

Scraps of Untainted Sky

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Scraps of Untainted Sky

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Summary

It should have been an easy enough diplomatic mission for the first year of the Enterprise: respond to the call of a planet entering the space age. But when an engineer forces her way onboard, the crew is forced to confront the realities of the quiet planet. For refugee Kanna, the idea of personhood is worth risking her life, but the boundaries of freedom, love, and expression prove more difficult to navigate than she had imagined.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

The world had never hummed before – not her world, anyway. Kanna thought she knew every sound the complex made: the woosh of climate control in the walls, the miniscule crackle of algae generating power. She knew what creatures came to her thin window and when, and even the occasional jump of the transports.

The hum was none of those. It was too subtle to hear, barely strong enough to vibrate through her bones, but it was there, all around her. Either she was dead, or her hare-brained scheme had worked, but she could not seem to open her eyes to find out which. She floated.

All at once, she was aware of her lungs and the hundreds of tender muscles surrounding them. They spasmed, and she felt rather than heard herself cough. The oxygen kick started her body, and her legs and arms began firing afferent nerves, but she could only wait as they banged against metal and told her about the cold air – she had no control. The interminable hum grew louder.

Sympathetic first, *Kanna thought, trying to calm herself.* Parasympathetic follows: internal knowledge, outside sense, vision, hearing. Muscle control. Then intersympathetic.

A lifetime of heartbeats. Then oxygen surging her through with glucose and adrenaline. The hum reached a fever pitch, blaring painfully. Electrical static against her skin resolved into clear bodies, people surging around her. Their language, when her ears adjusted, bubbled from their mouths like ball bearings.

“Please,” she gasped. Agony shot through her head as she opened her eyes. Red-covered figures loomed, their hands on their hips. She made out the blurred outline of their captain and touched her forehead, gesturing towards him. “Please.” He did not understand her request to connect to him, only kept on burbling, thinking they had spoken his language this whole time. Kanna gasped in response, gaped. Was it meant to hurt so much to breathe after beaming through space, if that’s what she had done? No body like hers had ever done such a thing. She tried to remember what had caused her to slam the button and came up with a handful of blood. Her efferent nerves were barely working, much less her intersympathetic system. She could not communicate beyond useless verbal speech.

Kanna wondered where he was – the one who healed her, standing so close that she could have fallen straight into his mind if she hadn’t be forbidden.

“Please,” she managed again. Darkness was beginning to dart at the edges of her vision. She thought of his fingers brushing her jaw, the discomfort, how strange it had been to be touched. The captain reached for her, his hand outstretched, and she lost herself in the black.

First watch had just ended when the alert blared, sending senior officers sprinting from their rec to their departments. Scotty swore and threw his fork down in disgust.

“One bloody meal.” The first six months of the Enterprise’s mission had hardly been smooth sailing, and the alarm was the end to hopes that their first real diplomatic mission to an uncontacted planet had gone without a hitch.

Spock was already on the way to the bridge where he found Sulu in command. “Security incident on the freight transporter, sir,” he reported. “Looks like someone planet side transported onboard unexpectedly. Captain’s there now with security.”

Spock didn’t bother to hide his surprise. “Via freight?”

“Yes sir. Medical is already on scene.”

“Any comms?”

“Nothing sir,” the lieutenant at the station reported. “All channels are open, including visual.”

Spock settled in the captain’s seat and called into the engineering room to nothing but a terse ‘copy’. It wasn’t logical for both him and Jim to be in the transporter room, he reminded himself. It made much more sense to keep one of the two most experienced officers on the bridge. Even if that just meant waiting. And waiting.

“Orbit status?” He said after a long while. Over the central channel, someone called an all clear and the alarm switched off.

“Holding steady sir.”

The minutes ticked by. On the screen, Gwydion-F turned slowly beneath them. The deep maroon of anthocyanins marbled the continents, cut through by vast deserts and hot shallow seas. The idea of anyone planet-side forcing a transport made him frown. The inhabitants were still in the most basic stages of space exploration. They had local transports, but the Enterprise was orbiting well above their thousand-mile range.

But he had read about something recently – in fact, he and Scotty had been discussing the possibility only last week. A recent article in the journal *Frontier* had demonstrated the electron signature that remained in the atmosphere after a transport, dependent on the force of the magnetic field to disperse in much the same way jet streams feathered in winds. The natural implication was a trace, and Scotty had mentioned that he’d not been able to stop thinking about the idea.

He had a suspicion, but it was nothing without proof.

Even running full blast, the scrubbers could never quite rid medical of its astringent scent. Christine Chapel was vicious with the med techs – it wasn't unheard of for her to make them re-sanitize four times if she felt they had been sloppy.

But now Spock could detect the hot, metallic stench of gore. A trail of pinkish Gwydion blood lead to the closed door of the operating room. The captain and Scott stood by McCoy's desk, leaning over a small black box.

"Ah, Spock, good." The captain waved him over. "What do you make of this?"

"I can hardly believe it," Scott exclaimed. "I was telling the captain we were only just on this ourselves. What a coincidence!"

Spock turned the box over in his hand. It was around five centimetres square, too large to be worn on a wrist, but small enough for a pocket. The back popped off to reveal a mess of shoddily soldered boards and batteries. He poked at the blue-glowing algae battery and rolled a wire between his fingers. Even that small movement pulled it from the node. He nodded.

"You don't recognise it?"

"I mean, the casing's the same. I'm only upset that she got to it before I could. Could use some refinement of course but-"

Spock cut him off with a raised eyebrow. "I don't think she beat you to it."

"Will someone tell me what's happening?" Kirk snapped. His irritation got the better of him when he felt helpless, and nothing made him feel more helpless than someone having knowledge about his ship that he didn't.

Spock moved to the small observation window and peered through. McCoy glanced up, his expression unreadable behind the surgical mask, then turned back to the deep wound he was gluing up. Spock traced up the side, following the line of the sanitary drapes, to the patient's face. Despite the sedation, her eyes flickered wildly under her lids.

"Mr Scott and I met this young woman planet side," Spock said. "Once as an aide while touring the generator, and while we were out collecting samples. The second time, she had this."

"Aye, it looked similar on the outside," Scotty said again. "But I know what I helped her build inside, and it was nothing so powerful as this."

"I believe that to be true," Spock admitted. "Captain, I think its possible that she pulled the plans from Scott's mind psychically. With such skill that neither of us knew she was there."

Chapter End Notes

The title is taken from EM Forrester's wonderful short story "The Machine Stops".

Chapter 2

1500 Enterprise Time

Gwydion-F was not unlike Vulcan: more humid, but with the strong sun reflecting off the tan stone, it was no surprise the locals went around draped entirely in drab fabrics, hiding everything but their heterochromatic eyes. Anyone Spock tried to speak to stared doggedly past his shoulder – odd given that the council had been so welcoming.

Their guide gave the merest twitch of their features after one of Spock's attempts. "You will notice we do not speak much, Visitor Spock," they said. "To speak is to risk contaminating with emotions and disrupt society."

"How do you communicate without speaking?" Scotty asked. "Seems to me that being hesitant to speak could risk potential dangers becoming disasters." The council had spoken readily – perhaps too much. They were loquacious and fluent – and incredibly coy about the source of their translators, only emphatic that they disapproved of computerized earpieces.

The guide tilted their head. "You are about to see our generators. There you will see the workers communicate perfectly well without words."

"I never understood why Bones complained about your lack of emotions, Spock," Scotty muttered, "but I think I'm beginning to understand."

"It is an impressive lack of display," Spock agreed. "I would love to know if it is practice or biology."

As they wound away from the council chamber, the windows peppering the drab walls were replaced with deep sconces of glowing algae that mimicked the planet's harsh daylight, but even these eventually fell away. When they reached a certain distance, even the outer covering of the walls fell away; Spock could feel Scotty practically vibrating with the urge to stop and deconstruct the systems now laid bare.

The generator for the government compound was housed beneath an acre of intelligent plexiglass panels, currently dark against the midday sun. A manager led them between tanks of algae growing like carpets. A eutrophic stench, like a river in a heat wave, pervaded the still atmosphere, so that Spock fought the urge to cover his nose.

"Maybe we should allow our people to sit to work," Scott quipped, indicating the panels only a foot or so above the ground. "Might improve my moral if they stop whinging to me."

The woman sitting cross-legged before the panel glanced up, then scooted to the side as the manager indicated her.

"It is redirecting the electron flow from the tanks," the manager explained. "You can see how the old system-"

"I think you mean *she* or *they*," Spock cut in. "Standard does not refer to sentient people as *it*. An easy mistake to make."

The woman's gaze shot up from the tools she was lining up. She couldn't see the brittle, toothy smile being offered by the manager, but Spock took from the imperceptible tightening around her eyes that it was more alike an ape's aggressive gesturing than a Terran grin.

"Indeed. As I was saying, you can see..." He went on explaining the intricacies of the system: silicon derived tubes in place of wires, repeaters to minimize resistance. He had reached the output when he trailed off. "This isn't correct." He turned to the woman. She continued to straighten her tools, now arranged by size in painfully accurate rows. Spock wondered why she did not place them in the case next to her, whose straps were clearly meant to hold them. "Speak up for our visitors," the manager ordered. Irritation, the first Spock had heard on the planet, crept into the manager's voice.

The woman placed her hands on her knees and then looked up slowly. Her eyes - one blue, one bright hazel – gave her a distractedly lopsided look, so that Spock found himself focusing on her deep philtrum, positioned between her thin nose and wide mouth.

"Wishing that the honoured visitors pardon me for inconsideration." Her voice was low and quiet, but unwavering. "I only sought to remind superior manager that the implementation of new micro-nutrients last month necessitated the update of the nodes."

"Yes. I know that."

"Superior manager kindly guided me to improvise a temporary measure for the increased output while the factory manufactures the pieces." Scotty fought back a frown so hard that his jaw ached. Blank faced and obsequious as she was, he knew what she said amounted to *'I'm not sure why you don't remember or even understand this essential repair I had to do with limited resources because you couldn't be fucked to place orders on time.'* It was a message he'd delivered to superiors many times over the course of his career. Spock too did not like the way she kept her eyes on the ground, or how the other workers in the area had suddenly made themselves scarce.

"The old system will handle the output until the new nodes arrive," the manager replied, "while your improvisation is a hazard to safety and consistency. Remove it."

"Respectfully, if I remove it-"

"Do it."

The woman shifted slightly, hesitating. Around them, the pressure in the room thickened. The manager stared at her bowed head so violently, Scotty wouldn't have been surprised if it burst. After a long moment, she flinched, selected one of the smallest tools from her arsenal and set to work, stripping back a node from what he assumed were grounding wires and extra capacity. Scotty admired the way her hands moved the delicate parts. Each piece she removed was set by her range of tools, and every few moments she dropped her hands to think carefully about her next move so that she worked even more quickly for lack of errors. The whole process took only a few minutes, and when she was done,

she sat back and placed the wrench back in its array.

The manager clicked his teeth. "Remove yourself. I will tell the workroom your tools have been checked."

The manager led them away, apologising for the incident. It took less than five minutes for the panel to give way in mass of sparking silicon, and as the lights above their heads sputtered out, Scotty couldn't help but grin in the darkness. And neither he nor Spock mentioned that when they had looked back, they'd seen the woman slipping the smallest of the pre-counted wrenches into her pocket.

Kirk looked unimpressed by their story. "So, you're saying she's a mid-level worker with a less than ideal boss. I fail to see the connection."

"A lack of connection does not indicate a lack of motivation," Spock added. "I admit that if the council wanted to attack us, they would be better off using someone we had not met. But we seem to have motivation for her acting against their best interest."

"As a disgruntled employee?"

"Well, there's a bit more to it than that," Scotty admitted.

Chapter 3

01:30 Enterprise Time

Night came swiftly, but not with the chill associated with deserts. The humid air trapped the heat long after the sun went down, so that even after a tiring day of meetings and cross-species interaction Scotty found himself tossing on the palate he'd been given. Beyond the fabric door screen, he could hear the buzzing wings of some nocturnal creature as it bounced against the lights. Finally, he threw off his blankets, dressed, made sure his communicator was still securely around his wrist, and went out into the night.

It didn't surprise him that Spock was also awake, sitting on a patch of lichen-tussock in the courtyard. The lights of the rooms of the rest of the landing party were dark, but the Vulcan did not require as much sleep, preferring instead to meditate. When he heard Scotty approach, he opened his eyes.

"If you are nervous about sleeping, I can assure you I will hear anyone and sound the alarm well before they approach."

Scotty waved his hand. "I think even I could take one of them, small as they are. No, that's not my worry. What are your impressions, Spock?"

"Such conversations are best reserved for when we are back aboard," Spock replied with a cocked eyebrow.

Scott sighed. "Aye. I thought you'd say that." He stuck his hands in his pockets. "I think I'll go for a wee mooch. If I'm not back in an hour, send out the search party, will you?"

Spock stood and stretched. "I'll come with you. I'd quite like to see if I can capture any nocturnal specimens for the lab." Not wanting to disturb anyone else, they called their position to the ship, and set off.

The compound for the united planetary council was situated on a peninsula, cut off from the city across the tide flat by a wide swath of scrubland sparsely populated with corpses of stunted hardwood trees. It was into this they wandered, away from the city light, for it was a privilege to see the stars set into their dome of sky. Though Scotty had lived among them for nearly 20 years, it was still a special sort of marvel to tilt his head back and see unfamiliar constellations cut by the lazy lights of artificial satellites and the scattered remains of a moon struck apart eons before.

They stopped after a few kilometres to let Spock set up his trap and waited for any small creatures that might be attracted, moth like, to the bright light. Soon, animals the length of a pinkie finger were darting up on jewel-toned wings, blurring brightly into the light, but never stopping long enough to capture.

"Are they birds or insects?" Scotty asked. Spock just shrugged, uncharacteristically imprecise, but feeling too wrung out from the long day of socialising to respond. So they waited in silence, Scott with his head tilted back to watch the stars spin slowly, Spock trying to get a closer look at the creatures.

The humidity and stillness had begun to lull them both into a state of semi-sleep when the branches rustled behind them. With all the training years of Star Fleet provided, they jumped to standing, phasers pointed. A ghost floated in the shrubbery. White-glowed in the moonlight, with a gaping void where the face should be. For a moment, the men were struck still by this unknown creature, then it moved forward slightly, solidifying into the woman from the generator room.

"What happened to you!" Scotty exclaimed. In the light from the trap, they could clearly see the woman from the generator room. A livid bruise swelled the side of her jaw, mottling her cheeks with what could only be fingerprints.

The woman just pointed at the trap.

"We want to collect specimens to study," Spock explained. "I assure you, we have permission."

"Specimens." She said the word like it tasted foul. "Dissection. Vivisection. Analysing."

"We will not kill it," Spock assured. "The veterinarian on board will study them, see how they perform in space. Ideally, they will be mated."

Her face didn't change, but Scott got the impression she was grimacing internally. "Look here." He undid his communicator and asked the computer to show him the live feed of the hydroponics lab. "See, they'll have plenty of plants, and they're kept separately from other species. Not even you or I can tell the artificial sunlight from the real thing."

She took it by the tips of her fingers, turning it slowly this way and that, then seized by a bout of inspiration tapped the screen twice as Scott had done and demanded, "electronic signature produced by animal cells."

The screen flashed black and white with results and the woman gave what could almost be construed as a triumphant "ha!" though it sounded hardly more than an exhalation. She dropped to the ground and began pulling things from her pockets, all the while scrolling. Almost as an afterthought, she tossed something absentmindedly at Spock. He caught it one-handed and turned the battery-sized object over in his palm.

"Magnets," she said, eyes flicking through various entries. "Not light. Child's trick. It likes this." She nodded at the screen.

Scotty had been standing stock still with surprise, but the sight of a woman trying to pry apart his communicator lurched him into action.

"See here, you can't just—" The back of her head popped off and she made another gleeful sound, lying it on the handkerchief she had laid out.

"Come help it while he catches *qarsrar*," she said. Like most words in Gwydion languages, the name of the specimen was unpronounceable without a bifurcated larynx. "You are honoured engineer and it wants to learn more. It is Kanna, and there have no one to teach it."

Scotty looked at Spock, who shrugged, and requisitioned the torch and sat down across from her with a sigh. “Well, why did you have to take apart my communicator?”

“Why not?” She replied. Her hands were busy laying tools and pieces out into straight lines above a palm-sized device. “It is still connected to the screen so we can use it, and Kanna gets to see how it works.”

With a twist, she split her own device similarly, leaving it connected by a few wires. An assortment of miscellaneous chips and spare parts were spread on a handkerchief before her. “It is to trace an electrical signature,” she explained, “then force a transport to the nearest hub when it is detected. There are five in the compound. That part is easy. It is the electrical sensor that is not working.” Kanna pointed with her little finger.

Scotty blanched. “Do ya know how transports work? Forcing one from the other side, without proper checks of the system, could scatter you.”

She bobbed her head. “Just an experiment. To see if it is possible.”

“I fail to see how a magnet attract these ‘karsars,’” Spock called.

Kanna glanced up, eyes widening slightly in humour. “No fun to tell.”

“How are you calibrating this?” Scotty asked, drawing her attention back. “With a sample?”

She paused. “That question confuses Kanna. But perhaps honoured visitors do not cover their necks because they do not have electroreceptors?” Scotty shook his head. “How odd. Kanna calibrates by feel. Many animals on this planet have such organs, but ours are very sensitive, so is easy to use trial and error.”

“Well, I do not know how your system works exactly but...”

Pushing past his apprehension, he walked her through a few of the finer points of her idea. There was nothing he loved more than young engineers with sticky fingers and quick minds. He pressed her to vocalise her ideas when she resorted to hand gestures. She listened to his critiques with an attentively cocked head, and before long they had taken the device entirely apart, occasionally consulting Spock to bounce off ideas. Scotty could not have pulled himself away even if he wanted to.

