




# Alien Conversation

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Published under 

# *One*

## Forward Momentum

Finally the sliding door closed behind Ensign Sylvia Tilly. She took a deep breath and listened to the quite humming of the life support systems. A sound that had always calmed her down. Here in her quarters she could finally give in to her feelings. While running to the endless corridors of Starbase 71, she had had the feeling that everyone was staring at her.

She dropped to the bed and pressed her face into the pillows, unable to stop the tears. She had failed. Again. Everything had been alright. Her knowledge of ships engineering was excellent and she could answer every question on Starfleet regulations that was thrown at her. It was not her knowledge of the facts that failed her. It was herself. She had failed the psychological exam. When she was under stress in a situation, she had doubts. She had questioned her own decisions, taken too long.

As always.

“You’re a great officer.” They had said. “But we’re sorry, you are not a candidate for command. You’re too emotional.”

Too weak. A failure. That’s what that really meant. Maybe her mother was right. She wasn’t Starfleet material after all. Of course none of this was actually true. You don’t get a Medal Of Honour for outstanding skill and bravery from Starfleet, if you do a bad job. But her medal was back on *Discovery* along with all of her friends, who would surly be doing all they could to lift her up.

After a while, she got up, wiped her tears with the back of her hand, and went for the tiny bathroom. The hot shower helped her to calm a little, but the feeling of inadequacy did not leave her.

Back from the shower, she got into her her nightdress, and routinely checked her messages before she went to bed. There were five new messages. All of them from her mother.

*How did your exam go? Call me. Mum.*

*Did you fail again? Why don’t you call back?*

*Your sister was asking if you made it this time. I couldn’t tell her anything, because you don’t talk to me. Call me back!*

*Sylvia, are you ignoring me? Talk to your old mother. I’m worried.*

*Really, Sylvia. I did not raise you to be such a neglecting person. You should be ashamed of yourself, ignoring your old mother like that!*

Tilly sighed put the data tablet away and got into her bed.



An hour later, she was somewhere in between sleeping and waking, with nightmares of her failure haunting her, when the main com-screen lit up. A bleeping noise signalled an incoming call. Tilly woke up completely and moaned. She heaved herself out of bed heavily.

“Oh come on mum, seriously?” She groaned, when she walked over to the screen to take the call. On her way, she picked up her robe, and wrapped herself into it.

With a heavy sigh, she pressed the *Accept Call* button on the screen. The silver and blue *Starfleet* logo disappeared and was replaced by the face of a man in the uniform of a *Starfleet* Lieutenant Commander who looked at her very officially.

“Ensign Sylvia Tilly? I am Lieutenant Commander Brock, with *Starfleet Command*.” He suddenly realised that Tilly was in her nightie.

“Um, is this an inconvenient time?”

Tilly blushed. “Ah, you . . . you woke me up. I’m sorry. I was expecting this to, um, to be my mother.” She wrapped herself tighter into her robe.

“I can call you back, when you’re dressed.” The man said. “The matter is kind of urgent, but of course, you can make yourself presentable first.”

Tilly caught herself. “It’s alright Sir, it’s not like you caught me in the shower or something. Go on please.”

The man looked a puzzled, but dropped the matter. “The *USS Windhoek* is leaving for a strategically important mission in two hours. You have been assigned to Captain Athon’s team. Get dressed and report to the *Windhoek* immediately. Captain Athon will brief you on the mission.”

Tilly was mystified. “Sir, does that mean, I will not return to *Discovery*?”

“This is only temporary, ensign. After this assignment, you will return to your post on *Discovery*” Brock said. “I can’t tell you much more, because I don’t have any details. Captain Athon will fill you in.”

“Understood, Sir.” Tilly nodded. “I’ll get there immediately.”

“Thank you, ensign.” Brock actually smiled. “The *Windhoek* is docked in Bay 14. And ensign . . . , sorry for the inconvenience.”

“It’s all right. Thank you.”

The screen went dark, and Tilly wondered what this was about. She hurried to the small drawer, and picked out a spare uniform, then stuffed the one she had worn alongside some toiletries and her nightgown into her knapsack. She didn’t bring much, because she didn’t think she’d be gone from discovery for longer than two days. After a quick look around her cabin, checking that she didn’t forget anything, she left the place and logged out with her badge.

On the corridor, she looked for a wall terminal. Space stations like *Starbase 71* were enormously large, and it was not uncommon for people to get lost in them.

“Computer!” Tilly called the voice activated machine. “Show me the way to docking bay 14!”

“Affirmative!” A soft baritone voice answered. “Please follow the corridor left of you to the end, and make a right turn. You will find turbo lift 147, which will take you to the docking bay area ten to 15. Once there follow the way signs to docking

bay 14. Currently the *USS Windhoek* is located there, and is ready to be boarded.”

“Thank you.” Tilly said. Unlike many people, Tilly always tried to be polite to computers, although she knew that the simple artificial intelligence was not capable of feelings, and quite indifferent to the way humans talked to it.

“We hope you had a pleasant stay on *Starbase 71* and will visit us again soon.”

“Yeah, right.” Tilly murmured and headed for the turbo lift.

The *Windhoek* was one of the smaller long distance ships. It was equipped for transporting VIP guests on state visits. It was not the most glorious ship in the fleet, but for sure the most pompous. It had presidential suites, a five star kitchen and personnel to fulfil every wish a state visitor might . Also, accommodation could be changed to different conditions for any life form known.

Tilly entered the ship through the main access tunnel that connected the ship to the star base. The view of a star base’s docking area still took her breath every time she saw it: A space so huge that even a huge star ship, like the *Discovery* or the *Enterprise* would be dwarfed by the giant hall. Star bases were the largest enclosed spaces ever build by humans.

Tilly shook her head and hastened her pace. She had no time to marvel at the beauty of engineering. She entered the ship through the central airlock. The inside of the *Windhoek* was even more pompous than she had anticipated. The main corridor looked more like a luxurious hotel lobby than a star

ship's. The walls were wood chipped and the floor was tiled with marble. An officer in a ceremonial uniform came up to her.

