

Four Friendships and a Team

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1: Sarda and Piper

The first time they met was the first year at the academy: genetics class, lab partners by random draw.

Sarda had no particular hopes for his partner—there were only six other Vulcans in his year at all, and none in this class. Most of his classmates were human, though he'd also felt the presence of a Betazoid. While he had no particular desire to be partnered with a human, it would at least be preferable to working closely with an unshielded telepath.

“You and you,” said a bored-looking professor’s assistant, and his new human partner smiled grimly in his general direction.

“I hope you’re better at this than I am,” she said, even before telling him her name. “This is way outside my field.”

Sarda suppressed a sigh of resigned annoyance.

“Then why are you in the class?”

The woman shrugged. “I wanted to try my hand at something off the beaten path.”

Sarda's brow furrowed. "It is not logical to attempt a course that you know is beyond you."

The human shrugged again. "I won't know if it is until I try." She held up her hand in an aborted-handshake-turned-wave. "Piper," she said.

Sarda clasped his hands behind his back and nodded stiffly. "Sarda."

Piper grinned. "Another one-namer, I guess? I always heard Vulcans were. I've also always heard you guys were good at science, so I hope that one's also true."

"I also possess a clan designation," said Sarda, not particularly wishing to talk about that, "which is similar to a last name. However, as a Vulcan, I am likely to be approximately thirty-seven percent better at fields involving large-scale models, statistics, and memorization than denizen of Earth."

"I'm not from Earth," said Piper offhandedly, "but point taken. I'd take offence, but I'm probably going to suck at this class anyway."

Sarda couldn't quite suppress a frown. He had taken the class because it was a basic course for any of the science paths, and he had carefully considered all of his options before selecting his course schedule. He could not fathom deliberately choosing a course he would likely fail at when he did not have to.

"...illogical," was all he managed out loud.

“Yeah, well, I value a breadth of experience. I’m command track—I figure at least a passing familiarity with as many fields as possible is a prerequisite.”

“It is not a requirement.”

“I require it,” she said more sharply. “I’m not going to run into a situation where I have to rely *entirely* on other people to even understand it. Not if I can help it.”

Sarda opened if mouth to indicate that that was *not* something she could control, but the instructor interrupted by calling the class to order.

It should have been a painful class, assigned partners with an utterly illogical human who even admitted that the class was not her strength, but somehow it was not. At the very least, she did not attempt to touch him, a courtesy all too many students either were ignorant of or chose to ignore. Beyond that, she did try. She made a habit of coming early to the lab to work on the problems that puzzled her, and Sarda (who made a habit of coming early to everything) often found himself explaining concepts that the instructor had not adequately covered.

“Oh,” said Piper, and her eyes lit up as she finally understood. “Sarda, I swear you’re the only reason I have a C average in this class. Have I thanked you lately for being a lifesaver?”

“Approximately one point two times a week,” said Sarda, but he found that the unnecessary repetition was not as much of an annoyance as it should have been.

Piper laughed. “Good.”

Time slipped by again, and they finished out the class—Piper with a hard-won C, Sarda with an unsurprising A.

“Thanks for everything,” said Piper on the last day of class. “It’s been good being partners with you. Sorry I couldn’t bring more to the mix.”

Sarda nodded slightly. “It has been an...enlightening experience.”

Piper grinned. “Till next time, then.”

2: Scanner and Sarda

Scanner shoved his last suitcase in the general direction of the bed and glanced around.

“Is that everything?” said his mother. “Are you sure you’ll be all right here? Have you got everything you’ll need?”

Scanner grinned. “I’m *fine*, mom.”

“Do you have your class schedule?” asked his father. “Be sure and find out where everything is ahead of time.”

“I know, I know,” said Scanner, and pouted. “Don’t you guys *trust* me?”

“Not on your life,” said his sister with a snort. “Who’s going to remind you to stop and eat or sleep when you get stuck tinkering with your toys for hours on end?”

Scanner raised a hand in protest, and then dropped it again.