“You are acquiring fluency over the Gwydion number system very quickly,” Spock observed. He had finally pried apart the magnets and was enjoying himself capturing the animals in cages of magnetic fields while the other two worked. “I find myself struggling with it – and I am more proficient in base-8 than you are.”

Scotty waved a hand dismissively, punching in calculations on the screen. “Eh, its only because it’s applied is all.”

Spock only hummed in reply.

In the darkest part of the night, right before dawn, Spock checked his communicator. “We should return to our crew. Are you certain you would not like me to heal your injuries? I have a medipack.”

Kanna waved a hand. “You should not waste something like that on it.”

“On me,” Spock corrected finally. “You are not an it.”

That apparently gave her something to think about. The council was the same: nothing was said without a protracted pause. Spock could not work out if it was a translation error, or simply a linguistic difference.

“Kanna can use, I and me?” she asked finally. “First person singular, no status markers?”

He raised an eyebrow. “In the Federation, we do not reduce people to inanimation with our pronouns.”

The pause was longer this time. Spock held still, allowing her to scrutinize his face for any sign of falsehood.

“I am Kanna,” she said slowly. Her eyes widened. “I am Kanna, and I am worth using a medipack on.” In the dimming light of the torch, they could almost believe that the corners of her mouth ticked up.

She made Scotty turn around while she unwound her scarf and slipped from her outer garment. Her thick dark curls were shot through with gold and tamed in a rope around her head. Beneath her robe, she wore a tight sleeveless garment with a high neck. By any standard, she was lithe and well-formed: petite with strong hands and a wide set of hips, but she shrank into herself, curling around her spine and away from his eyes.

Spock examined the bruises disappearing under her collar and said, “It would be more efficient if you removed that too. I promise I will view you with nothing but a medical eye,” he added as she tensed.

“I don’t mean to offend you with my doubt,” she whispered. “But, here, if someone is so unclothed, something bad is probably happening.”

Something bad indeed. Spock schooled his features to complete impassivity as she discarded her vest. Bruises circled her neck, ending in two violent splotches beneath her jaw on either side. Seemingly random scars, mostly round, peppered her ribs and arms, and he had the impression that if he turned the tricorder to her, her bones would reveal a novel of trauma.

“I need to touch you now,” Spock warned. Kanna’s mouth tightened. She stared at him, unblinking, monitoring his intentions. As lightly as he could he placed his fingertips on her jaw, sweeping the nanogel up in small strokes. This close, with his hands on her, could pick up on her emotions, a strange mix of fear and longing and disgust. He had once felt the same when his mother insisted on hugging him. This woman’s

mind felt closer than it should. He felt that even without touching her nerve points he could simply reach out and bump his consciousness against her own.

By the time he moved to her other cheek, she relaxed slightly into his hand.

“You are from a different planet?”

“Vulcan.”

“What is it like?”

Spock thought. “Much like this. It is hot with a strong sun, but it is much drier.”

“Oh.” She seemed disappointed, as much as anything showed in her face or voice. “Are all planets like this one?”

“No. That would be improbable.” Spock dipped his hand in the jar again and began to work on the fingerprints. She lacked iron-rich blood, making the bruises anaemic and yellow.

“I am not good in that subject,” she admitted. “I have aided mechanical engineers and linguists and even physicists but never a statistician. I was deemed to kinaesthetic.” She closed her eyes, trusting the steadiness of his touch even as it moved to her neck.

“Is the generator a good job?”

“It is better than waste. I have been there too. But it is not as good as-” she cut off with a surprised breath as he reached the point below her jaw where a Terran’s lymph nodes would be, the round spots that indicated the worst and deepest bruising. “Not there please. Those are my electroreceptors. They’re...sensitive.”

By the time he finished applying the stabilizing bandages to her ribs, a hint of sun was showing at the horizon.

“I have to go,” she insisted. “But I am very grateful for the help you have given me.” She looked between them, hesitating. “And I would be ever more grateful if-”

“Mums the word.” Scotty said, zipping his lips. He had enjoyed himself immensely. His mind was buzzing with new ideas, not least of which was for a transporter trace. “When we are back shipside and have to tell the captain why we’re suddenly experts in catching bugs and fixing computers, but that won’t get back to you lass.”

They were rewarded by that widening of her eyes. Then she was gone, disappearing back into the bush.

“Ach,” Scotty spat when she got out of earshot. “What do you make of all that Spock? Are we heroes or fools?”

Chapter 4

McCoy did his best to shield his patient from an inquisition, but the captain was furious enough with his first and second officers that no amount of “*Well what I helped her build didn’t help her break onto the Enterprise, I can tell you that*” or “*It didn’t seem important enough to bear mentioning before the official report*” or “*I pumped her full of a stable’s worth of tranquilizers to get her damned secondary nervous system down*” would assuage him.

So Kanna came to consciousness violently. One moment, nothing hurt, and the next she was thrown into a world of sharp, biting pain.

When she had come out of the transporter, everything hurt, and in that way, it was manageable, but now her abdomen seared like a bolt of lightning cracking across the darkness behind her eyes. She writhed against it. She reached for the hive, but it was gone, locked her out, isolated her in her pain so as not to contaminate them. She bit down on her tongue but even that could not muffle her scream.

Spock watched the captain from the corner of his eyes, but could not detect if the woman thrashing and screaming on his orders disturbed him. Finally McCoy got the hypo-needle of painkillers into her arm, and she quieted with a final moan. By the time Nurse Chapel had gotten her dressed and her hair tucked away, Kanna had vomited twice, and no amount of soothing could keep her from babbling in her two-voiced language.

If being confronted by three angry men gave her any discomfort, she did not show it, but sat cross-legged on the bed, rigidly straight despite her injury. The standard black clothes from the store gave her skin a silvery pallor.

Kirk did not waste time. He brandished the device. “How did you get this? And you’ll have to speak, please.”

Kanna tilted her head. “I...I never intended to use it. Contingency. But then, then it was necessary.”

“So you admit you took the plans from my engineer’s mind? Who else has them?”

“No one. It was only for me.” Her hands scrunched on her knees. “I apologise, Superior Engineer. I think maybe you see it as an intrusion. But in the moment, I had to make a choice and you both...you both saw me, and I didn’t know what a person was, but you thought I was one. And I thought maybe if I had to...” She took a deep breath. “Asylum. Sanctuary.”

Her request hung in the air, and with flesh and blood before him, bruises half-healed from nanogel, dead pieces of her uterus sitting in hazardous waste, Kirk felt the success of his first mission crumble out from under him. He grasped at the pieces.

“Someone hurt you? A partner, perhaps, gave you that injury?” He gestured at her midsection.

“No. I hurt myself that time.” Kirk relaxed, until her next sentence: “I didn’t want them to have more of me.”

“More of...”

“I know it seems selfish,” she said in a rush, “it was planned for so long. I knew it was coming. But then...Superior Engineer Scott said I was clever, and I thought, ‘I know I am clever, because I fix things that Superior Manager cannot fix.’ But they say I am not clever, but base. But they do not go into space, so who knows the truth? Who is more likely to say who is clever – or a person: them who keep us or them who go into space?”

“And once I thought that, I thought, ‘Why would they lie to us? What happens if I am a person and say no? If we are all people and can say no?’ And the answer is everything falls apart, so they could be liars trying to hold the world together. But if they are liars, and I believe them, then I am not clever, and-”

Behind her, the biosensor beeped wildly, betraying the emotions behind her blank facade. On her knees, her knuckles were white. McCoy lifted a hand to place on her shoulder, then dropped it.

“Jim,” he said softly. “At the risk of contravening your orders...”

“I can’t just leave her to rummage through the minds of everyone aboard.” His rage had dissipated, but that did not make the captain’s gaze any less intense.

“It’s not like that!” The pitch of Kanna’s voice was approaching a wail, and she had drawn the edge of her scarf over her face. “He was...it was *there!*”

“I’d be happy to hear your explanation,” Kirk said dryly.

A hazel eye peered over the edge of the scarf. “Your group really did not know? How did you think you were communicating with us?”

“Advanced AI of some kind. We have a technology in beta test that uses brainwaves and implants, though there are some bugs to be worked out with emotional seep.”

Behind the scarf, Kanna fought with her emotions. Whatever drugs were in her system made her feel soupy and slow, and combined with the adrenaline, she was finding it harder and harder to keep her facial muscles from twitching out of place. The day had begun with a rush of fear as a control team had burst into her cell, and that fear had not stopped. Even splayed out on the operating table her pituitary gland had continued priming her secondary nervous system to flee. She had not thought this through: she had acted out of fear and spite and the desire maybe to die or at least to make it stop, and instead of being greeted with the gentle delight of catching a qasar with magnets or dismantling a new invention, she was being asked to explain – verbally of all ways! – the unexplainable by a man *who would let computers translate his*

thoughts.

She forced herself to breathe. Her whole life had been defined by a balance of usefulness, and now was not the time to abandon that tact. Explaining intersympathetic sharing to people without it felt like teaching a plant to eat. And they had made it clear she was not to plumb their minds for a touchstone metaphor – she'd have to come up with one on her own.

She took another deep breath, made sure her face was properly blank, and dropped her cover. "May I demonstrate pictorially?"

The scientist— *Spock*, she reminded herself, *they use names here*— proffered a tablet, popping a stylus from its side. She considered the whiteness of the screen, compressing the four-dimensional model in her mind down to two.

Schematics were soothing, though she preferred straight, measurable lines to this round mass of curves. Once Spock pointed out a circle drawing tool, she found the programme intuitive, and for a moment dared to loose herself in a future where she was allowed to design her own machines in such a way.

But she drew her last line far too quickly and was forced to turn the tablet to her lingering audience. A black donut held the middle of the screen. Several other circles intercepted it, as if they were staring down at an architect's drawing of a round table with round chairs pushed beneath it. Where the outside circles intercepted the centre one, their edges turned to widely spaced dotted lines, and the centre's edges within them were dotted more closely.

"Each of the outside circles is a person, and the inside is a...hub. I am a hub. Hubs dissolve psychic barriers. It arose in the genome several thousand years ago – a sudden mutation amplifying much weaker abilities." Kanna traced her finger over the picture. "Imagine a thought as a particle. Without a hub, the boundaries of the mind are impermeable. Knowledge is stuck in one place, and can be communicated only physically, but with a hub, it can be shared, bounced around. There is no need to ask your worker where they left a tool: you just know."

"But you are not considered a person," the captain said with a grimace.

"We are tools, given by the...the primordial creator for our ability to advance civilisation. We are moved to where we are needed most. We have our own pronouns, our own suffixes. It is the nature of a foundation to be base.

"If a thought is a particle, and a solid piece of line is a barrier, the thought has a higher percentage chance of reaching through the first set than the second set." Kanna paused, struggling to extend the metaphor. "There are 'our' thoughts, 'your' thoughts to be shared, and 'your' thoughts not to be shared. People have enough psychic abilities to cordon off parts of their mind, just not extend it outward."

"And can you break that cordon?"

Her face heated at the captain's question, sending tiny lightening bolts flushing across her temples. "I can see your hands," she offered. "And when you move, sometimes your wrists show, but to see anything else against your will..."

"Would be a great violation," he finished for her. Kanna nodded and hoped her face was not as hot as it felt. "But we came in covered from head to toe – are you saying your council violated us?"

"I am saying you came in naked, not knowing that clothing existed." She tilted her head towards Spock. "All but Superior Scientist, who... became aware of his nakedness when we connected. We sensed his discomfort, and it was spread to not connect to him. We only needed language, you see, but if the entire council was hubbed to just one of you, feeding off your language capabilities, you could have noticed. You would have become tired, speaking for two or twelve."

"You weren't in the council chamber," Spock pointed out. "How do you know all this?"

Kanna gestured to the tablet. "That is a simplicity. Expand it out: three dimensions or four. One hub for ten people, and you needn't speak, and knowledge is a communal river bound only by population density. To speak is to break yourself willingly from that river with another person, to be intimate. To be forced out is to be punished in the most horrible way." She turned to Scotty. "Do you understand, Superior Engineer?" The effort of speaking now sagged at her limbs. Her voice grew hoarse and the ache in her belly intensified.

"Aye, lass," he said gently. "You didn't mean it. You thought the information was public." He was tired himself: the watch was nearly half over. He should have eaten and been asleep long ago, and given the headache that was building, he suspected Kanna was still using him to create her own words.

Spock took the tablet, considering. "Telepaths are unusual, as far as we are aware," he explained. "For those who have some ability, it can be deeply uncomfortable to feel another person's mind. Yet I cannot detect your presence, and you do not seem uncomfortable. This has very interesting implications."

Kanna froze. She was in the creche standing before two control officers discussing her advanced fine motor skills; a geneticist looked at her blood results, monologuing about her genome's applications. Her life was a series of interesting implications, each leading towards an erosion of herself. Her words came to her with astounding clarity.

"I will not be a brood mare," she said softly. She stared directly into Spock's curious eyes, refusing to flush at her boldness. It was practically a sex act for the people of her planet, but it was necessary to hold these alien's attention. "I'll bite through my own arteries before I allow my blood to continue be complicit in my destruction."

Spock did not reply. They stared each other down, their minds a hairsbreadth apart, and he found he wanted to know what it was like, to mind meld without fear. He wanted to set every scientist in his team on her – xenobiologist, psychologist, chemists, anthropologists – and pull her apart and put her back together to know how she worked. He would not call it jealousy, but progress.

But he also knew what it was like to be base, and when McCoy finally threw his hands up in protest and herded them away from Kanna's

slumping form, he did not listen to the soft cries his Vulcan ears picked up: Pride is too often all that remains.

Chapter 5

Steam rose from the replicated food. Though it looked familiar enough, a mass of legumes, cooked to near mash, starchy grain and flatbread, Kanna poked at it suspiciously and eyed the strange utensils held to the side. She mimed eating with her hands.

Nurse Chapel shrugged, tired from her late end the night before. “Sure, go ahead. Just clean them first.” She indicated the sanitizer by the bed.

Kanna complied, and, despite her apprehension, dug in. It had been an interminable time since she’d eaten. The previous evening, before McCoy signed her over to the reserve doctor, he’d forced her to drink a series of nutrient shots while he monitored a series of blood nutrients and watched for anaphylaxis. And before that, it had been the morning of the generator incident – her rations had been cut after as her official punishment. The beating that followed was merely Superior Manager Hyada’s personal warning.

Christine eyed her from across the room when she was still eating several minutes later. “Do you always eat so slowly?”

Kanna swallowed her mouthful and bobbed her head, then mimicked throwing up. Christine grimaced. Kanna liked the nurse. She hands that didn’t give Kanna the uncomfortable feeling that being touched normally did, and her matter-of-fact good humour made her feel like she was on solid footing.

“McCoy will want you to talk when he gets in,” Christine warned. “He’ll hand you over to his chief headshrinker.”

Kanna gulped. “Please tell me that’s a metaphor,” she said, unable to think of a hand sign. Her voice was raw, unused to so much monolaryngeal speech.

Christine smirked. “A therapist. Psychologist. We can’t have anyone unstable running around a spaceship. She’ll help you work through whatever messed up feelings you have going on up there.”

Kanna allowed herself a slight nose wrinkle in discuss. “It’s someone’s role to listen to you *speak* about *emotions*?”

Christine put down her tablet and came to lean on the edge of the bed. “I’m being glib, but it is good to say things out loud – makes you feel less alone. We even have group therapy.” Her blue eyes sparked.

Kanna choked, a bit of bean flying down the wrong pipe. “Do you have to do the procedure here,” she wheezed, wiping her mouth, “where you spread your legs and the meds swab your insides. Because I’d rather-”

A peeling laugh cut her off, and Christine left her to finish breakfast in silence.

As the first quarter hour of the day ticked by, the clinic grew steadily busy. Workers in a drifted in and out of side rooms to lament their illnesses or were tended to on the beds that line the walls of the main area. Occasional announcements echoed over an intercom, and the hum of voices filled the clinic like water in a vessel.

Despite the half-pulled curtain, Kanna could feel the curious glances as she pushed away her food tray, and she imagined that if a ship is anything like the government compound, her presence will have spread before the morning was half over, but to her relief, no one spoke to her.

She sat cross legged, forcing her mind and body into stillness, her spine to be straight even though her belly ached. Apprehension was not a useful expenditure of her energy. She had seen those hubs emerging from isolation shaky and strange, having spent their imprisonment in panic. It was more useful to map the facial expressions and gestures she could see, storing them up to mimic when she was on her own.

She pulled herself from Christine’s mind to push herself to observe without native context. The spreading of the mouth was not a threat, but a familiar expression that arrived with greetings or jokes; eyebrows pressed together in worry. Hands varied from person to person: some used them wildly to emphasize their speech, while others held them still. Only a few people used them instead of speech, their movements so quick and complex she could not follow.

By the time Dr McCoy arrived and pulled the curtain tightly around them, she had a veritable catalogue recorded, and when she connected back to his language centre, she was pleased to find that most of her observations were correct.

“Well, you’ve certainly caused a stir!” He exclaimed. “Let me look at your incision and then we’ll talk. Do you remember what I told you last night, about doctors?”

Kanna nodded. Having sensed her distrust and embarrassment, he had rather sternly set her straight. “Doctors are medical professionals who care about their patient’s wellbeing,” she intoned. “They are not vivisectors or butchers who touch patients without consent or for their own gains.”

“And what is consent?”

“The ability to have a say about what happens over one’s own-”

“*Your* own,” he corrected. “This applies to you too. I want you to practice that.”

“Over my own body, because my body is a safe place that belongs only to me.” She paused. “Is that something you tell children?”

McCoy smiled. “It is, but until I think you believe me, I’ll make you keep saying it. Now, how do you feel about lying down and letting me see how that incision is getting on?”

“I feel very badly about it.”