"Can I help you, ensign?" He asked politely. He was Denobulan, and the stripes on his uniform marked him as an ensign.

"Ensign Sylvia Tilly reporting for duty. Permission to come aboard?"

The ensign looked at his data pad, and then grinned, which looked rather scary, for the Denobulan's have wide mouths, with an impressive row of teeth.

"We've been waiting for you. You're quarters are on deck 44, room 22. You can drop your belongings there, and then report to the ready room immediately. Captain Athon is eager to depart."

"Understood." She smiled. "Thank you."

It took her a while longer than expected to get to her quarters and then find her way to the bridge, so when she arrived in the ready room, the senior officer's were already assembled.

Captain Athon was a tall Andorian. His white hair was cut short, and a thin beard grew around his mouth. He looked at Tilly with an annoyed expression on his face. He clearly didn't like the interruption.

Tilly straightened her back. "Ensign Silvia Tilly reporting for duty, Captain!"

He only nodded quickly. "Nice that you care to join us, ensign."

Tilly swallowed her urge to protest. It wouldn't have done any good. But it also didn't make her feel better about herself.

Captain Seru would never talk to a crew member in a tone like that, she thought.

The senior officers continued, as if she wasn't there. The first officer, a human woman named Pratchett, was just explaining that they would carry their guest to Starbase 52, where a group of Ambassadors from Earth, Andoria Vulcan and Betazed would be awaiting them.

The captain nodded. "We don't know much about Xaheans. The Queen," he stopped in his tracks "Me Chann. . . um"

"Me Hani Ika Hali Ka Po" Tilly said. And her eyes lit up. She suddenly realised why she was ordered on this mission. No one less than the Xahean queen herself had requested her presence. She didn't want to act out of place here, but it was hard for Tilly to hide her excitement.

All eyes were on her now. She blushed. "It's how her name is pronounced. Me Hani Ika Hali Ka Po. Po for short."

"Thank you, ensign." The captain looked mildly confused. "I'll try to remember that. What else can you tell us about the Xaheans?"

"Xahea is a class M world. It's inhabitants have just recently reached warp capabilities. Their home world is very mineral rich, and holds the largest deposits of dilithium in federation space. The Xaheans also have created a technology that allows them to recrystallise depleted dilithium, a technology that was invented by the queen herself. She won't share the secret on how she did it, out of fear that her home world might be harmed through excessive dilithium mining."

Tilly continued. "The Xaheans have a very close relationship to their home world. They believe, they were created at the



same time as the planet, and think it to be a living organism. Po, the queen I mean, considers Xahea to be her twin sister.”

“Thank you, ensign.” The captain said. “That was really useful information.”

Tilly beamed.

“Now,” the captain continued. “we need to plan the reception. Since Xahea is a monarchy, I suggest we provide official military honours.”

He turned to his security officer. “I’d like you to assemble the vanguard, and place them in rows at the transporter room. Ensign,” he turned to Tilly, “Do we know any music, that is required to honour the queen?”

Tilly raised her eyebrows. “If you want her to turn tail and run right back to the transporter pad, you can do this. She absolutely despises pomp and circumstance.”

“Really? What would you suggest?” Pratchett asked sarcastically. “Offer her scones and tea?”

Tilly was unimpressed. “Spumoni ice cream.” She said. “That’s her favourite. And I don’t think she managed to replicate the recipe herself yet.”

Pratchett snorted. “I don’t know how things are handled on *Discovery*, but we take our mission seriously here.”

Tilly could feel her face become hot, and she was angry with herself for it. “I am not joking.” She said weakly.

“How would *you* know what the queen of Xahea likes to eat?” Athon asked.

“Because she’s one of my closest friends.” Tilly said.

Every pair of eyes in the room were fixed on her now. Tilly felt very uncomfortable.

“How did you get to meet the queen of Xahea?” Athon finally asked.

“She wasn’t queen when I first met her. She had run away from home, and ended up as a stowaway on *Discovery*.”

“Why don’t we know about this?” Bolton, the security guy, asked.

Tilly shrugged. “I don’t know. I took the incident down in the ship’s log, as required. I guess the captain didn’t see it necessary to file an official report. I was never asked about it again.”

“Have you been in contact with Xahea ever since?” The captain asked.

“All the time sir. We write regularly. She came on board the *Discovery* to help solve the *Section 31* crisis.”

Pratchett checked her files. “That explains while the Royal Court expressly requested Ensign Tilly’s presence.”

The captain leaned back in his chair. “Under these circumstances, I believe it would be best if you take our guest under your wing, Ensign Tilly.”

Tilly couldn’t help but to grin. “I’d love to do that, sir.”



# *Two*

## Acceleration In A Straight Line

*Hello my dear friend,*

*Thank you for your last letter. I am sure you will succeed at the academy. You're a great officer, and Starfleet knows your worth. Trust in yourself! And don't beat yourself up about the possibility of failing. I will certainly not think any less of you, if you don't become a captain. Uh, look at me talking all posh.*

*I am writing to ask a favour from you. As you already know, Xahea has formally requested membership in the federation. Most of the talks are done by our diplomats. Luckily, I must say, because I'm still much more of an engineer than a politician. Thank The Great Unity I'm not prime minister. Anyway, I'm invited to a meeting with the ambassadors of several federation worlds at a state banquet. I heard that Spock's father Sarek will be there, representing Vulcan. I'm looking for-*

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*ward to meeting him.*

*I have asked Starfleet to invite you too. It's a wonderful chance to meet and catch up, don't you think? I've been missing you.*

*Love you very much, Po*

Tilly looked at the letter on her screen. It had been relayed to *Discovery* first, then to *Starbase 71* before it was finally forwarded to the *Windhoek*. That round trip took three days. "Would have been good to know in advance what's coming." She thought. It was astonishing, how subspace communications allowed face to face meetings in real time over hundreds of light years, but it took three days to relay an electronic letter. On the other hand: Real time communication across light years was kind of impressive, so maybe that was reason for a little humility.