“...well...”

His sister rounded on his new roommate, who was neatly unpacking his luggage on his side of the room and ignoring them all. “You,” she said, pointing. “My little brother’s new roommate.”

The Vulcan looked up in what was probably confusion.

“Keep an eye on him, will you? Make sure he doesn’t do anything *too* idiotic? Remind him that he’s actually biological, and not mechanical like his toys?”

“Spoken like a biologist,” muttered Scanner. “I’ll be *fine*, sis!”

His sister glared at him before glancing back at the Vulcan. “I’m serious,” she insisted. “I’m sure in return he could whip you up a tachyon circuit out of staplers and a toothbrush or something—”

“...that doesn’t even begin to...”

“—but could you please just watch out for him a little?”

The Vulcan blinked, probably unsure what to make of her. Scanner certainly was.

“...very well,” he said.

Scanner’s sister smiled and nodded sharply. “My work here is done,” she said breezily. “He’ll be fine. Let’s get out of here.”

Scanner's father laughed, and his mother grinned. "Well, if you're sure you have everything," she said. "Come here then." She rounded him up in a bone-crushing hug.

"Hey," complained Scanner. "Lana's gonna have to switch to med school if you're not careful here!"

"Like *that* would ever happen," scoffed Lana. "Besides, I just like cutting stuff up, not putting it back together. On second thought..."

Scanner wiggled out of his mother's grip. "Nah, you'd never want to mess up this adorable face," he said with a grin. Lana made as if to punch him, but he ducked and pulled her into a hug. "C'mere, sis. You know you'll miss me."

"Not on your life," said Lana, but her throat wasn't quite open all the way.

"We all will," said his father with a mock glare, and then both he and Scanner's mother wrapped their arms around the pair in an utterly stifling display of familial affection.

When the door finally shut on the last set of "be sure and call often" and "see you over the holidays" and "try not to get yourself *too* killed", Scanner collapsed on the bed.

"Ow," he said, and sat up again, rubbing his head where he'd hit it on the suitcase, only to stop when he found his new Vulcan roommate staring at him.

"Oh, right," he said, and flopped back to his feet and crossing the room in two bounds. "Judd Sandage," he said,

grabbing the Vulcan's hand and pumping it. "But everybody calls me Scanner, pretty much."

"Sarda," said the Vulcan, disentangling his hand and clasping it behind his back.

"Sorry about Lana," said Scanner, hopping back over to his side of the room and throwing open suitcases. "She gets a little overprotective sometimes."

"Your family seems to care a great deal about you."

Scanner paused with a pair of pants in one hand and a book of circuit design in the other.

"Well...yeah," he said, glancing back. "I mean we get on each other's nerves something fierce, but we're still *family*. I mean..." He shook his head. "Doesn't your family care about you?"

Sarda turned and neatly finished folding an undershirt and placing it in the drawer with the others.

"They were not pleased with my decision to attend the academy."

Scanner frowned. "Why?"

"They wished me to attend the Vulcan Science Academy," said Sarda. "But they did not disown me over it."

"They *didn't disown you*?" said Scanner. "Is that seriously the best you can say for them? I mean, Dad was hoping I'd go to his old school, but he wanted me to go where I'd be happy."

Sarda raised an eyebrow halfway. “My family did not see the logic in choosing Star Fleet over Vulcan.”

Sarda snorted. “Logic, smogic. You obviously had your reasons.” He grinned. “Sounds like what you really need is a new family. Want mine? You can have ’em, cheap.”

Sarda frowned, and Scanner waved a hand dismissively. “Seriously, though, roommates are always welcome at my house. I think we’ve had at least one at every major holiday since my brother first started college. So if you’d like to experience Earth culture first hand, you’ve got a home away from home.”

Sarda regarded him for a moment.

“I am sure that will be unnecessary,” he said, and picked up another shirt to fold. “But the offer is...appreciated.”

“Any time,” said Scanner easily, and dumped a duffle bag into a convenient drawer.

