Pon Izau
by MZ_Supermanfan

Summary

There's a lot that has changed since 1992 and one woman is about to find that out. Amelia Wright, caught in the wake of the first time travel mishap, finds herself in good ole' 2259. Suspicion surrounds her arrival, while others fight to keep her safe. Follow her journey as she makes a place for herself. McCoy/OC
Chapter 1

STARDATE 2492.197

M. J. Archer Base Camp

Antarctica

Adjusting his lab coat and pushing back stray strands of brown hair, Commander Eli Jefferson prepared himself for one last inspection, a data PADD resting across his left arm. It wasn't particularly necessary, but the situation allowed for additional precautions. He knelt at the base of the ten foot structure. He climbed up several ladders stationed around its mass. All done in order to check items off the list, his trained eyes searching for anything out of place. A missing bolt. A cracked tube. A misaligned cable. Anything that could cause a malfunction.

The commander wasn't alone as he paced around the white spherical pod, several other high ranking Starfleet officers making their own observations, each carrying an identical PADD. The five man team, comprised of four humans and a vulcan, flowed around one another with the grace of water. Double check. Triple check. Aside from the soft taps signaling data entries, the circular room was surprisingly quiet.

Eli was one of the first to finish, glancing over his shoulder once more at what would be one of the most recognized achievements since Cochrane. Some of the greatest minds of the Federation had joined together to construct the device. Eli felt his chest swell with pride having been a part of it. He wondered if the vulcan shared the sentiment.

One by one, the five man inspection team slowly gathered together, comparing notes and murmuring on with excitement, breaking the prolonged silence. No one had found any trace of error, which meant that in twelve hours time the pod would be sent to its destination. An hour after that it would return to the room it currently resided in. And then history would reflect on their dedication.

It was a good day to be a scientist.

A soft hiss drew their attention back to the pod, their eyes never straying as symmetrical breaks formed in the pod's surface, revealing a hatch. They watched on, not with surprise, but with anticipation. It opened outward, releasing more soft sounds of escaping air, and lowered until it touched the pristine floor to form the pod's landing ramp. One man and one woman stepped out from within the sphere, both dressed in soft yellow uniforms. Both wearing smiles.

"It's ready." Captain Matthew Parcell stated, jerking a thumb towards the pod. Two words that the team had been hoping to hear. Of course, they hadn't been expecting any other diagnosis.

"Yes." Eli responded, a small grin forming. "Yes it is." More statements of approval followed. Finally, Matthew and Joanna stepped off the ramp, beginning the short walk that would lead out of the launch site. Eli followed, stopping once to submit his results to command, and once more to place his PADD on its return cart. Even with the delays, he caught up to the two pilots before they reached the osmium plated doors.

"Won't be much longer now." Matthew said, not facing Eli as he addressed him. Eli wasn't too bothered by it, the captain presently occupied with the security panel embedded between the sliding doors. And, after years of working together they had grown past some of the more common courtesies. Matthew finally looked over his shoulder, pinning Eli with a soft green gaze. "I can't
believe we're here."

As the double doors parted a swift gust of cold air made its way inside the room, a testament to the harsh environment outside the compound's walls. It was also a reminder of the safety precautions being taken. Predominately, isolation.

"Better start believing it. We launch in-" Joanna broke off as she stepped out of the room and into a white walled corridor. "Eleven hours and forty-seven minutes."

"And there is still much to be done." Eli supplemented, mentally listing what would follow. Starfleet command would be arriving in seven hours, along with Federation representatives and a contingent of Vulcan and Andorian scientists. There had even been word that the Romulans would provide an ambassador, though that was still uncertain with their newly budding alliance. The event could serve to bring them further within the Federation or potentially empower them individually.

Of course, all that was politics and beyond Eli’s range of concern. Instead he focused on the fact that the inspection team would run three more complex simulations and verify future calculations. Which meant he needed to bid Matthew and Joanna luck and head off with his own team.

As he prepared to turn and face the captain, he found himself interrupted with, "I know, I know." Matthew's words were accompanied with a wink. "Good luck." The captain shot him a brief salute and then started forward with Joanna in the opposite direction, leaving Eli with the other four inspectors.

"Commander Jefferson." The senior inspector, Chief Commander T'Janis, drew Eli's attention back to the task at hand, his eyes meeting a pair of brown ones. The female Vulcan falsely appeared impatient, the downfall of having a blank expression. Then, for a brief moment, Eli could almost see a flash of anxiety cross her slightly wrinkled face. "We will begin a simulation in twelve minutes. I presume you will be present?"

The fact that the chief bothered to state the obvious meant something, though Eli wasn't sure how to translate her actions. "I will. I am actually on my way to the lab. Care to join me?" T'Janis tilted her head, her hand gracefully swinging, motioning for Eli to 'lead the way'.

The walk was relatively short, the lab strategically positioned close enough to the launch room that, should an emergency arise, someone could physically get to the pod. When Eli and T'Janis passed through the security doors, they were met with the other three team members.

One of them, Lieutenant Commander Timothy Walker, glanced up from a row of computer monitors. "We're engaging Project Pon Izau simulation one." The Vulcan words didn't flow easily from the human male, the pronunciation a slurred 'pon ease how'.

Project Pon Izau. Time Shift. When Starfleet first began toying with the idea, the Federation came forward with its concerns. Time is delicate. It can be used against us in ways we cannot even fathom. The damage will be irreversible.

And Starfleet responded with the only answer that could ever change the minds of the Vulcans. "We cannot let it happen again." Together, they developed the Temporal Directive. A series of classified rules and regulations designed to protect the time line that they would one day ride. Only after it was established did Project Pon Izau begin.

Eli mused on the project's history, thinking of how far Starfleet had come. How tightly it had drawn the Federation together.
"Commander." T'Janis pulled Eli from his thoughts, directing him towards an empty console. Its display was already filled with data, compilations of previous inspections, simulations, and projections. He took a seat, located his headset, and gave a slight wave to T'Janis over his shoulder. Sliding the soft material over his ears, blocking out the voices of the other technicians, he was ready.

"Commencing simulation one." A computerized voice spoke through the headset.

With the cue, Eli inhaled, his fingers moving swiftly and accurately across the control panel to submit information. "Computer, set destination. STARDATE 2392.197."

Several hours later, Eli was mentally exhausted. He anticipated that his pupils would take another half-hour to return to normal after having been focused on the display monitor for such an extended period.

An additional simulation was added, one member of the inspection team encountering an error with the chroniton ring generator. After examining the subsequent data, it was determined that the computer had a defect in its memory storage and the additional simulation was enough to counter the system failure. The team celebrated with replicated champaign, and toasted to the journey that Matthew and Joanna would be making.

By the time the deadline struck, everyone felt more than prepared. Or as prepared as someone could be for such a momentous occasion. The lab's computers were re-initialized, wiping clean the simulations and uploading the programs for the first test run of the chroniton pod.

Eli couldn't help but feel nervous as the team watched on security cameras as Matthew and Joanna suited up next to the pod. He adjusted his headset in order to be fed audio, even though they weren't scheduled to synchronize in for another twenty minutes. "-good thing we don't wear these everyday." Matthew's jovial voice came across clear through the headset.

"I thought it was bad when we were fitted." The two laughed and Eli found himself smiling. T'Janis, wearing her own headset, glanced over in his direction.

"Humans. Complaining about equipment that is designed to keep them alive." Though it was almost snarky, Eli interpreted the remark as T'Janis attempting to connect. He winked at the vulcan, who simply raised an eyebrow in response.

"We complain. It's part of our appeal." Eli said with a shrug. Attempting to change the topic's direction, Eli found himself asking, "Have you had a chance to see the diplomats?" Save for their Chief Commander, the team had remained in the lab, seeing to the set up of the computer systems.

"I have. The Ambassador has arrived, along with four members of The Science Academy. The Klingon Chancellor is also in attendance with two scientists from Qo'nos. Seven Romulans arrived an hour ago. I believe they have passed through security. And three Andorians. I am not aware of their... profession." Her reply was more informative than he had expected, and just as quickly as she ended the conversation, she resumed watching the security feed. Eli guessed that the diplomats had their eyes rapt on the same images.

Matthew and Joanna placed their palms simultaneously against the pod's surface, the breaks beginning to form for the hatch. As a security measure, the pod itself would only open for five people, two of them required to bypass the entrance locks. No single person could ever open the pod and no single person could operate it.

It was regulation two-seven delta of the Temporal Directive.
Once Matthew and Joanna entered the pod, the team lost visibility of them. Originally, the pod had been designed with a view screen, but during an initial engine test they learned that a transmitting a visual feed from within the pod interfered with the chroniton drive. Even though the disruption wasn't considered significant, the team simply decided to use an audio only feed.

However, they kept the security line open to watch the room itself.

Over the course of three minutes, the team became re-acquainted with Matthew and Joanna's voices, listening in to their chatter, soft smiles spreading on their faces as the two captains eased themselves into the situation.

Eli would have done the same under the circumstances. Despite all the calculations, all the simulations, and all the projections. There was still the chance that those two would never make it back. But that kind of negativity wasn't something the team allowed to thrive. Instead they focused on ensuring that Captain Parcell and Captain Pike would see them in an hour and ten minutes.

"Commencing countdown to launch. Ten minutes." Command's broadcast reached the entire compound.

"Ready, Jo?" Matthew.

"Can't really back out now." A few nervous laughs echoed through the lab.

As they had been trained, Matthew began talking through the process. Since there was no video feed from inside, that was their affirmation that the two captains were operating on schedule. That and the physical changes in the pod over the security feed. "Powering ring generator. Sealing hatch."

The confidence in his voice was present, one of the reasons Matthew had been chosen to be pod's pilot. Fearless... and even when he felt fear, he pushed through. He'd once stated that there was always a way home and if something went wrong, he'd not stop til he found it. His career had proven that to be true.

But how does someone find their way home when it doesn't even exist yet?

The pod's hatch finally sealed, and all the members of the team had their eyes rapt on the monitors, switching between watching small openings forming on the pod's surface and a steady stream of data confirming the pod's status. The ring generator had been designed with nodes across the pod's surface to help ensure stability of the chroniton rings.

"Countdown to launch. Seven minutes."

"Time to hover. Engaging thrusters." The pod lifted off the ground, remaining at just over a foot in the air. Eli glanced at a temperature reading of the room, noting a twenty degree spike in temperature. So far, so good.

"Establishing ring one." Hearing Joanna's command, Eli could picture her operating the console to release built up energy from within the ring generator, which was redirected through magnetic fields. The energy would flow through an exit port at the base of the pod, then continue from node to node until it was a steady circle around the sphere.

"Hey, Eli." At Matthew's call, Eli's cheeks heated, a flush forming as the captain singled him out. "How's it looking?"

He fumbled with the headset, his fingers finding the open comms button as he responded. "I'm sure command is keeping you well informed."
"They are. I just want to know how it looks from your perspective." Matthew wasn't able to see the formation of the rings, but the inspection team had a perfect view. Ring one expanded outwards from the pod, spinning strings of light that slowly beginning to rotate. It looked like a planetary ring, keeping an even six inches from the pod's surface. The nodes released small magnetic containment fields, blinking in time as they worked to keep the ring stable.

For a brief moment, Eli felt reminded of an angel's halo. A remarkable feat of ingenuity and invention. They had witnessed this on a much smaller scale during the test runs, but the size of the pod and the even greater size of the rings caused Eli's chest to tighten with awe.

"It's beautiful, Captain. You'll be able to see the feed when you get back." His fingers left the comm button, their open connection coming to a close. He couldn't risk distracting Matthew, or let Matthew distract himself.

"I'll hold you to it." He nodded, despite his friend not being able to see it.

"Establishing ring two." A second halo expanded, passing through the first ring. Bright sparks flew at each intersection of the rings, tiny crinkle sounds of electricity flowing across the headset. The gray color of the second ring contrasted with the pure white of the first, each one identifiable as they passed through one another.

"Countdown to launch. Five minutes."

"Ring three." The pace of the captain's work increased. Once the first ring was established they could only hold the rotations for ten minutes max before having to restart the system. Calculations had allowed for a three minute buffer should the first ring fail formation.

Not that they had anticipated a failure.

Each of the following rings appeared with darker shades, the fifth ring appearing black, small slivers of white light wrapped throughout it. "All rings holding." Matthew announced. "Preparing to activate Chroniton drive." Though the rings were captivating in their looks, the chroniton drive was the true hero of the pod.

The drive was designed to release chroniton particles throughout the rings, surrounding the pod with their unique temporal properties. Too few rings and only part of the pod would be transported, too many and the particles would be spread too thin. Upon the drive's activation they suspected the pod would simply vanish, though this would be the first time witnessing the pod's departure with human passengers.

A burning sensation formed in Eli's chest and he realized that he had been holding his breath. Glancing around him, he observed the other inspectors all wearing flushed expressions. At least he wasn't the only one, he thought as he rubbed his palms against the bottom of his lab coat. His eyes landed on T'Janis, who was oddly expressive for a Vulcan, her gaze rapt on the screen, her fingers clenched tightly.

Her mouth made silent words, but Eli wasn't very good at lip-reading, much less in Vulcan. Maybe there were times where even a Vulcan prayed.

"Launch in five-four-three..." His gaze returned to the screen, watching as the five rings of the pod widened further from its surface, their circumference thickening, as if strengthening themselves for what was to come. As they grew in size, the small static sounds rose to a dull roar. Eli adjusted his headset to compensate.
"Drive active!" Matthew shouted above the noise, indicating that even the Captains were not protected from the sound, despite the dense osmium shielding of the pod's surface.

"One."

"See you in a hundred-"

No one made a sound. Not when the rings imploded into the pod. Not when all that was left was an empty launch room. And not when the computer made the announcement, "Launch complete." The destination should be free of all life. Antarctica. STARDATE 2392.197.

For a brief moment Eli felt a sharp spike of dread as he wondered if they had just sentenced themselves to non-existence.

July 15, 1992

Flagstaff, Arizona

Amelia Wright browsed, searched, and perused, her trained eyes looking for perfection. Or at least the potential for it. It wasn't often that she had the opportunity to be picky, the merchandise before her quite a haul from home and much more abundant.

Finally, she settled a sharp blue gaze on her prize, a satisfied gasp escaping from between parted lips. "There you are." She murmured at the sapling with a smile, as if trying to encourage the plant. "You're going to be very strong one day." The statement wasn't entirely true, but Amelia had never discouraged a plant before. She didn't intend on starting with a dogwood who wouldn't bud a flower for several more years.

For as long as she could remember, she loved watching things grow. Animals, people, plants. They age, molded by the elements around them, developing personalities and quirks. Animals were simple, easy to figure out. Happy, sad, and bored. People were a little more challenging. Happy with traces of the other two. Sad, with a touch of anger. But plants...

Once a plant was rooted, past it's first budding season, that was usually that. Her father would call her silly for assigning moods to a plant. Her mother would defend her, understanding because she had shared a similar love.

The dogwood was still too young for Amelia to say for sure what its temperament was, but if she had to guess she'd give it stubborn. Much like her father. "Yep. You're a Henry all right." She muttered, leaning in closer to eye its trunk, adjusting the strap of the backpack on her shoulder.

"Amelia!" She started at the shout, her eyes narrowing to glare at the short bald male making his way towards her. Not that she held any true ill will towards John... she simply had an aversion to surprises. Straightening to her full frame, she placed a balled up fist against her hip, hoping the posture was enough to discourage his behavior.

Of course, five feet wasn't particularly intimidating. Combining that with the blond hair pulled back in a pony tail and what some had jokingly called doe eyes, she wasn't likely to discourage much of anything.

Fumbling with the rolled up cuff of her flannel shirt, she let her eyes relax, losing the narrowed glare.

"Yes?" She huffed as John finally came to a stop to stand by her side. His gaze was drawn almost immediately to the dogwood, a frown slowly appearing. Already she knew that what he planned on
saying wouldn't be what she wanted to hear.

"It'll be hard to culture back home." He crossed his arms in disapproval, tilting his head as he looked upon the thin branches. With a careless grasp, he lifted up one of the branches, the limb threatening to break. She briefly wondered how the man had succeeded into the horticulture business, treating the plants so harsh.

"No worse than here." Amelia knelt down, inspecting the sapling further. She fought a frown as she touched the soil, her hands coming back without a smudge of dirt. *Too dry,* she thought, finally letting that frown show.

"I've only had it for a week and it's already turning brittle. Dogwoods aren't made for this environment. You'll spend too much time and money keeping the soil rich and he'll never transplant anywhere. Damn thing saps up water in seconds."

"I've never had one at the greenhouse. I think he'll fit in nicely." Amelia closed her eyes to picture a fully grown Dogwood in the center of her greenhouse, its branches covered in soft white blooms. The frown on her face dissipated. It would take quite a bit of work, but she was certain it would be worth it.

"Well, the boys loaded up the Mallows and the Silver Puffs. I suppose I'll throw in ole-" He arched a brow and waited with mild impatience for Amelia to supply a name. They'd been down this road a time or two.

"Henry."

"Henry here." Shaking his head and huffing, he knelt down to grab the pot, waving Amelia off when she went to assist. At least he showed a little more care as he cradled the plant. When he met her gaze, his brow crinkled, his mouth opening briefly before snapping shut. She recognized the concern almost instantly.

Confusion crossed her features, her hand grasping the backpack and steeling herself for bad news. *What?*

"Nevermind." John added with a shake of his head. "I'll take him out to the truck and meet you up front." Abruptly, he turned away from her, heading out back to where her little red Ford ranger was parked. She watched his back for a few moments, before turning the opposite direction.

Amelia had known John for almost six years, stopping by his plant nursery at least once a quarter. And never once had she seen him act that way. Angry over bad seasons, she'd seen. Sad after losing his wife. Bitter quite a few times. But concern was new.

*Maybe I've read him wrong,* she thought, still thinking about it when she made it to the register. The backpack fell at her feet, her hands searching through the front pocket for a small wad of cash. A stipend she'd saved just for this trip.

By the time she'd finished counting, rising to stand, John had already made it back and was still wearing that same expression on his face. "You gonna tell me what's on your mind?" Directness was something a man like John appreciated, and after she asked the question, she knew that it was the right one.

He sighed and rubbed a hand across his bald scalp, a nervous tick that she'd seen a few times in the past. It was usually followed by bad news. "Honestly... I've been hoping you would stop by." She kept quiet, her fingers clutching tighter around dollar bills as he spoke. "I'm worried about you."
"I'm doing fine." She relaxed a little. The greenhouse was thriving, her sales enough to pay taxes, utilities, and give her a little extra each month. Yeah, she'd stopped eating red meat a while ago, but overall she was doing good.

"No, hun. I'm worried about you being in the middle of nowhere. Especially with everything going on." Everything going on? Amelia hadn't been into town in at least three weeks, and the paper she had picked up that morning still sat unread in her truck. Maybe she should have skimmed through it before picking up plants.

"What's going on?" He gave her a sideways glare, the look asking if she was serious.

"You don't watch the news?"

"I don't have television, John." She'd gotten by without it so far, but for a brief moment she wondered if she'd missed out on that much because of it. If the news had been that bad, surely someone would have called her. Like the family you don't have? Or one of her customers would have mentioned something.

"The war is spilling over." The war currently causing havoc an ocean away. The war the US had been fighting to keep off the borders. The war that 80 percent of the population had been ignoring. "New York City declared martial law yesterday. Mandatory gene testing. Checkpoints at the border."

Genetic tests meant the military was looking for one thing. "There's Augments in America?" The public, though primarily ignorant of the specifics, had received bits and pieces of news. Augmented humans in Asia and Europe rising up, claiming some sort of right to leadership and instilling dictatorships. Most people shrugged it off as rumors, especially secluded Americans like herself.

"Apparently." John pointed at her hands and the crumpled up bills within them. "Pretty soon, that's going to be worthless."

Amelia shrugged, "No more than it is now." Because there had been optimism about the economy, built through propaganda. Propaganda that Amelia had been more than willing to indulge in simply because society hadn't fell just yet. And even if it did, she'd turn on her generator and wait out the worst of it.

Why did John seem so worried, when he knew that her little patch of land made her self sufficient?

She must have said some of her thoughts out loud because John responded with, "I'm worried because you may have food and water, but when the soldiers pass through you'll be alone."

"Maybe, but if they pass through we'll have more to worry about than the soldiers." She held out the useless bills and John drew them from her grasp. Despite his negative statements, he still had faith in the system. Or was at least faking it.

"You can always stay in Flagstaff. I've got the guest house out at the ranch."

"Thanks for the offer, John." Kneeling down, she grabbed the backpack, swinging it onto her shoulder with a huff. Her eyes drifted towards the window of the shop, the sun just a few hours from setting. She'd need to leave soon if she wanted to make it home before dark. "But I can take care of myself."

"I hope so." Resignation settled on his face and Amelia wondered if the man thought more of her than just a customer. A daughter maybe? Perhaps that was why he was looking at her like he was about to lose a loved one.
She gave him a small smile, an attempt to not let her visit end on a sad note, though there wasn't much she could do to change the mood. "I'll see you in a couple of months." A promise of sorts. That she would take care of herself. That she asked the same of him.

"Yeah. I suppose so." He slipped her the receipt, catching her hand in his own. She looked down at his grip, noticing the dirt under his nails and the calluses against her palm. She'd misjudged him before. John made an excellent horticulturist. Not because he cared about a person, plant, or animal's mood, but because he took care of it. In his own way.

"A couple of months." She said again, and he released her, giving her a sad smile.

During the walk to her truck, she made several mental notes. Get the paper more often. Call John once a week. Restock on some non-perishables. Re-fill the five gallon gas jug. And do an inspection on the generator.

She recalled her great-grandmother telling stories about the depression. Preparation had kept them alive for the most part, along with a touch of luck. She intended on being prepared, especially with John's update on the war.

It was coming, even if she hadn't believed it before.

The dull red of her truck pulled her back to the present, her eyes drawn to the back where Henry stood tall. The Silver Puffs required her to lean over the bed to see them, their lack of buds testament to the season. She'd ensure that they made it with her to next year.

Tossing the backpack in the passenger seat, she climbed inside, looking over her shoulder at the nursery, rows of plants visible through the opaque plastic walls. Next trip she'd pick up tomatoes and squash.

Definitely.

As she pulled around front, John rested against the door frame watching her, his gaze following the Ford. With fingers against his forehead, he waved her off, his expression appearing grim even in the distance. He was still standing there when she looked in her rear view mirror, the store parted by tall Henry in the back of her truck.

Finally, she set to the road, the sun to her left, heating her arm on the window.

Her mind was occupied with news of New York City and she couldn't picture such a police state being enforced. Though it wouldn't be happening unless the military thought it necessary. Augments were said to be stronger, smarter, and overall superior to the standard person. Many myths surrounding their creation had started during the cold war and after some of the Nazi projections were made public.

Amelia made the decision to call a few of her friends when she arrived home, to see if they had heard anything from overseas. If all of this talk of war was true, then Europe and Asia were in deep peril.

Her eyes drifted to the passenger seat, the newspaper nestled under her backpack. Perhaps she would stop by town just before getting home and pick up a more local paper. Flagstaff news might have something concerning other states, but Page's daily ledger would be more telling of the situation close to home.

If there was one thing worth doing on a drive through the desert, it was thinking. She loved calling Arizona home, it's beauty rugged and unrefined, much like the man back at the nursery. Her eyes drifted across the desert plane, cacti standing a little slouched, tumble weeds occasionally taking their
chances across the road.

The heat of the evening started to fade, the sun only halfway visible on the horizon, and Amelia yawned, exhausted from both the trip and her concerns. She caught a flash of movement from her corner of her eye, her foot hitting the brake and clutch together instinctively.

"Shit!" She swore, an uncommon occurrence, as the ford came to a sudden stop, fatigue suddenly replaced with adrenaline. The truck’s shifter was jerked into park. It sputtered, stalled, and died just as she leaned up to get a good look in front of her bumper.

A coyote sat, unharmed with its ears down, in the center of the road. If looks could kill she'd be coyote food.

She silently said her thanks that she was alone on the road and no one had been injured. To include the still pissed-off animal before the truck. "Well, you caused this incident, buddy." Her voice must have startled the animal, because just as soon as she had spoken, it took off in a sprint towards the desert, a small plume of dust following.

With a snort, she turned the key, quick clicking noises indicating a worse problem. Her eyes narrowed at the steering wheel, her hands already shoving up the fallen sleeves of her flannel shirt. Though the old ford was usually reliable... there were days she wished she could trade it in for something newer. An automatic perhaps.

She twisted the key again, that clicking noise grating on her frayed nerves. Resting her head against the steering wheel, she glanced out the driver's side window at the sunset. Her head shot back up almost immediately.

A ball, roughly the size of her garden shed, appeared silhouetted in front of the sun. Out of seemingly nowhere.

"What the hell?" Without the obstruction of buildings or forest, she could see it clearly even from a mile away. And the sight of it had her opening the driver's side door and stepping out onto the blacktop road. It hovered surrounded by strings of white light. If only she had kept one of those bulky phones in her truck. If only she owned one of those bulky phones.

For several moments she stood mesmerized by it, taking in its alien appearance. The thought spurred her to shout, "Oh my god. It's an alien!" Like with the coyote, she felt her words had some sort of affect, the light around the ball vanishing. Then it fell to the Earth.

The impact as it hit the surface made a soft thud, but she took distance into account and imaged it was much louder on site. After her stunned state faded, more assumptions came to mind. If it's an alien, then it could be hurt. First contact couldn't be remembered by humanity's lack of compassion, she determined. Impulsive behavior seemed to take over in place of panic.

Remembering that she kept a small first aid kit in her backpack, she ran to the passenger side of her truck and threw the door open. The strap was barely settled over her shoulder when she began the jog towards the foreign ball a mile away.

"Best thing you have in that kit is an ace bandage, 'Melia." And if they were indeed aliens, then her lack of medical supplies might be irrelevant. Heart hammering in her chest, from both the jog and the situation, she was almost half-way there when another thought occurred to her.

The Augments. What if this was part of their invasion? What if that ball was used to keep them hidden from air traffic control. A sort of shield. Her body stopped moving, fear gripping her in place.
John had been right to be concerned about her safety. She was in the middle of nowhere, being driven by her nature to help out strangers.

"It could be some sort of satellite." She reasoned, a slight hysterical laugh following. But what kind of satellite suddenly appears in the sky? "I'm just a horticulturist! Why do I have to make these decisions?!"

Amelia stared at the object resting just under half a mile into the desert, debating on if she should continue forward, or run back to the truck and get out of dodge. Someone could be hurt. Alien, augment, or astronaut, it made no difference.

Her feet started moving again, carrying her towards the sphere. As she closed the distance, trotting another quarter mile, she was able to see more details. No openings, doors, or hatches were visible on the white surface, which made her wonder if anyone really was inside.

How would they have gotten in there?

She was nearly two hundred meters away when the Alien theory seemed confirmed. The ball that had embedded itself a foot into the Earth, began to rise, small waves of heat drifting towards her. Then a single ring of light formed around it.

Even though it looked pretty, she was terrified. Amelia threw a glance over her shoulder, staring at her truck. If she jogged she could make it in seven minutes. If she ran she could make it in five. She turned her head back to face the levitating sphere, mimicking the salute that John had given her just a couple of hours prior.

"Looks like you have this handled."

And then she turned back and ran towards the haven of her little red Ford. I am not dying today. She told herself, unable to voice it through huffs of air. Behind her she could hear electrical sparks, like when she plugged something in wrong and heard a tiny buzz. Except these sounds weren't tiny and reminded her more of thunder.

And they only served to make her run faster.

Amelia wasn't an adept runner and the desert landscape didn't help matters. She stumbled over sudden dips in the ground, kept looking back over her shoulder at the shining ball that was now several feet in the air, and overall just failed to keep a good pace. That five minutes was quickly turning into seven.

Another glare was sent back at the sphere. Momentum carried her in a circle when she turned just a little too much, her back hitting dirt a second later. The air whooshed from her lungs, her gasping barely audible over the sound of thunder.

Just as her breathing became steady, everything turned white. Pain erupted in her ears, her hands instinctively moving to protect them. She'd been wrong about it all. There was no one inside because the damn thing was a weapon.

Her insides felt like they were being torn in different directions, the pain in her ears pushed to the side as she felt the need to throw up. Curling to her side she embraced the silence, her eyes squeezed tightly shut and forcing out built up tears.

This is it. Henry would be obliterated. John would be sad. Her little greenhouse would fall into rotting ruin. And worst of all is that she would die and she was barely 30.
A few seconds went by and she pulled a hand away from her ears, still terrified of what she might find when she opened her eyes. It was still alarmingly quiet and the wetness against her palms would be undeniably red and life altering.

Taking in a deep breath, she mustered up what little courage was left and opened one eye, putting a hand in front of her face. Blood seeped into the creases across her palm. "I'm still alive." she reminded herself, still by both her optimism and her pounding heartbeat. As she rolled over, her blurry gaze focused on the concrete beneath her, the sight of it no more a shock than the events that had just happened.

Where had the desert gone?

A burning sensation rose in her throat, her head swerving to get into posture just as the contents of her stomach ended up on the road. At least now her insides weren't twisted and she knew that most of them were working right.

Right enough to vomit anyway.

A strong gust of air hit the side of her face, drawing her attention up just in time to see a floating car heading straight for her. Most people might have moved, or at least stood up. All Amelia did was stare until everything went black.
Chapter 2

STARDATE 2259.320

Shipyard Grant

Denver, Colorado

Time is a funny thing, Amelia thought as she slowly pulled herself from the depths of slumber. The way it seems to pass in stages and each event in life is marked by it. Recently, it had struck at odd intervals, the times she had woke, reminding her with each conscious draw of breath that she was alive.

The first time had been chaos. A siren raged in the background, several faces above her showing a variety of emotions. Fear, anger, determination. The entire left side of her neck felt like it was on fire. Her mouth opened to scream but no sound escaped. The feel of multiple needles wasn't even enough to draw her attention from that pain against her throat.

Like salt on an open wound, the pain intensified. She tried to lift her hand to place pressure against it, but her limbs refused to cooperate, heavy against the ground. The last time she had dealt with this much pain, she's woken to find her parents were dead. The sudden invasive memory was enough to make her cry, wetness further blurring her already hazy vision.

"She's conscious."

"That's impossible. Her nervous system should have kept her out."

"Hypospray!"

A stabbing pain shot through her chest, right above her sternum. The sensation of cold water seemed to spread through her body and then the pain in her neck faded away. The cold became almost pleasant as she was pulled back into unconsciousness.

The second time was nowhere near as traumatic. Murmurs, beeps, and echoes of thunder drifted through the air. Her limbs were still heavy, but the heat in her neck had become a dull warmth. This time when she opened her mouth, tiny whimpers drifted to her ears.

The whimpers became background as someone started speaking. "We saved her vocal cords. And the on-site repair of the eardrums seems to have been a success. Let's conduct another nerve test."

Her eyelids were heavy, an attempt to open them unsuccessful. Fingers prodded against her neck, where the warmth was beginning to bloom. "We need to use the dermal regenerator again. The tissue is breaking down."

"There could be some latent bacteria interfering with the new cells." Now the warmth was becoming uncomfortable, Amelia's cries rising. "Another hypospray. She just doesn't want to stay under." Again, her sternum filled with liquid, relief explosive and exhausting. She didn't fight the pull, fully willing to succumb to the darkness.

"Fascinating."

The third and final time came with no significant amount pain, just a subtle ache that was familiar. She'd felt it before, after a day's worth of gardening, her limbs protesting each movement, but still
obeying the commands. This time was just like that, her eyes opening at first try to see a soft yellow ceiling dotted with lights above her.

The day's – or was it several days'- events ran through her mind. *The Dogwood. The weapon. The car. The ambulance.* Amelia recalled the wound in her neck and she reached for it. Unmarred skin spanned the area where she was convinced a gap in flesh had once been. *It was pretty traumatic. Maybe you don't remember it correctly.* Or maybe the plastic surgeon on hand was a god.

Shifting in place, she realized that she was laying on some sort of cushion, the material firm and far from a decent substitute for a mattress. As she rolled over, the yellow ceiling became a yellow wall, windowless and door-less. Her head tilted in confusion.

It certainly didn't look like a hospital room.

As someone usually did when waking up in a strange place, she assessed herself. Everything seemed to be intact, but her clothes were replaced with a thin blue hospital gown. Without the protection of her jeans and flannel shirt, the cold of the room seeped into her skin, goosebumps forming on her arms.

Her bare feet were freezing, but she pushed aside the discomfort to focus on other things. Like the room she was in. Rising to her elbows and ignoring the twinge of soreness, she rotated her head to get a better view. The soft yellow walls connected to form a square room, a circular table in the center with three rolling chairs and a single hallway leading out from one corner.

The mat she rested on was elevated off the floor on a gurney, which should have made it easier to stand. Instead, when she dropped to her feet, vertigo struck fast and hard and she had to fight the churning of her stomach. She recalled throwing up not too long ago on a concrete road and it was a feeling she didn't want to repeat.

As soon as Amelia regained her equilibrium, she found herself face to face with three men, their abrupt presence almost enough to shock her into losing what was left in her stomach. A quick hiccup escaped instead.

"I see that you are recovering." If he had known what she was feeling, he wouldn't have said something so *dopey.* The three males were staring at her, one looking angry with a narrowed glare, another seeming to focus his concentration, and the one in the middle simply taking in her appearance. She didn't deny them the courtesy of the same, her gaze traveling across their identical yellow uniforms, the only difference lying in the embroidery of their collars.

It made her think of military rank, and she wouldn't have been surprised to learn the guess was correct.

"Who are you?" The first question she thought of was the first one she voiced, the stunned silence of the room begging to be broken.

"We'll get to that. Would you take a seat, Miss Wright?" It may have had all the components of a request, but it wasn't. The man in front waved his hand towards the gurney and for a brief second she considered telling him no.

But these men were some kind of para-military or special police force and denying them could lead to her having an even worse day. So Amelia ignored the rush of dizziness as she moved and pulled herself back onto the gurney. Her hands fell into her lap, her vision returning to find the three men seated in rolling chairs.
Maybe her sense of timing was off, and the vertigo lasted minutes rather than seconds, explaining their sudden appearance and the movement of the chairs in the room.

A prolonged silence ensued and she wondered if they were expecting her to break it first. Her sharp gaze landed on the man who had spoken, a sudden thought occurring to her. *Would you take a seat, Miss Wright.* "How do you know my name?"

"You had a bag with you when you arrived. There was identification in one of the pockets." At first he'd looked like he didn't want to tell her that, his eyes darting to his counterparts as if asking them for permission. Then he reached into his back pocket and pulled out the familiar shape of a driver's license. He gave it a quick once over before looking back at her. "Is Amelia Wright your real name?"

"Uh... yes." She kept a rapt focus on his expressions, trying to determine his emotions. His left brow lifted a little. Disbelief? If they were indeed military then they could tell the difference between a real ID and a fake one.

"And you were born in 1962?"

"Yes." The man turned to look at the one on his right who still had that intense concentration on his face. Tiny gestures passed between the two, an indication of an unspoken conversation. The other man on the left still glared at her.

It made her instantly uncomfortable... well more so than she had already been. The anger radiating from him set her into defensive mode, her own eyes narrowing in response. "What is this about?"

"Though you're not being charged with any crime, you did enter the perimeter of this shipyard without authorization. Until we can determine your reasoning, you are going to be held in this facility."

Shipyard? Perimeter? The state was landlocked. None of what he had said made any sense to Amelia. "Wait." Holding up her hand, more for herself than the three men, she continued to ask. "Why is there a Shipyard in Arizona?"

The main speaker looked back at the concentrating man. Another silent conversation ensued. At what she guessed was its conclusion, he turned back to her. "You're not in Arizona. You're in Denver, Colorado."

*That's over 10 hours from Page.* Her head was shaking, her breath coming in short pants. "No, no, no. That can't be right." How did she get there? How the hell was she going to get home?

"She doesn't understand." The concentrating man spoke for the first time, his statement addressed to the others.

"Of course I don't understand!"

"Mr. Keller... careful." At least she had a name to attach to the man on the right. But what was it that Mr. Keller had to be careful about. He was simply confirming the obvious. Her lack of understanding should have been clear.

Or maybe it wasn't obvious. They were treating her like an enemy. Maybe not with torture and a prison cell, but it was still very intimidating and until she figured out what they were she wasn't able to provide them with anything.

How long would they hold her? *Until they figure out how you got here.* But she didn't even know how that had happened. Weren't they responsible for her being there?
She shifted through recent memories, starting back with her purchase of Henry. The plant was probably still in the back of her truck, drooping or dead from the weapon. The idea of him not even making it a few hours after she had bought him made her a little sadder than it should have. No one would even know that she was missing for at least a few days, and even then it would just be a customer who showed up at her house.

Amelia steeled herself against crying. They weren't people who'd respond to tears, too intent on finding answers to questions they hadn't even asked yet. What she needed most was comfort and there were few places she could get that.

Plucking at the blue hospital gown, she gave a small sigh. "Can I have my clothes?" The familiar feel of denim was certain to make her feel better.

The main speaker, her interrogator, looked over his shoulder to Mr. Keller, who gave him a quick nod. Another one of those damn silent conversation occurred before he turned back. "We'll bring them in when we're done." However long that would take. "First, we want to know who you're working with."

"If I don't answer, does that mean I don't get my clothes?" Defiance struck before common sense, her teeth clenching in anger.

"We want a name. An organization. How did they get you on this installation?"

"I'm self employed. I'm part of the American Horticultural Society. And I don't know what 'they' you are talking about!" She didn't get violent and the sudden urge to throw something caught her by surprise. If there'd been anything within reach she probably would have followed through. *I'm the one who has been through hell the past few days. I'm the one who survived that weapon. And now I have to sit here and be interrogated by these... these... assholes!*

Mr. Keller flinched, his eyes widening slightly as he leaned in to talk to the man in front. The whispers were low, but enough to draw her out of the mental tirade.

"I just want my clothes." She whispered, her stare focused on the pale green of the carpeted floor.

Whatever Mr. Keller had whispered was enough to set the odds in her favor. "Lieutenant Commander, go get Miss Wright's clothes." The man who was glaring stood abruptly. The surprise on her face wasn't hidden as she watched him walk towards the hallway and out of sight.

After another long silence, the man in front finally asked, "Tell us about the weapon." She tilted her head, confused. She hadn't said anything about it, or at least she was pretty certain that her mental conversation hadn't become a vocal one.

*They're the government. Maybe they already know about it. "It um... it was a ball. A sphere about twelve feet in diameter. It just... appeared. In the sky. And it had these rings of light around it. At first I thought it was Aliens." Despite her fading anger, and how uncomfortable she felt, she still managed a small laugh. "Stupid really. But the rings disappeared and it fell."*

She thought back to that night, how worried she was that someone inside was hurt. What had she said? Aliens, Augments, or Astronauts... it didn't matter. "Then the lights came back on. And it exploded."

"Exploded?"

"Yeah. Everything hurt. It was loud. Heat waves. Pretty much what you'd feel after being near an explosion. Next thing I know I'm in an ambulance. And then some doctors are talking," Amelia
stopped, frowning as the memory slowly returned. "And here we are."

"You don't know how you got here?" Hadn't she made that clear?

"She doesn't. She has no idea why she's being held here. The only thing we are doing is scaring her." Mr. Keller managed to hit the nail on the head, his concentrated gaze still focused on her. Her brow raised. He was good at reading people. Perhaps he was like one of those trained detectives in movies. Or maybe just really observant. Sherlock Holmes style.

"What are you, Psychic?"

That earned him a glare from her interrogator. "Mr. Keller-"

"No. We've done enough, Commander. She's a victim in this." Something passed between the two of them, agitation maybe. Some form of insubordination?

"Wait." Her hand rose, palm out, and they both faced her. "Did the government send that weapon to the desert? I figured it was Augments. Wouldn't you guys at least check for people!?" The fact that all this was their fault spurred another wave of anger.

She was really losing her cool today.

"How could the military be so stupid!?" Her hiss echoed in the room.

"Miss Wright, we didn't send a weapon to Arizona." The Commander sounded defensive, but that quickly changed into curiosity. "Also, why would you think augments were responsible?"

"Because they invaded New York City yesterday." Or two days ago... or whenever.

"Yesterday?"

"Yes! It was in the paper." Even though she hadn't read it, she was sure that what John had told her would have been on the front page. "I picked one up the morning that I saw the weapon."

"Commander." Mr. Keller stood, looking almost tired from the ordeal. You and me both, buddy. "I think we have enough to have Miss Wright transferred from the facility."

Her interrogator gave a small nod, his hand waving towards the hallway. "Go ahead and start on your report. I'll stay with her until Geoffrey gets back." Geoffrey must have been the Lieutenant Commander.

"She may be innocent, Commander. But she's still pretty sharp." If she didn't know any better, she would have thought Mr. Keller was giving her a compliment.

They didn't have to wait long before the angry man returned, carrying her flannel shirt and blue jeans. On top was even a fresh set of underwear, which made her almost like the guy. Neither one of them flinched when she started to get dressed, the gown large enough for her to maneuver the clothes without revealing anything significant.

Maybe the military desensitized them. Either way, she was willing to sacrifice the modesty in order to feel that touch of comfort. It was almost immediate as she buttoned up the shirt.

"Thanks." She looked down at her bare feet, but didn't say anything. "Do you have what you need? Can I go home now?" To Page. To her little greenhouse.

The Commander's next words killed any optimism she held on to, his expression a mixture of
grimness and reluctance. "That might not be possible right now." But this time she kept any tears and anger at bay.

**STARDATE 2259.321**

**Shipyard Grant**

**Denver, Colorado**

After the interrogation session, Amelia was moved from what she learned was 'the yellow room' into a barracks style one. It was a spacious flat, fully furnished with red cloth furniture, a small bathroom, and galley kitchen. Though not quite large enough to be an apartment, she was told to make herself comfortable for the next few days.

In one corner of the room there was a twin sized bed, the mattress quite a step up from the mat she had woken on. As soon as Commander Richard O'Shea, Mr. Harry Keller, and Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Salo had left her in the room, she'd made use of that bed, sleep coming before her shoes had even been taken off.

Amelia dreamed of flowers and trees, bright yellow tulips growing in the shade of tall oaks. It was pleasant, invoking feelings of home and comfort. The subconscious mind tends to take two paths while one is asleep. The path of joy. And then the sudden dark path of fear. The oak lost its leaves, the dead orange drifting down until it piled high and heavy on the tulip.

The Autumn sky turned gray and everything lost its jubilant color. Then the ball appeared in the sky, surrounded by black rings that were almost invisible in front of the clouded sky. With a thunderous roar it exploded, a twisted version of Amelia's memory. The leafless tree caught fire, ash fluttering to the ground.

The forest burned.

She woke up screaming, sweat making her clothes cling to her body. It took several moments for her to catch her breath, her eyes darting rapidly around the dark unfamiliar room. It wasn't home... not even close, but she still managed to find her way towards the door, her hand spanning the wall just below eye level.

No matter where you are, some things stay the same, she thought as her fingers touched a raised area. She clicked on the lights. Her gaze traveled to the opposing wall, an analog clock hanging in the center. 7:49 AM. In eleven minutes, Richard would be there, expecting her to be ready to write down everything that had happened the night she saw the ball in the sky.

He had said there were other people she needed to meet, some of the few select personnel who were aware of her unauthorized arrival. If they treated her the same as Richard had when they'd first met, she'd rather not see any of them.

But keeping them at bay would only delay her chances at getting home. She had to get it together and deal with the now in order to see her greenhouse in the future. 7:49 AM. Amelia frowned, lost in thought and now running behind.

She slowly traveled to the bed, a set of clothes on a small nightstand. They were white with black trim, and not too different from the uniforms that Richard, Harry, and Geoffrey had been wearing. Except there was no insignia on the collar or on the breast.
However, they were far different than anything she was used to wearing. Even the shoes didn't seem to offer much protection, lightweight cloth that she'd happily trade in for a pair of boots.

The commander had said that later she'd be given more options, but today was going to be busy enough. "No time for show and tell until after reports were filed." He had said.

Her eyes drifted up to the small mirror above the nightstand as she began to unbutton the flannel shirt. A shower had worked wonders the night before, her blond hair only looking slightly tousled from sleep. The elastic band, kept around her wrist from habit, was taken to the hair as she made it into a ponytail. It wasn't very creative, but it kept stray locks from hanging in front of her blue eyes.

And mama always said that she shouldn't hide them. They'll get you everywhere. She had said with a knowing smile.

Thankfully, she'd managed to figure out the zippers on her new clothes, and by the time a beep sounded at the door she was already lacing the shoes. "Come in!" The door didn't swing open, but instead moved into the wall. The first time she'd seen it, Richard had simply stated that the military preferred efficiency to tradition.

And, apparently, swinging doors weren't efficient...

There were other minor differences in the way the military operated than normal people. Where her cell phone would have been the size of a portable TV, theirs were more advanced, fitting in a palm. The computers were also smaller and seemed to be everywhere, but she had yet to get an opportunity to closely examine one. Maybe they would eventually let civilians in on that technological advancement.

Amelia still had an ancient typewriter sitting on her desk that rarely had correction tape and was missing at least three letters. She was picturing it until someone cleared their throat at the door.

Finishing the lace's bow, Amelia looked up to see Richard and Mr. Keller wearing the exact same clothes as yesterday. Duh. Military uniforms. It wasn't as though they'd be walking around in jeans and tees any time soon. Though she wouldn't mind seeing Richard in a pair of jeans.

Upon closer inspection of Mr. Keller, she noticed a familiar strap across his shoulder. "My bag!" Just the sight of it made her feel a little better. A little less lost. He shrugged it off, holding it out in offering.

"I was given authorization to return it, however the gardening tools have been confiscated for the time being." Before she could ask why, he continued. "They are rather pointed." It almost wasn't worth getting the thing back if they took the one thing she'd cared about most. Don't be silly. You have your ID and money...

But those tools had been her mother's, refurnished and kept in prime condition. "So... does someone think I'm going to go around stabbing people with a trowel?" Amelia almost sneered, but kept her voice level as she took the bag from him, giving Richard a sideways glare.

"Just a precaution." Mr. Keller supplemented, his voice carrying a touch of apology. "It's likely you will get them back by the end of the day. After reports."

"Speaking of which," Richard gave her a pointed look. "I hope you have a good recollection of what happened."

"It's still pretty fresh." The nightmare had oddly enough helped matters, the image of that ball current and clear. Concerned with what the rest of the day would entail, she prompted, "What's on the
"You'll make a written report, an oral report, and then we'll draw up some diagrams." Draw up diagrams? Of the ball?

She pinched the bridge of her nose, giving a frustrated sigh as she adjusted the backpack on her shoulders. Even though she'd already steeled herself against the day, it felt like a rehash of the night before. "I already told you what happened."

"Amelia-" Richard hadn't used her first name often, but she noticed he'd begun to when he felt she wasn't understanding. It grated just a little on her nerves. ",you must realize that we're doing everything we can to both protect you and our own people. If some of my superiors had their way, you'd be in a prison cell right now."

She wondered if this was just a tactic, or if he was seriously on her side. Some form of good cop-bad cop.

"Because I gained 'unauthorized access' to the shipyard." They both looked confused as she made air quotes, as if the action was foreign, or potentially insulting. With the way they stared she wasn't quite sure.

Eventually, Richard clarified. "That... among a few other things." He ran his hand across the back of his neck, a nervous gesture that she wouldn't have expected of the seemingly controlled man. She wondered if it had to do with the superiors he had mentioned before. "We need to get on our way. A lot of people want to meet you."

"I bet." She muttered as they started out of the room. Even without any personal belongings she still asked about locking it, to which Richard said that wasn't necessary. She wasn't sure if that meant the base was safe, or they simply didn't care about the room.

The building was unlike any she'd seen before, several corridors connecting it to other buildings.

Richard wasn't very specific about the compound, but every now and then he'd point out something of interest.

The dining facility. A recreation area. A gym.

Amelia was surprised to see more people. Passersby in uniforms, silver medallions against their breasts. She came to realize that silver badge was a symbol of their branch. They weren't Army, Navy, or Air Force... but they were indeed all in the same military group.

She wanted to ask Richard about it, but when she turned to him, he had stopped walking, standing by a door similar to her own. "Mr. Keller, I'll walk with her the rest of the way. Could you make sure that Lieutenant Commander Salo arrives on time?"

"I will escort him, Sir." Mr. Keller said with a nod.

Richard cast a quick glance at the closed door, then looked at her over his shoulder. "He doesn't like me." Amelia said, recalling the angry stares that Geoffrey Salo had been sending her during the interrogation.

"No. That's why you'll be walking with just me."

"Better look out. I still have a driver's license. I could card you to death." She saw the shadow of a smile on his face.

Richard gave her an amused once over. "I think I can take you." Then he started off, leaving Mr. Keller behind.
It took roughly ten minutes for them to make it back to 'the yellow room'. It was arranged differently than when she'd been there yesterday, the gurney gone and several chairs surrounding the oval table. A couple of pens were resting on a full sized yellow pad of paper.

She'd expected to be writing on something a little more formal, but Richard gave a small wave for her to sit down. "They'll be here soon." She had no idea who Richard was referring to, but she kept silent, picking up one of the pens and giving it a cursory glance.

The bag on her shoulder was dropped to the floor, forgotten as she uncapped the pen. In no time she'd drawn small circles in the corner. Pens work. Of course they work. Don't want to miss this opportunity to make my hands sore. How detailed do I have to write this? I mean... I've never been that great at this sort of thing. Her thoughts continued to ramble on, but she didn't voice them.

"Amelia." She looked up from the pad of paper, her eyes meeting Richard's. "I know this is all very frustrating, but you'll need to bear with me. When they come in, don't stand. I'll introduce everyone and they'll sit down. They might ask you to begin writing or they might want you to start with the oral report. Everything in this room is recorded so hopefully you won't have to do this again." He looked towards the hallway and Amelia could hear footsteps in the distance. "Mr. Keller and I have fought on your behalf so you'd have some freedoms during the investigation. Don't be surprised if others look at you like the enemy."

The enemy?

Just as he finished, three new people stepped into the room. Their uniforms were different colors, two wearing red, and one wearing blue. Everyone looked so pristine, save the man in blue who looked a little worse for wear. She didn't feel like anyone considered her an enemy, everyone almost curious in the way they watched her.

They didn't waste any time, taking seats across from her as Richard began the introductions. A hand landed on her shoulder and she glanced up to see Richard giving her a nod. As soon as Mr. Keller and Lieutenant Commander Salo stepped inside, she was told to begin writing.

Salo glared, making her wonder if the only one who considered her the enemy was him. Amelia ignored it the best she could, rarely glancing up once the pen met paper.

She started with John and the nursery, figuring he would be important since he was the one who mentioned the augments. She fought threatening sadness that came with thoughts of home, but reminded herself it had only been a couple of days and they hadn't so bad. Food and board had been provided, even if she was 'unauthorized' personnel.

The good things kept her focused as she described the ball, being as detailed as possible. Shining light. Description of the explosion. There wasn't much when she came to the section about arriving in Denver. Just that she saw the car. A few glimpses of doctors. And then her interrogation.

She even used that word since that's what it had felt like.

Everyone asked to read everything, their eyes quickly scanning the pages, some questioning her handwriting, and a few others asking for more details about the ball. She was glad when it was over because her hand had started cramping and Salo's glares were harder to push aside. As soon as the oral part was over, she hoped he would leave.

Even though Amelia had never been questioned by police, she was pretty sure it was similar to this... except cops would have had more guns.
The oral report went much quicker on her end, but more questions were posed. The man in a blue uniform left with one of the others in red when she was done, and she wondered if her time there was almost finished. Richard had mentioned something about diagrams, but she had no idea what that meant.

"She's lying." Amelia wasn't surprised to hear the Lieutenant Commander's accusation, his narrowed glare persisting, just the same as it had yesterday. She was certain that the facial expression was the culprit behind all his wrinkles.

"She's not lying." Mr. Keller defended, looking annoyed by the behavior. The newcomer in the red shirt seemed to share that annoyance, glancing between the two. Richard simply ran a hand across his forehead.

"Did you consider that she's been trained to evade you?" Salo's voice rose as he stood from his seat, pointing an accusing finger at Amelia. She wondered if he meant she'd received some kind of special training... like what special forces get to prepare for capture. Maybe they often trained women for those tasks, and this was some sort of projection.

"She's not evading. It's the truth to her." To her? Versus what other kind? She arched a brow at Mr. Keller's words.

"She could be a sleeper agent." Had she really given indication of being some kind of spy?

The man in the red shirt also stood from his seat, his voice low and demanding. "Commander Salo... You need to step outside."

He was getting madder now, his jaw clenched and his breathing rapid. Amelia considered stepping back, away from him further. The table didn't look like it would be barrier enough if he decided to attack her. And she certainly felt like that was a possibility. "There is only one way to tell for sure."

Mr. Keller must have picked up on something because he stood, suddenly angry. "We are not drugging her and we're not using a Vulcan."

Vulcan?

Salo waved his hands in the air, incredulous that no one seemed to be taking him seriously. Another pointed finger was shoved in her direction, his shouting rising. "You're acting like she's one of us!"

"We never said that. All we said was that she isn't responsible." Her chair rolled back, someone having grabbed the spine. Richard swiftly stepped in front of her. An act of protection, his body and the table now standing between her and Salo. "Security."

He hadn't said it to anyone in particular, but the reaction was instant. Two more men entered the room, their eyes focused on her. "Not Miss Wright." Richard corrected. "Lieutenant Commander Salo." For a brief moment, they seemed confused, but then the two simultaneously grabbed Salo's arms. "It was a mistake having you on this case. Chief of Security or not, you're being removed.

"You're the one who's making a mistake! She's working for Khan." Khan? The name held no meaning to her, Amelia's head tilting to the side. The others, however, all stiffened, various emotions on display. Richard was sullen. Mr. Keller was angry. The two guards halted in shock. Salo still huffed in anger.

Amelia realized that whoever this Khan was... he was a bad man. And Salo had attached her to him for one reason or another. It would have explained his hatred towards her, if there had been any logical reason for him to associate the two.

Mr. Keller spoke first, his voice steady, but quiet. "Khan was a terrorist. An augment who launched
an attack against the military and killed thousands in San Francisco."

"That can't be right. The public would have heard about it. I would have heard about it. The only news about augments we've had is that they could be in New York. On the other side of the country." Unless this had happened within the past two days. The pieces started to fit. All the isolation. All the questions.

Was everyone concerned about her being a... terrorist? Her eyes drifted to the hallway, hazily watching Salo's back. When she found her voice, she finally asked, "You think I'm a terrorist?" Richard looked slightly apologetic, but not accusatory.

He sighed. "We weren't sure. We had good reason to suspect, but our suspicions have been relieved."

"The commander doesn't seem to think so." Another pointed look towards the hallway.

"Right now he's blinded by anger." Richard took a moment to look regretful, as if he should have noticed that building rage before now. In a way, Amelia also blamed him for putting her in a potentially dangerous situation.

But instead she just prodded, "It sounds... personal. Like he's putting something on me."

"He is. But he is also one of the leading experts on Augments. Having him has been invaluable." Another first, having Richard tell her who did what at the compound. It seemed they were dropping their guard, allowing her more and more information.

"Why divulge all this now?" Amelia's eyes met his, and she was again surprised to see a ghost of a smile appear on Richard's face.

"Because I have about thirty minutes to earn your trust before we tell you how we think you got here."

Are they sure? The tactic was successful, a growing sense of faith forming between them. He hadn't lied to her... that she was aware of, and he had done everything in his power to make her more comfortable.

And now it was like he was pulling her within this secret circle. "But I don't even know how I got here."

Before he could respond the two men who had left earlier, red and blue shirt, returned, their eyes darting to the missing space that once sat Salo. Neither mentioned his disappearance and no one seemed inclined to fill them in.

The man in the blue shirt, approached her, his expression exceptionally curious. A dancing light seemed to twinkle in his brown eyes with a head of unkempt hair and locks falling across his gaze. If she had to guess she'd say he hadn't slept in days.

He stretched out his hand, palm sideways and flat. Without hesitation, she grasped it. Her first handshake at the compound. It was almost landmark. When he spoke, his voice was inviting, a touch of excitement to it, despite the words. "We have a theory on how you got here, but you won't like it. And you're going to have a harder time believing it."
Chapter 3

STARDATE 2259.321

Shipyard Grant

Denver, Colorado

The man in blue introduced himself as Doctor Jacob Jefferson, a self proclaimed expert on warp fields. His earlier exclamation still rang in her head. You won't like it. And you're going to have a harder time believing it.

You won't like it. What made it worse was how excited the man sounded. Like he was getting a new toy. Why in the world would someone be happy when someone else was going to get bad news? You're going to have a harder time believing it. That statement, however, might have been a lie.

She'd been through quite a bit in the last two days, able to adapt and fill in information where she could... where the pieces most fit. The board was becoming clearer now. Salo's hatred. Richard's suspicion. Mr. Keller's astute observation. Richard's active hover mode.

Believing something wasn't so hard when all the evidence pointed towards it. Impossible wasn't a word she used very often and she didn't plan on starting now. Amelia had made tropical plants bloom in the desert. She'd traveled 600 miles in the blink of an eye.

How much crazier could things really get?

Taking another look at the man in blue, she noticed a rolled up poster under his arm, its edges crisp and new. He followed her gaze, jerking his head towards it. "This is a diagram of the sphere you saw. Take a seat and I'll show you. It's amazing really."

She would have used the word terrifying, but... to each his own. When he rolled out the poster, she was taken by surprise with the amount of detail. They must have used her written description, minute details standing out. The size of the rings, the number...

They had even shaded them, making the image look just like the ball in the air she'd seen. "We're pretty sure the rings are designed to create some kind of grid. You said there were four in your report, but the computer estimated that five would make exact segments. There could have been more, but we wanted to stay close to what you had described."

"It's... perfect." She fixed a stare at Jefferson. "But what does it do?"

"Well, we're pretty sure that it's not a weapon. It's more likely that it was a ship." There was an extended silence while they waited for her to process that. A ship. And not one that goes in the water. She recalled how it hovered above the ground. Like a rocket ship.

Richard reached out to trace one of the sketched rings on the drawings. With a hesitant voice he stated, "We think it was a time travel device."

Amelia snorted, unable to stop herself. Then she laughed. "You can't be serious." Mr. Keller's gaze went dark. Richard stared at her. And Jefferson nodded. "Like, H.G. Wells? Or that Delorean?"

What the hell was a time travel device doing in the middle of the desert? What the hell was a time travel device doing anywhere? "That's impossible." The word escaped her before she could stop it,
an automatic response to something so outrageous. This... this would fit into that narrow category of impossible.

"It's impossible right now. If anything it came from the future." Richard said it as though the statement made sense.

"You're telling me. That this thing. Can move through time." The response came out broken, separated with pauses of disbelief. Amelia shot a wide stair at Jefferson, the 'Doctor' of warp fields... whatever that meant. How had he ever made it in science?

*Time Travel?*

"We're telling you that it explains how you got here." Was she the only one who thought this was absurd?

"But I'm still in 1992. It's only been a couple of days. I just moved location."

Shaking his head, Richard leaned forward to catch one of her hands. She jerked it back, dropping it into her lap. "Amelia. I'm sorry, but it's not 1992. It's-"

She interrupted him, still focused on how absurd this all sounded. Still reeling that they were trying to explain something like this. Time travel? "And if it was a time travel device, why didn't it land with me?" Amelia had to find the holes in their logic... point it out so they ceased trying to make her believe the ridiculous.

Jefferson continued, his words coming quick and urgent as he attempted to convince her. "We theorized that you were just caught in it's wake and dragged forward along the path it was taking."

"No... this is some kind of joke. Some kind of mental game you're playing with me." Because she'd just used the word impossible and she never used that word. The military was setting her up, trying to make her lose her mind.

She slapped a hand against the table, suddenly furious. At Richard, for pretending to be on her side. At Jacob, for giving her false hope. And at Mr. Keller for being that annoying constant in the room. "No!"

"Miss Wright. Listen to me." As soon as Mr. Keller started talking, her anger reluctantly began to fade, an unexplainable pull to calm down. "You come from a time just before the Eugenics War began. Augments took over, enslaved humans. The very fact that you're from the year 1992 is the reason you were held for questioning. Six months ago, San Fransisco suffered an attack by Khan Singh, an augment who was a leader during that War."

He shot a sideways glance at Richard. "She doesn't understand." Words he had said before, that continued to understate how she felt.

"You expect me to believe this?" From their faces, she already had her answer. They not only expected her to believe it... but for her to embrace it.

"1992 is history for us. You remember, Amelia... I told you that it might not be possible for you to go home."

Because he was saying that her home didn't exist? But Mr. Keller had just said an Augment from her time was responsible for a terrorist attack in theirs. As if reading her mind, Mr. Keller supplied, "Khan was cryogenically frozen after the Eugenics War ended in 1996. The attack was a result after he was revived." Cryogenically frozen...
"How long?" Has it been? Has she traveled?

It wasn't as though Amelia wanted to believe them, but rather that she felt an oncoming dread that she had no choice in the matter. If she walked outside, how different would the world be? They hadn't answered her, which made that sick feeling in her stomach grow.

"Everyone I know?" She knew what answer was coming, bracing her hands against the table as if preparing to absorb a physical blow instead of a verbal one. Her eyes drifted closed, droplets of salty water falling from the corners.

Richard successfully caught her hand in his own. "I'm sorry, Amelia. You're in the year 2259."

2259. 260 years. "I know that this is a lot to take in. We can hold off on the rest until you've come to grips with this."

"I can't..." You can. You have to. You're in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people in an unfamiliar time. You have to stop crying and start focusing on the next step. Pick the plant, buy the soil, set it in the ground, and fertilize it. It'll grow. "I can hear it now."

"We've achieved space travel."

She snorted. "The moon landing was a few years before I was born. I'd hope there was some advancement there."

"We've achieved faster than light travel." Of course they had. Two hundred years was a long time. Long enough to invent all sorts of things. Eventually someone would even invent a time machine. "This military organization... it's called Starfleet."

"Star Fleet." She repeated, her legs growing weak. Not only was there time travel, but there was a fleet specifically designed to explore the stars. Her butt found the chair. "You explore space. That's why there's a shipyard in the middle of the desert." Because they weren't building boats. They were building space ships.

It was perfectly clear now. Overwhelming, but... clear. "We don't have to do this now. We can go slow, introduce you to these things when the time is right."

"The time is right." She wasn't much better than a parrot now, doomed to repeat everything that Richard was saying. Amelia laughed, more tears building up in her eyes. "The time. Ha! I guess there's no better time than 2259." That calm feeling was fading now, hysteria rising in its place.