She put the data pad away, and left her quarters on the way to the galley to request some spumoni ice cream. She had a feeling Po was going to need it.

Tilly had already given up convincing the captain, that he should keep protocol to a minimum. Maybe he was excited to meet an actual monarch for once. There weren't many queens left in the Federation. After all, most space faring civilisations had established some form of democracy. Even the war mongering Klingons did not have a king or chieftain. They elected their leaders, even if it was legal to overthrow a candidate by fighting them.

Xahea also was not an absolute monarchy, and in reality Po's

power was limited to being the representative and some sort of role model to her people, and to act as an ambassador to other species. However, her word carried a lot of weight, because the queen was perceived by her people as the voice of their home world, which the Xaheans believed to be a living organism; and their sister.

The state visit would be televised, and maybe -even after almost two centuries of space travel- people still hungered for stories about queens, princes and armoured knights.

At least her visit to the galley turned out to be a success: the chef was human, and even of Italian descent. The prospect of serving a special dish from his home region to an alien leader delighted him.

The rest of the day went by without much to do for Tilly, so she went to her quarters. The crew of the *Windhoek* was capable of preparing the state visit without her, and after sharing her knowledge of Xahea, she would only be in the way. That somewhat dampened her mood, because it gave her time to reflect on her latest failure. And also there was yet another message from her mother.

Tilly sighed, sat down in front of the small screen, and selected the communication relay to earth. Right now, while she still had some time to spare, she could get this over with. She dialled the number of her parents house, and shortly after, a three dimensional representation of her mother appeared on the desk. The holo-projector in her cabin was not as large as the one on discovery, therefore the image of her mother was only

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a few inches high and limited to the viewing screen. Tilly was quite happy about that, since seeing her mother face to face as if she was in the room always had an intimidating effect on her.

Siobhan Tilly was an impressive woman, tall in stature and and with dark hair. A life dedicated to hard work had left traces on her face, but she was nonetheless very beautiful. She was very determined, and had demanded independence from her children from a very young age. While Sylvia's stepsister seemed to get along quite well with her step mother, Sylvia's relationship to Siobhan was more complicated. She had yearned all her life for the one thing her mother couldn't give: Her embrace. So always in the shadow of her over-achieving step-sister, she could never shake the feeling of inadequacy.

"Hello Sylvia!" Her mother said.

"Hello, mother." Sylvia said, her mouth dry.

"How nice of you to call. It's not that I left you a message days ago!"

"That was yesterday!" Tilly protested. "And I was very busy."

Her mother looked annoyed. "You failed the test. Didn't you?"

Tilly grinded her teeth. "Yes. Happy now?"

Her mother was obviously upset. "How can you say such a thing?"

Tilly blushed and looked away. Why did she always feel guilty, when she talked to her mother?

"Because you always sound, as if you don't want me to succeed." She murmured.

“That’s nonsense.” Her mother shot back at her. “Of course, I want you to succeed. I just don’t think Starfleet is the right place for you.”

“But it is!” Tilly defended herself. “I want to do this, more than anything in the world!”

“And look where it got you! We had a goddamn funeral for you, Sylvia!”

That hurt. “I didn’t ask for that! I was nearly dead when *Discovery* was lost.” That was a lie of course, but Tilly was not allowed to tell the truth about the battle against Control. Not even to her own mother.

“You hid in a life pod during the battle. Do you think that will impress your friends at Starfleet?”

“Would you rather have me dead?” Tilly shot back. “Is it that? Am I such a great disappointment to you?”

It was unfair, and Tilly knew that.

Her mother sighed. “Sylvia, I just want you to come home.”

Tilly shook her head. “We’ve talked about this, mum. I am not going to leave Starfleet.”

“Sylvia, I really don’t know what to do with you. I really don’t know.”

“Just let me live my life.” Tilly said.

There was an awkward silence between them. Finally, Siobhan said: “I’ve got to go, honey.”

“Yeah.” Tilly replied. “Have a good.”

“I love you, baby. Please understand that.”

Tilly nodded. “Talk to you soon.”

“Bye.”



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The screen went dark, and the small image of her mother disappeared. Tilly felt as if she was going to cry. Why did every conversation with her mother end like this? She knew that Siobhan meant well. She really was worried, but she also never trusted Tilly to be an adult and make her own decisions. When she had been a child, her mother was rarely at home to see her daughter grow up. Maybe that's why she thought Tilly was still a little girl. The fact that she had thought for three years, that her daughter was dead, while those three years had only been a few months for the *Discovery* crew hadn't helped the situation.

She decided to go to bed, and try and get some sleep.

After a rough night full of weird dreams and tossing and turning, Ensign Sylvia Tilly stood in front of a mirror and checked her new ceremonial uniform. The new, more colourful design of Starfleets uniforms had been picked up in the ceremonial garments, and she had to admit, they looked quite fancy.

She checked her hair in the mirror a last time, then left for the docking bay. For some reason, Po would not beam aboard the *Windhoek*, but arrive in a shuttle craft. Tilly suspected, that this was due to protocol.

The docking bay was decorated with federation flags and Xahean banners. A guard of honour was flanking the path where the shuttle craft would land. They carried phaser rifles and they were the only ones to wear hats. Tilly asked herself how long Starfleet would keep these archaic rituals up. The military pomp was in stark contrast to everything that Starfleet represented.

To the side stood a military band, ready to play the respective anthems. A few cameramen and an estimated dozen of camera drones were whirling around in the background.

“Shuttle approaching” a voice announced to the ship wide intercom.

Tilly straightened her pose and put her hands behind her back. This posture was done in Starfleet instead of a military salute.

The bay doors opened and through the blue shimmer of the force field, that kept the atmosphere inside the ship, the Xahean shuttle appeared. The ship was of a sleek design, with an elegantly curved exterior hull. It looked more as if it had been grown rather than build, as most Xahean technology had an organic vibe to it.

