilet now.

He managed to get himself up on shaky legs and go to his intercom. "Chekov to bridge."

"Bridge here," Uhura greeted. "Good morning, Mr. Chekov."

"I need to call in sick," he muttered.

There was a pause. Then, "Okay, my Russian's a bit rusty, but I got it. Is there a reason you're not speaking English?"

Pavel blinked. "I'm not?"

"No. That was definitely Russian."

"Shit," he muttered.

"I'll send McCoy."

"Don't," Pavel insisted. "It's just a migraine, not a broken leg. I just need some sleep."

Another pause. "Okay, fine. Get better soon, okay? The bridge isn't the same without you."

Pavel signed off and collapsed back into bed.

--

Pavel jerked awake when his door opened and footsteps approached the bed. He grabbed the knife under his pillow. "Vho's there?" he croaked.

"Just me, kiddo."

Pavel blinked, then groaned. "I told Uhura I don't need medical."

"Tough luck," McCoy said. Oh, good, Pavel was able to speak English again. "It's been seven hours and you didn't answer your intercom when she buzzed you."

Pavel checked the clock, then the flashing light of his intercom indicating several missed calls. "...huh."

McCoy leaned over him and took his pulse. Pavel forced himself to stay still and calm. He'd never had anyone in his room without invitation, and he didn't like it. Especially not when he was sick. He still hadn't let go of the knife.

"Have you eaten today?" McCoy asked, pulling a thermometer out of his med kit and placing it on Pavel's forehead.

"Nyet," Pavel said. "Not hungry. Threw up earlier."

"You need to get something in your system. Crackers or soup. Something." The thermometer beeped. McCoy pulled it off and winced. "101. I'm going to give you something for the temperature, something for that headache, and something that should help you keep your food down."

"Isn't there an emergency in engineering that requires your attention, doctor?" Pavel asked, as tightly as he could without being insubordinate.

"Probably. Scotty was downright heartbroken when he found out you were sick. Wouldn't be surprised if he came up here himself to check on you, probably with some of that homemade alcohol of his that's supposed to cure all ills." McCoy rolled his eyes as he administered the hypos. "I'm going to heat up some chicken noodle soup for you. Try to eat it."

Pavel nodded as he sat up, keeping his movements slow so as not to aggravate his stomach. Already the hypos were working, the headache eased enough that McCoy could raise the lights to fifty percent so he could navigate the kitchen. Sweat clung to Pavel's body, his mouth tasted like an ashtray, and his legs were cramped from staying in bed for twenty hours. He stood, slipping his knife into his pocket. He wanted to shower. But he didn't want McCoy or anyone else in his room when he was at his most vulnerable. It was hard enough having him here when he was sick.

Pavel settled for washing his face and brushing his teeth, watching McCoy in the mirror. The doctor replicated the soup, made sure it was at the right temperature, and set it on the table.

"I have to get back to Medical," he said when Pavel came out of the bathroom. "Eat that, try to keep it down, and call me if your symptoms get worse."

"Okay," Pavel said. *Get out get out get out get out.*

McCoy picked up his kit and left. Pavel sat at the table, studying the soup. He tried to dip the spoon in to eat it. He couldn't. He kept thinking of a ruffied beer in Rio. McCoy was a doctor, he had plenty of drugs...

Pavel poured the soup down the sink, threw away the bowl, and made it himself.

--

PADDs were too bright for Pavel's sensitive eyes today, so he was listening to an audiobook (*Moby Dick*, one of his favorites), when there was another knock on his door about five hours later.

Pavel stiffened. He turned off the audio and made sure his knife was in his pocket. He was curled up under a blanket on the edge of his sofa, so four paces from the door, six from the bathroom, and five and a half from the kitchen knives. "Come in," he called.

It was Sulu and Uhura, of all people. Pavel forced himself to relax. He worked with these people every day, saw them every day, willingly spent time with Uhura every week. Never once had they hurt him or threatened him. They had not used an override code to break into his room. They were fine. It was fine. He was fine.

"How're you feeling?" Uhura asked.

"Um...I'm okay," Pavel said. In truth, he still felt like shit. He'd thrown up the soup half an hour after eating it, but had managed to keep some crackers down. He eyed the covered pot Sulu was holding. "What is that?"

"Homemade soup, just the kind my dad used to make for my sick days," Sulu announced, bringing it to the kitchen. "Have you been able to keep anything down?"

"Some crackers." Pavel stood and followed Sulu to the kitchen, watching his every movement, especially his hands as he handled the food. He saw Uhura out of the corner of his eye sit in the middle of his couch.

"We figured you'd be bored out of your mind right about now," Sulu said, pouring out three bowls. "And Uhura said that you've never seen the *Terminator* movies, which are a classic hallmark of science fiction and I cannot let that slide."

Pavel blinked. "So...you're here to watch movies with me?"

"Just the first two," Uhura called from the living room. "After that, they're horrible."

"The third one was decent," Sulu argued, handing Pavel his bowl.

"Horrible."

"All right, fine. You can leave when we put in #3."

Pavel looked down at the soup in his hands. It was chicken wild rice, and it smelled delicious. His stomach gurgled, reminding him that it was empty, like it had any right to complain, seeing how it'd been so damn picky today.

It was confusing. Sulu had specifically made this soup for *him*. He and Uhura had both decided to willingly spend the next several hours with *him*. And that conversation about old

movies had happened six poker nights ago, almost two months, and Uhura still remembered that little detail about *him*.

"Hey." Sulu put a gentle hand on his shoulder, almost making Pavel jump. His eyes were worried. "You okay?"

"Um, da. Fine."

Sulu hesitated. "If you want us to leave, that's fine. You don't have to entertain guests when you're sick. We just thought you could use the company."

Pavel didn't know what to say or do in this situation, or what was the polite way to react. There had been no movie nights in Andrei Chekov's house. Nobody wanted to spend time with a teenager at the Academy. Why would anyone want to spend time with a teenager on the Enterprise, especially when there were far smarter and more entertaining people around, like Kirk and Scott and McCoy and...?

What Pavel did know was that he did not want them to leave. He might not have liked people coming into his sanctuary unannounced, but his social life was non-existent, unless you counted cyber-stalking and sorta-spying on possible victims of abuse, which Pavel didn't. He knew Uhura and Sulu wouldn't hurt him, though Sulu was certainly capable, with that sword of his. And he was sick and tired and just wanted to pretend to be a normal teenager who had a normal childhood and did movie nights on a regular basis and actually had friends who gave a shit about him.

"Nyet, it's fine, it's fine," Pavel said quickly. He didn't have to force the smile, it came easily. "I'm just...just tired. I'm not going to be good company today."

Sulu smiled, clapped him on the back and led him to the living room. "Don't worry about it. No one's expecting you to be Einstein today."

"Probably for the best," Uhura said, taking her bowl of soup from Sulu while Pavel sat in his spot on the corner of the couch. "These movies make no scientific sense. I'm a linguist and I know that much."

Sulu sat on the other side of Uhura, who was turning on the television and flipping through the ship's options. Pavel waited until one of them started eating before taking his first spoonful of soup. It was delicious.

Uhura was right. The first movie was amazing even though it made no scientific sense. Enterprise had proved the multi-verse theory correct when it came to time travel, while this series worked with the in-loop theory.

Pavel managed to keep the soup down. Sulu went for seconds while Uhura started the next movie. It was getting harder for Pavel to keep his eyes open. He wanted to curl up in bed and sleep until morning, which, considering the fact that he was sick, was probably the best thing for him to do. But he couldn't do that with people here. As comfortable as he was with two other people in his room that he deemed quasi-trustworthy, he had to be awake and alert for that.

He managed to keep himself from nodding off--barely--until the movie ended, though he couldn't for the life of him tell you what it was about. Uhura saw him yawn and stood. "Well, I'd say we've overstayed our welcome. Sulu, can you get the dishes?"

"Yeah, sure."

Pavel blinked, and moved his sluggish limbs. "That's fine. I can--"

"You are going to bed," Uhura said, gently but firmly. She put a hand beneath his arm and tugged. "Come on."

Pavel stiffened at her touch, but let her guide him to bed. The sink started running in the kitchen while Sulu did the dishes. Uhura pulled the blankets back and *tucked him in*. She smoothed the blankets over him. "Get some sleep. You should probably take tomorrow off, too. Wouldn't want to overwork yourself and end up right back here, right?"

If Pavel's voice had been working, he would've told her that he should be just fine tomorrow. But everything got lodged in his throat.

The sink stopped running in the kitchen. "I'm putting the soup in the fridge," Sulu called. "There's enough for another couple of bowls. Just return the pot when you're done, okay?"

"Okay," Pavel managed to croak out.

Uhura pointed a stern finger at Pavel. "Take care of yourself, or I'll sic McCoy on you again."

Pavel narrowed his eyes at her. "I knew that was you," he grumbled.

Uhura smirked. She ruffled his hair before turning out the lights and leaving with Sulu in tow.

Pavel turned onto his side. His body screamed at him to sleep, but his brain was in overdrive. He had no idea what to do with this. This was the same feeling he got when Pike had suspended his bullies without a second thought, when he'd invited Pavel to stay at his place during the foster home search and taught him how to throw the butterfly knife. This was the same feeling he got when Spock would cut time out of his very busy schedule to talk about science with Pavel, never once questioning the boy's theories or inquisitive nature because of his age.

It was that same feeling, but much more intense. He hadn't felt it in this caliber since...since Uncle Vadim.

Cared for. Pavel was being cared for.

Pavel curled up into a ball and cried.

XI

Chapter Notes

Almost there, guys! After this chapter we'll be all caught up to the present! :)

Also, longer chapter than usual. Sorry, not sorry.

Gaila was the only friend who found out about Pavel's...unique skills.

Which Pavel thought was kind of funny, in hindsight. Given how many missions went bad, how many villains the Enterprise faced, and how many crewmembers hated the thought of a teenager ranking above them, Pavel was surprised he'd managed to keep it a secret for so long. It was the way he liked it, in part because it gave him the greatest advantage of being underestimated, but also because he didn't want to think about how the bridge crew would react if they knew about Andrei, and Chaz, and the pit fights, and...

There were a few times Pavel had had to use his knife or fists on a crewmember. The first had been very, very drunk and angry, startlingly similar to Andrei Chekov. It was shortly before the Khan incident. No one else had been around, and the crew was on shore leave so there weren't any cameras that saw the intoxicated security guard take a swing at "you l'il cunt 'f an ass." He missed, thanks to Pavel's fast reflexes, and got taken down by a few well-placed punches. He hadn't remembered any of that after waking up with a concussion, a bloody nose, and what Pavel assumed to be a very bad hangover. Pavel didn't report him or press any charges.

Another was a fresh face in Engineering, a twenty-one-year-old who figured she was hot stuff and knew more than Pavel just because of the age difference. So when Pavel pointed out a mistake she'd made, she'd blown up on him. Pavel had stayed calm and level-headed, trying to de-escalate the situation, but she hadn't been having it, and tried to slap him. Pavel's knife had been out in a flash. He hadn't had to do anything except place it in front of his left cheek. The momentum behind the woman's hand had done the rest. She'd told everyone in Medical that the giant stab wound that went through her palm had been from a freak control panel accident.

The third had been a man who hurt Gaila, while the crew celebrated Pavel's eighteenth birthday.

--

Pavel's actual birthday passed unnoticed, exactly the way he liked it. He was officially free of Andrei Chekov. He'd already forgotten about the Shermans. He was now 100% self-reliant.

The nightmares had been something fierce, dredging up the nastiest memories of Andrei and Vadim's corpse and Pavel's mother, too. They were Pavel's normal birthday well-wishers. He hadn't minded it so much this year. This year made it worth it. He'd smiled all day and hummed on the bridge and sang in Engineering. Quietly, when no one else was around. Except Keenser walked in on him and Pavel made him swear to secrecy, which he obviously did not because the next day Mr. Scott asked if he was ever in choir.

And then the bridge crew went and freaked out about it.

They were five days from a tropical planet on the fringes of the Federation, where they'd spend a two-week shore leave. Everyone had been chatting about it non-stop. Even Spock had been looking forward to it; apparently it had the largest library in the Federation. It used to be the second largest, but the lost Vulcan planet was a bit of a taboo subject.

At the same time, they'd be picking up some new crewmembers. Kirk was going over the roster. He barked a laugh. "Hey, we're going to have a new youngest on the ship!"

"What?" Uhura asked.