“Then you probably shouldn’t have shoved a rusty piece of metal into your reproductive organs and delivered yourself into my healing hands. Scootch.” He hesitated. “You *were* Kanna just flashed him slightly wide eyes and wriggled down until she was lying flat. The joke was in the statement of the truth. Above her, the lights mimicked weak sunlight, and someone had gone as far as to put a cloud-painted filter over the bulb. Her body ended at her ribs. The hands she could feel gently lifting her shirt were not on her.

“I’m going to touch you now,” McCoy said. “I need to press on the scar tissue to make sure those post-ops I pumped you full of are doing their job. Now, Christine said you didn’t want any painkillers this morning, so it may hurt, but let me know if it gets unbearable, okay?”

Kanna eked out a nod. She wished he wouldn’t ask. If he didn’t ask, it wasn’t her body this was happening to. Was the sky this blue on the planet they were from? She closed her eyes against that idea.

His fingers had barely touched the scar when she whispered, “Stop.”

Immediately, he stepped back, hands lifted. “Did that hurt, or did you want to make sure I’d stop?”

Relief flooded through her. “I wanted to make sure.”

If he was offended, McCoy didn’t indicate, just set again to his work. A tricorder could have given him adequate feedback, but without being calibrated to her biology, he’d rather trust himself. “Scar tissue doesn’t feel too thick,” he said, pleased. “You should be right as rain in a few days – only a line. Do you want to see?”

“No.”

“I know that sounded like a question, but I think you should look. Something bad happened to you, and now there’s a mark of it on your body. Are you going to avoid it forever?”

Kanna turned her head to the side, eyes still tightly closed. “You want to know what happened.” The stool squeaked as McCoy sat.

“I want you to be able to talk about what happened and live with it. It’s not just for you. I have a responsibility to everyone on board – I have to make sure we are all healthy enough to be in space together. If one person decides to hurt themselves, that could affect everyone. Maybe it makes them want to hurt themselves too; maybe they did it in away that poses a physical danger to the ship. You don’t have to tell me everything all at once, but I need to be able to tell the captain, ‘yes, she’s safe to have on board.’”

“I do not understand.”

“I know you don’t. You may just have to trust me, which is a big ask. But you’ve asked us to trust you too. Sit up – I have an idea.”

McCoy swung the table back over the bed and set a tablet and stylus in front of her. “Why don’t you draw while you tell me?”

“Draw what happened?”

He shrugged. “Whatever you like. What about your bedroom? Where did you sleep?”

Kanna hesitated, but took the bribe, picking up the stylus and began to speak.

1530 – Enterprise Time.

It was a matter of assuring the desk hub that Superior Manager Hyada had counted her tools, depositing the sealed bag, and getting away before anyone noticed the spanner was missing, tucked into the pocket of her robe. The desk hub was well acquainted with Kanna and didn’t want to know; they avoided any mind contact and quickly tossed the bag in with the rest.

She wanted to go straight to her cell and get to work on her idea, but it was not good to seem too antisocial. She headed towards the hub canteen instead, skipping from mind to mind as she wound through the corridors. News was travelling quickly about the aliens, and her interaction had only added to the chaos. In the council chamber, the council members had changed their tact to make sure that the hubs were hidden, given that their status had aggrieved the engineer and scientist. But there was the mundane as well: queries around meal menus and weather, idle gossip about people’s relationships. It was only in the canteen that she allowed herself to disconnect from people all together and slip into the pool of hubs.

The canteen was a dim, dingy room deep beneath the operations sector. The still air hung with the smell of steamed meal packets and chemical soap until it was sweet and thick as the generator room. At this time of day, only a few beige-dressed figures hunched at the table. There was no need for guards to monitor their thoughts for sedition: any hint was enough for someone to hold up their hand to Control for an extra meal pack in return for their fellow’s solitary.

(“How long is a metre?” Kanna interrupted herself, playing with the scale function on the tablet. McCoy held out his hands to demonstrate.)

One of the figures jerked up when Kanna entered the room, spinning to face her. Yva’s eyebrows pushed the limits of propriety, and her green and brown eyes shone.

You talked to them! She practically shouted the thought across the pool, causing several others to look over in irritation. Kanna created a mental section for them alone: not enough of a blockade to cause any suspicion, but enough to dampen her companion’s emotions.

They were tall. One was red and the other green. And they spoke loudly.

What else?

Nothing else. Kanna brushed the edge of her little finger over Yva's shoulder affectionately.

I can't believe you spoke to them.

They thought nothing of it. Their language is like chiselling stone blocks. Hyada's response was more marked.

Yva wrinkled her nose. Hyada was known to let his thoughts 'accidentally' drop into the public space. She could easily imagine the lasciviousness Kanna's voice evoked.

I like the green one, Yva said. She was unabashedly rifling through the memories Kanna had offered. *The red one's face is too expressive.*

You're one to judge.

The door opened again, admitting a slender man. Kanna dissolved her conversation with Yva and looked towards the screen in the corner, hoping she looked deep into the hourly devotional. Above them, the lights flickered.

The man approached them. "Equal Hub Kanna."

She wanted to melt – now of all times. *Equal Hub Dryd*, she responded, determinedly subvocal. Every ear in the room had perked up at his voice.

"I wish to speak to you about the future."

The food steamer began to stutter. Three stories above, the node was giving way under the increased output of the generator, and here Control's pet hub was soliciting her in front of an audience.

Surely there is nothing we cannot discuss here.

Dryd made a gesture of disapproval, followed by one of firm beseeching. Kanna stared ahead.

"Hub Kanna." She clenched her hands at the removal of equality. His neutral expression now hinted at anger. She calculated the output differential of the node, the amount of energy that couldn't go anywhere versus the silicon's specific heat.

"Your insistence on disrespecting my request will not change the situation," Dryd continued. "You are being deliberately rebellious. I see now why Control has insisted on our pairing." His eyes glinted. The insultative properties of the silicon barriers would be giving way.

"They hope a physical relationship between us will result in more desirable offspring and temper your behaviour."

With a great crackle, the lights blinked out, just in time to hide her unavoidable expression of dismay.

Chapter 6

The curtain parted, and Kanna fell silent, staring down at the tablet. While she spoke, she had sketched her small cell with its single palette and low desk. Two by 1.5 metres defining her life. The electric and plumbing schematics ran through the walls, connecting her to Yva's.

"Do you work on plumbing, then?"

She jumped. She hadn't noticed it was Scotty standing in the space. He gestured awkwardly to her tablet. "Is that how you draw your plans?"

"I created my own notation," Kanna said, suddenly shy. "The standard doesn't account for potential risk points between electric and water."

"It's very fine," Scotty said. "Nice and clear even for an alien like me."

McCoy cleared his throat. "Did you need something?"

"Aye, sorry. I've found a spare tablet. I thought maybe Kanna could use it for the library – not have to borrow yours Bones. You, uh, do you read?"

Kanna nodded, her eyes wide with a smile. "Yes, I read."

"Got records to issue you an access number and all, and I've loaded some things I thought you'd like."

"Don't you have a job?" McCoy groused.

"Ah, pardon me then for trying to mould young minds." Scotty vanished with a wink.

Kanna pressed the new tablet to her chest. "Why did he do that?"

McCoy raised his eyebrows. "He's being kind. And, between you and me, he doesn't meet many people on his level. You can play with it later. I think you were telling me about Dryd."

Kanna's hands dropped, and her face fell. "Yes. Dryd." In her voice, his name split into two inharmonious tones. "It's hard to translate and use other languages' insults."

"You want to try?"

"An ox-fucking wetblanket of a Control-gleaning imbecile."

McCoy bit back his laughter. "And he propositioned you."

Kanna fiddled with her stylus. "Physical intimacy isn't allowed for hubs. We are inseminated and carry until the foetus can be transplanted in an automatic uterus. But sometimes, as a reward or a punishment, it's sanctioned."

"His reward was your body?"

"In hopes his influence would steady me."

The doctor took a moment. "That's...How did that make you feel?"

The bright eyes peered over at him almost mischievously. "Like for the first time in my life, I hated what they were telling me to do more than they made me hate myself."

0450 – Enterprise Time

Her hems were wet with dew as she crept into Yva's room. Her mind buzzed with everything that had happened: the kindness of the engineer and the soft touch of the scientist. For a few hours, she had forgotten everything that had occurred after the lights went down. Dryd had given her a look as Control came to carry her off to see Hyada, and she shuddered to think of the promise it held. But there could be hope.

"Yva," Kanna hissed, prodding her friend with her toe. "Wake up."

The sleeping lump wriggled deeper into her pallet. "No."

Kanna plopped to the ground and pulled her scarf off her head. "I saw the aliens again."

Yva bolted up, curls in a haze around her head. "No!"

Kanna nodded and related the story in hushed whispers. The walls were thin, and there was never a guarantee that no one was listening to their minds.

"You let him touch you?" Yva demanded. "You were *undressed*?"

"He touched my electroreceptors."

Yva gave a silent, scandalized squeal.

“And the engineer! You cannot believe the things he knows. I think...Do you ever think maybe we don't have to live like this?”

“Like a better assignment?”

Kanna took the transporter from her pocket and began to break it apart again. The schematic for the larger transport was still fresh in her mind. “I've been working on this,” she admitted. “It was mostly a joke – you could calibrate it so if Hyada was coming towards you, you would transport across the compound. But the engineer had another idea.”

Yva nibbled at her nail. “Kanna...I know that you are nervous about Dryd, but really it could be good. Control likes him. If he vouches for you...”

“I can't think about that now.” Her voice felt uncharacteristically harsh. She pulled and resoldered wires, amplifying the trace's effect. “There's more important things to do.” With a tiny sonic saw, she cut the dampener in half, slipping the scrap back into her pocket where the sharp edge dug into her leg.

“Do you not think its time you start at least trying? You could be working in the university!” Yva's nose wrinkled. “If I had half your skill – the sucking up I'd do!”

Kanna wasn't listening. The screen was back on, and code was running across it almost faster than she could edit it. She held the image of the spaceship's transporter in her mind.

“Kanna. Kanna!” Yva poked her knee. “I have to get dressed and go.”

“Hmm? I'll see you later?”

If Yva made a face, Kanna didn't look up to see it. “Of course.”

“You think she said something?” McCoy prodded. Kanna had drifted off again. Her storytelling was disjointed and sparse, jumping from matter to matter and interspersed with long silences as she tried to wrangle her mind back to the people involved.

“If I never see her again, does it matter?” She stopped drawing and stared desolately down. “Either your captain allows me to remain here, or I die. Why don't I just pretend? Why would she do that? She wanted stories and affection, and I gave them to her.”

“You loved her?”

Kanna turned her head. “Love?”

“You don't know 'love'?”

“I can see how you use it. I can put it into a grammatical structure, but I don't know it.”

Now that, McCoy thought, felt like a whole other can of worms. He rephrased, “Was there never a moment where you participated in the system where you were not a person?”

“All the time. Constantly. Every moment. Even when I thought otherwise, I pushed it down.”

McCoy rubbed his chin. He tried not to get caught up in the blandness of her tone. He was a *human* psychiatrist by training, and sure, he had professional development hours in Vulcans psychology and had fought with them during their annual psych evals, but he still found it difficult to approach emotions from an alien's point of view – especially one who was so obviously in the early stages of deconstructing, watching his ever reaction with the intensity of a kicked dog. He couldn't work out what was real, and what she was feeding him.

“Why don't you keep going,” he suggested.

1730 – Enterprise Time

The pipe pressed in on every side. Kanna squeezed forward, her arms stretched above her head. The heavy scent of waste coated the inside of her mouth and nose, despite the protective gear. The waster manager had gestured an apology when they told her the pig was broken, but she knew it was an extension to her punishment: unfed, demoted, and wriggling through the sewage systems to clear manually clear blocks. She hadn't even bothered to carry out the pig repairs. Tomorrow it would be miraculously back running through the pipes.

By the time she scrapped the last bit of congealed fat and hair away from the junction, it was well past her usual time off. Her legs and core ached from her awkward scramble, and not even the stench of sewage could keep her stomach from growling after a long day of hard manual labour. Maybe Yva was right – maybe it was better to toe the line and lie in a soft bed with a full belly with nothing more strenuous to do but amplify the thoughts of lab workers. Wasn't there a rumour about a new ship depot in development to implement technological advances from the aliens? Maybe pairing with Dryd wouldn't be so bad if she could have a hand in the stars, even if no one ever acknowledged it.

With one final shove, she extracted herself from the access hatch and landed in a heap on the floor of the antechamber. The sonic cleaner switched on, making her skin tingle as she stripped off the soiled coveralls and face mask. A further blast of ultraviolet light left her squinting

as she exited into the workroom.

Two unfamiliar people were waiting. Even without touching their minds she knew they were Control. Their shoulders held a confidence that even the superior managers didn't carry. She slipped on her outer robe and took a long drink from the cooler. Her hand shook. Stolen tools and illicit transporters bounced against her leg.

But when the officers turned to leave, she followed silently.

"Where are we going?" she asked, blushing at her own voice. The penalty for connecting with anyone from Control was harsh, and being forced to speak only intensified the discomfort of their presence.

No one responded. She put her hands casually in her pocket and wrapped her hand around the device. Someone in the universe thinks you are worth something, she told herself. No matter what happens, there is an engineer who thought you were worth teaching. The thought buoyed her. She thought that maybe she could survive it. Maybe she could close her eyes and think of the scientist's hands on her when Dryd made his grabbing approaches. If she buried these things deep enough, no one could use them against her.

It was the lack of smell that clued her in on their location. The air filters in medical ran continually, calibrated by the most trusted hubs.

"I don't believe I'm ovulating," she protested. The deferential pronouns soured in her mouth. The smaller of the Control officers pointed at the examination bed in the otherwise empty room. The presence of two others through the other door buzzed against her neck. She could feel Dryd, his signature heightened with excitement.

I should have had more time. Her throat tightened. *I do not want this. I. Kanna. I.* She repeated that single syllable, a suffix-less pronoun. Somewhere, thousands of miles above her head, was a place different from this. She warred with herself, as if Yva were speaking to her. She loved her work, forming the world into her specifications, but they weren't really *her* specifications, were they? She'd never have a chance to fix things the way she knew they would work best. What was life worth without the ability to bring her schematics into the real world? Even the device in her pocket was just a silly dream, a design that would never come to fruition.

The officer pointed again, not even deigning to speak to her. The door to the other room creaked.

The Superior Engineer's voice boomed in her head, *You've got good instincts, lassie, you just have to trust yourself.*

Her fingers brushed against the piece of dampener, its cut edge sharp.

"No."

Pain had been a near constant part of her life, but it had been the wearing down of soft, constant aches. Nothing could prepare her for the fiery punch as she sank the metal into her lower abdomen. Maybe she screamed, but all she could focus on was the give as the metal parted the tough sinews of muscle and plunged into the abdominal cavity. She jerked sideways, the jagged edge mutilating as it went.

Vaguely, she was aware of someone grabbing her arm, tackling her to the ground, but she wanted to laugh. What could they do to her? Her gametes were shredded. They would let her bleed out and shuffle her body away. Stars danced in front of her eyes. She wouldn't go Beyond – she hadn't said her devotionals or acted with servitude, but maybe she'd go to the stars. People were yelling. Somewhere, space waited, silent and black and shining with promise.

I'm a person too, she thought, gasping to breathe. *Only a person can choose their way.* Her pocket was hard to find. She groped through her blood-soaked robes, feeling for the button of the device the engineer helped her make. She wanted to touch the proof of her life again. She wanted to see the stars.

The last thing she saw was Dryd's face, and then the world dissolved in golden light.

Chapter 7

From a young age, Jim Kirk knew how to use people towards his own ends. He saw the actions of his stepfather or younger brother laid out like the panels in a comic strip, waiting for him to cut and paste. Once he started school, the feeling got worse. He gathered peers like a compulsion and lulled his teachers into compliance.

It terrified him. He carried the knowledge of his own wickedness pressed deep into the most secret part of his heart. He laboured to see them as people rather than puppets, but Starfleet gave him an out: He could replace his own goals with those of the Federation and reveal in his ability without guilt as he moved pieces about on increasingly large-scale board. Their aims were his aims, and in that way he became noble.

The hurdles came when orders fell into ambiguity, and he was expected to follow his own sense of morality. Take Gwydion-F: A planet with significant accurement who was advanced enough to disregard the Prime Directive and answer their plea for extraterrestrial contact. Establish diplomatic relations; exchange technology for an accurement supply easily accessible for Starbase-10's industry.

But slavery? Or apartheid? Whatever it was the caste system was not compatible with the Federation's codes. Jim rubbed the bridge of his nose. If he sent back the girl, trade could be established. One life for the millions that could be saved by Starbase-10's research. Maybe over time, the Federation could exert their influence and end Gwydion-F's abominable system, and the Enterprise would have a gold star on their first diplomatic mission. He knew that if he ordered it, the specifics could be erased from the reports. All history would see was a stowaway being sent back to where she belonged. Bones would fight him, and Scotty would gently seethe, but he loved the Enterprise too much to really fight back. He could even survive the disdain of Spock's coolly raised eyebrow.

Was that what Starfleet *wanted*?

"What did you learn then, Bones?" He asked, eyes still closed against a building headache.

"More than I'd like, to be perfectly honest." Bones grimaced. His baseline psychological interview with Kanna had taken it out of him. "She was born and raised by the state. Seems the young 'uns are used in creches to help caretakers better care for the young 'people' – if you'll forgive the phrase: who's hungry, diaper changes, things like that. By the time she was an adolescent she was bought by a linguist for their household and research. Then a physicist and finally and mechanical engineering department at a university.

"But after a series of incidents, her breeding was deemed a failure. Her parents were chosen for their skills but turns out that led to a girl who liked a bit too much of malicious compliance, if you get my meaning. If there's a loophole, she'll make mischief."