With a gentle *pop* the ship drifted through the energetic barrier that separated the ship from space, as a tiny bit of air escaped into the vacuum outside. The shuttle craft slowly turned on the spot and then touched down on the docking bay floor. The docking clamps fixed the small craft, and for a couple of minutes nothing happened. Finally, the shuttle’s airlocks opened, and six soldiers of the Royal Vanguard stepped out. Unlike the Starfleet officers, they wore only a small ceremonial dagger, and were not visibly armed.

“Ah-ttention!” The commander of the guard called, and the Starfleet guards shouldered their rifles.

Then the queen herself appeared. She looked a little more grown up than three years back, when Tilly had last seen her, but she was, if that was even possible, more beautiful than ever. She wore a robe that was embroidered with symbols unknown

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to Tilly, but was otherwise so simple, that Tilly felt ashamed for wearing her pompous Starfleet uniform. The young monarch gracefully walked down the gangway, while, one after the other, her guards fell in line behind her. She approached the captain.

“Your Serene Highness Me Hani Ika Hali Ka Po! In the name of the United Federation of Planets, I welcome you on board the *U.S.S. Windhoek*.” Captain Athon said.

Po smiled politely and reached out her hand to shake it with the captain. It was a very human gesture and confused the Andorian captain, but he took her hand and shook it. Journalists and camera drone surrounded the group like insects, everyone eager to get a good picture of this historic moment.

Then the queen and the chief diplomat of the Federation walked down the red carpet, and the band began to play. They played Beethoven’s *Ode To Joy*, since the Xaheans never adapted the concept of national or planetary anthems. Although the world was known to have a rich musical culture, little was known about it in the Federation.

With the formal greetings over, the camera drones were shut down, and security personnel shielded the state visitor from the curious journalists.

Together, the Starfleet crew and their guest left the docking bay.

“The cameras are off now?” The queen asked captain Athon.

“Yes, ma’am.” The captain confirmed. “We have prepared some refreshments for you; if you like to follow me.”

“In a minute, captain. In the mean time, allow me to greet an old friend.”

The captain was puzzled. “Well, of course. As you wish.”

She smiled at him and then walked over to Tilly, who had been the last of the officers to leave the docking bay. To Tilly's surprise, the Xahean mornach flung her arms around her and hugged her tightly..

"It's so good to see you my friend. I thought I'd lost you! I grieved for you."

Tilly blushed, but she returned the embrace. "I missed you too. Thank you for inviting me."

The queen looked at her. "You're going to help me, aren't you? I still have no clue how to do all this state business stuff."

"I am afraid, I'm not very good at it either." Tilly confessed.

"Doesn't matter. Just stay with me, will you?"

"Of course."

"To be honest: I'm terrified." Po whispered into Tilly's ear.

Tilly gave her friend a reassuring pat on the back.

Po straightened up and smiled at her friend. "Thank you. Once this official business is over, I'm all yours."

She broke away from Tilly, but took her arm, leading her back to the captain and her guards.

"Now Captain," she said with a bright smile. "I hope those *refreshments* include some spumoni ice cream?"



# *Three*

## Motion Through Space

Finally, the official part was over. The big ceremony was still to come when they arrived at the star base, but for the time being things were a little more relaxed. Captain Athon did not seem to think that way; he was clearly under stress. His high guest would absolutely not act as state visitors were required to in his experience. Instead she bombarded him with questions on warp drives or the transporter system that he could not answer. She was by far the most unusual head of state he had to deal with in his career. For example, she had sent her guards to the galley, urging them to try the ice cream. And she was engaging in conversation with the catering staff with the same naturalness that she used when talking to the big heads. Rank and titles seemed nothing to her. Her role as queen meant she had to take on certain obligations, but neither did that mean she felt above

the common people, nor did it stop her from using a very direct language. And then she surprised the captain with diplomatic grace, that was in complete contrast to her common behaviour.

But maybe his biggest problem was himself: In the years of service for the diplomatic corps he had dealt with presidents, chancellors and ambassadors of all races, and considered himself good at his job. He had an air of arrogance around him that maybe was needed when dealing with the Klingon ambassador. But Po had a very subtle way of letting him know that she didn't approve of that part of his personality.

So when the official program was over the Andorian captain was very grateful that he could hand his weird guest over to Ensign Tilly, although he wasn't too fond of her either. She talked too much and he thought she was a pain, because she would always question decisions. However, Captain Pike had praised her in his reports. Although quite a lot of the story behind *iDiscovery* was confidential and inaccessible the reports clearly stated that Tilly was quick-witted and resourceful and that she kept a clear mind in a crisis. He valued Pike's opinion enough to give the girl a chance.

Tilly had held her distance to the commanding officers during dinner. They sat to far apart from each other to have a conversation. And it was clear that the queen wasn't pleased with the seating arrangement, but neither of them could something about it. So Tilly had kept quiet, just watching the girl on the other side of the table. None of the command officers had bothered to talk to her either, so she ate in silence.

When everyone had risen from their seats the captain led his guest towards Tilly.

“Your Serene Highness,” he began. “If it pleases you, I’d leave you in the capable hands of Ensign Tilly for tonight.”

“It would please me very much, Captain!” Po answered. “Maybe she could show me around the ship? I’d love to see your engineering deck.”

The captain nodded. “Of course, Your Serene Highness!”

“Tilly, show Her Highness around.”

Tilly couldn’t hide a smile. “With pleasure, sir.”

Captain Athon raised his brow at the Ensigns open enthusiasm, obviously seeing a lack of professionalism in Tilly. This caused Po to demonstratively put an arm around her friend.

“Let’s go then love!”

And with that, the two young women left the observation deck. Captain Athon thoughtfully watched as they left.

“Truly remarkable.” He muttered to himself.

“Do you think that young Ensign will cause trouble?” His first officer ask.