"You're kidding," McCoy said. He was doing his usual hover-over-Kirk's-shoulder-to-make-sure-he's-not-doing-anything-stupid routine. Which meant they were about forty-five minutes from their lunch break.

"Nope," Kirk said. "A sixteen-year-old...I can't even pronounce that word. It's that new alien race that just joined..."

Uhura said the word in the native alien language flawlessly. Pavel didn't even want to know how it looked written down. Probably twelve consonants and two vowels, because that's how it sounded.

"Yeah, that," Kirk said.

"Does that really count?" Sulu asked. "They hit maturity at age twelve. Average life expectancy is...what was it, Mr. Spock? Thirty?"

"Thirty-two Terran years," Spock confirmed.

"So?" Kirk asked. "She'll still be younger than our resident seventeen-year-old."

"Eighteen," Pavel corrected without looking up from his screen.

"What?" Kirk asked.

"I turned eighteen last week, sir."

There was a heavy pause, until Kirk sputtered, "Why didn't you say anything?!"

Pavel blinked and looked over his shoulder at him. "Huh?"

Nobody seemed angry, which was a relief, because that's what Kirk had sounded. But they were all either confused, surprised, and/or, unless Pavel's eyes were playing tricks on him, a little hurt.

"You turn into a legal adult and decide not to celebrate with us?" Kirk asked. He was saying it in fond exasperation, but Pavel could detect the tiniest grain of hurt.

"Um..."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "Not everyone wants to spend their birthday getting wasted at giant parties, Jim."

"Hey, I have a reason to get wasted, okay? My birthday is also a yearly funeral," Kirk said. "Mr. Chekov, on the other hand...actually had a reason to get wasted, too. He's legal drinking age now."

Pavel managed not to shudder at the thought. He also managed not to say that his birthday was also a yearly funeral. One woman's death by medical complications was nowhere near a hero's death to save 800 lives. "No alcohol," he said with a fake smile.

"What, really?"

"Good," Sulu said. "It's overrated, anyway."

"Fine bourbon isn't," McCoy defended. Whose side was he on?

"Captain," Uhura called. "It's Pavel's day. He'll spend it how he likes."

Kirk groaned and ran a hand over his face. "But cake, Uhura! We've missed out on a perfectly good opportunity to have really good *cake*! And Bones' peach cobbler. And Scotty's amazing drinks!"

Pavel stared at Kirk, then turned to Sulu. "This is why I don't tell that man anything."

"Smart move," Sulu said. "Happy belated birthday."

"You're both jerks," Kirk grumbled.

--

Pavel assumed that was the end of it. Pavel had to remind himself that he was an idiot.

Poker night that week saw the appearance of McCoy's famed and very, very rare peach cobbler. He made it less than once a year because he used real ingredients and fresh peaches, both extremely hard to produce on a flagship, instead of "that replicated garbage."

Pavel looked at the cobbler on the table, then at McCoy. "What's the occasion?"

"Nothing," McCoy said, cutting out a slice for himself. "Just wanted to make it."

"Uh-huh."

He put a slice on a paper plate and plopped it on Pavel's spot. "Siddown and eat your damn cobbler."

--

Sulu gave him an eighteen-year-old Gor'ac tree. It was about six inches tall and in a red pot with "Pascha" written on it.

"The alien race that raise these trees also name them," Sulu explained. "It's actually a bit of a rite of passage. When one of them becomes an adult, they're given one of these trees that's exactly their age to care for and tend. It's supposed to symbolize that they're responsible and need to care for life, or something. I don't know. Anyway, I named it Pascha because that's a variation of Pavel."

Pavel looked at the tree in his hands. "So...you're giwing me an alien tree named after me?"

"Yup."

"That...is the veirdest and sveetest thing anyone has ewer done for me," Pavel said truthfully. "Thank you."

--

Uhura gave him books.

Real, leather-bound books.

By his favorite author, Leo Tolstoy.

In Russian.

Pavel sputtered, flipping through the thin pages of *War and Peace*. "Where did you get these?!"

"Our last shore leave," she said. "I was actually going to ask you when your birthday was, that day on the bridge, or look it up, so I could give it to you the day of. But you..." She poked him in the chest. "...decided to be your usual meek and quiet self and didn't say anything."

The pages smelled heavenly. Nothing beat that smell. It was wisdom and adventure and peace and knowledge. It was the tiny library on the edge of the village where Pavel would read for hours, his first sanctuary from Andrei before it'd burned down. It was the bookstore two blocks from the Academy with a café, that sold antique books and had soft leather chairs where Pavel did his homework.

Pavel wanted to cry. This was one of the greatest gifts he'd ever received in his life, second only to Vadim's knife.

He gave a wobbly smile to a startled Uhura. "Thank you."

--

"I heard it was someone's birthday last week," Mr. Scott said with a grin when Pavel arrived in Engineering for his internship.

"Please don't giwe me some of your illegal alcohol," Pavel pleaded.

Mr. Scott gave him a horrified look. "Do I look like the kind of man to blatantly break Starfleet regulations and have a sill in the belly o' the ship?"

Pavel gave him a look.

Mr. Scott waved it away. "Relax, lad. I don't fancy givin' ya incriminatin' evidence on the day you can actually be charged for it. I've got somethin' much better."

Curious, Pavel followed Mr. Scott to one of the rec rooms, where there was a box wrapped in newspaper with a bright blue bow on Keenser's lap, who was sitting on the table.

"This is from Keenser and me both," Mr. Scott said as Keenser handed Pavel the package. "Go on, open it!"

Pavel obeyed. He frowned at the red regulation shirt.

"Turn it inside out," Mr. Scott instructed.

Pavel did. It was his regular gold. Pavel snorted, flipping it back and forth. "Does this ewen count as regulation?"

"Ack, who cares?" Mr. Scott said. "Now ya don't have to run like a mad man to your rooms to change every time ya work a double shift with us."

A slow smile spread across Pavel's face. "That...is really thoughtful, Mr. Scott, Keenser. Thank you."

Mr. Scott rolled his eyes. "For the hundredth time, lad, call me Scotty!"

Pavel decided that it was okay to be immature for just this moment, and stuck his tongue out at his superior. "My birthday, my rules."

--

Kirk bought the bridge crew dinner, a few days into their shore leave. It was an Indian restaurant, one of Pavel's favorite cuisines. He'd stayed in India for a few days on the way to the Academy and it had been some of the best food he'd ever eaten. He'd vowed to go back when he had the time and the money.

"Birthday boy gets a free entrée," the waitress said, smiling down at Pavel as she handed out menus.

"Dang it, Captain," Pavel grumbled.

"Happy birthday," Kirk said with a grin. As the waitress walked away, Kirk gave a low whistle. "I think she likes you, Chekov."

"Nyet," Pavel said, opening his menu. "Not happening."

"You sure?"

There was a clunk. Kirk winced, as if he'd been kicked, and frowned at Uhura, who was giving him a death glare. Pavel hid behind his menu.

Great. His superior officers were fighting over his sex life. "How is this my life?" Pavel muttered to himself.

"Ah, they just want what's best for you," Sulu replied quietly. Pavel startled when he realized he'd been heard. Sulu didn't seem to notice. "Kirk wants you to have a good time, explore your boundaries and whatnot, and Uhura wants you to be comfortable."

Considering the fact that Uhura had brought Spock, she was not doing a very good job. But Pavel was a genius, and did not tell her that.

"Hey, they have karaoke," Kirk said with a grin. "Any takers?"

"I can do country songs," Sulu offered. "Otherwise, no."

"You like country, too?" McCoy asked, mystified.

"And biology, including medicinal biology."

"You and I need to spend more time together."

"Considering the fact that Vulcan music differs widely from Terran and often sounds grating to human ears, no," Spock said.

"Chekov?" Kirk asked. "They've got an open mic."

Pavel shook his head. "Nyet. I can't sing."

Everyone at the table seemed downright puzzled by this. "Gaila says a different story," Uhura said carefully.

"Gaila likes rumors and exaggeration," Pavel pointed out. "She also has wery bad taste in music."

"Hey, the Green Boys are a *classic*."

Pavel gave her a look that conveyed his disdain better than any words he or Uhura could muster. It made McCoy choke on his drink and Sulu hide a grin behind his menu.

Kirk turned to Uhura. "I'll give you ten bucks to sing a Green Boys song just to piss him off."

"Deal," Uhura said.

"Hey!" Pavel protested.

In the end, Pavel did not have to put up with any Green Boys. Considering the reason why, he would've vastly preferred suffering bad music.

Uhura's com went off halfway through dinner. She apologized as she answered. "This is Uhura." She frowned, then her eyes grew wide with concern as she stood and quickly left the table. "Gaila? What's wrong?"

Pavel's ears perked up. He watched Uhura across the room as she grew more and more agitated. The mood spread, everyone becoming quiet. Pavel set his fork down when Uhura flipped her com closed and went back to the table to collect her jacket.

"I have to go," she said. "Sorry, I'll explain everything later."

Pavel stood and followed her out, ignoring Sulu's protests. "Uhura!" he called when they got outside. "What's wrong with Gaila?"

"Nothing," Uhura said when she reached the car. "Go enjoy your birthday."

Pavel put a hand on the door to keep it closed. "Do you really think I'm going to celebrate anything while one of my friends is in so much trouble she called for help? Gaila does not call for help. Ewer. So, what happened?"

Uhura hesitated. "It's a private matter."

"I understand that."

She sighed. "She was with a man and it...went sour."

Ice poured down Pavel's spine. He felt that familiar deep anger settle in his bones while the rest of him became numb, cool, and calm. "Is she hurt?" he asked.

"I would've grabbed McCoy if she needed medical attention. She just needs emotional support right now, someone to help her figure out what to do next."

"Great." Pavel went around the car and opened the passenger door. "Let's go."

"Chekov, this isn't an equation you can just plug into a computer and get a clear answer," Uhura said, annoyed. "This is serious and complicated and delicate."

Pavel met her look with a steady gaze. "And terrifying and confusing and *lonely*. So are we going to keep Gaila waiting, or are we going to get moving?"

Something passed over Uhura's face. A combination of realization and horror that was quickly pushed down and locked away. She nodded and got in the driver's seat.

--

Gaila's emerald skin was bruised and she had a split lip. Otherwise, physically speaking, she was fine.

"Lieutenant Coulson," Gaila said, while Uhura gently pressed an ice pack over the bruise on her cheek. "From the science department. Smart, dark hair, absolutely gorgeous. Funny, too. I didn't have time to talk to him much while we were on board, but I flagged him down just before shore leave and asked him out."

They were in a hotel room, something modest in the downtown area of the city. Uhura sat on the edge of the bed next to Gaila. Pavel stood on the other side of the room, near the corner, far from Gaila and far from the door to offer her a quick escape. He also had a clear line of sight to the door, so if anything tried to bust in, his knife would be in their throat before they took the first step. Right now, Pavel was on his PADD, looking into this Coulson character.

"So he's a Starfleet officer," Uhura said quietly. "We can tell the captain and he'll handle it."

Gaila shook her head. "There's no proof. We went to his room after dinner, on the other side of the city. But I wasn't feeling it, something about him was off. I didn't start getting those vibes until we were in his room, though, and he decided he wasn't taking no for an answer." She wiped a tear and sniffed. "We fought, literally, and I managed to get away before he managed to...leave any DNA on me. There weren't any cameras, and he's probably healed up all of his wounds with a first aid kit by now. It'd just be my word against his."

"We can still get him reassigned to another ship," Uhura said. "Even if we can't put him away, Kirk'll gladly remove him if he's causing another crewmember problems."

"Coulson has a record," Pavel announced. "Two other complaints like this. I wouldn't be surprised if there were others off the books."

Uhura frowned. "I didn't know ensigns have access to those records."

"We don't."

"Then how did you...?"

"Our cyber security needs work."

"Pavel," Uhura scolded, but there was no heat in her voice. If anything, she sounded like she approved.

Pavel ignored her and turned to Gaila. "The captain will absolutely remove this man from the ship if you lodge a complaint. Uhura can probably speed the process. We can leave him here on the planet and never see him again."

Gaila gave a determined nod, fire in her green eyes. "I like that."

"Okay," Uhura said. "Then that's what we'll do. In the meantime, do you want anyone with you?"

Gaila's nod was a bit more frantic. "Yes. Please. If you don't mind. You're my bestie and Pavel's like a little teddy bear."

Pavel gave her his cheeriest smile, his hand in his pocket and wrapped around his knife.