The captain blinked his eyes open. His senior crew sat around the conference table littered with coffee mugs and half-eaten dinners. Uhura looked pained, and Chekov's eyebrows had practically merged with his hairline.

"Is she dangerous?"

Bones shook his head. "The only person she's ever hurt is herself, as far as I can tell. Can't test her linguistic intelligence as she only speaks Standard when using our language centres, but mathematical, kinaesthetic, and spatial was very much on the high side of what we check for – even on the engineering scale. Logic was give and take depending on how concrete the question was, and emotional was lower than you'd like. She's already taught herself what our facial expressions mean and can read micro-tones well, but struggles with deception and nuance."

"Do you think she's lying or putting something on?"

"I'm not sure she knows what a lie is."

"It makes sense," Spock cuts in. "If their society is built around sharing thoughts, falsehood would be nearly impossible or maybe even taboo."

"What if she's not 'connected' to you?" Kirk asked. "Does she maintain anything she's known before?"

"I asked myself the same thing. Without us, she maintains a handful of Standard words and her grasp over base-10. She explained it like being a messenger: You won't remember every message you someone's asked you to send unless you really work at it."

Uhura cut in, unable to hold back the linguist in her any longer. "I don't suppose you kept track of what words?"

Bones grinned. "It's in your inbox. Basic pronouns and a handful of technical terms she used with Scott and Spock: magnet, spanner, that kind of thing. And the occupations of us she's met."

Uhura started to respond, but Kirk cut her off. "Options."

"Take her onboard and rely on the UN's asylum protocols. Set her up with ID, occupational therapy to make sure she can hold her own in a human conversation, and make her the next Starbase's problem," Bones offered.

"As she came onboard illegally, we have no responsibility to her."

The doctor spluttered. "Even a Vulcan can't possibly believe that!"

"I'm merely pointing out the obvious. Captain, if we accept her request for asylum, it will confirm that the situation on Gwydion-F is incompatible with Federation trade."

"Are you suggesting it's not?" Kirk asked.

Spock shrugged. "We don't have sufficient data."

Scott bit his tongue. His temper leaped to react like Bones and accuse the first officer of being unfeeling, but he knew he was just playing devil's advocate, looking out for the interests of the Enterprise above all.

"I think she's an asset," he said instead. "She hits all the Starfleet benchmarks, she has intimate, personal knowledge of a new planet. We haven't closed the door on trade, but maybe we've gained an insight and a new asset."

His chief engineer was trying far too hard to sound casual. Kirk turned on him wryly. "What's your interest in her? Hoping to act the hero and get her gratitude?"

Scotty spluttered and flushed, turning the same shade as his uniform. "Do you take me for a cradle robber, captain! My interest is purely academic. You're the one who told me I needed to work on my line management and mentoring!"

"Yes – of your junior officers. Not on any passing civilian who captures your imagination."

"Do they even know she's here?" Chekov piped in. He'd been on an alternate watch pattern and was just coming up to speed, having been pulled in by Kirk for professional development.

"This came through just a few minutes ago," Uhura said, throwing an image up on the central screen. A picture of Kanna was overlaid with red glyphs. "Seems like they took their time to figure out a message."

"Have you managed to translate it?" Kirk asked. The woman in the picture was a complete blank slate: she could have been a teacher or an insurgent or a chef.

A booker a baker a candlestick maker, he thought dryly.

"It says..." Uhura stuttered. "It says they don't want her back."

"Lieutenant."

She sighed. "Inoperable. Recycle."

The room fell silent. Kirk rubbed at his eyes again. Chekov swirled his coffee uncomfortably. Scotty stared down at the as-built drawings he was meant to be approving.

Kirk slammed his fist on the comm, making everyone jump. "Kirk to Holguin."

"Holguin here, captain," the young psychologist's voice crackled back.

"You've know our guest?"

There was a pause. "What guest, captain?"

"Don't be coy – I know how gossip goes."

"Apologies sir. I saw her earlier when I was in medbay. Dr McCoy hinted that he may need my help."

"She is staying onboard, and you'll be responsible for her. Liaise with legal to get some asylum paperwork going. Whatever documentation they think she'll need. Put her in the remedial safety course and if there's none going find someone to start them – I won't have ignorance of protocol on my ship. Any other classes you think she'll benefit from – ESL, history, get her some context to who we are. You'll meet with her daily with McCoy accountable, so make sure to report any issues straight away."

"Guest cabin, sir?"

"Crew. Tell Supply to put her with Ensign Nellor. Kirk out." He pressed off and gave a great sigh. "When are we next scheduled at a starbase?"

"Six months, sir," Chekov offered. "Though we could re plan."

Kirk shook his head. "I'm not keen of the idea of tossing a chick from the nest before it knows what predators look like. Hopefully she'll learn a bit of street smarts before we let her go."

- *Safety boots (r – y, l- y blk, 35)*
- *1 pr trainers (r – y, l- y blk, 35)*
- *3 tunic (f, modest, blk, s)*
- *3 legging (f, blk, 6)*
- *1 sweater (button, s)*
- *2 workout shirt (f, blk s)*
- *2 workout pant (f, blk, m)*
- *2 bra (wireless, s)*
- *1 bra (workout, s)*
- *7 underwear (short, gusset – y, pouch – n, s)*
- *3 undershirt (s)*
- *1 head covering (blue)*
- *1 head covering (red)*

Kanna compared each item of clothing to the list, trying to memorise the new words as she unpacked the printer-warm clothes into the drawers beneath her bunk. She lay the red scarf across her knees and stroked it reverently. Colour was for elites, so that even the black that seemed to plain to the Starfleet hurt her eyes. The fabric was smooth and strong – breathable, the supply officer had called it. *Black. Blue. Red.* Her mind throbbed with new information. *Muster point. Fire. Fire ex...exsangisher? Shuttle.*

Ensign Nellor was curled like a cat on her bunk, steadfastly ignoring her unwanted companion. Junior officers and enlisted crew mixed together in rooms, with assignments determined by gender, personality and biological need. With an odd number of Vulcan women aboard, she had drawn the lucky straw. She did not appreciate having to share with another alien who needed high temperatures. When Dr Holguin had led her charge to her new home, Nellor had taken one blank look at Kanna and said that she “shouldn’t presume to mind meld with me” – a declaration which left Kanna completely unable to communicate or read once Holguin was out of range.

With a shy glance to make sure her new bunkmate was still engrossed in her book, Kanna slid off the black scarf and tied on the red, shivering as the fabric brushed the underside of her jaw. A strange woman was reflected in the mirror. The red and black emphasised her silvery skin. The new tunic fell to mid-thigh and fully covered with at least two layers top and bottom, she felt fully dressed for the first time since she beamed aboard. She looked different without her voluminous robe. She felt different. For the hundredth time, she looked down at the back of the tablet Scotty had handed her, now emblazoned with a label: *Taliesin, Kanna.* A new name chosen with Dr Holguin to distinguish her from any other Kanna in the galaxy.

She had slept for most of the afternoon after telling her story to Dr McCoy, jerking awake several times, terrified she was having a long, elaborate dream. Just after the shift changed a harried woman in a blue wrap dress practically fell through the curtain. She looked around Kanna’s age, with round brown eyes and a mass of black hair piled on her head. She addressed herself as Dr-Holguin-but-call-me-Macy and gave a wide, genuine smile that had Kanna practically leaning away. What followed was a blur of forms and tours and questions. Kanna had been issued an official ship record which was cross referenced to her tablet and loaned communicator. Macy had enrolled her in Basics to Self-Defence, Math for Space, something called ‘The Federation and its Context’, and English – the language that, with a few Vulcan grammatical structures, formed Standard.

“You...learn while you work?” Kanna asked suspiciously.

Macy blinked. “Well, we can’t be out here for months at a time with no access to training. It lets enlisted officers get up to speed and ready for the academy and encourages officers to cross train. We only take one or two at a time, but it’ll be good for you.”

The last few hours had been filled with so much to take in, Kanna could barely feel her mind. She knew if she lay down to sleep, overlapping voices would replay shadows of the day. Even worse, her thoughts had nowhere to go. They sat inert in her mind, discomfiting her with their never-ending self. For the first time aboard, cut off from any communication or context, she felt truly alien.

With nothing else to do, she followed Macy’s instructions: unpack, then eat. In contrast to the compound, the corridors of the Enterprise were bursting with colour. Plants trailed their waxy leaves in niches, fed by the UV lights overhead. Where the walls weren’t flashing warnings and instructions, they were decorated with vistas and murals. Kanna ran her fingers over the ridge of an aching green hill dotted with white animals. Further along she was distracted by the pollen-catching filter over a plant. The care put in to make a safety-oriented vessel feel welcoming was mindboggling. It was hard to remember that beyond the outer hull a vacuum sucked at every seam, feeling for weaknesses.

The gentle *snick* of the door sliding open was all the warning Kanna had before the weight of twenty pairs of eyes settled on her. Her temples heated at their unabashed interest. They didn’t stop their conversations as she edged around the room, but they were hardly subtle. She watched their physicality from the corners of the eyes: they sprawled in their odd seats and tangled their legs under the high tables. They *leaned* on each other, seemingly not noticing the brushing of elbows or arms slung across backs. She was relieved when the screen of the replicator demanded her interest.

The menu of options flashing across the touchscreen dazzled her. Unknown glyphs labelled the sides, and she couldn’t even decipher the picture. What was meat and what plant? She jabbed blindly, prompting an indecipherable error message. Everything Macy had shown her earlier in the day fled from her mind, but she was aware she had been standing too long.

“Kanna?”

It took her a moment to remember that odd, flat word was the way they said her name. She turned, face hot, and flinched at the man’s closeness. He said something else, and she shook her head violently as if that could stem the flow of words to her ears. They joined the stream of incomprehensible babble running around her. His dark eyes were clearly concerned, but she couldn’t handle them – the drag of them against her skin was like grit paper. A jagged breath escaped her, and she clenched the muscles around her ribs more tightly. Every mode of expression available to her was barbarian and strange.

Sulu, feeling her alienation, reached out, but by the time his hand had lifted from his side, Kanna had fled.

Chapter 8

Kanna slammed out of the rec room, barely missing a shocked looking Spock who was about to enter. She didn't bother signalling her apology. The ache in her chest was growing too hot to ignore. It propelled her through the corridors too quickly for her to bother veiling her face. She had been displaced suddenly before. It should be easy now. She had always prided herself on her coolness in a new assignment, never revealing her discomfort to new managers. But here, with stakes so high, she looked like an emotional fool. She cringed at the memory of pouring her story out to Dr McCoy.

Another turn, and the corridor emptied. She sagged against the wall, pressing her face into the cool metal. When McCoy had showed her the scans of her mutilated uterus, a hiccup of laughter had bubbled out of her. His bewildered look was brief, but she replayed it now. He must think her a barbarian for laughing about such a crime, even if he was too civilized to say.

With a despondent finger, she traced the raised letters of the sign by her face. Without tone marks above and below, their glyphs were plain. The round one mimicked the shape of the mouth as it was said, and the second one moved forward like lips.

O-b, she mouthed. There was another open sound further on, and a crisp tutting cross shape, but the others were mysteries. She leaned back slightly to get a better look, and the motion sensor caught her. The door slid open.

Kanna stepped forward like in a dream. A bank of windows bowed along the entirety of the outside wall, and beyond there was... It was nothing like seeing stars from the ground, their light waves compressed and filtered by the great lens of the atmosphere. Even in the deep field, each pinprick of light glistened with its own steady colour. She drank in the umber of a distant spiral galaxy and the cloudy blues and greens of a nearby nebula passing before a star. She cursed biology, reaching a hand towards the window, that her eyes could see such a pathetic portion of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Their position relative to the star behind the nebula shifted, and the cloud of dust fell slowly into darkness. Her ears rang from the loss of it. The pressure that three- and four-dimensional space created vying in her mind spread out before her; never had she been so sure of the infinite surface area of a proton unfolded or her own ability to reach through space and fold the universe to her will.

"Kanna."

This time the sound of her name didn't make her flinch, nor was she embarrassed. So he had followed her from the rec room to ascertain her well-being - how could such a small thing matter?

Spock didn't say anything further, just set the something down next to where she sat on the floor and retreated to pull a strange device from a black carrying case. From the corner of her eye, she watched as he plucked at each of the wires strung between the frame and adjust their tension. Was it for cutting food? She picked up the cylinder next to her curiously and peeled at the paper wrapper. It was a bread wrap of some kind - she didn't see the connection, so took a hesitant nibble. He must have synthesized her dinner something before coming.

Spock raised an eyebrow in question and pulled again at the strings. This time, his hands didn't stop, but flew, so that the vibrations of the strings didn't cease but layered one over the other.

Music was radical - a barbaric custom used to perpetuate group delusions, a perversion of even speech, but now she heard for the first time prolonged harmonies, tones like rippling water and the crackle of wind through hardwood shrubs in the dry season. They pulled at her, and she felt tears rising shamefully to her eyes.

Spock did not see when he played - he fixed all his attention to the patterns behind his ears. Without Uhura's improvised singing, it wasn't as challenging of a practice as he had planned to do in the rec room, but he could experiment with mathematical spirals and tonal ratios that humans disdained in their music.

"Mmm." A multi-vocalic grunt cut him off. Kanna had dropped her dinner and was waving to get his attention. The skin around her eyes was cut with the lighting of capillaries. She tugged at her ear, then jabbed at the window, her finger leaving a mark on the glass.

Do you hear them? She seemed to say. *Play that.*

Spock had been a child the first time he set foot in the observation deck of a ship shuttling him and his mother towards Earth. She had stared at him expectantly, wanting the same wonder from him that burst from the other children. That he did not express it did not mean that his chest had not soared painfully outwards with a thousand waiting calculations. It was one of the first moments he truly understood *synesthetic* and felt it not as a slur from the mouth of a doctor, but a window into the physics of the universe.

It was one of the songs tucked deepest within him, the slurs of gravitational lensing and jumping scales of doppler shift. He stared out the widow playing whichever star his eyes landed on, and Kanna unfurled slowly, her legs dropping away from her chest and her back relaxing against the pane. The tones he played were discordant in some places, peaceful in others. Occasionally, they aligned semantically with her own tonal language, spinning accidental narratives.

The deck gave an imperceptible shake, and beyond the window, the world compressed into a series of bright lines. Their work on Gwydion-F complete, the crew of the Enterprise had dropped into warp speed. In an instant, Kanna was farther away from her home planet than anyone else had ever been. She forced herself to confront that as the last note faded into nothingness. It didn't hurt nearly as much as it would have an hour before. She knew it would again, often and strangely, but now she had seen - and heard - what she had run for.

Spock shifted, and she returned to the moment, suddenly aware of the accidental intimacy between them, but unlike the humans, his face was comfortingly smooth, meaning she didn't feel the compounded embarrassment from having it reflected at her.

He said something, and she caught 'eat', and got a confirming nod when she lifted the wrap. He watched as she took a bite, then produced his

own. The warp lights beyond the window dizzied her, but she could not look away as they ate in silence, visualising protons along perpendicular axis.

Long after she had gone to bed, her secondary nervous system twitched to stellar galaxies, and she dreamt of hands and prying brown eyes.

Chapter 9

Scotty met Kanna outside the gym on his way to the rec room.

“I should go clean. I smell,” she demurred to his invitation. In the frigid air of the Enterprise, the sweat on her skin felt like a layer of ice now that she was cooling down. A half hour of conditioning and another of self-defence had left her feeling shaky in more ways than one. The inside of her cheek was torn from biting it every time a faux-blow came her way.

“The anti-bac light we put you through when you came aboard means nothing will be colonizing you for at least a week more yet,” Scotty countered. “If anything, you have that new baby smell!” Like many things Scotty said that she didn’t understand, she ignored that.

“I must answer my homework, even though it creates more work for the instructors,” she said, falling into step next to him. She’d been scolded more than once for not completing her work outside of class.

“AI marks most of it. What it can understand of your hack-handed equations.”

Kanna didn’t respond – she knew Scotty wouldn’t dare hurt her feelings if it was even a little true. Human humour shared much with her own in favouring patent falsehoods, though they delighted in the semantic contrast rather than the physical act of lying.

The past two weeks had been a blur of emotional exhaustion, until her mind acclimated to the stress of sudden change and began taking the oddity in stride. Her mornings were defined by meetings with Macy and simple jobs like tidying common spaces. Classes cluttered her afternoon, and she was quickly learning much that they weren’t intending to teach her: Her telepathy, for instance, caused a lot of discussion about ‘cheating’, a concept which had taken Scotty the better part of an evening to explain to her, so foreign was the concept of individual performance.

But the times when Scotty was on the third watch were a reprieve from all that. During these quiet times when she struggled to sleep, he sat her in the main engineering room with broken parts and piles of schematics or discussed quantum engineering and shared morsels of carefully doled out shortbread. There was nowhere she felt as comfortable as sitting with her back against the heat of the wall abutting the engine, a mug of bitter tea cradled in her lap, listening to Scotty pontificate about the kids had abandoned traditional mechanics as he signed off gateway checklists. He wanted nothing from her, and she found his bashfulness endearing, as if *she* were the terrifying alien.

“How is the signal repeater replacement?” She asked shyly as the door to the rec room slid open. Macy had told her to work on asking questions of others, and Scotty has shown her the burned-out part from the day before. She was secretly hoping he might let her go into the crawl space between decks to watch the installation, though that would definitely be against regulations.

“An absolutely massive pain in my ass,” Scotty admitted. “You didn’t get on with it anymore, did you DeAngelo?”

The burly engineer shook his head, sliding his chair over so Kanna and Scotty could join the group at the table. This time of evening, the rec room was near bursting as those of all ranks ate and gossiped and played. At one table, a book club argued about the pairings in a new release, and around another a group of all ages sat bent over some sort of yarn craft. In the corner, Spock hunched over a multi-tiered gameboard, moving pieces against a computer.