"I can't help her." Mr. Keller said, casting a frustrated glance her way.

"I don't think anyone would be capable of that right now." She whispered, realization sinking in. It was all true, of that she was certain. Her life as she knew it was over. Her greenhouse was gone, John was long dead... along with her customers. And there would be no more visits to where her parents rested in the ground.

The plants had probably withered away from neglect. Her little red ford would have been found in the middle of the road, with no driver in sight. All she had left was the bag at her feet and the clothes on her back. And the clothes weren't even hers...

"We'll help you establish a life." Mr. Keller again, looking far less frustrated, gentle concern lacing his features.

"I had a life!" Grief shifted to anger on the drop of a dime. Her usual balance was disrupted as she attempted to process everything. Deep down she knew they were doing their best to ease her while
still being truthful. But even that fact wasn't enough to help her stay level.

Richard again, with that ever understanding demeanor. "You're a smart woman, Amelia. You know that you'll have to start again. Let us help you."

"I don't really have a choice now, do I?"

The man in blue, ignored for the most part, finally jumped in. "Ma'am. There's so much we can learn from you. So much you could learn from us. It won't be that bad."

"Yeah? And what would I have to give to a society that's had hundreds of years to advance themselves. I know how to plant flowers and trees. My knowledge is pretty limited." The idea made her feel small and insignificant, despite the fact that several high ranking officers sat before, devoting their time to walking her though this.

"History from 1992 is skewed because of the war. Your very life is valuable to us." That excitement returned to the man in blue. Was this the reason he had seemed so happy about her appearance?

"Doctor Jefferson is correct. You will contribute great things." Her life flashed before her, small moments that defined her time. Technology. Agriculture. Lifestyle. Did it really matter so much? In that strange way that Mr. Keller had of being able to read her mind, he continued, "Of course it matters."

"I have nothing. No home. No money. I don't think the few twenties I got will cover much." Not that that money was even in circulation. An annoyed huff left her.

Richard piped up. "Currency isn't always used in society now and we'll make sure you're taken care of."

"I don't want to be kept here." Amelia couldn't even imagine being inside the compound all day. Not when her days used to be spent in the sun, her hands in the dirt. Again the cycle of emotions started over, home sickness kicking in at the thought of her greenhouse.

"You can still garden. There's still several schools that focus in horticulture." Richard managed to peak her interest, her gaze meeting his own. "The technology may have changed, but technique is probably the same. Shove it in the dirt and let it do its thing."

"I bet you've killed a lot of plants with those steps." Someone laughed, the sound making her feel just a little bit better. At least there was something to look forward to. "I need a minute. Can... everyone just leave for a minute?"

They all looked to Richard, waiting for approval. With a quick glance her way he gave it, a single nod. One by one, they filed out of the room.

Except the commander. Richard stayed, as he always had. For a few moments he didn't say anything. No comment on the tears that ran down her cheeks. No encouragement that she would make it through. Just silence.

Which she gladly embraced. Amelia enjoyed silence. Maybe it was the reason she lived thirty minutes from anyone. Maybe it was the reason she preferred plants to people. Plants didn't scare you with thoughts of war and mayhem. Plants didn't remind you that your parents were dead and one day you'd be over it. And Plants didn't screw up time travel and completely ruin your life.

At thirty years old, Amelia would have to start all over. In an unfamiliar world with unfamiliar people. Even she wasn't certain that putting it back together was possible.
After a good ten minutes, Richard finally broke. "You're taking this well."

"No, I'm not. I'm just faking it so you don't put me in a straight jacket." The two of them seemed to pass humor well with one another. Richard gave a small laugh, rubbing the back of his neck.

"We don't treat our disabled that way. You'd just be medicated and given counseling." How much things had changed...

The corner of her mouth tilted upwards in a small grin. "I still might need the latter."

"We can get you someone." There was a touch of seriousness to his tone and Amelia looked up from her chair to see him leaning against the table. "Don't be put off by it. All of us have to see a counselor once in a while."

"I'm not ashamed. I'm just... lost." She was sure he didn't blame her for that. In fact, the look on his face said he was blaming someone very far away.

"We'll help you find your way."

"Why are you so interested?"

"Because we're a civilized society. We protect our wounded. And you're wounded now, whether you accept it or not." He started at the yellow wall, seemingly lost in thought. A variety of emotions fluttered across his face, finally landing on sadness. "I lost my sister in San Fransisco. When I first heard of your arrival, the estimated time that you were from, I was like Salo. Angry. Bitter. I don't know if I hid it well, but the moment I saw you... you reminded me so much of her. Maybe it was the hospital gown. Maybe it was just your honesty. So innocent. And then Mr. Keller confirmed that you were indeed a victim in all this."

"Am I a project for you?"

"I want you safe, Amelia. I'll pull every resource I can into making sure that happens." She believed him, that trust he was asking for earlier now given with little reluctance. Her choices were limited... to pretty much zero.

"Where do I go from here?"

Shrugging, Richard gave her a sideways look that said he'd already considered that. "New identity. A job. We'll get you settled."

"How will people react when they find out I'm from 1992?" He stiffened at the question, and she knew the answer wasn't going to be in her favor.

"That's another thing. No one can know except us. You saw how Salo reacted... just because he knew you were from the past. Others may not have his restraint, especially with tension so high from Khan's attack." He made sense, his reasoning solid, even with the short explanation. So she'd have to lie about her past. A price to pay for still being alive? "We'll try and keep your personal history as close to accurate as we can. Just a few dates and places will need to be changed."

"So Amelia Wright is now born in what... 2229?" Richard nodded.

They sat in silence for a while, until several more strangers filed into the room. They shook her hand, some asking about what life was like back then, some just curious to see the girl from 1992. Richard stayed with her, being as diplomatic as ever.
By the time they were finished, all she wanted to do was lay down and grieve for the life she lost... the one they were so damn interested in.
Dirt flew from her gloves as she shook her hand in sporadic rapid motions. Most of it landed in the plant bed, but several specks ended up dusting her jeans. She'd stopped wearing the white uniform while working in the garden, despite the attention that denim drew. White just wasn't very practical when it came to this kind of work. At least the jeans would be good again for tomorrow.

She looked down at the freshly planted tulips, a smile coming to her face. They would have never thrived outside, the cold weather of December killing almost every flower that sprouted out of the ground. But the garden was inside, technology allowing a perfect environment all year round. Her tulips would grow to take over the mostly empty bed. She couldn't wait to see their progress in a few months.

"You think the name Lily would be just a little too ironic?" She arched a brow as she asked the flower. "I thought so. We'll go with... Amanda. You all look like Amandas."

Still in a kneeling position, she reached back by her feet, her hands seeking out a small square device. They'd called it a Tricorder and apparently it did analysis on almost anything. The one she held was given to her by the lead gardener on the shipyard, Garren Lou. Garren had tried to show her how to use it, but the entire time she'd been distracted by the antennas sticking out of his head.

And his blue skin. The Andorian hadn't seemed too offended by her curiosity. He'd just sighed, annoyed more that she hadn't learned anything about the tricorder.

Now she used it like a pro. It was already powered on, her thumb holding down a button on the side as it read the pH level of the soil, feeding her information on nitrogen and various other chemicals that had been part of the fertilizer compound. The tulips would do quite well if the readings were correct.

"Amelia!" A familiar, and particularly upset, voice rang out from the double doors of the garden, the footsteps that followed heavy and paced. She didn't look back, instead shoving her tools and gloves into a plastic bag before piling them into her backpack.

"Hey, Richard."

"You missed your appointment at sickbay." And here Richard was to round her up and escort her. She shot him a glare, not missing the fact that he wasn't wearing his uniform. A relaxed set of black clothes had taken it's place, long sleeved and warm. "Don't look at me like that. Next time they'll just use the transporter." The threat of the transporter was enough to send her to her feet, her brief inspection of him brought to a halt.

"They wouldn't." Amelia had made it perfectly clear that she would never voluntarily use the death machine, only to be put back together a new person. "It takes you apart, Richard! Why am I the only one who is freaked out by that?" She had been assured that no one would force her to use the transporter unless it was a life or death situation.
"They will. You got to keep updated on your hyposprays." Because she was from 1992, there had been a large medical concern as to what bacteria she carried. Bacteria that Starfleet medical had eliminated years ago. "I'll go with you."

"I bet you will. You'll watch on as they stab me in the neck five times. And you'll smile and laugh, just like the past four times that I've been to sickbay." He didn't deny it. The bag in her hands went to her back and together they started for the door.

Casting a look back at the garden as they passed through the doors, Richard asked, "Are you liking it here?"

A loaded question, but Amelia didn't feel intimidated by it. It had been a common one, mainly asked by the select few who knew how she had arrived. "It's... I'm adjusting. Garren has been giving me a crash course on 2259 horticulture. A lot has changed." She hadn't expected it to be easy, but the technology learning curve had been steeper than she'd thought it would be.

"You seem to be doing well. I liked the tulips." They entered into a long hallway that Amelia referred to as 'sickbay row'. Instead of looking dull and uninviting as usual, it had been adorned with random batches of green leaves, red berries in the center of each cluster.

A reminder of the season, that had her dreading sickbay a little less. "They decorated!" The only other indication of the upcoming holiday had been a small evergreen sitting in the reception area of the shipyard's headquarters.

She was getting the impression that even though Christmas was celebrated, it was secular and not near as commercial as it was in her time. In fact, it had only been mentioned in passing, a few Starfleet personnel talking about vacation every now and then.

Did they still buy gifts for each other?

Richard interrupted her assumptions, his tone jovial and slightly accusing. "I think it's more to calm the patients than to be festive." He gave her a pointed stare, arching a brow.

"Way to ruin it for me."

As soon as they passed through the sickbay doors, she was ambushed. Dr. Jenkins, the bane of her existence, struck fast and true, the hypospray in his hands hitting her neck with less than gentle force. "One down." He shouted, green eyes looking far happier than anyone should while standing in sickbay.

The stinging in her neck faded, but she still clamped a hand against the injury, her eyelids dropping into narrowed slits. ".-the hell!?"

"If you'd make it on time, then I wouldn't have to go to such measures." He was far from sympathetic as he shrugged, picking up a second hypospray. "You're almost done with the series, Miss Wright. Best to just get it over with."

Placing a hand on her hip, wave reluctantly waved him on. "Fine."

It was almost ritual at this point. She missed her first appointment, only to show up later in the day and get an unwarranted assault from the doctor. Jenkins was well aware of her history and even though he was curious, he hadn't pried as much as some of the others.

Jefferson was one of those others, but she understood that his curiosity was driven more by professional reason than personal ones. All Jenkins really cared about was making sure she didn't
infect anyone with her 'ancient' bacteria.

Richard always joined her for the appointments, even though she was sure that he had other things to do. Being a Commander of Personnel came with a large set of responsibilities. She wondered how long he could shuck them just to make her more comfortable. In all honesty, she was grateful for his presence.

Doctor Jenkins gave her the final hypospray, patting her on the shoulder as he finished. "You only have one appointment left, then you won't have to see me until your physical." That made her think about the long term, which she hadn't done too much of so far. Was she really going to be there this time next year? Another Christmas in Denver?

Richard tapped her side with his elbow. "Let's go get some dinner."

Amelia adjusted the backpack, giving Richard a thumbs up. "Sounds like a plan."

One of the great things about staying on the installation, was that most of the buildings were connected. Temperature controls kept them cozy all year round, even the connecting hallways barely impacted by the cold weather outside. Just wearing a pair of jeans and a tee shirt she was still comfortable.

"Speaking of plans," Richard said, "Do you have any for the holiday?" With Christmas just five days away, she had given it some thought. She knew the dining facility was going to have an extended buffet, traditional foods of turkey and ham being the stars. And the rec room was going to be converted into a dance hall.

"Garren said he was going to have a small party on Christmas Eve. Many of the gardeners are going to be there." She wasn't too certain about attending, having only met them a few times. But the number of friends she had was limited, the only close one walking with her to the dining facility.

The thought made her sad and her expression must have given her away because Richard placed a hand against her elbow. "Hey, I know." He'd been beyond understanding, guiding her through everything in the past month. Doctor's appointments, introducing her to technology. Introducing her to aliens. There was very little she'd been through alone. "I was thinking that you could come with me. Meet some of my family. We have enough room and my father has been dying to meet you."

Surprised by the offer, she stopped walking, quickly turning to face Richard. He had talked of his family often, including the sister that he'd lost during the Khan incident. There had been times that she wondered if it was therapeutic for him. She wracked her brain trying to remember his father's rank. "Captain O'Shea?"

"The one and only. The USS Huron is scheduled to arrive in orbit tomorrow and the crew will get a brief shore leave for Christmas. Dad's going to meet us at the lake house in Salinas."

"Us? You mean your brothers?" Ryan and Walt O'Shea had been featured in many of her and Richard's conversations. Her earlier statement about their talks being therapeutic seemed to work both ways, because just as often would she talk to him about her father, Henry, and her mother, Julia. Maybe it was another reason why they had grown so close in the past few weeks. Tied together by tragedy, adversity, and new life.

He broke her train of thought with the gentle request, "And you if you'll come with me." An expectant look crossed his features, which soon shifted into an almost pleading one. "You don't fill the place of my sister, but you create a similar place nearby."
Amelia could understand that after having had John, who was strangely a stand in for her father. Glancing down, she saw his hand hanging by his side. With a universal gesture, she grasped it in acceptance. "I'd be happy to go with you."

"Good." He beamed, looking down at their joined hands. His gaze shifted, just slightly, until it landed on her jeans and she already knew he was about to make his usual comments on her attire. "We should also consider getting you something else to wear."

Ritual was a great healing tool. She'd embraced it after learning the truth of her arrival in Denver. Mornings with a couple of the shipyard's gardeners. Noons spent in the green-room. Evenings either spent in her room or with Richard. Mixed within the ritual was slow introduction of technology.

Replicators had been on the first new inventions she'd seen, able to create almost anything out of a jumble of matter. Food, tools, and most importantly, 20th century clothing. She'd worn the uniforms when requested, but nothing made her feel more comfortable than when she was in her room wearing jeans and flannel and reading a real paperback book. All of it given upon a simple voice command.

During her second week, Richard had taken her to see an in-construction starship, the USS Exeter. It had been magnificent, even in it's frame stage and he had promised that she'd get to set foot on one in space soon enough.

Then the transporter, a topic recently brought up by the commander. They had explained it well, stating that thousands used one every day without issue. If only she'd had access to some kind of database to see how many times the damn thing had malfunctioned. In just a few minutes of learning about the technology, she'd swore that she'd never use one.

And there was still so much to see.

Richard let go of her hand, snapping her from the memories. With a raised brow, he waved a hand at her pants. "We'll find you something." Which meant that they would replicate something. Amelia felt pleased with herself for picking up the terminology, though life would get a little hard if she didn't try...

They continued their walk towards the dining facility, the details of their trip eventually hashed out over bowls of beef stew and buttered rolls. Ritual, with just the slightest sprinkle of change, was indeed a wondrous method of healing.

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**STARDATE 2259.356**

**Transport Hub**

**Denver, Colorado**

Amelia's fingers plucked at the material of the blue wraparound tunic. It fit weird, scratched at her skin, and overall looked like something she'd see at one of those ridiculous fashion shows. Her mouth turned down in distaste as she tried to ignore how silly she felt.

"It looks fine." Richard said with a huff as he loaded a small duffel bag into their shuttle. He'd wanted to take a site to site transport, but with her voiced aversion, he'd scheduled a less "lethal" form of transportation. "Stop worrying about it. Several people here are wearing the exact same thing. It looks fine." Not only were several people wearing the wraparound, but Richard had on something similar, the casual beige complimenting his skin and eyes.
"It doesn't feel fine." She hissed, tossing her backpack in the transport to land besides Richard's. He seemed to know just how to calm her, his hand landing on her shoulder.

"Amelia. It's fine. You look great. Now get in the shuttle." Already she was feeling better, her eyes finding all the strangers with similar clothes. It was pretty common, though it was like everyone wore either pajamas or uniforms. On some she couldn't tell the difference.

They piled into the shuttle, two sets of four seats set across from one another. She shot a sideways glance at Richard that asked, where is everyone else?

"I'm Commander of Personnel. I think I can get my own car. Also, we're going to have an exam." She watched him maneuver around the shuttle, closing the hatch and setting their destination. The 'exam' he mentioned made her groan and she knew that she was about to regurgitate the same information over and over.

Richard was grinning when he took a seat across from her, pulling the straps across his shoulders. Unfamiliar with the shuttle, she watched him first before trying her own belts. Victory was short lived because as soon as a solid click resounded from her harness, Richard started. "So, Amelia... where were you born?"

"Phoenix." Question one... easy.

"Oh yeah? Me too! Did you go to school there?" They had tried to keep all of her history as close to the truth as possible. She was glad for that, having a firm moral code of honesty. But in the end she would have to lie, and she would have to do it well.

"No. I went to school in Flagstaff."

The mock conversation continued, Richard posing the next question. "I see. So, what is your profession?"

"I'm a horticulturist subcontracted by Starfleet." That part was true, an ID in her bag proof of her 'employment'.

He gave an approving nod. "You must have went to a very prestigious school. Where did you get your degree?"

Arizona State? She tried to picture her file, but the altered dates and places were like blurs in the mental image. Across from her, Richard's foot tapped against the floor in impatience. It had science in the name, remember... since horticulture is a science and all. The delay in her answer came to an end when she guessed, "Phoenix Academy of Science?"

"Close enough. Arizona Academy of Science in Phoenix." They continued the quiz for the rest of the thirty minute ride, Richard correcting her when needed and congratulating her on the harder facts. She'd spent a decent amount of time studying over her file, trying to memorize what had changed and what had remained the same. A false Starfleet background check was even attached, another set of pages to learn. And if she scrolled to the very bottom there was a section that simply said 'REDACTED Level A9D Required'. Richard had told her that only ten people had access to that, which gave a full report on her arrival.

The exam ended with an easy question, just as it had started, and then Richard unbuckled himself. It was her cue to do the same and just as the straps came off, she felt the shuttle come to a stop. Nervousness settled in her gut, not because she'd answered questions wrong, but because she was about to meet Richard's family.
She'd heard so much about them already, including their successes which made her feel a little intimidated. Through their conversations, she'd learned that Richard was very proud of his father, a captain in Starfleet and decorated hero. Captain O'Shea of the USS Huron.

Once the shuttle doors opened, she was grateful for the wraparound tunic, that scratchy material proving warm against the cold air, made colder by the sea nearby. Following Richard out of the transport, backpack hanging off one shoulder, she could hear the joyful family reunion begin to ensue.

A man with brown hair and brown eyes, identical to Richard's, was hugging him. He was just a little taller and a hair older and she knew it was Walt, his older brother. A younger man with blue eyes and blond hair stood off to the side, watching the two with an envious expression. "Come on! Why do you always get a hug first?"

"Because I'm old! Age before beauty remember?" Walt looked over his brother's shoulder, spotting her outside the transport. "Though there should always be an exception made." He said as he stared at her. It hadn't even been two minutes and already someone was flirting with her.

Heat filled her cheeks.

The two parted, Richard and Ryan giving each other a quick hug next. It was brief, but she was pretty sure that was for her benefit, their attention shifting her way. Walt made it to her first, his brown eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. "You must be Amelia." He reminded her of Richard, not only because of his looks, but because he had that diplomatic air around him.

Instantly she knew that she'd like him. The O'Shea's just had an inviting appeal about them, friendly and open, always using the right words. Her smile grew when Walk took her free hand in his own, giving it an old fashioned kiss on the back. "Aren't you a charmer?" She said with a wink.

That nervous feeling was forgotten as they brought her towards the house. When he had said it was a beach house, he had meant it. The waves almost touched the house's piers and if it had been a little windier the waves would have made it. It looked like something out of a picture, the white home standing still against the constantly moving ocean.

She couldn't recall seeing anything quite like it. "You gonna come inside?" Ryan's voice sounded behind her, his eyes seemingly focused on her hair. She'd caught Richard doing that same thing once or twice before, his gaze becoming misty, his words sometimes broken.

And looking at Ryan, she realized there was a good reason for it. If Walt and Richard took after their father in looks. Then that meant Ryan and Natalie took after their mother. Amelia wondered if when Ryan looked at her... he was seeing his sister.

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**STARDATE 2259.358**

**O'Shea Beach House**

**Salinas, California**

The wind had picked up, the waves finally making their mark against the concrete pillars that supported the house. She couldn't see them from where she stood on the balcony, but she could hear the impact, the slapping of water as it struck something solid.

The sound kept rhythm, two seconds-four seconds-two, and she let it lull her into a daydreaming
state. She didn't like it in the future, but she didn't hate it either. She missed her home and the simplicity of it, something that she would never get back.

It made her heart hurt thinking about it... and then her brain would remind her that she'd put herself in an early grave if she kept this up forever. Richard had told her she'd learn to love it. All the opportunities she would have would keep her from thinking about the past too long.

But in these moments, just like when she was gardening, she could almost pretend that it was still 1992 and eventually she'd be getting in her little red ford and riding home to her greenhouse.

The dream came to an end as footsteps signaled someone's approach. They were heavy and paced as always and when she turned around she knew who would be there. "I thought we'd talked about the jeans?" Richard's accusation was laced with a small laugh. "I guess we can't change that, can we?"

She gave him a once over, noting that he was wearing another beige tunic. "Well.. you look silly." Another laugh as he walked towards the balcony to stand beside her, his hands coming to rest on the railing.

"I've been wanting to talk to you." His words were hesitant, just shy of reluctant. "I know you're settling in at the shipyard, but... I have news."

"Is it bad news, because it's Christmas Eve and it's just not a good day for bad news."

"It isn't bad, not exactly." She kept silent, looking out on the waves. Just a few minutes ago they had kept her tranquil. Now they just made her antsy. Richard might have sensed her building anxiety, but he pushed forward anyway. "Salo has requested that you be taken off the installation." How was that not bad news?

Shock filled her. "Why?" *You know why. He hates you, remember? He thinks you are working for Khan.* At the reminder, shock was slowly replaced with anger. It was infuriating that someone would go to such lengths to make her life worse, when she barely had a life to begin with.

"He brings a solid case against you. Citing that even though you were reluctantly brought here, you have no clearance to be on a shipyard. There's more but I was only able to get part of his recommendation." Richard's lack of optimism had her turning to face him, her hip resting against the railing. He didn't look her way, his eyes on the waves. Maybe he was looking for them to keep him calm.

"Lots of civilians work on the shipyard. All the gardeners are civilians." He nodded at her argument.

"Yeah, well... his case is going through. If you get removed from the installation, then it'll be unlikely that Starfleet will give you further assistance." Finally, he faced her, regret lacing his features as he placed a hand on his shoulder. "I made a promise to you Amelia. And I'm going to keep it."

"I can make it on my own." Even as she said it, she wasn't sure if she believed it. Life in the future was hard in a much different way than in the past. She couldn't even operate a transport shuttle when nine year olds of 2259 do it daily. She gave a frustrated sigh.

"If you're located somewhere else or on a different Shipyard, then the process will have to start all over. I think I can buy us some time." Now she was hearing some of his usual optimism.

She processed what he was saying, her head tilting in confusion. "You want me to leave Denver?"

He sighed, the sound heavy and pending. Then his eyes met hers and she knew that it was another life altering change. Just like when he'd told her that it was 2259. "I want you to leave the planet. It'll
give me time to build a case against Salo's."

"You want me to leave the planet?" The words came slowly, her head starting to shake. Of all the things he could have suggested. Another shipyard would have been one thing, but, "The planet, Ricard?! That's your solution?"

"Amelia-"

"I'm a gardener! Where the hell am I going to garden off the planet? The only other planet I even know of is Vulcan and that doesn't seem like the best place for tulips." For a split second she pictured herself on the desert planet that she'd read about. She probably wouldn't be able to get a cactus to grow on such an environment.

"Wait, listen to me." That hand on her shoulder gave a slight squeeze and she glared at him over her shoulder. "Every Heavy Cruiser is equipped with a hydroponics bay. My father's freighter, the USS Huron even has one."

"You want to put me on a starship?" That was almost worse than another planet. At least then there would be ground under her feet. She hadn't even been into space and he wanted her to stay there on her first trip?

"Yes. You'll be safe there, Amelia." He'd used that word often with her, and after just meeting his brother she wondered if he was projecting the loss of his sister onto her. He was trying to save her where he had lost his sister. It shouldn't have been a secret, not with a few stray comments here and there that would have had anyone thinking that.

But seeing a picture of Natalie was almost like looking in the mirror.

Safe. "You mean a starship like the one that's being rebuilt in space? Safe? No... I'll be secluded." The mere thought of being trapped in space almost made her hyperventilate. But she forced herself to stay calm, counting as she took deep breaths.

"They aren't mutually exclusive. Seclusion would be safety for you." He seemed convinced that this was her best option and almost every other time she'd have trusted him. Just like when he took her to see the doctor and when he'd introduced her to one alien after another.

But this time, she didn't want to. "I like open air. I like dirt. I won't make it a week on a starship."

"Yes you will. Because you're strong and you do what needs to be done. I've seen it over and over again. You've forced yourself to adapt to this life and you'll force yourself to live on a starship. It's our best option."

"Best option for what? To keep me within the Starfleet circle?"

"Yes. I've done everything I can to keep you on the installation because you're safe there. I said it before, if anyone finds out that you're from 1992 then you're put at risk. That's why we've worked so hard to limit your contact with civilians. If Salo's case succeeds then that risk increases. The wrong person learning can cost you your life. I won't let that happen."

She felt like she did a month ago, accepting something so outrageous simply because he was asking her to. "When do you want me to go?"

"In four days." That soon? It meant that she wouldn't be going back to Denver at all. She'd be going straight to whatever ship he planned on sticking her on.
"Richard..."

"I'm sorry." He touched her arm, then moved faster than she had time to react. His arms circled around her, pulling her tight into his embrace. It wasn't too hard, but it was a firm hug, one that asked for compliance. "I'm so sorry. I know you've worked hard this past month, but everything... everything has led up to this. You know how to work in a temp controlled garden. You know how to use a tricorder and a replicator. You've met every alien race that could be on the ship."

Amelia pulled away, feeling a little betrayed. With just that tiny movement back, Richard let her go, his face showing guilt. "You've prepared for this? You knew I would be leaving?"

"I had an idea." He didn't expand on it, stopping abruptly as a second set of footsteps could be heard. They both looked to the double doors that led onto the balcony. Within a few moments, Richard's father stepped into view.

There was a knowing expression on his face as he watched them, glancing back and forth between his son and Amelia. "I see that Richard has told you about the move."

An indignant snort escaped her as she cast them both annoyed glares. "Am I always the last one to know what's going on?"

"He hasn't told me everything, keeps saying it's classified. But I think my son forgets that I've built up far more contacts that the average Captain." Mr. O'Shea approached the railing, his gait slow like he was sneaking up on a rabbit. "He's right, you know. You will be safe on a starship. With all that's going on, this talk about augments is spreading like wild fire. They get wind of you and you'll be a target."

"So I've been told. Am I going to be on the Huron with you?"

"Unfortunately, no. I've already got three techs in my hydroponics bay. I'll be taking you up to the orbiting shipyard though. On a shuttle, since Richard says you won't use the transporter." The last part was said in mild annoyance. It seemed everyone but her trusted the damn thing.

"So what's going to be my new home?"

"The USS Enterprise. She'll launch in just over a week for their five year voyage." Five years...

"Five years? Oh, hell no. Richard, that's like a prison sentence!" He expected her to be gone for five years?

Mr. O'Shea jumped in before Richard, "It'll go by quick. And by the time you get back, everything should be taken care of. Your identity will be secured. The experience you gain will help you stay contracted Starfleet. If you want you'll even get a chance to test in as enlisted." As Mr. O'Shea spoke, Richard nodded in agreement.

"Five years?" She said again with a whisper, but they didn't seem to bothered by the length of time.

Then Mr. O'Shea went on to describe how the hydroponics bay worked on the Huron, making it sound just like where she'd planted her tulips just a few days prior. Except she'd be focusing on food, both to supplement the replicator and work as an emergency stockpile of food should the replicators fail. Overall, what she had learned so far would be put to use.

Richard had done well guiding her, preparing her for what was to come.

When the conversation was over, she realized that she had accepted this fact. Just like when they had
told her she'd traveled through time. Mr. O'Shea gave a proud smile, crossing his arms and looking at her with admiration. In a surprised tone he said, "You were right about her, son. She's a strong one."

They gathered around the fireplace and it reminded her of a scene out of a movie. Richard laughed as Ryan told a joke. Mr. O'Shea smiled as he poured a small glass of whiskey. And Walt grinned as he placed another log on the fire. The warmth of the room seeped through her skin, making her feel better than she had in a long time.

It felt like home. Richard made it feel like home.

They didn't talk about the fact that she'd be leaving so soon, instead sticking to topics like the weather and prior holidays. But even though they hadn't brought it back up, her mind still focused on it. She wouldn't have a view outside. She wouldn't have home-made cocoa.

She'd have the hydroponics bay and sometimes she'd have a video log sent from Richard. What little family she had gained, she was soon to lose only to be trapped aboard the starship Enterprise. Five years was a long time. Long enough, maybe, to make new friends and form a new family.

She cupped both her hands around her mug, staring down at the steaming liquid that sat inside. This new world came in waves, just like the ones outside that lapped at the pillars.

"Hey." Richard's soft voice drew her gaze upwards. He was holding something in his hand, it's colors red and green and resembling of the occasion. A similar package was tucked under his arms. "I have something for you."

"I thought exchanges happened on Christmas?" The corner of her mouth tilted up. Placing the mug on the table she took the box as he handed it over. It wasn't adorned with ribbons, just simple paper, but she stared at it, tears forming in her eyes. Life in 2259 had it's moments, accompanied with cocoa and dirt and things that hadn't changed much since 1992. "I have something too, but it's in my bag."

"You can give it to me tomorrow." He said as he took a seat beside her on the couch. "I just knew that you'd be over-thinking everything and... I wanted to make it a little better." Her fingers toyed with the corner as he spoke, sinking in to the break in the paper. "Go ahead."

That was all she needed, her hand tearing down the side and shoving the paper to the floor. It was a thoughtful gift, her chest tightening as she gazed at the item in her lap.

It was a framed picture of them, taken during her third week by Garren. She was wearing one of the white uniforms, dirty fingerprints and smears across the pants. She was holding a potted orchid, the blooming flower an unusual dark purple. She'd been using a color enhancing fertilizer and on that day it'd finally had its desired effect. Richard was pointing at the plant, making an exaggerated face that said congratulations.

"I love it." The whisper barely reached her own ears, the words scratchy with emotion. "I'll keep it in my quarters. On the Enterprise."

"That's the idea." He pulled the other box from under his arm, but she held her hand up, stopping him short.

"Wait. Let me get mine." With a sigh and a grin, he waved her off. She made the trip quickly, running to the guest room and searching through her backpack. It wasn't in fancy paper, just wrapped in some of the black plastic that was kept for plant beds. When she made it back to the living room, he was still on the couch, staring down at the picture he'd just given her. "Can't take it back now."
"I have one just like it in my office." He admitted, glancing back up to see the package in her hand.
"You didn't have to," He said, taking it as she held it out.

"I know. But it's tradition. Even after all this time." Just like her, once he found the side, he ripped open the plastic. And just like her, his eyes filled with mist. He held it carefully, working to keep his prints from the glass.

Pressed between two panes, straightened and pristine, was a five dollar bill. She'd learned it's worth was more than it's monetary counterpart in her time. Turning in one of her twenties had scored her a few hundred credits.

A collector's item, they had called it. Just five weeks ago, she'd known it as cash. "Something to remember me by."

"I don't think I need currency for that." Together they looked into the fire. "I'll send you video calls as often as I can.; Over a secured line in case you need to talk."

"I'm sure I'll need it." They both traced their individual gifts, seemingly lost in the present...
Chapter 5

STARDATE 2259.363

San Fransisco Fleet Yard

Earth's Orbit

She wore the white uniform again, her hair in a tight bun at the command of Captain O'Shea. Against her back, heavy and bulky, rested her backpack which contained every item she owned. At her side was Captain O'Shea, in full uniform and looking just as handsome and pristine as his son always had. It was almost like walking with Richard, except at a slightly slower pace.

Captain O'Shea had been the one to make all the arrangements on her transport to the Enterprise, accompanying her under the guise of wanting to have Kirk give him a short tour of the ship. The Huron waited for him on the other side of the fleet yard.

Amelia was antsy, which was a step up from the depressing despair she had been feeling the few days before. She didn't get to say goodbye to Garren, or Harry Keller, or even the Chef who had served her at Denver's dining facility. And her farewell with Richard had been teary... a little on both sides.

A sudden touch at her elbow startled her, that antsy feeling making her more jittery than normal. "Miss Wright." The Captain was formal for this trip, being careful not to draw additional attention their way. Some would ask questions if their relationship was too obvious. We want to keep this transfer as quiet as possible, Richard had told her, explaining that her location would be unknown for a short time while they worked against Salo's case.

Remembering the prodding touch, Amelia realized that their shuttle had connected to the much larger ship. The USS Enterprise. She'd spent hours using her data padd, the other gift from Richard, trying to learn everything she could about it. A constitution class ship, designed for exploration and long term missions. Unfortunately, during her search she'd come across several details that were classified.

Except the hydroponics bay. The data padd had pulled up schematics, detailing almost 600 square meters of space. It was larger than most home gardens and with the rotation schedule of food, she was certain that she'd be able to keep up a daily supply of fresh vegetables.

With a rudimentary idea of the ship's layout, she was able to follow the Captain with ease, pointing out significant areas. Her new home. It had plain hallways, but they were inviting with the corridor lights, not too bright and just the right dimness. They made it to an elevator like door, the 'turbolift' as the plans had shown. "Deck 4" The Captain's command spurred the lift into movement, blinking lights joining the ride. "I've arranged a room on deck 4, hallway E. Don't forget, 4E211."

"Thank you. For everything."

"It was no problem." He said as the turbolift came to a stop. They continued on down another plain hallway, each door resembling the ones at the barracks in Denver, sliding doors instead of swinging ones. "Richard insisted that I take good care of you. That boy has a protective instinct a mile wide."

"I've noticed."

The Captain came to a slow stop and she looked above her door, 211 stamped above it. "Don't fault
him for it. After Natalie he went through a lot. We all did. I'm glad he's found someone to talk to about it." He went to a control panel just to the left of the door, entering a series of numbers. "Before I leave, you will need to code the door. If you want you can use a voice activated command, but it's generally easier to just do a series of numbers."

He waved her on just as the door opened and she took the first step in. It wasn't spacious, but it was enough. Instead of a kitchen like she'd had at the barracks, she had a food replicator embedded within the wall. And instead of regular twin bed, she had one that was latched against the wall. Small, but... I can see myself here. On the opposite side of the room sat a small desk and a locker. She dropped her backpack by it, reminding herself to set her picture on that desk.

"It's no apartment, but it's climate controlled and inside." He gave a small chuckle and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'd take you to the hydroponics bay, but I've got to go and meet Kirk on the bridge for that promised tour."

"Thank you for everything, Mr. O'Shea." The older man gave her a sideways glance, the corner of his mouth shifting upwards. Then he hugged her, a quick embrace that was so close to the one Richard had given her just hours before.

"You'll be alright, Amelia. Always look forward. Don't take any crap from anyone. And call Richard once in a while. I don't want to get a request to take the Huron your way when he hasn't heard from you." A few final words of advice was all she got before he gave her a mock salute and headed out the door. It slid closed and she suddenly felt how alone she really was.

With sluggish movements she made her way towards the desk, grabbing her backpack along the short walk. "This is it... I'm on board a starship with aliens and replicators and transporters." And no one she came even close to calling a friend. Not yet, anyway.

She unzipped the backpack, pulling out several items to place on the desk. Her data padd, still powered down. Her framed photo. She tucked it at the corner of the desk, moving it around until it no longer had reflected light hitting it. And her driver's license.

Richard had wanted her to leave it with him, to be secured someplace safe. But she had reminded him that the Enterprise was to be her haven and it would go with her. It sat face up in the other corner, a reminder of a life she would never truly leave behind.

Still in that slow state brought on by reluctance, she powered on the data padd. Richard had passed on a message from Jefferson, the man in the blue uniform that had done that amazing diagram of the hovering ball. He'd asked for her to take time to record stories about her life, a project that might take the entire length of the Enterprise's journey.

Turning on the volume, she started to listen to her first recording and she smiled at the recanted memory. "I remember when we replaced the rotary phone for a button one. I must have been about twelve... we were always late when it came to new technology. Even as an adult I rarely even saw a computer..." Since she wouldn't be talking to Richard as often, this would probably be her new form of therapy.

Talking to herself about herself.

Scrolling through the menu on the data padd, she pulled up the downloaded map of the Enterprise. She wouldn't carry the padd outside of the room, not wanting to take the risk of someone getting a hold of it, but she did want to burn the map into her short term memory. There was no desire to begin working in the hydroponics bay today, but she at least wanted to go see where she'd be working. With a general idea on directions, she powered off the pad and shoved it into her backpack.
The locker against the wall had a panel on its surface and she stared at it, deciding that she'd figure that combination out later. Just like her life.

With a deep inhale, preparing herself for the next step, she started for the door. All that she had learned about life had been enforced every day in the past month. *Head high. Carry on. Take punches when warranted and dish them out if needed.* It seemed lately, though, that she was getting more hits than she had been giving...

But Amelia kept her head up as she changed the code on her door, and she didn't look to the ground as she made her way towards the turbolift. The large door slid open and she stepped in, turned around and waited.

"It doesn't go anywhere unless you say something." A sudden voice at her back had her jumping around to see a smiling female. Her skin was dark, her long brown hair pulled into a high pony-tail. For a second, Amelia just stared at her. The woman was still smiling when she said, "Didn't mean to startle you. Where are you heading?"

WHERE? As if suddenly remembering where she was going, she said, a little too loud, "Cargo bay six." The turbolift began to move, those blinking lights rotating in synch.

"Ah, the hydroponics bay. Are you the new gardener?" Was everyone aware that there was someone new or did the woman just have a good sense of deduction.


That smile turned knowing, the woman grasping her hand and giving it a small shake. The turbolift came to a stop and they broke apart, the woman giving her a beaming grin, "Well, Good luck and welcome aboard the Enterprise." Good luck? Do I need luck? Amelia thought as she stepped out of the lift and into the cargo bay.

Pushing the odd encounter aside, she looked around, a smile forming on her face. It was massive, at least four times the size of her greenhouse and much bigger than the floor-plans had indicated. Since the Enterprise had been under repair for the past eight months, there were no growing plants, but all the raw materials were there.

Amelia paced around the large expanse of a room, mentally laying out where each set of vegetables would go. The garden beds were latched down, the space where the soil would be had metal covers over it. *In case artificial gravity fails, then there won't be dirt everywhere.* There were large containers packed against the corner of the rooms, each one having a stamped description of the contents. Seeds, fertilizer, water pump systems, soil. It would take her most of the day to do an inventory, a task that she planned on leaving for the following day.

If anything was missing then she would have time to see the quartermaster... and possibly get the supplies before the Enterprise departed in three days. Unlike most, she didn't look negatively on the extensive work load before her. She embraced it. Work was her release, the best method for relieving the stress that was bound to build.

It's what made the past month bearable. And it is what would make the next five years enjoyable.

**STARDATE 2259.364**

**San Francisco Fleet Yard**
The following day she found herself with sweat dripped from her brow, landing on the data padd in her hands. It's configuration was frustrating, so different from her own padd that sat in her room. With a low growl she shoved at the open box in front of her. "Why the hell are these labeled corn? They're not corn seeds!" The fact that things like this were still screwed up in the future would have been funny if the entire box hadn't been mislabeled.

What she wouldn't have given for a sharpie... "Squash. Cucumber. Watermelon. Tomatoes. Lettuce. Peas. Where is the corn?" She rummaged through to the bottom of the container, finally spotting that familiar yellow. A victorious cry escaped her as she jerked out the bag. "Radish." She said, reading the label. Someone back on Earth has a sick sense of humor.

Closing the container, she moved on the next. "Vulcan." Now things were getting tricky. It wasn't likely that the Earth vegetables would grow in the same environment that the Vulcan vegetables needed to grow. Which meant that she had to set up a separation barrier somewhere in the bay.

She made notes on the data padd in preparation to see the quartermaster. There wasn't much missing in the bay, the water systems having all their parts and the bedding being complete. But building a separation barrier would require more tools and construction parts than she had available.

Amelia recounted her containers, making a few more notes, and then she headed towards the turbolift. "If a quartermaster handles supplies... then they would probably be in the-" The turbolift doors opened and she stepped inside. "Supply room?" She gave a small sigh of relief when it started moving.

Using the turbolift was an experience. Sometimes she forgot to even tell the thing where she was going. Just like when she'd met that woman the day before. Then, sometimes, she'd give it an nonexistent room or location and that computerized voice would act all condescending, telling her that she was mentally unfit to use the technology. Or something like that. She figured it would be another week at least before she stopped making the same mistakes.

The turbolift came to a stop, the doors sliding open. With the hydroponics bay data padd in hand, she stepped forward, her eyes darting to scan the area for signs of life. It didn't take long, an angered voice coming from the other side of the room, separated by shelving units.

"Listen here, yeoman. I have a hundred plus members of this crew to vaccinate before we move this ship. Get me some damn hyposprays!" A man in a white coat came quickly around the shelf, forcing her to side-step or be run over. Then just as quickly as he had passed by, muttered curses following him, he was gone. Amelia watched the turbolift doors slide shut.

She briefly considered coming back another time, the poor yeoman manning the supply room already having a heavy plate. But the hydroponics bay wouldn't build itself and her time was limited.

Maneuvering around the shelves, she ended up in front of a narrow desk, a haggard looking young man sitting in a chair on the other side. Unable to help it, she asked, "You alright?" His eyes were wide when he looked up, and for some reason she was instantly reminded of someone with shell shock.

"It's always like this just before launch." The murmured complaint barely reached her ears and all she could do was shrug. It made sense that supply was getting hammered now. At least that meant people were doing their jobs and working on getting what they were missing.

It would be unfortunate to get three months out and find out they didn't have the necessities. "Well,
I'm hoping to only have one list of necessary supplies."

"Let's see what you need." He was starting to look a little better, his eyes seeming normal now and more focused. He waved a hand towards her data padd and she handed it over, the screen already displaying the list. "Looks like you're building something. What do they have you doing down there?"

"I'm setting up an area for Vulcan plants." He gave her a skeptical glance, his right brow lifted.

"We only have two Vulcans on board. Not sure it's worth the effort." She hadn't considered that, wondering now why they had bothered with so many seeds. Maybe humans were known to eat Vulcan food too?

In any case, she gave another shrug. "Well I can always use it for other plants. It'll be handy to have a secondary environment."

"Most of this stuff can be found in cargo bay 3. They put aside spare paneling and a crew is working down there so tools shouldn't be an issue. If you need an engineer you'll have to talk to Chief Scott. He's not in the best of moods, though, so be warned. I'll put in the request for the rest." A grateful smile crossed her face as she mentally logged his suggestion.

She thought back to the angry man who'd just left the supply room. "Sounds like everyone else on board."

"You're not starfleet." The observing glance across her uniform rested on her left breast where everyone else wore that silver emblem. "Don't worry. You'll get used to people being irritable and short tempered. Especially at times like this." He held out the data padd and she took it with another small smile.

"Seems like you've adapted." Her words inspired a little laugh and she couldn't help but chuckle with him.

With a quick motion, he stuck out his hand. "If you need anything else, don't hesitate to come by. I'm Yeoman Anthony Fuller."

Clasping his outstretched one in her own, she gave it a quick shake. "Amelia Wright." And a brief swell formed in her heart as she realized she had just made her first friend about the USS Enterprise.

After getting directions to cargo bay 3, a short walk from supply without the use of the turbolift, she parted ways with the young yeoman. The path to cargo bay 3 should have been simple, but she still managed to get lost, stopping to ask a stray ensign for directions. He must have been new too because he just stared at her when she'd asked.

Turning a five minute walking into a fifteen minute one, she finally made it to the cargo bay, the doors opening to reveal a bustle of activity. Sparks flew right near the entrance, someone in a red uniform leaning over several exposed wires and cursing. Many other men and women were carrying flat metal panels across the room, shouting directing their movements.

"No, no, no. Put it by tha' shuttle!" One male's voice rang louder than the rest, and Amelia instantly garnered that this was the man in charged. The voice, tainted with a strong Scottish accent, continued to echo in the bay. "No! Bloody idiots. The panel. Goes by. The shuttle." Turning her head, she watched two obviously confused Starfleet personnel pointing towards a small shuttle craft. "Yes. Thank you."

Just as she had when she'd entered the supply room, she considered turning on her heel and leaving.
This time, consideration turned into action. They were all busy, doing what was probably far more important things than working in a hydroponics bay. And most of the stuff would still be there after they left the fleet yard.

"Can I help ya, lass?" It could have been meant for anyone, but Amelia still stopped and looked over her shoulder. A red haired man was walking her way, his brows up in question. His accent quickly gave him away as the man in charge, but at least he wasn't yelling at her. In contrast, it almost seemed like he was flirty, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Shifting to face him, she asked, "Are you Chief Scott?"

"The one an' only. What can I do ya for?" Definitely flirting. His wide smile remained, his eyes dropping to a curious glare.

"I'm trying to get some panels to build a secondary environment in the hydroponics bay." Curiosity changed to interest. There was a pregnant pause as he opened his mouth to reply, his gaze swinging to look around the cargo bay.

"That so, eh? I can give you a few, but I can't spare anyone to help with the build. I'll have them transported by the end of th' day." An anxious look took over, his eyes narrowing sharply. "'ey! Stop it! You're gonna blow the-"

A large cluster of sparks flew past her head, the smell of burn flesh following. Someone behind her yelped. She kept her back to them, not particularly inclined to set eyes on the damage. "I see you're currently occupied. Don't rush it."

Chief Scott snorted. "I rush these lads and someone's gonna end up in sickbay."

"Wouldn't want that. I hear they're short on hyposprays." More panels passed by her side, carried by clumsy crewman. "I'm going to get out of your way. Thanks for the help, Chief."

She would have shook his hand, just like with everyone else, but he was already on his way towards the wounded crew member at her back. "Anytime, lass." He hadn't been kidding when he'd mentioned sickbay, the Chief already communicating with a Doctor through his hand-held.

Shouting on the other end of the bay ensued, followed by another yelp of pain. Life aboard the Enterprise was certainly going to be interesting.

**STARDATE 2260.004**

**Beta Quadrant**

The New Year came and went with celebration all across the ship. Amelia witnessed firsthand an increased boost in morale. Tensions lowered, tempers were... tempered, and the crew interacted with a particular skill and grace.

A skill and grace that she didn't always share. Her panels arrived the day the chief had promised, but getting an engineer's help had been next to impossible. They sat in an isolated corner of the hydroponics bay, the surrounding area designated for the altered environment. She was only given partial power, all non-critical systems taking a hit as routine testing was done across the Enterprise.

As almost everyone else on the ship was able to finish the day's work and make their way to the chow-hall, she was still sitting in the bay, manually testing the water systems one by one. "Because, God-forbid I get full power to do a systematic check!" What made it worse was that she had to pull up the test procedures on the assigned data padd every single time.
An announcement had come out earlier that day, that full power would be granted within twelve hours. It was six hours past that deadline and the hydroponics bay was still barely lit. "You managed without all the fancy gizmos for years, Amelia." She stopped mid-test, setting the data padd on one of the nearby containers.

"Screw it." It wasn't the best way of motivating herself, but it had its charms. She stalked to the container marked soils and unlatched the top. *Sometimes... you just need to dig in.* Selectively, she picked up a bag of black dirt. It was enriched, prime for tomatoes. And it would be the first of many she tore open.

She snapped open the soil barricades on a nearby empty bed that had wire cages attached to the top. *At least that's already done,* she thought as she poured out the bag, the black dirt rolling out and filling the space. It was a thing of beauty watching a bed being built, but it was even better when she was the builder.

An hour -maybe two- later she stared down at the completed tomato bed, an unnecessary stick labeling it as such sticking up from a tiny hole in the metal cover. Since it was a seed and not a transplant it would be a few months before the vines made any headway on the cages. But in four or five she would have prime red tomatoes. Three other identical beds sat in rows behind it, and one day their rotation would come.

In less than a year she'd have every plant grown to maturity and have others already on their way. If she got the water systems finished that is.

She went for the cucumbers next, another hard hour of labor. Then the squash. With tired eyes, sore hands, and a stained white uniform, she finally looked across the bay at what the day's labor had wrought.

And the lights brightened to full.

By design, there was a sonic shower in the hydroponics bay, and even though she usually preferred the real thing with water, she used it anyway. Since the power was restored, the small replicator in the bathroom was able to replace her uniform with a clean one, the old now a jumble of matter stored elsewhere.

Clean, refreshed, and finally satisfied with her work, she decided that the water systems could wait. All she wanted now was a hot meal. Amelia considered going to her room and just having something replicated, but she knew that she had a limited amount of replicator rations and using it for clothes was draining what little was left.

Still tired, her gait was slow as she made her way to the turbolift. "Deck 3." At the command, it started to move and Amelia felt a small swell of pride at learning that the dining facility was on deck 3. This would become a constant trip once the food was ready for harvest, and she needed to make more of an effort to memorize the ship's layout.

After leaving the lift, she worked her way through the corridors, polite starfleet officers and enlisted personnel passing by with smiles. The New Year cheer seemed to be clinging on and she found herself smiling back.

A growl came from her center and she placed a hand against her middle. "Working on it." She muttered to her stomach, the sound growing as the smell of food filled the next corridor. Following it to the chow hall, she passed through double sliding doors.

She'd been there before, before launch, but there were far more people sitting around now. While
You would too if you knew you'd be limited to one 'restaurant' for the next five years. Round and square tables were scattered across the dining hall, conversations kept soft and low as to not intrude on other patrons. Glancing around, she didn't recognize any of the faces.

You only know three people on the ship. The always busy chief, the constantly rattled yeoman, and the unidentified woman in the turbolift from her first day. The latter probably shouldn't even be considered someone she knew, since she'd had longer conversations with the tomatoes.

Grabbing a tray from the end of the serving line, she made her way forwards. "I was wondering when you would stop by." A different Chef from the one she had seen a few days earlier was standing on the other side of the food bar. It was easy to notice too, his blue skin and stark white hair standing out. "You are Amelia Wright. The resident horticulturist." The antenna on his head twitched, parting in quick motions.

It almost seemed like he was laughing about something, just without the sound.

She wasn't sure whether to be offended by the inside joke or impressed by his quick identification of her. "Yes. How'd you know?"

The Chef placed a small black container on her tray, averting his gaze across the dining hall. "I make it my business to know these things. We're going to be seeing a lot of one another." He turned his green eyes back to her.

"No, really?" Another small black container was placed on her tray and she moved forward in the line, Chef just a few steps ahead. She pushed on, "I mean, I've barely left the bay much less had time to become... recognizable."

"You wear a white uniform, are female, and do not have a starfleet insignia. The only other person you could have been is Suz'ani U'vall, but you are not green." That didn't answer her question, but the look on Chef's face told her it hadn't been designed to. He was playing coy, a shadow of a smile on his face. Coy was something she could handle.

If she wanted a specific answer, she had to ask a specific question. "And who told you that I would be wearing a white uniform?"

"Lieutenant Uhura. She also makes it her business to know these things." She recalled his opening greeting and his use of the word horticulturist. Amelia had finally identified the woman in the turbolift.

Shaking her hand up and down, indirectly pointing at his person, she asked, "Are all Andorians this-"

"Suspicious? Yes."

"Astute." She corrected with mock indignation. "I was going to say astute."

"Yes to both. Superior to the Terran in every way." The antenna twitched again and this time she was sure that was an indication of laughter. Instead of taking offense, she took it as an ice breaker. Making fun in a friendly way. There wasn't a smile on her face, but her eyes crinkled at the corners.

"I wouldn't say suspicion is a positive trait."
"Well..." His eyebrows wagged up and down in a human-like gesture. "It's kept us alive so far, hasn't it?"

A throat cleared behind her and she shot a glance over her shoulder at the upheld line. Before she could say goodbye, the Chef said, "Come and see me after you finish. I will show you around the Kitchen." It had been one of the unchecked things on her to do list. Then he waved her off as he turned to hand the next person their food.

After finding a seat at an empty table, Amelia set to opening the black boxes. A creamy soup, a small house salad, and decently seasoned chicken breast. It was filling and tasted a little more authentic than what she'd been replicating. Much better than the protein bars Richard had jokingly told her she'd be eating for five years.

At the sudden thought of her Earth-side friend, she made a mental note to send him a message. The crew had been warned that there would be times where communications were disrupted and she felt it best to make sure she sent out at least one before that potential disaster occurred.

As she ate, she thought about what she'd say. She'd tell him about the hydroponics bay and her frustrating evening. She'd tell him about the chief and Anthony in the supply room. And she'd tell him that she was getting the feeling that this little adventure wouldn't be so bad after all.

The tray and empty dishes went into a replicator recycler and as Chef had asked, she went back to the people-less chow line. The Andorian's antenna turned first, his head soon swerving with it. She briefly wondered if she'd ever get used to non-humans, but then she remembered how easily talking to Garren had become.

"Did you enjoy your meal?" He asked as she leaned over the barricade to see into his side of his kitchen.

She watched him wave a white stick across the counters, a glowing light shining off the surface. "Very much. What is that?"

"A sanitizing wand." Before she could move, he passed it over her hands, a tingling sensation prickling at her skin. "Have to make sure you're not carrying unwanted bacteria into my kitchen."

He pointed at an access door to her right, just at the end of the chow line. "Come."

Obediently, she passed into the kitchen.

Most everything on the ship was eerily sterile, except, it seemed, the kitchen. Despite having equipment like the sanitizing wand, it was the epitome of cluttered. Crates were stacked everywhere, narrow paths made in order to access 'necessary' space. The Chef navigated through the mess, pointing at lockers and refrigerators and various other instruments that she couldn't even begin to relate to.

"Once you get a rotation schedule, the kitchen will be less cluttered." He promised with a sly smile, as if blaming the disorganized state on her.

Certain that her cheeks were red from the accusation, she argued, "I don't see how it's my fault."

"Well, I had to order all these crates of vegetables since we have none growing on board. Yet." Now that he had pointed it out, she could see the small stamps on each crate, identifying them as produce. "How long until we see fresh vegetables?"
"A few months. At least."

He continued forward, but looked back at her with a rising brow, "Even with rapid growth?"

"Rapid growth?"

"And you said you were a horticulturist." The Andorian tsked. "Most hydroponics bays have at least one maturation modifier. It's a machine designed to speed up a plant's growth, though it tends to end up killing the plant if it's used for more than one harvest. Usually it is rotated from garden to garden after initial launch. It will help get you on schedule."

Hesitantly, and with a touch of skepticism, she repeated, "A maturation modifier." Wouldn't that have been something Garren used? If so, then why had she not seen one during her time at Denver.

The Chef sighed, "Yes. I've worked in several hydroponics bays and they have always had at least one."

She gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "I've inventoried every box in that bay and I haven't seen anything like that."

A loud snapping sound reached her ears and she stared at his hand. The man must have been raised on Earth to be using such common gestures. She doubted other races snapped their fingers when they got an idea. "Well, then it must be in use somewhere else on board."

More skeptical glares his way. "You think someone took it from the bay?"

"Scandalous, I know." Oddly, he didn't look the least bit concerned. In fact, he seemed to thrive on the idea, the antenna on his head curling down.

"Is that a note of suspicion I hear?" If she had him pegged right, then he was a gossiper, a wanna be detective, and a jack of all trades.

"Absolutely. There's a thief on board, Amelia Wright, and we have to find them. Our bright red tomatoes depend on it." She didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. It was the very last thing she needed. Another task on her to-do list.
"I paid $4500 for the little ford. It was a standard transmission, five years old, and had 76,000 miles on it. But it was clean and dent-free and I had just enough in savings to say yes. The following January there was an unexpected hail storm and no dents turned into about 15 all over the hood. It made it another eight years and 90,000 miles before I... well before I wasn't there to drive it anymore. I probably would have had to get a new car anyway. I miss my truck." Amelia paused the log, wondering what else was worth adding. *Maybe I'll come up with something later*, she decided and saved it. She'd only made a few logs so far but they were quality. She considered sending them the Richard, but recalled that he had asked her to just hold onto it.

An already watched video log sat paused on her comms terminal, Richard's face carrying a smile, but his eyes looking tired. He'd updated her on the Salo situation, but the progress wasn't as hopeful as he had expected. But he reminded her that she was safe where she was and that he wouldn't stop until this was 'taken care of'. Whatever that meant.

Powering off her data padd and terminal, she put that out of her mind. There was other stuff she needed to focus on. Like the investigation to find the maturation modifier. Every time a lead had been established, she'd reach a dead end. It was time to pull in more resources. If there was indeed a thief on board, as Chef Th'eon had suggested, then alerting security would be the next step.

She looked to the red numbers just above her door, sighing when she realized that it was time to return to the bay. An engineer would be there soon, finally on loan from Chief Scott, to help with the secondary environment. Even though Yoeman Fuller had said there was only two Vulcans on board, she still intended on using it from Vulcan produce. She could always change it after first harvest.

At precisely 0800 hours she left her room. Instead of the white uniform she had been used to, she had replicated a brown one, using what was left of her January rations. Brown seemed like a more appropriate color, much better at hiding the smudges of dirt that would no doubt appear over the course of the day. Though the white uniform sat folded in her room, waiting to be worn the following day. It had become a key factor in identifying her across the ship.

She passed a few familiar faces in the corridors, other people who lived nearby, and a few smiled in greeting. One day she'd make it a point to learn their names. But not today. By 0815 she was in the hydroponics bay where she heard a small voice echoing from the other end.

Her first thought was that it was the borrowed engineer. "Bloody panels are warped." And not just any engineer it seemed. She found him leaning one of the panels against the wall, his gaze rapt on the base. Like his muttering had pointed out, the panel was curved instead of straight.

"Chief Scott." A startled glare was shot her way, but it quickly softened, a small smile forming on his face.

"Scotty." He gently corrected. "And good mornin', Miss Wright."

"I figured you would send someone else." Since she was sure the Chief Engineer had better things to do than work in the hydroponics bay. Scattered tools rested around his feet and she watched as he stepped around them, moving to get a broader view of the corner where the enclosed space would
"Every now and then I like a good project that's not the engine. Besides, I think she'll get along without me for the day." His hand patted the wall and she realized that the she he was referring to was the ship. Just like she formed emotional connections to her plants, he seemed to have done the same with the Enterprise. "Ya' ready to get started?"

There was quite a lot to be learned from Scotty, a genius with a quick calculating mind. He was inventive and dedicated. When they weren't physically involved with the construction, they spoke of the ship and his eyes would gleam with pride and a touch of love.

He talked about the crew and the engaging story of how he'd become part of it. It was almost unbelievable. They had experts on everything. The transporter, languages, security, engines, and navigation. And there was herself, the horticulturist. Apparently word had gotten around about the hydroponics bay and their new crew member who wasn't Starfleet.

At some point he'd asked, "So, how did ya' come across this assignment, lass?"

Oh you know... I'm a time traveler from 1992 and there really wasn't any other place I could go. I don't have up to date skills either. Life's kind of funny like that. Instead she'd said, "Just lucky I guess."

A few hours in, their bodies tired from labor and begging for a break, Scotty was called back to main engineering. He had left in a hurry, but told her to hold off on continuing the construction. "Probably preventing some kind of core melt-down." She said, but trailed off on a laugh, suddenly going serious as she felt that it could be a very real possibility.

Especially after hearing stories of the ship's previous encounters. One on one battles against planet destroying ships. Fights with other Starfleet vessels that had been commandeered by maniacs. All within a couple years of the Enterprise's initial creation.

Not only did the ship have history, but so did many members of its crew. Scotty told her of a fight that ensued between the First Officer and the Captain, describing it as 'exciting'. She wasn't sure if exciting was the word she would have used. Weren't those two responsible for the safety of the entire crew? Did they often get into fist fights?

A chime sounded throughout the cargo bay and Amelia recognized it as the comms center. She quickly made her way to the panel. "Amelia Wright." She answered, holding down the talk key.

"I won' be making it back today. One of the nacelles is overtaking the other on power. If I don't get 'er fixed then we'll be moving in circles." She didn't even bother trying to figure out what a nacelle was.

"Do you want me to pack up anything?" Her gaze drifted towards the mess in the corner, tools and broken panels spread across the floor.

"Nah. Leave it for me, lass. I'll continue work on it tomorrow. Scotty, out."

Since that project was on hold, she figured it would be a good time to see Chef. Th'eon would love to hear about her day so far, more of his time spent gossiping than cooking. And if she left soon she could catch him before the lunch rush.

Fixing her hair back into a respectable bun, she left the bay, taking the turbolift to deck 3. After more than a week of walking the same route, she was more familiar with it now. She could even make it at the end of the day when it was an effort just to keep her eyes open.
The dining hall wasn't empty, but it was far from crowded. Th'eon was already serving at the line, his eyes finding her almost immediately. He threw a box on someone's tray and shooed away an ensign, calling her over. "Amelia, darling. Come on in."

Unlike before, the kitchen now had a semblance of order. Many of the crates were gone and the ones that were left had been organized. Chef had her to thank for that, as she had spent a day dedicated to making paths throughout the room. It had been the only way to get to the excess produce storage area. "I heard that you had a visitor today."

"Where do you hear these things?" The exasperated statement escaped her, his unlimited knowledge of the ship's activity worthy of jealousy.

"One of the crew was talking about it. I hear everything. Superior, remember?" Grinning, he pointed at one of his antennas, as if that explained why. "Also, have you found your maturation modifier?"

"No." A small bowl of something liquidy was shoved in her hand and even though she couldn't identify what it was it smelled good. As soon as Chef handed her a spoon, she took a sip. "I think I need to talk to security."

"And the investigation intensifies." His antennas curled, and she'd learned that it meant he was plotting. Or possibly angry. The two were almost indiscernible. "It would be appropriate to inform security. However, I have heard that we have a hobbyist on board."

"A hobbyist of what?" She took another sip of the nutty soup and passed Th'eon a satisfied wave of approval. Not only could he gossip, but he cooked just as well.

Another ensign appeared on the line and she followed him to the serving area. He didn't let work stop him from continuing to inform her. "Lieutenant Mark Dualla is a practicing gardener."

"And where can I find this Lieutenant?"

"I believe he works in operations." Something Chef didn't know? Amelia arched a brow in surprise. "You would need to talk to Personnel to verify... or you could wait until I hear something else."