--

Coulson was removed from the Enterprise roster within two days. Pavel had never seen Kirk so furious, which flipped like a light to sympathy when Gaila was in the room. He may have been a liar to Pavel and a bit annoying at times, but it was obvious that nothing was more precious to this man than his crew. Pavel was so proud to serve on his ship.

Pavel spent the rest of his shore leave with Gaila. Everyone reacted differently to a situation like this, but they usually fell into one of two camps: isolation or group dependency. Gaila fell in the latter. She never wanted to be alone. She took Pavel or Uhura or both to crowded plazas and restaurants and parks. She apologized at least a dozen times a day for being so "clingy," but Pavel and Uhura always assured her that it was fine. Uhura even gave Gaila a list of all the best tourist attractions the lieutenant was interested in, and they spent one of their days together hitting all of them. Pavel took her to science museums and antique ships and buildings, places where their shared interest in engineering was displayed (she'd once considered being an architect). Pavel didn't want to leave Gaila alone anymore than she wanted to be alone. Unlike Chaz, Lieutenant Coulson was still very much alive, and very angry.

"We should ask for some security guards," Pavel said, for what felt like the hundredth time, though it was only the fifth.

Gaila shook her head. "I want to at least pretend I'm having a good time on a perfectly normal vacation."

Pavel sighed, but conceded.

Gaila looked at him for a moment, then threw her arm around his shoulders and gave him a half-hug. "Thank you for caring," she said.

Pavel returned the hug. It was strange and warm and good. Maybe it was odd that Pavel had never wanted to protect someone else before. He'd never had anyone *to* protect, besides himself. But he was protecting Gaila. And he realized he'd do the same for Uhura, and Sulu, and Mr. Scott and Kirk and McCoy and even Spock. He'd be terrified and wouldn't trust Spock with his back in a million years, but he'd do it.

And that was a good thing, because Coulson decided to visit Gaila the next day.

Pavel and Gaila were in her hotel room, watching bad movies and eating popcorn. Pavel kept pointing out all the scientific inaccuracies while Gaila mocked the overrated romantic subplot with a perfect impersonation of the character's voices. It made Pavel almost fall off the bed laughing.

There was a knock on the door.

"Gaila," a male voice called. "It's me. Can we talk?"

Gaila froze. Pavel knew who it was just from that reaction. He paused the TV and stood, silently.

Gaila found her voice. "No," she said firmly. "Go away, Coulson."

"Come on," he pleaded. "I feel...I think we got off on the wrong foot. There was a misunderstanding. I just want to talk to you, okay?"

"No."

Coulson pounded on the door. "Bitch! Open this door!"

Pavel stood in the entryway, hand in his pocket. Gaila had her com out. "Gaila to Enterprise. I need security on my location..."

"You'd better not be calling the cops!" Coulson shouted.

"The threat is Lieutenant Coulson. He's making threats and trying to break in..."

The door slammed open.

Coulson had been expecting Gaila. He hadn't known Pavel was in the room, so he was completely off-guard when Pavel palm-struck him in the nose, breaking it with a bloody crack. The sudden reverse force on the top of a moving object forced it to fall. In other words, Coulson landed flat on his back.

Pavel was on him in an instant, straddling his chest. He put his knife to Coulson's throat, and the man froze.

"Ensign Chekov?" he gurgled around his broken nose.

"Move and I slit your throat," Pavel said. His voice was dead. He gripped Coulson's shirt with his free hand. "And please, I am begging you to move."

Gaila cleared her throat.

Pavel looked up, and saw her standing over both of them, phaser pointed at Coulson. "He's my attacker, so I get dibs."

"I outrank you," Pavel pointed out.

"So?"

Four bright lights appeared in the room. Pavel shifted off of Coulson and quickly tucked his knife away. Gaila stepped forward so her phaser was directly in front of Coulson's face by the time the security guards beamed into the room.

They arrested Coulson and dragged him out of the room. Giotto turned to Pavel and Gaila. "Mind telling me what happened?"

"Gaila brought him down," Pavel said. "She broke his nose with the phaser after he broke in."

Gaila raised an eyebrow at him, but confirmed the story. It wasn't until Giotto left that she turned on Pavel. "Why did I get the credit for that?"

"If everyone thinks you beat him by yourself, who's going to be dumb enough to attack you?" Pavel replied.

"Oh, there are plenty of idiots out there in the universe," Gaila said, even as she was smiling. She squeezed Pavel in a hug. "Thank you."

He hugged her back, burying his face in her crimson hair. "You're welcome."

--

Three days after shore leave was over, the Enterprise ran into the Sagacitans.

--

Nothing good happened when Pavel was the center of attention. So having the largest Sagacitan stare at him the whole time he was here was disturbing, to say the least.

It also meant Pavel couldn't dig his knife out of his pocket and undo the chains.

He knew these beings were telepaths. But they weren't very good telepaths, or maybe they were only touch telepaths, because Pavel had been thinking about that knife for a while now and nobody had come to disarm him.

So Pavel planned an escape route in case Mr. Scott couldn't beam them onto the Enterprise, and talked with Captain Kirk, and waited.

The leader entering the room was just the distraction he needed. With everyone's attention on her/him/it, he was able to get the knife out. He used it to pick the lock while the priest kept talking, and...

Great. Everyone was looking at him again.

"Don't touch him," Sulu ordered. Perfect timing; his voice covered the sound of the restraint coming undone. Pavel kept his arm still, as if he was still restrained.

The priest ignored him, and reached to touch Pavel's face.

"Don't," Pavel warned. He did not want to kill anyone in front of the officers.

The priest smiled and moved forward.

One of the other Sagacitans noticed something was wrong and shouted, "Priest, don't!"

Pavel stabbed the priest in the neck.

But it was too late. It had already touched his face.

XII

Jim blinked. The priest gasped, gurgling around the knife in its throat as black blood ran down the length of Chekov's arm.

A second. It had taken a second for Chekov's entire life to flash before Jim's eyes. He wanted to throw up.

The priest's blue skin pulsed, going crazy. The restraints around the crew's wrists and ankles released and dropped them to the ground.

Spock and Sulu were the first ones to react, charging at the frozen Sagacitans. Jim joined them, pushing the shit-show of the last second (eighteen years) in the back of his mind.

"Captain!" Uhura warned. Jim turned from his fight with one Sagacitan to see another draw a phaser.

It dropped dead with the butterfly knife in its throat.

When all the aliens were either dead or unconscious, Jim started searching for communicators. He saw Chekov remove his knife and wipe the blood off of the blade with his sleeve, the one that wasn't already drenched in black blood. Jim found a communicator on the priest and started tuning in to the Enterprise's frequency. "Kirk to Enterprise, tell me you're reading this. Hello?"

Chekov paused when he noticed everyone staring at him. He looked down at his knife. "Um...I can explain?"

Sulu snorted. "Considering the fact that your entire life flashed in front of our eyes, you don't have to explain jack."

Chekov frowned. "Vhat?"

Spock, sounding more tentative and hesitant than Jim had ever heard him and decided he never wanted to hear again, explained: "When the priest died, it sent a telepathic flare that affected all of us. Because it had already linked with you, whatever you two shared was seen by everyone in the room."

Chekov went very still. "So...you all saw..."

"Saw Pike teach you those knife-throwing skills that he decided not to share with me? Yup," Jim said, deciding to go with one of the cheerier memories in a crap attempt to lighten the mood, instead of the abusive father, murdered uncle, that Brazilian asshole, the number of people in Starfleet and *Jim's own crew* that Chekov had taken down just for a sliver of respect and dignity and, oh, Jim was going to go on a goddamn *purge*...

Chekov looked at the floor. "...huh."

"Enterprise to Kirk, we read ya, cap'n!"

Scotty's fuzzy voice cut through the silence. Jim felt boneless with relief. "Any chance of you beaming us out of here before we're executed?"

"Not where you are, cap'n. The molecular structure of the buildin' ye're in is fiddlin' with the signal. Ye gotta get outside."

"Of course we do," Bones grumbled, looking up at the open sky of the coliseum-like room they were in. "Because anything else would be too easy."

"Are there any weapons lying around?" Sulu asked. "Anything we can use?"

"There's this guy's phaser and Chekov's knife," Jim said, taking the phaser. "And one grenade. Don't know why a common guard needs a grenade, but whatever. Uhura, you're the crew's best pitcher."

Uhura tucked the grenade in her pocket. Spock was already at the only door to the room, his pointed ears listening for any movement. He motioned for them to come forward. Jim went right behind him, phaser up as they opened the doors.

There were two guards. Jim took down one, Chekov took the other.

"More phasers," Jim cheered. Spock took one, Sulu the other. Chekov reclaimed his knife, and god damn did Jim need to get one of those.

"There should be more guards," Uhura commented.

"I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth," McCoy said. Then he cursed as the walls began glowing blue.

Jim tightened his grip on the phaser, looking for a threat, a power source, something. "Spock, any ideas?"

"I need more data," Spock said. So, no.

"Pavel?" Sulu asked. "You okay?"

Jim turned to Chekov, who was holding his stomach and looking very confused. "I don't know, I feel a little..."

As if there was a rope around his gut, Chekov was yanked back by an invisible force, dragged down the hall. Jim and the others immediately gave chase, sprinting after him. Chekov flailed, trying to get a grip on the smooth walls. It wasn't until whatever was grabbing him turned a corner that he was able to grab the corner and cling to it with his fingertips. Jim reached him and grabbed his arms, pulling him back.

Around the corner, he could see a short hall that led to a large room, and it was packed with Sagacitans, all of them glowing blue. Assholes.

The telekinetics pulled harder. Jim's boots skidded along the floor. Someone grabbed him by the waist--from the familiar smell of cologne, Bones--and pulled back.

"Down!" Uhura ordered, pressing the button on the grenade.

Spock grabbed Chekov and yanked, muscles straining as he dragged both him and Jim around the corner and to safety. Uhura threw the grenade into the room.

The walls shook, and thankfully dimmed from glowing blue to black stone. Chekov dropped to the floor, taking Jim down with him and ending up on top of him. As soon as he did, Spock let go of him and took three steps back, looking pale. Jim was still holding the little navigator, and felt him trembling.

"You okay?" Jim asked.

"D-Da." Chekov pushed off of him and stood. Any and all terror he was feeling was locked away behind his usual, cheery mask. "Let's not do that again, yes?"

"I approve of that plan." Bones helped Jim to his feet.

Spock held up a hand. "Quiet."

They all obeyed, though Bones looked a little miffed about it. Spock turned back the way they came. "I hear birds."

Spock took point. Jim planted himself right next to Chekov, ready to grab him again in case a fresh batch of telekinetics showed up. The others apparently had the same idea, because Chekov was in the dead center of the group: Jim and Uhura on either side of him, Spock in front, and Sulu and Bones bringing up the rear. Nobody touched him, though. Jim had to fight the urge to put a hand on his shoulder or arm, hold him close and fucking *dare* anyone to try to him away. It didn't take a genius to know that Chekov would not react well to being touched right now.

Spock's ears were right, and they ended up outside. The building was carved into a mountain that went from pitch black to grey to crimson in the growing dawn. It was beautiful. Jim hoped he never saw it again.

"All right, I got yer signal," Scotty announced over the com. "Energizing."

XIII

Spock threw up when they got back to the Enterprise.

Any other day and he would've scolded himself for allowing his emotions to cause such a violent physical reaction. Not today. The physical pain was a sliver of penance.

And he was alone in his quarters. No one else was here to see it. If a tree falls and no one's present, etc.

Spock flushed the toilet and rinsed out his mouth. His stomach was still roiling. Food would not be a good idea for at least two hours. And he needed to meditate. Then he needed to converse with Nyota. And the captain. Possibly Sulu and McCoy, as well. And then Chekov.

Spock changed his clothes and set up his mat, candles, and incense. He wondered what the others were doing now. The debriefing wasn't until next morning and they were all declared off-shift after returning to the Enterprise. Chekov had walked out of the room without a word. Given the rage roiling off of the captain, Jim was in a gymnasium. The others had probably gone off to do their own rituals for after intense missions.

Today's meditation, of course, centered on Ensign Chekov. Spock remembered first seeing him in his classroom and dismissing him entirely. He'd estimated that the boy would leave the Academy within a week. He had been pleasantly surprised when Chekov had approached him after a month on a paper Spock had written a couple of years earlier.