“Whatever idiot rerouted that pipe left the smallest room,” DeAngelo complained. “I’ve either got to jerry rig a new tool or shut down coolant to this sector.”

“You signed off on that reroute!” A younger woman, Janie, protested. Her hands blurred as she shuffled a deck of cards.

“How big is the space?” Kanna asked. DeAngelo demonstrated with his hands, about half the height of a deck of cards. “And the nut is here?” she pointed directly beneath. He nodded, and, careful not to touch him, Kanna slipped her hand through and twisted her shoulder to manoeuvre her wrist.

DeAngelo swore. “Joints are supposed to bend like that.”

Even Scotty looked impressed. “You didn’t tell me you were double jointed.”

Kanna shifted, embarrassed by her own bragging. “I am just Gwydion.”

“You’re not claustrophobic, are you?” DeAngelo asked. Kanna widened her eyes slightly in humour, thinking of the sewage pipes, and shook her head. “Scotty?”

Scotty looked uncertain. “Between these walls, I danna have an issue with her having a go, but...”

“We’ll keep it in department,” DeAngelo winked, and Kanna tried to turn her mouth up slightly in an appropriately grateful smile. From his puzzled expression, it didn’t quite work. “Janie, you’ll go in there with her – I don’t like the idea of anyone alone with a sharp tool that close to the coolant. If the pipe is nicked, the fumes’ll overwhelm someone that close.”

“Great. I love babysitting,” Janie grouched. “Do I have to teach her poker too?”

Kanna dropped her attention to the table. It wasn’t so much that she was bothered by people not liking her – her entire life had been largely devoid of amicability – but that for once in her life she couldn’t tell *how* she was displeasing to some of those around her. Sure, there was a contingent of the crew who had agreed to allow her to access their language centres when she needed, but only their language centres. Two weeks was not enough to relieve her from the ache of being trapped in her own mind, or to teach her to read nuances into tone and expression. It baffled her how society managed to function without that transparency. At least when you knew why someone disliked your presence on

Gwydion-F, you could move on with no lost face.

She realised everyone was looking at her, waiting for her to say if she was playing. She flushed and shook her head, choosing instead to disconnect from Scotty's mind and bury herself in her language homework.

He has brown eyes and big ears, she wrote next to a picture. Above another, *They has long hair*. Scotty turned his cards over with a dramatic sigh, and she leaned over to peek at his hand. Janie snapped something about cheating.

She has the big noze. Kanna rapped her stylus on the screen and looked around, desperate for a distraction. Sulu, Uhura, and a woman named Nassim had just colonized a nearby table, and she took Sulu's wave as an invitation to abandon her language work. Surely it was better practice to actually *speak* English.

"How's it going?" He asked as she slid into a seat.

"Good, thank you," she said stiltedly. "How are you?"

Uhura smiled. "Your accent is much better!"

Kanna shook her head, not understanding. "My dog is green. He is a doctor. I do not speak English, sorry."

The table laughed, and Kanna slipped into Uhura's mind, letting the babble around her resolve into words.

"God, I hated English lessons," Nassim said. Like Kanna, her hair was covered, though she wrapped her scarf to leave her neck bare. Kanna eyed the style enviously. She'd taken to wearing black electrical tape over her electroreceptors to dull the constant hum of the Enterprises' systems, which, unlike algae-based electronics, made her itch. "They never teach you to say anything you need to know. Like I needed to navigate a shopping mall while living in a mining camp on Nigel-12."

"Surely it makes it easier for you, speaking it with us?" Uhura asked. "Muscle memory, brain patterns?"

Kanna wiggled her head and picked at the food Sulu had slid in front of her. He'd taken to her like a new pet, choosing her new things to try at each meal and shooing away others from his prize. She knew his attention was partly to do with her novelty but wasn't stupid enough to not take advantage of someone willing to show her the ropes. And no one at this table laughed when she struggles with cutlery.

"You can fight the science department to get some time on my brain scans," she said. "If I was connected to you and speaking, it would be your speech and muscle sections lighting up, not mine. What is this?"

"Bibimbap."

Nassim made a face. "Replicator kimchi tastes like sadness."

Uhura ignored the aside, her eyebrows creased. "You're not letting the blues run over you, are you?"

The texture of pickled carrots and rice was virtually indistinguishable, a poor replacement for 'real' food, but miles above rehydrated pulses that always tasted slightly of dust. Kanna swallowed, debating how to respond.

"They ask. It is hardly a bigger burden than wiping tables." Sometimes she said no, just to make sure she could, and the various biologists-neurologists-evolutionary anthropologists went away empty handed.

Uhura's frown deepened. On one hand, it surprised her that Spock, defensive as he was of his own privacy, would allow his department to take liberties of Kanna's people-pleasing, but she could also see a situation in which unfettered access to a new alien humanoid provided far too much temptation to resist crossing the boundary of propriety. He'd been in a particularly changeable mood lately, almost smiling at her one moment only to leave in disgust when she couldn't improvise to a particularly complex riff.

Feeling her stare, Spock looked up from his game and crooked his brow. Subtly as she could, Uhura flicked her eyes to Kanna, who was now listening intently to a conversation between Sulu and Nassim about the complex romantic situation on the Enterprise. It was as if she'd flicked a switch. A curtain passed over the first officer's face and he turned away without further ado.

The non-answer confirmed her suspicions: Something about their new visitor had put a bee in his bonnet. It couldn't be romantic. Spock approached such things head on and so privately, Uhura never found out unless the woman approached her for advice as his friend. Besides, those rare women were never anything less than paragons of the scientific community for whom his admiration was so great, it couldn't help but bubble over into a sexual nature. While Kanna wasn't by any means unattractive, her quiet, watchful nature lacked sophistication. Uhura had yet to see any spark that would prevent her from crumpling with any show of personality. When she spoke, they all strained to hear, and Uhura often caught her mirroring other's micro-expressions or trying to fit her words into facsimiles of humour that lacked the intent needed to land. Scotty had confided that he was worried what someone could talk her into with mal intent, so eager was she to adapt to her new surroundings.

Kanna wasn't privy to any of Uhura's thoughts, but she was aware of the silent communication between her and Spock. She had not interacted with the Vulcan since he left her outside the observation deck, but she watched him from the corner of her eye when they were in proximity, and often caught him staring openly, his eyes narrowed.

Specimen. Dissection. Vivisection. Analyse.

It was obvious to her who was sending the technicians to draw her blood or stick her in a cap of electrodes, but she struggled to reconcile that coldness with the person who demonstrated such care in tending to the injured or heard the stars, so she watched and waited, extending her senses just that bit farther. Of all the minds in the room, his was the most like hers, his neural structure creating a space she could so easily

latch into if only he didn't hold himself so tightly.

"I don't understand," she said, pulling herself back into Sulu's gossip. "If it causes so much strife and anguish, why do you all insist on continuing? Why not make everything open?"

"Drama is entertainment here. What else do we have to do with our time? Card games, gym, helping with the animals or plants – it all gets boring. But interpersonal drama? An endless source."

"You're entertained by the pain of others?"

"We all pull our weight. Our own pain is entertaining too. For instance, Christine."

Setting her tray down, the nurse gave Sulu a weary look. "Must you?"

Sulu pressed on. "Christine, what would you do with your time if you weren't pining?"

"Think my roommate would get more sleep without all the buzzing," Christine muttered darkly. Nassim and Sulu snorted.

"You see?" Sulu swivelled back to Kanna. "Christine slept with someone once a year ago, and it still provides ample entertainment. Never underestimate a good fantasy to pass the time."

Kanna did not see. She had spent time occasionally dreaming about past beds or warm meals, or even just sitting quietly in the sun, but sharing a bed? And buzzing? She tried to factor that into what they had told her about intimate partnerships, but everyone seemed intimate to her – how could they tell who was paired off? And why?

"Sleeping next to someone is an important ritual?" She asked cautiously. "To...mark a special intimacy?"

Four pairs of eyebrows shot up. Kanna drew back into herself, suddenly burning with embarrassment that she didn't understand.

"Sleeping with' is how we talk about sex, Kanna," Uhura said matter-of-factly. "It's a colloquialism."

The burning turned from embarrassment to panic. The bed in medical was lightyears behind her, but she felt desperate as if she had just been led before it.

"D'you...have sex on Gwydion?" Nassim asked, wrinkling her nose. Kanna couldn't respond. She hadn't seen any children on board. Did they ship off the artificial uteruses on a shuttle? Beneath her layers of clothes, the long-healed scar tissue cramped. She stared down at her tray to stop her eyes flicking wildly. What would they think of her when they learned what she had done? If someone asked her, would she be forced to tell them that she made herself barren against all custom? Rice crawled up her throat.

Christine sighed and put down her fork. It had been a long day, Spock had been cold, McCoy terse, and she was in no mood to switch back into nursing mode to comfort the statue-cum-woman sitting at the other end of the table, but Uhura was shooting her frantic looks, and Sulu and Nassim were clearly struggling with the idea of anyone being sex repulsed.

"It's not a big deal," Christine snapped finally. "For all that Sulu is being glib, we take consent quite seriously. I know McCoy told you that about medicine, but its about this too. No one will touch you unless you want it."

Kanna turned her head slightly, looking positively ghostly. When she spoke, it difficult to hear her over the sounds of the rec room. "How do you get the children off the ship?"

Nassim laughed, then slapped a hand over her mouth as Sulu glared at her. "We make sure that isn't an issue to begin with," Uhura explained. "There's no conception. It's for intimacy, like you said, and, well, fun."

Kanna couldn't help it: she threw up what little she had eaten on her tray, shame burning her eyes.

"If it makes you feel any better, Uhura spun the rumour mill. All I've heard is that she has a carrot allergy."

Dr Macy Holguin dropped her hands from her face and stared at her boss. "I'm not sure it does."

McCoy sighed and punched two more cups of coffee into the replicatory by his desk. "Did she say why she got so upset?"

Macy accepted the cup of coffee with a shrug. Her specialities were the psychological side effects of long-term space travel, not xenopsychology or even sexuality, but her latest crash course was almost certainly due to some strange shots last shore leave, and a subsequent blurry conversation with the captain. Unfortunately for her, McCoy saw it as a 'fabulous development opportunity'.

"Sexuality is so nearly a data set of one when dealing with known species," she mused. "But I got the impression...you know when kids are just entering adolescence? All your friends are suddenly crazy for girls, and you're left confused as to why they're not getting cooties?"

"You think its less asexuality, and more of an immaturity? She's well past adolescence. Talk me through it."

"I know it's not the perfect model, but hierarchy of needs for one," Macy ventured. "She's never even had her physiological needs truly met: Food rationing as punishment, dangerous working conditions – hell, her mind wasn't even her own. Forget safety – any time she's been undressed in her life around others, she's been physically and psychologically abused. She avoids her own body, and her relationships with others have been defined by power dynamics and the potential for betrayal."

"So what you're saying is it's no surprise that she feels that way, and all we can do as providers is continue to educate her and give her coping

mechanisms and help her find her own way.”

Macy slumped and nodded. She knew McCoy was right – it wasn’t a reflection on her as a psychologist, despite the guilt she was feeling. It had only been two weeks.

“We don’t even know if she would react to physical touch in the most ideal circumstances,” McCoy continued, “much less sex. Let’s focus on getting her comfortable in her own skin. She’s doing self-defence classes isn’t she? Encourage her to do something positive as well, yoga, dance, anything where she isn’t the enemy. And she has to look at that damn scar!”

Macy sighed again and crumpled her coffee cup in irritation. She was never drinking again.

Chapter 10

The shift patterns on the Enterprise were generated by a great algorithm which took into account everything from current mission needs to recreational preferences to personality conflicts. No one but the HR programmers seemed to understand how it worked, but everyone complained about it, and now its hand had descended to take Scotty off third watch.

Nellor didn't sleep much either, and her presence in the small cabin bit at Kanna's peripherals. When around 80% of the ship descended into sleep, lights in the hallways low in an attempt to maintain circadian rhythm, she took to wandering the hallways, arms wrapped tightly around her torso. Lack of sleep and cold kept her metabolism high. She nursed the extra rations McCoy ordered, eking out the minutes until the ship came back to life.

One of these nights, she sat cornered in the mess by a chatty private lecturing her on the trajectory of media since the 22nd century. She kept her head tilted vaguely in his direction, but stared down at the tabletop and ran through her algebra lesson from the day.

Distance equals time times speed. Time equals distance divided by speed. If distance stays the same but speed increases towards the speed of light, time decreases to maintain balance; therefore a photon experiences no time.

"...but really it isn't until you get into post-post modernism that the schism became really evident..."

Distance squared equals time squared times speed of light squared minus 3-dimensional distance x, squared.

".....a seminal work, really..."

If light is travelling through space, then x equals time times speed. At the speed of light, space time distance is null. A calm sense of satisfaction washed over her at the simple equations. For a photon, there was no time or distance between absorption; there was being and not being.

She rubbed her fingertips together, centring herself in the tiny sensation of her fingerprint ridges. Did he know she wasn't listening? She wasn't demonstrating any of the listening markers that humans normally gave each other, but maybe he dismissed her stillness for alienness. Certainly she could only understand every few words. Was she allowed to tell him to stop talking? She steeled herself and began walking through the formula for time dilation.

Kanna was not the only one irritated by Scott's removal from third watch. It wasn't often that Spock felt the urge to socialise, but when he did, the quiet company of the chief engineer was preferable. The jabber of a voice caught his ear as he walked by one of the junior rec rooms.

"Who propped this door open?" He demanded, leaning inside. Scotty swore Spock derived pleasure from the terrified looks he extracted from the crew, but he was wrong.

It was more satisfaction that twitched the corners of his eyes as the ensign swivelled frantically. "Sorry sir! It's only that the vent is blocked and-"

"And is your comfort priority over fire safety, ensign?"

"No sir. Sorry sir."

Spock looked at Kanna. Beneath the table, her fingers rubbed against each other frantically, and she was practically leaning away from the ensign. "I believe you promised me a game of chess, Ms Taliesin, if now is a good time."

She hadn't, but Kanna lurched to her feet anyway. They could sort out whatever confusion once she was out the door. With a final stern glance at the ensign, Spock let the door slide shut behind them.

"I do not know how to play chess," she said. Though she was improving, her English still came out stilted and heavily accented when spoken independently. "You think I am someone other."

"I was giving you an opportunity to leave," Spock replied. "Unless-"

"Oh. Thank you."

They stood awkwardly for a moment, staring away from each other, both repressing the urge to take great, curious looks. For weeks, in his spare time, Spock had poured over her medical records, sent scientists to scan her brain, take her blood, run tests on her joints. He could recite her anatomy: small stature, organs padded with omega-3 rich fat. Her ribs settled puzzle-like against her spine, held apart with a web of muscles. A scar split through the fibres and into her lungs.

Her brain nestled like his own in a cushion of cranial fluid. The spinal column was flat and wide, fanning out to entwine with the back-most lobe like lace. He had laboured over structures that meant nothing to him, and traced amygdala, hypothalamus – cradled safely in the depths, as resistant to evolutionary variation as eyelashes.

There was another way to uncover the mysteries of her telepathy. "Would you like to learn chess?"

Kanna tilted her head back to look at him. He transformed so quickly: one moment reflecting those noisome human emotions, the next smoothing out. She struggled to find the right words. "Please do not be kind," she tried.

He looked mildly taken aback, then realised. "I assure you, I'm not being polite. Chess is a very individual game, and one quickly runs out of

opponents on a ship.”

Spock led her in silence to an empty reading room. A hardwired library terminal hummed in the corner. Kanna peered at the high number on the thermostat.

“Regulation?”

“It’s broken. That’s why this room is always empty,” Spock replied, folding himself onto a couch before a low table. Kanna sat cross-legged on the floor. The pieces were already laid out in their neat ranks. He explained the rules, and they played for a while in silence, a succession of quick games.

She found herself relaxing into the quiet, the need to monitor her eyes to engage with the human’s non-verbal language slipping away. The tension slipped from her throat and cheeks until her blank expression wasn’t a maintained mask but a natural state.

As Spock tipped her king for the third time, she drifted her hand down her chest.

“That’s an apology sign? It is not a failing. If we play a game against the computer, I can explain it as we go.”

Kanna wasn’t sure she cared, but she enjoyed the way her chest warmed under his eyes, so she moved around the table. They held themselves stiffly, each shuffling and moving to ensure his leg could not brush her shoulder. Spock fired up the chess app and propped his tablet on the table so it could scan his moves.

“It makes more sense with us on one side, but I still don’t understand,” she admitted finally. Spock had walked her through the last several moves, but she could not follow his mind as it went into the future. “Why can’t I move this…pawn…here?” she jumped it across the board. “Why does this man who is so big not move?” She tapped the king.

“It’s a game about war and acting with scarcity of resource.”

“I don’t understand those words.”

“You have to solve a problem, take the other player’s king without losing your own, with only the tools you have in your pocket.”

Kanna considered. She had lots of tools in her pockets. She couldn’t help but pick up pieces of scrap or the odd broken item. Whatever she fixed from the scrap pile, things that were too degraded to be of quality for the ship, Scotty let her squirrel away.

“And this is to make me think of a day when I will not have more tools.”

“Yes.”

“And the rules…simulate scarcity?”

“Yes.”

“And this is fun?”

“It is stimulating.”

Kanna twirled a discarded pawn between her fingers. A metal washer clunked in the base of the plastic, giving the hollow piece the weight to stay upright. The computer slid a knight across the screen, and Spock mirrored it so the physical board matched. He held his elbows in tightly and moved his arm like an automaton to make sure they didn’t brush. She sat like a statue on the ground, her eyes locked on the board.

“I will come again,” she lurched suddenly to her feet and was halfway out the door before she called back, “Keep playing.”