"If he even has it at all." Amelia cleaned out her empty bowl, placing it in a stack. It was a small lunch, but the Chef wouldn't be offended if she cut it short to follow up on his lead. In fact, his curling antenna said he'd be disappointed if she didn't.

When she made it back to the hydroponics bay, she was stunned to see two men in the back, busily working on setting up walls. They both turned in greeting to wave, but were back at work a second later.

At this rate, it would be up before tomorrow.

**STARDATE 2260.015**

**Beta Quadrant**

McCoy stared at his friend across the table, an exhausted look on his face as he glanced up at the clock with a hopeful gaze. Another story of James T. Kirk's amazing exploits ensued, the man boastfully claiming how he'd saved not one, not two, but three damsels in distress. "It was insane, Bones. I mean these two guys were huge. Massive. But I guess they'd underestimated little ole' me."

It continued on, the story even more outrageous than the last time he'd heard it.

And the worse part was... he'd been there. "It was one girl, Jim. One girl and one guy. And he was
as scrawny as Chekov. And the police were there within four minutes."

Jim's enthusiasm fell, a narrowed glare shot his way. "You know how to bring a man down, Bones. Next time I won't be telling you the story." The lingering threat was enough to bring a smile to McCoy's face.

"You promise?" At his request, Jim went back to his food, silently. McCoy shot another glance at the clock before looking back at his own bowl. Whatever was inside was thick, creamy, and brown. Not a stew, and not quite a soup. His mouth turned down in disgust. "What is this? Is this even food?"

"Taste fine." McCoy glanced up to see Jim putting the spoon in his mouth. With food still inside, he said. "You can see if Chef will get you something else."

"And anger the Andorian that fixes my food every day? You know how they are, Jim. Vengeful." He pushed the tray away, crossing his arms in distaste. "I think I'll just use the replicator."

"Hey, hey. Who's that?" Whatever Jim had seen, caused him to put the spoon down, his eyes focused somewhere behind McCoy.

"Let me guess. It's a woman." Rapid nods ensued.

"Yeah. Brown uniform." A hand tugged on his shoulder, stopping him from turning around. "Don't look now!" Jim hissed. "Real pretty. Blond hair. She's talking to Chef. I've met almost everyone on board and I've never seen her."

"She's probably got better things to do than to be ogled by you, Jim." McCoy firmly tapped his friend in the chest. "Leave her be."

"She's not even Starfleet." At this, McCoy felt his interest rise. Another attempt to turn around was thwarted.

"Talking to an Andorian. Not Starfleet. Blond hair. And you've never met her?" Sarcastically, McCoy sneered. "Must be a spy. Best stare at her to make sure she doesn't poison us all." He jerked on Jim's sleeve, pulling him into the chair.

"You sure know how to bring a man down, Bones." Jim said again as he picked up his tray, his eyes trailing towards the door. This time, McCoy was able to turn his head. "She's gone. Let's go talk to Chef."

"Bout the food?" He'd be sure to politely suggest not making this... dish again.

"Bout the girl." The exasperated sigh that followed was almost as frustrating as Jim's obsession with women. Not that McCoy didn't have that problem once upon a time. But life had delivered a hard lesson that the opposite sex was a force to be trifled with. His nickname was proof of that fact.

They dumped their trays in the recycler, Jim being the first to make it up to the serving line. As the Captain, his mere presence caused the few people in line to step aside. The Chef stared his way, a slow smile spreading across his face. McCoy wasn't sure what the moving antenna meant, but knowing the Andorian it wasn't a good sign.

Jim just had more faith in people than he did. Of course, being a doctor didn't help his outlook on life. He got to see stupid first hand every day...

"Good afternoon, Chef." McCoy rolled his eyes at the smooth tone of his friend's voice. It was sweet and sickening and it reminded him of a used car salesman.
That charm wasn't as effective on the Andorian. His blond brow rose just a little as he corrected Jim. "Good morning, Captain."

McCoy watched on as his friend continued to make a fool of himself, the man's hand waving in an uninterested gesture. Sometimes... it was like waiting for the trains to collide. "Is it morning? I hadn't really noticed."

"So what did you notice that brought you to converse?" There was a knowing look on the alien's face which made the question all the more irritating.

McCoy intervened with a sneer. "The girl. Who is she?"

"What girl?" Feigning ignorance, the Andorian waved a hand in the general direction of a group of seated women. "I see lots of females. Every day. Every meal service."

Jim turned an annoyed glance at the doctor, saying without words that he wasn't impressed with his methods. Taking back the conversation, Jim said, "No time for games, Chef. McCoy here said she could be a spy."

"A spy. How interesting..." The Andorian trailed off, an annoying habit. McCoy shoved an elbow into Jim's side, hoping to push this along.

"Seriously, who is she?"

"That's not how this works. Tit for tat, Captain. You give me yours..." Even McCoy would have thought the Captain above having to trade gossip, but the Andorian was still waiting and Jim looked ready to give.

"Bold, Chef. Real Bold." Jim tapped his fingers on the barricade for a moment, then suddenly snapped his fingers. "Alright. I heard that the First Officer is involved with our linguist."

Chef cast him an annoyed glare that said he was losing interest. "That was old news two years ago."

"Fine. Ensign Wallis is supposedly sleeping with Lieutenant Parr." Those antenna snapped straight, and then slowly curled towards white hair.

Apparently it was satisfactory gossip, because Chef placed his hands against the barricade and leaned in, saying in a soft voice just above a whisper, "Her name is Amelia Wright. She's a horticulturist and she works in the hydroponics bay." Quickly, he shoved off the barricade, moving to stand in front of someone waiting with a tray. "Now, if you're done interrogating me, I have a crew to serve and you're holding up the line."

As they left the dining room, McCoy turned to Jim. "You do know that you have access to all the personnel files."

"Too much work."

"More than that." With a quick jerk of his thumb he pointed towards the dining hall. Why was it that Jim always chose the path of most resistance? He watched his friend's back as Jim headed in the opposite direction of the bridge.

Shaking his head at the man's antics, his feet carried him the well worn path towards sickbay. He was scheduled to review the ship's roster and find out if there were any non-vaccinated personnel on board. And he was already running ten minutes behind his preset schedule.
"No point in really keeping time on this damn ship." Because everything seemed to operate in days and weeks and the months it took to pass from one solar system to another. Jim had mentioned checking out an anomaly that was four days travel from their current location.

Which was who knows where in the Beta quadrant. Personally, McCoy hated space. He hated everything about it. The endless expanse. The disease. And the boredom. What he wouldn't give to be performing surgery...

But he had adapted to it, because life was one small adaptation after another until evolution kicked in and rocked the whole system.

Sickbay was as empty as ever, the only signs of life stuck in petri dishes. Sitting at his terminal, he started filtering through the personnel files. All of operations was up to date, the last of their stragglers having come in a few days prior. And navigation had been good to go since day one. He sorted everyone by sections, ticking them off one by one.

Supply however, was composed of multiple groups. The dining hall, the quartermaster's crew, and.. the hydroponics bay. It was listed as having only one member. The female that Jim had seen.

And McCoy could see why she'd caught Jim's eye as he looked over her photo. She was real pretty, stark blue eyes and blond hair. Expanding her profile, he went through it, both medical and historical. The two almost contradicted one another. "Why is she getting the Xeno series when she was born on Earth?" He rechecked the dates of the last set she'd received. "Someone's due."
Marking the profile, he found himself reading the historical data.

"Arizona, 2229, 30 years old with a birthday in May. Degree in Horticulture studies." It seemed... sterile, less thorough than most contractor's profiles. He skipped to the bottom. "Redacted. Now why in the hell would a horticulturist have a classified file?"

"Computer!" He shouted, swerving in his chair. "Where is the location of crew member Amelia Wright?"

A computerized female voice responded, "Cargo bay six."

"Open a comm channel with Amelia Wright's communicator."

"There is no assigned communicator."

"Why the hell not?"

"Unrecognized command."

"I wasn't talking to you." He muttered as he pinched the bridge of his nose. Every member of the crew had a communicator. It was standard issue. His eyes drifted back to the screen, the big red letters at the bottom of her file standing out. REDACTED. Wondering if sickbay was the only place she had yet to visit, he instructed the computer, "Computer, open a comm channel with Yeoman Fuller."

A series of beeps sounded and he heard the brisk voice of the young man. "Quartermaster Fuller."

Going with his hunch, he asked, "This is Doctor McCoy. Did you process Amelia Wright when she came on board?"

"Actually... no, sir. She did stop by before launch though. Asked for some supplies for the hydro bay. Real nice lady." By the tone of his voice, real nice lady meant she hadn't hounded him like everyone
"Why wasn't she processed?"

"She wasn't on record to be processed. I did check the manifest after seeing her though. I'd figured she must have been processed on another ship and just moved with equipment. For all I can see she's valid crew."

"Well, set her up with a standard issue. White uniforms, communicator. Whatever else she would get on initial boarding."

"Will do, sir." Hopefully the kid wouldn't ask too many questions and would keep this to himself.

McCoy briefly considered telling him not to mention it, but decided against it. Their quartermaster wasn't known for gossiping, unlike the Andorian... and Uhura... and pretty much everyone else.

"Computer, close channel."

McCoy scratched his head in confusion. It was like she came out of nowhere. No processing through supply. No processing through medical. The latter was worse because she'd missed an entire series of hyposprays. "Infect the entire crew and then where would we be. In space... with no one to save us."

He grunted, heading over to collect the necessary supplies and a transport kit. He could open a comm directly to the hydroponics bay and summon her to sickbay, but this was something he'd make the trip for. And Jim had wanted to know more about her so if a few questions came up then so be it.

Finished with packing everything into a silver briefcase, he went back to the terminal to close her file. It wouldn't do to have anyone else seeing it. The last thing they needed on board was all eyes pointed at the new girl...

**STARDATE 2260.015**

**Beta Quadrant**

The two crew members continued to work in the back corner, making decent headway in the past twenty minutes. Amelia tried to keep her distance, but in the end she would find herself over someone's shoulder. She didn't want to correct them, knowing that it would get back to the chief if she continued to hassle his crew.

*But the door is in the wrong place.* It had been much easier working with Scotty, the man a perfectionist. His crew just didn't seem to have the same idea on where everything was supposed to go. Finally, she stopped one of them, once more showing them the diagram she'd drawn. Without complaint, they moved the door.

*See., that wasn't so hard.* She'd never had to manage people before, her little greenhouse a one-woman shop. And it hadn't required hours just staring at a screen trying to learn how to use it.

Satisfied that they were back on track, she returned to the plant beds, adjusting lighting one each one to simulate night. Originally she'd wanted to do it when she went to bed, but after finishing another chapter in the hydroponics bay guide she'd learned that growing plants in space was done just a little... differently.

With the crew's few mishaps, she didn't feel like leaving to track down the hobbyist Lieutenant Mark Dualla. She made her way to the cargo bay doors, opening a container that was attached to the wall. The assigned data padd rested inside, already powered on. She pulled it out, navigating until she opened a free notes section. With a quick scrawl, she wrote his name.
A task for tomorrow.

Ever since she had finished setting up the plant beds, she realized why this had been a single person assignment. It wasn't too hard. Yeah, there were a few pop up jobs aside from the regular maintenance and care of the plants, but it wasn't more than one person could handle.

In fact, she found it pretty crowded right now with three...

Attempting to keep herself otherwise occupied, she grabbed a tricorder that was sitting next to the data padd. It was a good time to check the soil, the tomatoes showing their first sign of green. Before she was able to turn around and get started, the bay doors opened.

And in waltzed the captain.

She'd seen him around, his stature hard to miss, crew members going out of their way when he was nearby. She wondered what had brought him to the hydroponics bay. Maybe he was checking the status, an errand that he was bound to get to sooner rather than later.

"Captain Kirk." She said as she replaced the tricorder back into its holder, tilting her head to give him a once over. They could have passed for siblings, blond hair, blue eyes, and similar short stature shared between the both of them. Except he could easily pass for model material. His yellow shirt was crisp and clean, looking as diplomatic as Richard always had.

When he smiled it was far more familiar, flirty and casual. He gave an uncertain wave of his hand, gesturing towards her. "You're Amelia Wright?"

"I am." The noise in the back corner of the room came to a halt and she shifted to glance back. The two crewman sat watching her interaction with the captain. Realizing they'd be caught, they turned back to the work, the faint noise of tools once more filling the bay. Slowly, she turned back to the captain. "What can I do for you?"

With a small shrug, he started off towards the cucumber bed, his eyes darting between her and the small green leaves popping out of the ground. "I just thought it was time to see if we had some veggies."

She smiled, a little amused by the fact that he thought they would be farther along. He didn't seem like the kind of man who would take interest in things like plants and a still under construction hydroponics bay. "It'll take longer than a couple of weeks. But they are in the ground. And they're showing progress."

He did a good job feigning interest in the bay, walking past the various plant beds, eyes landing on each one for just the right amount of time. But there was a hesitancy to his step and he would cast her the occasional sideways glance. Like he was patiently waiting for something.

Being forward had never let her down, so she went ahead and asked, "Is there anything else?"

That seemed to be what he was waiting for, because he turned on his heel, facing her with that same wide smile. "Well, as Captain, I make a personal effort to introduce myself to all new members of the crew. So, after looking at the manifest you can imagine how disappointed I was to find out that I had overlooked the one person who is going to keep us well fed." He was good. The right amount of charm. The right amount of looks.

If only she hadn't already been warned by Th'eon that the man was an incorrigible womanizer. Of course, that just made it better seeing the captain in action.
With her own wide smile forming, she said, "I'm afraid Chef's in the dining facility on deck three." His smile didn't fall, but instead shifted into a grin.

"Ha. I get it." He opened his mouth to say something else, but it snapped shut, his eyes landing somewhere behind her. She turned to see the open doors of the bay, a man in a white medical jacket carrying a silver case stepping inside.

Where she would have classified the captain as pretty, the doctor easily fell into 'rugged'. A small growth of facial hair and accusing hazel eyes completed that picture. She found her smile faltering, a little stunned by his sudden arrival. Though she wasn't as caught up on all the gossip like Chef was, she had still heard plenty about the ship's doctor.

"Doctor McCoy?" She asked, catching the small nod he sent her way. Finally, she had a face to put against the man who had been shouting at Anthony in supply.

"Amelia Wright?" He practically grunted in question, and she nodded back.

"Bones." The captain at her back said across her shoulder.

"Jim." Another grunt, but a little friendlier than the one she'd been given.

There was an extended pause before she clapped her hands, all eyes turning towards her. "Well... now that everyone's met, uh, can I ask what you guys are doing in the hydroponics bay." It certainly wasn't the best place to hold a sort of meeting...

Captain Kirk sighed and rolled his eyes before muttering. "Thought we just went over this."

The doctor, still glaring, ignored him and said, without the grunting, "You're due for your Xeno series and giving you the benefit of the doubt-" The way he said it, his voice slow and dry, implied the opposite. "-I realized you didn't know how to get to sickbay to receive them."

"Xeno series?" Kirk asked with a hopeful tone. She couldn't understand why this made the captain perk up. He tilted his head to look her way. "You're not Terran?" Maybe he was into aliens?

"I am. I just never received them as a child." It was bound to come up at some point, and she found herself easily regurgitating the practiced response. "In fact, I only started to get them after contracting with Starfleet." The last part was an added amendment to ease her conscience. It wasn't a lie, but it was close enough that saying it made her heart beat just a little faster.

"Captain," Doctor McCoy said, a little more formal than before. His eyes had yet to stray from her and she couldn't help but feel a little intimidated. Was he angry? Based on what she had heard, the better question was when is he not angry.

"I have a few questions for Miss Wright and I'm afraid I need to ask you to leave."

A harsh whisper passed between the two, too low for her to catch, but she did hear the captain's farewell, "Didn't think you had it in you, Bones." Then he turned on his heel, as quickly as he had before, to face her. "It was a pleasure. I hope to see you again sometime."

"It's a small ship, sir. I'm sure we'll run into one another." Both she and McCoy watched as the captain left the cargo bay. Before she could begin to get drilled with medical questions, she looked towards the two crewmen in the back of the bay. Figuring it was best that she be the one to kick them out, she shouted, "Hey!" She waited a moment for them to stop working. "Mind taking a lunch and giving us a minute?"

They passed questioning glances to one another, but proceeded to lay their tools on the ground and
head out the doors. When she turned back to the doctor, he was still staring at her,

"You gonna tell me what you're doing on this ship?" A small part of her had been expecting this. Someone was eventually going to ask that question, and it made sense that it was Doctor McCoy. He had access to her file. And she was sure that he was a smart man and could put pieces together.

Though he'd never come close to guessing the truth.

Richard had prepped her. His father had prepped her. But lying didn't come naturally and she had to be careful about what she said. Another set of practiced answers started to flow, automatic with a touch of personalization. "I was assigned to this ship. And if you look around you'll see why." With a small wave, she indicated towards the plants behind her.

For a brief moment she wondered if he was a betazoid, able to read her mind. Because his face told her he thought there was something she wasn't telling him. "My duty is to protect the crew of the Enterprise. Now, I don't know who got you on board, but the fact that you skipped medical and supply brings up a whole lot of questions." She took a moment to process that statement. Was he implying that she would harm members of the crew? The subtle insinuation irritated her, her eyes narrowing in response.

He watched her as he started walking towards the only desk in the bay, resting his silver case on its surface. With a flick of his thumbs, he popped it open.

In a defensive manner she brought up her hands, palms facing him. "Woah, woah, woah. One, I'm not Starfleet. I didn't have to go through you. Two, I went to supply on my second day of being on this ship. I didn't skip anything."

"You skipped your Xeno series, which is a biological hazard. Especially when you're trapped in a steel container with over a hundred other people."

"Yeah, well, I've had a lot on my plate trying to get food on yours." This time, she let some of that irritation seep into her voice.

"Hell of an effort." An unimpressed glance was sent past her towards the several seeded beds. "Maybe in half a year I'll get a damn potato." The conversation was swept into a swift spiral downwards. Every word out of his mouth sounding more and more like an accusation. Hell, it was an accusation. He was pissed, but she just couldn't figure out the reason. He didn't even know her. A small voice retaliated in her mind with 'maybe that's why'.

He continued, pulling a hand held device out of his jacket pocket. "And why don't you have a communicator? It's standard issue!"

"I don't have one, because they are Starfleet issue."

"Contractors get them too!" McCoy shook his head, as if trying to clear it of confusion. That hard stare went back on her a moment later as he asked, "What are you doing on this ship?"

She wasn't sure if it was that ruggedly handsome face, or his god-awful attitude, but the sudden desire to hit him almost overwhelmed her. Several four letter words came to mind, but she kept her mouth closed, her jaw clenching in rising anger.

Those practiced answers were shoved to the side. She didn't have to defend herself to him. Not to anyone. It wasn't her fault that she had been unwillingly yanked from 1992. It wasn't her fault that she had only been given a month to prepare for this life. It wasn't her fault that there were just some things that Richard hadn't told her.
Her hand balled into a fist, her fingernails biting into skin. *Don’t take any crap from anyone.* Captain O'Shea's words rang in her mind. Slowly, she looked from him to the open silver case and the five hyposprays resting inside. She didn't feel like fighting with him. She didn't feel like fighting with anyone. With a small sigh, she said, "Just give me my shots and get out of my bay."

If she was lucky, she'd be able to avoid him for the next five years...
Chapter 7

STARDATE 2260.020

Beta Quadrant

Their journey towards the anomaly was delayed. Captain Kirk announced that the Enterprise was within range of a long range communication's probe. Each deck was given a set time to place video calls, trying to limit everyone from using it all at once. Even with their advanced technology, it seemed that *switch boards* in space could get overwhelmed. Or at the very least, confused.

Amelia made it back to her quarters just as Deck 4’s allotted time rolled around. The small computer terminal was already running, a series of numbers and names already typed into the console. "Denver, Colorado Shipyard. Commander of Personnel. Richard O'Shea." She read out loud, opening a channel to place the call. Someone, somewhere, would make sure it got to the right person.

It would be the first time they were able to talk one on one since she'd left and it eased some of the strain that had been building on her shoulders. Avoiding the captain had been quite a feat. Avoiding the doctor, however, was just a touch easier since she was sure he'd been doing the same. She still had to track down Lieutenant Mark Dualla and see if he had taken the maturation modifier. And then there was the secondary environment. Though the room was fully constructed, figuring how to configure all the settings was taking hours of reading through the hydroponics bay guidelines.

All she wanted to do now, was talk to someone. The terminal's background changed to the Starfleet seal, a few beeps sounding and a line of text running across the screen that told her the call was being made. In less than a minute, Richard's face appeared. She didn't know if he could see her well, but his image was crisp and clear.

Then his voice sounded from small speakers on the front of the terminal. "Amelia! I've been wondering when I'd get a real call instead of those short videos." Unexpectedly, her eyes welled with tears.

"Oh, Richard... it's so good to see you." Swiping a hand across her cheeks, she managed a smile. Seeing Richard, the one person she considered family in this new world, was like a kick in the gut. She could have never prepared herself for it.

"Hey, hey. Don't cry." His quick request made a few more tears fall, so she took a minute to wipe her face with her sleeve. When she turned back to the monitor he continued. "Let me secure this line and you can tell me how things are going." After a minute, he motioned for her to go on.

"It's... going. The bay is mostly finished. The vegetables are planted and a small bed of flowers, too." She wanted to complain about everything else, but her time was already too short to fill it with talk of negative things. "I'm-" She tried to think of the right way to put it. "settling in."

"Well, we have good news on this end. Salo's case has been put on hold since you were reassigned. A few of the contractors, mainly the installation's gardeners, here have put in good words for you. I'm thinking I'll have a certified title for you within six months." That was good news. Richard leaned in closer to the monitor, his voice dropping just a little bit. The gesture had her doing the same, even though they were separated by solar systems. "Have you had any problems with your identity file?"

She felt her smile drop. "Nothing I can't handle."
"I know you. There's something you're not telling me."

"Well. Apparently all new crew members have to go through some kind of processing. The fact that I didn't has... roused suspicion. If I work hard and actually do what I'm good at then I have the feeling they'll accept me." Some people already had, and that brief reminder brought her smile back. Th'eon 'traded' gossip with her. Scotty stopped by the bay on occasion. And she'd even made an effort to stop by and see Anthony every now and then. Those few people had a tendency to make her days just a little bit better...

"We spent a lot of time going over answers to those questions. You're still sticking to the story, right?" Richard finally leaned back away from the monitor, crossing his arms. In just that single movement he managed to make her feel like a rebelling youth.

With a small sigh, she admitted, "I haven't really divulged the story. Just bits and pieces."

"Some of those questions would go away if you just filled them in." She opened her mouth to respond, but he continued. Astute as ever he said, "You're going to have to lie some time, Amelia. That part of your past... it can't exist here."

"But it does exist. It happened to me! I don't want to lie about it." Maybe that was the crux of things. Her problems with the doctor. Her hesitancy to push herself farther into the crew's lives.

"I don't want you stuck inside a medical ward for the rest of the five years you're on that ship." She suddenly pictured herself in a white straight jacket. "You don't even mention the words 'time travel'. You understand that, right?"

"Yes, but it would just be so much easier if I could really talk to someone." What she would give to be able to tell Th'eon about the 80's. Of course, he would go on to tell the entire crew, which would lead to Richard's prediction of the padded room.

"You can talk to me."

"Yeah, once every blue moon." When the Enterprise just happened upon a long range comms probe.

"Talk to me now. Tell me about your mom and your many days spent gardening. Hell, tell me about going to a movie theater and watching... what was it... ET!" He smiled and snapped his fingers. In that charming way of his, full of honesty and care, he managed to pull her to a topic that he knew would make her smile.

So she told him more about her mother and a little about her father. And for added measure she talked about her greenhouse. Stories he had heard before and a few he hadn't. A random trip down to Flagstaff to visit John. A journey to the Grand Canyon.

The memories, some fading and some fresh, were carried with her long after she had to finish the call. It had been a mood lifter getting the chance to talk to Richard, but she knew that those kinds of opportunities would come few and far between.

With her personal time coming to an end, she looked over the hydroponics bay data padd and stared at the name scrawled across the screen. Mark Dualla. Th'eon had asked her every day how the 'investigation' was coming along and today she planned on having a different answer.

She had to find someone with access to the manifest. "Anthony." The quartermaster had a list of every crew member and the location of their quarters. Since Anthony lived on deck 5, his allotted time was still a couple of hours away. Which meant he would be in the office. Probably bored. Probably hungry...
Amelia set a plan of action, fixing her hair into a loose pony-tail and straightening the collar of her new white uniform. Tucking the data padd under her arm, she began the small walk towards the dining facility.

A few corridors, a turbolift ride, and following the smell of food, she made a direct bee-line towards Chef. He must have sensed her budding enthusiasm, because those antenna curled. He leaned forward, his hands braced against the barricade. Sharp as ever, he asked, "What is it you need?"

"Good food." She said with a grin. "To go."

His eyes went to her hair, the free falling strands drawing attention. Mainly because he had never seen her wearing it that way. With his own slow forming grin, he asked, "Are you trying to impress someone? I thought I was the only man in your life."

"You're the only Andorian if it makes you feel any better." A slight twitch of those antenna told her that he approved. Then again, he was one of four Andorians on the ship. Glad to have boosted his ego for once, she continued, "And yes. I'm going to attempt to get information."

"On our thief?" His inquiry was combined with the fake curling of an imaginary mustache. An act she'd seen him do once or twice before. Life on Earth had certainly made an impression on the chef.

She reminded him of another one of Earth's traditions, hoping that it hadn't changed over time. "Innocent until proven guilty, Th'eon."

"In that case, let me make something. Come in." Heading back into the kitchen, Amelia was reminded why her task was so important. The crates were getting fewer and fewer in number, their supply of fresh vegetables dwindling. All the reading she had done on the maturation modifier said that it would cut the growth time down to a just a quarter of natural time. She needed to get a hold of it and quick.

"Pasta or red meat?" Th'eon asked, already pulling out equipment.

"Can I get both?" Her eyes widened slightly, her expression hopeful.

He asked her, "You know the drill."

This time she arched a brow at him, crossing her arms. "Get cooking and I'll share." Resting a hip against a counter, she waited for the soft clatter of pots and pans. As soon as the familiar dings sounded in the kitchen, she started. "Well, Captain Kirk stopped by the bay yesterday around 1400 hours. He told me a little bit about the anomaly we're going to be checking out and we should be there in a couple of days. Scotty visited around 1900, hung out for an hour. He told me about a girl he's interested in."

The sizzling of meat could be heard through the room, the smell making her mouth water. She should have asked for another portion. Before she had a chance to mention it, Th'eon perked up. "Do you have a name?"

"No." She said and disappointment fluttered across his blue face. "He's keeping it to himself for now."

"Anything else?" Th'eon set aside some black containers. With a shake of her head, he continued to pull out the garnish, and she found herself appreciating the extra effort. Even with her tiny tidbit of gossip.

Technology made the cooking process faster, but it still was a good eight minutes before the pasta
and meat was finished. The Andorian placed a small round steak in the smaller box as she recalled something else. "Oh, and I saw that Ensign you pointed out. She is definitely into Parr. How did you find out about that anyway?"

"How do I find out about anything?" Th'eon gave her that trademark shrug of his, the one that tried to say he wasn't impressed with himself, even though everyone on board knew he was a narcissus. Then he scooped the pasta into one of the boxes.

She plucked out a piece of penne, shoving it quickly into her mouth and avoiding the hand slap Th'eon sent her way. Another small grin formed on her face. "You make up stuff and bribe the crew with false information?"

"You know me too well, darling." He said as he held open the kitchen door, shooing her on. "Let me know how it goes!" The farewell drew a few glances their way, members of the crew finally showing up for lunch. She could only imagine what was going on through their minds.

But she didn't let it get her down. Today was going to be productive and positive. She had Richard and Th'eon to thank for that. Juggling the packed lunch and the data padd, she headed off towards the supply room on Deck 5.

As she passed through one corridor to another she realized that the ship sounded like home. She was able to ignore the soft hums, the various beeps, and could even recognize what most of them meant. It had taken a few weeks, but now it was comforting. Even the gravity difference was something she no longer noticed.

The thought made her smile as the door to supply slid open. As usual, Anthony was sitting at his desk on the other side of the shelves, leaning over a data padd with a frustrated expression on his face. She rapped her knuckles against one of the metal shelves.

As soon as he looked up, he shot her a tired smile. "They running you ragged?" She asked, holding out the two boxes of food.

A small sigh escaped him as he pushed aside the data padd, setting the food on the desk. "I'm going over weapons inventory with the armorer. A couple of discrepancies have popped up."

Discrepancies and weapons weren't something anyone would consider good news.

She gave him a small frown. "That doesn't sound good."

"It could be nothing." The words were optimistic, but his tone wasn't. She wondered if she had picked a good day to try and butter him up. He opened the containers, inhaling deeply. "You're an angel, Amelia. Thanks for this."

She didn't think it was fair of her to manipulate him, so she opted for another approach. After giving him a few moments to start in on the steak, she said, "Well. I'm actually working for some info."

"Is it classified, because I'll have to stop-" Her hand shot up, palm out in a quick attempt to stop his train of thought. As far as she knew, where someone lived wasn't really classified. It just wasn't info given out to everyone.

"No. Just... sensitive. I'm looking for someone's quarters."

Anthony stilled, a fork of pasta halted in the air. Then he asked, "You going to tell me what this is for?"

"I have a question for him and I don't want to bring it up where he works. It might be...
embarrassing." Potentially on her end if he didn't have the modifier. The last thing she wanted to do was accuse someone of stealing when all she had was Th'eon's word.

Anthony didn't say anything else as he finished his meal, looking torn between giving her the information or telling her no. She shifted from foot to foot, hoping for the former. Then he folded up the empty boxes and reached for his data padd and said, at last, "Give me the name."

After another twenty minutes of chatting and catching up, she was given a series of letters and numbers, followed with a stern warning from the quartermaster. "You didn't get this from me."

Recycling the boxes, she made her way out of the supply room. Carrying the data padd close to her nose, she looked over a map of the Enterprise. It was a turbolift ride and a few corridors away, she figured, about to put the data padd back under her arm.

Instead, the padd smacked her in the face, pain blossoming in her nose and tears welling in her eyes. Embarrassment filled her and she kept her mouth closed to avoid saying any four letter words. She had collided with an immovable object.

Or an immovable person. "Are you injured?" A concerned voice reached her through the dizziness. Concerned and familiar. The pain seemed forgotten as irritation took over. She lowered the data padd, the hallway coming back into view.

As well as the ever depressing sight of Doctor McCoy. The instant their eyes met, the concern on his face evaporated. Well, I don't like you either, buddy. She reminded herself as she touched a hand to her sore nose. He huffed, still glaring at her like he always did the moment they found themselves in the same room. "Damn it, girl." The muttered curse was followed by a quick step her way.

Automatically, she took a single step back. She didn't say she was sorry, even though she was well aware that the collision had been her fault for not paying attention.

She could tell her protective posture had offended him, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Despite whatever negative opinion you have of me. I'm still a doctor. Is it broken?" Her eyes went wide with surprise at his question, her silence seeming to answer him. Maybe he figured she would be screaming or crying if the impact had broken her nose.

His hand twitched upwards, but he quickly retreated as if decided it was a bad idea. If a step forward made her defensive, then touching her probably wasn't a good idea. Instead he moved his head as he looked her over. Finally, he said, "No bleeding or bruising. Yet.

"I'll live." She managed to find her voice, small but with a touch of snark. Even with the awkward tension, she still felt compelled to ask, "Are you alright?" If she'd hurt him, there was no telling how long that would be held against her.

"Yes." Seemingly satisfied that she didn't require his care as a physician, he took a wide berth around her as he continued on down the corridor. She watched him over her shoulder, thinking how strange the encounter had been.

They hadn't screamed at one another. And his glare had been short lived. There was still a large amount of distrust on his end and anger on hers, but he had pushed that aside to do his job. Even if for just a moment. It made her feel just a little bit safer, knowing that the doctor had it in him to be profession when it counted.

Rubbing the side of her nose, she looked around to get her bearing. Since every door had markings above it, it wasn't difficult to re-orientate herself and begin the short walk towards the turbolift. This
time, she kept the data padd down...

**STARDATE 2260.020**

**Beta Quadrant**

As usual, he sat around hating space. McCoy was days from losing his mind to boredom. All inoculations were done. There were no scheduled surgeries. And since beginning their exploration mission, they had yet to actually explore anything.

"But there's an anomaly, Bones!" He tried to raise his pitch, attempting to match Jim's. An anomaly wasn't going to do anything to ease the stagnant life they had been living. *It's better than dealing with psychos like Khan. Or insane Romulans.* Maybe he should plan a trip to the bridge... stir up something with the green blooded bastard. Of course, even Spock hadn't been as easy to rile up as of late. Perhaps Uhura had something to do with that, toughening him up to better tolerate the humans.

He looked towards the clock and realized that he wouldn't be able to make it to deck 4 for his scheduled call time to Earth. Sickbay had it's own terminal, and despite being on another deck, he was certain that a call would still be authorized.

But who could he call? His father was on a carrier ship in the middle of the Pacific. His sister was on a freighter at the opposite end of the alpha quadrant. Getting a hold of them would be next to impossible. Even if he called, he wasn't sure what to talk about.

There were no new stories to tell. No battles or planets to describe. He thought back to a few days prior, his heated encounter with the woman in the hydroponics bay. If anything he could vent about her... his building suspicions.

He pulled up her file on the terminal, scrolling down the bottom. Several times he had attempted to access the REDACTED section, only to be denied over and over.

Suddenly struck with an idea, he starting to place a call. "Computer, open a comm channel. Starfleet Academy. Commander of Personnel. Francis Williamson." Commander Williamson had been a classmate of his back in Mississippi. And not only were they on good terms, but McCoy was also owed a favor. A favor he intended on collecting.

The blue Starfleet emblem appeared, text scrolling across the top and bottom. The call wasn't immediately answered, McCoy placed on a sort of hold. Either he had opened a channel at the wrong time, or his friend was trying to get to another terminal.

It was about a seven minute wait before a man appeared on the screen, a grin on his face. "Leonard! How you doing?"

McCoy grunted, but still managed a half smile. "I'm in the Beta Quadrant. Stuck in the vacuum of space. How do you think I'm doing?"

The man's grin widened on the other end as he gave a chuckle. "Horribly bored? Paranoid about a breach? What can I do for ya?" He cut to the point, a trait that McCoy had always appreciated and a trait which later sealed their friendship all those years ago.

"There's a woman on board. Her name is Amelia Wright. She's not Starfleet and she was assigned to the Enterprise just a few days before we launched. I'm wondering if you have access to her file."

"If she's not Starfleet then it's not likely." McCoy wasn't fully aware of what his friend had access to and the call wasn't looking too productive.
Hopeful, he stated, "The closest transport hub is you guys. She could have been processed in San Fransisco."

"Not on board?" Francis asked and McCoy gave him a quick shake of his head.

"I have a weird feeling about her, Frank. Can you just take a look and see what comes up?" Francis didn't cut their connection, but leaned out of view. When he came back, he was holding an Academy issued data padd. McCoy spelled out the name, and

"Well, damn. She was processed here. There's a big gap in the record though." That same suspicion that McCoy had been feeling was present on his friend's face. "Wait. It says her sponsor was Captain O'Shea of the USS Huron. Do you think she transferred from the Huron?"

"No. She's never been on a ship before. She didn't even have her Xeno series complete."

"I can't see her medical, but that seems odd." The man on the monitor stared at his data padd, shooting the occasional glance up towards McCoy. "Don't Terrans get the Xeno shots as infants?"

"There's exceptions and she's one of them." The real reason was why. And did it have anything to do with her sudden appearance on the ship. Unanswered questions had always captured his interest, though they tended to be of the medical variety. This one... this one wasn't something he could let go.

"Well if she's not Starfleet and she's never been on a ship before... why was she assigned to the Enterprise?" It was the same thing McCoy had asked himself.

"Not sure, but she works in the hydroponics bay."

Francis snapped his fingers. "That explains it! We get contractors for that all the time. I was worried she was working in sickbay with you."

"Still doesn't feel right." With a shake of his head, he leaned back towards the terminal.

Suddenly, Francis's head snapped up, tilting to the side. "Why is there a restricted section on her file?"

"See! Why would a gardener have a classified file?" A sense of justification filled him, his friend confirming that he wasn't the only one with restricted access. Usually the Chief Medical Officer was able to see it all for the sake of properly caring for a patient. So why hadn't he seen Amelia's?

"Did you ever consider that she's Starfleet Intelligence?"

Now that was something he hadn't considered. It was plausible, but unlikely. Still, he gave a narrowed glare to his friend. "Ah, hell. Why would you plant that idea in my head? Besides, Starfleet Intel would have at least made her up to date on her shots."

"Unless that's part of her cover." Then the man laughed and McCoy realized he was being toyed with.

He crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair as he growled, "You're an asshole."

"Listen, one out of twenty people in Starfleet have classified files. You have a classified file. You're getting yourself worked up over nothing. She's new... be friendly." Jim had said something similar a few days ago, though he didn't seem to take issue with her classified file. Was McCoy the only one was found this strange?
"She ain't exactly approachable." That might have been his fault though, his behavior not exactly the most profession. Insulting her in the hydroponics bay? *What were you thinking?* But there was still that nagging in the back of his mind. "She's hiding something, Frank. I know it."

"We're all hiding something, Leonard." A knock sounded in the background and Francis looked past his monitor. "I hate to cut this short, but I have 1,000 personnel to prep for graduation. You take care out there."

"You too." McCoy said just before the comm line closed, that Starfleet emblem back on the screen. He realized that the conversation with his friend hadn't gotten him any closer to the truth, though the idea that she was Intel was new and prospering.

No. You said it yourself that Starfleet would have made sure she had her Xeno. But what was with her classified file? Still no closer to those answers, he looked up at the clock. It was early, but lunch would already be started and Jim said he was going to grab his before their allotted comms time.

Taking off his jacket and resting it on one of the bio beds, he headed out towards the corridor. Rapidly turning a corner, he was taken by surprise when a soft female body collided with his own. He managed to keep his footing, but the female staggered back.

Of course she hadn't been able to see where she was going, a data padd in front of her face. He put a hand against his chest, staring down at her in shock and hoping that the padd hadn't broken her nose. That *would* help out the issue of boredom though.

*Running around injuring the crew is not a good solution.* "Are you injured?" He asked, automatically.

The data padd fell down to her side, revealing the one person he had so many questions about. The irony of it didn't escape him and he found himself muttered, "Damn it, girl." Looking her over, he found himself suddenly concerned.

Women and tears ate at him, whether for sadness or pain it just wasn't something he could shake. And her blue eyes were brimming with them. *Probably because she just smacked herself in the face with a data padd.*

Worried that it was broken, he took a step towards her. And she immediately took a step back. He didn't know if he should be pissed that she was afraid of him, or work on correcting that unnecessary reaction. He settled on the latter, "Despite whatever negative opinion you have of me. I'm still a Doctor. Is it broken?"

He could see surprise on her face. He *was* a doctor... what the hell did she think he was going to do? Just leave her standing there with a potentially broken nose? His hand itched to tilt her head so he could get a closer look, but he thought better of it. It was a common injury, one he'd seen hundreds of times. A quick look was all he really needed for the exam.

It was red, not yet bruising and no blood dripped down. He commented on that but inside he was distracted as to why she'd gotten defensive. *Because you've been an ass every time you've seen one another?* It wasn't like he had no reason to be suspicious of her.

"I'll live." That much was certain. "Are you alright?" She seemed genuinely concerned, her eyes drifting up and down his form, as if searching for any injury.

He wasn't quite sure what to make of that, this encounter so different than their previous one. Neither one of them raised their voice, and aside from his swearing it had been... civil. Despite all that,
something still nagged at him. *She's still hiding something. Don't forget that.*

Recalling her question, his gaze shot to hers. At least those tears had dried up, making him feel just a little relief. "Yes." He was alright, the tiny woman probably incapably of hurting him. As he remembered her reaction when he'd approached her, he made sure to walk around her as he continued down the corridor.

All he could think about through lunch was, *who the hell is Amelia Wright?* Maybe the better question was, *why do I care?*

**STARDATE 2260.020**

**Beta Quadrant**

The pain surrounding her nose was fast fading, her eyes still red, but no longer producing a teary response. She tried to push aside the whole incident, her current task needing more attention than the gruff Doctor McCoy.

No... she needed to focus on finding Lieutenant Mark Dualla's room. The series of numbers led her down another hallway, narrowing down the location to just a few rooms. Finally she stood in front of the correct door.

Taking in a deep breath, she prepared herself to press the comm button. With her finger just an inch from the red key, the door slid open to reveal a young man with brown hair and brown eyes. His uniform reminded her of her own. Not that it was white, but because there were various patches of dirt spread across it.

Th'eon, it seemed, hadn't been incorrect. His room smelled of fresh soil, a scent that reminded her of home and the hydroponics bay. When her eyes drifted back open she saw him standing the doorway, looking down at her with a curious gaze. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, I'm hoping you can. My name is Amelia Wright and I work in..." She trailed off, a sight beyond him capturing her attention. In a large glass case, sitting on a table in the center of his room, was an enormous long stemmed rose. It wasn't its size that dumbfounded her though. It was the neon green color. "Oh my God! What is that?"

Suddenly forgetting every ounce of protocol, she pushed past him into the room and stared into the case. "Uh. That's a Glow Rose," Dualla responded. She'd never heard of anything like that. Did it really glow or was it just named that because of its neon color? Anticipating her next question, he hesitantly said, "I'll show you. Lights 30 percent."

When the room's lighting dropped, the rose was the highlighted view. It was brighter than she had expected, casting a green glow across the table, reflecting across the surface and almost touching the walls. "That's amazing!"

"I know. They rarely last this long, but with the modifier the blooms can last for a month." He waved at the glass case and she noticed a control panel on the bottom. So this was the maturation modifier. Shooting her another curious stare, he asked, "I'm sorry, what did you say you do again?"

"I didn't really get there. Distracted." She shrugged a hand towards the rose. "I'm a horticulturist. I work down in the hydroponics bay."

"Oh." He said with a frown, but then he smiled, excitement radiating off of him. "Oh! I didn't know it was operational."
Mark Dualla didn't seem like a thief, just a bundle of energy, all of it directed towards that rose. She piped up, drawing back his attention. "Yes. And we're behind schedule because-"

Looking between her and the rose, he seemed to put two and two together. "Because I have the modifier. Oh, man. I checked with the manifest before I took it." Now the kid looked remorseful, almost worried.

"Well. Here I am. I'm afraid I'll need it back." Rapidly nodding, he agreed.

"If I would have known you were on board, I'd have brought it back immediately. I'll have to go to the transporter room to set up its transfer. It may not be heavy, but it's too big to fit through my door." Amelia had been wondering how he'd gotten it inside, casting a look over her shoulder at the narrow doorway. Far more narrow than the case was wide...

"Seems like an honest mistake." Glancing past the rose, she noticed the rest of the room, several other long stems growing in pots. "You like roses."

It wasn't a question, but he still nodded. "My mother loved roses. I've only recently picked up growing them though." As an afterthought, he added. "It's tougher than it looks."

"Tell me about it." She looked at the glass case, then turned a sideways glance towards Dualla. "If you want, you can come down and help me load it onto the vegetables. It'll be great to have someone that's familiar with it help me out."

His eyes lit up with the offer. "I'd love to come see the bay." Even though he'd been on his way out, he stayed as she told him what was already planted. His genuine interest in plants was heartwarming. No one on board had really been the type to discuss soil nutrient levels for fun or problems with the water system equipment.

Half an hour passed before the conversation came to an end, and she felt better than she had all day. Mark promised to get the modifier transported by the evening and swore he'd stop by the following day to help show her how to use it. By the end of February she'd at least have tomatoes.

A completed video log of her past life. A call with Richard. A friendly chat with Anthony. And now she'd found the maturation modifier. Overall, despite the close call with almost breaking her nose, it turned out to be a pretty productive day.
Chapter 8

STARDATE 2260.024

Beta Quadrant

She had neglected all of her daily duties. There had been no errands run, no hours spent in the hydroponics bay, and no visit to Th'eon for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. It wasn't going to fall apart without her, but today was supposed to be the day she transferred the modifier from the tomatoes to the cucumbers.

Amelia, instead, remained curled up on her bunk, a bucket resting on the floor. It was a change in the room's arrangement born out of necessity. She'd had a good ten minutes of calm, before her stomach turned once more, forcing her to roll over on the bunk and clutch the bucket in her arms, dry heaves wracking her small form.

Her whole body was sore, her throat on fire. She'd lost everything in her stomach a few hours earlier and was left with nothing more each time the urge to throw up hit her. She'd shrugged off the white uniform, determined to wear something that would soothe her. If not physically then at least mentally.

The flannel and jeans had been buried in her backpack since arriving on board. Now, they fit nicely against her person, a remaining scent ingrained in the clothes that could only be described as the desert. It was impossible, really. The clothes were a replicated version of the ones she had arrived in, the originals torn to shreds during the sphere's blast and even more so when she was struck by the hover car.

But just the feel of cotton was enough to bring the memory to the surface.

Or maybe she was just hallucinating. Another wave of nausea passed. More dry heaves and a few more tears. She reached around to pat the floor next to the bunk, her hand searching for a small square device. Her communicator, something she barely knew how to operate.

Prying one eye open, she spotted it and quickly snagged it in her grip, popping it open. Small letters and numbers appeared and she dialed in another comm code. First Initial, Last Initial. Assignment Location. SM-ENG. She was missing the last digit, a precaution against calling two people with similar names. But it would still open a channel.

Someone with the same initials just might happen to get the call as well.

"Scotty, here."

Hearing the Scottish brogue on the other line, she gave a long sigh of relief, grateful that there wouldn't be anyone else on the line should she start vomiting again. Not that she cared for her friend to hear that either.

Quickly, she replied, "Scotty, it's Amelia."

"Aye, lass. What can I do for ya?"

"I need. Someone to help me-" She broke off, clutching the bucket hard against her chest.

More dry heaves. It took a moment for her to catch her breath and she could hear Scotty asking on the other line. "Ah, Are ya’ ill?"

"-get to sickbay." She continued, both answering his question and asking a favor.
"It's the anomaly. There's been thirty or so who had to get suppression medication from Doc McCoy. There's assigned personnel to the transporter. Call for a transport." It was bad enough that she was throwing her guts up, now Scotty was making jokes.

A low groan escaped her as she clipped out, "I don't feel. Like dying. Today."

"It's perfectly safe." He'd been trying to get her to use the transporter for weeks now. He should have known that her calling for help was her way of still avoiding the damn thing. Safe was not the word she would use to describe that particular invention.

A wave of exhaustion hit her and she worried that she might pass out while still on the communicator. With as much fierceness as she could manage, she said, "Promise me. You won't. Take me apart."

"Alright. I'll be on my way."

"Thank you." Then the communicator beeped, signaling the end of that conversation. If she'd had the strength to get up, she would have changed back into the uniform, but her arms were heavy and her legs were weak. Like when she was nineteen and had to suffer alone through a severe case of the flu.

She wasn't sure how long it had been before her door slid open, a single eye widening to see Scotty's red uniform. "Ya' look terrible, lass." He leaned over her on the bunk, pulling her up to wrap an arm under her shoulder. There was brief contact of his hand at the back of her neck, and she heard him exclaim. "You're burnin' up!" Now that he mentioned it, she realized she was pretty sweaty and his hand had felt cold.

They made it out the door, Scotty supporting her with his frame as they walked quickly to the turbolift. As they made the journey, Scotty filled her in on what was happening across the ship. "It started with a few headaches. Then some upset stomachs. Doc McCoy said it was the anomaly, but nothing too severe. Cept' you it seems."

Between tiny gulps to keep the nausea down, she said, "Have we left the anomaly?"

"We're working on it. It has a gravitational pull and we got caught in it before all this happened. The ship's moving away, but slowly. I'd estimate another day before we're out of range." 24 hours? She wasn't sure if she could survive another minute like this?

"How can an anomaly in space cause something like this?"

"Magnetic fields most likely." She felt him shrug beside her as he talked. "Since the human body has its own fields interference can create a whole list of symptoms."

"And we plan on checking out everything we come across?" She tried for incredulous, but instead her voice came out with a squeak.

"That's the plan. Though we record the data and in the future we know not to approach. Humans learn best by making a mess of things, don't ya' think?"

She just nodded, her vision going hazy and her mind blanking. It was okay though, because Scotty was pulling her into sickbay. She'd never expected the sight of Doctor McCoy to be a desired one, but the instant she saw his grumpy face she sighed in relief.

"Doctor... I think I'm sick." She could have sworn his eyes went wide, either from surprise at her statement or shock at her appearance. Probably the latter, because in the next instant her knees gave out and she fell to the floor.
Ask and you shall receive. His boredom had been wasn't an incapacitating illness that struck, but it was something. In a matter of hours after being caught in the anomaly's gravitational pull, the first crew member had reported to sickbay. McCoy didn't associate the two at first, a complaint of mild headaches and slight stomach pains nothing to get riled up about.

Best nip whatever it was in the bud, though, he had thought, giving his patient a suppressant and sending him off to his quarters for the day. By morning the ensign was sure to be fine. Another hour had passed with two more patients coming by. The thought of an epidemic crossed his mind as he saw patient number sixteen.

Still nothing serious symptom wise, but he wondered how long that would last. Patient twenty had to endure more testing. He called up an engineer to have him review the results. Their exploration of the anomaly needed to come to a halt, those final tests revealing what he had suspected.

Coincidence wasn't in his vocabulary.

Doctor McCoy sat at his terminal, sending a text only message to the captain, informing him of the situation. Jim's response had been short and to the point. "We'll be out of range in 22 hours." Why it would take so long, he wasn't sure.

Scotty was the damn engineer.

Then there was patient thirty-seven.

"Doctor!" That deeply accented voice drew his attention to the door, the one and only Scott Montgomery holding up the woman who'd occupied his mind one too many times as of late. She looked like hell, her hair haphazardly pinned up on top of her head, her eyes red and bloodshot. And what in god's name was she wearing?

Was that denim?

"Doctor. I think I'm sick." She would have been the last person he expected to come crawling, or be carried, into sickbay. The mere fact that she was voluntarily there sent him into a deer in the headlights state. Before he could compose himself and help Scotty, she promptly passed out.

And the sound of her hitting the floor sent him moving. He knelt next to Scotty, catching the opposite arm and tucking his own under her limp shoulder. He shot a glance at the engineer behind her back, asking, "How long has she been like this?"

"No idea. A few hours, I'd say. Since this whole illness started." They pulled her onto a biobed, McCoy already reaching for a tricorder before even releasing her. "Lass was in a bad state when I found her. Throwing up. Feverish."

At that information, McCoy placed a palm against her forehead. "It's critical."

"Where's your assistant?" Scotty looked around for the doctor's aide, a woman McCoy was sure he'd seen a few times around the ship.

"Doing house calls." McCoy answered without sparing the man a glance. His eyes were fixated on the control panel of the biobed, initiating a timer for a forcefield. "Step back." The engineer quickly complied as McCoy pressed a hypospray against Amelia's neck. Got to get the fever down. Just as he
pulled back, the forcefield went up around the bed. In the contained space, the temperature began to drop.

"Come on." He urged, closely watching on as two sets of digits fell. The air inside the biobed, and her own corresponding body temperature. After a moment, he gave a ragged sigh of relief. It was far too early in their mission to lose someone. "Another half-hour and she'd have gone into shock."

It took just a few minutes to pull her from the danger zone, Scotty remaining for as long as he could before getting a comm to return to engineering. McCoy understood the man's urgency. It was now more important than ever for them to get the hell away from that anomaly.

That timed forcefield reached the end of it's cycle, dissipating with flickers of light. He ran a tricorder over the still form of Amelia Wright, giving a nod of approval. It had been a rough couple of minutes, charged with wondering why she was reacting more severely than any of the other patients. A few tests should answer that question. McCoy unsnapped the bottom latches on the biobed, rolling it towards the examination terminal. He considered calling back Doctor Robinson and having her assist, but thought better of it. She's dealing with the rest of the crew.

Turning his attention back to Amelia, he moved several pieces of equipment above her. A full x-ray, a stasis scan, and a bio map. If he happened to fill in some of her medical gaps at the same time, so be it.

Initiating the exam, he sat at the terminal, watching as data populated the screen. Instead of answering his questions, more popped up in their place. "Regenerated ear drums? Surgical marks on her neck and vocal cords?" The X-ray revealed even more confusing results.

Pieces of metal were attached to three of her ribs, embedded in the bone to help with structural integrity. The bio scan dated the material to almost 15 years of age. She would have had them installed as a teenager.

Metallic implants hadn't even been used for over fifty years. What backwater doctor performed that kind of surgery when he could have just slowly regenerated the bone? He ran his hands under a sanitizing wand and made his way back over to her, his mind still mulling over the results.

Her odd shirt covered the area where the metal rested within her and he lifted it up to take a look at her lower right rib cage. The skin would have been flawless, but three two-inch pink lines ran horizontally across her external oblique. They were faded with age and he would have placed money on the fact that she rarely even noticed them now.

And why didn't they at least use a dermal regenerator? He pulled the shirt back down, his eyes narrowed in a silent fury at doctors he had never even met. Putting metal in someone? They hadn't even bothered to remove the scarring.

He made notes of those questions in her file, then turned to continue reviewing the bio scan. A slow frown spread. Three months ago something traumatic happened to her. The other, more recent, surgical marks were also dated, this time the readings more accurate. Based on their precision and method he could easily make one assumption. Starfleet doctors had been the ones to perform on her. That doesn't tell you why she's sick now. He told himself, attempting to get back on track. The bio scan gave a break-down of all her major systems, but it was also capable of a molecular scan. "The Xeno series." He muttered, as he rubbed a finger across his forehead. Of course it was the shots he had forced her to take that threatened to kill her. God, if he even existed, was an ironic bastard.
His terminal began to beep, indicating that the final images had been stored into her medical file. At least now he had a full exam of her should anything else pop up. Slowly, he paced back to the biobed, stopping only when his hip touched the frame.

It was strange, seeing her in such as still state. The few times they had actually interacted, she had been... emotional. Defensive. Angry. Scared. Angry. And as he pondered over it, he slowly came to understand that he hadn't helped situations. With every clipped accusation, he'd forced her to be defensive. With every implied insult, he'd provoked her into anger. And he had made her react with fear.

That thin line where he protected the crew had become blurred when it came to the mysterious Amelia Wright. Because what had he done to protect her? Giving her a Xeno series that almost ended up killing her. Was what she was hiding that important?

With an unsteady hand, he rubbed his jaw, still staring down at that head of blond hair. The questions weren't going to go away on their own, but he needed to make a decision and fast. Should he let the answers come on their own time? Or should he continue to push no matter what the consequences?

Does any of that matter right now? He asked himself. When the answer struck him, it wasn't a surprise. The woman's past didn't matter. All that concerned him was his patient's survival and recovery. Taking a deep calming breath, he composed a new set of hyposprays. A suppressant, a fever reducer, some pain reliever, and a mild sedative. Her body had worked hard to keep itself going and the medicinally induced rest would do wonders.

McCoy made no plans to wake her, but every ten minutes or so he found himself pacing back over to the biobed, rearranging equipment or running another tricorder scan. If the machines happened to be loud, or the tricorder continued to beep... it wasn't intentional.

Resting in his jacket pocket, his communicator wailed. With every ounce of self control he possessed, he kept himself from looking at the woman behind him. Managing to keep his voice soft and low, he answered the call. "Doctor McCoy."

"Bones." He hoped that Jim had good news. "We're breaking the gravitation field. What's the status in sickbay?" Last he had heard, they were twenty hours from that goal. How long had he been pacing around sickbay?

"Between me and Doctor Robinson we've seen 52 members of the crew. Only one is currently admitted into sickbay."

"How bad?" An irritated huff escaped McCoy. What was the point of sending Jim reports when he never read any?

Summarizing what was in the three pages, he said, "She's unconscious, but stable. There were other factors, but it's under control."

"Good. You give me a call if anything changes."

He gave a nod to a man who couldn't even see him, but quickly voiced, "Will do."

"Scotty?" A weak female voice sounded behind him. He cast a glance at the communicator in his hand, shaking his head slightly. The conversation must have woke her, despite his added effort to keep his voice down.

He snatched the nearest tricorder, turning to face her. Some of her strength had returned, her small
form propped up by an elbow. Her gaze was unfocused, her head facing the door. He swallowed heavily, following it up with a light, "Just me, I'm afraid." The speed at which she snapped around to look his way said she was getting better by the second. He approached slowly, not planning a repeat of their last encounter. "Lie down. You're still recovering."

As if on cue, whatever strength she had seemed to vanish, her back against the mat a moment later. "I am pretty tired." He gave a gentle nod, still moving with slow measured motions.

Usually he would opt for the tricorder, but, impulsively, he placed a palm against her forehead. She didn't shirk back. Instead, her eyes drifted closed and she gave a soft sigh. As if the touch was comforting. "You had a 40 degree temperature when you were brought in. And your immune system has taken a hard hit since it was occupied with the Xeno series."

Even with her eyes closed, he sensed her attention was on his voice, small physical responses occurring as he spoke. A tiny nod of her head, a crease in her brow. Her voice was small when she asked, "The anomaly?"

"That... combined with your Xeno series. You were the worst case we saw during the epidemic." One blue eye opened to stare up at him, a faint trust in that half gaze. It struck him that all he had done to earn it was save her life.

"How is everyone now?" Her concern for the rest of the crew was genuine, something they both shared. He found himself giving her a small smile. Or as much of one as he could muster. He pulled his hand away from her.

"Better." Since making distance from the anomaly sickbay had only one call every couple of hours.

"Good." A solid nod followed. She meant it.

McCoy paced back to the terminal, taking a seat in front of it. There were several other questions he needed to ask, notes to make against the x-ray and bio scans. Which meant he he had to tell her about the exams. Turning his head, he faced her for the quick confession. "While you were unconscious I performed a full bio scan."

"Find anything interesting?" Her voice was light, almost joking, but it was twinged with tiredness. She rotated her head to the side, her gaze focused on where he was stationed in front of the monitor. He knew she couldn't see the results, but there was no doubt that she was aware of what they were. The corner of his mouth shifted into a half grin. "I'm sure you know the answer to that."

"I guess I do." A soft sigh echoed in the room, its meaning easy to interpret. Surrender. "So, Doc... what's the first question?"

Her blinks were getting longer, her breathing deeper. Maybe it was best to table the conversation until she'd fully recovered. He settled for putting the ball in her court. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

Another sigh. "No, but it was bound to happen sooner or later." She made her choice, rolling over to her side and squirming until her head rested on the crook of her elbow.

"Alright. What happened three months ago?"

"I was hit by a hovercar." And he had thought his summaries were short.

"What happened 15 years ago?"
"I was hit by a... hovercar."

"This seems to be a reoccurring event," he said with a small snort.

"Why do you think they put me on a spaceship?"

"No hovercars?" Just illness, planet destroying psychos, and maniacal augments.

A soft female chuckle filled the air, followed up with, "You got it. Good." She was making jokes about getting hit by hovercars? His eyes dropped to quickly check her temperature to see if her fever had returned, though with the medication she'd been given, that would have been next to impossible.

He frowned, finding nothing wrong with any of her major systems. Maybe she was just tired. "You need to rest. After that I might get a real answer."

"That was a real answer. 15 years ago my family and I were in a car accident. A... an intoxicated driver t-boned our car. Both of my parents were killed and I was in the hospital for two months. Five surgeries later I was released with nothing and no one to go home to. Nothing except a small one bedroom and an old four by seven greenhouse." The story flowed, smooth and practiced. He almost thought she was lying, but even from across the room he could see her eyes going glassy. She didn't shed any tears, though and he realized that she had told it so many times that there were just no more tears left.

She continued, the edges of her mouth falling down into grim lines. "There's no secret story to tell you, McCoy. Just a sad one. Who really wants to carry that around in a personal file for everyone else to see?"

"And three months ago?" He pressed for more. "What's the story there?"

"I was unwillingly transported onto the Starfleet shipyard in Denver. I ended up on a highway where I was hit by a hovercar. The doctors there fixed me up before Starfleet started interrogated me. They wanted to know how I had bypassed their security fields. Who I was... working with. I had no idea what had happened. I guess there was still tension from the terrorist attack in San Fransisco, but I ended up a target on someone's radar. I made a few friends and one of them got me on board the Enterprise. They said I would be safe here." Safe? On the Enterprise? Her friend must not have not seen the news in the last two years.

He recalled the name of her escort when she boarded, and the pieces started to fall into place. "Captain O'Shea."

"His son, actually. Commander O'Shea." Her eyes drifted closed, remaining that way. For a second, he thought she had gone to sleep, but then she spoke up once more. "So... here I am." *Here you are.*

He made more notes against the bio scan, filling in some background concerning the metal in her ribs and the surgical scars in her neck. He didn't put the full story, just enough facts to be able to recall what she had told him.

About ten minutes later, he heard her ask, "McCoy... Do you think I could get some water?" Without hesitation, he made his way to the replicator. By the time he had a cold glass in his hand and was standing by the biobed, her eyes had already closed and her breathing was steady. The conversation had drained her.

Setting the glass down by the biobed, he gave her a once over. He hadn't gotten to ask about her unusual choice of clothing, or discuss the fact that they'd finally come to some sort of understanding. McCoy's curiosity wasn't fully appeased, lingering doubt and suspicion in the back of his mind, but it
was a start.

And as far as her medical record was concerned he had all he needed.

That mysterious veil that had surrounded Amelia Wright had diminished now, just a thin layer. But it was hers and it no longer intruded on anyone else.

He slept in sickbay for the first time since being on board, unlatching the unfamiliar bunk. She didn't wake through the entire four hours that he dozed. And in another six hours they were so far from the anomaly that none of the crew came in for suppressants.

With the help of a mild sedative, she remained unconscious for almost an entire day, her body fully recovered from the toll it had taken just to keep her stable. Scotty stopped by to check on her and McCoy realized they must have formed quite the friendship.

Th'eon brought him two packed meals, one specifically for Amelia that came with a warning of touch it and die and one for McCoy for taking care of the chef's gossip buddy.

Was he the only one who had harbored any negative feelings against this woman? Before the Andorian was able to leave, McCoy asked him, "What is it about her?"

Th'eon shot him a knowing smile and for a moment, McCoy thought he didn't plan on answering. Finally, he said, "She's life, doctor. She finds a way wherever she can. And if a way isn't available, she forces one into existence. She knows so little yet here I am, the man who knows so much, drawn to tell her everything. She's managed to recreate the planet Vulcan in that hydroponics bay. She's tracked down thieves and now knows how to make roses glow in the dark. Did you know that Amelia can tell the mood of plants?"