It had been gratifying, having a pupil. One who wanted to be challenged and to learn, enough that they'd run away from home and slept on the streets for weeks to do it, though no one had known that little fact until today. Spock had seen a bit of himself in the boy: the full-blooded Vulcans of his youth had scorned him for his human heritage the same way everyone scorned Chekov for his age. And yet, he persevered. What was better, Chekov never once tried to "break" Spock, to get him to "act more human" (re: smile, laugh, cry, or reveal some other emotion) or made fun of his mixed heritage. He'd sought Spock out purely for his mind and clung to every word he said, unafraid to question something he didn't quite understand or was contradictory to something he'd learned in the past. Spock had been extremely pleased to find Chekov as the Enterprise's navigator when they'd answered Vulcan's distress signal.

Then, to borrow some of Jim's vocabulary, Spock had royally fucked up.

He should have approached Chekov immediately after and explained that he didn't hold him at all accountable for Mother's death. Spock had lost people at his fingertips before, had worked with people in similar situations, so he knew how illogical guilt could weigh you down and cling to the least responsible person. Spock *knew* this. But in the chaos of the Narada Incident, he'd completely forgotten about the young man.

Spock hadn't even connected the dots when Chekov began avoiding him. He'd assumed it was a combination of an increasingly busy schedule and the attitude everyone had taken to him lately, which was a complete and utter lack of knowledge of how to communicate with

him given the recent loss of his planet and family--an understandable attitude, but slightly annoying, especially when Spock needed to work with these people in close quarters--and maybe some teenage angst as well; human adolescents were prone to it. He hadn't considered Chekov's guilt.

Or his fear.

Even today, when the Sagacitans had been dragging him away and the crew had been saving his life, when Spock had put his hands on Chekov to pull him back, he'd gotten the full blast of Chekov's terror, not just of the Sagacitans but of *him*. Even when Spock was helping him, saving his life, he was scared of him. As scared of Spock and he was of Andrei.

How could he stand to be in the same *room* as Spock? Day in and day out? He had to be more insane than Jim!

(Through the overwhelming guilt, there was a trace amount of pride and gratitude and annoyance. Spock couldn't say he condoned Chekov's hacking into his personal files and covertly spying on Nyota, but he could appreciate the boy's compassion. He cared about Nyota, enough to go to such great lengths to look after her. That was...that was very good to know.)

Spock rubbed his hands together and allowed himself a sigh. He had to fix this. He didn't know how, but he had to do it. He could still taste Pavel's fear in the back of his throat.

--

After his fists were numb and cracked open from beating into the punching bags, and his legs were throbbing after pounding on a treadmill, Jim felt like he could hold a steady conversation with another human being.

He showered, changed, and asked the computer where Ensign Chekov was.

As he was leaving the room, he literally ran into a very angry looking pilot.

"Sulu!" Jim frowned. "Something wrong?"

"Obviously," Sulu growled. "May I come in, sir?"

Oh, boy. Jim stepped back and allowed Sulu entrance. "What's wrong?"

Sulu ran a hand over his face. "Well, sir, I think it's safe to say that we all need to have a conversation with Chekov about this."

"Yeah..."

"But before you have yours, I need to ask you something. Why the hell did you lie to him about trusting him?"

Jim frowned. He hadn't lied. He did trust Chekov. He didn't want anyone else being his navigator. Why would anyone think he didn't...

It slammed into him like a freight train. Jim slapped his forehead and groaned. "The timing. I didn't even think about the timing..."

"What timing?" Sulu demanded.

Jim should probably scold him for being insubordinate. Then again, Jim had been a colossal idiot. He decided to let it slide. "You've noticed he sings or hums when he's working, right?"

"Yeah, of course," Sulu said, confused. "We all have. We've been trying to get him to do something public for weeks."

"Did you notice that he does it *only* when he's working?" Jim asked. "When he's working on an equation or a piece of machinery? Never when he's just standing around or relaxing?"

Sulu gave him a weird look, then realization hit. "Oh..."

"Yeah."

"You need to tell him that."

"Where do you think I was heading, lieutenant?"

--

Chekov was, predictably, working. Today was a red shirt instead of gold. He was in Engineering, elbow-deep in a control panel when Jim found him. He wasn't singing. He stiffened at the sound of Jim's footsteps, but didn't look up from his work until all the loose wires were safely tucked away. He pulled his arms out and straightened. "Captain?"

"I didn't know you had a shift down here today," Jim said.

"Nyet. I just...I needed to do something. Sir."

They were both avoiding looking at each other. Jim could only guess that this would go on for a while.

"Listen, Pavel..." Jim started the same time Chekov blurted, "I'm sorry, sir!"

Jim stared at him. "For what?"

Chekov cringed. "For illegally forging a parent's signature to get into Starfleet early. And hacking into the crew's private records. And stabbing a few of them."

Jim barked a laugh. "Okay, first of all, the stabbing was well-deserved. I would've preferred you told me or another officer about being assaulted by a crewmember, but I'm not going to rail on you for acting in self-defense. Second, since Pike knew about the forging and didn't say anything, I'm not going to say anything. And third, there's no proof of the hacking and it wasn't particularly sensitive information, so since you didn't get caught..." Jim shrugged.

Chekov stared at him. "So...you're not mad?"

"No! Why would I be mad at *you*?"

Chekov looked at his shoes and didn't say anything.

The amusement died. Jim ran a hand over his face. He'd known the kid was prone to undeserved guilt and a less than optimal self-confidence, but *jeez*. Jim didn't think he'd ever have to spell it out for him.

"You're not in trouble," Jim said. "You're not going to face any disciplinary action. You're not getting kicked off the ship or the mission. You're still a Starfleet officer. You're still my navigator and part-time engineer, if you want to be."

He waited for his words to sink in. Some of the tension in Chekov's shoulders finally eased.

"Now, having said that," Jim continued, "I get it if you don't want to be on the bridge for a while. Things between you and everyone might get a little...awkward. So if you want, Scotty's been asking to borrow you for an extended period of time. A week or two, to work on a larger project down here."

Chekov nodded. "Da, he told me. I was going to ask you, first."

"If you want to stay down here for that, then permission granted," Jim said. "Buy yourself a little time to work some things out, okay? Maybe talk to the others a bit one-on-one. Sulu nearly chewed my ass out a few minutes ago, so if you could tell him I'm not a dick, that'd be great."

Chekov nodded again, more of that tension draining away. "Da. Thank you, sir."

"Great. I'll let you get back to work." Jim backed away. "Don't overdo it, all right?"

Miracle of miracles, Chekov gave him a small smile. "Yessir."

Jim was five steps away when he remembered. He immediately snapped back around. "Oh, one more thing."

Chekov paused. "Yes?"

"You know you sing or hum while you work, right?"

Chekov stiffened, all the tension right back where it'd started.

Jim held up a pacifying hand. "It's fine. It's not against regulations or anything. If you were bad at it, then we'd say something, but you're not. In fact, we've been trying to get you to do it more often. Me, I try to give you more work to keep you going, but you finish it all so damn fast I have to ask you to do it all again, or double-check it."

Chekov blinked at him.

"If it bothers you, tell me, all right?" Jim pressed. "Not everyone on the bridge is a mind-reader."

"Um...okay? Yessir?"

Jim left him standing there in Engineering. He felt a little better, mostly because he was actively not thinking about how confused Chekov sounded at the idea of asking for a little respect.

XIV

On one hand, Nyota was annoyed.

Normally she would slap anyone who accused her boyfriend of being abusive, and/or would think that she was the type of person to let that kind of thing happen to her.

On the other hand (and this was the hand that won), Nyota was very touched. And concerned. Mostly concerned.

She used her guest access code to enter Spock's room just as he was rolling up the meditation mat. He paused when she came in. "Nyota..."

Nine out of ten times, when he was this nervous, it was adorable. Not this time. Nyota crossed the room and sat on the edge of his bed. She held up two fingers. Spock immediately grasped them with two of his.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

Spock sat on the bed with her, not letting go of her fingers. "It's difficult to say, at the moment. I was rather hoping you would have some advice."

Nyota snorted a laugh. "I have no idea. The closest thing I've ever done to something like this is Gaila..." She drifted off. She remembered that night, when the crew had celebrated Pavel's eighteenth and Gaila had called her in a panic, sobbing and begging for help. The only reason Pavel would've been able to put himself in Gaila's shoes so easily, to know what to do and understand explicitly how she felt after being attacked like that, was if it'd happened to him. She had wanted to ask, because that kind of thing had to have happened before he'd joined the Enterprise or they would've heard about it, which meant it'd happened before he was seventeen, and Nyota wanted to know what kind of a monster would do that to a child so she could hunt them down and make their life a living hell. But Gaila had talked to her before she could.

"He doesn't want to talk about it," Gaila had said. "Trust me, I tried."

Nyota had stared at her. "When did you...?"

"That night we tried to make something happen. He had a flashback."

Nyota had swallowed her anger while Gaila continued: "I've been keeping an eye on him-- this kind of thing is a bit more common on Orion, so I know what to look for. He seems to be doing okay, so don't push it. Wait until he turns down another date to ask him about it, okay?"

Spock squeezed her hand, pulling her back to the present. Nyota squeezed back. "I don't know what to do," she confessed. "But...tomorrow's poker night."

--

The fact that Pavel would be hiding in Engineering for the next week was completely understandable. But it made the bridge too quiet and stilted. And Nyota had to wait until after shift to pin him down.

"Are you coming to poker night?" she asked, after finding him squeezed between two massive pieces of machinery and working on the guts of one of them.

"Um..." Pavel blinked at her. "Really?"

"Well, yeah. It is Wednesday, right?"

"Da..."

"So you'll be there?" Nyota asked, putting on her best smile.

Pavel played with the little wrench in his hands. "If it won't cause any problems..."

"It's not going to cause any problems," Nyota promised. "McCoy can't come, but Gaila and Giotto'll be there. Maybe Marcus, too. See you there?"

Pavel nodded. He even showed up.

The conversation flowed as smoothly as it always had. Nyota waited for a good opportunity; she'd planned exactly what she'd wanted to say, she just needed the right moment.

Gaila was trying her usual diversion tactics. "That looks suspiciously like bed hair, Pavel. Who's the lucky girl?"

"The Enterprise's warp engines," Pavel replied with an eye roll.

"Sounds kinky. Did you stay up all night with her? Put those skilled hands to use?"

"Da, and you'll be grateful when we have to warp out of a Klingon battle." He pushed five chips into the pot. "I'm calling your bluff, Gaila. Full house."

"Flush," she grumbled, watching Pavel take the hefty pile of chips with narrowed eyes. "I'm starting to think McCoy's right about you cheating."

Pavel gave her a child-like smile. "No, you're not. I'm too young and innocent."

Giotto barked a laugh. "Teenage boys are never innocent. Trust me, I've been one."

Nyota thought about the knife in Pavel's pocket and couldn't help but agree. She changed the topic. "Speaking of teenage boys..."

"Are we thinking of a little truth or dare, Nyota?" Gaila asked, shuffling the cards.

"Something like that. Bad dating stories tend to be some of the best."

"No such thing as a bad date with Lieutenant Giotto," he boasted.

Nyota rolled her eyes. "All right then. Worst ex."

"Just one?" Gaila asked, passing out the cards. "And does sex have to be involved?"

"You have to have called them your significant other at some point in time," Nyota said.

"That narrows it down," she muttered.

"Mine's definitely a half-Klingon I dated in college," Giotto said. "Let me tell you, those guys know how to hold a grudge."

"Nuh-uh. Vulcans," Gaila said. "Definitely Vulcans. They freeze you out."

"You dated a Vulcan?"

"Yeah, until she turned out to be a bitch. Sorry, Nyota."

Nyota snorted. "Spock's not a bitch. But I can tell you the story of someone who was, back in high school."

"I thought you only dated guys?"

"I do and did. This was a guy named Joshua Evans. I was sixteen, he was seventeen, and we decided to go out," Nyota explained. "He was charming, and cute, and funny..."

"Football star?" Giotto guessed.

"Hockey. Only missing one tooth. Anyway, I wanted to take it slow, because I'd only ever dated one other person before and rushed into it and it became a huge mess, so this time around I wanted slow and steady. Evans had other ideas. I think he was looking for more of a fuck buddy than a girlfriend, no matter what he said."

"Ugh, I hate those guys," Gaila grumbled. "Know what you want and own it, for god's sake..."

"Anyway," Nyota continued, "We're at his place, hanging out, and he keeps coming onto me. It's been four dates and hasn't gone beyond kissing, exactly what I want, but not what he wants. It dissolves into this argument, and Evans decides that the best way to deal with the situation is to slap me."

Pavel went rigid next to her. Giotto and Gaila didn't seem to notice, they were too busy staring at Nyota. "He didn't," Gaila breathed.