Spock played the computer into a stalemate. He did not allow himself to relax, as to relax would be to admit that he had been tensed to begin with. Bodies did not raise that effect on him, and this interaction was fully scientific.

Kanna returned with an arm full of dull metal and bright, mischievous eyes.

“Is that a transporter plate?” Spock asked as she began laying pieces out on the ground. A handful of tools and screws came from her pockets, along with a collection of circuits.

“Mostly burnt out. Only good a few grams.” She jerked her chin at the table. “Not a smart way to play the computer.”

It was the night in the scrub flat all over again. Kanna sprawled on the ground, her ad hoc workshop between the triangle of her legs. Spock watched her sceptically for a time, but he had to admit to himself that he enjoyed her quiet industry. There was no need to force unnecessary conversation or justify his being, his *Vulcanness*. She did not take his logic as a slight.

“Have you begun to consider what you will do once you are off the Enterprise?” He asked after a time.

“Hmm. Same as always maybe,” she said. “Scotty says it is good I am not scared of grunt work. Even people with spaceships need plumbers and electricians.” With a flick of her wrist, she stripped the end of a wire. Her hands shook. “But sometimes I think maybe I made an error in coming here and there is nowhere for me. Humans are so strange. They are angry with me. They treat me like a child.”

“You could go to Vulcan.”

Kanna glanced up, her eyes wide in her smile. They narrowed again at his expression. “Oh. You are not joking.”

“Why not?”

She gestured at the tablet. Spock nodded, waiting as she found the admin to the chess app and began to input a new module. Only a month, and she was rummaging around in their technology.

“I can feel how tense your mind is,” she said after a while. “Humans are so open, easy to ignore for their softness. But you and Ensign Nellor hold yourselves in, like you worry you will spill out. I can feel that...that tightens?”

“Tightness.”

“That tightness. I think a whole planet gives me a headache.” She slid the transporter plate under the chessboard. “There. Start a new game?”

He clicked each piece down, revelling in the feeling of the washers settling in their base. He imagined that was him and every click was a further grounding.

“How did you know that the contact made me uncomfortable in the council chamber?” He asked. “I was not even aware.” The question had been nagging at him for weeks – the idea that someone had knowledge of him that he did not.

Kanna made a vice gesture with her hands. She was watching the board eagerly, practically vibrating where she knelt by the table, waiting for him to start the new game. “You did that,” she said absently. “Half a second. The hubs pulled away quickly.”

“Is it possible to learn to be less tight? To know when someone is there?”

She sat back on her feet with an irritated wave. “You are so...briggged in your own mind. What good is that? Everyone making faces and tones and touching, and you care if someone knows you think their eyes ugly? You do not know – it is so quiet if you let it go! The last month the words in my head go this way and that way but they do not go out. I am trapped in myself. I am only myself and cannot be Yva or share ideas with another generator worker. You do not even imagine what it is like, all of you. Words are so sweet when they have meaning and are not just thrown here and there.”

It was the longest speech Spock had heard her deliver, her voice awkward and hoarse, tongue tangling with irritation at her lack of vocabulary. By the end, she was holding her veil over her face, her temples red with embarrassment.

“I have been trying to figure out how you do it,” he admitted. “I keep sending technicians to do brain scans.”

The look she shot him was almost wry. “I know.”

Spock cleared his throat. “Perhaps with your participation, I could better further my understanding.”

Kanna dropped the veil. “You let me show you?”

“If you come to the lab we can-”

“No.” she gestured around them. “Here. Not an experiment.”

For the first time, they let themselves stare at each other. She took in the way his ear curved into his jaw, the green tinge that intensified over his cheeks. Evolution had mirrored the shape of his ears in the swoop of his brow, so much more dynamic than her own flat eyebrows. In return, she let his gaze linger on her eyes and spots of hyperpigmentation on her cheeks. With every breath they could feel the other’s mind just out of reach, barely sparking their mirror neurons.

Spock tore his eyes away back to the board. “Here,” he agreed, moving a pawn blindly. The computer reacted, and with a gentle hum, a black pawn shimmered and rematerialized a few squares forward. Impressive. If not an unorthodox use of ship equipment.

Kanna flopped back down onto the floor, a wave of tiredness washing over her. “It works,” she said, reaching for her tablet to lay out the schematics. “Now I make it better.”

Chapter 11

Ensign Janie Loft scowled to no one in particular. Get Montgomery Scott to take you under his wing, her advisor at the Academy had said, and you're set for a successful career. Not because the man had any savvy in Fleet politics, but because if he took an interest enough to warp your mind to work like his, even a little, you'd be the *crème de la crème* of space engineers.

So she'd worked. It hadn't even been that difficult. She was a prodigy after all, someone for whom numbers slid into place and resolved into engine output or fuel consumption. No one had ever had to sit with her and explain how the matter/anti-matter interactions mapped onto the equations: she read it and let the understanding follow.

Janie grabbed her foot, ignoring the painful stretch in her hamstring. That's what being an officer was, ignoring the pain of working third shifts and monitoring grunts fixing sewage pipes even though it bored you half to death and never letting anyone know the moments when your heart pounded and you thought your head would cave in from the stress of it all.

All to be looked over in favour of a woman who needed hand holding to understand the calculus behind fluid dynamics.

As if to mock her foul mood, a peal of laughter rang out across the gym. The hoarse sound cut off quickly, surprised, and then started up again, joined by a booming masculine tone. Janie peeked from beneath her fringe. Kanna sat hunched over by the weights, her scarf pressed tightly over her face as she shook with laughter. Next to her, eyes shining with mirth, was Scott. Janie's jaw ached. How had that frigid fish made him laugh? Her jokes just made the chief engineer stare blankly, and she knew she was funny.

"You sound like a dying seal lass!" Scotty wiped at his eyes. "I'm not sure if we should make you laugh more often or ban it outright for fear of someone thinking we've a new alarm on board."

"I don't like it," Kanna wheezed from behind her scarf, setting Scotty off again. "How do you *breathe*?"

Janie shook her head in disgust. She had no intention of watching while a civvy rummaged in the crawl space to fix the signal repeater. It was against regulation, and if they were found out, Lord knows that Scotty and DeAngelo would get a slap on the wrist, but the dark eye of the captain would hold her down for months, even if she wasn't officially punished. Besides, she'd been practicing, and with a set of softer tools, it would be possible – if not easy – for her to strip the bolts and swap the pieces without damage to the coolant pipe. She wouldn't even mention it, just mark the job as complete in the queue and only bring it up if asked. *I misunderstood, I'm sorry. But it's done now.*

Standing under the hot stream of the shower, Kanna pressed a hand to her ribs. Surely she had laughed before? Or had nothing ever been so funny that she couldn't – or wouldn't – repress the spasming of her lungs? The ache lingered in her cheeks. She'd be embarrassed by the whole thing if Scotty's face hadn't lit up in such childish delight that she didn't mind the risk of being seen a fool. She pondered this slowly and from a distance as she got soap from the wall dispenser and scrubbed.

She missed the sonic cleaners back home, where one simply stood, eyes screwed up tight against nakedness. The feeling of her own skin beneath her hands was alien, and she worked quickly to avoid thinking about how much more sensitive some places were than others: the crooks of her elbows, the flat of her sternum or where her scar stretched tight between her hips.

Humans were obsessed with bodies. They flaunted them and tended them meticulously. Just beyond the door of the shower cubicle would be a row of women at the mirror rubbing and plucking and examining themselves and each other. She had once even seen a few comparing the hair between their legs, debating the best shapes for different genitals.

Kanna dressed quickly in the shadow of the cubicle. She had been told she didn't have to, that they wouldn't look, but she could always sense someone peering from the corners of their eyes and assessing how her flat chest and round hips stacked against their own. If there had been space for her to wield her elbows in the tight space, she would have braided and covered her hair there too – Uhura and Nassim and other curly haired women were always shoving bottles of products towards her or offering to do it for her. The thought of their hands in her hair made her blush furiously.

She was in corner farthest from the door when a woman shrieked in surprise. "Jesus *fuck*!"

"Dramatic much?" Someone called back.

The woman poked her head from her cubicle. "The dryer just scalded me!"

"So report it to maintenance and stop being such a baby. We're late."

Kanna closed her eyes. The Enterprise was an efficient system. It wouldn't bother generating heat for the dryers but take it as a waste product from somewhere else, like the library servers. But often heat generated in the centre of the ship was radioactive. The only safe method of disposal would be to run coolant through and extract it into space, taking with it excess heat from other systems as it went.

Coolant.

If a coolant pipe had burst, the heat from the servers may not be modulated, causing over-heated air to flood the dryers.

Burst. Or punctured.

Kanna reacted on instinct. Her mind shot out. Near the door, a Lieutenant Mason dove for her communicator, paging engineering and medical, spurred by the foreign thoughts suddenly in her own head. It felt violating, but Mason could complain later. Everyone in the room now knew

what Kanna did: in as small of a space as the coolant pipe was, hydrogen gas, fourteen times lighter than air, could quickly rise and suffocate anyone working.

A half-dressed security lieutenant flanked Kanna as she moved into the hallway. Someone nearby knew that hydrogen coolant was compressed to 3.5×10^7 pascal. Just over 100,000 pascal in the Enterprise's atmosphere. Together, they calculated the rate of flow into the chamber, how quickly hot air would have reached the dryer. If Loft had not gotten out when the pipe was pierced, her air had been oxygen deficient for a minute and a half.

Kanna's mind sang. She was part of a system again, minds shining towards a single goal. There was no inefficiency of speech or face. The lieutenant was stronger but didn't know anything about the between decks. Kanna was confident in tight spaces. The lieutenant offered the cradle of her hands as soon as they reached the hatch, boosting Kanna towards the ceiling.

If you can't rescue safety, wait for help, intoned between them.

Kanna wriggled through, keeping flat to the floor to avoid hitting her head on a vent. Despite the pounding in her chest, she took a moment to orient herself. The space between decks was nearly a metre high, but crammed with the MEP that allowed a safe and convenient life on board. This was her native habitat, a jungle of ducts and wires that resolved under schooled eyes into tidy systems.

A minute and forty-five seconds.

Lights should have clicked on above her as she pulled herself through the crawl space, but without the signal repeater, they were cut off from the Environmental Management System. She relied on her electroreceptors pinging a staticky map of wires and her intersympathetic nerves. A metre ahead behind a fire hatch, the sticky slow activity of an unconscious mind flowed towards her like honey.

For a moment, the door stuck, and it occurred to Kanna that she had potentially overreacted. Then she felt Scotty come into range and a moment of his frantic panic as he realised the extraction fans weren't running, allowing his ship to fill with flammable hydrogen, and she put her weight into her efforts. The door creaked up.

Two minutes and fifteen seconds.

Kanna shoved herself over a lip and into the dark. Hydrogen was odourless, but when she took a breath, her body failed to react, searching for the oxygen.

There's a light on your communicator, Scotty thought, his mind shivering uncomfortably at the contact with a foreign system. Kanna struggled to get her hands in front of her, then winced as light flooded from the side of the communicator and illuminated a face and inch from her own.

Janie lay prone in the tight corridor, her hand still caught in the nest of pipes.

Shallow breathing. Kanna edged forward, wedging herself into the gap and followed Janie's hand with her own. Her lungs began to tighten. Around the back of the pipe, gas plumed over her fingers and made them ache with cold. *I can feel the leak, but I don't have any tools.*

Scotty stabbed at his tablet to reset the fans. "Get Janie—" *Get Janie out and close the fire door. I have epoxy for the pipe.*

Kanna moved back, keeping her face close to the floor. She felt light-headed with the pressure of the situation. Janie outweighed her by nearly a third. She'd have to pull her backwards.

It's a mechanics problem lass, Scotty thought, sensing her trepidation. *Choose the point your force will be applied best. Touching doesn't count right now.*

Still, she cringed as she wrapped her arms around the unconscious woman's ribs, practically pressing her face into her waist. Beneath her shirt, Janie was so much softer than she looked. With her boots braced, Kanna heaved, curling back. Her inter-rib muscles screamed in protest, pulling into her spine. An inch.

Two minutes and forty-five seconds.

Again. Another inch.

Janie's head bounced against the lip of the fire door.

Kanna bit back a scream of irritation. Her hair was falling into her face in itching tendrils, and her muscles protested at the lack of air. She let go and moved back to Janie's shoulders. The lip of the door dug into her forearms as she used them as levers, hands under Janie's armpits, to heave her head and neck out into the corridor.

I will be brave, she thought to herself in the secret part of her mind. *And kind like they all are.* If she succeeded at this, shoving herself into uncomfortable places, sex-close to another, for no benefit to herself, it would prove she could be part of the type of community that had taken her in. That she was worthy of Scotty's help registering her finessed chess-plate for something called a patent, so it would be known it was made by her. She could accept Christine and Uhura's invitations to their rooms to watch their drama shows and smooth their bodies. She could teach Spock how to open up his mind, and it would mean something – she'd have a place with them.

Teeth clenched, Kanna pushed and pulled. Inch by inch she pulled the unconscious ensign through the fire door, until her toes cleared the threshold and the door could slam back into place. The distance to the hatch seemed interminable. There was nothing in her consciousness but an ache that turned to burn as she inched backwards. Somewhere in the dark, Janie began to stir, consciousness firing sparks.

When Spock left the bridge, it was with every intention of keeping his gaze fixed on the middle distance and avoiding any interaction that

could delay his return to his cabin. He knew he needed to meditate when the whine of cooling fans set his jaw tightening. Even after so long in Starfleet, moulding himself to the frame of *Science officer Vulcan* proved exhausting someday. It wasn't a façade – the large majority of what he presented was himself – but the wariness, the sense of being watched and measured at every turn pushed his capacity for stimulation.

The daytime interior of the Enterprise hardly helped. The murals and plants bursting in the corridors were a necessary touch to keep long-haul crew feeling contextualised, but Spock preferred it at night when the colours softened under dim lights. He squeezed his eyes shut against the cheerful force of the flowers swaying on the wall of the lift.

As the door slid open and he stepped out onto his residential deck, he wished he'd kept them shut. Whatever was causing the small group gathered beneath the hatch, he wanted no involvement, especially with how Scotty's face was screwed up in distress and the doctor was fiddling with an oxygen tank.

Suddenly, the doctor dropped the tank and three sets of arms raised towards the hatch. Spock stepped forward. There was something uncanny about the motion, as if it had been caused by a signal he had not heard. A moment later, a blonde head flopped from the hatch, and they pulled an unconscious ensign from the ceiling. Spock sighed – that was probably something he should check in on.

"Status report, Mr Scott?"

"Ach – give me a moment here Spock," Scott said, jabbing at the tablet. "I'm trying to get these fans back on. Hand the epoxy up to Kanna, would you? It's in my back pocket."

Spock glanced up. Kanna peered down at him, her cheeks flushed with exertion. That, at least, explained the eerie way the medical team was working in silence, each movement choreographed to their partner. She was without her scarf, and curls frizzed around her in a halo, blurring her into the dark. Her scarf acted like a barrier between her and the world, a harsh cartoon's outline impressing her onto the surface of the world. Now, as she leaned down to snatch the epoxy and inched back into the dark, Spock was struck by how *in* the world she seemed.

The ensign on the gurney gasped into the oxygen mask, and the stocky lieutenant at her side murmured.

"Kanna won't have to hold her breath now, at least," Scotty muttered, dropping his tablet. He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "How'd we get into this one then, Spock?"

Spock watched the gurney disappear down the corridor. "I suspect you know more than I."

Scott shook his head in disbelief. "I could tell you *everything*. From a handful of viewpoints. I don't know how she does it – I think my brain may explode!"

Spock's chest twinged. "In that case, I'll expect a comprehensive incident report."

They waited, Scotty occasionally furrowing his brow at the ceiling as he communicated with Kanna. It took only a few minutes later for her to appear again. She swung down, only to fall as her arms gave out. Spock lurched forward at her gasp. He reached out, his fingers tangling in her hair as he grabbed her around the ribs. In the human-cold air, she was hot beneath his hands. He curled his fingers instinctively towards her warmth, feeling the taught muscle bridging the spaces between her ribs expand with a sharp intake of breath. Very much in the world.

Kanna jerked away, her face flaming. "Sorry. I strained my back." Her speech had the fluency indicating she was using Scotty's language, and Spock found he missed the stiltedness.

"You okay lass?" Scotty looked frantically into his face. "Breathing alright?"

"I patched the pipe," she said. She twisted her hair into a rope, twining it around her neck to cover her electroreceptors. Spock cut his gaze determinedly over her shoulder. "The epoxy dried before I could get it smoothed out, but it's on. And the signal replicator is in, so you shouldn't have any more issues with the EMS." She held out a handful of small tools only for Scotty to wave them away.

"But are you okay?"

Kanna glanced between them. "Scotty," she said slowly, weighing each word, "I don't believe that my well-being is priority. I think-" She took a nervous breath. "You'll forgive me for advising you check on Janie."

Scotty's face fell. "Oh."

"And maybe...ask why she was up there alone?" Kanna jerked at the end of her hair, tugging her self-made noose tighter. Scotty fidgeted.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing that I know is my place to say."

With a grimace, Scott hurried away.

"I said that okay?" Kanna asked when he was gone. She was speaking stiltedly again. "Not hurtful or rude?"

"Very tactful." Spock coughed. "Are you feeling alright though? I know humans in particular often have negative reactions to stress hormones."

To his surprise, when Kanna tilted her head up to look at him, her eyes were bright. Her expression couldn't be called a grin, but her mouth pulled back from her teeth in a skull-like grimace that still managed to convey a mischievous confidence. Spock knew that feeling well from people like Jim – the thrill of having done something and done it well and done it in circumstances that could have killed someone less skilled. The ego-blush of the damned.

“Is that what Starfleet is like?”

“Sometimes.”

“That is it.” Kanna pointed at the ceiling. “That is what I want to do. I want in.”