“I hope not, Number One.” The captain replied. “But I think that Xahean girl is more of a source of trouble herself. I have no idea how to deal with her. She clearly has a political agenda, and I doubt she’s as naïve as she wants us to believe. And yet, she acts as if protocol doesn’t exist.”

“And that worries you? I was surprised how humble and grounded she is for someone in her position. I expected a spoiled brat. Maybe we can learn something from her.”

The captain looked at his first officer and nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, maybe.”





The two women walked down the corridors towards the turbo lift.

“What do you think about that dinner?” Po asked.

“Oh, well, the food was excellent.” Tilly said cautiously.

“The decor on the plates was very beautiful.” Po nodded.

Tilly looked at her friend in bewilderment. “That’s a strange thing to say.”

Po laughed. “It’s a diplomatic way to say that it wasn’t enough to feed a person. I appreciate that it was almost a work of art, but I’ve been travelling for two days. Not that my shuttle doesn’t have food. But to be honest, I’m still starving.”

“The galley then.” Tilly laughed and steered her friend down another corridor.

The ships galley was usually for crew only, and thus not much different from those on other ships in Starfleet. It was a simple hall, with tables and chairs and an automated food dispenser. Most food on board a star ship was pre-processed, although most ships were equipped with a kitchen. Processed food was simply easier to store and to handle than fresh food, however especially on long journeys fresh food was not a luxury, but a necessity. The *Windhoek* did not offer such comforts to her crew, but her travels seldom took more than a couple of days. Her kitchen was solely used to cook for state guests.

“Let’s get something really unhealthy!” The young monarch suggested.

Tilly smiled. “Fish and Chips coming up.” She turned towards the food dispenser and pressed the *Order* button.

“Two plates of fish and chips, please” she instructed. The computer beeped. “And if you patronise me, I’ll kick in your

speakers!”

“Order taken.” The computer responded, but did not comment on her eating habits, as it usually did when she ordered a triple espresso.

A few minutes later she balanced two trays over to her table, complete with two cups filled with cranberry lemonades. Po jumped up and took the cups before they could fall.

They sat down and started eating. “How do I eat these?” Po asked pointing at the chips.

“Fingers.” Tilly said, already with her mouth full. “The knife and fork is for the fish.”

The queen grinned mischievously and started stuffing her mouth with chips.

“So much better than the dinner.” She stated. “Not that that wasn’t good, but most of the time I felt guilty destroying the artwork on my plate.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Tilly nodded.

“What is this?” Po asked pointing to the fish. “Tastes like it’s from the sea.”

“It’s cod I think. Well, this one is synthetic, but it almost tastes like the real thing.” She picked up a chip. “These are chips. Also known as fries. They are made from the roots of a plant we call potato.”

“Po Ta To?” Po asked. “Sounds like some kids mocking my name.”

Tilly had to laugh. “Does it mean something in Xahean?”

“Not really, but children would make up mock versions of a name in one-syllable rhymes like that.”

Tilly thought of her school days, and how the other kids used to call her *Silly Tilly*.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh at you. Were you bullied as a kid?”

The automated translator, that the two still used although Po’s English had considerably improved over the past three years, had some trouble translating the word.

But finally Po nodded. “From time to time, when I was little. Now the caricatures are more grown up, I guess.”

“I’m sorry.” Tilly said flatly. She had never thought about how a public figure like Po had to endure ridicule. She thought of the times she had laughed at a vicious depiction of a Federation politician, and blushed.

Po noticed that her friend felt uncomfortable and changed the subject back to the food. She sniffed the lemonade.

“Never mind. What’s this?”

Tilly’s mood lifted again. “Cranberry lemonade. A carbonated drink made from berries. Well, there’s as much fruit in there as there is actual fish in the fish. But it does the job.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t taste like it rotten fruit.” Po sighed.

Tilly was shocked. “Do you think I’d serve you spoiled food?”

“Your captain did.” Po said after taking a nip from her cup. “I didn’t say anything, because everyone else seemed to enjoy it, but the beverage they served at the dinner tasted like it was rotten.”

“That’s because it *is* rotten.” Tilly said, trying not to laugh. “It’s called *wine*, and it is the most expensive kind of rotten. And you don’t say *rotten*.”

Po was astounded. “Really? That’s some sort of delicacy for humans?”

“I suppose so.” Tilly answered. “It was the most expensive glass of wine I ever had, that’s for sure. I suppose you don’t drink alcohol on Xahea?”

“I thought there was something like ethanol that in it. Isn’t it a bit of a risk drinking it for recreational purposes?”

“Yes. Most of the time, it is used in social situations like the dinner we just came from. But some people overdo it and act, well, unseemly then.”

“On Xahea ethanol is banned as a drug.”

“Oh!” Tilly was shocked. “I was told you could digest it as well as humans can. That maybe something, I should tell the captain. Not that one of you end’s up with alcohol poisoning or something.”

Po took a bite from her fish and continued. “It takes a lot more than a glass of your *wine* to harm or kill us. But more ethanol can make us lose self control. People can get into *Xul V’ahid* from drinking it.”

“Xul what?” Tilly asked, confused.

”*Xul V’ahid*” Po repeated. “The mind of the predator. Our biological ancestors were fierce predators, hunting creatures much larger than ourselves. Long before we invented tools and weapons. What do you thing these are for? ” She held up one hand, and showed her long fingers each of which ended in a long black claw.

Tilly swallowed. “I never thought of your people as like that. You are so . . . peaceful.”

Her friend smiled. “Not always. Our sister, Xahea, showed us the way of civilisation, by bringing the *Great Unity*. Before that, warriors prepared for battle by drinking large amounts of fermented drinks to get themselves ready for battle. In their rage, they knew neither pain nor mercy.”

”Oops.” Tilly said. ”I usually just get very emotional when I’m drunk. I cry mostly. And then I throw up.”

”You’re the most peaceful person I know. That’s what I love you for.” Po gently put her hand on her friends arm..

”When we’re done eating, can you show me the rest of the ship?”