He shook his head at Th'eon's question and then realized how fitting the comparison really was. She had forced herself to survive. When disaster had taken from her, she had flourished. That greenhouse she'd mentioned must have been her release, and the reason she eventually went to Phoenix to pursue that degree in Horticultural studies. And then Starfleet had taken her once more from the life she had known and thrust her on board the Enterprise.

The question that came next was weak, the driving force behind his curiosity fading. "No one thinks she's hiding anything?"

"Oh... she's hiding something, alright. But does it really matter? We can't know all of life's secrets."
The tomatoes were the first to ripen. Eight months cut down to two with the help of the maturation modifier. Amelia gently cradled the red baseball sized vegetable, careful not to break it from the stem. It would be ready to pluck within the week. She looked behind her to where the cucumbers rested under a large glass case. If she extended their time under the modifier, they would make it before the squash.

A few of the leafy vegetables in the Vulcan environment looked like they were ready, but she needed a second opinion on that. Maybe if she called the captain, she could see if he would spare his First Officer for a few minutes. He was the only Vulcan she even knew of on board.

She let go of the tomato, standing to look around the flourishing hydroponics bay, a place she constantly compared to the green house. Time seemed to fly lately. After the incident with the anomaly two months before, there was one thing after another to explore. An uninhabitable class H planet, an asteroid belt, and a dying star.

Every now and then, Amelia would make her way to the observation deck to see twinkling lights upon more twinkling lights. She was never able to stay for too long. It made her think of the ocean, so overwhelmingly large that one could get dizzy thinking of the distance of just... nothingness. It also had the disturbing tendency to remind someone of how small they were in the universe.

But it was nice to look at once in a while. She gave a silent thanks to Richard for making her introduction to this time a little easier to bear.

The captain's latest announcement was their slow approach to a class M planet. Th'eon had informed her that Earth was considered a class M, which meant that not only could life could be supported, but human life as well. It was far more exciting than the asteroid belt and the crew seemed charged with anticipation.

Even Amelia found herself looking forward to this new world they intended to explore.

The doors to the bay opened, and she turned to see Lieutenant Mark Dualla standing at the entrance. "You're early." She noted with a smile, urging him over to where she stood. "Come see the tomatoes!"

When he looked down at the vines, his eyes widened just a little. She remembered the sight having a similar effect on herself. "Wow. They weren't even grape size last time I saw them."

"I know. I think I'll take a couple to Th'eon." There weren't any that were fully ready, but they'd be good for salad toppings. Or maybe even salsa. If she could track down some jars, she'd even consider pickling some. She briefly wondered if people still enjoyed pickled tomatoes. Her eyes darted back and forth, searching for the largest three.

When she plucked them from their stems, Mark piped up as he gazed at their size, "Showing off?"

"Just a little." She grinned, walking over to the table at the front of the bay. The day before she'd
started preparing containers with labels, a simple task fueled by optimism. She set the tomatoes in their box and snapped it shut. Looking over her shoulder, she sent Mark another smile. "Thanks for helping me with the modifier."

He palmed the back of his neck, giving her a mild shrug. "Figured I could make up for taking it."

"Well, I'm going to head to the dining hall. You're free to stay in the bay and check things out." She clutched the box of tomatoes and shot him a quick glance that said, *don't do anything I wouldn't do.* Hopefully he wouldn't go rearranging the water systems again. For him the hydroponics bay was one scientific study after another.

"Will do. I've been reading up on those Vulcan vegetables. I think I'll take some readings." Already, he had snagged the tricorder from it's holster near the bay doors. At least readings were harmless, she thought as she started towards the turbolift.

When she made it to the dining hall, Th'eon was nowhere to be seen. The lunch rush had passed, which meant he was either loitering around the dining hall, pestering patrons for information, or in the back of the kitchen enjoying his own meal.

Walking towards the other end of the room, she spotted him at one of the far tables. There were only select crew members who could coerce the chef into taking a seat and chatting. None other than Captain Kirk had engaged him. The captain was leaning in to tell him something, while Doctor McCoy, his usual lunch partner, tilted his head back and looked up at the ceiling. Either he was stretching or rolling his eyes, she couldn't really tell for sure, their conversation too low for her to hear.

Not that it was any of her business. She peeled her eyes way from them and headed back into the kitchen to wait for Th'eon to return. Depending on what was transpiring at the far end of the dining hall, she knew she might be waiting for a while.

Almost twenty minutes later, after she'd helped herself to the daily special soup, the Andorian made his way past the refrigeration unit to where she sat at his desk. "You should have sat down with us." He tsked, staring down at her. His gaze drifted over to the box in her lap. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Do you think it's tomatoes?" She asked with a grin.

"Yes." His antenna wiggled with satisfaction. Then he went on to give her a smug glare. "You've been talking about them for days."

"Then you'd be right." She passed him the container, watching with a smile as he opened it.

"I can see they have been well loved in the hydroponics bay. Very nice coloring." Those antenna curled inward and she braced herself for some outlandish idea. "If these somehow went missing, do you think anyone would care?" Well... maybe not so outlandish.

"Go get the salt." Amelia felt a little entitled to a reward, and in a few days they would have enough to harvest to share with the crew. Th'eon came back with a small shaker, a plate, and a knife. In the end they only ate two of the tomatoes.

Satisfied with the results of the past few months, she relaxed against Th'eon's desk, the Andorian pulling up a chair to sit across from her. There was a pause, before he started talking, information she was sure he had been holding in ever since he'd come into the kitchen.

"So, while you were waiting for me to return, I received the most incredible news." As usual, he carried a smug expression on his face, one that said he knew it all and was only willing to share at a price. If he wasn't so charming, she would have found him insufferable.
Feeling pressured into prodding him on, she said, "Well, don't keep it to yourself."

"If you insist and only because you brought a treat." He picked up the last tomato on the desk, his attention alternating between her and the red vegetable. "Captain Kirk said that we have reached the solar system with the Class M planet and we'll be in range for transport within six hours."

By itself, it was good news. The crew always seemed to perform better when they came across something new to explore. "That's exciting."

"Oh, there's more." The Andorian grinned, and she wasn't certain if that meant more good news or trouble. It was usually 50-50 odds. "They've done preliminary review of the planet's atmosphere and organic potential. It appears that the planet is covered in plant-life and only inhabited on the southern hemisphere. Conveniently, it only has two landmasses with are divided by an equatorial ocean. They plan on sending an away team to collect samples."

"Someone's going planet-side?" This would be a first. The last planet they had come across was far too hostile for anyone to beam down. They had only been authorized to observe and record data on the newly numbered planet. Planet-side exploration seemed to be the primary mission of Starfleet. New worlds. New civilizations.

"Not just anyone." His head snapped quickly to stare at her and she felt a building dread... and excitement at what he was going to say next. That focused attention meant it had something to do with her personally. "You will be going. As the Enterprise's resident horticulturist you will join a science officer as she examines the plant life."

She'd kind of been expecting him to say that she would just get samples sent to the hydroponics bay. Maybe even something edible. But this? She shook her head. He must be joking. But he was grinning and it wasn't in a humorous 'ha, I got you' way. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. I'm sure you'll receive a call to report to the ready room within a couple of hours." The ready room? She'd only seen senior staff be authorized into the ready room. Then again, they held meetings between all the lead divisions in the ready room.

She tried to mentally picture an alien planet, but found herself just picturing unique parts of Earth. The Grand Canyon. The Amazon. The Pyramids of Giza. "I can't go down to some strange unknown planet. I wouldn't know if something is a tree or an alien. Wouldn't that be a... uh... a xenohorticulturist's job? And don't they transport the away team?" Either her arguments seemed silly, or Th'eon was just too invested in this to care about her points.

He continued to smile. "They're collecting samples, which means they'll be sending a shuttle. And, technically, everything alive on this planet is alien. I just thought that I would tell you, so you could... prep. Which, I need to start doing for dinner service."

"You're kicking me out?" Her eyes went wide with disbelief. Th'eon was supposed to be there to support her. Like a therapist.

"Honestly, yes."

He snatched up the last tomato before she had a chance to take it with her, and then shooed her from the kitchen. He waved at her from across the serving line and she scowled his way before heading out of the dining hall.

"He can't have been serious." She told herself while standing in the moving turbolift. But then she considered everything he had told her. He was very serious. And his comment about her needing...
time to prep suddenly rang loud in her mind.

The turbolift came to a stop, but she didn't make her way to the hydroponics bay. Instead, she quickly said, "Deck 4." The turbolift began to move once more.

Her room was tidy as always, her data padd resting on the desk, along with her mother's gardening tools, her drivers license, and that framed photo of her and Richard. The locker on the far end of the room was her first stop. She needed the backpack. She'd never gone anywhere without it and if they truly intended on sending her down to the planet she intended on taking it with her.

She dumped out the contents. Useless money, her one set of vintage clothes. A cassette tape. Receipts. And a small first aid kit. The last item had come in handy once in a while, a half empty box of band-aids proof of that.

In a way, that first aid kit was the main reason she found herself on the Enterprise. Her hand went to the locker, an attempt to steady herself. "Best thing you have in that kit is an ace bandage, 'Melia." It wasn't quite a flash-back, just an isolated moment in time that she could remember so clearly that longing for home soon followed.

Her gaze went to the floor of her room, stray paper and items littered across the carpet. Most of the people on the ship wouldn't even be able to identify what they were. And they expected her to identify things from their world? The first time she'd used a replicator, she'd damn near fainted...

This is your world now. You have worked to hard forcing yourself into it. You can't back out now. She could use a tricorder. A data padd. The replicator. She was on a ship traveling at speeds faster than light. If she could survive this, she could do anything.

She stayed in her room, picking up all the items from the floor and neatly arranging them on the small shelves in her locker. Her past, just a cluster of memories and trinkets, sat on the top shelf. While her future hung neatly below. A set of four white uniforms and one brown one.

Maybe after she returned, she'd take some time to complete a few more logs. Her way of preserving that life in something more timeless than memories.

Crew-member Amelia Wright, please report to the ready room on Deck 1. A computerized female voice sounded in her quarters and she grabbed the backpack, the black strap standing out against her white uniform. Amelia took a moment to straighten her belt, her communicator and tricorder holstered on the sides.

She wasn't too worried about being unprepared, the meeting in the ready room probably designed to set her up for success. But she was nervous. She would be the only person from her time to ever set foot on an alien planet. You're also the only one who has traveled through time. Lots of firsts to be had...

Deck 1 wasn't very large, consisting of mainly the bridge, the captain's quarters, and the ready room. It wasn't too hard to find, especially when the bridge doors wouldn't open for her, limiting her to only two other options.

When she stepped inside door number two, her eyes scanned the large round room, taking in the massive observation window that allowed a clear view of space. An oval table took up a majority of the room, the chairs turned to face a decently sized view-screen. Aside from the visible twinkling stars outside, she could almost imagine this setting in a corporate office, its design regal yet functional.
There were five other people already spread out around the room. Captain Kirk, who was standing next to the first officer. The man was easy to identify, his eyebrows straight diagonal lines and his ears pointed. Vulcan traits were surprisingly easy to accept, the rest of their appearance much like a human's. Doctor McCoy sat at the table, a silver case resting in front of him. Amelia had come to learn that the case was usually filled with hyposprays.

Of course, when did McCoy not have a hypospray nearby?

A male ensign in a red shirt also sat at the table, looking as nervous as she felt. And then there was a female in a dress, her long hair in a high pony tail. Th'eon had once referred to her as Uhura, the communications officer.

As she approached the table, all eyes turned her way. The captain was the first to speak up, his tone light and relaxed. "Welcome, Miss Wright. Take a seat. We'll be starting the brief soon."

She picked the open chair next to the doctor. Since her near death experience two months ago, they had been on... decent terms. No more narrowed glares followed by grunts and no more accusations or insults. Then again, he wasn't overly nice either, but that distanced attitude seemed to suit him and she wasn't the only person on the receiving end.

Which made it quite a surprise when Doctor McCoy leaned over in his chair towards her. He wasn't grinning or smiling, but his brow lifted when he pointed to the young man in the red shirt. "Kid looks like he's about to have an aneurysm."

Amelia turned to glance at the anxious male, sweat beading on his brow, his hand tapping against the table. The vibe he was giving off was almost contagious. "Why is he so nervous?"

"First time on an alien planet. Not that Pointy Ears helped." Pointy Ears? Automatically, she shifted to glance at the first officer. That was a rather... accurate nickname. "The Vulcan told him the priority order for emergency transport."

"Priority order?"

"Each member of the away team is given a priority for who to beam out first. Pretty sure the kid is last on the list." That's odd. She briefly wondered how she'd trumped the young ensign...

Still a little confused, she stated, "can't you beam more than one person at a time."

"Usually." He didn't expand any further, leaning back in his chair and giving a shrug. He didn't seem overly interested in this briefing, giving the occasional sigh of impatience.

When he started to tap his fingers against the table, she asked, "Are you going? To the planet, I mean?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "No. We've already got Jim and Spock on the away team. Best not to tempt fate and send the chief medical officer too."

Was he implying that this was dangerous enough that senior personnel would get injured? Or worse, killed? Imparting some of that concern into her voice, she raised a brow and asked, "Should we be worried?"

"You'll have them." He gave a sluggish wave in the direction of Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock. "Jim wouldn't stand to lose a pretty girl on any mission." Her brow shot up as his implication. Did he consider her a 'pretty girl'?
Just as the captain finished his conversation, the first officer headed her way. He stopped when he reached her chair, looking down at her. Feeling the urge to stand, she complied, still having to tilt her head back to see his face.

"Hello, Miss Wright. I am Commander Spock." She didn't try to shake his hand, recalling her first time meeting a Vulcan and learning that they were touch telepaths. If she could only remember how to form her hand into their special wave. Instead she just gave him a nod.

"Hello, Commander Spock."

"I have a transporter locator for you." He opened his closed fist to show her a small metal pin, formed into the shape of the Starfleet insignia. "Should an emergency occur, this will be our best way to detect your precise location." She remained still as he leaned over to handle the collar of her white uniform, snapping the pin into place.

"Everyone keeps mentioning an emergency..."

"What is it that humans say? Hope for the best, prepare for the worst." And they said Vulcan's didn't have a sense of humor...

Spock took an empty seat across the table, the captain soon setting down beside him. Within moments, another person walked into the room. The newcomer, a woman, wore glasses and a blue uniform similar to Doctor McCoy's, but its design was far more flattering with it's feminine curves. Her brown hair was pulled back into a bun and her brown eyes were keenly observant as they crossed over everyone in the room.

Amelia had to rotate her chair away from Doctor McCoy to face the woman standing at the head of the table. Spock was the first to greet her. "Hello, Lieutenant Commander."

Behind Amelia, McCoy leaned in to whisper. "Jenna's a biologist. A damn good one too." She tilted her head to shoot him a grateful smile. And when he shot one back, she knew her eyes widened just a little in surprise. "Someone's got to fill you in." McCoy explained.

Before she could thank him, the view-screen came on, a large photo of the planet suddenly displayed behind the lieutenant commander. Th'eon's description of the planet was accurate enough, two large continents covering most of the surface, a familiar blue separating them. The equatorial ocean.

Jenna pointed to the southern continent first. "We've determined that there is a large humanoid population that is spread across the lower hemisphere of the planet. All of our readings indicate they are in a pre-industrial state. They are advanced as far as agriculture goes, but there has been no indication of any technological advancement." She continued to break down what was known about the alien society and Amelia was reminded of Native Americans. Tribal, yet no longer nomadic.

That part of the briefing ended with, "It is imperative that we do not make contact." Richard had once explained the concept of 'The Prime Directive' though Amelia had never needed to comprehend it until now. They weren't allowed to interfere with a society's development.

Which is why the briefing had been so extensive on the humanoids that lived on the planet. Starfleet couldn't interact, yet wanted to know everything. How does that even work?

"The northern hemisphere, however, has no humanoid population." Amelia looked back and forth between the two continents. Where one lacked an expanse of green, the other made up for it. "It is extremely dense vegetation. There were two potential landing sites, both located near the shore-line. The primary objective of the away mission is to collect samples of the plant life. If possible we can
determine if any can be cultivated in the hydroponics bay.” At Jenna's last statement, Amelia straightened in her seat.

They intended on transferring plants from an alien planet into the hydroponics bay? Amelia found herself speaking, words coming faster than thought, "For all we know, foreign plants could end up killing everything in that bay. Months of work could be lost just by bringing a sample into the room." McCoy cleared his throat. Spock raised a brow. And the Captain just smiled. Had she just violated some kind of protocol by interrupting? Or had they simply not been expecting her to say anything?

The 'damn good biologist', as McCoy had put it, gave Amelia a quick nod. "We understand. Everything we bring back will undergo complete testing. The end goal, however, is seeing if it can be grown on Earth." Her tone wasn't condescending, but it still sounded as though she were talking to Amelia like she was a child.

This time, Amelia kept silent, even as scenario after scenario of disaster ran through her mind. After the break down of the northern hemisphere, the lieutenant commander went on to discuss the atmosphere and its stability. It was about the point where Amelia lost focus, still stuck on their crazy idea to put samples in the hydroponics bay.

She hadn't worked to have fully grown tomatoes just so some alien grass could infect them all.

"Good brief. So, we'll be ready to go in three hours?" Captain Kirk's words brought her back to the present, his eyes darting around the room to land on each person present.

Spock was the first to respond. "Three hours is sufficient. I will have a shuttle prepared." The Vulcan's sharp gaze landed just behind Amelia where McCoy sat. "Doctor McCoy?"

She rotated her chair, watching as the doctor stood and started to unlatch the silver case. "Guess that's my cue." He said, pulling out a hypospray. Captain Kirk groaned, but didn't hesitate to be the first to get out of his chair and expose his arm. "Everyone line up for boosters."

Amelia had to stand, suddenly feeling crowded as everyone approached McCoy. The captain, in his usual charm, shot her a grin as he jerked a thumb at the doctor. "This is his favorite part."

"Yes, Jim. I just love listening to everyone moan about how I'm the bad guy who sticks them. And to top it off, no one thanks me when they don't die of a xeno-cold." McCoy took hold of Kirk's arm, not particularly gentle as he stuck him in the crook of the elbow with the hypospray.

Jerking his sleeve back down, Kirk said over his shoulder. "Ah, Bones, I didn't know you needed the validation." McCoy just huffed in response.

The rest of the away team received their shots without comment and when it was her turn, McCoy gently gripped her wrist. It was fleeting, but she could sense hesitancy. He waited before pressing the hypospray against the crook of her elbow and there was another pause before the injection. "I'm only gonna say this once. You have a bad reaction to this and you're restricted to sickbay for the rest of this mission."

She wasn't sure if he was prompted by guilt to say that, or if he was just making light of what had happened with her Xeno series. When he released her, she found his hazel gaze focused on her. She could almost swear she saw concern in that stare. "Worried about me?"

Then he averted his gaze, saying in a low gruff tone, "You're accident prone. Let's just say I'm being cautious."

"Well thanks." Then she added, "for making sure I don't die of a xeno-cold."
Why was it that he was always left being the voice of reason? It made him seem like a nagging hen. But that didn't stop him as he tugged on his friend's sleeve, stopping their slow paced walk to the dining hall and gently forcing Kirk to face him. "It's a bad idea, Jim."

Jim rolled his eyes at McCoy's statement, the display of annoyance followed with the standard brush-off, "Everything is a bad idea to you."

"There's a reason why regulation states who can join who on an away mission. It's not diplomatic. There's no need for both you and Spock to go together." Might as well go and shove every critical member of the crew and send them down to the planet. Even though he hated to admit it, this mission couldn't go on without Kirk and Spock.

"It's the first planet we've come across! You think I'm going to stay cooped up here while Spock gets to run around on the surface? And you know how irritating he gets when he hasn't been exposed to sunlight." Jim's voice dropped, his tone empty as he mocked the vulcan. "Fascinating. Humans. Illogical." A second later, he resumed his normal voice. "I am days away from strangling him."

He released Jim's sleeve and they resumed their leisured pace. "At least tell me you're taking someone with a lick of sense."

"Who do you think I am, Bones? I've got it all worked out." Like that comment didn't raise a few flags. When did Captain James T. Kirk ever plan ahead?

"Who are you taking?"

"Jenna Carver and Amelia Wright." The name, as always, conjured a perfect mental image of the blond haired, blue eyed woman. No matter how often he'd fought against thinking about Amelia, outside influence forced it upon him. She'd be in the chow hall and Jim would point her out. He'd be in sickbay and he'd just so happen to come across her name on one manifest or another.

This time, the tug on Jim's sleeve wasn't gentle. "Are you out of your mind?"

"You know, I'm beginning to think you have some kind of problem with Miss Wright." His friend was intentionally trying to piss him off. Jim looked unconcerned, but it was false bravado. McCoy knew him too well to miss the small hints. The way Jim would carefully watch his changing expressions, the way he gave a small smug smile when McCoy flustered with anger.

"She's a distraction."

"To who, Bones?"

"You. You're constantly telling me when she comes into the room. Every time you go to the hydroponics bay I have to listen for an hour about how she spurned your advances. And now you're having her go with you on an away mission." Knowing Jim, he'd be stuck staring at Amelia the entire time and wouldn't get anything done. Or worse, get himself killed.

"When she comes into the room the only reason I point her out is because you're staring at her! When I talk about her you get weird and it's fun to watch! Just by saying her name you seem to lose control." Kirk gave a pointed stare down where McCoy still gripped his uniform. "Now, seriously, what is your problem with her?"
"She's..." A liar? That wasn't necessarily true and he didn't have any proof of it. Hiding something? That was obvious and didn't seem to be something that was going to change. Attractive? Undeniable, but that was hardly a problem.

Or maybe it was the problem. The first time he'd walked into that hydroponics bay he'd been thrown off guard, not expecting her to look at him with doe eyes all wide and startled. He hadn't expected any verbal fight that day either. Amelia Wright was a contradiction to everything he knew about women. She was intelligent, but she wasn't manipulative. She was attractive, but she hadn't used that to her advantage. She was hiding something, but that didn't seem to stop others from gravitating towards her.

Everyone was so damn enamored with her. Including himself.

Jim jerked his arm out of McCoy's grasp, his sigh impatient and McCoy simply glared at him, telling him without words how this conversation was his fault. "Get it under grips, Bones. She's here to stay and I'm taking her with me to that planet. Between her knowledge of horticulture and Jenna's biology expertise, I might end up with a passable botanist. Which I need for this away mission."

So much was bound to go wrong. There were the boosters every away team had to receive, and so far Amelia didn't have much luck when it came to shots. There was the fact that the two most senior personnel on the ship planned on going together. And then there was the simple fact that Amelia had only recently left Earth. "She's never been to another planet before! How useful do you think she'll be?"

"That's unfair. And you know it." It was. How many members of Starfleet proved to be invaluable, even when they'd never stepped foot off of Earth? Too many for McCoy to name. The building shame within him was foreign and if it showed on his face, Jim didn't point it out. Instead, he straightened his back and gave him a sideways glare that was rarely sent his way. The one that reminded McCoy that Jim was a Captain. "Get used to the fact that she's coming with us. She'll be part of the away team briefing and you could try to grant her just a touch of kindness. She'll be nervous enough without you jumping down her throat."

At least his friend had the mindset not to bring her up again. Not until the Andorian joined them at the table. McCoy rolled his eyes and tried to ignore Jim as he excitedly told Chef all about the planet and the pending away mission.

Partially through their conversation, McCoy's head drifted to the side, catching the sight of blond hair heading into the kitchen. There was no mistaking that backside as anyone other than Amelia Wright. Jim had been right about one thing. She did have a tendency to capture his eye. Without even trying.

"That sounds quite amazing. I wish your away team the best of luck." Thank God. He's leaving. McCoy straightened in his chair as the Andorian stood from his own, his antenna doing that creepy curling. Why did that simple response always set him on edge?

As he watched the chef head back to the kitchen, Jim tapped him against the arm. "At least Amelia will get a heads up about the mission."

His eyes widened, an irritated huff escaping him as he growled out, "Is that what this was about? Twenty minutes of talking to the blue guy could have been one? Next time just say, 'And tell your little blond friend that she's going with us.' "

"Remember what I said about being kind. You should really work on that." Jim was grinning as he pointed at the table and McCoy looked down at the half empty plate before him. "Also, the moment his little blond friend walked into the room, you stopped eating."
"Damn it." He muttered as he began to follow Jim out of the dining hall. He managed to keep himself from glancing across the serving line, where he knew Amelia would be deep in conversation with the Andorian.

And later he managed not to think about her when he packed up a full set of boosters. His mind was blank as he made his way to the ready room. Uhura was already seated. Jim and Spock were pestering one another. The assigned ensign from engineering eventually wandered into the room.

The call was made for the remaining members of the away team and McCoy found himself mentally repeating a mantra of, *be nice, be kind, and don't stick your foot in your mouth.*

When Amelia Wright stepped into the room, all eyes turned her way. Some surprised that she was even there, and some, like himself, already prepped for her arrival. Of all the places she could have chosen to take a seat at, she picked the chair beside his own.

*It starts here.* Maybe she'd not take up so much space in his mind if he actually had a conversation with her once in a while. He saw a brief flash of surprise pass across her face when he pointed out the young ensign. And then when he introduced the biologist he realized why everyone so quickly fell for the woman.

Because when she smiled at him, he felt a little less like a jackass.
Amelia fought rising nerves as she strapped herself into her seat. Jenna Carver, the biologist, sat across from her, seeming far more at ease with the situation than Amelia could ever hope to be. Though they had a rocky start in the ready room, an hour of sitting around discussing the plant life on the planet was enough proof that the woman was... as McCoy had put it, damn good.

Though Jenna didn't have the know-how when it came to horticulture, she understood life. Plant life, human life, animal life. What makes it thrive and what makes it die. What makes it sick and what heals it.

The lieutenant commander had graduated in the top ten of her class and later went on to join Starfleet when the civilian world just didn't have the amount of adventure she was looking for. Jenna was driven, wanting to be there for the next first contact. Wanting to be there to record every aspect of newest member to the federation. The Enterprise's five year mission had been a pull she couldn't resist.

After latching the final strap, Amelia glanced around the shuttle. It wasn't spacious, just a foot of space resting between her feet and Jenna's, but she wasn't cramped against the ensign either. Even still, she found herself inching to put a few more inches between herself and the sweating young man. At the back end of the shuttle were stacked containers, meant to hold the samples they intended to collect. Somewhere shoved between them was Amelia's empty backpack.

And a small narrow opening on the other side led to where the captain and the first officer sat as pilot and co-pilot. It reminded her of a van with no back windows and with far less standing room.

When Jenna finished buckling her own 'seat belt', Amelia managed to catch her attention. "How long do you think it will take to reach the planet?" The actual transport hadn't been covered in the brief, the captain eager to take the flight into his own hands.

Jenna, being far more familiar with this sort of mission, was quick to calculate the time. "Twenty minutes or so. It would be faster if it was uninhabited, but we have to travel in the stratosphere a little longer to avoid detection."

Detection? Amelia's head tilted to the side, her confusion obvious. "You said they weren't advanced. Technology wise, anyway."

"They aren't, but we can still be seen by the naked eye. Best to go with the planet's rotation and do a slow descend to the landing site." Though she didn't fully understand how that worked, Amelia nodded anyway.

She opened her mouth to ask about how long they planned on being on the surface, but voices from the front of the shuttle stopped her short. "You guys strapped in?" She couldn't see Jim, but she couldn't miss the excitement in his voice. There was no doubt that he was smiling.

One response of yep and two simultaneous calls of yes, sir was all that was needed for the shuttle to
come to life. In a way, Amelia was glad she didn't have a direct view to outside, that added visual might be all that was needed for that nervous flutter in her stomach to explode into hyperventilation.

It was hard enough to stay calm as she felt the tilt and row of the space craft. The ensign was shaking beside her, but remained quiet. Jenna looked passive, almost bored. One of the pilots was probably stoked, while the other was busy calculating every probable scenario they could face.

Amelia looked over at the ensign, glad that his part was to just make sure the shuttle would get them back. If he had been assigned as security she might not have even shown up for the away mission.

For a good ten minutes the inside of the shuttle was lit only by the interior lights, but when the shuttle started to shake and they entered the atmosphere, the lighting inside was almost unnecessary. Sunlight poured in through the front window, and for a moment Amelia hoped that the captain wasn't blinded by the sudden brightness.

Kirk announced their descent, and Amelia leaned forward against her straps, struggling to see through the passage where the pilots were seated. The nose of the shuttle dipped, but she didn't jerk back against the seat. Instead she pulled forward just a touch more and caught sight of an expanse of blue through the windshield.

"It's beautiful." She whispered, surprised by how much it resembled Earth. Green, blue, and beige joined together to create the shore-line. When they moved closer, she could see the sandy beach shifting. No... it wasn't moving. Water lapped onto land, creating the illusion of shifting sand.

"Isn't it." Jenna had also moved forward, but her gaze was higher. Amelia followed it towards a wall of green. It wasn't just a forest. It was a jungle, so dense that she was certain the trees didn't allow much light to pass through. At least they had the foresight to plan for almost anything, including packing enough flashlights to get through the area.

"I think I'm going to be sick." The ensign muttered beside her, and once more Amelia found herself inching away.

"You'll be fine." Her words contradicted the paleness of his face.

From up front, they heard Kirk's voice calling out, "Brace for landing!"

This time, Amelia did tuck back against her seat, shooting a glance at Jenna. "I thought shuttles were a smooth ride?"

Jenna just smiled, seeming excited by the whole experience. "Usually, but since we're landing on the beach, it'll be a little rocky."

Amelia's idea of turbulence was far different than everyone else's. She had expected something akin to a plane passing through the clouds. The shuttle just vibrated, rowed forward, and then settled down. She'd experienced worse shakes on a kid's train ride at the fair. "Nothing to it." She muttered, shooting a glare at Kirk as he popped his head into the passage way. The man was grinning, as usual.

"Just making sure you were paying attention." He said with a wink.

Everyone was quick to release their straps and get to work. The ensign was to remain with the shuttle at all times, while she and Kirk would take the lead as far as exploration. Jenna and Spock were set to be the recorders, and both seemed quite pleased with the assignment.

The side doors of the shuttle pressed out before sliding back, revealing the brand new world they
intended to explore. Amelia put a flat hand above her forehead, blocking out the brightness to see into the distance.

They had been right about the landing sites being few and far between. There was only twenty yards or so between the water and the jungle, the narrow line of sand just enough space for them to unload the containers.

Amelia snagged her backpack and shoved a few of the smaller boxes inside. As an afterthought, she packed up two of the sealed bags of water before pulling the strap across her shoulder.

Several times, the first officer was forced to reign in the captain, reminding him of all the tasks they had to complete before even entering into the wooded area. Amelia shared Kirk's anticipation. Between setting another box on the ground and pacing back to the shuttle, she found herself glancing at the dark green wall.

Trees, vines, bushes, and flowers were stacked closely together. If they wanted, they wouldn't even need to enter the area, a variety of prime samples lined up against the sand. Of course, the best soil readings would come from deep inside. If the large tree trunks, gigantic leaves, and thick stems of the flowers were any indication, they were receiving their fair share of nutrients.

Another thought suddenly came to mind and Amelia jogged over to where the lieutenant commander was fiddling with her tricorder. "Hey. Did they find anything concerning animal life?"

"Not in this area. About fifty kilometers to the west there was indication of herd animals, but we try to keep the first visit devoted to plant life. And we've set it far enough away that we won't interfere with the wildlife's habitation or grazing area. If we can make it back then we'll push for animal study." Jenna's explanation was concise, but effective. It made sense to conduct exploration in stages. Plant life. Animal life. And if possible, civilizations.

"Is it strange that there's such a large area without animals?"

Jenna gave her a small smile and shrugged, reminding Amelia of one very important fact. "It is an alien planet. What is strange to us may be normal for this environment."

Jenna's eyes darted to something behind Amelia and she turned her head just in time to see Kirk and Spock walking their way. Spock was the first to speak up, both his expression and voice blank. "We have finished unloading all the necessary equipment. As the captain is slowly losing patience, I recommend you both calibrate your tricorders and prepare to gather samples."

He shifted in the sand to stand in front of Amelia. "Miss Wright, please maintain a close perimeter to the captain. As you are not assigned a phaser, he will be tasked with ensuring you return safely to the shuttle." It was a wonder that the first officer was able to inspire any confidence at all. The past two times they had spoken to one another, he had made it seem like death was a very real possibility. Like it was imminent if she didn't follow his instructions...

Kirk gave an irritated sigh, waving a hand towards her as he studied her face. "You're making her worry for nothing, Spock. We'll be fine." Fine. As long as she maintained a 'close perimeter'.

As though he had completely ignored Kirk, Spock continued on to say, "the commander and I will be within communications range should anything occur." Then he spun around to walk away from the group. The act was just as effective as saying, now I am busy, so do not interrupt unless it's important. Amelia scowled at his backside.

Before Jenna followed, she held two fingers up to her forehead in a mock salute and said, "meet you
in an hour."

Amelia's tricorder was in her palm a moment later, still set for the work in the hydroponics bay. Luckily she didn't have to change anything, the data she intended on recording the same kind as what she checked daily with her own plants. PH levels. Nitrogen. General soil nutrition.

Keeping Spock's warning in mind, Amelia stayed tight on Kirk's tail as they approached the jungle. Once they passed through the green barrier it was like walking into another world. She found herself looking around with child-like wonder, the scene around her enchanting, as though it were pulled from a fairy tale.

The tree roots were the size of her torso, dipping up and down out of the mossy ground. Dark green leaves hung from thick limbs, longer than she was tall. Vines hung from the tall trees, too heavy for them to push out of the way. And then there were the flowers, sporadically spread through the forest. Their blooms were larger than her head. She felt like Alice in Wonderland, half expecting them to start talking.

Then again, that hadn't been a pleasant experience for Alice.

She had been right about the trees blocking out light, but there was still enough that they had yet to use flashlights. Sunlight still peeked its way through to land on the moss covered ground.

Every now and then she would call for Kirk to stop so she could take a few readings from the soil. Given the size and mass of everything around her, she wasn't surprised to find the dirt at optimal levels. Everything just *thrived*.

"You ready to pick some flowers?" Kirk called over his shoulder, coming to a stop. She realized why he had halted as she peered around him.

A blooming field rested before them, a rainbow spread on the ground. They were fully open flowers, similar to a long stemmed rose, but so much larger. Their stems were shorter, however, keeping them close to the green floor of the jungle. "Wow."

Stepping around Kirk, she knelt next to an orange colored flower. It's petals were as large as her hand and smooth, save for the edges which were lined with tiny thorns. They almost looked like teeth. Amelia shrugged off her backpack, and pulled out one of the empty boxes. Behind her, Kirk watched on as she reached out to touch the flower.

Already, her mind was anticipating the feel of the petals. Would they be soft like a rose? They certainly looked like one.

She stopped just a centimeter away, her eyes trained on those thorns that lined the edges of the petals. Suddenly, she was hit with another familiar feature. "You know what this looks like?" She asked, casting a glance back at the captain.

"What?" Kirk asked, not really appearing to be interested, but doing his part to urge this along.

"A Venus fly trap." She recalled her second semester botany class and having to do a final project where she had to transplant and study five similar, but of different species, plants in a shoe box sized terrarium. She'd chosen a variety of bug eating plants. "These thorns... they're not like stem thorns. Too narrow at the base."

"Venus fly trap? Don't those eat slugs and stuff? What do they call them... Carnivore plants?"

"Carnivorous, but yeah. And the size of this one... it could eat-" A cat. A small dog. Some of the
other blooms she had seen were larger than small children. Her back stiffened, a sudden wave of fear approaching. "People often build terrariums just for carnivorous plants. If there's one, several more varieties usually exist in the same exact environment. They thrive and die together, taking out waves of insects that would normally devour them. But their numbers only protect them for so long, until there is nothing left to eat."

Amelia shot a wide eyed glance at Kirk, then looked past him to find the closest tree. "I need a branch."

"Testing a theory?" He asked, as if aware of her train of thought. "Something like that."

He pulled his phaser off his hip, following her gaze to the tree. As if reading her mind, he raised the gun-like device and pointed at a small limb that wouldn't be too large for her to wield. She'd never seen a phaser used, but just like she had mentally pictured it, a laser-beam sliced through the wood. "That's... efficient." Then again, everything about Starfleet was efficient.

Including the way Kirk took the branch by its end and tossed it onto the rainbow bed of flowers.

The reaction was as quick as it was violent, the beautiful blooming petals practically imploding into flat surfaces. Bits of bark flew, loud crunching sounds echoing beneath the trees as the carnivorous plants fought over their share. Amelia tucked her head into her elbow, protecting herself against the debris. If they could do that to a fresh solid branch the width of her wrist, she could only imagine what would have happened if her hand had been caught in one.

When she looked back, scattered wood rested at her feet. "Oh my god!"

"And that... is classified as hostile." Kirk pulled out his communicator, holding it up to his ear a second later. "Spock. Do not touch the flowers." The first officer said something that had him narrowing his eyes in annoyance and shouting. "And you didn't think to share with the class? Amelia almost got her arm taken off!"

The captain went silent for a while, listening intently to whatever it was Spock had to say. After a minute he snapped the communicator shut. His voice wasn't jovial and relaxed like she was used to. It deeper and quick. The unquestionable tone of a commanding officer. "We need to get to the shuttle. Now."

Amelia nodded, but didn't reach for her backpack. Instead she picked up the small box and opened it. "I'm going to grab a sample." She pulled a cloth glove from her backpack, sliding it on. Perhaps they could find a use for such strong plants. Since the rose like blooms had closed, she figured they wouldn't open until they were finished digesting whatever was trapped inside. That was usually how a snap trap worked on Earth anyway.

In any case, she steered clear of the pistil, her hand slowly reaching for a stem. It was about as thick as her finger, and when her first closed around it she made sure to snap it quickly at the base. A moment later she almost dropped it, a burning sensation erupting across her palm.

She gritted her teeth against the pain, focused on folding the plant into the box. When she finally snapped the box shut, she pulled the glove off, her eyes looked over the damage. "I think... there was a second defense." She looked across her shoulder to see Kirk eying her hand. Letting out a quick hiss, he reached for wrist to take a closer look.

Tiny dots of red littered her entire palm. "The stem must have micro needles. Like a bull nettle." The
quick explanation was said through clenched teeth. She should have never touched it in the first place, too focused on comparing it to the plants of Earth even though she'd bore witness to how very different the plants were.

"I don't have a dermal regenerator with me, but there is one in the shuttle. The wounds look superficial." Neither of them were carrying anything to wrap her hand with, but since the cuts were so small, they had already stopped bleeding. They still burned though, like tiny paper-cuts.

With a sigh she rubbed her hand against the leg of her white uniform, the blood transferring and leaving her palm with a few caked red spots. She hoped McCoy wasn't going to be there when the away team returned. "You're accident prone." He had correctly stated and she could only imagine what he would say if she came back covered in blood.

Kirk shot a glance at the closed flowers behind them and she tossed her backpack across her shoulders. "At least getting back will be faster." She said as she followed the captain, taking the path they had come through.

"You'd think so, but..." He stopped suddenly, and she almost ran into him. Leaning over to look around him, she could see their footprints in the moss. Blue flowers interrupted the path, larger than the ones they had watched destroy the tree branch. "I don't recall seeing those on the way in."

As he spoke, the flowers seemed to rotate their direction. Amelia's heart thudded in her chest. "Kirk... they're looking at us." On instinct, Amelia stepped back.

Kirk's arm shot out instantly, clutching the front of her uniform in a hard grip. "Don't move." She swerved her head to see the reason he'd stopped her. A flower bloomed just behind her. Another step back and she would have been limping for the rest of her life.

More flowers popped up through the moss, opening into full blooms in the blink of an eye. Within seconds they were surrounded by a terrifying display of pink, purple, and green. Kirk dropped his hand from her uniform, pulling out his phaser.

"I think now is a good time to go." She said, receiving a short nod in response. Kirk aimed the phaser at the closest plant, the first one standing in their path to the shuttle, and fired. The bloom disintegrated and Kirk took a single step forward. Just as his rear foot left the moss, another plant sprung up from the ground to rest between them.

She took great care not to brush against the petals that were just centimeters from her legs.

"Did you ever consider the fact that this continent wasn't inhabited for a reason?" He fired more phaser shots, tugging her along with every step he took. Behind them, plants continued to sprout. "Yeah. I'm starting to get that."

Something wet landed on her cheek, a drop of water. She reached up to touch it, surprised by how sticky it was. Another drop, this time larger, hit her shoulder. Rotating her head she looked at the amber colored liquid.

"Is that sap?" Apparently Kirk was also getting a light drizzle. His hand ran through his hair, the strands ending in points and maintaining that shape. He groaned, "My hair's all sticky."

Amelia rubbed her hand across her cheek, smearing the sticky substance and having no luck removing it. A numb sensation crept in around the skin of her palm and on the side of her face. A third drop landed against her right eyebrow, sliding down past the corner of her eye. "You think the
trees want to eat us too?"

"Pull your backpack over your head. This stuff seems to have some kind of tranq quality." His instructions were quickly followed, but it seemed like the damage was done. Her fingers twitched, pins and needles spreading across her skin.

Whatever was in that sap was acting fast, the vision in her right eye blurring. "I can't feel my hand or my face. And I can't see from my right eye."

"Well you're one better than me." Kirk turned to face her and, despite the numbness, her other eye still went wide. Through her half gaze, she could see that amber liquid was spread across his forehead, and though his head was turned in her direction, he wasn't looking at her.

"Don't panic, Amelia-" Why did that phrase have a tendency to inspire the opposite?"-but you're going to have to take my phaser. I'm walking blind here."

"Kirk, I don't even know how to use the phaser." Contradictory to her words, she was already taking it from his outstretched arm.

And even though their odds of making it out were slowly dwindling, he grinned. That small expression was enough to ease the pounding in her chest. "It's easy. Point and shoot. It's already on the right setting." His hands moved unsteady in the air until he touched her arm. "You're guiding us out of here."

She nodded, being extra careful as she moved around him. They were forced to stand hip to hip, too many flowers surrounding them for any maneuvering space. But when she was settled up front, she pointed the strange gun at the next plant in their way.

Kirk still had a firm grip on her arm, so when she fired and took a step forward, he moved in tandem with her. Drops of sap continued to fall, some large enough to soak through her uniform. Splotches of skin lost sensation, but she kept moving.

And so did Kirk. He didn't say anything else about not being able to see, but every now and then he would give a frustrated sigh. After ten minutes of a slow shoot and step pace, she could see a break in the jungle. The shore-line was visible now, and she could hear voices rising above the sound of water.

Spock and Jenna.

The sound of phaser fire followed, but this time it wasn't Amelia who had pulled the trigger. Light made it's way into the jungle, landing to illuminate her path. Spock approached her and Kirk from the shore-line, carefully navigating around the flowers that hadn't been there when they'd entered.

"I'm afraid our exploration of this planet must come to an end." Again with that Vulcan humor. Behind her, Kirk laughed. "And I thought we were going to stay. Camping, s'mores. The whole shebang." How he managed to laugh, she didn't have a clue.

Spock's eyes traveled up and down her form, landing on the red smear on her pant leg. "You are injured?"

"Superficial." She muttered, holding up her hand that still carried dots of red. "But Kirk can't see."

"You should have hailed for a transport." This time, emotion did make its way into Spock's voice. Disappointment filtered into his tone.
"I tried." She watched as Kirk tapped the silver emblem against his chest. "Emergency transponder doesn't seem to be working."

She shot him an accusing glare, though without his vision it was a wasted effort. He had planned to transport her? Without permission? She'd just have to use her words to convey how upset the idea made her. "You were going to transport us?"

He gave an unapologetic shrug. "I didn't want to say anything. Not with your phobia. Figured I would just take the beating back on the Enterprise." And then, with a small grin, he added. "Hey, Spock, can you tell me if she's scowling?"

Spock ignored the question, still focused on the transporter issue. He tapped his own Starfleet insignia. When nothing happened he looked up to the giant trees above them. "Perhaps the plant life is interfering somehow."

Spock reached to his belt, pulling out his communicator. He hit a few buttons, then held it to his ear. After a long silence he snapped it back against his belt. "I cannot reach the Enterprise."

"It's a little early to start panicking. We still have the shuttle and check in is about two hours from now. If we don't reach them, they will find a way to reach us." His lack of sight wasn't slowing him down. Instead Kirk squinted his eyes and tilted his head, as if searching for a ship he couldn't possibly see. Now there was a man who inspired confidence.

The Vulcan turned abruptly, waving them to follow. It was a short walk to the sandy beach and she sighed when she saw that it was free of flowers. She'd half expected them to pop out of the sand. The irony of her relief didn't escape her either...

Behind her, Kirk spoke up. "I don't hear Carver anywhere."

As if on cue, Jenna Carver screamed.
Chapter 11

STARDATE 2260.061

Planet MBY004

Beta Quadrant

She stared at the device Richard handed her. It fit in her palm and was roughly the size of a hand-
held cassette player. Except there were flickering lights that had all the colors of the rainbow and round buttons with zero indication of what they meant. She turned it over in her hand, little black panels and holes dotted across the top.

"What is it?" She finally asked, looking up to see a slightly amused look on Richard's face. It was the look he always wore when he shoved something new her way.

"It's a tricorder. I'm sure you've seen people carrying them around the installation." In addition to his words, he pointed at a small group of people standing further down in the corridor. One of them held an identical device in their hand.

Amelia shrugged, looking back to Richard with an arched brow. "I've seen lots of strange things around here. I meant what does it do?"

"They can be programmed to analyze almost anything." Programmed... like a computer. Before arriving in 2259 Amelia could count the number of times she'd seen a computer on both hands. Nowadays, everything was a computer.

Richard continued to explain, taking the device out of her palm only to open it and hand it back."There are tricorders for medical officers, programmed to check for disease. There are tricorders for engineers, programmed to check power levels. And... there's tricorders for gardeners, programmed to check anything from soil levels to overall health of the plant. This one was given to me by Garren."

For a moment she wasn't sure who Richard was referring to, but when it struck her, she almost shouted, "The blue guy?" With the things sticking out of his head?

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "We really need to work on your cultural sensitivity. I don't think the Andorian would like being referred to as 'blue guy'. Just like Mr. Soleer didn't appreciate you pointing at him and calling him 'eyebrows'."

"I figured it was better than elf ears." The corner of Richard's mouth twitched and Amelia wondered if he was fighting a grin. He didn't let it show, though, unwilling to reward her behavior.

"Maybe you should have just asked his name first?" Again, Richard used his admonishing tone.

Amelia gave another shrug before turning a serious gaze on her friend. It wasn't like he could really understand. He had grown up with aliens, walked with them when he was in grade school. The first time she'd seen one of the green ones she almost passed out. "I've met all of two aliens. Excuse me if my comfort level isn't high enough for that one yet."

"You're bound to meet a lot more in the near future. You're going to need to be more... adaptable."

Adaptable. It was a word they'd used way to often and for some reason it set her on edge.
"Adaptable? Richard, I'm holding a computer in my hand. Do you know how big the computers were when I went to college? They were bigger than your office and the most they could do was print my name. I'm being adaptable!" She felt like chucking the tricorder. All it represented was sleepless nights staring at blinking displays and reading another technical manual. But that was the opposite of being 'adaptable'. Instead, she clutched it to her chest, holding with it all that it represented. One technology at a time, Richard had said.

"And loud." He shushed her, looking back at the group of people that had been standing in the corridor. She could almost see him planning out what he would say next, weighing his words. "I'm sorry. I know how hard you've worked to not... panic. I just mean that you're going to have to learn the technology and get used to any non-Terrans."

"I've used the replicator."

"It's voice activated, Amelia." Some of them were, but she didn't remind Richard of that. "The tricorder will be more difficult. I've arranged for Garren to take some time every other morning so you can be proficient with it. And hopefully you'll get used to-" he sighed, "-the blue guy."

"Can't I just get a little green-house and live out the rest of my life in the middle of nowhere." But after everything she had seen... a little green-house just wouldn't cut it anymore.

As astute as always, Richard arched a brow and said, looking down at her, "You and I both know that deep down, you want something more with your life."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you've been alone for too long. Think of it like... the next adventure."

"The next adventure? Her last adventure had been to take a surprise trip to Flagstaff and pick up a dogwood.

"I'm not an adventure kind of girl."

"Yes, you are. Or else you never would have ran towards that hovering ball in the sky." Richard turned away from her, leaving her standing with the tricorder. He cast one look over his shoulder, saying with a smile, "0830. Garren will be in my office."

The next adventure wasn't at all like Richard had made it out to be. It wasn't all awesome technology that could create a steak from thin air or beam tons of equipment from one military installation to another or get close to the beauty of space.

It was Jenna's high pitched scream that set the first officer into a inhuman sprint. It was Captain Kirk walking blind beside her. And it was herself, stuck on a killer-plant infested planet. Of all the adventures she could have pictured... this wasn't one of them.

Her palm still ached where thorns had pierced it and the vision in her right eye was still hazy. And Jenna's scream made her stomach turn with horror. She clenched her eyes shut, her hand fisting Kirk's sleeve.

"Amelia?" Concern laced his voice, questions hanging in the air. Why had Jenna screamed? Where were they? And why wasn't she saying anything?

Amelia finally opened her eyes again, catching a glimpse of Spock leading Jenna out of the shuttle. The Vulcan's arm rested gently across Jenna's shoulder. The fact that they came out without the ensign created another wave of nausea. "The kid's dead." Amelia muttered, recalling how she'd told him that he'd be fine. Apparently her words had been a far cry from reality.
Kirk sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We need to find a way of contacting the Enterprise."

Before Amelia could remind him of their already failed attempts to contact the ship, Spock returned. He looked more sullen than usual, the tiniest display of emotion portrayed by his narrowed brows and tight lips.

"Captain." The both turned towards the first officer. "The sand appears to no longer deter the plant life. Ensign Weston has been strangled by vines."

Amelia's eyes drifted closed, her head bowing. While she took a tiny reprieve, Kirk continued his assessment of the situation, one question at a time. "How's Carver?"

"Distraught. I've tasked her with pulling the emergency beacon from the outer panel of the shuttle." Amelia cast a look back at the shuttle, but Jenna must have been on the other side, only her shadow visible. Jenna had more of a stomach than Amelia did, because if she had been the one to witness the evidence of Ensign Weston's death then she'd still be throwing up in the sand.

The mere through of it made her queasy.

Behind her, Kirk asked another question, pulling Amelia's attention back to the problem at hand. "Is there a chance that we can get through to the Enterprise?"

"The beacon will send a more direct and powerful signal. We won't be able to send a custom message, but they should hear the distress call." Spock's words inspired hope. There was at least a chance that they wouldn't die on this planet.

"What time-line are we looking at?"

Spock tilted his head, a reaction that Amelia had come to decipher as his 'calculator mode'. "Approximately thirty minutes for set-up, twenty before the call is heard, decoded, and responded to. And an hour for the second away team to prepare for departure. At most we're facing four hours before a rescue shuttle arrives." Four hours. That was how long they had to make it.

She'd survived quite a bit these past few months. What was another life threatening situation?

But then Kirk brought up a fact that she'd never considered. "Remind me again how long it will be until nightfall."

Without missing a beat, Spock responded. "Two hours, Captain."

"Alright. I need a medical kit and some water. Hopefully if I wash this sap off, I'll be a little more useful. And if you could, check Amelia's hand. The last thing we need is an infection." For a man who couldn't see, Kirk certainly kept up with what was happening around him. He'd hear Jenna say something to Spock and turn his head. He'd hear something from the wood-line and face it with an unclear gaze.

Spock spared a few minutes to take a look at her hand. He sprayed it with a clear substance and even though she didn't know what it was, she was grateful for it. Her palm ceased its throbbing almost instantly. Then, abruptly, he asked her to 'take care of the captain'.

After Amelia did a thorough job of washing the sap away from Kirk's eyes, she focused on her own. She found herself frowning when there was no immediate change to the haze in her vision. Which meant that Kirk was still blind.

"Good things come to those who wait..." She muttered to herself with a sigh. She must have drawn
Kirk's attention with her words, because he rotated around to face her.

For a moment he didn't say anything, just seemed to stare over her shoulder. Of course he wasn't really staring at anything. After a moment, he asked, "They're almost done with the beacon, aren't they?"

She looked across the sand to where Jenna and Spock were constructing the small tower. It wasn't any taller than herself, but it seemed to have several pieces. For an emergency beacon, it sure looked difficult to put together.

Spock stood, holding his hand against the base of the spire tower. Lights began to blink soon after. "I'd say so. It's blinking."

"That's good." His words were positive, but his tone seemed dim. When she glanced over at him, he was facing the forest, concentration wrinkling the skin around his eyes.

Her natural curiosity took over, "What is it?"

A small smile formed on his face and she found herself sharing the expression. He turned away from the forest and said, "Just thinking of something Bones told me before we left."

Her smile faded. "Doctor McCoy?" Of all the people he could be thinking about, he picked the most negative man Amelia had ever met. "He's never struck me as the optimistic type. Now might not be the best time to recall his words."

"He said you were a distraction. When I get back I'll have to tell him how wrong he was." Amelia frowned at that. Then again, she wouldn't expect praise from the good doctor. "You saved our lives back there. And you're doing a hell of a job keeping it together." The compliment brought her smile back, even if it was laced with concern.

Maybe she was doing alright at hiding her fear.

"Running around like a chicken with my head cut off wouldn't get us any closer to home." Home. Where was that again? Amelia looked up at the sky, as if expecting to see the great starship Enterprise floating in the distance. After a few months it certainly felt like home. And she couldn't wait to curl up on her bunk after a sonic shower.

Kirk tilted his head. "You say the weirdest things sometimes."

"Old habits die hard."

Before Kirk could respond to the ancient colloquialism, Spock and Jenna made their way over towards them. The Vulcan looked almost satisfied, glancing back over his shoulder at the beacon. When Amelia looked at it, she could see a few more steady blinking lights.

"The emergency beacon is active." If Spock's time-line was accurate, that meant there was a little less than two hours for them to hold out.

Already the sun was beginning to set in the distance, bringing about another challenge. Amelia glanced towards the sun, a hand covering her forehead as she asked, "What are we going to do about nightfall?"

"I'm afraid there is nothing we can do to prevent that, Miss Wright." She whipped back around to shoot a narrowed glare at the pointy-eared comedian. If he was trying to lighten the mood... he was doing a awful job.
"I meant, what temperature changes are we facing? Lighting?" She waved a hand towards the sky. "Is there even a moon orbiting the planet? Are we going to have to fight off killer vines and flowers while it's pitch black and freezing? What. Are we. Going to do. About Nightfall?"

The Vulcan narrowed his gaze and deferred the question. Of course he would address the captain first, stoic in his role as the first officer. "Captain?"

"Good questions." Kirk twisted where he was standing, as if looking around their small circle. "Carver?"

Jenna arched a brow. "Biologist, not an astronomer."

And then full circle, Kirk turned back towards the first officer. "Spock?"

"Temperatures have dropped two degrees over the past two hours. Calculating with our time remaining on the planet, we're looking at a low of 18.4 degrees." 18.4 degrees? For a moment she forgot that everything was metric now. But no one looked concerned, which meant that 18.4 degrees wasn't a threat.

Before she could stop herself, she asked, "What is that in Fahrenheit?"

Kirk and Jenna looked confused while Spock didn't miss a beat. "65 degrees." The Vulcan cast her a quick sideways glance, his brow arched. Amelia could only imagine the questions he wasn't asking. She could only blame her lack of forethought on stress.

She'd just have to be more careful in the future.

"As far as lighting is concerned, we will have sufficient moonlight." At Spock's words, Amelia looked towards the shuttle. There was still the concern of the plants. Would flowers eventually pop up on the beach? Would more vines make their way across the sand?

Was there anything else in the distance that threatened to kill them?

**STARDATE 2260.061**

**Orbiting Planet MBY004**

**Beta Quadrant**

McCoy tapped his fingers against the data padd. Sick bay was prepped, a precaution made every time an away team was selected and sent off-ship. He hoped that the clean sheets would stay that way and he would be given even more time to analyze a dead strain of the Lo'fak virus. Because eventually he planned on being published once more and what better motivation was there than boredom?

Leaning against his desk, he shoved a fist under his chin and frowned at the data padd. "Who in their right mind would classify Lo'fak as nerve impacting? It's cerebral, you morons."

"You certainly don't think highly of your peers, do you?" McCoy turned abruptly, surprised by a sudden voice from behind him. A single glimpse was all that was needed for McCoy to realize why he'd been taken by surprise.

Andorians... *sneaky bastards*.

Instead of voicing his aggravation at being startled, he pointed at the data padd and directed his
frustration elsewhere. His 'peers'. "Not when they're nitwits."

"I see." Though it was clear that the Andorian couldn't care any less about McCoy's problems. Not that the doctor had expected any sympathy...

McCoy sighed and set the data padd aside, picking up a tricorder. There were few reasons that Th'eon would ever enter the med bay. The Andorian wasn't due for a checkup, none of his 'friends' were currently admitted, and he was well aware that McCoy wasn't the gossip type. Which meant that he was sick.

Already, McCoy was running through the possibilities, his eyes scanning over the blue man. His antenna were drooping slightly, the skin under his eyes pale. He looked tired, explaining why the Andorian wasn't his usual chatty self. If it hadn't been for medical reasons, McCoy would have been glad there was something to keep him quiet.

"How long have you been having symptoms?" McCoy asked, waving the tricorder in front of Th'eon's face.

"Two days." He wasn't peppy or sarcastic, which raised more flags.

McCoy was already drawing towards one conclusion, but he continued with the standard questions anyway, plugging answers into Th'eon's already pulled up file. "It's a little early for the treatment to be wearing off. Everything else alright? Diet? Sleep habits?"

"Loss of appetite. Sleep is extended by a couple of hours." Normal reactions when the Andorian's natural metabolism began to kick in.

An Andorian required more rest than a human, though their lifespan was much longer. Most of the time they selected jobs that would allow them to follow their natural schedule, but there were occasions where they chose instead to go another route.

As Th'eon had.

Injections every six months which stabilized their system so they could function for a more human-like shift. Then eventually, the six months would turn into five. Then four. It was a process that McCoy didn't agree with and if he stood any chance of talking the Andorian out of the series... it was now, when his body was already starting to fight.

"Well, you're aware of your options. Get another injection and continue the treatment, or allow your body to do what comes naturally." McCoy stressed the latter option, pointedly waving his had up and down the Andorian's form.

Th'eon sighed, his antenna curling in annoyance. "Doctor, you are aware that there are only three chefs on board this vessel and I am the primary. I am in no position to do what comes naturally."

"You're fighting a losing battle, Th'eon. Eventually, the treatments will no longer work and by then they'll have impacted your system to the point where your body will be unable to regulate its own metabolism." These were all points that Th'eon was sure to know, but it didn't hurt McCoy's case to reiterate them.

He didn't want to be the doctor who was there when Th'eon went into metabolic shock. Hell, he didn't want that to happen at all.

Another sigh, another twitch of his antenna. Th'eon's words were an odd mix of understanding and condescending, but McCoy didn't take it personally. "I'm 60 years old. I've been working for
"Starfleet for more than half my life. My metabolism is already compromised."

"Because you're fighting your nature. If you stop treatment there is a chance you can recover."

McCoy even considered asking the Captain to make a detour to Andoria. In his natural habitat, Th'eon's chances would greatly increase.

Th'eon, however, didn't look like he was convinced. Instead, those damn antenna straightened out in the standard display of anger. A response that McCoy chalked up to tiredness and irritability.

The Andorian raised his voice. "I will not waste precious time with hibernation or a potential comatose state!" McCoy gave the man a moment to calm down, watching carefully as Th'eon sighed and rubbed his forehead. Again, his tone fluctuated back to condescending. "Doctor, I've been taking this treatment for almost as long as you've been alive. Your attempts to dissuade me are as useful as banging your head against a wall."

The doctor was beginning to see that. "Alright. This is what you want?"

A huff of irritation escaped the chef. "If I didn't want it, then I never would have come to you."

There was an extended moment of silence as McCoy considered what else he could say to change Th'eon's mind. Andorians weren't known for being fickle, though. Finally, he gave a sharp nod. "Okay. I'd give you the spiel, but I'm sure you're well aware of the side effects."

"I am."

"Go ahead and lie down on the bio-bed." As much as he was against the treatment, he would still issue it. His patient knew the risks and took them willingly. Heck, he'd been taking them for 'as long as McCoy had been alive'.

As he prepped a small tray with medication, tools, and sanitizer, the Andorian climbed onto the biobed.

"Strip off your shirt." McCoy ordered. He'd never actually performed this treatment, but he'd witnessed it several times and he'd been tested on it at the academy.

When Th'eon placed his uniform jacket on the floor, McCoy was glad to see a small silver device planted against his upper arm. It was a crude device, one that was dated but still common among Andorians that were Th'eon's age. The deltoid looked unharmed by the panel, the skin just a little stretched from time.

Usually McCoy didn't do small talk, but with the Andorian's moodiness, he opted to keep him distracted. "When we get back to Earth you can upgrade to the sub-dermal device. It came out a few years ago."

"I know." Th'eon snapped, but quickly followed up with a softer, "I'm used to it now." Maybe talk wasn't such a good idea.

There weren't too many steps involved with the treatment. Uncover the capsule that rested within the panel, remove the capsule, refill the capsule, and then a single hypospray. McCoy managed to finish the first two steps within a matter of minutes.

Already he was planning the aftermath of the hypospray. He'd need to monitor Th'eon in the med-bay for at least an hour, verify that all of the major systems took to the treatment first. Then it would be hourly checkups via communicator.
And God forbid anything happen to the Andorian. Aside from the guilt, McCoy would also have to face her. The enigma that was Amelia Wright.

"Are you alright, Doctor?" He had stopped what he was doing, halfway through filling the capsule with a metabolic stabilizer. Or de-stabilizer in Th'eon's case.

Damn. Now was not the time to shift his focus onto that woman. He pushed the thought of her aside, shooting Th'eon a sideways glance. "Fine. Almost finished." A moment later he snapped the capsule back into place.

The easy part was over.

McCoy grabbed the prepared hypospray and held it up. "You want to be strapped down or do you think you can take it?"

"How little you must know of Andorians." Actually, McCoy prided himself on knowing quite a bit about their physiology.

He raised a brow at Th'eon's implication and responded with a grumbled, "I've treated more Andorians than you have."

"Just do it already." Th'eon braced himself, his hands clutching the sheet on the bio-bed. It wasn't that McCoy was unsympathetic. He was. He felt for the man, knowing that pain would soon race through blue veins and the Andorian's heart would ache as it worked overtime to distribute medication. But it would be short-lived and, thankfully, pain wasn't something you could recall through memory alone.