Scanner hummed as he aligned another wire in the Feinberger scanner he was building from scratch.

“Judd.”

“Mm-hmm?” said Scanner, not really paying attention.

“Judd.”

Scanner blinked and finally looked up. “Points?” he said. “What’s up?”

“You have not consumed any form of nourishment for nine point seven hours, and it is already well after twenty-four hundred hours.”

Scanner waved a hand. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

“That is what you said five hours ago.”

Scanner blinked. “Nah, couldn’t have been...”

Sarda held out a bowl of soup. “I do not know if it will be to your taste, but the cafeteria was closing.”

“Huh,” said Scanner, taking the bowl and pushing back from his project. “I coulda sworn I still had time to get there.” He tasted a spoonful. “Not bad. Thanks, Points. You really didn’t have to.”

Sarda raised an eyebrow. “I did give my word.”

Scanner laughed. “Technically so,” he admitted. “But I guess that means I owe you one. Or more than one. I don’t know about locating tachyons with toothbrushes, or whatever cockanany thing my sister promised you, but I could teach you how to hack just about any sensor system ever designed, if you care to know, from radio receivers to graviton locators. Whadya say?”

“I am unsure when such information would be useful—”

Scanner waved a hand. “*Starfleet*, Points. When is such information *not* going to be useful?”

“...surprisingly logical, if less than articulate.”

Scanner grinned. “Thanks. I think. So, radio receivers are actually real simple to put together...”

3: Merete and Scanner

Merete held the paper a little more tightly than even San Francisco’s wind demanded and made her way inside the small building it had directed her toward.

A little bell rang as she pulled open the door labeled *Mike’s Mixed Martial Arts* and stepped in.

“Hello,” called a human man from the desk. “Welcome to Mike’s. I’m Mike.”

“Hello,” said Merete softly. “I called earlier?”

Mike smiled. “Miss AndrusTaurus, was it?”

Merete nodded. “I’d called about Judo lessons.”

Mike nodded and stood up. “Of course,” he said. “Like I said, let me give you a demonstration, see if it’s the right fit for you.” Raising his voice a little, he called, “Hey, Sandage! Got a minute?”

“Comin’,” Merete heard, followed by a thump.

“Ow,” complained a young man, rubbing his head as he came up. “Yeah, Mike? I hope it was worth breaking my concentration!”

“Sorry,” said Merete.

The young man frowned. “Uh... you didn’t do anythin’.”

“This is Merete AndrusTaurus,” said Mike. “She’s here to see about Judo lessons, and I thought you’d appreciate helping with a demonstration.”

His eyes lit up. “Sure thing, boss!” He shook Merete’s hand. “Scanner,” he said. “I mean...Judd Sandage, but even I tend to forget that.”

Mike shook his head. “Come on,” he said. “Try not to scare off your new sparring partner.” He turned to Merete. “If you wouldn’t mind taking off your shoes, let’s get to the mat.”

The cool mat gave more than she expected beneath her feet, but she stepped on, determined to see this through.

“All right,” said Mike. “Now, Sandage here is going to play a slow-motion attacker, and I’ll show you how to stop him...”

Merete hadn’t expected to like it. She knew she had to try, but she hadn’t expected to actually enjoy herself enough to continue.

Taking a step forward, she grasped Scanner’s arm and twisted, and Scanner fell obligingly to the floor.

“Yeesh,” he said, rubbing his shoulder in mock pain. “I’m beginning to think my mom was right to make me promise to keep up with this. You’ll be the death of me yet.”

Merete stepped back and shook her head. “You could have stopped me.”

Scanner shrugged and stood back up. “Maybe today,” he said easily, “but probably not by next month. Wanna try it again?”

Merete re-formed her stance and waited. Scanner swung at her again, and she reached forward to throw him again.

“So, what are you doing here?” asked Scanner, picking himself up again. “It didn’t exactly seem like your idea at first. You doing this for family, too?”

Merete stopped moving.

“...I guess you could say that,” she said, barely audibly.