# *Four*

## Orbital Injection

“I am afraid our warp technology has a long way to go, compared to yours.” Po sounded a little disappointed. The two women were on their way back from an extensive tour of the *Windhoek*’s engine room. The queen was fascinated by warp drives, and she had enough detailed knowledge that she would be able to repair one, if need be. Tilly learned on this occasion that Po had studied engineering, but never graduated due to the tragic death of her family that forced her to take the throne.

The chief engineer seemed to enjoy the sudden interest in his field of work, and was eager to answer all of Po’s questions, although he had to give a pass on some of them. “I’m afraid you have to ask a physicist.” He said. “I’m content to know that it works.”

Tilly didn’t understand most of it, but she knew her friend

well enough to let her nerd out. It was one of the rare occasions when she could.

Now the two of them were headed back to the living areas.

“I don’t feel like going to bed.” Po said.

“Not sleepy?”

“Well, a little. But to be honest, I feel a bit lost at my quarters here. I know, you want to show off to your guests and all, but the suite is too big for my taste.”

“Aren’t you used to it. I mean, you surely had a large room for yourself, even as a princess, right?”

“Several. But I always preferred the natural caves. Or even a lab.”

“You sleep in a lab?” Tilly joked.

“While I was at the Academy of Sciences, I sometimes fell asleep over my work. They found me the next morning with my head on the desk. So yes, sometimes I do.”

“Sounds like a great recipe for a stiff neck.”

“I can sleep almost anywhere.”

“We could go to the galley, it should be empty by now.”

Po thought for moment. “I read a lot about human customs. I read your people staying at their friends place for the night. It sounds like a fun thing to do.”

“A pyjama party?” Tilly asked. “It’s something mostly young girls do.”

“I am young.” The queen grinned.

“Don’t you do that on Xahea too?” Tilly wondered.

“Not that I know of. And certainly not when you’re the princess.”

Tilly's interest was sparked now. "All right, let's do this. I grab some snacks, and we get your pyjamas."

"What's a pyjama?" Po wanted to know.

"What you wear when you're in bed."

Po blinked. "I don't wear anything when I'm in bed."

"Oh, um, well, you can always have one of mine."

"Can we go to your cabin? I'd really like to know how you live. Also, I don't want any of my guards hang around." She rolled her eyes in a dramatic gesture. Or at least that's what Tilly thought she did, for the actual eye rolling was barely visible. Po's eyes were completely black, with no iris or visible pupil.

"Well, I don't live there, actually. My home is my cabin on *Discovery*. And I only have one bed."

Po grinned sheepishly. "I'm sure we'll find an arrangement. I promise not to take up too much space."

The two women then decided to split up. While Tilly went back to the galley to order sweets and crisps, which the *Windhoek* surprisingly had on board. At the same time Po snuck back into her quarters to grab a toothbrush and some toiletries. Over the years Po had learned how to avoid the royal guards on any occasions she didn't want to be tracked. So about 20 minutes later, she rung the buzzer to Tilly's quarters with a toothbrush a towel and a few pillows in er arm.

The door slid open and she entered the small cabin. Tilly had already set up a small candy-buffet in front of the comms screen. The holoscreen itself showed a very convincing image of burning candles. The holo candles were the only illumination in



the room, so when the doors closed, the room lighted in a cosy half-dark.

Tilly had already changed into her night clothes. Instead of a uniform, she wore a pyjama with red polka dots on the top, and trousers in matching colour. Her ginger hair fell over her shoulders in curls. Po had admired that hair ever since they had first met. On Xahea most people had black hair, some with a tint of blue in it. A person with hair the colour of polished copper was exotic and alien, and people had initially not believed her when she told them about Tilly.

“Hey! Welcome back!” Tilly hugged her as if they had been away from each other for months not for ten minutes. Po dropped the pillows and hugged her friend back. “Thanks for having me.” She said.

“Any time.”

After they parted from the embrace, Tilly directed Po to the small bathroom. “You can change in here.”

“Thanks.” Po said, as Tilly handed her a bundle of clothes. She went into the tiny bathroom and closed the door behind her. She felt relieved to get out of her ceremonial dress. Although her choice of dress was rather simple, she still preferred a pair of leather trousers and a shirt over all the expensive dresses. The kind of clothes a hunter or a miner would wear. Comfortable and practical. The pyjama thing Tilly had given her, wasn’t exactly a hunter’s choice either, but it was equally comfortable. Although it was way too big for her. Tilly was a little taller than Po, and she had more curves in her figure. The wide shirt meant, however, that there was room for the long spikes that lined a Xahean’s back, and that human backbones lacked.

The pyjama was white with pink lining, which build a weird contrast to the blue patterns on Po's skin. The white cloth was printed with enormously cute stylised animals. Po had to laugh, when she looked at her reflection. She looked ridiculous in these, but also, wearing images of cute pets was so typical for her friend, that she could not help, but love it.

"How do I look?" She asked when she stepped out of the bathroom.

"Adorable!" Tilly smiled.

"What's with those animals?" Po asked. "Are they some sort of pet?"

Tilly laughed. "Certainly not. Bears are biggest land predators on Earth. They are among the few animals that can pose a threat to humans."

"They look so harmless."

"Only in the cutified version. In reality, they are fearsome."

"Why put them on your bed clothes then?"

"I have no idea. Someone decided to make a cute children's toy out of them centuries ago. It's been a cultural icon ever since. Maybe that way, we don't need to be afraid again."

Po sat down on the bedside looking at her friend. "I never had a chance to ask you about your exams."

"I failed again." Tilly sighed.

"You want to talk about it?"

"I don't know. There is not much to tell. I went in, they told me I'm a failure."

"I can't believe that's what they said, You're a decorated war hero."

“Well, they try to put it into nicer words. But the fact is, I don’t have what it takes. I always fail, when it comes to making the hard decisions. I’m a coward, I’m afraid.”

Po looked shocked. “How can you say that?” She said. “I look at you, and I see someone who jumped into the fire to save others. More than once.”