He asked Th'eon to count to 'three' and he gave the hypospray after 'one'.

"Kiib!" Now there was an insult if he'd ever heard one. McCoy kept his distance, his eyes darting between Th'eon, who was gritting his teeth, his back as tight as steel, and the bio-bed's monitor. Everything looked normal, all down to the way Th'eon suddenly dropping back against the bed.

His breathing was labored, but that was expected. His blood pressure was exceptionally high, but that was also normal under the circumstances. Even as McCoy watched, those high numbers began to drop.

He waited a few seconds before asking. "Feel better?"

Th'eon opened his eyes, staring with a wide gaze at the ceiling. "I feel... awake." His eyes then dropped to narrow slits, his antenna twisting outwards.

He was hearing something. McCoy recognized the motions. "What are you picking up?"

"Sub-sonic static. It's faint, too far for me to decipher." That was odd. There were no ships nearby, nothing to be sending any kind of sub-sonic signal.

"How far?" McCoy would need to make note of this reaction since he would be giving Th'eon the treatments until they returned to Earth. Additional data was always a plus, that way he could compare reactions to better recognize a negative one. McCoy took a seat at his terminal, updating the Andorian's file as he waited on an answer.

"I don't know. It's already fading. My sensitivity is returning to normal." Th'eon's tone said he was unconcerned. McCoy stopped typing mid-sentence, suddenly struck with a realization. There were no ships nearby, but a sub-sonic signal was being broadcast. And it was a direct one if the Andorian
picked it up.

"Don't go anywhere!" McCoy shouted as he ran towards the door. If it was any other situation he would have used the communicator, but this required an actual honest-to-god face to face. He made it to the bridge in just under four minutes, still huffing from the exertion.

The doors slid open and allowed him access inside. It was quiet...which worried him. That meant that they hadn't picked up the sub-sonic frequency that McCoy was almost certain came from the planet.

His eyes found his target, a male wearing a yellow shirt and who was firmly situated in the Captain's chair. "Sulu!" The man turned to face McCoy, his expression stunned.

But not near as stunned as McCoy was. "Prepare the second away team. Something's happened." The quiet was suddenly interrupted with an oddly familiar series of commands.

**STARDATE 2260.061**

**Planet MBY004**

**Beta Quadrant**

Amelia watched the setting sun, the nerves in her belly growing. Kirk was blinking furiously, but so far he still wasn't able to see much aside from blurred shapes. Spock was running back and forth from the shuttle to where their small group was huddled together. It astounded her that he actually dared to go inside the vine infested aircraft...

But time was ticking and he had ordered them all to stand by as he gathered supplies.

Another phaser for Jenna. Emergency torches. And some kind of curved bladed weapon.

Spock was anticipating a fight, but he hadn't told them that just yet. Even though Amelia had difficulty reading the Vulcan, she could almost *sense* that he was emotionally prepped for an assault.

She clutched Kirk's phaser to her chest, an action that she had repeated time and time again. The adrenaline of before was wearing off, fear approaching in its wake. Along with the memory of Ensign Weston. She didn't have the luxury of tears or sorrow or grief for the kid she barely knew. Amelia had to be strong. Just like Jenna, Kirk, and Spock.

She had to be focused. Her eyes were adjusting to the night, the blurred shapes of the trees becoming more defined. She wondered what else resided beyond that tree-line.

"Amelia." Jenna's voice drew her attention from the dark jungle, her head turning to face the biologist. "Commander Spock has recommend that we light torches and place them between us and the trees. It is possible that the vines were seeking heat."

It took her a moment to put it together, but when she did Amelia asked,"So we'll be using the torches as decoys?"

"Exactly. We're going to need to alter them, though. They're not designed to be hot enough to burn a human, but the safety can be overridden." Work was good. Work made it so that she could set aside the growing fear and actually get a glimmer of hope.

*Of course there's hope. You've survived over and over again. You'll survive this.* Jenna grabbed a silver case that Spock left behind on his last trip from the shuttle. When she opened it, Amelia looked
over Jenna's shoulder to see rods attached to a round ball. It reminded her of an old fashioned light post.

Jenna went on to explain how they would override the safety measure and, surprisingly, Amelia was almost able to understand. They were able to activate four torches just in time before the sun completely set.

The red glow against the sand made Amelia's stomach turn. It reminded her of blood and set her nerves on edge once more.

Spock rejoined the group, setting aside another silver case. He nodded as he looked at their handiwork, then he turned abruptly to face the captain. "Captain." He waited for Kirk to face him. "Is your vision improving?"

The captain was still blinking quickly, shaking his head. "I see red. I'm guessing you guys got the torches to work?"

"We have." Spock opened the case and removed an object from inside. "I'm about to hand you a knife. Do you feel comfortable using it?"

"I'm blind, Spock, not paralyzed. It'll be better than nothing." Kirk held out his hand and without hesitation, Spock placed the handle against his palm. Watching them interact reminded Amelia of how fluidly they operated. Kirk nodded and Spock tapped his arm, a conversation ended without words.

That cooperation was what would get them home.

As Spock moved past her, Amelia caught his sleeve. "You're worried, aren't you."

For a moment she was sure she wouldn't get an answer. But he seemed to know how much she needed one, so he told her, "No more than I was an hour ago."

"What happened an hour ago?"

"The sun began to set." She let go of his sleeve and he continued forward, taking the torches with him.

He didn't want them in the 'danger zone', he had said. Jenna and Amelia were to stand in front of Kirk, who was still at a disadvantage. Spock planned on standing between them and the torches. Behind them all, the sea slapped against the sand.

"Is he always this self-sacrificing?" Amelia asked.

From behind her, she heard Kirk sigh and say, "Yes. He is."

When Spock returned he leaned over his pile of supplies and picked up the curved blade. In his left hand he held a phaser, in his right he clutched the grip of the blade. Then he turned away from them all and faced the forest.

Slowly, the temperature dropped. She could barely recall how cold 65 degrees actually was, but she didn't recall it being this cold. Her white uniform did all it could to insulate her, but she was still shivering and goosebumps were forming on her limbs.

She ignored the discomfort as much as she could, her eyes narrowed and scanning the tree-line.
It wasn't the jungle that set her off though. It was Spock's back. He went stiff in front of her, his arm moving to raise the blade. The hand with the phaser pointed to the far torch. Amelia didn't know if Jenna was watching and she didn't really care to spare a glance towards the biologist.

Her eyes were focused on the red light in the distance. Time seemed to tick by just a tad slower as that red light sunk into the ground.

She opened her mouth to say something, but stopped short. The flowers had turned to face them when she and Kirk had conversed in the jungle. If she said anything now... whatever was out there might seek them out as well.

So she would stay quiet until that was no longer an option.

The second torch dropped and she was able to see the culprit more clearly. The vines, thick and dark and ready to devour anything that could even be considered as food, attacked the torches one by one. Aside from a few small gasps and heavy breathing, no one made a sound.

The third torch fell, a crack resounding as the bulb at the top was shattered. Amelia jumped, her knuckles white as she clutched the phaser.

Spock finally broke the silence, his whispers carried through the air. "When they come, attack quickly. Before they have a chance to constrict."

Constrict? Like snakes? Comparing the vines to snakes made her feel just a little bit better. She could handle snakes. Amelia had grown up in the desert and had taken on her fair share of the slithering pests. The only thing that would have made her feel a little better was if she had a garden hoe...

Her eyes went back to Spock just in time to see him shift his feet across the sand. Blood rushed in her ears, her heart thudding against her chest. Amelia tried to force herself to calm, counting as she took a slow inhale. When her lungs were full, it was as though time stood still.

On the exhale, time resumed.

Spock moved, faster than her eyes could track, a glinting blade sliding through the air. It cut through something with a brief high pitched whistle. The Vulcan practically danced across the sand, reacting just as she caught a glimpse of vines coming from the ground.

Beneath her own feet, the ground shifted, spurring her to jump into the air. Amelia never considered herself athletic, but the straight jump gave her enough time to point her phaser at the sand and fire. A black burn mark was all that was left of the thick green vine.

When her feet touched the beach, she fought the urge to take off in a sprint. She wouldn't leave Jenna and Kirk alone. Amelia cast a quick glance behind her, making sure that Kirk had yet to be drawn into the fight. He'd moved back some, standing so the water reached his ankles. In his right hand, he held up the knife, prepared to cut anything that touched him.

Amelia made a mental note not to bump into him.

The events around her were chaotic, erratic enough to where her focus would be drawn from one person to another, her finger constantly on the trigger of the phaser. The only person who didn't need assistance was Spock, who continued to remain in 'front'.

Almost ten feet to Amelia's left, Jenna shouted. Her arm moved before her head, the phaser turned that direction. A vine had taken hold of Jenna's arm, her own phaser on the sand. She'd never been too keen on target practice, but Amelia did inherit her dad's revolver.
She kept her eyes on the vine, fired, and prayed that she hadn't hit Jenna's arm in the process.

There were simultaneous sighs when Jenna reached down to retrieve her phaser from the ground, shaking off the dead plant.

"Amelia!" Kirk's shout drew her attention away from Jenna and she started towards him. She couldn't see the threat, not with Kirk standing waist deep in the ocean. Amelia was starting to get the idea that the vines weren't just instinct driven. They were intelligent. Both of Kirk's hands were submerged and he was tugging against something.

They'd gone for the weapons on both Jenna and Kirk.

Her pant legs were drenched now, the weight slowing her down. He was only a few more feet away from her. "Kirk! I'm on your left. Don't stab me!"

"I can't. It's crushing my wrist."

Amelia took a deep breath and sank under the water. Salt burned her eyes, but she was able to make out the hazy form of Kirk. She didn't know if the phaser would work underwater, but she pointed it anyway and fired.

Dark green vines still stood out against Kirk's limbs and she took another shot, sending another prayer up that she hadn't shot him. She rose back towards the surface, taking in a gulp of air. They were both neck deep now, herself pulled by the current and Kirk pulled by the vine on his other arm. At least his left hand was free now.

She swam towards him, but was stopped short by a tug against her ankle. The tug turned into a painful squeeze. She fired towards her own foot until the tug gave way.

Amelia redirected her focus back to Kirk, now swimming with the waves to get to him. Behind her she could hear yelling from the beach. There was no time to turn back and help the others. Another row of her arms and she was able to grab Kirk's sleeve.

"It's me." She told him, just before diving back underwater. His right hand still clutched the knife, but he couldn't move it. A thinner vine had wrapped firmly from his wrist to his elbow. It was probably taking all his energy not to be pulled under. Amelia touched his fingers with her left hand, urging him to let go of the handle and as soon as he released she started to cut through the vine.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been under, but her movements were starting to become sluggish as she sawed though a vine that was working its way up Kirk's leg. That added with the burning in her chest was a pretty clear indication that she needed to surface.

As soon as she cut the last vine she pushed Kirk towards the shore and started swimming up.

Something touched her waist a split second before she was jerked back down. The sudden pressure caused the air to escape her lungs, bubbles trailing up and away from the direction she was headed. She fought the desire to open her mouth as black spots danced across her vision.

Maybe this was supposed to happen? Time, as she had been told, was a delicate thing. Her mere presence skewed history, changed it in ways that were irreversible. Maybe her death was the only way to correct her accidental appearance in 2259?

Like hell. She was here... and she had a good 60 years left to experience this new life.

Her hand clutched the blade and she drove it down into the vine around her waist, feeling it pass
through and into her skin. The sudden pain had her gasping, her mouth opening to be filled with salty water.

Again, something touched her right wrist and she twisted to bring the knife down. It didn't make it's target, a firm grip stopping her short. She struggled against it, even as it pulled her from the water.

Her back landed hard on the sand. A moment later someone firmly grabbed her chin and propped her onto her side. Water spewed out of her mouth.

She struggled to inhale, barely catching the voices around her, save for the one directly at her back.

"Breathe, dammit!" Even with her fading consciousness, she would be able to recognize the gruff voice that shouted at her. McCoy pulled her onto her back and she felt his hands below her breast as he pushed, quickly and hard.

More water bubbled in her throat as she was forced back to her side.

Then she gasped, finally able to pull in a lungful of that life saving element known as oxygen. As her vision cleared she could see several men and women carrying rifles and firing. The beach was bright now, lit up with a second shuttle craft.

Hands grasped her, tugging her up, her arms soon braced against two sets of shoulders.

"Your performance was exemplary, Miss Wright." She couldn't be entirely sure, but she sensed respect coming from the Vulcan on her left.

"Thanks." She mumbled, exhaustion weighing her words just as much as it weighed her body.

Then she heard Doctor McCoy on her right saying, "She certainly finds a way, doesn't she."

She must have blacked out shortly after, because the next time she opened her eyes she was lying on a stretcher in the shuttle. Tilting her head she could see the planet through a narrow window.

Amelia was certain that she wouldn't miss it at all...
Chapter 12

STARDATE 2260.065

Orbiting Planet MBY004

Beta Quadrant

It had been four days since the incident on the planet and Amelia had had several revelations. Starfleet was obsessed with reports. Crew members had no problems asking her about the killer plants 'adventure'. And memorials made her cry even if she didn't even know the person.

The ship was still in orbit around the planet, a new team assembled and prepared for the threats that await. She hadn't volunteered to be a part of that team. And neither had Jenna. Kirk, however, was a glutton for punishment. Their captain had made several trips planet-side to oversee the collection of samples.

Just the day before he had dropped off a small souvenir. Amelia glanced towards the desk that sat at the front of the hydroponics bay, a small smile forming on her face as her eyes landed on a small glass jar resting in the center. Sap collected from the native trees.

The smile faded as she felt a pang against her side. She'd need to replace the bandage for the shallow stab wound soon. Th'eon would understand if she didn't make a trip to the dining facility for dinner. He'd been exceptionally understanding lately. As had most of the crew.

Amelia set aside the empty bin she had been carrying, making a mental note to take the fresh produce to the kitchen first thing in the morning. What she needed now was a nap. Taking a final glance around the hydroponics bay, she set the timer for the irrigation system.

The walk to her quarters was slower than normal, her body tired and still aching. It reminded her of when she'd first arrived, walking with Richard through the halls at the Denver installation. She felt another pang, but this time is was emotionally induced and centered around her heart.

Shortly after the rescue she had wondered what would have happened if she'd died. Would Richard be notified? The only person in her file was her sponsor, Captain O'Shea, but did that mean he'd be told? Would they have contacted the USS Huron?

She didn't voice her questions to anyone, but eventually she'd need to find out. Hell, did she even have a will?

"You'll be on the USS Enterprise. You'll be safe there." Just the memory of Richard's statement made her laugh. So far she'd been through one bad experience after another.

But you're still here. You're still walking to your room and you're gonna sleep in your bed. Small comforts, but comforts none-the-less.

When she made it to her room, the first thing she noticed was a small blinking white light on her monitor. She had a message. Ignoring her side and her soreness, she walked quickly to the desk. Only one person would be sending her a message. The blue screen came to life and, pressing a few more buttons, she pulled up the entry.

Richard's face came onto the screen. "Hello, Amelia!" He smiled and though he couldn't see it, she grinned back. "I'm hoping you've been feeling better since your experience with the anomaly. I'm
sure I could have prepped you better about space exploration, but... well it's just one of those things you have to find out for yourself. I'm glad to hear you've got the hydroponics bay up and running. I knew you would get there."

"Hasn't been easy..." She muttered.

"The family is doing well. Dad's on another freight transportation mission last I heard and, even though it's been a while, I'm sure he's alright. Garren told me that your tulips are thriving. He has to fight people off to keep them from picking the damn things. Mr. Keller has also been asking about you. You're definitely being missed..."

The Amandas. One of the last flowers she had planted while in Denver. Amelia was glad to know that Garren Lou was still taking care of them.

Richard then gave her a wider smile and she straightened in her chair. "Ready for some good news?"

"Of course." She answered, smiling when she realized Richard had left a pause just for that.

"We've established your identity here on Earth. It will be difficult for anyone to contest your presence on any installation. Your record will be updated to reflect your status as a Starfleet Contractor. It's not an independent job, but you're working for a small company that focuses in horticulture. Congratulations, Amelia."

Hadn't her record already said something similar? No one had really questioned her presence aboard the Enterprise, save for Doctor McCoy. And even though he had good reason, he was shut down pretty quick.

"The investigation Salo brought against you is almost concluded. So... you're left with some options."

"Options?"

"I'm sure you're wondering what those options are. You can stay on the Enterprise. I'm sure you've won over several crew members with your charm and have made some friends. If that's what you want then I'll see you when the mission is over." Amelia had made friends. Th'eon. Scotty. Mark. Anthony. But all of them would do just fine without her. Maybe she should be asking herself if she would be alright without them.

"If you just so happen to find another planet to call home... you can stay there. Your obligation to Starfleet lasts only as long as you want it to." So far the only planet she had been on aside from Earth wasn't one where she'd like to hang her hat.

"Or, you can come home. You'll have to wait until you come across another Starfleet vessel heading this way, but if the opportunity arises you can take it. I've included a message for you to give to the Captain should you choose that route. It's sort of a no-questions-asked kind of thing."

Richard sighed, and she found herself sighing with him. "You know you always have a place here in Denver... or wherever you want to go. I just wanted to let you know that it's safe to come back. I miss you, Amelia."

"I miss you too." Amelia said as the screen went black. She reached up to turn off the terminal, stopping short when Richard's face came back into view.

"I almost forgot. I've included some data files that you asked for. I got to admit, it was a pain tracking them down. I hope you enjoy them. I know I have. I'll expect a message after you get this."
"Stay safe."

When the blue screen finally came back, Amelia scanned through the additional files. When she clicked the first one, tears filled her eyes as sound filled her room.

"Aruba, Jamaica ooo I wanna take ya
Bermuda, Bahama come on pretty mama
Key Largo, Montego baby why don't we go
Jamaica off the Florida Keys
There's a place called Kokomo
That's where you wanna go to get away from it all."

There had never been a time where she would have thought the Beach Boys would bring her to tears. She didn't move until the song was over, finally choosing a softer Phil Collins as she stood from the desk.

"You're the only one- who really knew me at all." Amelia sang and hummed as she looked through her locker for a small container.

She'd opted out of the hyposprays and McCoy had offered her pills to take with her. "Take them at night. Don't operate heavy machinery." Gruff and to the point, as always.

Medicating wasn't really her style, but she'd had nightmare free nights since taking the sleep aids and the pain relievers were better than any Tylenol she'd ever had in the past. Amelia replicated a small glass of water and took them both, placing the glass back to be recycled.

By the time she had changed into a robe, she was drowsy. When Amelia's head hit the pillow, her thoughts faded away from the darkness of water and went onwards to an umbrella by the beach drinking a piña colada in Kokomo.

**STARDATE 2260.066**

**Orbiting Planet MBY004**

**Beta Quadrant**

Amelia had her work cut out for her. She needed to move the maturation modifiers, rotate the irrigation systems, fertilize the starches, and actually start picking vegetables. All before lunch. There were several rows of tomatoes to pluck, so many that when she was done she'd need to use the transporter to relocate them to the refrigeration unit in the kitchen.

Added onto all that she was stuck contemplating Richard's offer to return to Earth. The only cure for that, though, was to keep busy.

She spent a solid hour on moving the modifiers. It wasn't that it was laborious, in fact the task was made easier with a small crane unit- a crane unit that would have been nice to know about when she'd originally set up the hydroponics bay - but it took half the time just reading the manual for the thing.

Halfway through arranging the water pipes, a beep sounded from her hip.

She plucked the communicator from its holster and held it to her ear. "Amelia Wright."

"Melia. It's Scotty." Like she wouldn't have figured that out. His accent came across clear enough.
"Hey, Scotty. What can I do for you?" She continued moving a pipe, readjusting the connectors. There had been times where her college education actually garnered use while on board the ship. Mainly... trig.

"You can be 'vailable. I've got a question for ya'."

Amelia paused, shifting her focus to the man on the other end of the communicator. "And you can't ask me now because..."

"It'sa... project of sorts." Why did that statement make it seem like this project wasn't ship related? "Will you be in th' bay 'round 1900?"

She mentally went over her schedule. When was it that she had gained enough friends that she actually had scheduling conflicts? There was Th'eon, who she skipped out on the day before. There was Richard, who she needed to make a video message for. And there was Mark, who would be stopping in after lunch for a quick lesson on growing Orchids.

However, it would be good to see the ever-entertaining Scotty. Amelia sighed, keeping her voice light. "Make it 1930. I've already bailed on Th'eon enough this week."

"Deal. Take care, Lass."

And with a soft beep she closed the communicator and put it back on her belt.

Scotty's request stayed on her mind for a while, but somewhere between fertilizing the corn and contacting the transporter room, she managed to push it aside to focus on other things. Like work.

And a minor amount of play... if she was being honest.

She marched towards one of the plant beds, carrying a mini shovel and a small box. There were very few plants that had priority, but she had cheated on one. A single plant beneath the soil, resting below tomato vines. She dug it out, patted it off, and quickly stuffed it in the box.

Missing lunch today wasn't an option.

Amelia tucked the box under her arm and left the hydroponics bay. A few corridors and one turbolift ride later, she made it to the kitchen. Th'eon, as usual, was busy preparing lunch. When he looked up at her from across the serving line, he smiled.

And his antenna curled inward.

"What?" She asked as she rolled her eyes and waved her hands under the sanitizing wand.

He placed a hand against his chest in mock hurt, huffing. "Nothing." Sometimes it was like having a conversation with a spouse. And Th'eon was the woman. What's wrong, honey. - Nothing, I'm fine.

"No. No." Amelia said as she made her way into the kitchen, setting her container on the counter. "You have something to say, so say it."

"You didn't come in last night." He didn't really look hurt by it, in fact he seemed to hope that her reasons were worth talking about. She occasionally wondered if he prayed for her to start sleeping with someone, just so he could hear all the details.

"I hate to disappoint you, but I was tired."

And cranky, and sore. "Can't I take a night off from gossip?"
"I suppose." Th'eon's eyes drifted towards the box on the counter, his knife soon pointing at it. "So, what is that?"

"A gift." Of sorts. Amelia wasn't too sure how it would be received, but some things were worth the risk. And there was the added benefit of rousing Th'eon's curiosity, which was only a sentence away. "It's for Doctor McCoy."

Amelia beamed when those antenna curled once more. Th'eon ceased chopping vegetables in order to stare her way. "Now that's interesting. Care to fill me in?"

"Not this time." Leaving him stunned was it's own reward, she thought as she headed towards the refrigeration unit. She'd worked in the kitchen plenty of times, so when she was finished checking on the tomatoes, she knew just where to go for the equivalent of an oven.

Amelia retrieved her box from the counter, pulling out the object from inside. It wouldn't take long to cook, not with this technology at her disposal, but it would be a challenge to get it close to the real thing.

"I know what this is about." Amelia jumped when she heard Th'eon's voice from behind her. He sounded smug and self satisfied, like he'd figured out the big mystery. "This is about when you first met Doctor McCoy."

Leave it to Th'eon to remember every conversation he had ever had with anyone. The Andorian had the nerve to laugh, saying with a smile, "It's like watching two children flirt with one another."

She wasn't sure whether to laugh or stand there in shock. Instead, she stuttered, "this... is not flirting."

He didn't buy it. Not for a moment. He gave her a satisfied smile and rubbed his hands together, looking like some kind of Bond villain. Then, in a confident tone, he told her, "isn't it? Little boy pulls on little girl's pony tail. Little girl kicks him in the shins. They grow up, fall in love, and get married. This, my dear Amelia, is you kicking McCoy."

STARDATE 2260.066

Orbiting Planet MBY004

Beta Quadrant

McCoy tapped his fingers against the table, his eyes darting from one patron to another. Jim was running late, as usual, probably caught up chatting up some woman. He'd give him a few more minutes before he went ahead to get his food. There were still reports waiting to be written and he couldn't take all day waiting on Jim.

McCoy sighed, pondering over what was left to be done before calling it a night. "Reports, check-ups, restock. A few house calls." He muttered, sighing again as he looked towards the door to the dining facility. Jim was still nowhere in sight.

He braced his hands against the table, preparing to stand. He didn't have time for this.

A hand against his shoulder kept him seated. There was little force in the act, just a soft touch that asked him stay. His eyes went to delicate fingers attached to a soft hand and slim wrist. He tilted his head up, catching a gentle blue gaze staring down at him.

"Hello, Doctor McCoy." That gaze was a lie. Gentle wasn't a word he would use when he described this woman. Fierce would be more fitting.
Her hand still rested on his shoulder as she stepped around his chair. So focused on her face, he missed that she was carrying a tray, a black serving box in the center. Confusion fluttered across his face, a brow lifting. Was she planning on eating lunch with him?

Amelia Wright wasn't lacking in friends, so he had heard, which made that confused expression on his face intensify. Of all the people she chose to sit with... she chose him?

The small smile on her face began to falter and he realized he'd been sitting there in silence, even after she had greeted him. There was something he should be saying. Right?

Maybe it was the fact that his brain couldn't quite grasp the fact that she was standing there with a tray, but something caused him to ask, "What do you want?"

The smile dropped completely and he instantly felt a flush of shame. There were at least a hundred better things that could have come out of his mouth. Maybe even a thousand.

Her hand left his shoulder, those delicate fingers balling into a fist to rest against her hip. He didn't dare move as she glared down at him, concerned that fist might be directed his way. "You just can't help yourself, can you? Is jackass your natural state?"

"Yes." Jesus! You must have a foot-in-mouth condition. Unfortunately, there were no hyprosprays to save him.

"Well. The first step towards solving a problem is admitting you have one." For a brief moment, he swore the corner of her mouth tilted up. His embarrassment was entertaining her. Not that he deserved any less...

"And what's step two?" He asked, turning in his chair to face her. If it made that glare go away, he was willing to take a little embarrassment. Since when did you give a damn about what someone else thinks? Just tell her to move along. He told the nagging voice in his head to 'shove it'.

"Recognizing you can't solve it alone." Maybe that was why Jim kept trying to hook him up. To smooth out the rough edges caused by time, experience, and heartache. Like any woman could stand him for an extended period of time. His ex-wife was proof of that.

And even with the odds stacked against it, he found himself asking her, "Are you volunteering?" Why the hell had his voice dropped when he asked that?

"Hardly." Again, the corner of her mouth lifted in an amused smile. "I have enough on my plate."

"Trying to get food on mine?" Just what he needed to do. Bring up the first time they met, because that meeting went so well.

"You skipped your Xeno series, which is a biological hazard. Especially when you're trapped in a steel container with over a hundred other people."

"Yeah, well, I've had a lot on my plate trying to get food on yours."

"Ironic you'd bring up that conversation." Amelia Wright's glare didn't fade all the way, but there was a dancing gleam in her eye as she set the tray down in front of him. "Since I have your damn potato."

"Hell of an effort. Maybe in half a year I'll get a damn potato."

She'd brought him food. She'd brought him food and he'd sat there and asked her 'what do you
want'. McCoy had been certain that he couldn't feel even more like an ass, but as she popped open the box he found himself proven wrong.


"Ah, hell..." McCoy wasn't sure what else to say. *You can start with an apology.* Nagging voice returned, this time taking a stance he could agree with. From the corner of his eye he saw her turn away, her mission seemingly accomplished.

Without thought, he caught her slim wrist in his hand, this time stopping *her* with gentle pressure.

Blue eyes, wary yet patient, turned back to gaze down on him. He sighed and rubbed his jaw, gritting out words that he so rarely used. "I'm sorry." For not having a filter. For still having that lingering suspicion when Amelia Wright wasn't deserving of it. For acting like a damn fool and blaming it on her. "For what I said."

Finished saying what he felt needed to be said, he let go of her wrist. Her smile was slow, but well worth the wait. Was that how she did it? Bewitching them with pearly whites? That had to be it, because McCoy instantly felt better, embarrassment shifting into... comfort. And it wasn't the first time either.

He'd felt the same way in the ready room.

Her next words made that damn fuzzy feeling intensify. "I'd ask which time... but I'm pretty sure you covered them all."

**STARDATE 2260.066**

**Orbiting Planet MBY004**

**Beta Quadrant**

Her *encounter* with McCoy stayed on her mind well after lunch. Even as she showed Mark the proper soil and fertilizer for the Orchid, she pondered his behavior. McCoy went from being accusatory, to professional. From kind, to rude.

"He just had to be handsome." She muttered to herself as she sat on the floor, shoveling soil into a small ceramic pot.

"What was that?" Mark Dualla turned away from the desk, and the manual he was reading, to face her.

Amelia's cheeks went red, her response another quick grumble as she shoved more dirt into the pot, stray soil landing on the floor. "Nothing."

"Aw, come on. Who's handsome?" So he *had* heard her. Amelia contemplated telling him. At least then she'd have someone to talk to about it. Th'eon wasn't exactly an option since anything she said was fair game to trade.

Of course letting the cat out of the bag might still have consequences. She looked back up to see Mark patiently waiting for an answer. He didn't look half as sinister as Th'eon would have.

Amelia sighed. "Doctor McCoy."

His brow lifted in surprise, an expression she should have expected. He'd heard her mention McCoy
a few times... and none of those had highlighted the good doctor's more favorable qualities. Mark's brow dropped, his features shifting into agreement.

"I can see that." She didn't stop her mouth from dropping open. He laughed at her surprise. "What? He is. I get that you don't like the man, but you can't ignore his other traits either."

She could. She had just chosen not to. Apparently. Amelia huffed, picking up the pot of soil to carry it towards the table. "He's just so-

"Infuriating?" Mark asked, making a space for the ceramic pot.

Her agreement was instant. "Yes!"

"And that's made worse because he's handsome?"

"Yes." Because someone's face should at least give away their inner nature. Pretty boy McCoy hardly had a cuddly interior.

Realization dawned on him and she could tell by the way his eyes went just a little bit wider and his mouth curved upwards. "You like him."

"What is with people today? Have you been talking to the chef?"

"You like that he's a prick. You're so nice and he's... not. The yin to your yang." He turned back to the manual, almost dismissive. Just when Amelia thought the conversation had found it's natural end, Mark shot over his shoulder, "You should just sleep with him. Get it over with."

"Wow. Sleeping with McCoy is the last thing on my mind." Sleeping with anyone really. Amelia was busy enough just keeping her life together. Her last 'relationship' was over two years ago and even that was with a guy from college... who she'd known for years.

No. Sex wasn't something Amelia thought about too often, nor was it something she sought with strangers.

Five years is a long time. Close quarters. Eventually you won't be strangers...

"Nope." She said, shutting up the voice in the back of her head. Attraction or not, McCoy wasn't an option.

As she sat on the table, her thoughts drifted away from McCoy and onto the bigger picture. Like Richard's offer for her to return to Earth. She wouldn't get these moments if she left the Enterprise. No more gossip trading with Th'eon. No more study sessions with Mark. No more late night chatter with Scotty.

And no more standing on the viewing deck, watching the stars go by.

No more anomalies. No more hostile planets.

She weighed the pros and cons... like any sane person would when faced with a big decision. She didn't mention the offer to Th'eon when she met him later for dinner, but she used the time to focus on what was important to her.

The first real relationships she had had in years. Friends who made sure she didn't overwork herself in the hydroponics bay. Friends who stopped by to check on her when she was sick.

Starting with Richard, Amelia had let people into her life. One by one. Before, her life was
supplemented by people and centered around her plants. Now... people were the center and plants were the supplement.

After returning from dinner, Amelia found herself looking across the hydroponics bay. She knew each square foot, had cataloged every vegetable and even the few flowers that sat in an extra plant bed. It would go on without her. Between Mark and Th'eon the hydroponics bay would continue to produce enough food for the crew in case of an emergency.

She adjusted the timer for the water system and altered the lighting on the tomatoes now that they were no longer under the maturation modifier. She had just finished her nightly tasks when the door to the hydroponics bay slid open.

And in rushed a wide-eyed Scott Montgomery. He gave her a once over, still huffing as if he had ran to the bay. Correction... she could tell he had definitely run to the bay.

"So glad you're 'ere, lass." Of course she was there. He had asked her to be.

Still taking in his hap-hazard appearance, Amelia said, "Scotty, what-

"No time." He said, panting. "I've got one question for ya'."

"Uh. Okay?"

"Can I borrow your area?" Her area?

Her mouth opened to form a high pitched, "What?"

"That project I mentioned. It'll just be for th' night. I've already made measurements. It'll fit." Amelia didn't answer, still processing the words coming out of Scotty's mouth. "I swear, I would'na ask if I had other options. I know we av' only known one another for a short time, but I trust ya'." Scotty looked ready to burst, practically bouncing in place.

"Exactly what is it that you plan to fit in my area?" Because the way the conversation was heading, she just might have to reject the poor guy.

"Corn, lass! Genetically engineered corn." Of all the things she could have guessed, his answer wasn't among them.

She tucked her face against an open palm, looking at him through open fingers as she asked, "Why do you have corn and where have you been keeping it?"

And he answered as though it wasn't a strange question, giving her a slight shrug. "Lots'a places. Engineering. Shuttle bay 4. Inside a few wall panels. My quarters."

"Why the hell are you hiding corn in wall panels?"

"Again, lass, the less you know the better. So, can I use the bay?"

He was pouting, his eyes wide like a puppies. She couldn't really say no, not the that face, and the favor wasn't an intrusive one. "Yes."

He pulled out a communicator. "Aye, Chekov. It'sa go."

Almost instantly Amelia saw the hazy light she had come to recognize as the use of a transporter. The empty spaces she had used as walkways were soon filled up, tall stalks hovering over the rest of the plants. Except for her corn, which still looked a little short in comparison.
It took her a moment to figure it out, but eventually her mouth fell open and her eyes went wide. Why would a Scotsman be so keen on hiding genetically engineered corn? He certainly wasn't planning on *eating* it all.

Amelia turned on him, pointing a finger his way. He was planning on *fermenting* it! "You're making whiskey!"

Scotty sighed, but was still smiling. "Well... what's one more member for operation moonshine."
Chapter 13

STARDATE 2260.102

Beta Quadrant

Amelia held the glass in her right hand as she brought it up and closer to her face. There were times where she wondered just how far Scotty planned to push their friendship with small favors. Sitting across from her, leaning against a tube filled with water, was the far-from-patient Scotsman.

He rolled his hand at her, urging her to hurry. She took a small sniff, her head turning away the moment her brain processed the smell.

"This... is terrible." She coughed out. Instantly, Scotty broke out in laughter. As if he had expected such a response. Amelia's eyes narrowed, a frown forming.

"Not much of a fan, are ya?" He was still laughing, tears falling from the corner of his eyes. For a moment she considered throwing the liquid at him, but she settled for dropping a decade of maturity and sticking out her tongue. "It was jus' a joke, lass."

"Ha!" She set the small glass of whiskey down on the narrow walkway, her eyes darting around her to survey the engineering room below them. It had become a weekly ritual for them. Finding one another and sneaking off to some obscure place on the ship. Only to talk and vent and occasionally move on to a rec room to get over their constant boredom.

It had been over a month since the incident on the planet and everything seemed routine now. Vegetables were on rotation, harvested every few days. Even the Vulcan produce had been reaped, squash-like vegetables having found their way to the kitchen. Spock had actually made a visit to the bay, just to thank her for the effort.

She hadn't heard from Richard, but his offer was still on her mind. Not that she had been presented with an opportunity to accept...

"So, you consider takin' those xeno-linguistics classes we talked about?" Scotty's voice interrupted her thoughts, bringing her back to the present. When she didn't immediately respond he tapped his foot against her own. "Amelia?"

She cast him a sideways glance, shrugging her shoulder. She'd made a note of the class on her data padd, but it was still days away. "I've been thinking about it. Not sure it would do any good though. I couldn't even learn Spanish and we lived next to Mexico."

"You should know tha' difference between a Klingon hello and a Klingon goodbye. Even children take introductory courses on Earth." Apparently, there were children that knew more than Amelia did. A fact that had been coming up more and more during their conversations. Recent history was her worst subject so far. She'd been sharing the lie that she failed and skipped most of those classes in grade school.

Tuning back into the conversation, she raised a brow as she asked, "Children learn Klingon?"

"No' really. Mainly Andorian and Vulcan."

At the mention of Th'eon's race Amelia perked up. "Andorian?"
"Of course." Another shrug. "They're founders."

Andorians were founders? Before she could stop herself from sounding even more uneducated, she asked, "Of what?"

"And you think I'm the funny one." Scotty laughed as he reached above him to grasp the catwalk's railing. He pulled himself up, holding a hand out towards her. "Let's get out'a here. Do somethin' fun."

"And go where?" Amelia asked as she gripped his arm. Gaining her balance, she dusted off her white uniform, still holding the half full glass of... whatever it was Scotty was brewing.

"Deck 6. I believe Mr. Spock is teachin' a combat tactics class. Considerin' you are no' Starfleet, I feel he will take it easy on ya'." A short laugh escaped her as they started down the catwalk. Scotty plucked the glass from her hand, setting it inside a recycling unit as they left engineering.

"How long has Mr. Spock been teaching this class?"

"About thirty days. I'd say the trip to tha' plant infested planet spurred tha' decision." He looked over at her as they passed through the corridors, his expression almost admiring. "I heard you held yer own there."

She suppressed a shudder at the memory of being pulled under the water. It wasn't that it was hard thinking about it. In fact, it was on her mind more than she would like.

Instead of making him feel bad for bringing it up, she just rolled her eyes and said, "I stabbed myself, Scotty. Not sure that means that I 'held my own'." Her hand rose of its own accord, resting above where a small white line still remained.

"I once transported myself into the water chutes. Considering we're both still here... I'd say we're damn successful." His nonchalant statement was said with a shrug and Amelia felt her fear of transporters was well grounded.

As they turned into another corridor leading into the gym, Amelia responded, "I'll have to hear that story sometime."

"Maybe later. When we're not within earshot of the Vulcan." That was said with a smile, an inside joke that she hadn't been let onto yet.

"I'll hold you to it."

Entering the gym, Amelia was surprised to see several people seated on the floor and wearing white robes while forming a circle around the first officer. Spock, however, was standing in his crisp blue uniform, his left arm stretched out to form a bladed hand.

Spock cast a quick glance towards the door where she stood, his right hand moving to rest by his hip. Without addressing her, he returned his gaze towards the students around him, continuing the lecture.

"This form is preparatory, generally followed with a swift step forward and a strike from the lowered hand. It is offensive, meant to show that you have no intention of retreat. That is why you prepare yourself to follow through. If you must engage in hand-to-hand combat, you want the first strike to also be your last."

Amelia followed Scotty into the gym, locating an empty space among the other gathered Starfleet personnel. As soon as she was situated, Spock chose to demonstrate the technique, the right side of
his body moving fluidly as he surged forward, his right hand coming up in a blade to mimic the left.

It was slowed down, that she was certain. She'd seen Spock move in combat before and it was fast, furious, and deadly. This was paced, designed for a human audience. "Aim for the neck for a deadly blow. Aim for the axillary nerves for a disabling one." An imaginary opponent wouldn't have stood a chance, much less a real one.

As Amelia watched Spock display another attack, she found herself remembering the way he handled the blades on the beach. His movements were similar, the lack of weapons the only major difference. His stance changed, his knees bending to demonstrate the advantages of a lower center of gravity.

The students watched with fixated gazes, their hands unconsciously following the pattern of Spock's. He showed blocks for each attack, again demonstrating against an invisible partner. And soon they were facing one another in pairs, putting into action what they had just learned. Simple techniques turned into powerful skills to be added to their arsenal. Amelia wondered how often they would have to pull from that arsenal.

Amelia paired up with Scotty, who looked eager to engage. "No worries, lass. I'll take it easy on ya' ."

Amelia laughed while trying to remember Spock's stance, her right foot sliding back as she raised her hands. "I hope so. Didn't you take hand to hand at the academy?"

"Years ago." He reminded her, mirroring her stance. "Ya' ready?"

As soon as she nodded, he lunged forward with the move they were just taught. But his shoulder pulled back more than Spock's had, a telegraph that had her taking two steps back. There was far less finesse in Scotty's movements, his momentum carrying him around and landing him flat on the gym floor.

"Maybe I should take it easy on you." She said with a grin as Scotty took her outstretched hand. Pulling him up, she looked over to the other sparring partners, watching as they hit one another, often sending their opponents to the floor.

"I am surprised to see you here, Miss Wright." Amelia turned quickly at the bland voice behind her. He certainly didn't sound surprised. He didn't sound anything at all. Spock's mouth was set in a thin line, but Amelia tried not to take it personally. Vulcan's aren't known for their displays of... enjoyment. She thought to herself. "I would not have thought that horticulture required combat lessons."

"You're one to talk. Aren't you a scientist?" Amelia waved her hand at the blue uniform as she looked it up and down. When her eyes came back to his face she was caught off guard by his arched eyebrow and almost amused expression.

"I am also the First Officer." Spock paced around her, walking to stand next to Scotty, who soon took a hint and stepped aside. There was a brief pause before the Vulcan spoke again, his words measured as always.

"I could not help but notice you chose to avoid contact rather than block the attack." It was criticism, but it didn't come off as negative. Just a fact. He would have made an excellent teacher, not quite crossing the line of disappointed, but rather... helpful.

Amelia processed the criticism, tilting her head to the side as she responded, "Well, yeah. I don't
wanna get hit."

"Sometimes you do not have that option. If you avoid every blow, then when one finally lands you will be too stunned to react." Spock positioned himself in front of her, raising a hand. His intentions were clear that he planned to replace Scotty as her sparring partner.

"You know... the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."

"Again, we do not always have that option." He finished shifting into the stance, his left hand bladed and extended. His gaze was focused, two unwaivering brown eyes focused solely on her. When he spoke again, she could almost detect amusement in his voice. "This time you will block the attack using the method I demonstrated."

"Alright." Amelia slid her right foot back and bent her knees slightly. The stance was an old familiar one, a semester of Aikido at college still somewhere in the back of her mind. "Bring it on."

*He'll take it easy on ya',* Scotty had said. She hoped so. Without Spock holding back, Amelia wouldn't stand a chance. Not with his strength and speed.

Unlike her earlier Scottish partner, Spock didn't telegraph. He went for her shoulder, the edge of his hand turned to strike as it came down. Amelia rotated her hips, her lowered hand coming up sharp with her arm as she turned to the right.

As soon as she felt the contact against her forearm, she deflected, pushing his arm above her head as she rotated again in the opposite direction. His momentum worked in her favor as her other hand came up, grasping for an arm that would surely fall into place. It was almost a surprise when she found herself looking at the back side of his shoulder, his wrist in her left hand.

By the look on Spock's face... she wasn't the only one who was surprised.

"Fascinating." He said as he twisted his hand sharply out of her now slack grip. It didn't hurt, but she stepped back anyway, watching as he straightened his uniform. She took a moment to run a hand down her own. "Where did you learn that?"

"College." Amelia said with a proud grin. Not that she felt she'd really be able to take on the Vulcan. She just felt good about being able to pull off the counter attack after not having used it in years.

"Is that where you were also taught obsolete methods of measurement?"

Confused, she tilted her head. "What?"

"You once asked me to convert Celsius into Fahrenheit." Amelia froze, stunned that he recalled her request from the planet. Richard had chastised her plenty over her use of the Imperial system, reminding her over and over that only metric was used now. But Amelia's slip wasn't enough to cause Spock to consider her a time traveler. No. he would just find it... fascinating. "May I ask what college you attended?"

"Arizona Academy of Science in Phoenix." At least she could recall Richard's words now.

He kept his stare on her, as if he didn't quite believe her. If his disbelief drove him to her files at least her records would reflect that answer.

A soft beeping sound drew his attention away from her, saving her from further scrutiny. The comms unit in the gym activated as a female's voice sounded in the room. "Mr. Spock. You are needed on the bridge."
"Understood." The Vulcan glanced back at Amelia as he headed towards a set of lockers on the far wall. "Perhaps we will continue this lesson another time, Miss Wright."

Despite his mention of her slip and the shock that followed, the hand-to-hand class had been a fun experience. It had also allowed the hour to pass rather quickly. The rest of the group split up, heading towards different exits of the gym.

Amelia remained behind with Scotty.

"Guess we'll be back next week." He said after a pause.

"Yeah. I guess we will."

**STARDATE 2260.102**

**Beta Quadrant**

Doctor McCoy shifted the glass case under the microscope, his eyes focused on a monitor as the image moved. Blobs of red and white that could mean another publication. He smiled in satisfaction, punching in some notes on his data padd. As an added measure, he activated the recorder.

"Trial 15. Introduction of the antiviral compound was successful, however once bonding occurs virus mutates and effectiveness of the compound is degraded. Recommendation – Alter compound to better impersonate host attachment proteins."

McCoy palmed the glass container as he set the scope to standby. If he was lucky, he'd have the antiviral drug finished within a few months. His recent studies would need to be sent back to Earth for verification, not that he anticipated them finding any errors. It was just the responsible step to take.

Recently, he had found himself sinking more and more into his work, an attempt to keep his mind off of other things. Like how his ex-wife was keeping their daughter from sending any messages his way. Of course, he couldn't blame Joanna for not going around the she-devil. But it still stung with each passing month.

As he loaded the sample into a steel container, his communicator beeped. He didn't answer it immediately, ensuring that the bio-hazard was properly sealed in storage. The last thing he needed was to lock down sickbay for an emergency decontamination.

Punching in the security code, he waited for the signaling buzz of the quarantine cabinet before unsnapping his communicator.

"McCoy." He answered.

Jim's voice came across shortly after, "Bones. I need you in the ready room."

"On my way." The communicator beeped once more and McCoy snapped it back onto his belt. He shrugged off his white coat, placing it on a hook by the sliding doors of the med-bay.

When he stepped onto the turbolift he was surprised to see Spock already occupying it. The Vulcan looked him up and down with a quick glance before giving him a nod. "Good evening, Doctor."

"Mr. Spock." He muttered back. He tried to ignore the fact that he was still being stared at. "Were you sent to retrieve me?"
"As important as you are, I am simply on my way from a combat tactics class." The barb was quick and effective, causing McCoy to drop the attitude. As fun as a verbal sparring match would be, McCoy was now more interested in the class. He himself had considered teaching an emergency first-aid program.

"How was it?"

"Pleasant." The look on Spock's face confirmed that. "Miss Amelia Wright and Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott attended. It was interesting."

Amelia Wright. McCoy tensed at the name. Another distraction he'd been pushing to the side with work. He mentally pictured her in one of those white robes, pinning him-. He struggled to stop that train of thought. "What's a horticulturist doing in a combat class?"

"I am not sure. Boredom perhaps. She is quite fluid in her movements." Don't over-think that one, Bones. Spock said something else McCoy didn't catch, but finished with, "I believe she will continue to take the course."

"It'll do her some good with as much trouble as she gets herself in." The lift came to a stop and they both stepped out onto the bridge, Spock glancing back with an arched brow. If he had anything else to say, he didn't voice it.

They soon found themselves seated in the ready room with Scotty, Kirk and Uhura making their ways through the sliding doors. All of them stood as he entered.

"Have a seat." As soon as they complied with Kirk's request, the large monitor at the front of the room came to life. A map of their region of space appeared, two blinking dots signifying Starfleet vessels standing out among the stars. "Twenty minutes ago we received a distress call from the USS Huron. While in warp they passed through an anomaly that disrupted their deflector shields. The Huron was able to drop from warp, but without those deflector shields and the rest of the sustained damage they're barely moving past impulse."

Kirk glanced towards McCoy. "There were casualties with the sudden pull from warp. Nothing critical, but they requested medical assistance. We've already altered course and plan to make it to their location within 48 hours."

There was a break in the brief and Spock stated, "Captain, we should consider alerting the crew of this development. They may have family aboard the USS Huron." It didn't sound like something a Vulcan would say, but over the past few years the matter of family seemed more important to Spock. McCoy chalked that up to not having much left. Kirk gave a nod in agreement.

"I'll assign that task to security. They'll cross reference the manifest."

A sudden thought occurred to McCoy, a reminder of when he'd first found interest in Amelia's files. The Huron's captain. "Amelia Wright's sponsor was Captain Svenquist O'Shea."

"Alright. After this is over you can go inform her of the situation. Since the disruption, they're running on rations for the time being. Let her know that the hydroponics bay might need to donate produce." At Jim's words, McCoy frowned.

There were other things he needed to see to and he didn't want the added distraction that Amelia Wright was sure to bring. If he wasn't careful he'd open his mouth and say something he couldn't take back. They hadn't spoken since their encounter in the dining hall, but at least she'd smile at him once in a while. That wasn't something he wanted to change.
After a quick mental search for a task he'd soon need to complete, McCoy said, "I need to prepare a shuttle."

"You can stop there afterwards." Shot down. Guess you're going to the hydro-bay. Kirk looked from McCoy to Spock. "Spock, check with security and navigation and prepare for any threats we will encounter. The Huron is drifting close to uncharted space. Just a precaution."

Spock nodded. "Of course. Is there anything else you need, Captain?"

"Uhura, you will pass Chief Scott the distress call." Kirk shifted to glance at Scotty. "Get whatever you can to be able to prepare your team for repairs."

"Aye, Captain."

"Dismissed." Everyone stood and began to file out of the room. McCoy stayed behind, glaring at his captain. Friend wasn't the description he wanted to use at the moment. Kirk ignored the pointed glare and started to walk past him. He was stopped short as McCoy gripped his sleeve.

"What was that about, Jim? You could have easily sent Spock to talk to her."

At least he didn't deny his intentions, a small grin forming on the captain's face. "You're the one that mentioned her in the middle of a brief."

Because she would want to know! From what McCoy had gathered, the O'Shea's were people she considered friends, if not family. Instead of making it personal, he grumbled, "It was relevant."

"Hardly. She would have been flagged when we check the manifests. Obviously, you have Amelia Wright on your mind. As usual." Kirk raised a hand to point at where McCoy was gripping him, a brow raised as if to ask, 'you gonna let me go now?'.

McCoy's hand released Kirk's sleeve, his eyes going wide before narrowing sharply. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you spend a lot of time trying not to think about her and failing." The sliding doors of the briefing room slid open as Kirk approached the exit. With a final glance back, he ended the conversation, "I'll meet you in the shuttle bay in an hour."

McCoy huffed in agitation, running a hand through his hair as he started for the hydroponics bay. Get it together! It's just a simple conversation. One that he hoped wouldn't end with his foot in his mouth. Again.

Within ten minutes he was walking into the hydroponics bay. It had certainly changed over the passing months, the room more green now than gray. Against the far end of the bay he could see a light green glow reflecting against the back panel. Curiosity drove him that direction. At least he could have a look around while he waited for her.

His gaze darted around the room as he walked, taking in the greenish-red tomatoes that weren't quite yet ready. On one of the tomato cages he saw a white tag with the label, "Anthony." As he looked at the other plants he noticed more of the white labels. "Jim", "Richard", and "Monty" were among the most visible.

"That's an odd way to keep track of plants..." He muttered.

Finally, he found himself standing before the source of the green glow. The far wall had a narrow flower bed that spanned the entire length, a variety of plants standing tall.
To include green glowing roses labeled, "Mark." He couldn't recall ever seeing anything quite like them. McCoy knelt down to take a closer look.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" He jerked around at the voice behind him, his hand going to his chest as if to calm his suddenly rapid heartbeat. He'd been so keen on the damn rose that he hadn't even heard her approach.

Amelia's blue gaze darted downward to his chest, her smile slow to form as she said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"You didn't." He lied as he stood, straightening his uniform. His eyes drifted down her form, taking in the white uniform she usually wore. She didn't look like she'd spent the afternoon in a combat tactics class, her uniform pristine and her hair neatly pinned in a bun.

"Good." Her head turned as she looked down at the rose, her hand gesturing towards it. "The glow roses have a way of captivating a person's attention. You're lucky you caught the blooms in time. By tomorrow they won't be glowing anymore."

They weren't the only thing in the room that captured his attention, his eyes focused on her as he asked, "You grow them?"

"Not alone." Talented and modest. "Mark Dualla helps me."

His hand reached out, flicking the white label. "Is that what the label's for?"

"I name most of my plants." That small smile was still there as she gave a small shrug, not going into further detail. Finally, she looked away from the rose and back at him, her expression curious. "So... what brings you to my neck of the woods?"

His confusion at the question must have prompted her to ask again, "What brings you here?"

"We received a distress call from the Huron." Her smile vanished instantly, her eyes widening. The sudden fear in her eyes was a familiar one. He'd seen it in the eyes of children, parents, and friends as they prepared themselves for the worst of news.

McCoy shook his head as he touched her shoulders, instantly wanting to eliminate that fear. "No. No. Everyone's alright. It's more mechanical than anything. We've altered course to head their way."

"Oh, thank god." Amelia let out a ragged sigh of relief as she rested her hand briefly onto his. "How long until we see them?"

"Two days. There's another issue, though. Since they're having problems with power, they're not using the replicators. Captain Kirk was wondering if you can get together some produce."

"Of course. Whatever they need, just let me know. I already have quite a few crates stored in the refrigeration unit." She really had brought the bay a long way since arriving if she felt confident enough to provide for two ships.

"He'll probably need to hear back from Captain O'Shea before he has any numbers."

"I'm sure we'll be able to meet their demands." Then they stood in silence, a soft green glow settling around them. He could tell her nerves were still rattled, her hands shaking as she wiped them on her pants.

"Hey. They're alright. In two days you'll get to see your sponsor." When her lips turned upwards he
felt a rush of satisfaction at being able to bring that smile back on her face. Just like her fear had been recognizeable, her smile was also familiar.

"I wish the circumstances were better." So did he. Amelia cocked her head to the side, her hand reaching out to touch his shoulder in an appreciative pat. "Thank you. For coming to tell me."

"Not a problem." It seemed that after a month of avoiding her, he had the sudden desire to make up for lost time. He looked towards the doors of the bay, but his feet didn't carry him that direction. Instead they remained firmly rooted to the ground. He ran a hand across the back of his neck.

He could cut open a chest and restart a heart. He could transplant a kidney. But when it came to simple conversation he always found himself falling short. So, he pulled on something recent. "Spock said you showed up in his class today. Called it... interesting."

"It was. I think I'll go again next week. Get my kung-fu on." Amelia turned to head back to the front of the bay. She didn't dismiss him though, looking back and waving for him to join her. He didn't resist the invitation, following quickly after her. "Scotty's been trying to get me to take more classes while on board. He says it's a common way for Starfleet personnel to pass the time and get certifications."

"It is. We can't really be stagnant for five years." Stagnant like your personal life, Bones? Is that why you're still in the hydroponics bay talking to her? He pushed the intrusive thought aside. "I've been thinking about teaching one. An emergency response class would benefit the ship."

"From what I've heard of the Enterprise's track record you aren't kidding." Her eyes were crinkled at the corners with silent laughter. If she had heard any of the stories they must have been with omitted details. A first aid class wouldn't do much against what they had faced in the past.

Silence fell between them as she turned away to reach for a data padd. McCoy was sure that she had work to get to, but... he didn't want this conversation to end poorly. The only thing he seemed to want more is to have another one in the future.

He broke the silence. "You should take it."

She looked surprised that he had asked, a brow raising as she tilted her head. In a way he was just as surprised as her. "Your class?"

Where are you going with this, McCoy? You plan on making this a thing? "Yeah," he managed, both to her question and his own internal one.

"I'll think about it." I'll think about it. It wasn't a no. Amelia shot him another small smile and held up her data padd. "Listen, I don't mean to kick you out or anything, but I've got my work cut out for me if I want these vegetables to be ready. Thanks again. For letting me know about O'Shea."

"I've got to get to work myself. We'll keep you updated on the situation. You can always contact Spock on the communicator if you need something. Or Captain Kirk. Or me." Not that he would be able to answer any questions at this point. Maybe he could get Jim to fill him in later. Just in case.

Because Jim was right about one thing. He kept trying not to think about her. And failing just aggravated the crap out of him.
Chapter 14

STARDATE 2260.104

Beta Quadrant

Her muscles ached, her arms burning in protest as she shoved against another crate. With all the technology now available to her, physical labor hadn't really been necessary. But today had called for every ounce of determination she had.

The captain was diverting power on the Enterprise, the transporters prioritized for critical tasks. Which meant she had been lifting crates all morning and using dollies to get them to the shuttle bay. When she had started to become flushed, she shrugged off her jacket, dressing down to just her tank top and pants.

As she walked back out of the shuttle to retrieve another crate, she let her eyes roam across the shuttle bay, taking in the way everything seemed to operate like a well-oiled machine. Scotty’s team was occupied with loading their own shuttle, tools and equipment being carried inside as he gave order after order.

Every now and then she'd catch a glimpse of Kirk or Spock as they made rounds, ensuring that everyone would be prepped to go by their scheduled departure time.

To her left was another team, blue uniforms standing around a man with frazzled hair. Though she couldn't see him past the cluster of people, she knew it was McCoy. He must have finished giving them instructions because the small circle broke apart and everyone headed in different directions. Except for the good Doctor, whose intense hazel gaze caught her own.

She tried to keep from looking surprised when he started to walk her way.

It was hard reading McCoy. Most people were easy, their emotions clear on their faces. But then again most people were predictable. Th'eon always looked for the punchline or the next big news, so his expressions reflected that. Amusement, enjoyment, or conniving. Scotty liked to laugh and learn, wonder always plastered on his face.

McCoy generally shifted from suspicious to hesitant. From offensive to friendly. They had their share of miscommunication between them, though Amelia wasn't quite sure who to blame for that. After his last visit in the hydroponics bay she wondered if it was her who had started the back and forth they often found themselves in. Because he had seemed abnormally nice for once...

His pace slowed as he approached her and she was able to catch the subtle details that portrayed his own exhaustion. His face was flushed, his hair a mess, and his typically sharp gaze was dimmed. It didn't detract from that ruggedly handsome demeanor, though. Not the time, Amelia. She told herself.

He gave her a quick once over, something she attributed to his doctor mentality rather than his male one.

The silence stretched on as he looked down at her small pile of stacked crates and then into the shuttle where the rest were firmly seated. After a few more seconds, his face fell in a frown as he growled out, "You on your own?" Oddly, he looked upset by that, the corner of his eyes crinkling as he narrowed them.

She'd have expected that protective nature from Th'eon, maybe. Or even Scotty if the situation called
for it. But the only time that McCoy had ever shown a protective streak was when he was performing his duties as a doctor.

The idea of her working alone wasn't worth the frustration that appeared on McCoy's face. Added to that was the fact that she didn't know if she should be offended or flattered by the concern.

"It's okay. I've got it." She reached for the next crate, as if to demonstrate that she had everything under control. But before she could grab the other handle, McCoy was waving her off and clenching it in his hand.

"I'll help." Even though she wanted to defend her capacity to do this job, she was grateful for the help. The protesting muscles in her arms weren't screaming near as bad as they had been the last few crates she had loaded up.

Still, as they carried it into the shuttle she couldn't help but ask, "Don't you have a crew to lead?"

"You ever hear the expression 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth'?” The corner of her mouth tilted upwards at McCoy's question and the snark behind it. This was the familiar version of McCoy. Grudgingly kind.

Despite the task being made easier with help, they both gave a huff as they slid the crate onto the others. Deep down she unsure if she really would have been able to manage it alone. As Amelia finished strapping it down, McCoy asked. "What was in there? Rocks?"

Amelia tapped the container and grinned, her voice carrying with it a note of amusement. "The Leonards."

His head cocked to the side as if he was trying to figure out what she meant. It was his name she had assigned to the starches in the crate. She could see the pieces coming together as he glanced down at the crate, the concentration on his face slowly shifting into clarity.

"Potatoes? You named the potatoes Leonard, didn't you?" She couldn't tell if he was offended or amused, his expression changing between the two. Not that he really had the right to be offended, since he'd practically named them himself.

"I think it's fitting. Don't you?"

She barely caught his quite mumble of, "You don't want to know what I think."

"Actually, I do." Amelia crossed her arms and leaned against the stacked crates. It wasn't in her nature to ignore odd behavior and McCoy's recent displays, though kind, definitely fell into her category of odd. It was just like when John had shown her his own protective streak.

She waved a hand between herself and the doctor. "Why are you doing this?"

His own arms crossed across his chest, defensive. "Doing what?"

"This." Amelia tapped the top crate. "This whole friendly helpful... thing. And when you were in the hydro-bay... what was that about?"

A sigh escaped him, his arms falling to his side as he started to pace the length of the shuttle. When he turned back to her, he tilted his head to the side and ran a hand across the back of his neck. It let her know that whatever he had to say, it was going to put him out of his comfort zone.

"Every day I have to hear about this woman that works in the hydroponics bay and how she's a ray
of sunshine. Whether it's from Jim or Spock or the Chef or even that young kid that works in supply. I'm starting to feel like I'm the one person on this ship who has been cut off from seeing that side of her." The slow exhale that followed said just as much as his statement. It was exhausting for him to admit that.

Amelia's brow rose, her words just as honest as his. "You accused me of being a traitorous spy the first time we met and then you proceeded to insult my ability to perform my job. To tell you the truth, McCoy, you're gonna have to work to get that Amelia." _Because changing my mind about you is not only going to take time, but it'll take effort too._

Effort he was now giving.

"I'm trying." The growl in his voice wasn't threatening, just that bordering annoyed tone she'd heard from him plenty of times. She hadn't meant to set him on edge. With all the interrogating he'd thrown her way, it was almost humorous the way he objected to being given a dose of his own medicine. Almost.

But she didn't bask in his discomfort. Amelia's crossed arms fell open, her hand going to rest on his arm. "I know you are. I just wanted to understand why."

His gaze drifted down to where her hand rested, then up to meet her own. As usual his voice was gruff and hesitant. "Are you satisfied with the answer?"

Nodding, she said, "Yes. And I think we could be friends instead of... whatever it is that we are."

"I'd like that." He gave her a relieved half-smile. From outside the shuttle someone called for McCoy, causing his smile to be short-lived. He huffed, as if aggravated by the disturbance and then shot her an apologetic glance. "I have to go back to my team, but I'll have Spock find someone to help you load."

"It's okay. The last two are lettuce. Guess you showed up right when I needed you." She pictured him standing over her in the med-bay after her bout of delirious fever. And then once more when he was tossing her onto the sand and forcing water from her lungs. "Again."

"Anytime," Amelia knew that he meant it.

Somehow, she managed to keep herself focused on the task at hand, rather than on Doctor McCoy. Maybe it was because she felt the building excitement at the prospect of seeing Captain O'Shea, a man she considered family. Because if Richard was like a brother, then he was like a father.

When the shuttle was prepared, she made her way back to her quarters. Captain Kirk had mentioned the possibility of her being able to remain on the Huron for a night or two, which meant that she needed to pack a bag.