"Oh, he did," Nyota said. "And he immediately went into apology mode, probably hoping for some make-up sex or something. I don't know. I was pissed. So I broke a chair over his head."

Giotto laughed while Gaila sputtered. "It actually *broke*?"

"It was one of those really cheap chairs, and it was old, and they were probably going to throw it out, anyway. But yeah, it was like one of those bad movies where there's a bar fight and chunks of wood go everywhere," Nyota said. "And while Evans was drooling on the floor, I grabbed his car keys and drove myself home. And then he has the nerve to call the cops on *me* for stealing the car."

"You told them the story, right?" Gaila asked.

"Oh, of course. Didn't get so much as a paperclip on my record. Evans, on the other hand, went to juvie for assault, which was only for a few months considering his age. But he didn't get to graduate and last I heard he was working at his aunt's office building." Nyota scratched her forehead. "I'm probably down as his worst ex, too, now that I think about it."

"Let the bastard weep," Giotto declared, tipping his beer to Nyota. "Good for you, lieutenant."

Pavel was looking at Nyota with something akin to relief. She smiled behind her cards. "Who's bet?"

XV

Observation Deck 2 was one of the smallest decks on the ship, tucked away in a corner. Almost nobody came here. Pavel loved it. He came here a couple of days after poker night to read on his PADD, knowing that nobody would bother him.

So he was surprised when Sulu came.

Then again, since he and the rest of the bridge crew had recently been in Pavel's mind, maybe he shouldn't have been so surprised.

"Hey, are you doing anything after 1600 hours tomorrow?" Sulu asked.

"Um...I work in Engineering until 1700 hours," Pavel replied cautiously. "Why?"

"Because my usual sparring partner sprained his ankle and I need a new one."

Pavel blinked at him. "You want to spar with me?"

Sulu shrugged. "We've both gotta stay in practice. And we can probably learn a few things from each other."

"Sulu, you're a fencing master. You'll cream me."

Sulu drooped. "Is that a no?"

Pavel leaned his head back against the couch and sighed. People said he had the puppy-dog eyes of the ship, but Sulu was the real master of guilt-tripping others. "Blades or fists?"

Sulu grinned. "Both?"

--

Sulu did win the sparring session with Pavel. Barely.

"Okay," he huffed, lying flat on his back on the mat. "If that's you empty-handed, I'm not sure how I feel about fighting you armed."

Pavel giggled. He was lying opposite Sulu, their heads inches apart but their feet in opposite directions. Endorphins were rushing through his veins from the exercise, but without the terror of a life-or-death situation. It'd been weird, fighting without the need to survive, knowing that if he lost he wouldn't be dead or seriously injured. There had been a moment where Sulu had pinned him, and panic had raced up Pavel's spine because this was it, but then Sulu had released him and offered his hand to help him up ("Go again?") and that had been more disorienting than any Judo-flip. It'd been fun, just spending time together, learning from each other.

"Why did you choose the sword?" Pavel asked. "Wouldn't phasers make more sense?"

Sulu shrugged. "It looked fun when I was a kid, so I signed up for fencing classes and...I don't know. I just fell in love with it."

"Really?" Pavel thought about that for a moment. He'd never really liked fighting. On the street, in the pits, that had all been survival. Necessity. Doing it for fun? As often as Sulu did to get that good? Pavel just couldn't wrap his head around it. This, right here, was just because Sulu had asked him, and because he liked the idea of having a friend to spend time with.

Sulu must've read something on his face, because he said, very seriously, "It's not like with you, Pavel. I didn't need to know it. Before Enterprise, it was a sport. It was my favorite sport, but it could've been football or soccer. I never thought I'd have to use it in real life. Not until Narada."

"And now?" Pavel asked.

"Now? I'm very glad I learned it. Because I need it to protect my friends." Sulu looked back at the ceiling. "I'm sorry you had to learn all of this the hard way."

"Fighting isn't a sport, Hikaru," Pavel said. "It's not fun. It's not a game. If you keep pretending it's fake, you forget that it's real."

Sulu gave a grim smile. "I don't think we'll be able to forget that in our line of work." He rolled onto his side and got to his feet. He offered a hand to help Pavel up. "Come on. Let's go again."

--

Uhura cornered him in the mess three days after their last poker night. "All right, Pavel, I hate to do this, but you need to talk to Spock."

Pavel froze, his fork halfway to his mouth. He carefully set it back on his pasta. "I don't think I can do that, Lieutenant."

"Nyota," she corrected. "And you can. You've dealt with much more challenging things than having one conversation with a Vulcan."

Pavel tugged at his curls. "It's not...I can't...he..."

Uhura studied him. "You know he's not an abuser."

Pavel couldn't deny that.

"You know he hasn't been physically violent to anyone who isn't Khan or a threat to the crew since the Battle of Vulcan, which both he and Jim have forgiven and forgotten."

"I know," he mumbled.

Uhura tipped her head, meeting his eyes. "He was your mentor for three years. He never raised a hand to you, said a cruel word, or hurt you in any possible way--"

"I know!" Pavel snapped. He hunched his shoulders when a few people stared at them. "I know," he repeated, quietly. "But I just...I did everything but openly accuse him of..."

"And he feels terrible for making you think that way," Uhura replied, putting a hand on Pavel's arm. "He hasn't slept since Sagacita. And he'll never admit it, because it's emotions, but he feels personally guilty for making you as uncomfortable on this ship as you are."

"Then why hasn't he said anything to me?" Pavel challenged.

Uhura raised an eyebrow. "Would you believe him?"

Pavel slumped his shoulders. He shook his head. "Nyet."

She squeezed his arm. "He knows that. If you want to fix this thing between you two--and I know you do--you're going to have to take the first step."

Pavel swallowed. After a minute, he nodded. "Okay."

--

It took Pavel a week to work up the nerve to talk to Spock. He knew he wanted to do it before the project in Engineering was done and he'd have to go back to the bridge. (He wanted to go back. As much as he liked Engineering--the machines, Mr. Scott and Keenser--he missed seeing the stars as he worked, charting courses and graphing maps. And he wanted to do that without keeping half an eye over his shoulder at the science station.)

He didn't spend that week just wringing his hands, though that did happen quite a bit. He did his research. It'd been a year and a half since the Narada incident. Turned out, a Vulcan science officer could publish an awful lot of papers in that time.

A part of Pavel wanted to have this talk in private. In one of the labs, or maybe an observation deck. But there wouldn't be as many people around. And while Pavel intellectually knew that Spock would never hurt him, his gut still clenched just as the mention of his name and his body went into survival mode, ready to grab the knife or run out the door. So he approached Spock during lunch in the mess, when it was crowded with over fifty people; public place, dozens of exits, security nearby, etc.

Spock was sitting alone, as he usually did this time of day, eating a salad and reading from a PADD, probably reports, or lab results, or research. Pavel fortified himself with a deep breath, and dropped onto the seat across from him. "I have a question about a paper you wrote."

Spock paused, then looked up at him. Pavel was pretty sure that if he hadn't kept the Vulcan standards, he would've smiled.

XVI

On the year and a half Leonard McCoy had been stuck on this floating tin can, he'd treated injuries and illnesses for every crew member of the Enterprise.

Well, almost.

"I'm fine," Chekov insisted as he was dragged into medical by Scotty, who looked both miffed and amused. Leonard put down his PADD when he saw the severe third-degree burn and blood covering the boy's left arm.

"Sure ye are, lad," Scotty said. "That's just a wee sunburn."

"All it needs is some cream and bandages," Chekov grumbled.

Leonard tipped his head to one of the biobeds. "Put him over there. I'll take a look."

"Aye, Doc." Scotty deposited Chekov on the bed. "If ye don't get a clean bill o' health from the good doctor here, Keenser'll have my ass, and neither of us wants that."

Chekov sulked on the bed, clutching his burned arm. Leonard pulled Scotty aside. "What happened?"

"One o' the boards overheated and had a wee temper tantrum," Scotty explained.

"A temper tantrum."

"It exploded. The lad was the only one who got hurt. I'm surprised at that, actually; usually he's quicker than a race horse."

Leonard took a second look at Chekov. The kid seemed a bit thinner than usual. Paler, too, with bags under his eyes.

"I'll get him wrapped up," Leonard promised. "But he probably won't be back in Engineering for a while."

"Ack, we've gotten a good use out of 'im. But, uh, he seems a bit distant lately."

"Distant how?"

Scotty shrugged. "Don't really know, to be perfectly honest. He's workin' just fine, better than the others, in fact. But he's not talkin' as much as he used to and Keenser says he hasn't heard him singin' in ages, so somethin's goin' on."

Leonard hummed. "All right. Thanks for bringing him."

"Have fun with him."

Scotty left while Leonard got his tricorder and took some readings. He winced in sympathy. "Well, you've got some bits and pieces of metal and wire in that mess. Might have a bit of nerve damage by the time we're done."

"And when will that be?" Chekov asked hopefully.

"To remove the shrapnel, plus treat you for any possible infection, plus putting you under the dermal regenerator, at least fifteen hours. After that, you're on light duty."

Chekov slumped back in the bed. "No more engineering?"

"Vacation's over. Back to the bridge."

Chekov brightened at that.

"For half-shifts," Leonard ordered. "Until I say otherwise."

He wilted. "Can't I--"

"No."

"You know even know what I was going to--"

"Don't need to know. The answer's no." Leonard shook his head as he grabbed the tools needed to remove the shrapnel. "I swear, everyone on this damn ship has no preservation skills. Jim must be contagious." He hesitated, looking between the tools and Chekov. "The nerves are exposed. That'll make it impossible to give you something for the pain."

Chekov waved it away with his good arm. "It's fine. Just do it."

That's when Leonard remembered: he'd gone over Chekov's medical file after the shit show on Sagacita. Broken bones, dislocated shoulders, and one time had his hand burned because he "accidentally touched the stove." Never mind that it was impossible to get third-degree burns on a stove without someone holding your hand down...

Leonard swallowed his anger and got to work.

Chekov winced and hissed every now and then, but didn't make any other sound or move while Leonard worked. It took almost an hour.

"You're looking tired, kid," Leonard commented near the end. "You sleeping okay?"

"Da," Chekov said.

"Liar."

Chekov glared at him. "It's fine. Nothing I can't handle."

"If you're having nightmares, I can give you a sedative."

Chekov blinked at him.

"You can't take it every night; you need natural sleep with dreams," Leonard continued. "But if you're going too long without a solid eight hours, you might need the boost."

Chekov hesitated. "I...that sounds good, da. Thank you."

"Good. We're going to put you under the regenerator. Given this much skin damage, it'll take about twelve hours, maybe more."

"Can I have a PADD?"

Leonard gave him a warning glare.

"I von't do any vork!" Chekov promised. "I just vant to read something."

Leonard sighed while going to fetch the PADD. "Just as bad as Jim, I swear to god..."

--

Leonard gave Chekov the sedative after the kid's arm was baby pink with new skin, and told him to come in the next morning so he could do a final check-up. When Chekov arrived, he was bright and chipper.

"Got a good night's rest, I see," Leonard said, running a tricorder over the arm.

"Da! Thank you!"

Leonard gave him a look. "You know it's not a permanent solution, kid."

Chekov wilted a little. "I know. But the nightmares only last for a little while after a trigger. They'll be gone in a few more days."

"It might help if you talk to someone about it," Leonard said. "Doesn't have to be me, though I am offering. It can be one of the counselors here, or Gaila, or one of the other crewmembers. It helps to get things off your chest."

Chekov's hands twitched, as if they were itching to hold something (like a knife). "I, um...I don't think that's a very good idea, doctor."

"Pavel," Leonard said quietly, "we don't judge you for what you did to get here. If anything, we respect you a helluva lot more than we did three weeks ago."

Chekov seemed startled by that. Leonard continued: "You're still a kid, and too smart for your own good, but that's what I keep telling everyone on this tin can and nobody seems to listen, so..."

Chekov giggled. Leonard put away the tricorder. "Just think about it. Now, let's get to the bridge. The arm looks good and you look about ready to spontaneously combust if you have to sit still any longer."

Chekov was practically vibrating when they got on the lift. Until Leonard mentioned, "By the way, you're on half-shift today."

"Vhat?!" Chekov demanded, just as the lift doors opened on the bridge. "That's not fair! You said the arm was good."

"So long as you don't undo all my hard work. You're not working a minute past noon. I already cleared it with Jim."

Chekov looked at Jim, utterly betrayed. "Captain!"