Chapter 12

Several hours later, Scotty lifted his head from his hands long enough to shout *come in* as someone kicked his door.

“It smells like poison in here.”

He heard Kanna set something on the table before him and sit to take off her boots.

“Laphroaig,” he countered, “is smoked with peat.”

“That makes it *sound* like poison. I brought tea.”

Scotty sat up and felt his heart clench. A glass pot sat on his coffee table, steaming darkly beside a plate of scones and jam and butter that must have taken a week’s dessert ration to replicate. Kanna sat on the other side, scarf around her shoulders, buttering a scone as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“You didn’t have to do that, lass,” he said softly.

“Did you speak to Janie?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She shrugged and proffered the scone. “I don’t like to talk about *anything*, but no one gives me much of a choice.”

Scotty stared at the plate. The jam shone thick with seeds and lacked the strange jiggle of replicated – Kanna had found something *real*, bartered for it with God-knows what. “I just don’t understand how I fucked this up so badly. Captain had been telling me to take someone under my wing but...but I didn’t even think she *liked* me.”

The visit in the med bay had been agonizing. Janie’s head turned away in embarrassment through nearly an hour of stilted conversation to get to the point of why she had gone up there alone: she had wanted to be seen. By *him*. Scotty had sat stuttering, trying not to communicate how much he wanted to sink into the floor. It was so easy for the captain, for Bones too, to do the whole firm hand, kind look, I-see-you-and-make-you-feel-valued nonsense. Why couldn’t he do it? It killed him to see the brash ensign in tears – tears his inaction had cause – and not know how to fix it.

Kanna stirred a spoonful of jam into her tea, watching as the seeds spun in the maelstrom of her spoon. This was the moment where Macy would say something to prompt her with some question about her feelings. Instead she said, “You can’t fix something until you know it is broken, and you don’t know it is broken until something goes wrong. And once you know, you fix it.”

“It’s nice of you to say so, but you’ve no idea how shit I am at it. People they’re...I can’t see inside of ‘em. The Enterprise, I know her inside and out. She breathes wrong and I sense it. But people? And lasses especially? I say the wrong thing or in the wrong way, and they’re left offended, and I don’t even know what it is I’ve done. Surely it’s better to just say nothing at all?”

Kanna raised her eyebrows. She’d been practicing it in the mirror, and it felt like a good time to pull it out, even just slightly. “So, you’re saying it’s almost like the Enterprise is a planet where you can read minds, and suddenly you’re on an alien planet, where everyone is speaking a different language and not saying what they think?”

He chuckled despite himself, the sound warm and tired. “Aye then, maybe you do get it.”

They were quiet for a while, tilting their heads into the hums and clicks, footsteps beyond the door and the sighs of turbolifts. In the dimness of Scotty’s cabin, the scorching brightness felt impossibly distant.

“You never say the wrong thing to me,” Kanna said quietly. “If that matters.”

“Aye, well.” Scotty buttered another scone, pushing half across the table. “You’re an easy one for me to get on with lass.”

She smiled then, or at least he thought she did, a tiny uptick of the corners of her mouth. He wondered, not for the first time, how old she was – young enough to have the same bright look of mischief as his niece, now in her second year of a nursing degree, but old enough for a line at the corner of her mouth to barely give her smile away. “Can I ask a question?”

“Absolutely not.” Scotty slumped back in his chair, slopping the last of his tot into the cooling remains of his tea. “No questions here.”

“Do you...” Kanna began, and then paused, her mouth open, eyebrows creased. “Do you have a family?” She finished, rather lamely, pointing to the bedside table where a frame flashed pictures of a years-ago Christmas. “I’ve heard lots about families. It sounds stressful.”

He told her about families – or about his at least. Mum and Nan and cousins and a barely there dad who worked the shipyard for long stretches. Distant uncles who came in with handfuls of alien gadgets worked into barely feasible tech and an aunt who rode freighters in Orion and brought home a green-skinned lover who smiled with all her teeth. He could have shown her VR, but instead he told her about the streets of Glasgow, where holographic graffiti muraled the ancient art school and drunks shouted old revolutionary gripes from the pavement. Kanna listened as her mug grew cold in her hands, picturing what mountains must be like dressed in their golden birch leaves and trying to block out the guilt.

It lingered as she wished him good night and made her way to the reading room. It was one thing to ask Spock to talk her through what was

needed to enlist, it was another entirely to look down the possibility of Scotty telling her he didn't think she was good enough. She could imagine it, the way his face would fall slightly, and he'd stutter out an excuse. Better to hear about family, even if it felt like lying.

Spock barely glanced up as she sat on the floor by the sofa. Good. She'd wrenched herself away so awkwardly earlier, his hands around her rib a hot jolt straight to her throat, that she worried he would treat her oddly when they agreed to meet, and his disinterest gave her a moment to gather her thoughts.

"You don't have to sit on the floor," he said, finally closing the report he was reading. "You are not my inferior."

"Aren't I?"

Spock shifted. "On the ship. But not in a moral sense..." it took him a beat too long to notice the teasing glint in her eyes and trail off lamely.

"I like it," she explained. Chairs and stools and sofas all required different kinds of sitting, all variously painful. The floor was the floor. "And the sofa is...intimate." Artificial down was not so different from the softness of space time, drawing smaller bodies into large.

"How would you like to proceed?"

Kanna tilted her head. "I have not taught someone to breathe," she said, continuing her metaphor from her first day on board, "but maybe you show me how you do first?"

"Taught."

"Taught someone."

They looked anywhere but each other. That power had been taken last time they were in this room together, a brash violation of courtesy to soothe a mutual curiosity, but now the barriers were back between them, cocooned in their own discomfort. Spock shoved the table away and slid onto the floor, and what followed was a dance to avoid their knees touching as they sat opposite each other. Finally, Kanna managed to unfurl one of her legs out to the side, tucking the other even closer in.

"I'll have to touch you," he said apologetically. "I'll put my fingers on your face. Here, and here." He traced the points on his own skin with the precision of someone who needed to know exactly what to expect.

Kanna's breath caught. *Another set of hands, scholar soft, holding her face in place.* "Touch, or hold?"

"Touch. Just enough for the electrical impulses of our nerves to reach each other."

I have the ability to say what happens to my body, she thought. Macy made her say it at the end of every one of their sessions. *Just because something has happened to me before, does not mean its okay for it to happen again.*

"Would you like to do it to me first?"

Kanna nodded. To her shame, when he took her hand, it was shaking. Or maybe that was him, hardly breathing as he placed her fingers at his temple.

"You are not comfortable with me either," she said. Her thumb brushed a small dimple at the corner of his mouth.

"It would be illogical to feel uncomfortable with you," Spock replied tersely. He held perfectly still, hardly breathing to avoid leaning further into her hand. "I could easily overpower you." Kanna bit back a smile and drew her hand back. It was no longer shaking.

"Go ahead."

He had laid his hands on her before, but that was in the dark, with layers of nanogel and bruises between them. This time they were stark lit without the buffer of anonymity.

"It's not pleasant," Spock warned, his fingers sliding onto her temples.

It is.

Her intersympathetic nervous system buzzed, trying to make sense of the signals her efferent nerves were sending. She hadn't re-taped her electroreceptors after her shower, and for a moment, she felt buoyed by carbonation as his neurons connected with hers. The points of contact between their skin became magnified, spreading out until her jaw tingled, tickling her soft palate, and she opened her mouth to gasp at the sensation.

Then the wave hit.

Chapter 13

Deck 9, corridor 3, room 7. Had anyone looked in, they would have left quickly to spread the gossip about the science officer giving a strange Vulcan embrace to their stowaway. But no one came by, and it was just as well for the calamity of the moment could not be explained to anyone who had not experienced it.

A universe was being born. Data collapsed into stars fusing memories into places that didn't exist but in this space. Two minds warred, their gravitational pull redirecting every force until even individual electrons were being dragged along into a new orbit.

The new mind grasped for its identity. The building blocks of personality twisted like DNA, helixing experiences together in random synaptic flashes. They were an adolescent, standing in the school yard with the sting of alienation still smarting. They sat in Development, one of endless moments, their degradation demonstrated on an ecological chain. There was the horror of hands where they did not want hands, the safety of quiet moments beneath leaves flickering red/green/red. They were mothered and motherless, terrified and stoic with a shared muscle memory of stilled faces.

Small moments cleaved together, increasing in mass until they were checking the Academy packing list under their father's disapproving eye. They stared at the clinical bed, two paths unfolding as they gripped a piece of metal in their pocket. Mate or sky. Duty or stars.

The horror of the memory was enough for Kanna to remember herself and wedge them apart. She sprang up, her dual larynx contracting in a symphony of expletives. The room was too small, too hot. She felt stripped down to her skin as her heart pounded.

"Fucking primitive dangerous absolute bollocks-" She could only find words in her native language, even though she knew she sounded to him like nothing more than a bird.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Kanna stopped pacing and fixed him with a sharp gaze. He sat just as he had been before, and his calm made her enraged her. "You should have warned me you had no control."

There was not a trace of pity in his cool eyes. "You shouldn't have assumed."

She slumped to the couch and buried her face in her hands. Tears rose in her throat. That was the danger of emotions: To hold them in your own heart was one thing, but share them with another and they compounded and twisted in transmission. Her stomach burned with the feelings of liaisons she'd never had – decontextualised memories of men and women in her bed. A beautiful woman whose cheeks blushed like new leaves staring down at her with an expression that made the shame in her bones ache. She took a deep breath and dropped her hands.

"Excuse my outburst. It was surprising." Spock cocked an eyebrow. "Okay – it was horrible."

"Quite."

"Is it always like that for you?" Hardly a wonder his mind had reacted so tensely when they tried to connect with him in the council chamber.

"I would posit that it was made worse by your mind fighting back against the intrusion. Human minds offer less resistance."

Kanna slid back to the floor. Her edges felt blurred. She was no longer sure where she ended and the man across from her began. If she took reached out to him, who would feel it? She wrapped her grip around her boots to fight the shameful impulse.

"There are people who write books about this," she began, "But only people read books, so I will have to explain it only as I know it, and that is slow and strange for me.

"My people cover themselves because, to keep yourself, you can open either your mind or your body. If you give both, where do you make sure you remain? Right now I am thinking: how do my toes feel in my boots? How does grief make my mouth taste? I listen to minds around me but notice my scarf itches today. Anything that keeps me in my own body, I pay attention to and keep close to me. I can't share it or we..." She chirped a dissonant chord of a word. "Dissolve? Become soft?"

Spock listened to all of this, his eyes tracing the soles of her boots where her fingers gripped. It was an easy enough concept – mindfulness, meditation, being aware of one's self. These were things he did every day to counteract the constant stimulation of a starship. But something bothered him, a loose train of thought he couldn't help but tug at.

"So why not rely on auditory speech? Surely the physical act of speaking is a better grounding technique."

Her fingers tightened and she drew her knees up slightly. "If you cannot share your mind and your body at once..." she trailed off, but Spock was on her train of thought.

"Physical speech implies intimacy, and in a society which values the collective, intimacy is taboo."

"Speech forms bonds. It turns your mind against the whole, makes you selfish and not able to share and be *they*." A wryness crept into her tone. "I still do not know if that is true, or one of the lies."

Spock raised his eyes to the woman's face. She was contorted now in her discomfort, still gripping the bottoms of her boots with her knees up and pressing on the inside of her elbows. His childhood was constructed of careful parcels of words, each measured against impossible yardsticks of logic and emotions until they revealed nothing. But that came without the comfort of the mind – there was no omnipresence to soothe loneliness, you had to turn into yourself until the only intimacy you craved was that of shared logic. When adolescence came,

physicality was without closeness, all mechanical edges of need.

“You needn’t continue to instruct me,” he said, “If it causes you discomfort.”

Kanna gave a great exhale and shook herself, her limbs settling marionette-like to the floor. “No. We will try again. Besides, it would be illogical to be made uncomfortable by you. I can easily overpower you.”

And if it was not a smile they shared, it was at least a look of understanding.

The weeks passed without notice. The crew set orbits around planets and carried out studies and unloaded cargo and made trips to the med bay, but none of this involved Kanna. The man with whom she had traded the jam spread news that she could breathe life into broken things, and her days were taken up with repairs of those myriad of personal items that made long space voyages less painful. Before long, she was being called for quiet fixes that teams knew engineering could not be bothered with. Give her an hour, and gears stopped sticking or hover-carts turned easily again. For the first time in her life, she felt the thrill of tiny luxuries: a lilac scarf, cream that left her palms so soft she dared to apply it to other parts of her body. One day she took down her hair and tried to follow along as Uhura fixed her own curls, and when they were through, she dared to smile at her reflection. She joined an evening where Christine, Sulu, Uhura and Nassim watched an indecipherable film, and had dinners with Scotty where he plied her with music and anecdotes until her stomach ached with happiness. Her Standard improved until she was only in minds out of habit.

After she had been on board three months, the legal department reached out to her with a packet stuffed full of asylum information. There were ID numbers and pamphlets on voting and instructions on how to open bank accounts. A new digital passport was beamed onto her tablet:

Name : Taliesin, Kanna

Citizen : United Federation of Planets

Planet of birth: N/A

Planet of Residence: None.

When she showed it to Spock, showing deep the untethered trepidation it brought her, he nodded. “Good. You’ll be ready to apply to the Academy soon.”

“Academy?” She asked sharply. “I thought I was applying to enlist.” The Academy was an impossibility – a place spoken of with reverent fear among the enlisted and laughed about by officers.

Spock quirked an eyebrow with a coolness she envied. “Did you think I had you reading the implications of Surak on war manoeuvres to enlist? There will be an exam on the Enterprise in three months’ time. I proctor it myself.”

She didn’t bother pointing out that she wasn’t meant to be aboard in the three months. Guilty dread coiled in her gut – she still hadn’t told Scotty of her plans.

The bolt screeched, turned a quarter, and held steadfast. Kanna put down her wrench with a small frown and considered the scene before her. The table was stuck on its highest setting, inconvenient for the doctors and nurses, but perfect to allow her to sprawl beneath it, hidden from most of the comings and goings of the medbay. Christine wandered over occasionally with a cup of tea or a bit of gossip. It was slow – though Kanna had been scolded for using that word – and the nurse was bored. Much more fun to chat at Kanna as she tinkered with the broken table. Christine liked a conversation partner who didn’t talk back.

Kanna took a drink of cooling tea, savouring the dry rush of tannins over her tongue. The mechanism had resisted grease and anti-rust and sonic loosening, but sometimes, a situation called for brute force. She had grabbed her wrench and made to stand for the best leverage when the sound of the door opening stopped her. She squatted back into the shadows of the table, not wanting to have to exchange niceties.

“Hello stranger.” Christine’s voice immediately sounded different, more chipper. Her shoes scuffed softly against the floor as she moved around the front desk. “Been a minute.”

“Since yesterday is hardly cause for comment, Nurse Chapel.” Spock.

Beneath her scarf, Kanna’s ears twitched slightly in surprise. It wasn’t that the science officer was in the med bay, it was his tone of voice. Like Christine’s, there was something unusual there, a deepening in tenor that made her heart lurch despite his dry tone. She shifted slightly, putting herself deeper into the shadows, embarrassed now to interrupt.

“The mess hardly counts! I’m not an idiot, Spock – you don’t look at me if anyone else is around.”

“No, you’re not an idiot.” His voice deepened, and there was a rustle of fabric: the sound the uniforms made when brushed together, when a hand raised to a cheek. Kanna pressed her thumb into the top of her wrench, focusing on the dull pain instead of the heat flushing through her body.. She was cool, she reminded herself, she was shadow and quiet, and there was no need to analyse feelings one did not have.

Christine sighed softly, a genuine sound, but when she spoke again her voice was almost business like. “Are you coming by later, then?”

A rustle again as Spock lowered his arm. “Perhaps – I may be working late. I need to borrow some portable MRIs. Ours are not working.”

“Tried to upload your whole brain again, did you?” Christine laughed. Kanna pressed her chin into her knee and gnawed at the inside of her lip. In her mind’s eye, Spock was giving the nurse that slightly wry micro expression that functioned as his smirk.

Nothing further passed between the two as she listened to Spock remove the machines from a cupboard and say goodbye. Kanna waited for the squeak of the chair as Christine sat back down before rising, rather more loudly than necessary, and positioning herself to get a good angle on the bolt. When she risked a glance over, Christine was looking at her expectantly.

“What?”

“Do you think I’m a fool? It’s alright if you do – everyone else does. Mooning over him.”

“I...a moon?”

Christine rolled her eyes. “I shouldn’t bother – you have about as much sexual energy as a tree.”

“I find the whole thing very confusing,” Kanna replied, half because it was true, and half because she knew Christine found pleasure when she acted emotionally stunted. She positioned the wrench and pulled – nothing. Her molars clenched, and she felt her face heating. “But it is clear he has some investment in you.”

“Investment! Ha! I’m just his type is all – a brain in a tall body until someone more challenging comes along.” Kanna felt eyes skating along her form. “You’re luck you’re not his type.”

You’re lucky I don’t find you offensive, Kanna thought acidly. Never had Christine’s act wormed so deeply under her skin – what was it to her if someone else needed to make her feel small for her own wellbeing? That was hardly a jab. She was half flat on the table now, one leg on the floor, opposite arm braced. The wrench handle bit into her palm as she applied her full weight down. Her stomach roiled with disgust. A moment replayed in her mind, a gut-wrenching combination of wanting and confusion and pain as a lash connected with her bare ribs. And the person holding the whip...hadn’t she promised herself never again? Made herself a fortress against her own biology?

Suddenly, the bolt slipped, and all the oil she had applied chose its moment to grease the treads and the table collapsed under her, the mechanism giving way. Christine’s shocked laugh pealed across the medbay as she hurried over to help Kanna up.

“Good god girlie. I don’t need a patient today!”