She pulled her backpack from her wall locker. An extra uniform, underwear, first aid kit. Taking a quick glance at what few items she could call her own, her gaze landed on a small jar filled with sap. If the Huron planned to return to Earth, she wondered if O'Shea could deliver a gift to Richard.

Using the replicator, she created a smaller glass vial no longer than her palm. Then she filled it up and capped it, her eyes staring down at the small gift in her hand. Richard would like it, of that she was sure. He was sentimental like that, even if he'd never admit it. Her mouth curled up at the thought of him.

As departure time approached, she made her way back to the shuttle bay. After a sonic shower and donning a clean uniform, she felt prepared to make the trip to the USS Huron. Amelia adjusted the
strap on her shoulder as she weaved past gathering crew members.

Her steps slowed as she approached her assigned shuttle, catching sight of a man in a yellow uniform as he leaned into the pilot's compartment. She had never seen him before, though she didn't think that was odd. There were plenty of crew members she had yet to meet.

"You gonna be flying this thing?" She hadn't meant to startle him, but when he jerked back out of the shuttle, she realized that she had. "Sorry. Amelia Wright." She stuck out her hand.

Like almost everyone else on board, he was young. If she had to guess, she would say he was Japanese or possibly Korean, but as soon as he spoke she knew he was American, his accent bearing no trace of his descent.

"Lieutenant Sulu." His introduction was accompanied with a quick handshake and a smile. "And yes. I'll be your pilot this evening." The fact that he wasn't enlisted or an ensign made her feel more comfortable, not that she had anything against the junior grades. With her track record, it was best to err on the side of caution.

"My last pilot got me stuck on a planet that tried to kill me." Amelia half-joked as she tossed her backpack in the co-pilot's chair. Together, they paced around the shuttle. "I'm gonna ask that you make this a better experience."

Sulu secured the rear hatch of the shuttle, casting her a grin. "I've handled far worse than a shuttle flight. No chance we're going to get stuck anywhere." Already she could see that he was easy-going, a trait she was likely to enjoy in their short ride to the Huron.

"I'll hold you to it." Amelia promised as she climbed into the shuttle, pushing her backpack to the floor and taking a seat in the co-pilot's chair. She made sure not to touch anything, blinking lights and dials scattered before her. "How does anyone understand all this?"

She hadn't expected an answer, but Sulu perked up beside her, seeming more than eager to explain. "Years of training. It's pretty much muscle memory now. But in case of an emergency the computer can always take over."

"Why fly it yourself then?"

"Because it's been a while since I've had a chance to." He pointed towards the control panels then proceeded to give her a quick education. "So, say we get into a situation where I'm dead-" Not the most favorable of scenarios. "-and you have to get back to the enterprise. Just remember that if it has a label, it's aimed at someone like you."

She gave him a mock offended glare. "Someone like me?"

"Inexperienced. Look right here." Sulu pointed at a long blue button resting between them both. "This button initiates the auto-pilot, which is why it has Auto-Pilot just above it. Engage the auto-pilot and wait for the button to turn green. Then you activate the return sequence-" Sure enough he pointed to another button labeled 'return'. "-here. The shuttle will head back to it's programmed return station which is the shuttle bay on the Enterprise."

"What about this button?" Amelia pointed a finger at a large gray spot directly in front of her.

"Self-destruct." As she shot him a wide eyed glance she couldn't ignore the serious expression on his face.

Her hands flew back to rest tightly against her chest. "Why is it right there!?"
When Sulu began to laughed, she fought the urge to hit him on the shoulder. "I'm kidding. That releases the air in the cargo section. Don't worry, it won't engage if there is a life signature. There is a self-destruct program though, but we'll save that demonstration for another flight." He had the nerve to give her an amused grin.

"You're too much, Lieutenant. Just get us there in once piece, will ya?" Soft whirs and beeps and dings rang through the shuttle as Sulu's hands danced across the control panel. Last time she had flown she hadn't been able to witness the process, but now she could see it all. And Sulu's muscle memory was mighty impressive.

"Shuttle H ready to launch."

"Shuttle E ready to launch." Scotty's voice was heard across the comms and Amelia realized that they were in contact with the other two shuttles.

"Shuttle M ready to launch."

And then she felt the lift. It was a smooth ride in space and, unlike her last fight, she glanced out at the stars. The black expanse was broken by the tiny white dots, some maintaining a steady glow while others seemed to blink. For once they were oddly soothing. _Maybe you're just getting used to it._ There were probably thousands of other ships out there, some just like the Enterprise. Some still unknown.

Looking across the emptiness it made sense why the Enterprise's mission was so important. Someone had to pave the way...

Sulu would send an occasional look towards her, smiling in a proud way. Finally, he said, "It's amazing, isn't it?"

"You have no idea. I wouldn't have dreamed of this as a child." Her whisper contained a confession, but it didn't appear to be incriminating because Sulu kept a straight face instead of a confused one. She turned her gaze from the side window to look out in front of them.

The USS Huron grew in size as they approached, anticipation building inside her. It wasn't as long as the Enterprise, from what she could tell, but it was more box-like. She imagined it was designed that way since it was a freight ship, needing larger rooms for storage.

Amelia could see the dome-like area on the top, tiny dots that were people coming more into focus. "Is that the bridge?"

"Sure is." Sulu answered. He pointed towards a narrow opening. "And that's where we're headed." She recalled seeing Star Wars once in the theater when she was a kid and for some reason the scene before her reminded her of the Millennium Falcon being pulled into the Death Star.

Except there would be Starfleet personnel instead of storm troopers. Despite the ominous size and the related imagery, she didn't feel nervous anxiety. Just bounding excitement.

Because it was exciting. She was flying from one ship to another, able to experience another new adventure. And there was something familiar waiting at the other end. Beside her, Sulu managed the communications, talking to the other shuttles as they entered the Huron's shuttle bay.

She tuned back into the communications when she heard Sulu sigh. "No, Doctor McCoy. The Huron isn't going to fall apart and you are not going to find yourself adrift in the vacuum of space."

"I take offense to that, McCoy." Amelia grinned as she recognized the deep baritone voice of Captain
"Take it how you want, Sir. Fear is fear." Somehow, she managed to keep from laughing as McCoy's quick response.

The communicators were soon turned off, the shuttle powering down and the pilot hatches sliding open. Before she even made it out of the co-pilot's chair, there was already a crew unloading the crates.

Casting a quick glance around her she noted that the interior of the Huron wasn't as pristine as that of the Enterprise. She had to remind herself that the Enterprise had been rebuilt and was probably in far better condition than the older ship.

She looked over to where another shuttle was unloading. The Engineer's shuttle was just as crowded, Scotty shouting orders and directing at least ten people in red shirts to wherever they needed to go.

McCoy's shuttle, however, was completely empty. Of course if anyone needed to act quickly, it was the medical team. She silently praised him for his efficiency.

As Amelia climbed out of the shuttle, a taller woman with long brown hair approached her. She was wearing a blue uniform, but her insignia didn't look like McCoy's. In fact, it looked like Spock's. You're getting the hang of this. Amelia mentally congratulated herself on realizing that the woman was a science officer.

While Sulu left to pursue his own tasks, Amelia was left alone. She turned to face the science officer, who was already opening her mouth to ask, "Are you Amelia Wright?"

"I am." They shook hands. "And you are...?"

"Lieutenant Patricia Donavon. I run the hydroponics lab." Hydroponics lab? That explained why a science officer was talking to her. Patricia gestured towards the crates being unloaded, causing Amelia to take another quick look at the fast moving crew. "I wanted to tell you how much we appreciate this."

Her cheeks flushed, "You guys need it. I just wish we could have brought more."

"The replicators should be back up late tomorrow, but we've practically been running on rations and lettuce for a week now. I've got nothing left down in the bay. At least tonight we'll have a real meal." Patricia broke off as she looked over Amelia's uniform. It wasn't the first time someone had reacted to her lack of insignia, but the science officer didn't comment on how Amelia didn't belong to Starfleet. Instead she surprised her with an invitation, "Any chance you want to come by the lab?"

"I would. I just need to-"

"Miss Wright." The familiar male voice behind her caused an instant smile to spread across Amelia's face. She turned to see Captain Svenquist O'Shea, his yellow uniform looking less pristine than the last time she had seen it. But with what the Huron had been dealing with, it wasn't unexpected that she'd find him out of sorts.

He still looked commanding, though, and just a touch intimidating, save for the soft brown gaze he pinned her with.

"Captain O'Shea. Just the man I wanted to see."

"Let me give you a tour." As the captain took her by the arm, Amelia shot an apologetic glance
towards Patricia. O'Shea followed her gaze, his eyes landing on the Lieutenant. "Don't worry, Donavon, I'll send her your way when we're finished."

"Rain check?" Amelia called over her shoulder, only to have Donavon send her a puzzled sideways glance.

**STARDATE 2260.104**

**Beta Quadrant**

**USS Huron**

McCoy scowled at the sight of the Huron. He'd done his best at hiding his fear, but the old bucket of bolts looked ready to fall apart. So far he'd distracted himself by listening to the shuttle lesson that Sulu was giving Amelia. Like the woman needed to know how to pilot the damn thing.

Until they were preparing to enter the Huron's shuttle bay, at which point he made a snide comment about the status of the ship. Scotty's crew laughed and the Captain responded. At least he hadn't said anything worthy of reprimand.

His pilot, a boy ten years his junior, landed them safely in the ship. McCoy unsnapped his harness before the shuttle was even powered down, his mind already racing with tasks and procedures. The medical team was unloading the back while he started the long walk to the med-bay.

"Doctor McCoy!" A voice sounded from behind him and he turned, catching sight of his counterpart. The Chief Medical Officer assigned to the Huron, Doctor Vincent Kristoff, was jogging towards him. "I was hoping to catch you before you made it to sick bay. We've set up an emergency station in one of the cargo bays."

His spine went stiff at that. If they were using one of the cargo bays then the casualty list was higher than the original report. Of course those numbers could have risen as more injured crew-members were found. With power fluctuations and communication mishaps more might still pop up. "How many?"

"Twenty four." That they know of. "Four of those are in sick bay under watch. Did your team bring any subdermal regenerators?"

"Two mobile units." McCoy unsnapped his communicator, redirecting his team to the new location. If Doctor Kristoff kept him any longer then they'd made it to the cargo bay before he did. He must have noticed McCoy's impatience because started walking, leading them towards the interior of the ship. "What is the worst case?"

"Compound fractures. We have a punctured lung, but he's been stabilized." Compound fractures had their own list of potential complications. The tricorder at his hip was soon in his palm. As they made their way into the cargo bay he worked to program the device for fracture detection.

When McCoy looked around, he realized that he thrived in stressful situations. As a doctor he didn't enjoy to see people suffering so he tended to work hardest when they were. He conducted triage first, determining who needed him first and who would make do with the technicians.

A young woman with blond hair was his first patient, her blue gaze hazy as she looked up at him from a cot. Her words were slurred, but still understandable. "You're not my doctor." How she managed a grin, he'd never know.

"I am now." Which was a good thing because her previous doctor was apparently a moron. Her left
leg, though wrapped and braced, was set incorrectly. He kept from frowning, not wanting her to get a sense of how bad off the leg was. He'd rather her be grinning than crying.

By the time he was finished, his gloves were bloody, the grin was long gone, and she was unconscious. And that was just his first set. The one that followed was no better. He had to schedule three surgeries and two crew members had to be moved from the cargo bay to sick-bay due to further complications.

Things went from bad to worse, his team taking the brunt of the work. Because, apparently, the Huron's crew just wasn't prepared for any kind of catastrophe while his had the right amount of experience.

His eyes landed on another patient who was cradling his right arm. Dislocated shoulder. Quick fix. With the way the man was forcing steady breaths he knew that he'd yet been given any kind of sedative. McCoy picked up one of the many hyposprays off his tray and started towards him.

"You have any other injuries besides the shoulder?" He asked as he pressed the hypospray against the man's neck.

"No."

"Alright. I'll set it on the count of-" Then an alarm sounded. McCoy paused briefly to listen to the rhythm, a gloved hand braced against e crewman's shoulder. Before Kristoff could give any directions, he met the startled gazes of his team, silently asking them to remain calm.

"Ensign Galloway, lock down the bay!" Though the crew was probably aware that the alarm meant there were intruders on board, he didn't mention it. They had eighteen injured people to attend to and no one was going anywhere. Or getting in for that matter.

STARDATE 2260.104

Beta Quadrant

USS Huron

O'Shea led her out of the shuttle bay and into one of the corridors, pointing out various rooms as they passed by. She could hear the pride in his voice as he spoke of the Huron, reminded her of Scotty and the Enterprise. Starfleet crew members became attached to their ships, the flying metal wonders their home away from home.

There would be a waiver in his voice when he showed her an area that was still under repair, an underlying disappointment present. It took her a moment to realize he wasn't disappointed in the Huron, but disappointed in himself for allowing her to be damaged.

It was like her greenhouse and she felt a connection with the ship flourish. Not the ship she currently paced, but the one she could see when they passed by a window.

Her steps slowed, her eyes focused on that hovering ship, stars lining the background. The Enterprise stood out, a testament to it's trials. It was a flagship, so she had been told, designed to not be intimidating, but receptive. On a mission of peace.

But when peace failed, the Enterprise was said to carry a big stick.

At her side, she heard O'Shea sigh. When she looked over at him, he was staring at the Enterprise. "You know, ever since Kirk responded to our distress call, I couldn't help but wonder how you were
doing. The girl out of time..."

How was she doing? She coped. She survived. And she made friends, because a life of solitude would never be enough anymore. So, when she turned to O'Shea she said, "I'm good. I have a place there."

When she closed her eyes, she didn't see her greenhouse. She saw the large expanse of the hydroponics bay. Scotty stood in the background, helping construct the Vulcan environment. Mark leaned over the desk at the front and learned to plant tulips. Anthony carried in a data padd for her to sign.

"That's nice to hear. But... are you enjoying it?"

"Sometimes." Most of the time. When her life wasn't in danger. When she wasn't overwhelmed by the stars. When she didn't miss the somewhat hollow life she'd left behind.

"I'm not a big believer in fate, Amelia." This caused her to fully face O'Shea. She wasn't sure if she shared his sentiment, but she understood it. When chaos reigned around her she simply told herself to put one foot in front of the other and keep moving and eventually... the calm would come. She'd never considered that calm to be a promised fate.

He continued, still staring out the window, "I believe we make our own destiny, that we pave our own way. But you, your presence here, throws that belief out the window. Of all the places in the universe you could have landed, of all the times, you landed here. You landed on my son's installation. And he led you to me so I could put you on the Enterprise."

Turning to face her, he asked, "Amelia, do you know the history of the Enterprise?"

She'd gathered bits and pieces from Scotty, a few more from Th'eon. And then there was the general history log she'd found on her data padd. "A little. I know it was rebuilt because it took heavy weapons damage during a battle. And it was there for the destruction of Vulcan."

"The Enterprise had yet to make it's maiden voyage when Earth received a distress call from Vulcan. Because Starfleet had most of it's fleet handling another conflict in a different star system, the Enterprise's first set of crew members was cadets. Some of them were too young to even vote. Yet the Enterprise surpassed odds, that years ago, would have been deemed improbable. The Enterprise set the standard in a way. And then that crew decided to remain on the Enterprise to face Starfleet's next enemy. Khan." She knew that name, a shiver running down her spine. The man responsible for her original placement aboard the starship.

"The Augment?"

"Yes. Though the Enterprise did experience its share of loss, it still flew and, more importantly, it won. You see, Amelia... History will reflect the works of the crew of the USS Enterprise. And I have a feeling that you are somehow destined to be a part of it."

"Why?" For a man who didn't believe in fate, he seemed to believe that hers was already written.

"Because of all the places, in all the times, you landed here. And I gotta say, it feels an awful lot like fate. Reconsider Richard's offer. Don't come back just yet."

"It's been one catastrophe after another, O'Shea. Amelia Wright just isn't ready for space."

"I'd say it's space that isn't ready for Amelia Wright." She wished she could believe him. That his plea for her to remain on board was actually convincing. But his mere presence reminded her of
Richard, who reminded her of Earth, and, in turn, represented everything that she wanted for herself. A safe place to call home.

They remained in the empty corridor for a few minutes, his words resounding in her head. Until a new sound took their place.

A low sounding whoop filled the hallway, followed by two beeps and a whir. The sequence repeated, sending a chill through her. It was ominous and it made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

She shot a wide-eyed glance towards O'Shea. His previous smile was gone, anger and a small touch of fear showing on his face. "What's that?"

Starfleet personnel ran past them, filling the once empty space of the corridor. A few looked to O'Shea before continuing on their way, their expressions worried yet focused. "Someone's triggered a general alarm. I have to report to the bridge." He caught the arm of the next person, pinning them with that commanding stare. "Ensign! Take Miss Wright to the med-bay and tell them to lock it down."

"Yes, Sir!"

"Wait!" She pulled against the ensign's hold, looking to O'Shea for answers. What's going on?

And she knew his answer wouldn't be a good one when he sucked in a quick breath. "We've been boarded."
"Hey! Where are we going?" Amelia tried to turn, but was gently pushed forward, the ensign urging her to continue their quick pace down the corridor. She clenched a hand around the strap of her backpack to keep it from falling off as she tried turning again. Another gentle shove against her shoulder and she stopped trying to face the man.

"Sick bay, Ma'am." When they came to an intersection she saw a hand next to her face pointing to the left turn.

Just because she kept moving, didn't mean she would be herded around uninformed. "But why are we going there?"

"Because it's the closest lock down area, Ma'am." Her teeth ground together. The ensign was an endless pool of singular answers that did little to ease the tension building in her gut.

"Okay. One, stop ma'am-ing me. Two, why is anything being locked down?"

"A member of the crew signaled that there are intruders aboard the Huron. Protocol dictates that non-essential personnel report to the nearest lock-down site to remain until the threat has been neutralized. A security team will perform a sweep of the ship while essential personnel continue their duties to keep the Huron running."

"Intruders? Are you saying there's space pirates?!"

"Usually that's not an issue because of the Huron's size. But we are running on impulse and partial power. And if they happen to recognize the ship as a freighter..." He didn't continue, not that she needed further explanation. The unasked question was 'how far are the intruders willing to go?'

A set of double sliding doors was coming up fast. A sharp tug against her backpack brought her to a stop in front of them. "Hey!"

"Sorry, Ma'am." But he didn't look apologetic as he reached for a communications panel. "This is Ensign White, security code Helo-Jupiter-4-6-9. I have one non-essential crew member with me who needs access."

There was a long pause before the doors slid open, revealing at least five uniformed people. Most of them were wearing blue medical uniforms. And most of them were busy standing over gurneys.

Save the man at the door who looked slightly shaken by their arrival.

He ushered her inside and she entered with the added assistance of a shove against her back. She shot a glare at the ensign, but the glare quickly fell as he started to walk away from sick-bay. "Where are you going?"

"Gotta do a sweep, Ma'am." Then the doors slid shut and she was left with some answers yet a lot more questions.
Amelia turned sharply, coming face to face with a man wearing a blue uniform. Her eyes drifted down to his insignia, a cross just like McCoy's clearly visible. "Are you the-" She broke off, trying to think of the correct title. "-Chief Medical Officer?"

"I am. Doctor Vincent Kristoff." Amelia ignored his outstretched hand, looking past him and towards the other uniformed people in the room. Her gaze went from face to face as she searched for a familiar one. Shouldn't he be here? With all the injured people?

When she couldn't find him she turned back to Vincent. "Where's Doctor McCoy?" Because he certainly wasn't in sick bay with the rest of the doctors.

"He's with the other patients." *Oh.* She didn't hide her confusion. McCoy hadn't elaborated on the status of the crew on the Huron, but he had said the issues were mainly mechanical. *Mainly.* It seemed that it was worse than he'd let on. Had he been trying to save her from this concern she was now feeling? "We had to set up another treatment area in cargo bay four."

"Are they going to be alright down there?" She didn't doubt McCoy's ability to take care of himself, or others, but she was worried. Worried about things that were outside of their control. Like how many of those 'pirates' were roaming the ship. Or how dangerous they were. At least sick bay seemed secure.

But what about the cargo bays? "They should be on lock down, just like us." The Doctor's statement eased some of her worry.

As if on cue, the communications panel on the wall lit up, a gruff voice coming across the line. Amelia breathed a sigh of relief. "Doctor Kristoff, it's McCoy. I've searched through the equipment left in the cargo bay and I haven't been able to find a vascular regenerator. Did your team bring one when you relocated?"

Vincent made his way over to the panel, shaking his head. "No. The only two we have are here in sick bay."

"Then we've got a problem. I have a patient with DBVD and without the use of a Vasc-Regenerator he won't make it. I need you to send someone with the regenerator to the cargo bay."

"I can't. Not while we are under lock-down. Stabilize with a hypospray of Lectrazine."

"I've already tried." McCoy sounded frustrated, though she couldn't be sure without seeing him. "I wouldn't be requesting this if it wasn't his best chance."

"I'm sorry. I won't risk any of my personnel."

"You're risking one right now! He's going to die, Doctor." But Vincent didn't look like that made a difference. If protocol was the only thing holding him back, then the only solution was to provide someone outside of protocol.

Someone who wasn't bound by the same Starfleet regulations.

"I'm not one of your personnel." Amelia realized. She raced over to where Vincent stood by the communications panel, her gaze pinning his uncertain one. A man's life was on the line, too much at stake for fear to hold her back. Because she was afraid. If she left the security of sick-bay there was no telling what she'd run into.

Life is putting one foot in front of the other, right? So she forced the waiver from her voice as she stared down the Doctor. "I can take it to him."
"There was a pause and then she heard McCoy's voice again over the communicator, surprise lacing his tone, "Is that Amelia Wright?"

"Yes." She answered.

Doctor Kristoff looked irritated and his tone confirmed it, "She's not going."

This time it was Amelia who was irritated. "I'm not Starfleet nor am I under your command. If McCoy needs this regenerator to save someone's life and you're not willing to get it to him then give it to me because I will."

Another shock-induced pause before McCoy ordered. "Someone give Miss Wright a phaser."

A few of the others in the room had zoned in the conversation and as soon as McCoy voiced his request, a phaser was placed in her hand. A second later, Doctor Kristoff yanked it out of her grip. "We don't have the authority."

"She is probably the only person in that room who has fired one to save her life. Get her a phaser." Vincent handed it back to her and she snapped it against her belt. She hoped her chances of survival didn't come down to her using the device.

"How do I get to the cargo bay?" It only took a minute before someone shoved a data padd at her, the Huron's schematics already loaded. Like a blueprint, it was hard to read at first until she found her own location. From there it was fairly easy to orientate herself to the map.

"Are you looking at the ship's schematics?" Something told her that he was doing the same, guiding her even over the distance.

"Yes." She drew a line with her finger, the data padd recording it in bright red. It was like a pencil maze, having to backtrack with every dead end. Until she made a line that connected from the sick-bay to cargo bay four. "The best route is through primary corridor 7E, take the turbolift, then corridor 4E and 4N."

"No." McCoy corrected. "You can't take the turbolift. If power cuts out then you'll be stuck there."

"She can take corridor 7E, then cut through an access chute." Vincent pointed out a narrow space. She'd fit, but it would be tight. "-here and climb down three decks. That'll put her just outside the bay."

In the background she could hear McCoy talking to someone else, his words too low to make out. Then he said, "No. That runs too close to a generator."

Vincent looked confused as he said, "It's a small magnetic field, it would be harmless. She'll be fine."

"She's got steel implants. They'll heat up. Or worst case, be ripped out of her." Neither of those scenarios made her feel any better, but according to the schematics if she didn't take that route, then she'd have to move another 70 meters to another chute. And that one only took her two decks down.

"How long would it take for them to heat up? Minutes? Seconds?"

"I don't know; I'm not an engineer. But I do know that it's too risky."

"But it's the shortest path. And we've already wasted four minutes just showing me how to get there." Wasn't the clock ticking for the patient? Otherwise McCoy would never have asked to have someone bring him the equipment.
"Okay." Finally, Amelia sighed, the plan set. It seemed better knowing that all she had to do was take the case and he added, "I'll meet you. On your side of the access chute."

He didn't want her to go through the chute. And to be honest, she didn't feel like having three metal bars ripped out of her. "Sounds like a plan."

"Did someone get you a phaser?" She placed her hand against the phaser at her hip, nodding even though McCoy couldn't see.

"Yes."

"Make sure it's set to stun." It was. "Shoot anything that isn't Starfleet." She would. "And Amelia?"

"Yes?"

She wondered if she imagined the way his voice shook when he said, "Don't get yourself killed."

"I won't." She hoped. Her heart raced as Doctor Kristoff brought forward a small silver case. She popped it open, looking down at the device nestled inside. Though she had no idea if it was what McCoy needed, she trusted that it was the vascular regenerator.

Amelia snapped it closed and grasped the handle, her knuckles turning white from the force of her grip. She double checked to make sure she had her communicator and the phaser. McCoy's code was already programmed into the device should she need to make an emergency call. As an afterthought, she tightened the straps on her backpack.

"It'll only take six minutes. What's the worst that can happen?" She asked herself. The supplied answer came quickly. Death by pirate.

Then the doors to sickbay opened and she began to run. The last time her heart had raced this fast was when she was heading towards that ball of light in the sky. Her motivations now were the same. Help them. Because she was the only one who could.

A split in the corridor appeared in front of her and she mentally pictured the blueprint of the ship. Left. She veered that direction, counting the wall panels as she halls were eerily empty, lacking the usually passing of uniformed personnel. Amelia briefly wondered where the security team was. Shouldn't they be roaming the halls?

When her mental count of the wall panels reached forty, she took a right turn into another corridor. 7E. She clutched the silver case to her chest, still running the rest of the distance. Her gaze went to the walls of the corridor and she was no longer counting the panels. This time she searched for an access hatch.

Two minutes into the corridor and she spotted it, small and round and sealed shut with a spinning wheel. It looked heavy, but Doctor Kristoff had said it would be easy to open. Apparently they had different ideas of easy. Amelia huffed as she attempted to twist the wheel, her eyes darting down the hallway and back to the case at her feet.

Bracing her palm against the wheel and her feet against the ground, she gave it another shove. She almost shouted in joy when it turned half an inch.

Joy turned to panic with a single thud against carpeted floors. Voices came next, unintelligible words that were guttural and quick. Not English. Not any language she had ever heard before. Amelia shoved against the wheel once more, another two inches turned. It was easier now, whether because she was afraid of what would soon come around the corner or whether she had simply broken the
tension in the wheel... she wasn't sure.

The footsteps grew louder, the voices too.

She kept turning the wheel, her eyes now focused down the corridor as shadows fell into sight. And then three things rounded the corner. She couldn't tell if they were male or female, her knowledge of aliens far too limited for her to know the difference. But even across the distance she could tell that they were ugly. Ridges ran across their greenish-gray faces, small horns on their foreheads. A few had something akin to tusks popping out of their mouths.

Whatever they were... they spotted her just as the wheel stopped turning. She didn't wait to see what they planned on doing next, her sore arms yanking open the hatch. Something struck the solid metal barrier just as she tucked herself against it, maybe a bullet or energy. All that really mattered was that it hadn't hit her.

Amelia reached down and grabbed hold of the silver case. When she looked inside the access chute, she was surprised to see McCoy's wide hazel eyes staring back at her. It would have been a comfort if he hadn't been blocking the entrance.

It looked like she would have to take her chances with the generator.

"Go!" She shouted, climbing inside the chute just as McCoy began to climb back down. The voices were shouts now and though she didn't know what was being said, it wasn't pleasant. Amelia reached out one last time, grabbing hold of the hatch and yanking it closed.

The lighting inside the chute was dim, but she could still see the locking mechanism on the hatch. She shoved the bar into it's latch and snapped it closed. Banging against the outside of the door echoed in the narrow chute as the pirate worked to get it open.

She let out a sigh of relief, her body shaking from the aftermath of adrenaline. Amelia clung tighter to the narrow ladder.

Something touched her leg, causing her to jump. Embarrassed by the sudden reaction, she looked down to see McCoy's hand against her calf. "You alright?"

"Fine." She managed. It wasn't the truth, but telling him that she was scared shit-less wouldn't do anyone any good.

"Okay." She could hardly see him in the dim lighting, but when he brought something small up to his mouth she recognized it as a communicator. "Intruders spotted in corridor 7-Echo."

"There was three." She supplied quickly and he gave her a swift nod.

"I repeat, three intruders spotted in corridor 7-Echo." He snapped it closed before anyone responded, his eyes focused on her with strange intensity. "We have to move. Were you able to bring the regenerator?" When she waved the case in her hand a small smile spread on his face.

His hand fell from her leg as he started the climb down the chute. She followed after him, grateful that the access tunnel was slanted and she didn't have to climb straight down with only one hand free. Her side began to ache halfway down, heat spreading against her ribs.

Amelia didn't slow her pace, though, the idea that the metal bars against her ribs might rip out at any moment only serving to increase her speed. She grit her teeth against the rising pain, her eyes constantly darting down to check McCoy's status on the ladder.
He had already reached the bottom, working to open the other access hatch, but his gaze was on her. Light flooded the chute as he swung open the hatch. She was one step behind him as they left the access tunnel.

And then his hands were on her, his cool composure evaporated as he shoved up the white top of her uniform. Surprised, she dropped the case. He ignored her automatic shout of denial, his hand gripping the hem as it held it above her rib line. Amelia jerked back against the corridor wall as a cold finger prodded her sensitive side.

"What the hell, McCoy?"

"Take it easy!" She was the one who needed to calm down? It wasn't her who was panting and being all... grabby. "I'm a doctor, remember?"

A doctor who could at least give a girl some warning.

Amelia dared a glance down at the exposed skin of her side. It was pink with the exception of her white scars, not looking near as bad as it felt. That's because the damage is on the inside, she reminded herself as she swatted his hands away to pull her shirt back down.

He was wearing that same frustrated expression on his face that he had earlier when he helped her load the shuttle. Like it was his fault that this had happened. McCoy's voice was soft, softer than usual anyway, as he said, "When we get to the cargo bay I'll make sure that's taken care of."

"Let's just get there." Amelia muttered as she picked up the silver case.

They made it to the cargo bay without further incident and though she could tell he wanted to fix her throbbing side, he took the vascular regenerator and headed towards another patient. She found an empty cot in the bay and, taking his advice, she dropped her backpack to the floor and rested.

But she watched him from across the room as he gave a steady stream of orders. He worked quickly, but effectively. He had been needed there when he'd went to meet her in the corridor, but she realized he wouldn't risk the safety of anyone else in the room.

He seemed to take the burden with ease, naturally even. Maybe it was a part of his nature. Maybe it was what led to him becoming a doctor. After he finished with another patient, he made his way over to her, carrying a dermal regenerator.

Amelia waved him off, stating, "I'm fine. Help them."

His steps faltered, that intense stare back on his face. It took her a moment to realize it was respect in his gaze. She guessed he didn't give that out like candy and it made her feel warm inside. Silently, he nodded and walked away, towards the next patient.

Someone was touching her face, a light graze of fingers against her temple. "Miss Wright." A whisper soon followed, low and male. She opened her eyes wide, startled by the idea that she had fallen asleep. With the alarm still sounding, it was a surprise that she had even managed it at all.

The hand on her face was slowly removed, but she followed it with her eyes. Standing above her was Doctor McCoy, who continued to whisper, "Adrenaline takes it out of you."

"What-"

"It's time. I've finished with everyone else, now it's your turn." A hiss escaped her teeth as he pulled up her shirt, exposing her skin to cool air. It wasn't unpleasant, just a contrast to the heat that pooled
there. But the pain faded as he waved the dermal regenerator over her and she sighed in relief.

*It's a dermal regenerator,* she thought suddenly.

"Wait!" She cried out. It was too late. The pain was gone now, her eyes filling with water. McCoy looked startled by her sudden response, his hands going up in the air.

"What?"

She looked down at the skin, expecting to see the three white lines that had been there since the night her parents had died. Instead there was a smooth expanse of flesh, unmarred and sickeningly perfect. "They're gone." Amelia's rasp was low, filled with the same pain that flooded her heart.

"The scars?" His low mumble reached her ears, just as his hand reached her cheek. In another circumstance she would have been taken aback by the comforting gesture. "Ah, hell. Amelia, there was no way around it."

"I know. I feel silly. Distraught about years-old scars when people were close to dying. How messed up is that?" Even as she rationalized it, it didn't make her heart any lighter. Her teary gaze met McCoy's sympathetic one.

"I guess it depends on the scar." He told her quietly. "You still have them, they're just not visible anymore."

"We can't stop how things change, can we?" So far she hadn't been able to. First her entire life and now the change to her body. How long would it take for her memory to follow? For her to no longer have an image of her parents in her mind? Looking at those scars was always the easiest way to picture her father's face or her mother's smile, no matter how morbid it seemed.

McCoy's face held an expression of deep though, as though he was thinking of changes in his own life. Then he glanced down at her, an unreadable emotion in his eyes. "No... I don't think we can."

It was all a little too deep and raw for the moment, so she shifted on the cot and changed the subject. "Any word on security?"

McCoy rubbed the bridge of his nose as he looked up at the ceiling. Like he was just as frustrated about the situation as she was. Or everyone else on board for that matter. "They're still preforming the sweep, but the Enterprise located a Nausiccan vessel anchored against the belly of the Huron. Jim beamed over a security team."

That surprised her. The reason they hadn't beamed over equipment and people initially was because of the sporadic power fluctuations in the shields and transporters. "I thought the transporters were malfunctioning."

"Chief Engineer Scott rerouted power to bring them over."

McCoy seemed well informed, her brow raising in question. "How do you know all this?"

"Jim contacted me." Of course the captain did. They were close friends, from what Amelia had gathered. Always eating lunch together, always spotted walking the corridors on the Enterprise side by side. "He wanted to know our situation."

"Oh. So we just stay in here and wait? Can't we do something?" She wasn't sure what *something* they could do. Maybe grab a few phasers and help the security teams? Maybe do... recon?
"You did more than enough. You saved Ensign Rowlings life." McCoy pointed to a man resting just a few cots away. She recalled McCoy working on him first after retrieving the vascular regenerator. "For now we give the security team time to do their jobs. It's a big ship."

"Big enough for someone to hide in." Amelia reminded him. There was no telling how long the lock-down could last.

"Nausicccans are known for being aggressive." That didn't make her feel any better. "It's not in their nature to hide. If anything they will-"

The communications panel for the cargo bay beeped loudly, drawing McCoy's, and most of the other people's in the room, attention. McCoy was already moving before a stoic voice came across the speakers."This is Commander Spock, security code Beta-Four-Echo-Seven-Two. Open the cargo bay doors."

McCoy quickly punched in a series of numbers on the panel. The double doors slid open, revealing the First Officer of the Enterprise and four other men wearing red shirts and carrying some kind of rifles. While Spock faced McCoy, the rest of the security team watched the corridors.

Amelia shoved off the cot, making her way to where the two conversed.

Spock's words were emotionless, full of facts and nothing else. "Five of the Nausiccan intruders have made it onto the bridge. Captain O'Shea has been injured and we have negotiated to allow you access onto the bridge to treat him."

Her face paled at the mention of Captain O'Shea. "Is he alright?"

The question drew a sharp glare from Spock, or rather his normal stare, who answered, "Miss Wright, I am afraid this is a matter of security. I must request that you-

"No." McCoy cut him off. "She has a right to know."

Thanks. She'd remember to voice that later.

Spock's brow rose. "Very well. So far as we know, the captain was stabbed in his left leg with a bayonet. No major arteries were severed, however without access to an autosuture device he is likely to have permanent damage. There is also report of two other stabblings, though no further information was given to let us know their status."

"Miss Wright, could you grab the silver case on that table?" Amelia glanced to where McCoy pointed, a single open case resting on a long table.

As she went to retrieve it, Spock said, "I must insist that she not join us." It wasn't his fault that he couldn't empathize, limited by that Vulcan control. But she felt rising resentment anyway.

Then a confusing rush of hope as McCoy responded, "You try telling her no. She's coming."

"Only medical personnel have been negotiated to enter the bridge. We cannot guarantee her safety." That much was certain. So far she'd been deathly ill, attacked by plants, and shot at by pirates. Not that she planned on reminded the First Officer of all those close calls.

"I will guarantee her safety. She needs to see him, Spock. And she's more capable than we give her credit for. She risked her life to save a man she didn't even know. What do you think she will risk for a man she does?" Warmth spread in her chest, that underlying tone of respect detectable in McCoy's voice. And all she had done to earn it was carry a case across the ship.
Then Spock went and stopped that warmth cold. "That is irrelevant. Her presence would be an unnecessary complication." This back and forth between the doctor and the first officer would have been interesting to see if she wasn't the subject matter. And if Captain O'Shea wasn't currently bleeding out all over the bridge.

"Jim would back me on this." *Can't believe you used that card, McCoy. Why won't you?*

For a brief second, she could have sworn Spock sounded defensive. "Because I am not emotionally involved, whereas you are compromised."

"I'm gonna need someone with me, anyway. It might as well be someone who can handle a stressful situation. It's either her or one of the young medics behind me who are still wet behind the ears. I trust her to do what I say, when I say it." Amelia knew he meant it, but he was lying in a way. He trusted his team just as much. He wasn't doing this for him. He was fighting for her.

But couldn't they just avoid going to the bridge? McCoy had already said that Scotty had rerouted power to the transporters. "Why don't you just transport O'Shea out of the bridge?"

"The Nausiccans have activated a shielding device that prevents all transporter use. Until we can successfully negotiate their surrender, we will proceed to focus on treating the injured." The moment Spock was ready to relent, she knew. His brow dropped, his scrutinizing gaze focused on her. Then he said, "If you plan on joining Doctor McCoy, you will need a change of clothes."

Less than six minutes later she was dressed in medical Blues, a Starfleet insignia pinned against her chest. It was loose fitting and a little too long, but it was the best they could do in such a short time. She shot McCoy a wavering smile, part gratitude for allowing her to go with him and part admiration for him standing up for her.

She only hoped she would meet his expectations.
Chapter 16

STARDATE 2492.197

M.J. Archer Base Camp

Antarctica

Commander Eli Jefferson kept his eyes on the empty launch room, waiting for the pod to return. Waiting for anything at this point. His hands clenched the railing in front of him, as if he could find strength from the bars of steel. Behind him there was a flurry of activity, calculations being made, recordings, worried voices rising with each passing moment.

Because their captains were forty-eight seconds late.

The inspection team had trained for a number of scenarios, to include the one they currently faced. What if Captain Parcell and Captain Pike never returned home? It would set back the Pon Izau project by at least another five years. Finding new candidates, vetting them, and then getting them to accept the risks would be just one of the many problems the project would face.

In another room there were diplomats of the Federation gathered, probably discussing the fallout should the mission fail. What would it mean for the time-line? How could they correct any changes made? Would they even be able to? Would they want to?

"Should we be concerned?" Eli asked as a tall shadow fell across him, not bothering to look back as the Chief Commander paced at his side. For a Vulcan to be pacing the situation must be worse than they had been told. When she didn't respond he risked a quick glance her way.

Her narrowed eyes were focused on the launch room.

"No." Was that shaking he heard in her voice? "Not until we reach the five minute mark."

"It's time travel. Minutes mean nothing." Even if they had reached their first destination with error, their return should be exact. Down to the millisecond.

Again, T'Janis' voice wavered as she responded, "We have never done this before. Minutes could mean everything." Eli tapped his foot against the floor, impatient... but more importantly, terrified. His tapping came to a stop when T'Janis added, "The needs of the many..."

What she did mean by that, Eli wondered.

Finally, Junior Commander Fowler called out from the far side of the room, looking up from his console. "We're getting an incoming signal!" Just like everyone else, he wanted to bear witness to history. Uniformed personnel flew towards the observation window, crackling light beginning to appear in the launch room.

The thunderous roar returned, the pod popping back into existence with a deafening crack. Eli released the railing and jerked back from the window, fearful that it would shatter. But he never looked away. Not when the pod appeared. Not when traces of white dust slowly fell off the outer shell. And not when the pod began to power down.

Eli's heart thudded in his chest, waiting as the communications system come back on. Then he heard a familiar male voice as it said, "Archer Command, this is Captain Matthew Parcell. Please tell us
Applause sounded in the room, sounds of relief and joy resonating. Eli was among the sighing, but he didn't clap. Instead he picked up his two-way headset and took a seat in front of a terminal. Data was already streaming, lines of code to later be analyzed and translated.

Background applause could also be heard from the command station. "Welcome home, Team."

"Well that's one less thing to worry about." Matthew said just before he began the pod opening sequence. There was still decontamination to go through, which meant it would be at least thirty minutes before the captains were actually authorized out of the launch room. But communications would remain up until visual contact.

Eli glanced away from the screen and towards the window of the launch room, making notes against the code. He frowned as he read another downloaded line. Something wasn't right. It looked almost identical to every simulation run, but after having seen the passing numbers and letters more time than he could count, minor differences were easy to pick out.

He'd have to verify his findings with another inspector. Eli stood from the terminal, and headed directly towards the Chief Commander. She held a data padd in her hand, her brows low as she read the screen. When he made it to her side he could see that she was looking over the same lines of code.

There were no signs of agitation on the Vulcan's face, which would have been ignored by most people. Eli didn't miss it, however. T'Janis had spent her entire adult life on this project and he had seen her frustration when things didn't go to plan. A downward tilt of her lips, a clenched jaw. Subtle signs that were non-existent now.

Why didn't this bother her? Her life's work encountering a significant setback. And it would be a setback once this was brought to life, either by him, the inspection team, or by the two captains who had actually experienced the journey.

Eli let his hand drift into T'Janis' line of sight, his finger waving across the erroneous code. "What does this mean?" But he had a sinking feeling that he already knew what the code meant. That she also knew what it meant.

"Exactly what it says." The Chief Commander tucked the data padd under her arm, as if she had read enough. As if whatever she had read simply confirmed what she already knew. She pinned Eli with a steady gaze. "The pod did not arrive in Antarctica."

Where the hell did it go? That was the question Eli wanted to ask, but didn't. Instead, he went with, "How could that happen?"

"Simple. Once the chroniton drive activated, a subversive secondary program overwhelmed the first." T'Janis sighed, an unusual response from a Vulcan, then continued, "In essence, the pod was given a new destination."

"That makes no sense. Why would there even be a second program?"

What she said next caused his eyes to go wide and his breath to catch. "Because I put it there, Commander Jefferson."

**STARDATE 2260.104**

**Beta Quadrant**
Amelia handed Spock her phaser, her first line of defense soon clenched in the Vulcan's hand. McCoy frowned, but didn't say anything. He was well aware that the negotiator promised that whoever was sent as medical assistance would come in unarmed. That didn't mean he had to like it.

He could overhear Spock giving Amelia a quick brief on Nausicaans, coaching her on how she should behave in their presence. McCoy already knew. Keep your head down, don't look them in the eye, and don't even sound combative. They were a volatile race, driven by aggression and greed. It's what made them effective pirates.

A communicator went off and McCoy spared a glance back to see Spock holding one to his ear. His voice was too low to hear now, a conversation that seemed to set the Vulcan on edge occurring on the other end of the line. Then Spock's attention diverted back to Amelia. What was said next, McCoy wasn't sure.

The briefing came to a close and, even as McCoy packed a few items into his case, he watched as Amelia walked over to him. Her eyes were crinkled with worry, whether because of the fact that they would soon be dealing with the pirates in person or because of the captain's current status... he wasn't sure.

Her next statement answered that silent question. "These Nausicaans don't sound like good people." Concerned blue eyes met his hazel ones. He didn't know how to relieve her well placed fear, but he had to make sure she didn't go in there too scared to perform.

So he chose the direct route, because he'd come to learn that Amelia preferred it that way. "They won't kill us."

Amelia frowned, her disbelief obvious. "What's keeping them from doing just that?"

"Because they don't stand a chance on getting off this ship alive if they do." McCoy knew that was true. If there was any chance that they would be killed on that bridge, Jim would have never agreed to the negotiation.

She still had doubt written on her face and he refrained from reaching out to her. Instead, he shoved one of the silver cases towards her. When she took it without hesitation, he managed a small grin and said, "All you have to do is exactly what I tell you. We're gonna be just fine, Miss Wright."

"I think Amelia might be better under the circumstances." He was used to being formal, time spent in Starfleet doing wonders on rounding his rough edges. But her offer of informality was a welcomed one and, if the future allowed it, he'd probably never use her last name again. Now isn't the time for sentiment, McCoy.

Despite his mental chastising, he couldn't help but ask, "What circumstances?"

"Friends heading straight towards the danger." Amelia was grinning, like the situation was suddenly funny or so far-fetched that she couldn't keep the amusement off her face.

He didn't resist returning the grin, that expression too infectious to ignore. "You're a part of the Enterprise crew. Half the time there's no where else to go..."

The security team escorted them across the ship, each member armed with phaser rifles. It was kind of funny considering that the threat didn't exist in the corridors. No... it existed in the place where the security team wasn't allowed to go.
Amelia's gait was steady, each step paced and confident. McCoy tried to keep his thoughts away from the negative. He would do everything in his power to make sure they walked back out of that bridge. And he knew that his captain was doing the exact same thing.

The handle of his case bit into his palm as he tightened his fist. He hoped they were bringing enough medical equipment for what they would soon face. Three known casualties with unknown injuries...

The turbolift came into view and the security team ceased their guard, leaving McCoy and Amelia to walk the last few steps alone. Her pace slowed beside him and he shot her a questioning stare. "Last chance." *To back out.*

"I'm coming." Then her back went straight as she stepped into the turbolift.

For a moment, McCoy just stared at her. He admired her, respected her, but above all... he *liked* her. She was afraid, telltale signs written all over her posture, but she stepped forward anyway. She took risks, not for herself, but for others. And she was flawed in ways she didn't mind exposing. She didn't hide behind a cocky exterior like Jim. She didn't talk down to others like Spock.

He hadn't let go of the guilt for the way he'd treated her, but he had tried to make it up to her.

He never would be able to, though. McCoy understood that she surpassed him as a person. He may have the ability to heal a person's body, but she carried the ability to help them grow. Like all those plants in the hydroponics bay. Like how she managed to make him *want* to smile after years of scowling.

Now wasn't the time for him to analyze it he realized as she arched a brow at him, as if saying 'let's go, I'm ready'. Who was he to deny her?

His hand didn't relax against the handle of the case as he took his place beside her in the turbolift. The lights flickered, a beep sounding through the small space that signified their rise to the bridge. He could hear Amelia take in a long breath and he found himself mimicking the action. Surprisingly, it centered him.

It was the calm he needed just before the turbolift doors opened, revealing three disruptor weapons pointed at them. Behind the pistols were several angry Nausicaans, *growls* emanating from their did his best to maintain a pacifistic stance, but he couldn't help shifting slightly to place himself in front of Amelia.

A gentle pressure against his elbow had him glancing down to see her hand pressing against his sleeve. "Don't..."

Oddly enough, her soft whisper caused him to shift his attention away from her and back onto the situation in the bridge. The three Nausicaans holding the disruptor pistols exchanged a string of words, the language foreign to McCoy's ears. Behind them stood another Nausicaan who pinned McCoy with a deadly glare. *The leader.*

It seemed the universal translator wasn't operating in the bridge, because they conversed once more in their native language.

Someone on the far side of the bridge finally spoke up, this time in standard. "They want the cases." McCoy glanced past the Nausicaans to look at the woman who had translated. Of course no one would have told him that he'd be talking through a xeno-linguist. That would have been too easy.

As he and Amelia held out their cases, McCoy said, "Tell them I'm the doctor. I'm just here to check on the injured."
One of the Nausicaans lowered his pistol, yanking the case from McCoy's hand, while another did the same with Amelia's. That strange language was heard again as the woman translated, the tones shifting during the conversation.

It was clear that the linguist was doing her best to keep them calm, while working in McCoy's favor. After a brief pause, she addressed him. "They want to know who you brought with you. I told them blue was medical and she was either a doctor or a nurse."

Before McCoy could respond, the Nausicaan who had taken his case stepped forward and grabbed his arm. He didn't resist being pulled from the turbolift, but he did glance back to keep an eye on Amelia. Talking to her would only make them suspicious so he bit his cheek to stop the words from coming. It's only a search. Don't fight them.

He took the opportunity to get a better view of the bridge, his gaze searching for the injured. One of the navigation officers was cradling his arm to his stomach. Probably a dislocated shoulder. Low priority. A female security officer was holding a red bandage against her forearm. It probably wasn't red originally. Low priority. A small group of people were huddled against a man on the floor of the bridge. His yellow shirt was barely visible through the group. Captain O'Shea. High priority.

Ridged hands with long nails ran down his legs in a pat down motion. McCoy kept from recoiling, his eyes darting from one Starfleet member to another. Three known casualties. Three known injuries. The worst of it appeared to be the captain who remained immobile on the floor. The rest, it seemed, were following previously given orders to remain seated and stay quiet.

As soon as the hands left him, he turned to face the Nausicaan. "I need to treat the captain." Behind him, the woman translated.

More growling and a snarl or two later and the case was shoved back into McCoy's hands. When he started moving towards the Captain, Amelia followed. They kept their voices low, both trying to focus on the task at hand rather than the disruptors at their back.

The group of people surrounding O'Shea spread out, revealing the worsening condition of the captain. His pants leg was coated in blood while more seeped onto the floor. The doctor hissed through his teeth. At least there hadn't been enough time for the wound to become infected.

McCoy placed a hand against O'Shea's forehead and the touch was enough to startle the captain into opening his eyes. Apparently, everyone had been told to keep their hands off. When their gazes met, O'Shea's mouth opened in a surprised o. "McCoy?"

"The one and only." The doctor looked back towards the wound on the captain's leg, still assessing. It was frustrating enough to be performing under duress, now he had the added complication of lacking equipment. "I don't have anything with me to cut open your pants leg, so we're gonna have to take them off."

"Drop trow in front of the lady?" Even with the situation, O'Shea managed a rough chuckle and his eyes flickered to Amelia.

"Your dignity is the least of my concerns, captain. I'm trying to save you from muscle damage." McCoy glanced to where Amelia knelt at his side. "Open my case. Inside you'll see the micro-suture device and a small insert. Can you prep them while I get him ready?"

"Yes." She whispered just before turning away. He tried to be gentle as he tugged down the captain's pants, knowing that he failed when O'Shea let out a shallow gasp. There was little he could do about that now, save stopping his efforts at just above O'Shea's knees.
Blood ran in a steady trickle from the inch long gash. The knife hadn't been long enough to pass all the way through the thigh, but long enough to do serious damage. In his current condition he wouldn't be walking.

Amelia read McCoy's silent cues, handing him the micro-suture device just as he opened his palm. "You're going to need a subdermal regeneration later, but this is the best we can do for now." He shifted on his knees and shot a sideways glance at Amelia. "Can you get me a hypospray?"

The previously immobile O'Shea reached out suddenly, catching McCoy's wrist. His words were quick and grated, capturing the doctor's full attention. "No pain killers. I need to be alert. The crew's safety is my responsibility."

"You're going to be unconscious in ten minutes anyway. There's more than two pints of blood on this floor." If he said no again, McCoy wouldn't ask twice.

Amelia's hand drifted into McCoy's line of sight and he watched on as she clasped the captain's hand in her own little one. "Mr. O'Shea, take the shot." Though her voice was soft, it must have been convincing, because after a moment he gave McCoy a sharp nod.

Working around the Nausicaans wasn't a pleasant experience, but they both managed. After giving the captain a dose of the hypospray and suturing his wound, McCoy and Amelia moved to the next patient. Sudden movement set their captors on edge and even though they had disruptor pistols pointed at them time and time again, no one was fired at.

The female with the gash in her arm only needed a few swipes of the dermal regenerator. As they tended to her, McCoy noticed Amelia's attention drifting, her eyes darting around the room. Is she looking for something?

Maybe it was because she had never been in such a situation and her earlier adrenaline was wearing off, fear taking its place. It explained her quick glances around the room and the slight shaking of her body. If he wasn't so set on dealing with the problem at hand, he might have suffered from the same experience. But it was difficult to be afraid when there were injured around him. They didn't need a distracted doctor. They needed a competent focused one.

McCoy saved his last hypospray for the man with the dislocated shoulder, hoping that the medication would keep him calmer during the re-set. Sudden shouting would be a sure-fire way to set off the Nausicaans.

He gripped the hypospray in his hand as he knelt in front of the man still cradling his arm. Amelia was right there beside him, looking at him for the next instructions. "Second shoulder I've set today." McCoy said, both to her and the male in front of him. "I'm going to give you a pain reliever."

He didn't wait for permission this time, pushing the hypospray against the man's neck. "Amelia, I need you to wrap your arms around him from the side. You'll hold him in place while I pop the shoulder back." She complied quickly, flinching when the injured man groaned in pain. McCoy ignored it and gripped his wrist, his other hand braced under the arm.

There was no count, just a quick nod passed from McCoy to Amelia. The second McCoy jerked the arm into place, several things happened. The man shouted, more from surprise than pain considering the generous dose he'd been given from the hypospray.

When he shoved away from McCoy, he knocked Amelia back.

And she landed against the leg of one of the Nausicaan guards. McCoy jumped forward and over the
kneeling man, his hand catching Amelia's wrist. It didn't stop her from impacting the guard though and there was barely enough time for her to get to her feet before a disruptor pistol was pointed at her face.

McCoy held his breath, a sudden rush of fear keeping him in place. It was a good thing though, since if he intervened she might just get shot. To her credit, Amelia didn't move, standing more still than a doe caught in headlights.

A loud crack sounded throughout the bridge, stunning him out of fear and into anger. Amelia cried out at the Nausicaan's delivered backhand, her body twisting with the force. Still... McCoy didn't move. He couldn't. One wrong step and it would be a disruptor blast instead of the slap she'd received.

He did keep his gaze on her though, her unmoving form on the floor bringing violent desires to the surface. Everyone was silent, hushed whispers gone in an instant. His heart thudded in his chest as he willed himself to stay in place.

Then a Nausicaan on the other side of the bridge began to yell, as if agitated by the disturbance. Attention was drawn away from Amelia and towards the shouting match that soon waged between the pirates. The linguist didn't translate, but McCoy noticed that she followed the string of words as they passed.

When he was certain that Amelia was no longer in danger, he picked up his dermal regenerator and slowly made his way towards her. The Nausicaan who had struck her was turned away from them now, growling what could only be obscenities.

**STARDATE 2260.104**

**Beta Quadrant**

**USS Huron**

Amelia's face stung from the impact, liquid running from a shallow cut across her cheek where something metal had caught skin. Her vision blurred with unshed reactionary tears. But it wasn't blurry enough to block out the blinking light right in front of her.

Even through the pain, elation rose to the surface. *Everything is gonna be alright*, she mentally told herself as she averted her gaze away from the blinking device attached under the navigation console.

*Spock was speaking on the communicator, his hand held up in a silent request for her to wait. She did, but she couldn't help noticing the confused glances he kept throwing in her direction. Who was on the other end of the line?*

*The conversation may have been short, but there was no doubt that important information had been passed on. He looked hesitant, almost unsure. It was unnerving considering how emotionless he always seemed.*

*When he resumed speaking to her, his voice was a whisper. "That was the captain. Do you remember the device I mentioned earlier?"

*Amelia's response was also low, the feeling that this was a secret keeping her from being too loud. "The one making the transporters useless? Yeah."*

*"Our Chief Engineer believes it is a Nausicaan personal shield generator. Such a device is typically used to protect against disruptor blasts, however it can be adapted to disable unauthorized*
transporter use on an individual. Chief Scott believes if the generator is attached to another power source then its radius will be widened."

Amelia's mouth hung open for a second before she responded, "I understood less than half of what you just said."

"Somewhere on the bridge is a hexagon shaped device no larger than the size of your palm. If the device is removed from it's power source then-"

"Then you can use the transporters!" Spock raised a brow when Amelia resumed a normal tone, silently asking her to go back to a whisper. "That's great. So you're going to let someone know, right?"

"I'm letting you know." If the Vulcan was exasperated, it barely showed.

It took a moment for what he was saying to register and Amelia scoffed when it finally sank in. "I'm a gardener. Maybe this is better left to the guys wearing red over there. You know, the guys with the guns."

"As of now you are one of the two people given access to the bridge. It will take time and a presence on the bridge to locate this device."

"You can't seriously be suggesting that I disable this device."

Color drained from her face. Spock looked nothing but serious. "Should things escalate, that may be our only option to prevent further casualties. As pointed out to me by Captain Kirk." What was Kirk thinking? For some reason the man continued to give her credit when he really shouldn't.

"So tell McCoy. He's been through this kind of.. stuff."

She spared a glance towards the doctor, frowning as Spock countered. "Doctor McCoy will need to focus on the injured. This task, large as it may be, falls to you." He looked skeptical, but it seemed he was only the messenger. Kirk had been the one to give the order while Scotty relayed the information on the device.

Spock could take his skepticism and shove it, Amelia thought as she tuned back into what was happening on the bridge. The Nausicaans were shouting at each other, their voices rising with every word. The one who'd hit her seemed defensive and a little pissed, his ridged nostrils flaring. Or maybe that was a normal look...

She shifted on the floor, keeping her movements slow so attention wouldn't be drawn to her. Her arm extended towards the navigation console, her gaze darting between the Nausicaans and the hexagon shaped shield generator.

A leg fell between her and the device, startling her into looking upwards. Hazel eyes stared down at her, wide with worry. McCoy stood above her, his hand clenched tightly around a dermal regenerator. She stopped herself from telling him to get out of the way, that she had a mission to finish.

A mission given to her by Captain Kirk. A mission that could keep them all alive. But he was already kneeling, his knee next to her shoulder, whispering, "Are you alright?"

I would be if you'd just step aside. She didn't voice the thought. Instead she just gave him a nod and said, "I'm fine."
"He hit you pretty hard." His eyes narrowed as he looked over her face. "You've got blood on your cheek."

"A scratch." The mumble was kept purposefully low, her gaze still drifting between the doctor, the device, and the Nausicaans. At least their captors were continuing to argue amongst themselves. The sting in her cheek faded as McCoy waved the regenerator over the area.

She wanted to tell him thanks, but her mind was too occupied trying to develop some sort of plan concerning the shield generator. If Scotty knew that the device was causing the transporters to be useless, then he should know the moment that they were working again.

Even still, there would be a window where the Nausicaans realized the generator was pulled from the power source. How long would it take Scotty to react? Seconds? Minutes?

A loud snarl pulled her attention back towards the Nausicaans, the man who had struck her taking a few steps forward towards another one of the pirates. Amelia stared, taking in their body language, their rising shouts and raised fists.

They were about to fight. It was the perfect opportunity.

Amelia never personally considered herself a woman who sought adventure. But adventure had found her five months ago and for some reason it didn't seem ready to let her go. She did what she considered to be the right thing. Risks were just a biproduct of "the right thing" sometimes. And danger couldn't keep you from taking steps or you'd just be standing still forever...

She acted quickly, rolling on the floor. It forced McCoy to shift to his other knee, his surprise easy to notice, but just as easy to ignore. She couldn't spend time telling him what was going on, not when seconds mattered.

Her gaze landed on the hexagon shaped device, her hand reaching for it. The shield generator fit in her palm, her fingers clasping around it. One sharp tug pulled the device from it's nesting place, the blinking lights beginning to dim shortly after, yet still pulsing.

Was that it? It seemed so easy. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, her heartbeat strong in her ears. She was holding the one thing that gave the pirates leverage. It might even be the one thing that would protect her.

"Amelia... what are you holding?" McCoy's harsh whisper shook her from the oncoming daze of having actually succeeded. She glanced up at him, then back at the soft blinking lights of the device she had clutched to her chest.

Approaching footsteps had her standing from the floor, McCoy standing with her. The Nausicaans had stopped shouting, all five of their disruptor pistols pointed at her. Lingering words from Spock's briefing came back to her in a rush. McCoy held his hands up, not in warning, but in surrender.

She cast a quick glance around the room. The side of the bridge they stood on had only a few people. The man with the dislocated shoulder who was resting flat on the floor. The linguist who was taking shelter behind her console. And McCoy. If the Nausicaans fired, the blast was only likely to strike her or McCoy. Two standing targets.

Unless she acted quickly.

Amelia held the device protectively to her chest, her other hand slowly reaching for McCoy's wrist. He was good at reading unspoken cues. She'd seen that when they'd worked to heal the injured on the bridge. So hopefully he'd be able to read this one.
He didn't resist when she jerked him towards her, though his confusion was apparent on his face. There was no time to explain.

"Put your arms around me." Amelia's words were rushed and he reacted just as fast, his arms slipping around her to pull her tight against him. The sound of the disruptor pistol was similar to that of a phaser, a loud hiss that echoed in her ears. It was louder than McCoy's heartbeat, the fast *thump* audible with her ear pressed against his chest.

Light exploded in front of her, mere millimeters in front of her face, only to dissipate a second later. The personal shield generator had worked. "Such a device is typically used to protect against disruptor blast," Spock had told her.

Then the Nausicaans were enveloped in their own white sparkling light and the bridge fell silent.

Scotty had beamed them out. They had succeeded. *She* had done it. Captain O'Shea's words filtered through her mind, *"I have a feeling that you are somehow destined to be a part of it."* Was this really her destiny? Fighting pirates and plants? Was this the reason that ball in the sky appeared in the middle of the desert?

Amelia's thoughts kept circling around O'Shea's words. And about how much this journey had started to change her...
STARDATE 2260.127

Beta Quadrant

She was panting by the time she was done, her blood pumping hard now and sending a red flush to her cheeks and collar. Spock had intensified his training regiment, introducing more complex defense moves and even a few offensive ones. Other students looked ready to be finished, but the Vulcan didn't seem to notice. He was far from exhausted, unlike the rest of them.

Their only reprieve came with the communicator beeped in the gym and a voice called him to the bridge. Amelia breathed a sigh of relief and she cracked a grin when she heard a couple others sighing as well.

Before he left, Spock called out to them, "Next week we will focus on cardiovascular endurance." At first she couldn't tell if it was meant as an insult. Then the slight raise of his brow that followed made her think it was. *Humans just can't keep up.*

She limped towards where she'd stored her datapadd, a twinge in her right thigh noticeable now that she wasn't sparring. Her first thought was to drop by the med-bay and have McCoy wave some magic device and fix her right up. Her second thought was to just wrap it and move on.

McCoy had been popping up in her thoughts more often these days, interrupting her work and taking her mind off of more important matters. Like getting the hydroponics bay full once more. She'd had to pull out the maturation modifier to make up for the produce she'd given to the Huron. And there was still a quarterly report she had to finish.