“When it comes to sending people into dangerous situations, I take too long. I cannot really bring myself to do it.”

Po put an arm around her friend. “And you think that is a weakness? Not being willing to send people to their deaths?”

“My mother seems to think so.”

“Then she’s wrong.” Po said firmly. “It’s what makes the Federation: Starfleet isn’t about dying gloriously in battle. It’s about celebrating the diversity of life in the universe. And the fact that we’re in it. Infinite diversity in infinite combinations, as the Vulcans put it.”

She paused for a moment. “I am here, because I want this for my people. I want them to be part of this infinite diversity. To grow. To learn.”

“To me”, she continued “you are the embodiment of these values. Starfleet is exactly the place where you need to be. Because your kindness, your curiosity and your empathy are a constant reminder, what Starfleet was founded for.”

Tilly tried to fight back her tears. She hugged her friend.

“You’re really good at motivational speeches.”

“That’s what I am paid for.” The queen answered.

“I will never make the command chain, will I?” Tilly asked.

“That depends on where you want to go?” Po answered. “There are more things a Starfleet officer can do, than the commando on a star ship.”

“I don’t want to end up in admin. I want to be out here.” Tilly said.

Po nodded. “Everything else would be a waste of your talents. Have you ever considered becoming a specialist for first contact situations?”

“What? I am not an anthropologist. At the academy I majored in engineering!”

“So?” The young monarch shrugged. “I studied engineering and subspace field theory. And now I am a diplomat.”

“I don’t think I can do this.” Tilly said. “I am not a diplomat. Or a politician.”

“Maybe not. But you are open anything new. You’re unafraid of facing the unknown. You’re kind and relatable.”

“Do you think that’s enough?”

Po thought for a moment. “Remember when we first met?” She asked.

Tilly nodded.

“I was confused and afraid.” Po continued. “And pretty aggressive.”

“I was feeling like I had to defend myself, and took a fighting stance. I know how intimidating an angry Xahean can be.”

“I remember. What’s your point?” Tilly asked.

“Ask yourself how many people would have pulled their phasers and stunned me. You on the other hand, saw a creature in distress, and tried to help. And I must have looked very alien to you.”

“Not that alien.”

“Well, you looked pretty alien to me, and that scared me.”

“And you believe, that makes me a good first contact specialist?”

“It was a first contact situation, wasn’t it? And your behaviour on that day laid the foundations to our peoples current relationship. I doubt I would have such a positive image of the federation, had you shot me.”

Tilly pondered on that. “But that’s your personal view. And you’re biased.”

“Then what about the mycelium network?” Po asked. “From what I know, the hive mind in there thought the federation waged war against it when it abducted you. And when you came back, you made friends with that being.”

“That was a coincidence.”

“I doubt that. Basically, you prevented a trans dimensional war.”

“I’m not allowed to talk about that. It’s classified.”

“Not my point. You wanted to know, why you’re qualified for the job. The only question is: Is that what you want to do?”

Tilly thought about it for a long while. Po let her friend take her time, and simply allowed her to lean into her, gently stroking the ginger hair.

Finally Tilly spoke again. “I think I would like that very much. It’s at the core of what I think the federation means to me.”

“Then you should go for it.”

“My mother would note it as another failure.”

“This is not about your mother. It’s about you.”

“I want her to be proud of me.” Tilly admitted.

“Everyone wants their parents to be proud of them. You can only be yourself, and hope that they accept that. You cannot force them.”

Tilly pressed herself into her friends embrace, and Po held her tight.

“For all it is worth: I am very proud to call you my friend.”

“Thank you.” Tilly managed to say.



# *Five*

## Arrival

Tilly woke to the beeping of her communicator. Po slept next to her, one arm loosely around Tilly's waist.

They had been talking for hours, listened to weird music, among it an aria from a Klingon opera. It was silly and childish laughing at it, and they both knew that. They talked about the pros and cons of men and interspecies relationships and got into a sugar rush from all the candy they ate.

Eventually they both fell asleep on Tilly's bed. Now Tilly tried to get to her communicator.

She flipped it open.

"Ensign Tilly, report to the bridge immediately! We have a situation!"

Tilly was immediately awake. "What happend?"

"The queen is gone. She didn't return to her quarters last



night!”

Tilly relaxed again. No crisis here. “No need to worry, Sir. She’s with me. We’re all right.”

“What? Were are you?”

“Um, my quarters sir.”

“Bring her to the bridge. The captain wants to see you both. Bridge out.”

The communicator fell silent. Po stirred beside her. “What happened?” She asked sleepily.

“It seems you’re on a missing persons list. We need to get dressed and report to the bridge.”

Tilly could hop out of bed and get dressed in no time, but the princess was slower. So when Po stumbled out of the bathroom, Tilly was already in her uniform, her hair in a tidy knot, as if she hadn’t been up all night. She was already answering the communicator.

“The captain is waiting.” A voice just said.

“Well, you’ll have to wait until her Serene Highness is dressed.” Tilly defended herself.

Po stared at her friend with her best “Oh, really?”-look in her eyes. Her nictitating membranes were blinking rapidly, which was a sign she was annoyed.

She pointed to the communicator. “Give me that!” She commanded.

Wordlessly, Tilly handed her friend the communicator.

“You’re annoying. Stop calling, we’ll be there when we’re ready. Tell your captain, I’m not holding audiences before breakfast.”

She cut off any reponse by closing the communicator. Tilly looked at her wide-eyed. “Did you just cut off the bridge?”

Po nodded. “When you’re in my position you learn quite quickly how to deal with self important big heads. Show them who’s boss.”

Tilly sighed. “I’m not boss.”

“Not yet. But it doesn’t mean you have to put up with everything.” She thought for a moment. “I will have my office send a statement to Athon’s superiors, where they praise the hospitality on this ship, and especially your role in making me feel welcome. They won’t dare giving you a hard time after that. Trust me.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. Let’s see what Captain Bloathead wants!”