Kanna smiled back at her, knee smarting when the table whacked against it, any bad blood shocked away.

But as she was packing up, her communicator buzzed against her wrist.

Free tonight? Idea.

And her mouth flooded with the sickly sweetness of triumph. Working late indeed.

Chapter 14

By the time evening rolled around, Kanna had convinced herself it was just a blip. She was surprised, that was all, and jealous in that moment when she realised someone she thought was as alien as her had a tether she lacked. She and Christine met Sulu in the gym, and Kanna dared to tease Christine about the whole thing, and when the nurse laughed, she suffused with a warm glow. Maybe this was to key: to unlock their strange interactions, she had to let herself into their strange feelings.

Body aching, Kanna made her way to the reading room, contemplating the ethics of this. What would it mean to peel herself open? She thought of the Vulcans on board, who disdained their emotions not because they contaminated the environment, but because they believe they contaminated themselves and lead to disruptive actions.

Unfortunately, Spock spotted her hands fiddling in her sweater pocket as she thought. No one else seemed to notice, but his eyes always went straight to her hands when he saw her, the one point she couldn't mask.

"What's wrong?" He asked, turning back to the machines on his lap. Kanna slid to the floor in front of him and picked one up gingerly. A scull cap of wires set into a PVC frame, all feeding into a transmitter box at the back. She popped it open, staring at copper wrapped electromagnet inside. They had been in each other's minds countless times, thrown together as Spock tried unsuccessfully to separate telepathy from self, but never, even lying exhausted on the floor in the aftermath, had they given voice to what they had seen: disjointed waves of not belonging, betrayals as they tried to slide themselves into worlds where they did not quite fit – the discomfort of skin and noise.

"Do you ever think," Kanna said slowly, "that you have to be human to be a person?"

Spock paused his calibrating. Unbidden, a memory rose to the surface of his mind: sitting in class as a child, learning how to use correlative conjunctions. A smug child's voice rang out: *Spock is neither Vulcan nor Human.*

But there was nothing malicious in Kanna's posture. She leaned her shoulder against the couch, legs sprawled around his. If he shifted just slightly, his calf would press against her torso, and the question of what the warmth of her would feel like shocked him.

"Two hundred years of contact cannot undo millennia of speciesism," he replied swiftly, feeling the need to change the subject. "I think you'll find this interesting."

She tilted up her face trustingly and let him settle the portable MRI over her scarf. After several weeks of their meeting, there was no hesitation there. She knew he would secure the strap gently, and if his thumb brushed her cheek...

Brain scans had come a long way since the advent of blue and white magnetic imagery. Now, when Spock synched the machines to their tablets, they were met with shining webs of colour, scalable to the cellular level.

"This is me?" Kanna asked in awe, admiring the lights scattering across her lobes. Spock leaned over her shoulder. Watching their minds meld on the MRI would be useful, but he had to admit he was hoping for this reaction – the tense focus that came over her face as she homed in on something miraculous.

"Instinctual activity happens back here," he gestured to the brain stem, "and conscious thought up here. The older the function, the deeper in the brain its stored, as a general rule. If you think of something you're afraid of..."

Kanna obeyed, and the very centre swirled in a kaleidoscope of red.

"-or something that disgusts you."

A different section sparked green.

He leaned closer to tap the screen, bringing up both their images side by side. Spock froze as his cheek brushed her scarf, but she seemed too entranced to notice, dragging her fingers along their brains, giving him the same orders.

"We are the same here," she declared, tracing the almond-shaped amygdala, "and here, but this is different." She pointed to where her brainstem fanned into her temporal lobe.

"Divergent evolution." She smelled of the simple soap stocked in the bathrooms, accented only with a metallic hint of grease and ozone – none of the synthetic scents that made his headache. "Likely concurrent with the genetic mutation that gave your people telepathic abilities.

"What is this?"

"The medulla oblongata."

"And this?"

"Corpus callosum."

The curve, called out in lime green, spanned both hemispheres of her brain scan. She flipped to Spock's scan and found it, slightly different in shape, but there.

"What does it do?"

"What do you think? The two hemispheres have different functions."

"It's a link!" She turned her head with a wide-eyed smile, and before he could pull back, they were nose to nose. A soft *oh* of surprise escaped her, and then they were both silent, still as prey animals not daring to move lest the grass give them away. Above them, the climate control clicked on.

"Do you think," she said, her breath warm on his cheek, "that you could play it?"

"Play it?"

"Like the stars. It's the same as the stars from the observation deck."

He had forgotten about that moment – how had he been so bold to play for her like that, even buoyed by the realisation that she could hear it too.

"Would you like me to?"

Her nose crinkled, eyes bright. This close, he could see a halo of hazel in her blue iris. "You're not going to lecture me about how they're not the same?"

Something twinged in Spock's chest, he felt light. He knew he should pull back and remove himself, but instead he lifted his hand. "I don't believe I'm quite beyond a little suspension of logic," he said, laying his fingertips on her cheek.

The affect was instantaneous. She drew back, a mask falling over her expression.

Spock dropped his hand. "I apologise. I-" He what? He could hardly name the motivation behind his gesture. It wasn't sex – there were less complicated ways for him to fill that occasional need. But he also didn't think he had misread her interest, unless Gwydions shared personal space with different motivations. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," he finished lamely.

Kanna ducked her face, temples pink. The MRI sat on her head, wires skewed like the tentacles of a ridiculous sea creature. "I was in the medbay," she bit out, "earlier. When you came in. I was fixing a table."

"Oh." There was no way to explain without sounding callous or cruel. *I assure you, I only use her affections for sex*, wasn't something he was ready to admit even to himself.

Kanna bit the tip of her tongue and forced her breaths to slow. On the screen, their MRIs still transmitted data, turning their distress and discomfort into a flurry of colours. She forced her thoughts to static, letting white noise fill her from hear to ear until the storm faded. Spock must be doing the same, and only when the activity lessened did she dare to look back up, prepared to go on with their evening.

That's when pinging started.

Mail day was a quietly anticipated occasion. There was only one known way to send data through warp, and whenever the Enterprise passed one of the message buoys, it slowed to allow terabytes of video messages and letters and new bulletins to upload onto servers and connect, for a moment at least, the crew to the rest of the galaxy. For a day or two, one couldn't escape a conversation without seeing a photo of a nibbling or pet or viral video two months out of date.

It was also a time to get non-urgent messages from the Fleet, and it was one of these that made Kirk lift his eyebrows and gesture to Sulu as he hopped up.

"Helm, half speed again please – I need that buoy in range for at least an hour. Kirk to Spock," he said into his communicator as the lift doors closed him in.

The pause was longer than usual before the voice came back. "Spock here." Was it Kirk's imagination, or did his unflappable second sound tense?

"Have you seen the message from the Federation?"

"Looking at it now."

"Good. Find Ms Taliesin and meet me in Conference 3, would you?"

"Momentarily captain."

"Kirk out." He terminated the message with a sharp jab of his finger. Having Spock sit in on a meeting with his estranged father wasn't his ideal order, but it would look rude to greet the ambassadorial board without him present, and he trusted that both could put any personal matters aside for the length of a call.

To his surprise, the pair were already in the meeting room when he arrived, carrying with them a distinct air of awkwardness. Kirk bit back a smile. He hadn't seen much of their stowaway since she came aboard, but the last four months had clearly been good to her. She was still slight, but a layer of muscle and fat filled out her shoulders and hips, and her cheeks no longer had their sunken shadows.

But it was the tableau the two made that made him want to laugh. Clearly they had been together already to reach the room before him, and he knew that Spock wasn't prone to lingering in common areas so late. Kanna had slung herself cross-legged onto the table, her body oriented towards Spock even as her chin was pointed determinedly away. Spock lingered near by just as uncomfortably. A conference table of ten for them to occupy, yet they chose to ignore each other from an arm's distance.

Kirk couldn't claim to be baffled by Spock's affect on those around him. Hell, even he'd fallen into that trap at points in their friendship, bound by the intense chemistry of repression. But he knew those moments for Spock were few and far between, usually spurred by a wide-eyed admiration of scientific paragons. The poor girl must have expressed a desire and been rebuffed – whether the Vulcan had done so fumblingly or cruelly was yet to be determined.

Kanna spotted him first, sliding off the table into a loose attention. Spock greeted him with the quirk of an eyebrow.

“Ms Taliesen. Has Mr Spock told you why you are here?”

“Someone wants to speak to me.” Her Standard was smoother than the last time he'd heard her speak, but still carried a musical cadence that seemed at odds with her flat mien.

Kirk gestured at Spock, who busied himself at the console patching in the call. “Not just anyone – the Ambassadorial Board. Do you know what that means? They oversee relationships between Federation members. They carry quite a bit of weight within the Federation and the Fleet.”

Kanna hesitated. “You're worried I'll embarrass you.”

Kirk smiled gently. “It's not just me I'm worried about. Ambassadors tend to speak in riddles compared to you and me. I don't want you to feel intimidated or backed into a corner.”

“Why are they going through this trouble?”

“You're the only link we have to a strategically important planet,” Kirk said, flicking his eyes to the screen. One click, and they'd throw this girl into the lions' den. “You're our subject matter expert on Gwydion. Would you like to sit?”

Kanna shook her head, and Kirk directed her to stand at the head of the table. He and Spock sat to the side where the camera could still detect them and entered the meeting.

Kanna held perfectly still as the screen loaded, not even her fingers moving. For a moment, she could see herself reflected back on the video, a small figure stark against the white walls of the meeting room. She stood as if she were talking to superior manager, shoulders down, chin neutral, making sure she revealed nothing through her posture. She did not fully understand why she was being sought out, but she had the uncomfortable sensation that she was bait. Important people did not come at a moment's notice unless the prey was important.

The screen loaded, three squares with three sets of alien eyes locking into focus as they saw her.

“Ambassadors,” the captain said smoothly. His voice had changed again. “Thank you for joining us at such short notice. I apologise for the delay in getting your message. We have been in deep space for some time. I'm sure you are all very busy – we'll try not to take up too much of your time.”

If Kanna found this an odd thing to say – after all, it was the Enterprise who had been summoned – the ambassadors did not. The blue-skinned Andorian woman twitched her antennae, her gaunt cheeks giving her a severe air. “Thank you for your quick response, Captain. The Federation is eager to get into the details of your report.”

Kirk nodded. “I'm sure you all know Mr Spock, my second in command, and allow me to introduce Ms Kanna Taliesin. Kanna, these are Ambassadors Tanar, Cav, and Sarek.” Kanna used the niceties to take in her audience: Cav was a Tellerite whose prominent tusks gleamed by the light of his lamp, but it was Sarek who caught her attention. It was true that most Vulcans looked the same to her – as did most humans – but there was something familiar in the folds of his eyelid, the way the lines on his face bracketed his mouth. She looked at Spock from the corner of her eye and him sitting uncomfortably straight. She folded her hands behind her back and squeezed her thumb tightly.

“Taliesin,” Sarek said. “An interesting choice. Are you familiar with the poet's work?”

It was only after Kanna had taken the name that Scotty had told her it was a practically prehistoric bard who talked about mead and men and battle. “I have read some,” she answered honestly, “but I do not understand it.”

Sarek frowned, and Kanna fought to control her breathing – that had been the wrong answer, clearly, sending Spock stiffening in his seat. But when Sarek went to speak again, Cav cut him off. “We're not here to talk about poetry, Sarek. Let's get to the point.”

“Indeed. Ms Taliesin, I'm sure I don't need to tell you about your importance to the Federation. We've all read the report and the articles but feel there is some more information to gather before making a decision on the place of Gwydion-F in the diplomatic sphere of the Federation.”

Articles? She had known of course there was a report. Just as if there had been an incident on site, the captain would have explained what had gone wrong on the planet, but surely that was the end of it? They were all staring at her expectantly, not used to her long silences as she untangled their words. She felt as isolated as she looked on the screen, cut off from any context being part of a hive would have given her.

“Ambassador, you will forgive me my lack of comprehension,” she hedged, “knowing what you do about my people's communication customs.”

“It is our job to balance the needs of the Federation against the customs of another planet,” Tanar offered.

That was, as Scotty would say, clear as mud, but the implication made Kanna lift her chin, forgetting about the captain's imploration. “You still wish to trade with Gwydion for accurement.”

“With so little information available, we wish to speak with you before making such a decision.”

“What would you like to know, Ambassadors?”

If Tanar felt any discomfort, she did not express it. “Perhaps you could tell us, in your words, about life on the planet as you experienced it. We have read about the caste system, but how did it affect you?”

For a moment, Kanna stood stunned, then bitter rage flooded her mouth. Since she arrived on the Enterprise, the only reaction to her past life had been abhorrence and an adamant expression that such things were absolutely taboo in the Federation. A string of lawyers and social workers had plugged holes in her vocabulary, laying out in asylum applications the horror of it all in black and white; Macy had sat quietly while Kanna screamed herself hoarse coming to terms with it. Most nights she still didn’t sleep, worried she would wake up alone in her small room, rounding with an unwanted child.

An ember she thought she had let die sparked at the back of her tongue, and Kanna tilted her head innocently. “Of course, ambassador. I would be happy to. Please excuse my grasp of Standard, I am still learning. Is *apartheid* the word I am looking for? It can’t be genocide – I believe the forced breeding contradicts that one. I also fail to understand the difference between corporal and corporeal – they share roots, don’t they? Only one is a type of punishment and one is a rank? Or perhaps those are the same and the other is different, but I can get around that by calling them punitive beatings, can’t I?”

Beneath the table where the camera didn’t reach, the captain was jiggling his leg, and Spock’s eyebrows were practically in his hair. Kanna delivered the whole speech with such a lack of emotion or spite that it would have been impossible to catch her on any insubordination.

“I can show you my scars if you like,” Kanna continued, “but they’re not very impressive. I’m still young – the true disfiguration is normally saved for those who are less desirable. Of course, I suppose it’s not all bad. Fifteen hundred kilocalories a day under physical conditions, and I was only traded a handful of times. Not like some, passed year to year.”

A deep blue blush crept into Tanar’s cheeks. “The accurement is an essential resource for continued prosperity of the Federation.”

“So trade for it if you like,” Kanna said. Her thumbnails pressed hard into her index finger to prevent her voice shaking. “Such eminences as yourselves do not need my permission.” She fixed the camera with a blank, burning gaze. “Unless of course, its absolution you are looking for.”

A hush fell over the room. On screen, Tanar clamped her mouth shut, her smooth expression disrupted by a twitching frown. After a moment, Cav burst into a booming laugh that made Kanna flinch backwards.

“A fine argument, I think! You’d be welcome on the arenas of Tellar Prime!”

Kanna kept quiet, not trusting herself to speak without being sick. Her body was swirling with a painful mix of anger and confusion that made the room seem to spin around her. It was all she could do to hold herself still and blank as Taran and Cav made their farewells and logged off, leaving only Sarek staring thoughtfully down at her, his face taking up the whole of the four-foot screen.

“Please forgive my fellow council members for their seemingly callousness,” he said finally. “I can only offer my assurances that most of us believe ethical prosperity is the only worthwhile path.” He continued when Kanna didn’t respond. “I found the reports in *Evolution* very illuminating. I’m sure they will contribute significantly to our understanding of seeding.”

Air was going into her lungs. She could feel it, oxygen feeding her leg muscles even as they trembled. Sarek finally flicked his gaze away, and she had a feeling he was looking elsewhere on his screen. “Your mother sends her greetings,” he said simply, and then he too was gone.

Kanna sank to the floor, fist stuffed into her mouth. The sound that came out of her was neither wail nor scream of frustration, but she gave it once, twice, until the pressure on her ribs had lifted and she was sure she wasn’t going to cry. The world had broken. She was naïve to think this microcosm was all that awaited her. There was no where in the universe where differences existed without conflict, where the machinations of the powerful did not roll over individuals for the greater good. When she stood, she felt like she had aged a century, shrunk down to bones and skin in a harsh wind.

“I apologise, Captain, if I shamed you.”

Kirk shook his head. “Quite the opposite – for someone I’ve been told lacks an understanding of nuance, I think you did us proud.”

There was something else that was bothering her. “What article was the ambassador talking about?” She had a vague idea of what an article was – something that delivered news, or that displayed new discoveries, but that didn’t have anything to do with her.

Spock cleared his throat. “In *Evolution*. A scientific journal.”

“About me?” Spock nodded slowly. Her voice flattened. She could not keep her emotions held at bay any longer. “Show me.”

“You did consent.”

“Show me.”

The next moments Kanna felt herself rising from her body. Her hand moved to take the proffered tablet, her eyes scanned the paper, but she was not there. She was not seeing her anatomy splayed out in stark diagrams: There were her puzzle-piece ribs, her toes (length noted on a table of averages of known species). A cross section of her dual larynx stared obscenely up at her. On and on she scrolled, through headings like *Cranial Structure* and *Vestigial organs*. Pages and pages of words, meaningless in their complexity, describing every piece of her. And then she reached:

Reproductive system

Due to trauma, an examination of the subject’s internal reproductive organs was not sufficient to draw conclusions.

Her breath caught knife-like in her throat. That was it. There she was, ever piece of her for the galaxy to see, to be downloaded and passed from hand to hand, looked over and turned around and taken for spare parts. She was *illuminating*. She was *fascinating*. She had *interesting implications*.

At least it did not mention her foolishness. This had been a ploy from the beginning- from the moment he spread nanogel on her cheeks, she had seen Spock's eyes on her, watching, dissecting her until he had enough evidence to put his name on. The way he had watched her while they played chess, fiddling with the nuts and bolts of her mind. Even her telepathy – she new better than to think anyone wanted to learn things for the delight of them. To sate what she thought was a kindred curiosity, she had spread herself bare, and now the horrible truth of it all stared up at her.

The last sound she heard was the shattering of the tablet screen as it hit the wall where Spock's head had been moments before.

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