Then again, she had to face him sooner or later. Amelia figured all the rest could wait as she hobbled towards the med-bay. Another item on her list of things to do was a medical examination, ordered by Captain Kirk after the incident with the pirates. It was better this way, knocking this off her list, clear the air with the doctor, and hopefully she wouldn't be limping afterwards.

Maybe she would be able to actually focus once she was done.

The doors to the med-bay slid open, revealing McCoy in his white coat, his face pressed against a microscope of some sort. He didn't even turn as she stepped inside, his attention completely taken by whatever he was looking at.

Amelia hopped to where he was seated, her hand landing on the table to brace herself. She cleared her throat and at the soft sound McCoy pulled back from the micro-scope and shot her a sideways glare. Even though he was obviously upset at the interruption, when he recognized her, his gaze softened to be replaced with surprise.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then McCoy tapped his fingers on the tabletop. "You done avoiding me now?"

Amelia gave an unlady-like snort and raised a brow at him. "Are you going to insult my intelligence?" *Again.*

Looking like his normally irritated self, he stood from his seat and ran a hand through already messy hair. "I was upset. I apologized for that."
"Not sure that 'sorry, Amelia, but you need your head examined' counts as an apology." And if that was his idea of an apology, then she wasn't the only one who needed an MRI.

"You lied to me, deliberately put yourself in danger, and could have gotten the people on that bridge killed." It wasn't as biting as the first time he had said it. And she didn't bother defending her actions, having already done that weeks before.

She held up an open palm, stopping him before he said anything else. "You've mentioned that. I'm just here for my exam. And I need you to take a look at my leg."

McCoy huffed, his narrowed gaze leveling out as it drifted down her legs. "What's wrong with your leg?"

"Pulled muscle, I think."

"Fighting pirates?" He muttered under his breath.

"Hah. More like Vulcans." Concern was back on his face as though it was a real possibility that she had actually fought the first officer. "Spock's combat tactics class."

"You are the most unlucky person I have ever met." The accusation came as he guided her towards the bio-bed.

"And you are the most aggravating person I've ever met." He didn't deny it. Finally, Amelia sighed and sent him a pleading gaze. "Can we just do this without the commentary? Please?"

"Fine. I'll get you a gown." As he walked across the room, he called back to her, "You should have done this two weeks ago... you know, after being a hero."

"Commentary, McCoy."

"You said we were friends. Can't friends be honest?" They could. But McCoy's honesty was a mixture of brutal and insulting. Neither were what she considered beneficial to a friendship. For a doctor he sure picked his moments at using tact.

"I said we were working on being friends, and you set that back by a year." Amelia noticed the way his back stiffened at her words. It wasn't her fault he continued to make a fool of himself. She shucked her clothes and pulled on the gown, occasionally casting a glance at his back. When she was ready she took a seat on the bed and called out to him. "You can turn around now."

"Lie back, I need to get a full image." She did as he asked, watching as he rotated large pieces of equipment on the bed. Between pushing buttons and shifting the equipment, he asked, "And a year? That seems a little harsh, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should count the transgressions. Saying I need to get my head examined is about a month. Calling me stupid is two. Irrational is two. Danger seeking is a week, mainly because it might be true. Comparing me to a child is three months." She had been using her fingers to keep count, but halfway through he pushed her hands down, repeating his command to lie back.

His retort was a grumbled, "at least your memory is in excellent condition."

Across the beeps and whirs of the machines, she said, "I've got more-"

"No. I've heard enough." Then he fell silent as he gazed at her results, tapping his foot. A pregnant pause formed, causing concern to grow in her gut. Maybe she should have done this sooner.
When he spoke up, she realized he was messing with her. "Your image looks good. Let me take a look at your leg. Where does it hurt?"

"Right thigh." He slipped on a glove and pushed up her gown, keeping her modesty intact. Cool latex covered fingers prodded in a pattern starting from her knee. When he reached the sore area on her inner thigh she jerked back with a hiss. He pulled his hand back just as fast.

"You were right. Pulled muscle. I can get you a local relaxant. Speed up recovery." She watched him as he loaded up a hypospray, her gaze drifting down his backside. If there was one thing that was consistent about the man, it was his ability to be attractive even while infuriating.

She cleared her throat and shook her head, casting away the stray and random thought. "That sounds good."

As he pressed the hypospray against her thigh he asked in a low voice, "Are you done avoiding me now?"

She took a moment to consider his question, then gave him a slight nod. "I'll think about it, McCoy."

"I was upset, Amelia. You should have told me what you were planning." Another line she'd already heard. She arched a brow at him and circled her hand, asking him to turn around so she could get dressed.

As she slipped on her pants, she said, "That doesn't excuse what you said. Besides, Spock told me I shouldn't. He said you needed to focus on being a doctor. It's what you're good at." After zipping her jacket, she tested her weight on her injured leg, surprised to find that the pain was gone.

McCoy's next words were grated, "He should have never put you in that position. Jim either."

Amelia tilted her head, thinking back through the past couple of weeks. She'd been in the dining hall almost every day and had seen the captain quite a few times. Seated alone while eating. It didn't take a genius to figure out why. "You haven't had lunch with him since the Huron. Is that punishment?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Amelia scoffed, "Can't friends be honest?"

"I thought we were just working on it." His voice was filled with disdain, as if the idea of being in this in-between state was not only an annoyance, but a burden. Before she could retort, he continued in a softer voice. "No. I'm not punishing Jim. I'm... just not sure I won't punch the man."

"You're all heart." Despite the issues that resided between them, he managed to crack a grin at her jab. And McCoy grinning could almost make one forget how much of a jackass he could be. Almost.

Amelia picked up her datapadd from his table and headed towards the door. Over her shoulder she said, "I've come to learn that it's a small ship. You can't avoid someone forever. I know, I tried avoiding you."

"Yeah, since when?"

"Since day one, McCoy." Smiling, she walked out of the med-bay.

Her next stop was the hydroponics bay. Though almost everything was automated, it was still up to her to take tricorder readings. She popped it from the holster on her hip, the settings already programmed for the quarterly report.
Within a couple of hours she had managed to take basic samples and calculate the projected growth for the next quarter. It was almost like being home again, save there was no monetary value to attribute to the produce, unlike with her greenhouse plants.

The only segment left was the Vulcan environment. For the past week the plants had been stagnant, no longer producing vegetables. She wondered if that was a normal occurrence for a Vulcan plant. Amelia made a note on her datapadd to ask Spock about it.

She opened up the door panel to look inside, her eyes going wide when she did. Color filled the floor of small room, the rainbow expanse making her spine go stiff and her hand clench on the door handle. How in the hell did those flowers get in there? And where did the other plants go?

The large lethal petals rotated as she took a step back. She pulled out her communicator, dialing the one person who might be able to explain how the deadly plants had found their way into the hydroponics bay. "Jenna Carver. Why are the carnivorous plants in the Vulcan environment?"

"I was just on my way to pick up the bud. How is it doing?"

"Bud? There's more than twenty flowers in here. And they ate the Vulcan plants. All of them!" She couldn't keep the mild hysteria from her voice.

"That's impossible." Even across the communicator, Jenna sounded skeptical. If she'd been looking at what Amelia could see, she wouldn't have used the word impossible. "The seedling was there for less than nine hours."

"I'm looking right at it. Your experiment destroyed my secondary environment."

"I'll be there in ten minutes." To her credit, Jenna was there in eight, pushing a rolling cart in front of her as she stepped into the hydroponics bay. Amelia laughed at the size of the metal box on the cart, covering her eyes in dismay.

"We're gonna need a bigger box." Amelia said as she jerked open the door to the Vulcan environment. Jenna gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

For a scientist conducting an experiment, the woman looked oddly shocked at the results. "How did this happen?"

"You tell me. You're the one whose been experimenting with the things."

"I just wanted to test in a harsh environment." Amelia's harsh environment. "It was only going to be for twelve hours at most. This is amazing."

"Amazing?" She scoffed, her hand fisting against her hip. "That is not the word I would use. Your flowers ate months of work." Of course her hard work only fed one person on the ship.

"Sorry. See the green flower in the center?" Amelia followed where Jenna was pointing, a large green flower in the center of the environment. It was bigger than the others and stood above them. "That's the bud I brought in. Hard to believe it spawned so fast."

"Hard to believe it survived at all." There was a note of surprise in Amelia's voice as she considered the flowers. "I tried putting daisies in there and they died within a couple of hours. Just shriveled right up."

In pure scientist fashion, Jenna was now fully focused on the flowers, Amelia now a part of the background. She watched as Jenna tapped on her datapadd. "I'm going to make a few notes and then
I'll take care of them."

"You do that. I'm going to head to the dining facility. You want me to pick something up?"

Jenna just mumbled, "That'd be great. Thanks."

Amelia slipped the hydroponics bay datapadd back into it's compartment at the front of the bay, looking over her shoulder to see Jenna kneeling in front of the secondary environment. Though Amelia would have a week of work in front of her repairing the damage, it was interesting to see the scientific process happen. Experiments in the hydroponics bay. Then again, a heads-up wouldn't have gone amiss...

She kept her communicator with her, just in case Jenna had any problems, and then headed off to the dining hall. When she arrived, it was busier than usual, personnel lined up to receive a tray. She cocked her head to glance past the crowd, catching sight of a flustered Andorian.

It was unusual to see Th'eon in such a state and she couldn't fight the sudden desire to help him. Amelia pushed past the line, heading straight towards the kitchen door. She passed her hands under the sanitization wand and made her way over to Th'eon. As she walked, she took a deep inhale, surprised at the strong and pleasant aroma that filled the kitchen.

"Why is it so busy?" Her question was followed by an exasperated sigh as Th'eon shoved a ladle in her direction. She took it without question, already searching for the black bowls. Spotting a short stack she picked one up.

"I've made a mistake, Amelia-dear." The Andorian dipped his ladle into a large pot that was situated too high for her to peer into.

"Well, go on. I can't wait to hear this."

"I mentioned, in confidence to a friend, that I would be attempting a creole dish. Apparently they couldn't resist sharing that information with the entire ship. Now I'm handling the burden of the lower dining facility." It was Karma. All the times Th'eon had been told something in 'confidence' and he'd let it slip was coming back to bite him.

Amelia kept herself from grinning. "What did you make?"

"Jambalaya." He said it like a curse word, hissed through his teeth.

The grin slipped out then. At least she held back her laughter. Of course jambalaya would draw in the entire crew. What had he been expecting? "That sounds delicious."

"I suppose the ship had the same thought and now lunch time has descended into madness."

"It's just busy. One person at a time, Th'eon." And it was. Amelia served beside him, ladling bowl after bowl. Until the last man stood in front of them, a smirk on his face. Captain Kirk looked as dashing as ever in his yellow uniform, blue eyes dancing as he took in the sight of the overfilled dining hall. Then his gaze returned to her and Th'eon.

He pinned her with a soft glare as he asked, "You get your exam yet?"

Amelia tilted her head in a nod, smiling. "Did it this morning." Then for added measure, she continued, "I passed."

"Good." He shifted on his feet, looking like there was something else he wanted to ask. She placed
her hand on the counter-top between them, tapping her fingers against the surface. Eventually he opened his mouth, his hand waving as if what followed was an afterthought. "Did you, uh, happen to talk to Bones while you were there?"

Her fingers stilled on the counter. Now it made sense. He'd been pressuring her to do the exam for two weeks now. Not because she needed one, but because he wanted her to talk to McCoy. If any reports had actually been relying on her seeing the doctor, then he surely would have been more insistent.

Her mouth dropped open in astonishment, her finger rising to point accusingly at the captain. "You sly dog. You just wanted me to fix what's wrong with the two of you!"

Kirk twisted his head around, wondering if anyone had heard her loud proclamation. "That... is ridiculous."

"No, what's ridiculous is two grown men behaving like children. Would you like me to pass him a note next?"

"No." A sigh left him, along with his act of denial. His flare for drama had her brow rising. "That won't be necessary."

"Yeah, I bet." She muttered, passing a bowl full of jambalaya to the captain. Her glare was still there and he at least had the decency to look a little shameful. Good. With everything she had to do, the last thing she needed were meaningless errands on his account.

Not exactly meaningless. You did work things out with McCoy. The rational side of her spoke up, but she squashed the noise. There was still a disaster in the hydroponics bay she had to get back to. Th'eon thanked her for the help, packing her an extra bowl and sending her off. She didn't swap gossip with him, but it was still nice having been there when things got rough.

When she made it back to the hydroponics bay, Jenna was snapping her metal box closed, looking mighty pleased with herself. The scientist smiled when Amelia held up the black bowl. "Thanks. Those flowers don't go down easy."

She spared a glance inside the empty Vulcan environment, noting how empty it was. On the bright side, she wouldn't be doing a projection report concerning those plants. "At least they're gone."

"All except Verde." Jenna tapped the box. "My little spawner." Yeah, demon spawner.

"Next time find your own environment." Amelia muttered. For a second she just glanced around the bay. It could have been worse. "I'm just glad he didn't take out the whole bay."

"Sorry about that. I'll stop by this week and help you fix it." Yes, she would. Jenna was good at fixing what she broke.

And if Amelia was going to get some labor out of her, then maybe the entire environment should be changed. She voiced her recent thoughts about it, "I've been thinking of resetting it anyway. Maybe I'll drop the temperature to freezing and grow Andorian fungus."

"The next project?" Jenna said over her shoulder.

"Sooner rather than later, it seems. The Vulcan environment was educational and there's no reason not to learn something new."

The scientist began pushing her cart towards the doors, and with it the destructive flower that was
trapped inside. "Well, I'm a communicator away. Whenever you need me."

"Count on it." Amelia called back as she pulled the hydroponics bay datapadd from it's console. With that disaster cleared up, she could get back to her quarterly report. Anthony would be thrown into his frenzied state if she didn't get it finished within the next week. Not that frenzied was uncommon for the quartermaster.

If only he'd experienced her strange day. Amelia chuckled, wondering how it could have started so normal. What was it Th'eon had said? A descent into madness?

A few hours later she'd compiled the necessary numbers for at least half the report. Sorting it would have to wait until she was back in her quarters. A mid-night task perhaps. Amelia sighed and put the datapadd on the front-end table, her gaze overlooking the bay. Mentally, she organized the room, trying to find space for another plant bed. The Huron had spared extra celery seeds and if it was possible to plant them, she would.

The opening doors of the hydroponics bay interrupted her planning, her head turning to face her guest.

"'Ello, Lass." The red-haired Scotsman was grinning ear-to-ear, an expression that inspired many to suspicion. Amelia was no different, but she smiled anyway, knowing it was bound to bring something fun her way. And she could use a touch of fun right about now. She tapped her fingers on the table.

"You skipped combat tactics this morning." In fact, Scotty may have been the reason her day had been so off. If she'd been paired with him instead of the eager ensign looking to impress Spock, then her thigh wouldn't have been pulled. Then she would have come straight to the hydroponics bay and, just maybe, she would have been able to save the Vulcan environment.

But it was hard to be angry at Scotty, his energy as contagious as a cold.

He shrugged, nonchalant and unknowing of what his absence had caused. "Ah. Apologies. I've been working on something."

"When are you not working on something?"

"Come ta' think of it..." He tilted his head in mock thought, his index finger curling against his chin. Then he grinned even wider and said, "Never."

"So," Amelia said as she locked the datapadd and tricorder in their compartments. "What brings you to my bay?"

"I've come to kidnap you." She noticed now that he was carrying with him a small black case, a contrast to all the silver ones she was used to seeing. Her brow rose at his statement and he continued, slapping a hand against the case, "It's ready."

There was only one thing he could be referring to and, for once, she wished she could say yes. "I can't. I've got a quarterly report to finish. I've got a secondary environment to rebuild. And I have had one hell of a day."

"That's why it's a kidnappin', Lass. You don't get a vote." He caught her arm, gently pulling her towards the doors of the hydroponics bay. She didn't resist or struggle, knowing that the more she put up a fight, the more likely he was to cause a scene.

And Montgomery Scott knew how to cause a scene.
So she walked alongside him through the corridors of the ship, wondering where he was taking her. Finally, she recognized the door they stopped in front of, it's lettering above the frame familiar. "The observation room." Her voice was quiet, not out of concern, but rather surprise.

"Aye." She followed him inside, watching as he keyed a code on the door. A small light above the keypad switched from green to red. Her brow rose once more and he caught the expression, shrugging. "Maintenance code."

At one end of the room sat a narrow table and Scotty wasted no time in placing his black box on the surface. As he opened it, he called over his shoulder, "I kno' this is your first time in space and, considerin' all that's happened, you need this more than me."

He turned from the table, holding out a drinking glass filled more than halfway with a dark auburn liquid. When she took it from him, her gaze focused on the glass in her hand. "I haven't had a drink in years," her admission caused a small smile to form on Scotty's lips.

"Well, I'll be honored to have one with you now." She lifted her gaze, noticing that he now held his own glass.

It was always so easy with Scotty. The truth came in small confessions. A statement of her education. An experience from a simpler time. If there was anyone she trusted herself to drink with it was him. He wouldn't push for details or read into what she was saying, unlike the nosy chef and the astute first officer.

Amelia raised her glass, smiling as they clinked together. The liquid burned her throat and warmed her belly, just like a well-aged whiskey should. How Scotty had managed to pull it off, she'd never know nor would she ever ask.

Three glasses later and they were seated on the floor across from one another, looking out the window that showed the expanse of space. Her head felt light while her body felt heavy, the subtle signs of drunkenness sneaking up on her. The twinkling lights blurred now, hazy signs of hundreds of worlds.

"You see that!" Scotty's loud exclamation had her head twisting around to see his finger pointing at one of the twinkles. As always, he looked on with barely contained excitement. A lazy smile spread on her face as he said, "That's where we're goin'."

"It's so far." She observed, following his finger until she was staring at the blinking star. Maybe it was closer to Scotty, a lifetime of faster than light travel redefining distance.


Her smile fell as she thought about what it could be like on that distant planet. Were they like the people at home? Was there a John or a Richard? Suddenly, she asked, "Scotty, do you miss Earth?"

"Sometimes. But if I was there, I wouldn't be here." He tapped her leg for emphasis and a tightness forming in her throat kept her silent for a while.

"I didn't like it here at first." Amelia rested her head against the wall, her eyes misting as the confession flowed. "Everything was so different. Replicators and tricorders and transporters. It was scary, seeing so much so fast. How much things had changed."

"Change is inevitable, Lass. We just embrace it. Move forward." Scotty held up the bottle. "And another glass does no' hurt."
It didn't. In fact, it helped to ease the tightness in her chest caused by the sudden homesickness. Two more glasses later and she found herself lying on the floor, her hand on Scotty's arm as they gazed with half-lidded eyes out the window.

It was nice for her worries to be as fuzzy as the stars.

A giggle escaped her, her words slurred and thick as she said, "Last time I got drunk I ended up having sex in the back of a Tahoe."

"What's a bloody Tahoe?"

An SUV? She settled for, "It's a kind of car."

"Well the Enterprise is no' car, but I'd be free to make your experience complete, Lass."

She laughed, slapping a hand against his chest. The sound of her hand hitting him seemed louder in her ear, but she chalked it up to her drunken state. Until another bang echoed through the room. Even through her haze she realized something was wrong, her eyes blinking away dizziness as she frowned.

Her hand fell limply off of Scotty as he sat up, his gaze drawn to the door. "I guess the maintenance lock can't keep everyone out."

Amelia rolled over, twisting her head to look at the sliding doors of the observation room. They were open now, three people standing at the entrance. A cocky captain and his sidekick, Spock. The third was grumbling, his hand cover his face as he swore.

"Are you two drunk?" Kirk's voice was filled with a mixture of surprise and shock. When she looked him over, she noticed large bruising around his jaw, further highlighted by the way it ticked.

Instead of answering, she laughed and said, "What happened to your face?"
Unadulterated sunlight rained down on them, fresh air blowing in the wind and bringing with it a scent similar to that of pine. It was unusual for him to feel homesick, but the environment around him couldn't help but conjure images of a Mississippi forest.

He inhaled, his lungs filling with the crisp air. Beside him, Jim did the same. "I am so glad that Spock's not here." Of all the things his friend could have been happy about, that one caused McCoy to grin. He cast a sideways glance at his captain who was leaning against the shuttle. Two ensigns worked to unload it, stacking crates on the dirt at their feet.

Thirteen days ago the Enterprise received a signal from the planet, an old federation code attached. It spurred Jim's interest immediately and, as explorers, the ship set a new course. While in orbit they were sent another message, asking for medical assistance. So, McCoy packed his supplies and joined them on the shuttle ride, a meeting point established for both parties.

Anything to get off the confines of the ship.

There were obvious trails between the pine trees, flattened dirt paths marked in the sparse grass. The shuttle was situated between an intersection of sorts.

McCoy's head swiveled as he looked past the trees, his eyes searching for signs of life. Jim sighed and pulled out his communicator. "They're late. I'm going to see if Uhura received..." The captain trailed off, looking into the distance. McCoy was gazing right along with him, catching sight of pillows of smoke.

As the contraption neared, McCoy could see that it was a car of some kind, wheels carrying it across already made roads. Faint hissing noises could be heard over the distance, a rhythmic beat between ever plume of smoke.

"It's a steam-powered engine." Kirk's excitement was audible in his voice. McCoy didn't share it, his mouth twisting into a frown. If this was the current state of their advancement, then he could only imagine what they possessed medically.

"Last place anyone saw one of those was a museum. Why are they using such outdated technology?" McCoy asked, sparing a glance at his friend. He didn't look near as concerned as McCoy felt, wrinkles against his eyes showing an inward smile.

"Guess we'll have to ask them." Leaving the security of the shuttle, Jim started off down the trail, intent on meeting the colonist's half-way. The ensigns who were unloading shot confused glances between one another.

McCoy grumbled, following after the captain. With no clear picture of the medical situation, there was a chance that the people approaching them were contagious. Not that it slowed Jim down any...

They were roughly half a kilometer from the shuttle when McCoy's hair stood on end. Literally. Dark hair on his arms lifted slightly away from the skin. Without thought, he caught Jim's wrist in his
A sharp static charge had him letting go an instant later, the sting swift with a residual tingle. "Ow!" Kirk cried out, halting his steps. "What was that?"

"Ionization in the atmosphere. It's static electricity." Questions raced through his mind, quelled only by the knowledge that they would soon be answered.

The steam-powered vehicle was close now, close enough for McCoy to make out two men seated in the front. They wore simple white shirts and loose trousers, modest in appearance. As they approached, he kept a rapt gaze on their faces, looking for signs of illness.

Organizing a mission that included quarantine would have been the optimal choice, but Jim, ever eager, had suggested simply using immuno-boosters. McCoy hoped that choice wouldn't bite them in the ass.

The vehicle slowed, that rhythmic release of steam slowing with it. One of the men stepped down, a smile forming. It wasn't exactly a first contact situation since they were colonists, but the presence of Starfleet was apparently a pleasant surprise.

When the stranger spoke, it was in a drawled standard. "Sure is nice to see new faces." The man looked from McCoy to Kirk, his brow furrowed in question. "Which one of you is the captain?"

Jim stepped forward. "That would be me, Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise." Jim held out his hand, pointing to McCoy. "And this is Doctor Leonard McCoy." They didn't shake hands, a safety measure to protect their health. Neither of the men seemed offended by it.

"I'm Stanton Hale, the elected Mayor. And this is Carlos Ferra, my second." Stanton paused, casting a glance around them, as if determining their exact location. His gaze returned to focus on Jim and McCoy. "Before we head towards town, I should probably explain a few things about the planet."

"Like the charged air?" McCoy piped up.

"Yes. Most of the planet has an ionized inner atmosphere. The first generation of colonists learned that it interfered with their electronics, hence the reason we now rely upon steam and water power. The meeting location that we set is one of the few areas that has almost no additional charge in the atmosphere." Stanton pointed towards the path they had walked from. "I suggest you leave all electronics near that area, because the closer we get to town the chances increase that they might... explode."

Confusion was evident in Jim's voice as he asked, "How did you contact us?"

"There's a smaller safe spot in town. The colonists placed their Starfleet beacon there, in case a message ever needed to be sent. Also, we brought stabilization bracelets." Stanton reached behind him to a compartment in the vehicle, pulling out two metal cuffs. "The first generations use them to protect against the static charge."

"You're not wearing one." McCoy said as he clamped one of the bracelets around his wrist. A few seconds later the raised hair on his arms began to lower as the cuff absorbed the ionized particles. Other than a small tingle, he couldn't detect any other changes.

He glanced up at Stanton when he answered, "That's because my generation seems to have adapted. We don't shock each other on contact anymore." The man climbed back onto the vehicle, waving for McCoy and Jim to follow. "We'll ride you back to the shuttle so you can get what you need."
Kirk wasted no time in jumping onto the steam-powered car, pulling McCoy up after him. "Tell us about your medical situation."

They had to speak over the puff of the engine, but by the time they reached town McCoy had a good idea of what was wrong. A form of Meningitis was spreading, affecting children and adults alike. It was deadly, too, the symptoms similar to that of the strain found on Earth.

Both Stanton and Carlos received inoculations immediately, McCoy's pre-packed hyposprays including a few adult doses. Within the next 24 hours the Enterprise would beam down enough to sustain the town's population and he would begin giving each person a dose.

The list of things he had to do was relatively short, but considering the illness he knew he needed to act fast. He mentally went through it again.

"Bones!" Jim's shout accompanied a sharp jab against McCoy's side, drawing his attention back to the present. "I asked what else you would need. Stanton says we can send a message from town."

"I already sent my side-kick a list. I just need to get to the patients. See who is in the worst condition." Because there were people suffering and he needed to put an end to that. Without his tricorder, dermal regenerator, and only a few hyposprays, he'd have to get creative. McCoy tapped Stanton on the shoulder, catching his attention. "You said you have a doctor. What do you have for a hospital?"

Stanton pointed in the distance, a number of buildings coming into view. "We have box houses for families. The larger buildings are the town hall, dining hall, and the closest building is the hospital. It's small, more like a clinic than anything. All of the first generation was heavily screened to eliminate genetic disorders, so most of the patients consist of pregnant women. Overall, the population has been in perfect health. Aside from..." The Meningitis strain.

McCoy wondered how it was even introduced. Perhaps one of the colonists had carried it from Earth, but it had only recently mutated into a pathogenic strain. "I'll go there first. I'm guessing you're holding the patients there?"

"We are. Contact with the infected is being limited to the doctors and they're taking extra precautions concerning sanitation." The vehicle slowed as they approached the first large building. The word hospital was carved into the wood above the door. It seemed unnecessary for such a small community, but the labels would make navigating the town easier for Jim and McCoy.

McCoy unloaded his equipment, his eyes darting down what appeared to be the main road. A pump well could be seen almost four hundred meters out, resting in the middle of an intersection. Further out was a high fence, a few animals circling inside.

"It's not much, but this is home. We don't have memories of Earth, just a few stories that our grandparent's shared and some picture books that survived the ride." McCoy could see the pride on Stanton's face as he glanced at the small buildings. Beside him, Carlos shared a similar expression.

If the town had only been established in the last 90 years then they had done a hell of a job. Especially with so few people.

"What's it called?" McCoy asked.

"We call it Georgia. After the state. Our first Mayor was from there." Stanton sighed, his reminiscent stare fading. He turned back to Jim. "I'm going to get you set up in the guest house. The town is excited to see the both of you, and any of your crew who wishes to visit the planet. One day we
Jim leaned forward to come into view from the passenger seat, his gaze focused on McCoy. "Dinner at 1800 hours." He might as well have included a stern dear at the end of that sentence. McCoy just nodded and proceeded to watch the vehicle as it carried on down the road. 

He turned back towards the doors of the 'Hospital' and, taking a deep breath, he stepped inside. His first thought was that he'd worked in worse conditions. His second thought was it would be hell to perform a surgery. 

There were knee-high cots and a few steel flat tables. The floor was dirty, but that could just be because he compared to the med-bay on the Enterprise. His eyes turned back to the cots to see all were occupied with patients. A man wearing a white tunic was leaning over one, his hands clasping a patient's. His mouth was moving, silent words shared with the patient whose skin was flushed and covered with a sheen of sweat. 

"Are you Doctor Greer?" The man ignored him for a moment, finishing his quiet sentence. Before he acknowledged McCoy, he placed the patient's hand down to rest on a rapidly rising chest. 

The stranger looked tranquil as he stood. When he turned, McCoy noticed a book tucked under his arm. It was a book he'd seen before, but not in recent years. "No. I'm Father Jake." The man was Christian? McCoy kept his expression blank. "Doctor Greer is out in the pasture searching for Yarrow."

"Yarrow?" Small white blooms came to memory. "The flower?"

"Yes." Father Jake replied, waving a hand towards the patient he had just been speaking, praying, with. McCoy didn't voice his opinion on that. "It will help with the fever."

"I have to run some tests, but I'm pretty sure they have Meningitis. Yarrow will do nothing to save them." Skepticism leaked into his tone. McCoy located a small desk in the corner, placing his case on top of it, casting a glance back at Father Jake. How long did he plan on being there with the patients? Was he already infected?

"Perhaps. But it will ease their pain." What would really ease their pain was being cured. And that wasn't likely to happen until tomorrow. McCoy scowled at the fact that the doctor wasn't there.

"If it's not fever then it's stiffness and joint pain or raging migraines. Neither will be affected by Yarrow." McCoy turned back to his case, loading a hypospray. He'd inject them, put them in a light coma to prevent further deterioration. Then he'd take their blood and confirm his diagnosis. All while walking around the Father who was kneeling beside another patient. "Our Father who art in heaven..."

He worked quickly, dealing out hyposprays and taking samples. By the time Doctor Greer returned, McCoy was utilizing the tabletop microscope, shifting a gram-stained slide across the base. He squinted, staring down at slowly moving pink and purple ovals. All of them meant something. Standing from his place at the desk, he glanced behind him to stare at Doctor Greer. He couldn't blame the man for his faults, being a generational doctor and learning everything from the elders above him. And what few books were in their possession. But it was a surprise to see how much the colony had moved backwards.

McCoy sighed, placing the slide in a small container. He'd have it sent up to the Enterprise for a
more accurate analysis and, if they were lucky, he would receive the necessary vaccinations for the population.

Doctor Greer touched his shoulder, his words low even though the patients were in no state to listen in. "The dining hall is prepared if you wish to join the others." McCoy couldn't help but looked towards the patients. The next sentence was a reassuring, "I will stay with them."

"Not much to be done now. If you get anyone else in the mean time you can give them a dose."
McCoy handed him a hypospray, watching as the Doctor stared down at it in a confused wonder. After a moment, McCoy added, "Just pull the trigger."

Doctor Greer set the device aside and glanced back at McCoy, his brow furrowed. "We can't begin to tell you how grateful we are for your help. Starfleet has come a long way since the first colonists left."

"We're glad to be here." It's what we do. Jumping in and stirring things up. At least this planet didn't have a volcano on it. Just a few people who hadn't been given much to work with.

It was a shame the planet reacted so harshly with electronics. If not they could have advanced more and maybe this medical situation would have been nipped in the bud. But the situation was what it was, and the Enterprise was there now.

He made a mental note to leave behind some of his spare medical texts and data padds that could be used in the safe zones. It was an outpost, after-all.

McCoy turned back to the doctor. "How do I get to the dining hall?"

"Follow the lanterns to the center of town. It's the long building." That should be enough not to get lost.

The walk was calming, that pine scent coming in strong with a few light gusts of wind. He tilted his head back, looking up at unfamiliar constellations. Somewhere up there, the Enterprise drifted, Sulu at the helm under Spock's command. The med-bay was probably bustling with activity, rushing to gather the necessary equipment. And dinner was being served by the Andorian, gossip surely traveling across the room.

It was home.

A floating metal container in the sky was home.

It had taken time to make the transition from being just a duty station to a place where he felt comfortable. And then from just comfortable to a place he felt safe. Where he was needed and useful and...

And a member of a family.

There were others that appeared in his mental picture of the Enterprise. Scotty kneeling beside a console, cursing as it sparked. Uhura walking down the halls next to Spock. Then he saw her. The woman that distracted him on a daily basis, whether it was irritation, attraction, or amusement. Amelia Wright would be heading back to the hydroponics bay around now, clutching a black box of food.

Her hair was down in the image, falling past her shoulders as wide blue eyes looked at-

"Get lost, Bones?" Jim's voice infiltrated the image, causing it to vanish in a flash. McCoy's
narrowed gaze landed on him, realizing that he was standing still in the middle of the dirt road, the well pump just a few meters away. His irritation fizzled into air.

Lost? He never knew a time where he wasn't... "Just enjoying the quiet."

"Quiet?" Jim cocked his head, tuning in to the sounds of insects and wildlife.

"No humming." McCoy corrected, a small smile replacing his usual scowl.

"Right." Jim waved for him to follow, beginning the short walk to the dining hall. "How did it go at the hospital?"

"As expected. Four severe cases. I'm sure several others are already infected, but once we inoculate there will be nothing to worry about."

"I contacted Spock earlier. There's a security situation on the ship. I will need to return in the morning."

"Serious?"

"Missing weapon. The quartermaster found a discrepancy months ago, but we thought it was corrected. Spock is leading a shut-down for searches and it will take a few days." Jim waited at the door, as if expecting some response before stepping inside.

McCoy supplied, "I can handle things on the ground."

"Good." Then they stepped into the dining-hall. Almost a hundred people were in the room, seated around various long tables. They were dressed similar to Stanton, in humble tunics and trousers. Some even sported pants the color of denim, reminding McCoy of that time Amelia had stumbled into the med-bay.

Does everything remind you of that woman?

Across the hall someone stood. McCoy and Jim's gazes shifted that direction to see that Stanton and Carlos had saved them both seats. Several people greeted them, names exchanged that would most likely be forgotten.

It was obvious to see that their presence had caused a stir, but at least it was a positive one. The people asked questions about their ships. And then questions about Earth. Jim was better at answering, charming as always. McCoy stuck to the more scientific questions, finding it easy to be eager about the topic.

Food was brought out within the hour, smelling like pork and potatoes. McCoy closed his eyes in pleasure at having his first taste of real meat in months. The leafy vegetables were sparse, but just as good.

During the meal, Stanton spoke up, sounding a little sheepish. "I apologize that we didn't have more. We've been losing crops this season. The corn didn't even sprout."

"You've been more than hospitable." Jim piped up immediately. "Though I do have someone who might be able to help. There's a horticulturist on our ship. She'd be happy to look into the crop situation."

Pork lodged in McCoy's throat, causing tears to fill his eyes. He hit his chest with a closed fist, managing to force a swallow after the first strike and causing a small fit of coughing. Jim raised his
brow as McCoy downed a glass of water to fight the sudden tightness.

"You alright, Bones?" By the tone of his voice, Jim already knew the answer to that question.

"Fine." He ground out through clenched teeth, wondering what Jim was up to.

Jim's attention turned back to Stanton who asked, "Do you think she would be able to help? Our environment is a little different."

"She's been to other planets-" Planet. McCoy mentally corrected Jim. He didn't voice the fact that she almost died there. ", and I know she'll do her best. She could come down tomorrow morning with the medicine."

They continued on, discussing the planet and Jim's plans. The Enterprise would log it in the database as an emergency depot for small food supplies. Eventually an operation could be put into motion for the colonists to be given further assistance and advancement.

McCoy tried to follow, but he was still reeling from Jim's earlier suggestion to bring Amelia down to the planet. There were two general thoughts he found himself at war with. Seeing her after their last strange confrontation in the med-bay. And having the woman with the worst-luck being in the vicinity.

Maybe it was a good thing she would be within the doctor's reach...

Suddenly, Jim shoved his shoulder and laughed along with Stanton, finishing up an obviously funny story. ", and it just stuck."

People were turning in their plates now, ushering off into the dark outside. McCoy and Jim thanked everyone for their hospitality and they were soon led towards the small guest house on the edge of town. It was more like a flat really, one large room with a small enclosed bathroom and a kitchen. Despite their technological advancement being stunted, there was still functioning plumbing.

McCoy smiled inwardly at the thought that there was an actual shower was just a few steps away.

The beds were a mixture of straw, cotton, and down and McCoy quickly chose the larger of the two. When Jim pointed at his rank, McCoy countered with, "I'm old, Jim." The captain quickly dropped the topic and settled on his narrow mattress.

He stripped down, pulling on some loose fitting shorts before climbing under their provided quilts. From across the room he heard Jim ask, "You have anything else to sleep in?"

The question caused him to rise on his elbow and cast a look in Jim's direction. It was too dark to see him, but a shape moved in the distance. He scowled, annoyed by the strangeness of it. "You've seen me in less, Jim."

"I know." The sound of Jim shifting on the mattress could be heard. "But you're going to have a lady here tomorrow. Gotta be decent, you know."

Sleep was hard to find.

**STARDATE 2260.138**

**Beta Quadrant**

**Orbiting Planet MBW097**
The microwave was on the fritz again, constant beeping pulling her from sleep. She should have gotten rid of the damn thing year ago, but it was built in above the stove and she didn't have the money to replace it just yet.

The beeping continued, past the normal one minute fritz, and she finally opened her eyes. The wall was different than she remembered, no longer wood paneling. Instead it was a blank gray, a green glow flashing across it.

*That's weird.*

Except it really wasn't, because the reality was that she wasn't hearing her ancient microwave. And those wood panels were trapped two hundred years in the past. She was hearing the 'doorbell' to her quarters.

"Miss Wright, are you well?" Why was Spock at her door?

Amelia glanced over at her clock, stunned to see that it was only three in the morning. What could have been so important that the first officer was waking her up at such an ungodly hour? "I'm fine, Commander!" Irritation made her voice louder and she rushed to pull on her robe.

He'd have to make do since it was his fault she was awake. She made her way to the door, unlocking it and staring out as it slid open. "Yes?"

"I apologize for waking you, but there is a shuttle that will be taking you down to the planet in two hours." His words didn't make sense even though they apparently meant something.

Her mouth dropped open in confusions. "Um... what?"

"Your presence is required. I have replicated some necessary equipment and placed it aboard. Captain Kirk will brief you once you reach the planet's surface. Please hold out your arm." Still in a dazed state she obeyed, extending her arm towards the Vulcan. A moment later he pressed a hypospray against her.

"What was that for?!" Amelia cried out, holding back the desire to strike him.

"Protection against Meningitis." He said simply, like it needed no further explanation. Then he straightened even more and ordered, "Meet me in the shuttle bay in 90 minutes."

It took a minute for her to shake the confusion and close her door, Spock's words still ringing in her head. She had to go to the planet?

*Ugh...*

Her sonic shower was quick and not nearly as satisfying as it should have been. She grabbed her backpack first, shoving the usual stuff inside. First-aid kit. Uniform. Her real clothes. Amelia shrugged on her brown uniform, remembering the last time she had worn her white one and ended up with blood stains. Then she put her hair in a pony-tail instead of the standard bun.

She made sure to straighten up the items in her quarters, her data-padd placed neatly on top of her license and her picture frame with her and Richard tilted just beside it.

Amelia glanced up at the clock, noting that she had quite a bit of time to spare. She made a trip to the hydroponics bay, adjusting the timers for her absence. Her tricorder was pulled from it's compartment to be snapped against her belt. Her eyes found another clock, the red digits telling her it was time.
Spock was standing next to a shuttle in the bay, directing crew members who were loading in silver cases of all sizes. She felt a shiver run down her spine as she looked upon the shuttle. It represented every near-death experience she had on the Enterprise and, honestly, the idea of getting inside of it made her stomach roll.

But Kirk wouldn't have called her down to the planet for just anything. Something important needed to be done and her expertise was needed. So she swallowed down her fear and brushed past the Vulcan, climbing into the passenger seat.

He followed after her, his expression as blank as usual. "The Captain will meet you at the landing site."

She twisted in her seat, giving Spock a questioning glance as he stood behind her. "Has he said what this is about?"

Factually, he answered, "Crops on the planet's surface are no longer producing the necessary requirements. He believes that you can determine why."

Oh. Amelia would never fully understand why Kirk placed such faith in her. "I'll do what I can."

His stoic gaze was focused on her for a moment, silently measuring her. It was blank and eerie, but the scrutiny came to an end as he said, "We know you will, Miss Wright."

The pilot climbed in then while the rest of the crew shuffled out. As she looked out across the stars she failed to feel the same wonder she usually did. Maybe she was becoming desensitized to the beauty of it all. Or maybe it's just home now instead of wonderland? Guess you're no longer Alice...

Amelia kept her eyes wide as they began their descent, taking in the terrain. It was much like Earth, some areas desert-like, reminding her of Arizona. Some areas were greener, thick with trees and foliage. It was a sight that excited her, pushing out the fear that had kept her firmly against the back of her seat.

As they neared the landing sight, she could see the a man in a yellow uniform. Captain Kirk stood with his arms crossed, looking up at them while several others in white cloths stood beside him. When the doors opened, he was the first to step inside.

He pointed at things, explaining their purpose and she realized he was giving the strangers a tour of the shuttle. When it was over, he met her as she climbed out. Amelia closed her eyes as fresh air brushed her face.

"It makes you wonder, doesn't it." His words spurred her to open her eyes and stare at him, only to find that he was looking at her with a knowing expression.

"Wonder what?"

"That feeling you get standing on the ground with the wind blowing around you. It makes you wonder if we were ever meant to live in space." Kirk cast a glance upwards.

"Hasn't the past hundred years proven it was possible." She hoped her history was correct and when he smiled, she knew that she'd guessed right. She pulled her backpack from the shuttle, eager to get to the problem. "What can you tell me about the crops?"

"Not much. You'll have to talk to Carlos about that." Kirk pointed to someone behind her and she turned, taking in the appearance of the man who he was referring to.
Carlos stood patiently, his brown eyes looking at the shuttle rather than at them. He was tall with dark skin, looking as exotic as his name sounded. And he was handsome, a firm clean jaw and hooded eyes appearing almost brooding. He seemed to realize that he was being watched, rotating away from the shuttle to smile at Kirk and Amelia.

And it was quite a smile...

*You have been alone for far too long, 'Melia.* When he spoke it was in a deep masculine voice aimed directly at her. "I'm Carlos Ferra. And you must be Amelia Wright."

"I am." She shook his hand

"Thank you for coming to help us." His tone was genuine and she found herself smiling. He eyed her from head to toe, taking his time just as she had taken hers.

"I'm glad I could."

He smiled often, pointing out the names of plants on the planet as they made the drive towards town. Carlos also described their society and the situation concerning electronics. It made sense now why Spock had packed a manual testing kit for the soil and he could never know that it was more familiar than the tricorder she used daily. Before they arrived in town she was given a metal cuff to protect against the charged atmosphere.

At first she wondered if that was the reason the plants were dying, but then she dismissed it. The plants had been grown for generations under the same conditions, which meant something else had changed.

Carlos followed her everywhere, answering questions as they were asked. And it wasn't a terrible thing that her guide was easy on the eyes.

Just a few hours after arrival, she was kneeling between rows of potatoes, her hands working to dig up the dirt. They didn't use any form of pesticides, which greatly reduced the possibility that the top soil was contaminated. Amelia clutched a handful of the deeper soil, her other hand rummaging through the kit that Spock had provided her with.

It wasn't her first time examining crops. After college she'd entered into an internship with a national lettuce production company and half the job was figuring out why there would be drops in produce. Even with years between now and that experience, she knew what to look for.

She pulled a magnifying class from the case, twisting the lenses to get a better focus on the grains of sand. If it was a table-top then she'd be able to see micro-organisms in the soil, but the tube pressed against her eye didn't have that kind of power. Crystal-like edges could be seen on dirt. It would have been normal if the lining was thinner, which made her wonder what had thickened on the surface.

Amelia dropped dirt from her hand and placed the telescope back in her case. She needed to do a salinity test, check the salt level. Salt was a plant's worst enemy when it came in quantity. She rummaged through the case again, finding a small glass container.

By the time she got a deep sample, her hands were caked with dirt, some even smeared on her uniform and face. There was no keeping clean doing this job...

"Carlos?" Amelia turned as she called out to him, not surprised to see he was already looking in her direction. The way he had kept his eyes on her was almost flattering, as though he was infatuated with the idea of someone new.
"Yes?" 

"I need a shovel." He pulled one from the back of the steam-powered car, walking it to her immediately.

She selected a taller potato plant, wanting the root system to be large enough for testing. So far she'd pushed aside the idea that the testing kits would be useless since they were designed for Earth Plants, but as she dug deep with the shovel she found herself wondering if this was going to work.

*It has to. If the kits don't work then you're s-o-l.*

The thought gave her extra strength and she kicked the shovel down, finally dislodging the plant. It ended up in a small bucket. Tomorrow she'd spend the morning running her tests.

Her eyes went to the horizon, the planet's sun sitting atop the ground. It would be night soon. She looked towards the town, noting how people were making their way to the center. She recalled Carlos telling her that was where dinner was served on special occasions.

And their presence there seemed to be one of those.

"Would you like to join me for dinner?" Carlos offered in a deep timber as they loaded up the vehicle.

Amelia wanted to say yes. His gaze was dark and promising, implying more than dinner. His hand lingered on her own as he pulled the bucket from her grasp. But as attractive and alluring as the man was, she found that it was difficult to accept. Nice as it would have been to give into lust, it was something she knew she would regret later.

"I can't." She managed.

There was a brief pause and she wondered if she'd read him correctly or it was just another wrong assumption. Then he nodded and said, "I understand."
Before Carlos headed off to the dining hall, he escorted her to the guest house. It was just like the other small box homes, except a sign appeared to be recently hung above the door. The word 'Welcome' was carved into the plaque.

It was already getting dark and she picked up the small lantern they had provided her with. She lit it as she stepped inside, her eyes traveling around the room. Two beds sat on opposite sides, but it appeared the smaller one already had an occupant. Bags rested neatly against the frame.

No one had mentioned that she'd be staying with anyone...

After living on a ship with hundreds of people, the idea didn't bother her near as much as it would have a year ago. She just sighed and dropped her backpack on the other mattress, rifling through for a change of clothes.

When she'd been told that there were water showers available, she'd done everything in her power not to cry in joy. Now, in the privacy of the small narrow space, Amelia stripped down. She fumbled with the levers, not even caring as freezing cold water rained down from a spout above.

It took ten minutes of scrubbing for her to get rid of the caked on dirt, and even longer until she felt satisfied with the experience. Normally she would sleep in her underwear, but without her usual privacy she pulled on a pair of shorts and a white tank-top. The metal cuff went on last, contrasting sharply against her skin.

As she stepped out of the bathroom, the door to the guest house opened. Even in the low lighting she recognized the height, hair, blue uniform, and gait of the man who stepped inside. She stood still, stunned by the situation.

He, however, didn't look surprised at all.

Amelia opened her mouth, but no words came. McCoy's brow arched as he extended his hand. Her gaze drifted down to see he was carrying a bowl, warm soup still steaming as he held it out to her. "You weren't there for dinner." As if he needed to explain himself.

"Shower sounded better." She offered back, her mouth surprisingly dry. She didn't hide the fact that she was flustered, either, even if the situation wasn't likely to change. His brow lowered as she took the bowl, his eyes darting to the bathroom. She had a feeling he appreciated the water just as much as she had.

Then he returned a narrowed gaze to her, irritation flashing across his face. "No one told you we were sharing a room, did they?"

So that's why he was upset. Because she came into this unprepared. Little did he know that unprepared was the story of her life. And is he growling? "It's alright."

"No it's not." He scowled. "There are other guest houses, but Jim felt you'd be safer with me."
"Won't I?" She countered.

"Yes." There was no hesitance when he said it, a simple fact in a single word. A flush bloomed in her cheeks at his confidence.

"Then it's alright." She sat on her bed, bringing the bowl of soup to her lips. It was gamey, the broth thick and delicious. She closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying how filling it was. Finally, she opened her eyes to glance over at McCoy who was rifling through his bag. "How is the Meningitis situation going?"

He seemed surprised that she'd asked, but it was quickly covered. "Contained for now. We've started the inoculation process. I'll be here to make sure the patients worst affected will pull through. What about the crops?"

"Too early to tell." The conversation flowed with ease. "More testing tomorrow."

"So you're settling in for the night?"

"Too exhausted for anything else." A confirming yawn escaped her as she pulled up the quilt. She popped her eyes back open, looking at his backside as he headed across the room. "Thanks for dinner, by the way."

"Anytime." He said just before stepping into the bathroom.

The sound of water running could be heard through the door and it was surprisingly soothing, like the heavy fall of rain. It lulled her into oblivion, that comfortable state that sometimes seemed impossible to achieve. The down pillow under her head didn't hurt either...

When morning came, the light that filtered through the window landed across her face. The warmth of it pulled her from slumber. Amelia squinted her eyes, her head turned to see McCoy seated on his bed as he slipped on his shoes.

He ran a hand across the stubble on his face, a dissatisfied frown forming. She smirked, wondering if he was unhappy that he couldn't shave. Maybe no one ever told him that rugged suited him.

He stood, glancing across the room as he straightened his blue jacket. Then his gaze landed on her. The frown fell, an unreadable expression taking over. "You sleep well?"

"Like a baby." She shoved the quilt down, stretching out her limbs as she sat up in the bed. He turned away quickly, suddenly interested in digging through his bag. She climbed out of bed, her bare feet tapping against the ground as she pulled out a change of clothes.

When she looked behind her at McCoy, he was halted at the door and staring in her direction. "I'll be at the hospital today. If you leave town, let me know."

Amelia grinned, "You my keeper, McCoy?"

He grunted. "Just following orders." She supposed she had Kirk to thank for that.

After the doctor was gone, she changed, the familiar feel of denim against her skin spurring a deep feeling of comfort. She'd be more productive today because of it, a simple change that braced her for almost anything.

She pushed up the sleeves of her flannel shirt as she opened the testing kit. Based on what she saw under the magnifying glass, she pulled out the salinity test first. It came with instructions and she
scanned across the small sheet of paper quickly.

"Just like riding a bike." She whispered, walking over the bucket that housed a single plant. The roots would tell her what she needed to know, their primary purpose of delivering the plant nutrition. So what was it they were delivering instead?

Carlos arrived as she was stripping the root, his knock at the door interrupting her as she dropped pieces into a bag.

"Come in." She called out. Light spilled into the room and she turned around quickly. "Think you could prop the door open for me?" She should have done it earlier, the window and lantern supplying only half the light she needed.

"Of course." He said and shoved a stone against it. Amelia shot him a grateful smile. "How is it going?"

"Well, I've got to grind this into a paste before I can test, but I'm thinking you have a salt problem." Amelia squeezed the bag, watching carefully as liquid seeped from the pulp. It would take a few minutes of repeating before she'd have enough to test, but it was something her hand was actually trained for.

Carlos sat beside her as she worked, remaining silent. Apparently, McCoy wasn't her only keeper for the day. *Two gorgeous guys keeping an eye out? Lucky you...*

It was a pleasant change from the hydroponics bay and it felt good to be able to hone her knowledge as a horticulturist. She made a mental note to add a new video log about it when she returned to the ship.

When she'd wrung enough liquid from the root she set up the testing kit. Small strips of paper designed to color for various forms of salt sat before her. She dipped in the first strip, unsurprised when it faded into a light purple.

It was a victory and that purple color pointed to the source of the crop's enemy. Magnesium Sulfate. The only remaining question was, how was it getting to the plants.

"How do you irrigate the crops?" Rainwater could be the problem, but that would mean the salt was being pushed up. If that was the case, the only solution was to move to another field.

"From a natural spring. A mile of piping brings the water in."

"Do you drink from the same spring?" They would have tasted the difference, already been made aware of the salt's presence. Before he even gave an answer she knew what it would be.

"No." He shook his head, pointing towards the open door. Just past it she could see the central intersection of the town. "The well in town is connected to a different spring."

"I need you to take me there." Amelia picked out portions of the testing kit and threw them into a small bag. She shoved it into her pocket and headed for the door. Carlos followed behind her, pointing to the west. Or what would have been west if she was on Earth. She started forward, not exactly sure where they were going, but heading the way Carlos had pointed.

Though the terrain wasn't rough, it wasn't flat either. Amelia and Carlos navigated over creeks, rocks, and through, at times, heavy brush. It seemed that no one had been to the place where the spring surfaced in quite some time.
The soft shoes that had been perfect aboard the Enterprise were now inadequate. *Probably because they're not designed for hiking.* Then again, Carlos had been traveling in sandals. Amelia reminded herself it was only a mile and that was hardly enough time to develop a blister.

"We're getting close." Carlos pointed towards the ground, her gaze following to see bamboo-like piping was now surfaced. She walked above it, making note of the changes in the soil. The grass was thinned out and what little was left was yellow and sickly.

Dirt was soon replaced with stone, the piping ending at the base of a rock cliff. Water trickled from the pipe, running through time-worn dents in the vertical stone. Amelia pulled the testing kit from her back pocket and took a single paper strip from the bag.

She laid it under the small trickle of water that escaped the pipe, waiting until the tip was soaked by the drops.

It turned that light shade of purple moments later. "Ha! It's salt!" Amelia grinned at the victory.

Carlos, however, didn't share her enthusiasm. He huffed, looking from her to the pipeline. "But how will we water the crops? And how did the salt get in there?"

"Mechanical filter will take care of it." Something easy to fix and didn't require modern power. "And the spring probably shifted in the cliff wall. It's most likely passing through a nearby salt deposit."

She cupped a hand against the cliff, catching water in her palm. A lick further confirmed the test results, a salty taste filling her mouth.

"Oh. Well that is good news then." That handsome smile returned, his dark gaze narrowing in on her. "You are quite impressive, Amelia Wright." It was a compliment that she would never have received in her past life, but it had been said to her more than once since her time in 2260.

Had she really changed that much? She managed a small smile back. "Thank you. I do what I can."

Carlos glanced back to the path they had taken to get there. "If we return soon we can meet everyone for lunch. The offer remains for you to join me." He turned back to her, holding out a hand. "And maybe we can spend time together that does not involve working." Like the night before, his offer was clear, even if it wasn't voice.

"I hardly know you." There was no weak whisper in her voice, just a firm statement of her hesitation.

"Perhaps that is why we should have dinner." She took his outstretched hand, clasping it as he helped her down the path. It wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no either. Something was building inside her, a desire to walk towards the unknown.

Or maybe just a desire in general.

They made it back to town in time for lunch and Carlos finally stepped out of his role as her keeper and shadow. He was a man of integrity, if the stories told at the table were true, and he was not only the Mayor's Second, but also his lifelong friend. He was known for working hard and being a person who people turned to in time of need.

As far as she could tell, he was a good man.

Afterwards, Amelia made arrangements for the Enterprise to transport a filtration device. Carlos volunteered to take the lead on installing it. He promised to return in time for them to share dinner, suggesting that she enjoy the luxuries available while he was gone.
One of them was the small lake on the outskirts of town.

It was surrounded by cluster of trees, rocks leading down to create a path. Amelia bit her lip as she walked closer, the illusion of paradise coming into view. The water in the lake was crystal clear, the small stones at the bottom smooth. She'd never seen anything as enticing...

Most of the townspeople were working now, the chances of anyone coming slim to none. And what was it she had said before about risks? "You live on a spaceship, Amelia. You gonna waste this opportunity?" She asked herself, her hands steadily working to unbutton her shirt.

You've fought pirates. You've survived being hit by a car twice. You've stabbed killer vines to death. A little nudity isn't going to stop you from this, is it?

The shirt fell to the stone path, followed by her shoes, jeans, and every other article of clothing that would stand between her and the water. Even the metal cuff clinked as it hit the ground.

**STARDATE 2260.139**

**Beta Quadrant**

**Planet MBW097**

The hospital was filled with people, a line formed that exceeded the door and probably ran a few buildings down. McCoy clenched his right hand around the hypospray gun, his left working to detach an empty vial. He replaced it quickly, ready to stick the next person in line.

They were receiving the same immunizations that Starfleet personnel did, along with the Meningitis inoculation. He'd need to stick around for at least another two days just to make sure that no one had a reaction. He couldn't very well leave them to handle any fallout on their own.

McCoy pressed the hypospray against a woman's arm, his hand nudging her forward. A moment later he was immunizing a small boy. It wouldn't take long to go through the population, however there were a few select individuals who were unable to make it to the hospital.

Like the Mayor and his Second.

Stanton had assisted in organizing the line-up, explaining the medical 'crisis'. Not many of the people even knew what Meningitis was, but they were more than ready to wait in line to get their shot. Generally, this would have been the duty of a nurse, but McCoy didn't hold himself above immunization detail.

It would keep these people alive and that was all that mattered.

The patients who were resting in the cots had been taken out of their medically induced comas, but none were in any condition to leave yet. It might take a week for the worst to fully recover. Doctor Greer would have to take care of that. One of the colonists brought him lunch, thanking him for his efforts. McCoy couldn't help the rush of pride that filled him at the gratitude, despite the fact that it had hardly been an effort.

The last two men to walk through the door were Carlos Ferra and Stanton Hale. They were smiling, happy about something, though McCoy wasn't sure what it was. He raised a brow, waiting to be let in on the good news.

At least it wasn't a long wait. As Carlos lifted his sleeve, he said, "Amelia figured out why our crops are failing." Amelia? McCoy tried to ignore the itch in the back of his brain that was caused by the
man's familiarity. It had taken him months before he'd used her first name. *They aren't Starfleet, McCoy. No need to be jealous.*

"With the grin you're wearing, I'm guessing you found a way to fix it."

McCoy cast a sideways glance at Stanton, who nodded and said, "She did. We just installed a filtration pump against the spring outlet. It will take a while to repair the damage, but by next season we will have double what we can currently grow."

"That woman is amazing." At Carlos' statement, McCoy wondered if he should bring to light how Amelia tended to be orbited by disaster. Not that it was her fault... it just was.

"She's something." McCoy muttered as he pressed the hypospray against the man's arm, receiving a quick glare from Carlos. Maybe he'd been a little more rough than usual.

"How long will the two of you be staying?" Carlos question reignited the itch, because McCoy was certain he wasn't asking how long *he* was staying.

His eye twitched. "A couple of days." Stanton took Carlos place, his sleeve already rolled up to expose his arm. McCoy was gentler this time as he pressed the hypospray against him. His brow furrowed as he glanced past them and towards the door. "If Amelia isn't with you, then where is she?"

"Southwest side of town. She said she would meet me for dinner." McCoy's jaw clenched at Carlos' answer, his body shifting to turn away from them both. The sudden impact of emotion startled him more than anything.

As Spock would say, it was damn *logical.*

He needed to deal with this. And fast. The two men were his last to vaccinate and they knew their way around town just fine. McCoy grunted and headed for the door, not even bothering with goodbye. Stanton called after him, thanking him for his help.

He walked towards the pump well in the center of town, his thoughts hurried and cluttered and far from pleasant. When Amelia had been struck by the Nausicaan, his anger had been swift to come. But that was an acceptable response, one that he might have had if Jim had been in the same situation.

Jealousy, however, was a far cry from acceptable. Nothing Carlos had said warranted the reaction, nor was there any reason to believe that Amelia would approve.

McCoy laughed, his hand rubbing his eyes. Now he needed her approval? His eyes drifted closed, his breathing deepening as he focused on reaching the rational part of his brain. The part that told him he needed to find her.

She'd left town and hadn't told him and it was better for him to chastise her now, just to get it over with.

His feet carried him to the southwest side of town and he grumbled to himself along the way. *You probably should have asked for something a little more specific than 'southwest'.* It was getting dark now, almost time for dinner. Lanterns were being lit outside of the houses as the sky changed from daylight to the red tint of sunset.

*Maybe you should just wait for her to show up at the dining-hall?* But then when would he remind her that she had to tell him if she left town? Certainly not in front of everyone else.
The path changed from dirt to stone, leading down towards a cluster of trees. "Amelia!" She was probably wrist deep in soil, studying one of the plants. Isn't that what she did during her free time on the Enterprise?

He grumbled her name again, stepping past the tree-line.

A shiny object on the ground caught his gaze and the hair on the back of his neck stood up when he realized it was one of the metal bands that absorbed the static charge in the air. He knelt to pick it up, the metal now cold. He opened his mouth to call her name again, but the sound died in his throat when he noticed the water.

His heart thumped loud in his chest, a swift coil of heat shooting through him. *You should go,* he told himself as he rose from his kneeling position. For some reason, his body disobeyed his brain's command, his back straight and immobile, his feet firmly planted.

Amelia had yet to see him, her bare back to him as she dipped under the water. Her long blond hair was soaking wet, the tips fanned out and floating as she rose back to the surface. The water, clear as it was, did nothing to hide the curves already submerged.

He'd seen his fair share of women, some in the line of work, some strictly personal. But he couldn't recall ever experiencing such a quick and powerful reaction. He had never doubted his attraction for her, even as he fought it on occasion. In a matter of moments that fight just became a thousand times more difficult to win. His throat felt tight, the act of simply breathing becoming harder.

But not as hard as...

She shifted in the pool, turning around. He had seconds to react. Seconds that felt like minutes.

An image of her was burned into his mind as he put his back to her, his new primary objective to try and catch his breath.

"McCoy?" A ragged exhale left him as her soft voice floated to his ears.

He said the first thing that came to mind. "You didn't tell me when you left town."

"Well, I'm in town now." Without seeing her, he could only picture the frown on her face. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." Watching. Ogling. *Because I'm a man and you're a woman and you're naked-* "I didn't realize-"

"I can see that." His mind was playing tricks on him, amusement almost evident in her tone. He forced himself to remain facing the trees, the sound of water splashing causing him to flinch. "Just wait there for a second and you can walk me back."

"Of course." Soft taps against the stone signaled her approach.

McCoy was well aware of what he would see if he turned, his eyes sliding to a close as he fought a mixture of rising need and hunger. *You're a grown man, not a teenager. Get a grip.* His mental chastising helped some, his body cooling as he counted slowly to ten.

He was at five when he heard her yelp behind him, ruining any chance that he was actually going to get his body under control. McCoy turned, catching her arm as she fell backwards, her wet feet sliding on the stone.
An electrical shock ran through him at the contact, straight from his fingertips to his groin. He gritted his teeth against the sudden jolt.

McCoy had to take a quick step forward to stabilize her, his tight grip of her upper arm not nearly enough to keep her upright. His other arm circled around her, his hand rested low on her backside, bringing her against him.

She was bound to have crescent shaped bruises where his fingers clenched her arm. *Better bruises than a cracked skull.* Startled by the idea, he opened his hand, sliding his palm across her slick back to cup the nape of her neck.

It was terrifyingly intimate, her shallow breaths ghosting against his throat.

There was no doubt that she had regained her balance, but McCoy was locked in place. He looked above her head, the branch of a pine tree coming into focus. No matter how many pine needles he counted, he couldn't ignore the soft wet body pressed against him.