Scanner, who had been getting ready to try the attack again, stopped and dropped his arm.

“Aw man,” he complained. “Am I the only one around here without family trouble?”

Merete shook her head slowly. “My family is dead,” she said as matter-of-factly as she could manage.

“...oh,” said Scanner. “I’m...sorry.”

Merete shook her head again. “It was a long time ago,” she said. “It’s fine. But I suppose you could still say I’m doing this for them.”

“To honor their memory?”

Merete’s lips tightened. “So what happened to them never happens to anyone again.” She took up her defensive stance again, not really wanting to say more. “Let’s do this.”

“Fair enough,” said Scanner, and once again swung a too-slow fist at her.

4: Merete and Sarda

Merete changed out of her practice clothes and back into a uniform she'd finally gained confidence in, and headed off to her shift at the student medical services.

She was in a bit of an odd situation at the academy—she was already a doctor on Altair IV, but only for Palkeo Est biology. So now, she was adding a degree in xenomedicine that she would need for medical service with Star Fleet and simultaneously working on an internship with the student medical services that was allowing her to get experiences with species other than her own.

She had only just finished adding Vulcans to the list of species she was certified to treat, so when Sarda came to the clinic with a splitting headache, Merete was assigned to him.

The Vulcan's eyes were closed when she came in, and Merete took the short version.

“I'm Merete AndrusTaurus,” she introduced herself, pulling out her medical scanner. “What seems to be the problem?”

She'd already read his file, of course, but it was much better to hear it firsthand.

“Headaches,” said the Vulcan without opening his eyes. “Light sensitivity and visual distortions. Nausea.”

Merete frowned. “Sounds like a migraine,” she said, and entered the symptoms on her computer screen. Xenomedicine was such a huge field that, no matter how skilled the physician, computer backup was a given.

“That is not a bad translation,” muttered Sarda,

“Have you had these symptoms before?”

“Once. My roommate insisted that I come in this time.” He finally opened his eyes a little. His pupils were more dilated than they should have been.

Merete leaned in for a better look and held up her hand. “May I?” she asked, wanting to hold his eye open for a better look.

Sarda flinched visibly. “I would rather you did not,” he said.

Merete nodded and drew back. She could use the scanner instead.

“Are you also experiencing difficulty with telepathic control?” asked Merete, entering her guess to the computer even before receiving a response.

Sarda frowned slightly. “...yes,” he admitted.

Merete nodded. “That’s not uncommon. I can find you a mild telepathic blocker if you like, in addition to something for the other symptoms.”

Sarda closed his eyes again. “You have worked with telepaths before?” he asked.

“A few,” said Merete. Her last module had been on Betazoids, and she had treated several with telepathic components to their complaints. Though the telepathic blocker she’d used with them was contraindicated for Vulcans, so...

She went to the specialized replicator in the wall and touched the mobile computer to it. The machine whirred and faded to show two hypos and two small bottles of pills.

“Here,” she said, holding up a hypo. “This should help with the pain and visual symptoms.” She held it out in offer, and Sarda turned his arm toward her. “At the moment, controlling the symptoms is about all I can do,” she said, pressing the hypo to his arm, careful not to touch him, “but if they keep occurring, try to identify the trigger, and maybe there will be more I can do. Did you also want the blocker?”

“Please,” said Sarda, and Merete held that one to his arm as well and pressed the button that sprayed the substance straight into his bloodstream.

“Those should both work quickly,” she said, and noted that his eyes were already slightly less dilated. She turned for the two bottles she’d also ordered up. “Keep these in case it happens again,” she said, holding them out so he could take them without touching her. “Like I said, try to identify the trigger—if it’s an autoimmune response, I

should be able to deactivate it. I could also run a detailed scan to try and pinpoint it, but that would be difficult and time-consuming. The easiest way is still process of elimination, but I can order the scan if you'd prefer."

Sarda took the pills and nodded. "That will not be necessary," he said.

Merete smiled. "All right," she said. "Was there anything else you wanted to mention?"