Jim winced. "Technically I should've put you on medical leave after Sagacita. I had to pick my battles on this one."

"It's nawigation. I can do it with a hand tied behind my back."

"You'll have both hands tied to your legs if you don't follow medical orders," Leonard threatened, only half kidding. It probably wouldn't take much to convince Spock to nerve-pinch the stubborn l'il upstart. It probably fell in that 2% of all the topics in the universe that they actually agreed on.

Chekov grumbled something that sounded not very nice in Russian (considering how Uhura was biting her lip to keep from laughing, definitely not nice) as he marched to his station, relieving the Gamma shift navigator. Leonard pointed to Chekov and gave his captain an accusing glare. "You see this? This is Jim Kirk Syndrome in full effect."

Jim sputtered. "What'd I do?"

"When I started on this ship, people actually listened to their CMO, followed doctor's orders without question, and overall behaved very well. But the longer you've been in charge, the more thick-skulled your crew gets, and I have to deal with more of *this* stubborn idiocy."

Chekov snorted. "Please, doctor. Giwe me some credit. I was doing stubborn, stupid things *long* before I met Captain Kirk."

"That's not encouraging!"

Jim rubbed his eyes. "Bones, get off the bridge before you have a stroke. Chekov, welcome back, I need you to make an announcement."

Chekov pressed a button and gave the new voice code: "Zero Vashington Grawity Charcoal Norway."

"Access denied."

"Ack. Vhy do you hate my accent?" He tried again. "Zero *Vashington Grawity* Charcoal *Norway*."

"Access granted."

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. "You know, we really should fix that..."

XVII

Two months after the incident on Sagacita...

--

"An uninhabited planet, you said," Bones shouted while he and Jim sprinted through the forest. He had to practically scream to be heard over the war cries slicing the air behind them. "A cake walk, you said! A chance to stretch our legs, you said!"

"Oh, shut up! The scanners read it as uninhabited!" Jim shot back. The aliens didn't have a name yet, because Starfleet hadn't even known they existed until about ten minutes ago when they killed one of the botanists and sent Jim and Bones running. They were mean little fuckers who lived in the dense forest. Apparently their biology was so similar to trees that the scanners had read them as plant life.

Jim pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise! Where are you?!"

"You're still in the dead zone, Captain," Spock said. "Adjust your course 45 degrees west and you'll meet with the other team in .38 miles. We can lock onto your position there."

"Less than half a mile, Bones, come on!" Jim shouted, adjusting course.

"When we get back to the Enterprise, you're a dead man!" Bones promised.

"No, I'm not! You took an oath!"

"I broke it once to bring you back from the dead, I can break it again to put you back!"

Oh, wow. He really was pissed if he was bringing *that* up. Jim considered the bottle of southern bourbon he had stashed in his room that he'd been saving for Bones' birthday. That little present might need to make an early appearance...

The two of them burst into a small clearing. The yellow, blue, and red of the Starfleet uniforms had never been a more welcome sight.

"Captain!" Chekov called. Jim winced. This had been the kid's first official field mission, and Jim had really wanted it to be a milk run, assigning him equipment maintenance. Why was it that every time Jim tried to do something nice for someone, it blew up in his face on an epic level?

"Spock, we're all here," Jim panted into his communicator.

"Ah, shit!" Bones shouted as the white lights wrapped around them. The small army of aliens was on them, shrieking and whooping as they charged with obsidian swords.

Too slow, Jim realized. They were beaming up too slow. Or he was, at least. The rest of the group would make it back to the Enterprise in one piece, but he was closest to the aliens, and

one of them was inches away, sword aimed right at Jim's heart.

Until a butterfly knife sliced through its bark-like face, and whiteness consumed Jim's vision. When he blinked, he was on the Enterprise with the rest of the group, unharmed.

He gave a gusty sigh, feeling a little faint as the adrenaline left him in a rush. "Nice throw, Chekov."

Chekov gave a shy little smile.

--

Nobody seemed to consider the implications of that mission until a few days later, when Nyota realized Chekov hadn't been sleeping.

It'd happened before, of course, to all of them. At one point or another, the entire bridge crew had pulled an all-nighter (or two or three) to get all of their work done on time. Chekov did it more often than most, with the possible exception of Spock, but Vulcans didn't need that much sleep. At first they'd all assumed it was because he took on way too much work for a teenager, juggling navigation and Engineering. After Sagacita, they realized at least half of those all-nighters were due to nightmares.

This one was caused by nightmares.

It was a subtle difference, but it was glaringly obvious to Nyota, who'd spent years studying body language. Anything work-related got Chekov excited, almost overly so, even if he was sleep-deprived. Especially when you added caffeine and the insane amounts of sugar he put in his coffee (six packets a cup, for god's sake...), and he'd hum under his breath while he worked and bounce his leg. But if the sleep-deprivation was from a nightmare, the only similarity was the jitters from his coffee. He didn't sing. He threw himself into his work with more desperation than joy. His right hand would often travel to his pocket.

When Nyota figured it out, she wanted to slap herself.

After their shift, she pulled Pavel aside onto Observation Deck 2, the one nobody used. "I'm sorry about the knife."

Pavel blinked at her, then forced a smile. "It was just a knife."

"Your uncle gave it to you," Nyota pointed out.

The smile slipped. He looked at his shoes. "It doesn't matter. I've been trying to wean myself off of it, anyway."

"Wean yourself?" Nyota echoed.

"It was working, too. Since Sagacita, I only had it with me if I'd had a nightmare, or if I had a bad feeling. Otherwise I..." He shrugged. "I didn't need it."

Nyota stared at him, then smiled. "I'm glad. And I'm sure Jim's glad you brought it with you on that planet."

"Me, too," Pavel muttered.

"But you want it back."

He nodded. "I'm naked without it."

Nyota dipped her head a little, trying to meet his eyes. "Pavel...are you...are you still afraid? Of some of us?" (Of Spock?)

Pavel stared at her. Then exclaimed. "No!"

"Pavel," she warned.

"I'm not scared *of* you--any of you! I'm scared *for* you!"

It was Nyota's turn to stare. "What?"

Pavel pulled at his hair. "The nightmares. That's what you really wanted to talk to me about, right?"

"Well, we have noticed you're not getting much sleep..." she confessed, still trying to work out exactly what he'd meant earlier.

He crossed his arms, hunching over a little, making himself smaller. "They're not about me. Vell, sometimes they are, but those are normal. I can get past them. I *did* get past them. I survived it, but..." He swallowed, his voice barely above a whisper. He wouldn't meet her eyes. "I'll have a nightmare about Andrei, but instead of beating me he's beating you, or Hikaru. Or I'll have the nightmare about Uncle Vadim, when I found him, but it won't be him, it'll be the captain, or Spock, or sometimes McCoy or even Mr. Scott, and...I *know* they're not real, that my subconscious is just playing nasty tricks on me, but it did almost happen--it *has* happened with Kirk, and we were very, very lucky to get him back, but next time we won't be that lucky and--and I don't want to lose anyone else and..."

Nyota grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. Pavel froze for a second before collapsing into her, returning it as he silently sobbed. Nyota rubbed his back, making soothing noises, not caring that her shirt was getting wet. She didn't need the secrets spilled on Sagacita to know that nobody had ever comforted him after a nightmare, or a fight, or a bad day, and tell him that it'd be okay. Vadim might have, at one point, but what was the point when the nightmare was living under the same roof?

"We're going to fix this," she promised when the sobs turned to sniffles. "We'll go down to medical and get some ideas from McCoy, or someone else if you prefer. If you want, you can do some extra hand-to-hand training, get you more comfortable without the knife."

"Doesn't work," he said into her shoulder. "I've been trying that."

Nyota gave a grim smile. "I'm sorry, Pavel, this isn't going to go away overnight. If I could pluck those nightmares from your head, I would, but that's not the way it works."

Pavel stiffened in her arms. "Vhy not?"

Nyota frowned. "Sorry?"

He pulled out, and started pacing. That excited flare was back in his bloodshot eyes, the same one he got any time he had an idea. "Mr. Spock vas telling me about this--I ewen saw it! Wulcans vere getting night terrors from Wulcan's destruction and some of the healers found a vay to stop them...I need to do research." Pavel turned to go, then he paused, turned back to Nyota, and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you!"

Nyota stood frozen on the deck, staring at the space Pavel had been a moment ago. This was either going to be really good or really bad.

XVIII

"Medical to Lab 4. Spock, you there?"

Without looking away from the microscope, Spock pushed the intercom. "Affirmative. Is there an emergency, doctor?"

"No," McCoy grumbled, "But can you come down to medical? I need to talk to you about something."

Spock raised one eyebrow halfway. Since when did Dr. McCoy summon him for a "talk?"

"I'll be there presently," he said.

8.2 minutes later, Spock was standing in McCoy's office. To his surprise, Chekov was there as well, sitting in one of the chairs. One look confirmed that he hadn't been sleeping since his talk with Nyota 35 hours ago, which was worrying to say the least. He was looking down, away from Spock, and wringing his hands. Spock felt a stab of guilt and resignation that he pushed away. He'd thought (hoped) that they'd grown past Chekov's fear of him, and in the last two months the ensign had shown a drastic decrease in nervous tics and "survival mode" behavior when he was around Spock, especially when there were others present, as it was here. Clearly, they weren't quite there yet.

"I have a wery, wery big fawor to ask you, Mr. Spock," Chekov said, still not looking up.

...or perhaps they were, and Chekov was simply nervous about this favor. Human emotions still often eluded Spock; he couldn't tell which was more likely. "Very well," he said cautiously.

McCoy crossed his arms. "I'm going on record to say that this is a bad idea."

Chekov rolled his eyes. "You don't have to like the idea. You just have to say that it might work."

McCoy glared at the two of them. "It *might* work," he bit out.

"Thank you."

"What might work?" Spock pressed. "What medical issue needs my attention?"

McCoy jabbed a finger in Chekov's direction. "He hasn't been able to sleep a wink because he keeps having chronic nightmares, worse than before. The only way we can get him to get a solid eight hours is with a sedative, which is not healthy. Therapy's not really working, either. Or if it is, it's taking too damn long. So, we need a plan C."

"And that plan is...?"

Chekov swallowed and started talking in a rush: "Two weeks ago we talked about Vulcan psychology and how some Vulcan healers found a way to stop nightmares about your planet, and that it's even been tested on some non-Vulgans and worked. So couldn't you please do a mind-meld Mr. Spock?"

Spock raised both his eyebrows and looked between Chekov and McCoy. "...I must point out that those human tests were preliminary, not conclusive."

"That's what I said!" McCoy snapped.

"Other types of mind-melds have been used extensively on other non-Vulgans with no negative side-effects," Chekov pointed out. He turned to Spock. "And I know you can do this because you were one of the scientists helping the healers with this technique. I read your paper on it while researching this."

Spock wasn't sure whether to be proud, impressed, or stop writing scientific papers that Chekov could use against him.

"And I know that mind-melds are personal and serious and newer to be taken lightly," Chekov continued. "Which is why I wouldn't ask if there were any other options."

Spock stared at Chekov, then turned to McCoy. "I need to speak with Ensign Chekov privately."

"You know, this is *my* office," McCoy grumbled, even as he was standing up and leaving. "Don't break anything."

The door closed behind him. Spock sat at the other chair so he wasn't looming over the Russian, who was looking anywhere except Spock's eyes. "Chekov," he began hesitantly, "if this is the way to proceed, and Dr. McCoy--" reluctantly "--approves it, then it may be best to detour to New Vulcan and find an anointed healer."

Chekov's shoulders hunched a little farther, which was impressive; he was already curled so tight Spock didn't think he could possibly make himself smaller without curling into a ball. "You're not comfortable doing it?"

"It's your comfort that I'm concerned about. A mind-meld, no matter how shallow, requires absolute trust from the recipient."

"That's why I'm asking *you* and not some healer I don't know!" Chekov said.

Spock blinked. "Given recent events, I was led to believe that you barely possessed trust in me as a commander, never mind..."

Chekov looked like he wanted to slap himself. He gave a sheepish smile. "Oh, right. That." He giggled. "I'd actually forgotten about that..."

Spock decided not to comment. Clearly the boy was in desperate need of a good night's sleep if he was forgetting such vital pieces of information.

Chekov pulled up his sleeve and held out his arm. "Touch my wrist."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Wulcans receive other people's emotions just by basic contact. See for yourself."

Spock hesitated, then put two fingers on the back of Chekov's wrist.