Po did not take the direct route to the bridge, diverting them through the galley to grab a mug of coffee before heading on. Tilly got more and more nervous.

“The captain is already waiting for us, we need to move.” She said.

“The captain will wait for us. Don’t worry.” Po gave an encouraging smile.

Together they entered the bridge. Capatain Athon stood in the centre of the oval room, his back to the door. He slowly turned around.

“Ah, Ensign Tilly. How nice of you to honour us with your presence.” He said.

“I’m sorry sir, Her Serene Highness, ahm, needed a moment to get ready.” Tilly stuttered. Her face reddening.

“You don’t have the authority to modify protocol. We will discuss this later.”

Po now stepped forward. “No, we will discuss this now.” She said. “Because I want to know where the problem is!”

“I am sorry for any inconveniences, Your Serene Highness. We do have strict protocols implemented, so all our visitors get the respect and honours they deserve.” The captain explained.

Po sighed. “Relax captain. I am willing to play your game where necessary. But you might have noticed, that I am not the Klingon ambassador, and I assure you, there is no war looming between the Federation and Xahea. On the contrary, I think we are very much on the same wavelength. And for the record: I had a great time yesterday. I was catching up with one of my oldest and dearest friends, and sneaking out of my quarters was part of the fun.”

She smiled sheepishly. “Maybe I should have warned you. My own people have gotten used to it by now, but I should have told you how I tick. I apologise for this.”

“But... the crews quarters are in no way appropriate for a queen!” The captain exclaimed.

Po shrugged. “Do I look as if I care? I used to sleep on the naked floor in the dilithium caves on Xahea.”

The captain was obviously confused. An aggressive Klingon ambassador was something he was prepared for. But the blunt, almost working-class attitude of this teenage queen was something he never had dealt with before. He had expected a diplomat, or even a spoilt brat. But this woman was neither. His

anger at towards Tilly evaporated. Maybe it was a good idea to let the two women run free and have the young ensign keep his royal guest off his back, before he did something stupid.

But of course Po would not let him get away that easy.

“We stil have two hours until we arrive at the starbase.” She said. “I need a decent breakfast before I can face all the robe-wearers. Captain” she turned towards Athon, “would you like to join us? I would really like to try out an Andorian breakfast. Maybe you can show me, what your people prefer to eat?”

She gave him a warm smile, that not even he could resist. And so they spent the next hour in the galley, trying out breakfast dishes from different worlds. The captain looked like a fish out of water. Because the Xahean’s unconventional way of dealing with people none of his diplomatic standards worked, which in the end forced him to be himself. That however, turned out to be a good thing, because beyond his captains no bullshit attitude, Athon was quite a pleasant man. Still Tilly enjoyed watching him struggle when dealing with everyone at the table, for Po had invited everyone along the way to join them, from the security chief to the janitor.

When their small feast was over, they had tasted Andorian fruit plates, a Bovarian grass soup, bacaon and egg sandwiches Vulcan puffed mushrooms and many more things, that Tilly didn’t even know the food dispenser had on it’s menu.

With lifted spirits among the crew, the *Windhoek* reached her destination, and when Po and her entourage left the ship, everyone on board was sad, she was leaving. Everyone, except for

the captain, who -although he too was delighted by the young monarch, also felt some relief, that the routines aboard his ship went back to normal. His mixed feelings extended towards the young ensign Tilly, whose unusual way of handling things he found disruptive, but he had to admit, her close personal relationship to their guest had been a life-saver for him. And after all, she had done the right thing, when he himself was at his limits. Athon was a fair man, and he would mention that in his report.

Meanwhile Tilly had a lot of free time on her hands. Po was in the negotiations with the federation officials, and she would not be back before the evening. Now technically there were no days on a starbase, but different parts of the huge construction had different day and night cycles. The parts mostly populated by humans had a twenty-four-hour day, while there were parts with sixteen or even thirty-hour days.

Tilly kept in mind that her friend was not used to twenty-four hour cycles, and she would be tired when she came back from the talks. Xaheans needed less sleep than humans, but days on their world were shorter, and they usually slept for short intervals during the day. So Tilly had arranged dinner in a fancy, but not too fancy restaurant that served artificial meat, and tickets for the movies later. People lived in an age, where they could play interactive stories with holograms, and yet most places still had an old fashioned cinema. There were even a lot of movies still produced in 2D. Oddly, on a night out nothing seems to beat sitting in a darkened room with strangers, staring at a silver screen.

For the rest of the day, she walked around the station, went for a bit of shopping, and mostly thought about last night's conversation with her friend.

Being in command of a space ship had always been her dream. But was it really the right decision? The idea of being at the forefront of discovery excited her: As a specialist for first contact scenarios, she was still on the command track. Such experts often served as first or second officers, because they were essential to any captain in a first contact situation. It would still be a possibility to get her own command. It meant taking the long way around, but doors would not close forever. And the idea of being sent on a five year mission into the unknown, on a ship like the Enterprise, was exciting to her.

By the time she picked up Po for dinner, she had made her decision.

"I'm going to do it." She told her friend when they sat down for their supper.

"Do what?" Po asked.

"Go for the first contact specialist. I really think it's what I want to do. It's what I am good at."

Po grinned. "I told you so."

"I'm actually looking forward to tell my mother." Tilly said. "She's going to have kittens, but for the first time I will not feel guilty. I know what I want now. She can say whatever she likes, I'm going to do it."

"Have kittens?" The Xahean asked, looking mystified.

"Oh, it's an earth saying. It means she'll be shocked to hear about my plans, maybe even upset. But I can prove to her, I'm good at something."

“You don’t need to prove anything.”

Later that night, Tilly sat in front of the comms-screen in her quarters. Po was sleeping on the bed behind her. She had already been tired during the movie, where she had dozed off from time to time, her head resting on Tilly’s shoulders. Tilly didn’t blame her; it had been a very long day.

Tilly was too excited to sleep though. For the first time in a long while, she knew where she was headed. She smiled, and selected her mothers contact on the holo-screen.