Sarda shook his head. "That was all. Thank you, Healer."

Merete looked aside. "I don't know how accurate the term is, but you're certainly welcome." With a nod, she turned and left the room.

It wasn't until several days later that Merete found out that Sarda had formally requested to have her listed as his primary physician.

"You must have made quite the impression," said her coworker. "Vulcans usually seem to think that it's illogical to have a preference among equally qualified providers."

Merete frowned. "I'm far from the most well-versed in Vulcan physiology," she pointed out.

Her co-worker shrugged. "Like I said, a hell of an impression."

But it wasn't until Sarda came back with a list of substances that had triggered his Vulcan migraines that she had a chance to ask.

"Hmm," said Merete, glancing over the list. "Looks like it's some sort of tannin. That will make it much easier to identify." She smiled. "Thank you. I trust the pills kept you from being in too much misery?"

Sarda nodded. "They were much appreciated."

"Good," said Merete. "Let me just set up this scan. It should only take a few minutes, and then we should be able to re-set that trigger." She tapped the last key and let the computer start its job, and then sat down and considered for a moment.

"...may I ask," she said finally, "why you had me listed as your primary physician?"

Sarda frowned slightly. "Do you wish not to be?"

Merete shook her head. "Of course I don't mind," she said. "It's just...I'm far from the most qualified to treat Vulcans. There are doctors here who wouldn't have to rely so heavily on the computer to back them up—why didn't you pick one of them?"

Sarda was silent for a long moment, and Merete began to regret asking. "You don't have to answer," she said, looking at the readout on her computer. "It's not important."

"...that is why," said Sarda.

Merete frowned.

“You do not make demands,” elaborated Sarda. “You listen. You asked permission before touching me, and when I did not give it, you did not. You considered that I might not wish to take medication that would affect my mind, and respected my wishes in that as well.”

Merete frowned. “Of course,” she said. “You *asked* me not to touch you. And I’m not a telepath, so how could I demand that you take something I couldn’t even experience?”

Sarda shook his head. “Such consideration is not as common as you seem to think.”

Merete was quiet for a long moment, frowning softly.

“...and that’s worth having a doctor who has to rely on computer backup?”

“It is more than sufficient.”

Merete was silent again, and then the computer beeped for attention.

“Ah, there it is,” she said. “Let’s see if we can’t get your immune system to stop overreacting.” The replicator shimmered and left her another hypo. “If I may?” she asked, and waited for Sarda’s nod of affirmation before pressing the hypo against his arm.

The computer banks were more than adequate, of course, but that night she added an extra book on Vulcan physiology to her stack.

5: Piper and Everyone

“Hard to port!”

Sarda slammed the ship into a hard turn as I locked the *Banana Republic's* tractor beams on a convenient moon to starboard, sling-shotting us around in the direction we needed to go.

Scanner made a sound of dismay. “Come *on*,” he implored. “OI’ Rex isn’t built for this! I only just got her back up to snuff!” He pulled the cover off a newly-smoking access panel and started crossing wires in a dizzying display of the talent for jury-rigging that I kept forgetting he had.

I grinned ferally. “She’s seen worse,” I said. “She’ll be fine.”

How had we gotten ourselves into this one? Easy. Captain Kirk.

Well, more specifically, he’d gotten *me* into it. I’d pulled everyone else in.

“So,” Captain Kirk had said to me with that not-quite-grin that meant I was in for a world of pain. “How would you like to participate in the second annual Small-Ship Field Maneuvers?”

I blinked in the beat that had followed, and then half a groan escaped me.

“...is this going to be another Outlast?” I asked, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

Kirk’s eyebrows had bobbed in my general direction, and I wished I’d bitten my tongue. “You were in the Outlast?” he said, and I nearly groaned again.

“Me and Sarda.”

His eyebrows only rose further. “This should be old hat to you, then. How long did you last?”

I bit my tongue again. “...we won,” I admitted out of the side of my mouth.