The exhaustion hit him first, both physical and emotional. Chekov was annoyed with himself, though for what, Spock didn't know. Perhaps for being in this situation, or for not being able to find an alternative solution. He was nervous, though that was rapidly declining. He was excited, the same kind of excitement he got whenever presented with a new scientific inquiry. He was a little embarrassed. And there was also an echo of old guilt; Spock knew exactly what that was about and they would have to fix that soon, and some fresh guilt, probably from asking such a monumental task from Spock.

There was not one drop of fear.

Spock was so surprised he kept the contact going for another 36 seconds just to be certain. He'd calculated that there would be at least some residue of the last year and a half of tiptoeing around each other. But there was nothing.

Chekov beamed at him. "See? I trust you." A new wave of guilt prickled at Spock from the contact. "Sorry it took so long."

Spock removed his hand and gave Chekov a steady look. "You had every reason to avoid trusting me. I should be the one apologizing."

There was a knock on the door, before McCoy poked his head in. "Hate to break it up, lovebirds, but I do have other patients to get to."

Spock ignored the nickname and stood. "I suppose you'll want to monitor Chekov's vitals while we proceed, doctor?"

"Damn right. 2100 hours, don't either of you be late."

--

Spock returned to medical at precisely 2100 hours to find Chekov and McCoy already there in a private room. Chekov was sitting on the biobed, barefoot and in his sleepwear, a purple blanket over his shoulders.

When Spock raised his eyebrow at the blanket, Chekov said indignantly, "Gaila made it for me. It's very comfy."

"I'm surprised you left your teddy bear behind," McCoy commented.

Chekov glared at him. "I don't *have* a teddy bear. Will you stop calling me a child?"

"You're younger than 33, that makes you a child."

At both Chekov and Spock's confused looks, he continued, "And when I turn 35, anyone under the age of 34 will be a child. You see how this works?"

"That's hardly reasonable," Chekov grumbled.

"Deal with it. Okay, Spock, we're all set. I'll be in the next room, so if any disasters happen I'll know."

"We appreciate the support," Spock said dryly.

McCoy muttered something highly inappropriate as he left.

Spock turned to Chekov to find him already curled up on the biobed, his reddish curls sticking out of the blanket. He went around the biobed so he was standing by Chekov's head. The ensign's eyes were closed and he was half-asleep.

He recalled one of the memories from Sagacita, when Chekov forced himself to stay awake because he wouldn't let his guard down so completely in front of other people, even if those people were Nyota and Sulu. Spock wondered if this was a sign that Chekov was indeed beginning to trust people, or if this was simply how exhausted he was.

"Are you certain you wish to continue?" Spock asked, even though he already knew the answer. It wouldn't be right not to offer Chekov one last chance. "There is no shame in saying no."

"Too tired to argue or be embarrassed," Chekov mumbled. "Please keep going."

Spock put his fingers on Chekov's psi points and closed his eyes. "My mind to your mind..."

--

"...my thoughts to your thoughts."

Chekov's mind was in slow-motion, weighed down and sluggish from the lack of sleep. The consciousness was quickly fading to the background the closer to sleep he got, and a dreamscape was slowly coming to view.

"Mr. Spock?"

Spock turned and looked down. Chekov was standing before him, but it wasn't the Enterprise's navigator. This was Pavel Chekov, age 12, a boy who'd never stepped foot outside his home village. Spock had thought Chekov was slim as a teenager; he had been borderline malnourished as a child. He was tugging long sleeves down to his wrists, trying to hide the bruises. Fresh marks from large fingers peaked out of the collar of the shirt, from when Andrei had grabbed him by the front.

Chekov slouched. "So it's you again."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Again?"

"Normally I don't see you until after you're dead, and I find you in Uncle Wadim's house."

That threw Spock completely off-guard. In the distance he could see Vadim's house building itself in the dreamscape. He held up his hand and froze it, keeping it away. He knelt in front of Chekov. "Do you...often dream about the rest of the crew?"

Chekov nodded, looking down. "It's better when I'm the one getting hurt."

...so the nightmares had been getting worse because they now involved members of the crew getting hurt, rather than Chekov himself. Spock found himself incredibly touched, humbled, and angry. If he ever met Andrei Chekov, they were going to have words.

He pushed his anger aside for now. "What are your other common dreams?"

"Brazil," Chekov whispered. He shook himself. "But that one's not so bad. I know it already happened and I beat it. Sometimes I can go back to sleep."

"Any others?"

He swallowed and wouldn't meet Spock's eyes. "Amanda Greyson."

...ah.

Spock reached out and took both of Chekov's hands in his own, startling him. He was already in the boy's mind, touch was minor issue now. "You had no fault in Mother's death. None."

"I wasn't fast enough--"

"No one could've been. She was too close to the ground."

"But--"

"Nero is the only one responsible for killing her."

"I know, but--"

"And if anyone deserves secondary blame, then it's me, and my father, and the other Vulcan elders for letting her stand too close to the edge."

Chekov glared at him.

"I should've kept her away from the edge," Spock continued, bringing up all the of the what-ifs he himself had dealt with immediately after Vulcan's destruction. "I should've gone to the surface sooner. I should've been standing in her place and died inste--"

"Stop!" Chekov ordered. "That's not fair!"

"It rarely is," Spock said quietly. He knew Chekov wasn't going to immediately let go of the guilt and blame. He'd been carrying it for too long, and that was Spock's fault. He should've

stopped this before it began. But Spock could start poking holes through it, making cracks in the armor until Chekov finally let go of the burden himself.

"I don't blame you for Mother's death," Spock said. "Neither would she."

Chekov's lower lip trembled. Spock didn't say anything, didn't do anything other than continue to hold the boy's hands while he fell apart and tried to put himself back together.

The dreamscape pressed around them, impatient. Spock had been keeping them on the edge for too long. He squeezed Chekov's hands before letting him go and stood. "After you ran away from Russia, you traveled," Spock said. "I've heard that humans often have favorites. What was yours?"

Chekov wiped his eyes and stared at him, uncomprehending, until he brightened. "India!"

Immediately the dreamscape went from dark and foggy to a bustling street in Madurai. Chekov's appearance also changed: he was in well-worn and slightly dirty traveling clothes, a backpack over his shoulder and a sleeping bag under his arm. The bruises were gone. He grabbed Spock by the sleeve and tugged him along. "I actually got lost while I was here," he said. "It was kind of scary, especially since nobody here spoke my languages. But then I found this little restaurant that a woman owned and she spoke a little Russian, and she helped me find the shuttle and gave me some free food, which was absolutely *delicious*..."

Spock waited until Chekov paused to catch his breath before he interrupted. This memory was much better than the alternatives, but it was dangerous to pull directly from real life. One could confuse dreams with reality. And there was a decent chance that something nightmare-worthy had happened here, as well. In short, reliving memories in dreams was simply a bad idea. So Spock asked: "Were you to come back here after the five-year mission, what would you do?"

Chekov paused. His appearance changed again, to his present state. He was eighteen, the sleeping bag gone, the backpack replaced with a duffel bag. He was wearing civilian clothing: a t-shirt and jeans. "Hmmm...well, I'd stay in this little hotel I saw that looked like a bed and breakfast..."

The scene changed, the noisy street replaced by a quiet hotel room with dizzying speed, except the hotel didn't have a roof, so they could clearly see the stars. Spock slowly began backing out while the dream took its own form, other people beginning to appear. By the time Anjun Nayak--a famed Indian chef--was attempting to teach Chekov and Ishmael from *Moby Dick* how to make a complicated vegetarian dish, Spock pulled out of Chekov's mind completely.

McCoy was checking the screens when Spock came back and pulled his fingers away from Chekov's face. "Any luck?" the doctor asked.

Spock almost smiled. "I believe so."

XIX

Four to eight months after the incident on Sagacita...

--

"Chekov!" Jim called, catching him at the observation deck. "You have a new access code for the bridge."

Chekov put down the PADD he'd been reading and took the one Jim was holding out for him. He read the words on the screen, blinked, and read them again before looking up. "Captain?"

Jim smirked. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to find five Russian words that don't have any W's or V's?"

"I...no. Thank you."

--

"We've got a debriefing right after shift today," Jim announced from his seat on the bridge, "So I need everyone in the conference room by 1800 hours."

There was a round of "Aye, sirs," before Sulu turned to Chekov. "Do you want to move our session to tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's poker night," Chekov pointed out. "Day after?"

"Session?" Jim echoed.

"Sparring," Chekov said, giving Jim a sweet smile. "Would you like to join us, Captain? I think it would be very entertaining for you to spar with Sulu."

"Entertaining for *you*," Sulu countered. "That's a mean thing to do to anyone, never mind the Captain."

"Yeah, Sulu's kicked my ass a few times before, anyway," Jim said. "But I might win against Chekov."

Chekov gave him an amused look while Sulu hissed. "Yeah...Captain, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but..."

"Excuse me? Are you dissing me while I'm in The Chair?"

"I'm simply being realistic," Sulu said.

"You're goading him," Spock corrected.

"That, too."

"All right, fine," Jim decided. "Wanna settle this, Chekov?"

Chekov grinned. "I would love to, Captain."

--

Jim lost. Badly.

He didn't mind as much as he probably should have.

--

One time a poker night coincided with a joint mission with another ship. The table was full of fresh players.

"Dr. Richards, you mentioned you had a volcanic stone from Vulcan in your quarters?" Pavel asked about halfway through.

Richards, a geologist from the other starship, nodded. "Uh-huh, got it about five years ago, last time I was there. What of it?"

"How much would you say it's worth?"

Richards paused, and grinned. "You want me to bet my Vulcan keepsake?"

"Uh-huh."

The other players, including Nyota and McCoy, looked back and forth between the two, intrigued.

"I'd say it's worth about five hundred credits," Richards said.

"For a hunk of rock?" McCoy snorted.

"Yup. And I'll bet it on this hand."

Pavel counted his chips and pushed them into the pot. "I'll call."

"Full house," Richards said, revealing his cards.

"Straight flush."

Richards sputtered while McCoy laughed. "Told you. He's a little cheater."

--

Spock found the volcanic rock on the bed in his quarters the next morning. No one was around to see him smile, so it didn't count.

--

"Dammit, Jim, I told you I didn't want any noise on my birthday!" Leonard growled as soon as he stomped onto the bridge, holding a party hat in his hand.

"Hey, Chapel's cake smelled absolutely divine when she was making it, so count your blessings," Jim snarked back.

"You'd better make this up to me with good alcohol."

"I will, I will," Jim grumbled.

Later that day, near the end of Leonard's shift, there was a knock on the door of his office. "Yeah?"

Chekov poked his head in, holding a large covered bowl that smelled divine. He gave a shy smile. "I didn't know how to make peach cobbler, so I made stroganoff."

Leonard glared at him. Chekov shrugged and put the bowl on his desk. "See you tomorrow."

"Smartass," Leonard grumbled as Chekov walked out.

--

Pavel's nightmares were down to maybe once every two weeks or so. He usually spent those nights on the observation deck, working on equations or blueprints.

There were a few times, though, when he went to Spock.

The anniversary of Uncle Vadim's death, for instance. He didn't even have to ask Spock; the commander pulled him aside after their shift and asked if he required assistance getting some sleep that night.

Pavel's nineteenth birthday was another. A day that had before been marked with punches, insults, and the death of his mother, and then later commemorated with nightmares, was instead celebrated by Nyota trying her hand at cooking Indian food, beating Kirk and McCoy at darts, brainstorming with Mr. Scott and Keenser on some improvements on the warp thrusters, delicious flower-flavored cupcakes from Sulu, and a kiss from Gaila in front of everyone because they all enjoyed making Pavel blush, the sadists. Spock's "birthday gift" to Pavel was a nightmare-free sleep.

Away Missions Gone Wrong that ended with one of the bridge crew landing in medical was almost always a trigger. Unless Pavel was the one getting hurt, then it was fine. Well, not *fine*, but at least he didn't get nightmares. When it was Spock, Pavel just didn't sleep.

One time, Pavel surprised himself--and everyone else--when he fell asleep in the officers' lounge. It'd started with Kirk and Spock playing chess, and then Pavel, who hadn't sleep in over 30 hours because he'd been hit by a stroke of genius, came to run some ideas by Spock, but it'd involved some biology--both alien and plant--so they'd called McCoy and Sulu and it'd quickly degenerated into an (amusing) argument between those two and Spock, and Nyota showed up because Spock was supposed to do something with her but they'd all lost

track of time but that was okay, because Jim had made a joke about that and Nyota had shot him down spectacularly.