Kirk’s grin widened. “Excellent,” he said, and I was sure I’d signed my own death warrant. “I believe your ship should be out of repairs by now. You can have up to five crew, yourself included. Make your choices and report back to me at eight hundred hours tomorrow morning.”

“Piper? Piper!”

My name jerked me back to the present. “What?”

Merete shook her head very slightly. “I’ve found the next beacon,” she said, her voice louder than usual to carry over the noise, but still managing to sound like an oasis of calm.

“Let’s get on it, then.”

I trooped away from Kirk’s meeting with a half-contained sigh. This was *not* how I’d planned to spend my shore

leave. Though, on the bright side, at least this time I would get to pick my crew.

The doors to my quarters on the *Enterprise* swished open, and I walked in and glanced around. Sarda wasn't there, but Merete was.

"Hey," said Merete, glancing up from her book.

My lips twitched, and I sat down.

"So, Merete..." I said.

She frowned and glanced up. "...dare I ask?"

My twitching lips widened into a grin. "How would you like to come with me on a little thing Kirk assigned me to?"

Merete looked at me, and then closed her book and sat up.

"What sort of *little thing*?" she said suspiciously.

I shrugged. "As near as I can tell, it's a cross between a space race and a scavenger hunt. We'll take the *Banana Republic* and try to find whatever it is they've hidden before every other team."

"Who's we?"

I shrugged. "You," I said. "Sarda. Scanner. Me." Up to five, Kirk had said.

Merete did a funny thing with her eyebrows. "Have you asked them yet?"

I waved a hand. "Details," I said. I could con them into it.

Merete shook her head. “Why do you want me?” she said.

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, unless you’re planning on getting injured in the process, I’m not sure what help I would be.”

I frowned harder. “Well,” I said, “I supposed I could always plan to bash my head open on a console if it would make you feel better. But Captain Kirk told me to ask whoever I wanted on my team, and...” I raised my hands helplessly. “...*you’re on my team.*”

Merete still didn’t look convinced.

“Come on,” I said. “Where would your friends be without you? I think I’ve lost track of the number of times that you’re the only thing that kept us from killing each other.”

Merete looked away. “Like that time I held a phaser to your head?” she said softly.

I shrugged. “Set to stun,” I reminded her. “And under the circumstances, I really can’t blame you. But the point is, friendships are forged in fire, and I guess that even includes threatening to fire a phaser.”

Merete was quiet for a long moment.

“All right,” she said finally. “When is this event?”

I grinned and stood up. “Tomorrow at eight,” I said. “See you then.”

“Where’d that beacon go?” I asked, peering into the secondary scanners while I wasn’t needed on tractors.

“There,” said Merete. “In the middle of that gas cloud.”

“Aw man,” complained Scanner. “Right between two gravity generators. Did they *have* to make the race course more difficult?”

“Apparently,” I said.

“I believe,” said Sarda, “that you once told me that you know how to... ‘hack graviton locators’. Perhaps you were correct that that would be a useful skill set.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it, Points,” said Scanner. “Just gimme a minute...”

It wasn’t usually hard to locate Scanner—if he wasn’t on shift, in his quarters, or in the mess, he was in one of the sensor bank playing around with upgrades that probably weren’t remotely regulation.

Also, he tended to sing while he worked.

I heard a rousing chorus of “Cotton-Eye Joe” as I approached what had to be the correct sensor bank.

“Oh, Scanner,” I called in the sweetest voice I could manage, which was somewhere between copper and vinegar.

“Where did he come from, where did he go, where did he come from, cotton-eye jooooooooe...yeah, Piper?”

I leaned over the railing of the slightly raised deck where I stood and looked down to where he was lying on his back working on some inconveniently-located circuit.

“If I were looking for a sensor expert, do you know where I might be able to find one?”

Scanner had lifted his head to look at me, but at that, he dropped it back with a groan.

“Nope,” he said. “Never heard of such a thing. Ask yer Vulcan.”

“Oh, I plan to,” I said, and then scowled. “‘My Vulcan?’”

“You know what I mean,” said Scanner, and rolled out from under the console. “Whadya need me for, anyway?”

I grinned and explained the idea.

“Oh *hells* no! I had plans for my shore leave!”

I gestured around the room. “Did it involve this?”

Scanner looked sidelong. “Maybe.”

“Come on,” I wheedled. Or maybe demanded. “You know you’ll have fun...”

Scanner shook his head. “If I don’t get enough sensor time, I turn into a pumpkin!” he complained.

“You’ll still have some shore leave left afterward,” I pointed out, wondering what kind of animal a pumpkin was. “And I’m sure you’ll have plenty of fun taking ‘Ol Rex’ on a scavenger hunt.”

Scanner shook his head. “More like wild goose chase,” he muttered. “How long did you say this would take?”

I grinned. I had him. “A day or so.”

Scanner scowled and then looked regretfully around the room. “Or so?” He sighed. “All right. You win, ma’am.”

“You won’t regret it,” I lied.

Scanner snorted. “I’ve heard *that* one before, Pipes.”

I rolled my eyes. “See you in the morning,” I said, and left him to his tinkering.

“Got it!” said Scanner, and did something I didn’t even begin to understand to the computer screen. Damn, I really needed to brush up on my sensor tech. Again.

Scanner shook his head. “Dang,” he said. “That’s gonna be a tight fit. You up for this, Points?”

“I shall endeavor to avoid both Scylla and Charybdis,” said Sarda, in a voice I could only describe as ‘dry’.

“...what?” said Scanner, and I was glad he did, because that meant I didn’t have to.

“Mythical sea monsters,” supplied Merete, “from the Greek Odyssey.”

Scanner and I exchanged a look. Leave it to the two non-humans to know something like that.

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “Need me to hold on to anything?”

“Not at the moment,” said Sarda. “But should I be drawn into a gravity pocket—”

“Which you won’t,” I said.

“—you may have to draw us out,” he said, ignoring my interruption. “Merete, are you ready to get the code?”

“Yes,” said Merete, concentrating on her screen.

“Heading in, mark four-one.”

Two down, one to go.

I stood outside the door the flight deck, waiting for Sarda to come out. Granted, I hadn’t actually checked to see if he was in there, but he was. This was the only place he could find privacy to meditate, and damned if I was going to interrupt him. This time.

I was suddenly seized with nervousness. What if he said no? What if, having an actual choice in the matter, he decided the entire thing was an illogical waste of time? What if I had to go in with only part of my team? What if —

The door slid open.

Sarda didn’t even blink when he saw me. Either his controls were massively better than they had been—which was undoubtedly true—or else he’d been expecting me.

“You were waiting for me?” he asked.

He was wearing his Vulcan meditation robes, and he finally looked comfortable in them. For once, he really did seem to have that elegant calm that Vulcans were supposed to have, rather than that cold barrier he’d had when I first met him.

“Yeah,” I said, pushing away from the wall I’d been leaning on and pushing away the what-ifs with it. “I was wondering if you’d be willing to come with us this thing Captain Kirk’s making me do.”

“What sort of thing?”

For the third time, I explained what I’d been told, and then bit my lip and waited for him to say how illogical the whole prospect was. I’d have to come up with some way to entice him to join us, because no *way* was I shipping out without him.

Sarda raised his eyebrows slightly. “That sounds rather like a space-borne Outlast.”

I nodded. “That’s what I said to Kirk, who *apparently* had previously been unaware that we’d been in the Outlast. If I’d only held my tongue, I *might* have gotten out of this.”

I could almost feel the smile Sarda suppressed, but he kept his poker face. Damn, he’d gotten good.

“Unlikely,” he said, “given the Captain’s precedent. Although I must admit doubt that you truly wished to avoid this match.”

I looked aside with a scowl. I'd *thought* I wanted to avoid it...but my blood was already buzzing with adrenaline at the prospect.

"It would have been easier..." I offered half-heartedly.