And at some point during the snarking, debating, and laughing, Pavel's body had reminded him that he was, indeed, sleep-deprived and really needed to rest his eyes for a while. He'd already told his idea to Spock and written down some notes, so he wasn't going to forget anything. He was curled up on the corner of the couch, watching Kirk tell Sulu about something he did at the Academy while McCoy loudly corrected him on all of his "exaggerations."

At some point, Pavel fell asleep.

He woke to Nyota gently shaking him awake. "Hey. You okay?"

Pavel groaned. "Can't talk. Sleeping."

"You can't sleep in the officers' lounge, kiddo," McCoy said. He sounded suspiciously amused.

"Can."

"Janitor crew probably won't like it." Sulu gently put his arm under Pavel's chest and tugged him upright. "Come on. Let's get you to bed."

"M not a kid."

Sulu steered him toward the lift. "No, you're not. You're just a really sleepy navigator."

"Want some help, Sulu?" Kirk asked.

"Nah, I got it. I think I'm gonna follow his example, I'm beat. See you tomorrow."

Before the lift doors closed, Pavel heard Kirk say to someone else, "Holy shit, he fell asleep."

--

They did a shore leave at Yorktown, the largest and most advanced starbase of the Federation, after a nasty run-in with some Klingons.

All the Starfleet officers got their own rooms. Hikaru knocked on Pavel's door and came in before he could answer. "Hey, Kirk wants to take us out to eat if you're inter--"

He froze, his heart stuck in his throat. The furniture had been moved. Hikaru knew because all the rooms had the same furniture in roughly the same place, and this room had been changed to make the way clear to all exits. Pavel was walking from the couch to the bathroom, counting under his breath. He paused when he saw Hikaru. "Where?"

"Um...I don't know. I've never been there, but McCoy has...are you okay?"

"Da, I'm fine," Pavel said, and he genuinely meant it. "Vhat time are ve leawing?"

"...hour and a half from now. See you there?"

Pavel beamed at him. "Uh-huh!"

"Great." Hikaru turned tail and left. He closed himself in his room and breathed.

It was so easy to forget. When Pavel had fallen asleep in the lounge, Hikaru had thought Pavel had worked past it all. He had the odd nightmare now and then, but otherwise...

But no. Maybe on the Enterprise, and definitely around people he trusted. But there were still so much fear and mistrust, so many gut-wrenching stories and survival instincts that Pavel thought was completely normal. And maybe that would never go away.

But maybe Hikaru could take away just a small bit of it.

XX

Chapter Notes

Last chapter. But don't worry, there's a sequel! :)

"Sulu, if you want the kid to feel safe, why not give him a phaser instead of keeping him in the Dark Ages?" McCoy asked.

"He's better with an edge weapon," Hikaru said. "I mean, he *can* use a phaser, but he's much better with a knife."

"The odds of us finding a butterfly knife such as what Vadim Chekov gave him is 1.3%," Spock said. "Production of that kind of blade stopped forty-three years ago. To find one that would still be functional is .4%."

"It doesn't have to be a butterfly knife. It was a gift from someone who loved and cared about him and who wanted him to be able to protect himself. *That's* what's important," Hikaru said, getting impatient. He did not think it would be this hard to convince them to do this.

"Wait, you lost me," Kirk said. They were all (sans Pavel) in his quarters in Yorktown, and he was lounging on the loveseat in the corner. "Why exactly do we need to do this?"

Hikaru hesitated. Then, "I saw Pavel mapping his room today."

There was silence. Nyota cleared her throat. "As in 'ten steps from the couch to the front door, twelve steps from the kitchen to the bathroom'..."

"Exactly."

McCoy sputtered. "What the hell's gonna happen to us in *Yorktown*, for god's sake?! If anything wrong does happen, it's not going to be solved with a knife. It's involve a lack of oxygen and sudden expulsion to space--"

"Save the gloom and doom speech, Bones," Jim sighed. "Considering how many times Chekov's saved someone's sorry ass with a knife..."

"Get him a Swiss army knife," McCoy grumbled. "He'll actually be able to use that one."

Hikaru snorted. "For fighting? That thing has no balance and the blade can barely cut through butter."

"That's because it's a *tool* designed to fix things. I'm a doctor, not a weapons dealer, dammit!"

"Well, who says we only have to give him one?" Nyota asked.

They all looked at her. "Huh?"

She rolled her eyes. "There's five of us. This doesn't have to be collective."

Jim grinned. "I love you."

"Still dating Spock, Kirk."

"It is logical to give him several options to work with," Spock said.

McCoy rolled his eyes and sighed. "Much as I hate to agree with the hobgoblin..."

"Great!" Kirk stood. "Sulu, at what point does a knife count as a sword?"

Hikaru frowned. "Huh?"

"What's the limit? Ten inches? Twelve?"

"You're seriously asking about *limits*?" McCoy gasped, almost reaching for a tricorder.

"Well, I don't want to give him something he can't use!" Kirk paused. "Unless you've been teaching him how to use the sword..."

Hikaru shook his head, smiling. "He doesn't like swords. There's too much space needed and they're harder to hide. If you can hold the handle with both hands, or if the blade is more than eighteen inches, then it's considered a sword."

Kirk's eyes popped and he grinned. "Eighteen inches?!"

"Jesus, Sulu, you couldn't have underscored it just a little?" McCoy growled.

Hikaru was man enough to admit to himself that this might have been a bad idea.

--

"Hey, Gaila," Nyota said in her communicator. "Can you get Pavel out of his room tomorrow?"

--

Pavel was pleasantly surprised when, two days before the end of shore leave, Gaila showed up in his room and insisted on exploring Yorktown with him.

"Your nerd equations will still be there tomorrow," she said, dragging him away from his PADD. "I heard that downtown has the best smoothies this side of the galaxy, and I desperately need to test that theory."

They ended up going to half a dozen museums and unique architectural wonders all over Yorktown. It'd been ages since Pavel and Gaila had had a minute to talk to each other and

catch up. Pavel was stunned to learn that Gaila had a steady boyfriend. "And no, you don't need to stab him," she said. "That would be very rude."

Pavel made a sad face. "How else am I supposed to do the showel talk?"

"The only person in my life allowed to do any kind of stabbing these days is my boyfriend," Gaila said with a wink.

"Oh, nyet, change topic now, please."

"Okay, okay, fine. How about this: I heard you had to be a witness at a trial, or something?"

Pavel nodded. "Vhen I vas in foster care during the Academy, I liwed with a family called the Shermans. Vell, I say 'liwed vith,' but I vas actually liwing at the Academy. They paid for the house, the food in the house, and some of my textbooks. That's all they did."

Gaila stared at him. "You're not seriously saying they were neglectful, are you?"

"That's exactly vhat they vere. But don't vorry, I vas already at the Academy so I didn't care," Pavel quickly assured. "But they vere responsible for some other kids. Someone told the authorities a few weeks ago and they vanted my testimony, so I did it here by streaming."

"Well, I hope they rot in prison for the rest of their lives," Gaila growled, sucking down her smoothie.

Pavel honestly didn't care either way. The Shermans were nothing to him, which was why he'd been so surprised when, a few weeks ago, a friend of Hikaru's who worked in foster care asked for his testimony. Hikaru himself had tipped them off, and had gone on a tangent when Pavel had asked about it. Hikaru had been downright *vicious*. A part of Pavel wanted to stick him in a room with Andrei just to see what would happen.

"Let's go to Erskine Tower," Pavel suggested, pulling away from the darker thoughts. "I hear it's the biggest tourist attraction..."

Three hours later they went back to their rooms. Pavel yawned, ready to go to bed, when he stepped over the threshold and froze.

Someone had been here.

It wasn't anything specific that gave it away, more instinct than anything else. A wisp of perfume or cologne that Pavel didn't use, a tiny shift in the furniture from someone bumping into it, he didn't know. But he was immediately on high alert.

He stepped into the bedroom and saw five packages on the bed.

He checked the room twice to make sure there were no other nasty surprises or people lurking around, before locking the door and approaching the bed.

He recognized the handwriting on one of them and immediately relaxed. Then wondered why Uhura was giving him a present.

Pavel opened the little box from her and stared. It was a little neck knife. The blade was only two inches long and designed to go in the sheath that hung from one's neck, but the sheath could also be put on the belt, and it was tiny enough that it would be hidden beneath his shirt.

Pavel picked up the next package at random and laughed at the note on it. "Don't poke your eye out. --McCoy."

It was a Swiss army knife. Pavel would never be able to throw it with any kind of accuracy or use it in a fight. But the tools stuffed into the tiny handle would be very useful in Engineering.

He didn't even need a note to know that the giant bowie knife had come from Kirk. The man was incapable of subtly. Pavel wondered where the heck he could put this when he saw the sheath that came with it, which could attach to his boot.

The Vulcan dagger had to have come from Spock's personal collection, which made Pavel's eyes water a little. The blade was four inches and came with a soft leather sheath. Pavel could put it on his belt, or possibly get a strap and slip it up his arm.

Sulu's present was his favorite: six kunai throwing knives in an arm sheath. Perfectly balanced and absolutely beautiful.

These all must've cost a fortune. Pavel found himself torn: he wanted to stash these away and treasure them forever, and he wanted to give them back because it was too much.

His com chirped. Pavel swallowed the lump in his throat and answered. "Da? This is Chekov."

It was Kirk. "Don't even think about returning them, or insisting you can't take them, or any of that self-sacrificing bullshit Bones says is contagious from me but actually isn't. They're yours, we meant them as a gift."

Pavel stared at the communicator. "I thought Spock was the telepath?"

"No, we saw you come in from my room."

Pavel closed the communicator and ran out into the hall. He pounded on Kirk's door until he answered. "All right, all right, we'll do this in pers--oof!"

Pavel rammed into Kirk's chest and hugged him. Kirk chuckled and hugged him back. Somewhere deeper in the room, McCoy snorted. "I'll take a pass on that. Pretend I'm Vulcan."

"That is unlikely to ever be successful, Doctor," Spock said dryly.

Hikaru and Nyota were also there, so Pavel hugged both of them, too. And he did McCoy while he sputtered protests just because.

"Try not to stab anyone important," Kirk said. "The paperwork on that is god awful."

Pavel giggled. "I von't. I...thank you."

--

Two days back on the Enterprise, Hikaru and Kirk were on the lift heading to the gym for a sparring session.

"Considering the fact that you keep getting into fights with people three times stronger than you, maybe you should do this with Spock," Hikaru suggested.

"Nah, he's been a bit touchy on that ever since the whole almost-strangling-me-on-the-bridge thing."

"Still?"

"I know, right! Besides, you're a badass sword ninja. That's awesome."

Hikaru snorted and shook his head. "Don't call an Asian a ninja, Captain. Even if they are one."

"Okay, then you're a badass sword-wielding fighter...guy," he finished lamely.

"Thanks, Captain," Hikaru said flatly as the lift doors opened.

They both paused. It was the officers' gym, so few people ever used it. Which was probably why Pavel was there.

He was using one of the replicated Styrofoam dummies for target practice. Three of the throwing knives Hikaru had given him were embedded in its head. Pavel threw another. Four knives in the head. Five. Six. Then he pulled a Vulcan dagger from seemingly nowhere and chucked that, too. It shaved off the dummy's left ear before it clattered to the floor. Pavel swore in frustration.

"Yeah, Pavel, only six out of seven. That's awful," Kirk teased. "It's not like he'd be dead by the third knife in his eyeball."

"The dagger is very unique in its weight and form, which makes it more difficult to throw accurately," Pavel said, as if Kirk had been serious. He pulled the knives out of the dummy and slipped them in the sheath on his left forearm, which was hidden under his sleeve, a fact that Hikaru had honestly not considered when he got that and was now genuinely terrified.

"Where exactly were you keeping that dagger?" Hikaru asked while Pavel retrieved said dagger.

Pavel looked up at him, then pulled down his other sleeve to reveal the dagger's sheath strapped to his right forearm.

Hikaru turned to Kirk. "You sure you want to be taking lessons from me?"

"Yeah, you're a lot less terrifying," Kirk agreed.

Pavel beamed at them. "Don't tell anyone."

--

Pavel called the house he grew up in just that: a house. He called Andrei Chekov his biological father, and nothing more.

The Shermans were people who had occasionally given him money while he'd been in the Academy because the state ordered it. The Academy itself was where Pavel perfected the art of appearing normal, in addition to learning science.

But the Enterprise? That, without a doubt, was Pavel's home. His first home. And its crew was his family.

END

End Notes

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