Both Sarda's eyebrows rose at that.

"I have never known you to take the easy way out," he said, "even when it was the more logical path."

That was it. That was my cue to come up with some logical reason he couldn't deny. I opened my mouth, hoping something brilliant would come out, but Sarda beat me to the punch.

"Eight hundred hours, then. I will be there."

My mouth stayed open a second, and then I snapped it shut and grinned. "Sarda," I said, "have I mentioned recently that you're a lifesaver?"

"It has been approximately three point seven years since you have made that claim," said Sarda.

"Oops," I said. "Well, it never stopped being true. Literally, a time or two."

"Likewise," said Sarda.

I grinned, showing teeth. "Tomorrow, then. Let's show 'em what we're made of."

"Got it," said Merete.

“Pulling out,” said Sarda.

“There’s another,” called Merete. “Mark ten-six. Right past the Rigellian freighter.”

I gritted my teeth. Almost directly behind us.

“Isn’t that the last one we need?” asked Scanner.

“Affirmative,” answered Sarda.

“Can we get to it?” I asked.

Scanner and Sarda glanced at each other. That meant yes, but they weren’t entirely sure they wanted me to know.

“How?” I demanded.

“Another slingshot maneuver,” answered Sarda.

“Yeah, that would shoot us *backwards*,” said Scanner.

“Do you have any idea how hard that would be?”

Actually, I did. That seminar I’d taken on *The Helm and Spaceborne Weaponry* had already come in handy a time or two.

“We can do it,” I said.

Scanner sighed. “Sorry, Rex,” he said.

“You will have to use both tractor beams,” said Sarda, “to slow our forward momentum and create the ‘slingshot’.”

“On it,” I said, and attacked the control board. “Ready?”

“Ready,” he confirmed.

“I’m not,” complained Scanner, but I ignored him.

“And...now!”

The lights on the ship dimmed and the artificial gravity generators faltered and we were thrown backwards towards our goal.

I imagined the surprised faces on the Rigellian freighter as we hurtled past them, and gloried in it. No *way* we were going to lose. Not with this team.

Sarda struggled with the controls. “Merete,” he called, “can you get the beacon?”

“Trying,” said Merete without looking up.

“They’re gaining on us!” yelled Scanner.

“What?” I said, whirling around. Sure enough, the freighter was barreling towards us. “What do they think they’re doing?!”

“Precisely what you just did,” pointed out Sarda without inflection.

“Yeah, but they’re not us!” I complained. “They’re gonna get themselves killed!”

Scanner made a choking sound.

“Coming around,” said Sarda, and the ship finally responded to his hands on the controls without rattling like a bucket of old nails. “Passing by again. Merete?”

Merete frowned. “Almost.”

“Come on,” I said, skin tingling. “We’ve got to get it before them!”

We were neck and neck with the other ship, and we were on the outside of the curve.

“Come on...” I muttered, willing Sarda to edge just a little closer, willing Scanner’s fixes to give us just a little more power, willing Merete to snag it first...

The other ship drew forward just a little, and then Sarda’s reflexes yanked us off course just before the other ship when reeling straight into a stray gravity pocket.

“Got it!” called Merete.

I whooped, and didn’t even care.

“Hells yes! Let’s get out of here!”

Merete frowned. “Piper, the other ship was damaged by the gravity well. They might be in trouble.”

I grinned. “What do you say, guys? Do we have time for a mission of mercy on our way to the finish line?”

“Well, since you actually didn’t burn out the tractors this time...sure thing,” said Scanner.

“What about you, Sarda? Can you handle two ships and still get us there in time?”

Sarda didn’t look away from the controls, but I could still sense his amusement.

“Since you would otherwise leave them to their fate, I suppose I shall have to.”

I grinned wider.

“Excellent,” I said. “Let’s show ‘em what we can do.”

Around me, sounds flew along with sparks from complaining control panels as my crew worked together to get both ships out of here.

My crew. My friends.

And I knew I could never have hoped for better.