Disaster wasn't the only thing that orbited Amelia, he realized. *He* did as well. Ever since she had arrived on the Enterprise he'd followed her in one form or another. Was some great omniscient being toying with him up there? Toying with them both?

"McCoy." He shuddered, unable to stop the natural response to her muttering his name against his chest. His eyes snapped open when she asked, "Could you take your hand off my ass?"

After a moment he slid the offending hand up, stopping at the small of her back. His voice was low, almost a growl, as he countered, "You're not going to fall are you?"

"I think I'm good." Good wasn't even close to the description he applied to her, but he let go anyway, dropping his hands from her body as he turned to head up the path. He couldn't stay. Not now. Not when every nerve was raw and exposed and it wouldn't take much for him to-

Wind gust by him, a shiver running through him at the chill. McCoy glanced down at his uniform, noting for the first time that it was soaked all along the front. Compared to what he was feeling now, jealousy wasn't half bad.

**STARDATE 2260.139**

**Beta Quadrant**

**Planet MBW097**

She stood outside of the dining-hall, finding it difficult to step inside. There was no denying her attraction to McCoy, especially not now. Not when her body thrummed with pent-up energy at the simple memory of his hands on her.

Of course he was only keeping her from getting hurt, his discomfort over the situation obvious. Then again there was mystery of his very male response as she was tucked against him. She shivered as wind passed against her wet hair. Well, she blamed it on the wind anyway...

"Deep breath. Just go inside and eat dinner and everything will go back to normal." She scoffed at her own words, *normal* being a far reach.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her that she couldn't stand outside forever. Her feet carried her through the doors a moment later, the smell of stew heavy in the air. Carlos waved at her from across the room, pointing to an empty chair.
She scanned the room as she took a seat, not catching any sign of McCoy.

It was for the best, she figured. By tomorrow the whole exchange would probably be forgotten, another isolated incident that meant next to nothing. *Yeah, keep lying to yourself.* She shoved down the argumentative mental side of her brain.

Carlos was just as talkative for dinner as he had been through lunch, but for some reason his usual charm wasn't there. She had to force a smile at a story or two. Amelia wondered if she was simply missing it because her mind was on other things.

When she was full and tired, she made her way slowly to the guest house, unsure of what would face her. An irritated McCoy? Or that gentler one?

Amelia opened the door quietly, stepping inside to a dark room. There was no point in taking a shower, her bath in the lake more than sufficient. So she went straight to bed, kicking off her shoes before she climbed under the quilt.

McCoy didn't say anything and she was grateful for that. Her pride could only take so much embarrassment in a day and she'd used that up at the lake.

Her mind wandered as she lay against the down pillow, heat forming low in her belly as her thoughts went to places she'd rather not let them go. Carlos' offer came to mind, but she quickly squashed the idea. Sleeping with him wouldn't do anything to ease her nerves.

Of course there was another option not ten feet from her. Someone who she trusted. Her eyes shot open in the dark as she sat up quickly.

"We should have sex." The second she said it she wasn't sure if it was regret she felt or relief.

A steady snore sounded in the room a moment later.

So much for that idea...
Chapter 20

STARDATE 2260.142

Beta Quadrant

Amelia sat on the bio-bed, her backpack leaning against her. McCoy had all but dragged her to the med-bay after their return and considering the frustrated look on his face, she didn't feel like arguing.

"Roll up your sleeve." The order was given in a tight voice, but it was the most he had said to her since their exchange at the lake so Amelia found herself complying without hesitation. Soon, she had the white uniform tucked under her armpit.

He sucked a quick breath in through his teeth and she couldn't help but glance down at her exposed arm. The bruises were still present, small purple dots surrounded by larger yellow rings. She'd hardly felt them at all when they'd been put there, but as he prodded around the skin she could feel a twinge of pain.

Amelia swatted at his hand. "Yeah. Poke at it, McCoy. That'll make it better."

"I could have dislocated your shoulder." He grumbled as he waved the dermal regenerator over her arm, the purple marks dissipating. Of course, he grumbled. If McCoy wasn't grumbling, growling, swearing, or sneering then something was wrong in the universe.

"I could have also hit my head on the rocks and cracked it open." The quick glare he sent her way told her that wasn't the right thing to say.

"Damn it, Amelia." His growl was low and fierce. It would have been a shock if he hadn't said the exact same thing to her before. Amelia just rolled her eyes and sighed. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"You been holding that in for a while?" Probably since the night at the lake. Maybe that's why he'd barely mutter two words her way during their last few days on the planet.

"You were naked." Her eyes went wide. She'd thought his attitude had something to do with guilt or embarrassment. Now, she could see it was that he was also pissed. At her. Who the hell does he think he is? Certainly not anyone entitled to that behavior.

Feeling an irrational need to defend herself, she countered, "I wanted to go swimming and didn't have a bathing suit."

"Yeah? And what would you have done if I hadn't been there?" His accusation made it seem like the whole situation was her fault and he was the hero.

Amelia yanked down her sleeve and jumped from the bio-bed, glaring his way. If he hadn't distracted her at the lake, then she would have never slipped. She voiced the thought, "I probably wouldn't have fell in the first place."

"So this is my fault?"

"Yes." She slung the backpack over her shoulder, preparing to leave. Her late night swim wasn't the only thing he'd ruined either. "And you know what else, I might have actually had sex that night. Congratulations, McCoy, you saved both my head and my virtue!" She didn't add that it could
have been with him.

"What virtue!" Her mouth dropped open in shock, her hand suddenly open and raised. The fierce urge to strike him stunned her to the point of absolute stillness. She wasn't a violent person. And even when her thoughts drifted that way, she'd never acted upon them.

McCoy narrowed his eyes, glaring between her and the raised hand. Like he was asking for it...

"Am I interrupting?" Amelia jumped at the new presence in the room, her gaze darting to where Kirk stood in the doorway. Her arm dropped to her side, her fist clenching.

"Yes." McCoy ground out.

Simultaneously, Amelia said, "No." She brushed by the doctor, muttering to Kirk as she passed him. "I have to go check on the bay."

"Don't forget your report." The captain's call landed on deaf ears.

She didn't go to the hydroponics bay, instead deciding that her room was a better refuge. She blinked back tears, surprised that it had taken a hurtful comment from McCoy to bring them out, even after all she had lost.

There was more to it, she knew that. She'd placed trust in the doctor, only to have it thrown back at her. And it hurt.

She dropped her backpack to her floor, uncaring that there were things she needed to unload from it. A metal bracelet, a new set of clothes. Things that were just going to have to wait until later.

Amelia sat at her desk and rested her head on her arms, drawing in a ragged breath. She wanted to calm herself, find her center that was buried under anger. Her hand reached for her data padd, her thumbs already working to pull up saved video logs from Richard.

At the sight of his face, her eyes filled up with tears once more. She should have taken his offer and left with Captain O'Shea and avoided this emotional conflict entirely.

But then where would the people on that planet be? Starving within a year? Dead from Meningitis?

Amelia reached for her license at the corner of the desk, grasping for something that could ground her. Her hand fell on the surface of the desk, no plastic within reach. Her first thought was that she'd knocked it off when she picked up her data padd, but when she looked underneath the furniture it was nowhere to be found.

Thoughts of McCoy were pushed aside, panic taking their place. She never considered herself a meticulous person, but there was no doubt that it had been sitting under the padd when she'd left for the planet.

The plastic card that was once her identity was gone. She reached for the communicator on her belt and flipped it open, her finger hovering over the digits. There's no one you can call.

Amelia's breaths turned shallow, her mind racing with possibilities. She made a bee-line for her locker and threw it open, checking to see if anything else was missing.

But all her personal items were accounted for, save the license.

She clutched the communicator. Calm down. It could be nothing. And even if it wasn't, she couldn't
make a call in her current state.

Amelia sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes as she dialed, using the brief pause to carefully consider what she was going to say. "Chief Engineer Scott."

If anyone could answer her question it was Scotty. "It's Amelia. I've, uh... noticed something missing from my room. Is there any way a person could bypass my access code?"

"There was a security sweep performed two days ago. If something's missin' you should report it to the Security Chief. Or the First Officer since he headed the search."

Amelia's back went stiff. "Search for what?"

"Missing weapon." She breathed a sigh of relief, though it was short-lived. "It was found on deck 4 in someone's personal quarters."

So that explained how they had gained entry, but why would they take her driver's license? Her arm went slack, the communicator dropping to the floor even as Scotty continued to speak.

"Spock." She said out loud, the pieces falling together. "Spock took my license."

Amelia sunk to the floor, dazed as she snapped the communicator shut. Do something! But what? It was only a matter of time before he figured out what it was. Of course, he had it in his possession for two days. By now he was probably well aware of what it meant.

There's still a chance that it wasn't him. The thought was fleeting and hopeful and completely unfounded. Spock had already questioned her use of outdated phrases. He already suspected something was off.

The last time she saw him he had been in the shuttle bay when they arrived. And he had barely spared a glance her way. Was it a calculated move? Wasn't that the Vulcan way? She couldn't put off the confrontation forever, of that she was well aware. The real question was, what would he do with the truth? Would her position on the Enterprise be compromised?

Amelia stood slowly, straightening her white uniform. She clipped the communicator back on her belt and ran her sleeve against her face to wipe away evidence of her earlier distress.

As she carried her personal data padd with her she wondered if being labeled a liar by the First Officer was something she could deal with. Since day one she'd told Richard that she hated having to spin mistruths, because she knew that eventually it would catch up with her.

It took her several minutes and a few glances at her datapadd to make sure she was heading in the right direction. When she stepped onto the bridge she couldn't help but wonder if today was the day she could stop lying.

She didn't have time to appreciate the fact that someone had authorized her entry and she didn't have a chance to take good look at the head of the ship.

Spock spotted her almost immediately, his brow lifting as if to ask 'are you ready?'. Amelia nodded at the unspoken question, watching as he leaned over to speak with Kirk, who was seated in what she could only assume was the Captain's chair.

Then the Vulcan approached her, pointing towards the turbo-lift. Amelia had all of twenty seconds to snap out of her fearful state. She wasn't the same woman who ran from the bright ball in the sky. She was the woman who took on Nausicaan pirates and had survived her fair share of accidents and
assaults.

Even though the idea of lying sat uneasy with her, she knew she couldn't shy from it.

As soon as the turbo-lift doors closed and they started their descent, Amelia called out, "Turbo-lift, halt." The blinking lights fluttered, the turbo-lift shuddering in a sudden stop. Her brows pulled together as she pinned Spock with a glare. "You stole something from me."

He didn't flinch, his eyes focused straight ahead at the turbo-lift doors. "Could you describe the item you are referring to?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about." The swear slipped out of her, born of frustration and fear. She tried to tamper down on her emotions, because in her current state she'd find it difficult to recall the answers Richard had prepared her with. Just like the ones she had given to McCoy months ago.

"Are you certain that you wish to have this conversation in the turbo-lift?" She snorted at Spock's question. *Why put off to tomorrow what you could get done today?*

"That item belonged to my-" Not grandmother... that wouldn't have been a long enough gap. "-my ancestor."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Her counter was quick and firm.

"Which ancestor?"

"My namesake, of course."

"She quite looks like you." Probably because it was her. However, admitting that to Spock would cause a whole new set of questions.

Amelia grit her teeth, her mind already racing with answers. "Genetics."

"Mother's side or father's side?"

She'd always been told that she looked like her mother, so the answer that came forth was immediate. "Mother's side."

"Then how did she have the last name Wright?" Maybe she should have taken a second longer to answer the question.

Instead of changing her answer, she leveled a glare his way. "Coincidence."

His brow lifted a touch, almost like he was amused. Amelia found herself forcing her jaw tight to keep from saying anything further. "I doubt that." Then, after a beat, he said, "Turbo-lift, resume."

It was strange how he seemed both unconcerned, yet interested. She chalked it up to his Vulcan nature. Amelia gave a small sigh, "I want it back, Spock."

"You can have it back as soon as you divulge the truth."

"What truth? I'm the last of my line and that license was given to me." The doors opened and Spock stepped into the corridor. Unsure of where they were going, Amelia was forced to follow behind him, her words kept low as they passed others in the hall.
"What year were you born?" It seemed Spock was also concerned with being overheard, his voice dropping a touch as he continued the interrogation. At least this question was easier.

"2229."

"Where?"

"Flagstaff, Arizona."

"Where did you go to primary school?"

She faltered, but only for a second. Richard had told her if she couldn't recall an answer, then she should deflect. Resistance 101, he had called it. "All of that information is in my file. Which you have access to."

"I want to hear the answers from you."

"I don't have to answer anything. I just want my stuff back."

Spock opted to ignore that statement, still intent on digging for more information. "Why did you receive the xeno-series as an adult?"

Deflect. "That's medical and none of your business."

"Why do you have archaic metal implants?" She briefly wondered why he had asked about the xeno-series when that question made it apparent that he'd read her medical file.

But, lucky for her, the doctor at the Denver facility had prepped her for that one. "My body rejected traditional treatment."

"Why were you taught the imperial method of measurement?"

Amelia had spent a good twenty minutes searching on her datapadd for an answer to that one. After he'd called her out during their sparring session, she hadn't wanted to get caught off guard. Even to her ears the answer sounded rehearsed. "Anthropology. Second semester of college. I made an A."

As he stopped in front of a set of sliding doors, she found herself growing frustrated once more. So far she hadn't given him any reason not to trust her. In fact, she'd done nothing but prove herself time and time again. Her voice was sharp as she asked, "How many more questions do I have to answer before you give me back the license?"

"However many it takes to get the truth." The truth. Starfleet was the one who had made her file classified. She'd been instructed by senior members to do everything in her power to hide the truth.

Amelia laughed, the irony of the situation too much to ignore. "You want the truth, Spock? My life was taken from me. Everything. My home. My family. My work. I didn't want to end up in Denver. I didn't want to be put on this ship. But I'm here now and I have been through hell since day one. I'm the horticulturist who saved your Captain's ass. I'm the horticulturist who took on pirates to save the Huron. Under no circumstances are you entitled to question me about my past when my present has been so damn influential on this ship."

"That is the most honest statement you have made so far." She followed Spock through the opening doors, sparing only a quick glance around the room. It was designed much like the ready-room, save the observation window. Amelia turned her attention back to Spock, who was sending an intense gaze her way. His voice was softer when he spoke again, as if he was trying to quell her rising
frustration. As if he understood why she wouldn't answer. "But I contend that it is not enough."

She raised her chin, realizing that even though she wasn't supposed to give him answers, that didn't mean he couldn't formulate them on his own. The proverbial loop-hole of her situation. "Then you tell me what the truth is, Spock."

He reached into his pocket, the stare he sent her way even as he withdrew a small card. She recognized it immediately, the plastic glinting under the corridor lights. "You're a time traveler. You hold onto this license because it's yours and it represents that life that was taken from you. You use outdated terminology, have had outdated surgery, and have even worn outdated forms of clothing. My guess is that you did land in Denver and were immediately taken in for questioning."

Spock paused, not long enough for her interject, but long enough for her to know that he was still forming his hypothesis. "Someone suggested that you were working with the terrorist Khan Singh, because according to your medical file you are 30 years old and you would have been present during the Eugenics War.. So, in order to ensure your safety, your sponsor placed you aboard this ship. Based upon your work in the hydroponics bay I would also guess that you do indeed have an education in horticulture, yet you've had to adapt with the new technology available. Hence the latent use of the maturation modifier. Tell me, Miss Wright, what have I missed so far?"

She let out a long breath, the practiced answers fading from her mind. There was no point now in denial, not when he already knew. Oddly enough, she didn't feel fear or anxiety. She simply felt relief. Amelia cocked her head to the side, "How about the fact that my sponsor put me on a ship with Sherlock Holmes? How long have you known?"

"My suspicions were first raised when you asked me for that conversion. After that it was one small slip after another. You also mentioned that you were taught Aikido, a fighting style that hasn't been practiced in almost a hundred years, which spurred me to investigate further. I accessed your personnel file and was surprised to find that an entire segment had been redacted. Considering I have met both a time traveler and a cryogenically frozen soldier, my initial thoughts were that you fit into one of those categories. Then I found your identification card and I-" Spock's brow shot upwards as he held out his hand, the card resting on his palm. "-deduced."

As she took the license, she said, "I guess denying it wouldn't do me any good."

"No." He wasn't aggressive or hostile, just... there. She followed him as he walked towards the table, obeying in silence as he gestured for her to have a seat. Once she was settled, her datapadd resting in front of her on the table, he continued. "You confirming this knowledge will make the next step easier."

She mimicked his earlier expression, arching a brow in surprise. She'd thought his intention was to simply to get the truth. Now it seemed there was more to his short interrogation. "What step?"

"I will formally request to become your new sponsor. Captain O'Shea has returned to Earth and you will benefit having a new appointment."

That was unexpected. "Why? Why would you do this?"

"Because I am half human and the greatest emotion I feel is curiosity. As your sponsor I will be granted access to the redacted portions of your file and you will be free to confide your experiences with me. It will benefit both of us greatly. Myself in my career, and you in your knowledge of this time."

"Are you going to tell the captain?" Amelia could have sworn there was a flicker of emotion that
passed across his face. Something she'd describe as regret or, possibly, guilt.

"That may not be wise. Captain Kirk was almost killed by Khan."

Amelia started, that information sinking in slowly. What? "Wait a second... are you telling me that I was placed on a ship with a Captain who was almost killed by the man I'm accused of working for?"

"It does seem to be a large oversight on the part of your sponsor."

Quietly, she asked, "Spock, am I safe here?"

"As safe as you have ever been, Miss Wright." Well that didn't make her feel any better.

There were a few minutes of silence before he began to explain the process of transferring sponsorship. That relief she had felt earlier was expanding, especially when he asked her to tell him her story. Once she started, she didn't stop.

Spock remained quiet for the most part, urging her only when she struggled to find the right words. He'd said he had met a time traveler, so his chances at understanding her situation were better than most. Except his time traveler was from the future. And it was him.

His only parting words were, "We are simply a product of our experiences. You make a fine product, Miss Wright."

After she finished with Spock, she found herself back in the hydroponics bay. Green leaves and blooming flowers surrounded her, not fully setting her at peace, but at least giving her a chance of calming down.

"Amelia." Apparently, life had other plans, though. Her day was complete. She shuddered at the thought of having to deal with him again, already worn out emotionally and mentally.

She held up her hand, not bothering to look back as footsteps sounded behind her. "Don't. Don't say another word, McCoy. I have had enough." Between him lashing out at her and the two hours she'd spent with Spock, Amelia wasn't sure she could survive another bout.

"I shouldn't have said that. I should have never questioned your-"

"Virtue?" Her tone was tired, lacking any bite. Even still, McCoy flinched at the word.

"Your integrity. You've done nothing to deserve it. What you do on your personal time is your business."

She pushed aside her recent event with Spock, just enough so she'd gather the energy to cross her arms and ask, "So why did you?"

"Because when I saw you in that lake I didn't turn around." She couldn't move as he walked towards her, his words slow. His brow was furrowed in frustration. But when was it ever wrinkle free? "And I should have. I should have walked back the way I came and never looked back. Because you're disaster, Amelia Wright."

She should have stepped away when he placed his hand lightly against the back of her neck, his eyes dark as he stared down at her.

The grip was gentle, but his voice was hard. "And the first thing you ruined on this ship was me."

Then he slipped a hand in her hair and pulled her towards him, his mouth crashing down on hers in
violent desperation. For a moment she didn't move, her eyes wide open as his drifted shut.

It seemed like an inevitable course of action, like two stable elements that, once combined, would ignite. He was Magnesium, always teetering on the edge, and she was Water, the one thing that set him off. Fire burned, passion long dormant rising to the surface.

Amelia had spent years not truly caring for anyone and in the span of six months she suddenly had a multitude of people who cared for her. To include a Starfleet doctor who didn't seem to know whether to strangle her or kiss her like she was a lifeline...

Before she knew it, her hands were threading through his short brown hair, her mouth working in tandem against his. It was crazy. Unbelievable. The perfect vent for her built-up frustrations. His thumb stroked down her throat, her mouth opening in a gasp.

**STARDATE 2260.142**

**Beta Quadrant**

He hadn't intended on kissing her. It certainly wasn't the wisest decision he had ever made. Then again, when she was involved he rarely made the right choices. As she stared up at him, looking as confused as he felt, he couldn't resist the pull any longer.

She should have struck him in the med-bay. He would have deserved it. As soon as she had left, he'd repeated the conversation in his head only to find he was truly disgusted with himself. Yeah... he had spent several hours blaming her for his reaction on the planet, but in reality it was entirely his doing. Accepting that had been the first step in correcting this monstrosity of a situation.

And of course he had to kiss her before even begging for forgiveness.

Even as he tilted his head to deepen the kiss, he knew that it would be short lived pleasure. She'd gain her bearings and shove him back and her open palm would land on his cheek. Just like it should have hours earlier.

Amelia gasped against his mouth, a sound that made his heart skip a beat. He couldn't remember the last time he'd encouraged such a reaction and it only served to spur him forward. The hand that wasn't locked in long blond strands dropped to the small of her back to pull her tight against him.

It became harder to think, harder to hold on to the reasons he'd kept from doing this in first place. And it felt fantastic. His body responded, his muscles tensing as arousal licked at every nerve.

The only thing that tempered his reaction was her slow withdrawal. Amelia's hands stilled against his shoulders, her lips drawing back. He followed them, briefly leaning in to capture them one last time. Because he knew it could very well be the last time he'd ever get the chance to kiss her again.

McCoy fought to even his erratic breathing, noting that Amelia was occupied with the same task. That knowledge sent a thrum of male pride through him. He ran his thumb across her neck, his hand resting on her shoulder.

She shuddered, but didn't pull away. "Stop." The soft plea had him setting his hand a safer distance from her throat.

"I should have never said that." The words came slow, his body and mind still working their way from the haze of need. Because at this point he couldn't deny that he needed her. For what exactly, he wasn't sure.
"You keep saying that. And then you compound the mistake by kissing me?" McCoy froze at her words, fighting irritation.

"That part-" He corrected, "-wasn't a mistake."

"Then what was it, McCoy?" She snapped and he took a moment to simply look down at her. Tired lines ran across her face, lines that were probably only there because of him. He weighed his words, not wanting to hand over control by saying that he just couldn't help himself and not wanting to pin this on her.

So he made it an even match. "A revelation. That you want this as much as I do."

Amelia's eyes widened slightly. "You have a funny way of showing interest." He took note of the fact that she didn't deny it. McCoy couldn't help but feel a touch of satisfaction at that.

"I haven't had much practice. And you're not the easiest person to impress."

"You're wrong. You just suck at it."

He considered how she treated everyone else who was caught in her orbit. It was true that they received her affection because they gave it in turn. But affection had always been a struggle for him. "I guess I can't deny that."

"The first step to solving a problem is admitting you have one."

"My problem won't go away. She's stuck on this ship for five years." She didn't smile, but then again he hadn't expected one. He owed her more than just snark and sarcasm. McCoy sighed, running a hand through his hair as he admitted, "I'm a jackass. I have a temper and I can be a jealous man. Those are just a few of my many faults, but they tend to be the ones most present when you're around."

"This isn't healthy." Healthy? If he wanted healthy he'd have cut his losses and just stick to solo-sex in his quarters. At least then he wouldn't have to risk life and limb every time he opened his mouth around her. At least then he'd get some form of release. "So you want me. It's not enough. We can't even stand to be in a room together for more than five minutes."

McCoy warred with the desire to have her and the desire not to fight. But the first desire won and he found himself responding with a huff, "That's not true. We slept in the same room for several days."

"Two of which we didn't even talk to each other. Face it, McCoy. We may be physically compatible, but that's the only thing we have going for us and we both deserve better." No. She deserved better.

But he was a selfish man so he clenched his fists and stared down at her, pleading with her to at least give him, no, them, a chance. "Amelia-"

"No. I have had an emotionally draining day, most of which was your fault. Now, if you don't mind... Please get out of my bay."
Her breakfast partner was talkative, his excitement infectious as ever. Scotty babbled on about a recent discovery, technical words flying above her head faster than she could even begin to comprehend their meaning. Amelia nodded and smiled, tossing in a few wows once in a while. It took him almost five minutes before he stopped and stared at her.

"You don'na understand a thing I just said do ya, lass?"

Caught at her ignorance, Amelia just smiled and gave him an apologetic shrug. "Not a chance. But it sounded good."

"Let's just say I made my seeds go twice as fast." Her brow shot up, a smirk forming at his choice of words. Scotty just scowled and grumbled at her, "Eh, you know what I mean."

Trying to make up for her obvious lack of knowledge, she asked, "So when do you get to enhance the, uh, warp core?"

Scotty perked back up at the question, making her feel a little better. She could almost see his mind working, calculating the upgrades and mentally picturing the finished product. "A couple of months. We just need some supplies."

A couple of months? "And where do you get supplies in the middle of nowhere?"

"Andorian space station. We should intercept in 45 days or so."

Amelia released a small huff of mock irritation. "Why don't I ever get to know where we're going?"

"You could ask. Or go to the observation deck and pull up the navigation map." Scotty's grin caused one of her own to form.

"Yeah and then I could get a degree in star charting." They shared a laugh. "I'll just assume you'll let me know if it's important."

She used the quick break in conversation to finish eating her eggs. "So... you plan on tellin' me 'bout McCoy?" Yolk and white caught in her throat at his unexpected question, her wide eyes focused on him as she coughed.

Acting nonchalant was out of the question, not with the way Scotty was staring at her after her coughing fit. Somehow she managed to ask, "What about him?"

"Ah, come on, lass. Bones been a mite sensitive on the subject of you." Based on the way he was still staring at her, she had the feeling he was forming the same opinion about her.

Amelia set her fork down, tapping her fingers against the table. "One, how do you know this? And two, why is the subject of me even coming up?"

"Command staff meeting. Mr. Spock wanted to discuss your sponsorship with the Captain." Right. That made sense considering that he was the Chief Engineer.
Oh. "I see."


She couldn't help the blush that spread across her face. "It's... personal."

She heard more than saw Scotty gasp, then he leaned in closer as his voice dropped to ask, "Are you shagging the doctor? And ya didn't think to tell me?"

"No! What? No." A quick glance at his face told her that he didn't believe her for a second. "I am not shagging McCoy."

Scotty made a tsking noise, pointing his finger at her in accusation. "Maybe that's his problem."

"Unbelievable." She wasn't sure what was worse. That Scotty was implying McCoy was frustrated because of her, or that Scotty seemed so satisfied about setting her on edge.

At least he had the sense to shoot her an apologetic smile. "Oh, come on now. Five years is a long time without a bit of drama."

"Believe me, I have had my share of drama on this ship. Even without the romance." Eager to change the subject, Amelia piped up with, "How's operation moonshine?"

Considering that they hadn't shared a drink in a while, his response was almost expected. "On hold. Captain smacked me around a bit after catching us drinking. Wanted to know where his share was. I've got to lay low for a while, if you know what I mean."

"By lay low you actually mean that you're bribing him with the product, right?"

Another wide grin. "Precisely."

A short beeping sound throughout the room caught their attention. Amelia looked up towards the ceiling, searching for the source. It didn't take long before Kirk's voice came across the intercom. "Attention on deck, this is your Captain."

"Speak of the devil."

"As of ten minutes ago, two Klingon vessels have entered within sensor range of the Enterprise. I order all crew members to report to their stations. Some of you may be aware of the recent hostilities between Starfleet and the Klingon empire. Considering the failing truce that once existed between us, there is a strong possibility of conflict. Once more, I order that all hands report to their stations."

Her voice was shaking slightly when she asked, "What does that mean?"

"It means we're standing our ground." Scotty didn't look afraid. In fact, he looked rather excited.

Surprised, Amelia shook her head, "I didn't think this was a combat ship."

"She's not. But she's primed to hold her own." Then he left with many other diners, filing out of the dining hall. A flash of blue caught her eye and she turned her attention to Th'eon, who approached her. For once he wasn't wearing a smile.

Before he could open his mouth, Amelia asked, "How dangerous are the Klingons?"
"Quite. You should get to the hydroponics bay. I'm sure there are procedures in place."

"There are." It was actually one of the first things she'd learned while spending hours with the hydroponics bay datapadd. Dropping the blast doors. Shutting down the water systems. She cast a quick glance around, noting that the dining hall was almost clear of people. "Do you need help first?"

"I will be fine, Amelia-dear. You should go." Satisfied that she wouldn't be abandoning her Andorian friend, Amelia finally stood from her table. Th'eon was right about her having a place to be. Already her mind was working to recall the emergency safety procedures for the bay.

Because the food source had to be protected. Her thoughts drifted to the Huron and how they had been without the use of the replicators. The sudden memory made her increase her pace as she headed towards the turbo-lift.

Then the entire ship rocked, sending her careening into the wall of the corridor as a small boom echoed around her. Her shoulder impacted, but not hard enough to leave any lasting injury. A siren began to wail, others in the corridor still struggling to get their footing. Amelia surveyed the damage around her, surprised at how much debris littered the corridor.

Dislodged ceiling panels had fallen to the floor, buckled walls showed exposed wires. Someone groaned behind her and she turned instantly, catching sight of a woman in a red dress uniform sprawled across the floor. Her head sported a gash, but it wasn't the wound that had her immobile. A metal beam rested across the woman's leg, effectively pinning her down.

Amelia knelt next to her and pressed a hand against her shoulder. "Hey!" Her shout was probably louder than necessary, but she chalked that up to the mild ringing in her ears. As she waited for a response, she shifted down to the beam, noting how the skin trapped underneath was already a dark purple. She wrapped her hands around it and attempted to pull upwards, grunting at the strain.

It budged, but not enough for the woman to pull her foot free. Of course, in the woman's dazed state, she wouldn't be much assistance.

Amelia looked around, gaze wide as she searched for anyone else. She saw movement in the distance and sucked in a breath, calling out, "Help!"

The movement came closer, a man in a yellow uniform stepping over the debris. She let out a quick sigh of relief, motioning him over and stating the obvious, "She's trapped."

The man took a moment to look them over, his gaze lingering on the woman's face. Then he patted her cheek lightly, provoking a quick reaction. The woman startled, her gaze jumping between Amelia and the newcomer. "What-"

"Disruptor cannon blast, Lieutenant. Can you move?" It took a few moments for the lieutenant to respond to his question, but after stretching out her free limbs, she gave a nod. "Alright. Me and-" The man shot a questioning glance towards Amelia.

"Amelia Wright," she supplied quickly.

"Amelia here are going to lift this beam. I need you to roll towards me when you get clearance." Just as he maneuvered to the other side of the beam, another blast rocked the ship. This time, Amelia was braced for it, her hand catching the wall. She wanted to ask the man what else he knew about this attack, but there were more important matters at hand.

Like putting all her efforts into lifting the beam off this woman's leg. "One." He started the count.
"Two." She took a deep breath. "Three." Together, they managed to elevate it a few inches, the woman instantly rolling out from under.

"Can you get her to the med-bay?" His question was met with a quick nod from Amelia, and then, just as quickly as he had arrived, he was gone. The lieutenant struggled to her feet, pulling herself up until she was leaning against the wall.

Amelia watched the woman put weight on the leg that was trapped, a quick hiss escaping through her teeth. Their eyes met and she announced, "My ankle's broken."

"Med-bay isn't too far." Amelia said, moving over to tuck herself against the woman's side. She caught the woman's arm and pulled it over her shoulder, her other hand clasping her waist. "Lean on me."

Another rumble echoed through the corridor, the ship rocking once more. It wasn't enough to throw them off balance, but it was enough to remind Amelia that she needed to hurry and get to the hydroponics bay.

Hobbling into the turbo-lift and setting their destination, Amelia cast a sideways glance at the lieutenant. "How much do you think this ship can take?"

The woman tilted her head, as if listening for something. Then she turned back to Amelia. "Shields are still up. She can hold out for a while. And the Captain has his share of tactical experience."

"So I've heard." The corner of Amelia's mouth quirked upwards. At least they had that going for them...  

"What is it that you do?"

She guessed that the woman asked the question to keep her mind off the swelling ankle, and Amelia obliged her with an answer. "I'm a horticulturist. I work in the hydroponics bay. You?"

"Engineering." The woman blinked in dawning realization. Light glinted against wide, tearing eyes. Amelia couldn't tell if it was from pain or frustration. "I should be down there. Keeping the ship together."

"Can't really help til they fix that ankle. One step at a time, right?" Except the hundred steps that it took to get to the already open doors of the med-bay seemed to draw the energy right out of the lieutenant, her breathing heavy as they stumbled inside.

Someone in a white shirt approached them, taking Amelia's place. As soon as the weight was lifted, she straightened and looked around the room. There were more beds than she remembered, cots pulled down from the wall to house the growing number of patients.

"-he needs ... surgery, which I can't perform while the damn ship is moving. Get him stable." The familiar voice barked, and Amelia rotated her head to catch a glimpse of McCoy. He was wearing his white coat, his brow furrowed as he stared down at a patient. "125 ml saline over the next hour. Prep for a transfusion."

It was strange how these were the times she saw him at his best. When people around him were hurt and dying. She watched him place his hand on the man's arm, a comforting gesture meant to go unnoticed. But she noticed and it was that part of him she often found herself drawn to.

Just as she prepared herself to turn around and head towards the hydroponics bay, she heard his voice again. "Miss Wright, are you injured?"
Her spine went stiff at the formality, but she didn't blame him. She hadn't exactly given him reason to be more personal. When she caught his concerned hazel gaze, she said, "No. I'm fine. Just helped someone get here."

His expression softened, "You should stay here. The med-bay is a safe-zone, one of the last to lose power and shielding."

She countered, "I've got to get to the hydroponics bay."

"Your plants aren't worth your life, Amelia." His responding growl earned him a knowing tilt of her mouth. Not exactly a smile considering the situation, but an expression that said she was grateful for his concern.

"Those plants are going to be all we've got if we lose the replicators." Understanding spread across his face. "Go... you have people to save."

He caught her arm as she went to leave, his eyes fierce and his tone low. "I don't want you to be among them. You watch your ass." His statement wasn't a plea or a request. It was an order. And it was one she felt compelled to obey.

"I will." His hand dropped from her arm, his eyes darting behind him, to the many people who were waiting for further orders from the doctor. McCoy gave her one last hard look, then turned abruptly to head back into the med-bay.

As soon as he was out of sight, Amelia was back in the corridor, navigating her way to the hydroponics bay. The Enterprise was hit three more times in rapid succession and as she came closer to the bay, she could almost hear the sounds of returned fire. She wondered if that was because she was so close to the hull.

Whatever was happening... they were fighting back.

The well-known sliding doors of the bay came into view, the lights above blinking randomly. Even with the obvious power issues, they slid open without hesitation. The solar lighting above the plants was dim, causing her a moment of concern.

They'll survive without it, she reminded herself, refocusing on the task at hand.

Amelia pulled out the hydroponics bay datapadd, shifting through instructions until she found the procedure to bring down the blast doors. Detailed diagrams appeared, showing her a lever that she had seen many times before.

In the secondary environment.

Which was currently frozen over in order to grow the Andorian fungus.

"Not enough foresight for that one, huh?" Amelia muttered to herself as she threw open the door to the secondary environment. Cold air wafted past her, goosebumps forming on her neck. Her eyes went to the wall where the yellow painted lever glistened.

Maybe it was still movable. Amelia darted inside, closing her hand around the bar at the top and trying to ignore the sudden needle-like pain that spread along her palm. Taking in a deep breath, she tugged at it, willing it to budge. You don't have time for this!

Even if she altered the controls the room wouldn't defrost in time. And she couldn't walk away now. Not when the room around her might be their only hope for survival should the replicators fail.
Amelia tapped the heel of her hand against her forehead, frustration coming to the surface. "Think, Amelia, think!" It was too cold. Too frozen.

Her head snapped up. Which meant she needed heat. And lots of it.

She stopped at the control panels for the environment, shutting down every system inside. Then she ran to the primary environment panels and closed off the water systems. In the back corner of the bay rested a small stack of large black containers.

Amelia read the labels, pushing boxes aside when they weren't what she was looking for. "K. Potassium." Another shove. "N. Nitrogen." She slid that one over too. Her eyes landed on a series of letters and numbers. "N-H-N-O. Ammonium Nitrate."

Common ingredients in fertilizer. Ingredients she had used before to blow a tree stump clean out of the ground. She did alright in chemistry, but as she snapped open the container and started shoveling the nitrate into a steel bowl she wondered if 'alright' would get her blown to smithereens.

The hydroponics bay also had something along the lines of a tool-shed. Amelia ransacked it as well, sliding on the thickest gloves she could find. Because that metal bowl was going to get real hot real quick.

She didn't have a flint, but she had plenty of metal tools. Her eyes went to a familiar set hanging on the rack. Her mother's trowel and rake. She clutched them both in one hand, scooping the bowl in the other before racing back to the Andorian environment.

A sharp tilt of the ship sent her stumbling, the bowl and tools clanging across an iced floor. The attacks from outside seemed to be stronger now, as if the constant barrage was finally making a dent. You need to move faster, now.

She listened to that mental voice, her hands shoveling the ammonium nitrate back into the bowl. Tucking it between her knees to hold it in place, she gripped the trowel in one hand and rake in the other. "Girl scouts... don't fail me now."

Using all the speed she could muster, she sent the rake hard against the edge of the trowel. Sparks flew, but not where she needed them to.

Amelia adjusted her position, repeating her attempt at setting the nitrate on fire. One. Two. Faster. On the fifth strike, the compound inside the bowl caught fire, the flames erupting high enough to singe her eyebrows.

With gloved hands, she picked up the bowl, careful to keep it a safe distance from herself. But not from the lever. Elation filled her when the flames licked at the ice, water dripping down the wall. When her hands were close to blistering, she finally set the bowl back on the ground.

The second time she tugged on the lever, it gave. A small cry of victory escaped her when she locked it into the down position. As soon as it snapped in, a grinding noise rang through the bay.

Amelia glance out of the secondary environment, watching as the hull wall was covered by a second lowering wall. The blast wall. It had no sooner touched the bottom when she was thrown from her standing position, a resounding boom echoing in her ears.

Sprawled across the floor, a fire still raged beside her. She didn't think about it for too long, though, knowing that it was contained and it would die out on its own. Now that she'd secured the hydroponics bay, Amelia would need to find a safe-zone. A place for her to wait out this battle.
Her first thought was to go to the med-bay...

**STARDATE 2260.151**

**Beta Quadrant**

When the Enterprise gets hit... she gets hit hard. The second that Jim made his announcement, he knew what was coming. Maybe it was because he had faced the Klingons before, or maybe it was just the fact that his gut told him to prepare for the worst. His team returned early from their breakfast, filing in to their stations.

Doctor Robinson made an appearance too, deviating from her post on the lower decks of the ship. For a moment he wondered why she was there, then he remember she had been asking for a bone regen kit. Now was probably the best time to ensure she had one.

"White case under biobed four." It was all she needed to hear, because she was gone a moment later. As his team began to lower cots, McCoy prepped various hyposprays and intravenous drips. He snapped sanitation wands into their slots on the walls and did a second check on the biobed displays.

The wait that followed wasn't a long one.

While the nurses secured equipment, the first strike occurred. The only reason he remained upright was because he'd been bracing himself against his desk. The ship shuddered and he shuddered with it, his eyes drifting close as terror threatened to fight its way to the surface.

Despite the openness of space, retreat wasn't always an option. The metal box that contained them could be ripped to shreds. He had seen it exposed once before...

*Jim has saved this ship time and time again. Have a little faith?* McCoy found that to be a difficult task, but it was one he accomplished because how the hell could he tell a patient to have faith when he had none himself?

The first patient came in with electrical burns. The second came in with a concussion. Then the broken bones started to file in. Every once in a while his team looked to him for answers. And he gave them some, medical or not.

The worst was a commander who had shrapnel lodged in his lung. Because even though McCoy could remove the metal and sew him up, he still needed internal repair. He stared down at the man, wondering if he could spare the resources right now.

*Triage.*

One of the nurses asked, "Doctor McCoy? What would you like us to do with him?"

"Nothing we can do right now. What he needs is surgery, which I can't perform while the damn ship is moving. Get him stable." He hadn't meant to come across so hard, but frustration was building with every rock of the ship. The longer the Enterprise was engaged with the Klingons, the more people would die around him.

He looked down at the patient, calculating the best way to keep him alive. "125 ml saline over the next hour. Prep for a transfusion."

Someone carried a woman past him and he gave her a quick once over, his eyes lingering on her swollen ankle. Then he felt the sensation that he was being watched. He cast a glance at the door, startled to see Amelia standing there.
Her name was already forming in his mouth, but he caught himself before he voiced it, instead asking, "Miss Wright, are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine." He let out a sigh of relief. So what was she doing at the med-bay? "Just helped someone get here."

She looked ready to bolt. Instead of letting his confusion show, he went for the gentle approach. She always seemed to respond to that. "You should stay here. The med-bay is a safe-zone, one of the last to lose power and shielding."

"I've got to get to the hydroponics bay." McCoy bristled, that earlier frustration shifting its aim towards her. They were in the middle of an attack and she wanted to go the damn hydroponics bay? Of all the things...

"Your plants aren't worth your life, Amelia." He argued, somehow knowing that she would leave anyway.

"Those plants are going to be all we've got if we lose the replicators." His jaw ticked when he realized that she was right. Then she added, "Go... you have people to save." If only he could help them all.

She turned to leave and before he could stop himself he caught her arm. His voice dropped, hoping she would take his next words to heart, "I don't want you to be among them. You watch your ass."

"I will." He intended to hold her to that. As much as he wanted to stay there next to her, there was chaos behind him that he needed to tend to. Finally, he released her arm and turned away. He shouldn't be worrying about her. Not when there were bodies in beds that required his focus.

His communicator chirped and he swiftly brought it to his ear. "McCoy."

"Could you report to the bridge. You will need to bring a wrist brace and a diagnostic kit." Spock's tone was clipped, his words short and to the point.

There was only one reason they would pull him from the med-bay and that was an injury to one of the command staff. He dialed another communicator. "Robinson."

"I need you to take the med-bay." As his second, she would make sure it continued to run smoothly.

"Yes, sir." McCoy snapped the communicator back against his hip then began to pack a small silver case. He ensured that most of the patients were stable before he left, issuing a few more orders for the ones who weren't.

On his way to the bridge, the ship was hit several more times, a few jolts strong enough to make him lose his balance. Even before he stepped into the bridge, he could hear the bark of commands from his Captain.

"Fire." Kirk's mouth was set in a thin line as the viewing screen displayed the bright lights of the torpedoes.

"Photon torpedoes set for intercept." Sulu responded immediately, the man's eyes focused on the screen in front of them.

"Shields?" Kirk asked, his gaze intent on Sulu.

"62 percent." While Kirk went back and forth with Sulu, McCoy spent a moment to gaze at the
viewing screen. Two aggressive looking ships were displayed in the center. They certainly had the characteristics of a Klingon...

"Hull status?"

"Decks 18 and 19 have ruptured hulls, interior shields are holding for evacuation" Suddenly, the ships vanished. "Sir, they've cloaked!"

"Use a flare, scan for impact."

With a brief lull in the battle, Spock finally approached him, "Doctor McCoy. The captain has a fractured wrist." With the way Kirk was pressing it against his stomach, McCoy didn't doubt it.

"Captain?" Jim turned at McCoy's voice, giving a frustrated sigh.

"I said it was fine, Mr. Spock." Despite Jim's protest, McCoy still made his way over to the chair. His case was open a moment later, the brace in hand. "Don't you have patients to tend to, Bones?"

"Can't perform surgery til the battle's over." He waited for Jim to hold out his arm, pushing up his sleeve when he reluctantly gave over the limb. McCoy slipped on the brace and waved his scanner across it. "Keeping the Captain focused seems to be the fastest way to end this."

As McCoy tended to Kirk with a series of hyposprays and scans, Sulu tossed over his shoulder, "Scanners picking up a signal, Sir."

"Lock on, fire again." Again, the viewing screen changed to show the launched weapons. "Shields?"

"57 percent." The ship tilted once more, the booms growing louder. Sulu's voice rose to compensate. "47 percent. Cargo bays five, six, and seven have ruptured hull damage. Interior shields failing. We have a high temperature fire in cargo bay six."

"Life-signs?" Kirk asked with a frown.

"Scanner is disrupted in the area, Sir"

"Seal it off and cut the oxygen. If a fire spreads we can lose half the deck." Cargo bay six? Why did that sound so familiar?

McCoy shot a quick glance at Spock, realization dawning as he recalled that cargo bay six had been re-designated. "Is that the hydroponics bay?" At Spock's nod, McCoy's gut twisted as he looked back to his captain. He remembered the reason that Amelia had risked her life to get to that bay. "We can't lose the plants, Jim. It's our food source."

"I have no other option. Once it's safe we'll remove the seal. The plants will survive."

"Amelia's in there. She won't." His voice shook, his breath catching in his throat. Was this why he'd spent so many years alone? Because of the feeling of desperation that was building inside of him?

These were the hard choices. The ones that Jim was forced to make. Triage. But no matter how necessary it seemed, Kirk's next words sent a bolt of fury and sorrow straight through him. "Seal it off."

McCoy clutched hard the railing behind the Captain's chair, both to keep himself upright and to prevent himself from doing anything drastic.

Like deckling Jim. Like breaking things.
Behind him, things continued on, conversation filtering through his brain. "Sir, they've ceased firing."

"Surrender?" Jim's tone betrayed the optimistic word.

"Doubtful, Captain." Spock...

"Must have hit their cannons. The ship being towed, what's its status?"

"Still cloaked, however no power is being diverted to the weapons systems."

Reality crashed back over the haze that threatened to settle, Jim's voice suddenly louder at his side. McCoy needed to get out of there. Now. He needed purpose and drive and neither could be found on the bridge. He started for the doors, ignoring the concerned glances shot his way.

"Arm torpedoes, but hold fire. Open a channel."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise..."

Walk. McCoy listened to that voice in his head, stumbling out of the bridge. Now that the exchange of fire was on hold, he needed to get back to the med-bay and begin the multitudes of surgeries he was sure to face.

And he sure as hell needed to get a grip on his emotions. *Amelia's dead and there's nothing you can do about it. But you can get it together and keep other people from dying.* He couldn't start cutting people up. Not in this condition.

Not when his chest felt heavy, his throat felt tight, and his head roared.

"Doctor McCoy?" Robinson's worried face came into view and McCoy jerked back suddenly. When had he made it to the med-bay?

"Yes?"

"We have 19 patients. Four are prepped for surgery." Four? At the time he had been called to the bridge there had only been two.

"Any dead?"

"Yes. Three." McCoy's eyes drifted shut, a long exhale escaping him. He kept himself from asking the cause, knowing that information would come eventually. What he really needed to do was focus on the remaining four he could save.

His eyes snapped back open, his gaze landing on the biobeds. Sure enough, four bodies were strapped and stripped, scanners running above them. One of the nurses passed by and he caught her arm. "Get me a new coat and gloves." Turning back to Robinson, he asked, "You take the collapsed lung. I'll take the ruptured appendix."

"Yes, Sir."

Shrugging on a new jacket and slipping on fresh gloves, McCoy made his way across the med-bay. Several non-critical patients were resting in cots, injuries ranging from concussion and scrapes to snapped bones and burns. None required his expertise as much as the ruptured appendix. Especially when the man had been forced to wait out the battle.

It was a complicated surgery, made even more so by the fact that everything had to be done in spurts.
If the Klingons began firing again then hopefully it would be after the laser scalpels were off. McCoy, somehow, kept his mind from wandering. It was easier than before, the screen displaying internal organs in front of him allowing for little else.


When he was finished with that patient, he went on to the next. And when Robinson completed her assigned procedures, he directed her back to the lower decks where she was needed.

McCoy's communicator chirped, drawing his attention from one of his less critical patients. He held it against his ear and growled, McCoy."

"Captain Kirk requests a status report." Spock's voice came across the communicator and his usual stoic tone instantly set McCoy on edge. The woman you sponsored is dead you green-blooded bastard! It wouldn't hurt to at least sound affected by that knowledge...

Instead of voicing that thought, McCoy snapped, "So far, 19 patients stable and three dead. I'll send names as soon as I have them."

He was just about to close the communicator when he heard Spock's voice once more. "McCoy?"

Something in his tone stilled him, caused him to put the device back to his ear. "What?"

"The Captain lifted the seal for cargo bay six. Search teams did not find a body. Miss Wright was not in the hydroponics bay."

Deep in the cavity of his chest, his heart thudded faster. "Then where is she?"
"Then where is she?"

"We do not know. The ship's computer is damaged and we have encountered difficulty in locating other members of the crew as well. Chief Engineer Scott is working to correct this."

"Is there a possibility that she was pulled into space when the hull ruptured?"

"Yes." He shut his eyes, a weak denial against what Spock was telling him. "Depending on her location that is a possibility."

"I can't-" Deal with this right now. Can't accept anything just yet. "I have work to do here. Patients who still need me." And there were bound to be more filing through the sliding doors of the med-bay as the rescue teams were dispatched. "When I get time I'll help with the search."

"I will be assisting the search party. Your place is in the medical bay. I will inform you should we find anything." Of course Spock was right. His position didn't allow him the freedom to run any errands. Not now. Not after such heavy blows were dealt their way.

Wanting to get a better idea of the current battle situation, McCoy asked, "The Klingons... have they surrendered?"

"The Captain is still negotiating terms. They have no means to fight us with at the moment." So the Enterprise was victorious once more. McCoy sighed.

There were still two more ships to consider, though. Ships that had received their own share of damage. Considering Starfleet was at the forefront of humanitarian aide there existed a strong possibility that the Klingons who were injured would receive treatment as well. The thought made his stomach turn, but he wouldn't refuse an order. "Will we be offering medical aid?"

"It is unlikely that they would accept such a gesture."

After a moment's silence, McCoy simply said, "Keep me posted."

"Of course, Doctor McCoy." Then the communicator cut off with a beep, bringing everything else around him back into focus. A medic on his team was standing off to the side, having been patiently waiting for McCoy to finish the call.

As soon as the communicator was back on his belt, the medic stepped forward and held out a datapadd. "We've finished identifying the injured, Sir." With a grateful nod, McCoy took the datapadd, skimming over the list.

None of the category one patients were listed, ones who had come and gone with minor injuries. Later he would need to identify them just to amend their records. Category two patients still remained in the med-bay, injuries too severe to allow them to leave immediately. Even though he considered himself a man able to separate his personal life and his work, he still paused at familiar names.

Like the Andorian, Th'eon, who had a severed antenna. Damn.
He cast another quick glance around the med-bay, ensuring that it would run without him for a few minutes. The list needed to be submitted to Spock, but McCoy would have to vet it first. And quickly.

He turned on his head and started for the far side of the bay, towards his small office and terminal. Briefly, he wondered if this was a bad idea because silence allowed for a place to think and thinking led to feeling. And feeling was the very last thing he wanted to do.

He wanted to act. To follow muscle memory and protocol and drown out everything else until there was simply no energy left in him to feel. Because he knew when it came, it would hurt like hell.

Taking another long look at the list on the datapadd, he stepped through the sliding door of his office.

**STARDATE 2260.151**

**Beta Quadrant**

She fought dizziness and exhaustion, finding it hard to believe that less than an hour ago she'd been having a perfectly normal morning. Amelia knew that her tiredness was the product of adrenaline leaving her body, that tomorrow she'd be feeling even worse.

Despite the sudden aches that blossomed across her body, she managed to regain her footing and stumbled out of the hydroponics bay and into the adjacent corridor. Her palms throbbed and she feared what she would find when she pulled off the gloves. If she could get them off...

The smell of burnt fabric and plastic swirled around her, making her recoil in disgust. "Oh God..." She muttered as she finally looked down at her hands. What she saw explained the smell, the melted gloves warped around her palms. She didn't even attempt to remove them. "It's okay. It's okay."

Amelia pressed her eyelids firmly together, fighting back tears. "They can fix this."

*Get up.* She hadn't realized she was on the floor til that urging voice whispered in the back of her head. Taking in a deep shuddering breath, she rose from her seated position and started the walk towards the med-bay.

When she stepped through the sliding doors, she gave a ragged sigh and looked for someone in blue. A young man noticed her in the doorway, his hand clenched around a dermal regenerator. It was exactly what she needed.

Wordlessly she walked towards him and held out her hands. Someone beside her caught her shoulder and directed her towards an empty cot. The young man in blue placed his hand around her wrist and indicated towards the glove. "I'm afraid this will hurt."

She only replied, "I know."

He worked with speed and gentleness, but even with the tender care she still cried out as her skin peeled along with the melted mess. She knew there were people around her with injuries far more severe, but that didn't make it hurt any less.

It just made her cries a touch quieter.

The second the medic used the dermal regenerator, the pain began to recede. When he was finished she dared a glance downwards at her open hand, the palm still red, but no longer *crispy.* "One down." He told her. "You're doing great."

Amelia gave a pained chuckle at the lie. "Thanks."
The other hand stung just as badly, but she bit her cheek and kept from shouting. Within just two minutes the man had set her back to rights.

As she climbed off the cot, she looked around. She was a little surprised she hadn't seen McCoy so far, since he was always knee deep in the care of his patients. When she couldn't catch sight of him she asked, "Is Doctor McCoy around?"

"No, Ma'am. He was called to the bridge."

"Just Amelia is fine." Getting called Miss Wright all the time is bad enough. She let a small frown form. "He said the med-bay was a safe-zone, that I could stay here during the... the battle."

The medic paused for a moment, recognition filtering across his face. "Amelia? As in Amelia Wright?"

Well, that's odd. Then again several of McCoy's team had been there on the Huron when she had volunteered to go into the lions den. Maybe this was just left-over knowledge. Amelia Wright, the woman in the white uniform. "Yes..."

"If you walk to the far end of the med-bay there will be a door on your left." Amelia glanced to where he was pointing. "You can wait in there."

She sighed and shot him a small smile, saying, "Thanks."

She wasn't sure what she expected when she ended up in front of the sliding door on her left. A large room with several other crew members taking refuge. A type of bunker, perhaps. Whatever scenarios could have come to mind, the reality wasn't among them.

The door opened to reveal a small office. For a second she wondered if she'd made a wrong turn, or if the man had been mistaken, but when she caught his gaze and pointed, he only nodded in assurance. Amelia tilted her head in confusion and stepped inside.

She'd never seen McCoy's office before, not that she'd have reason to be there. Without him being present it almost seemed like an intrusion. Still, she continued to look around.

There were two small chairs on either side of the narrow desk, a monitor resting in the center. Two framed photographs sat in the corner, both resting on their backs. Probably knocked over in the chaos. She reached for one and stared down at the smiling faces captured in the center. McCoy and Kirk had their arms slung over each other's shoulders, beer bottles clutched in their hands.

He didn't look any younger, but that could have been because of his facial hair. Even the locks on his head were longer. Kirk, however, was grinning that trademark grin of his, minus the age lines near his eyes. The closeness portrayed in the photograph caused a smile to form on her face.

She set the photo back on the desk and continued her perusal. There was a fold out bed against the wall as well, and even a replicator embedded within the panels. She wondered how often he actually spent his nights there.

Amelia turned back towards the door. She could always leave, but then she'd be in the med-bay, in the way of all the men and women working to keep the ship going. And god forbid McCoy found out she'd been there only to leave.

He'd strangle her for sure.

So she sat in the chair closest to the door and waited, her eyes darting at the walls where a few more
frames were hung. Diplomas. Certificates. Awards. All the signs that showed he was proud of his life's work. Just like he was proud enough of Kirk to have a picture of them in the office.

When she finished eying all that she could see she positioned her elbow in the crook of the arm-rest and set her temple against her palm. Even in the uncomfortable position she fought to keep her eyes open, sudden fatigue draining her. Adrenaline's a bitch. "Just for a few minutes." She mumbled to herself, no longer resisting the darkness.

After the fatigue passed she felt a stiffness in her neck, the heel of her hand hot against her head. Senses came back to her one at a time. She noticed a small wet spot on her shoulder, just under where her mouth had fallen open. Drooling all over yourself? She noticed that the sounds from outside the room were softer now. And when she inhaled, she remembered exactly where she was, a familiar sterile smell drifting through her nose.

Amelia sat upright in the chair, wiping away evidence of her nap with the back of her hand. Her eyes searched for a clock, wondering how long she had been asleep.

Red lights above the door showed her that it had been just under an hour. The battle must be over, she thought. Any hard rock to the ship would have woken her for sure, right? So why hadn't the captain made another announcement?

She stood from the chair, glancing towards the door. Maybe now was a good time to leave, to help with the repairs. To at least do something instead of giving in to the drain of her body.

She made it two steps when the door slid open, revealing the familiar form of McCoy. His head was down, a datapadd in his hands. He halted mid-stride when he caught sight of her, though she guessed that the first thing he noticed was her shoes. Then her legs as he straightened his neck.

It unnerved her, the way he stared at her. Almost disbelieving.

Well, if she'd known that was how he felt about people in his office, she would have just waited somewhere else.

The sound of the datapadd hitting the floor caused her to flinch. Then she couldn't even move because McCoy had closed the small distance between them and pulled her tight into his arms. His hands touched her head, her back, her shoulders. Everywhere he could reach...

Something was off.

He was so close his breath hit her neck with every ragged exhale. Had somebody died? Did he need some form of comfort? Amelia didn't resist his hold, her hands trapped between them pressed flat against his chest, not to push him away, but just... there. She could practically feel the steady pounding of his heart, their bodies so close.

Suddenly, she felt anything but tired.

"McCoy?" She whispered, not willing to break the silence with anything louder. As soon as the word left her mouth, she felt him shudder and draw in a deep breath, his hands sliding up her back to land on her face.

He tilted her head back, his hazel eyes open in confusion. Staring down at her with that still-shocked look on his face, he whispered, "I thought you were dead."

Her mouth open into a little 'oh'. That explained the touching. Sort of. "It was just a couple of burns." Amelia raised her hands to show him, her palms still carrying a red tint. She could almost see the
moment he went into 'doctor' mode, his gaze narrowing as he traced his thumb across her palm, observing and assessing the already healed damage.

She tilted her head, watching as his digit skimmed the flesh on her hand. The motions slowed, shifting from clinical to intimate. Then he stopped and she turned to look up at his face. His jaw was clenching, the pressure causing his cheeks to flare out. And if it wasn't for the subtle rise of his chest she would wonder if he was even breathing.

"McCoy? Are you-" His lips landed on her own, cutting off her question.

They hadn't seen much of another another since he'd come to her in the hydroponics bay. But his absence had allowed her more time to think about what they had done. She'd told him that they both deserved better, that the chemistry between them wasn't worth the inevitable arguments they often shared.

But they weren't arguing now and she had the feeling he was working on that.

She could at least work on it, too...

The tip of his tongue touched the corner of her lips, a silent request for access. She gave it, her mouth dropping open in a gasp. The intensity of it all, the kiss, the touching, the way his hips pressed hard into her, set her panting. The hands that were once tangled in his hair dropped to slide under the collar of his coat, running over the material of his blue shirt.

His need was palpable, present in the way he acknowledge nothing but her. His white coat fell to the floor, his hands returning to her back, slipping under her white shirt. The heat from his fingers was sure to leave a red trail behind.

Suddenly, his lips were trailing away from her own, up her cheek, towards the small dip behind her ear. Amelia sucked in a quick breath, her chest flush against his as a tremor raced through her. She could feel him everywhere, the exhales against her neck, the corded muscles of his arms pressed against her back, and the hard press of his thigh between her legs.

Need. Explosive and overwhelming need caused her heart to race.

So caught up in it all, she didn't even realize he was moving until her back touched the wall. McCoy moved with speed and strength, his hands leaving her back to rest on her bottom, palms cupping the globes and lifting. Naturally, she wrapped her legs around him.

He groaned and she responded in kind, his hips rotating, pressing the evidence of his own arousal right against her. He pushed against her again, his lips trailing down her neck and back up again. She dropped her head back until it tapped the wall, gulping in air as though she was suffocating. Pleasure shot through her, like a bolt of lightning, hot and quick and stunning. Her nails scraped across the fabric on his back, urging him closer still.

He released another low groan, following it with more broken words. "Damn it..." If she wasn't so busy trying not to splinter apart, she would have laughed. Leave it to McCoy to start swearing at a time like this. "Say something... Anything."

What could she say? Did he want to hear that she wanted this as much as him? Did he want to hear that she needed it? She settled for both, her head dropping until her mouth rested next to his ear.

"Harder."

He swore again, one hand braced against the wall, the other clenched around her thigh. And her
single command was obeyed, the hard line in his pants meeting the warm center between her legs with greater force. Pressure built, driving her towards a place she hadn't been in *years*.

Amelia started shaking, her hips moving of their own accord now, pushing down against McCoy. She gasped when his teeth caught the lobe of her ear, "We... deserve this." He growled, the hand on her thigh sliding up to cup her backside.

Then he yanked her hard against him, that tight coil of pressure snapping and sending her straight into ecstasy. Her sudden cry was captured by his mouth, pleasure radiating across her body, every limb languid and hot.

It didn't take long for him to follow. She felt him shudder in her arms, a low groan muffled against her shoulder and the sound sent a very heady rush of feminine pride to her chest. His knees gave out, sending them both to the floor, but he kept her tight against him the entire way.

*What the hell had they just done?*

For a moment, neither one of them said anything, the only sound in the office their heavy breathing. McCoy's hands finally settled on her thighs, forcing her back and away from him. Amelia dared to open her eyes, surprised to find McCoy's dark gaze narrowed and focused on her.

"You alright?" He murmured, the gentleness in his voice contrasting with the hard look in his eyes. She certainly felt alright. More than alright. When she tilted her head in confusion, he clarified, "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Amelia shook her head immediately. "You didn't."

He reached out, catching her wrist to turn her palm up. She didn't pull away from his touch, watching carefully as he ran his thumb across the palm. "Your hands?"

"Fine." They weren't even tender, unlike other areas on her body.

His hazel gaze met her own once more, his voice dropping. The low tone sent a shiver through her. "I was rough."

Unable to help herself, she smiled. "It was good." She didn't miss the way the corner of his mouth quirked. "Next time, we'll-" The beeping of his communicator cut him off and he turned away from her. The device was laying on the floor, knocked off his belt during their... excitement. He flushed as he opened it, glancing her way as he said, "McCoy." There was a brief moment of silence as he listened intently to the other voice on the line. "Amelia's here, in the med-bay." Another stretch. "I just got it. I'll send it to you."

McCoy straightened to his feet, giving a long sigh as he ran a hand through his hair. Amelia followed suit, unsure of where to go now. Or what to say. She settled for asking, "Is it over? With the battle, I mean."

"Yeah." He called to her over his shoulder. She watched as he leaned over to pick up his datapadd. "Jim's about to announce the Klingon's surrender. He'll want everyone to report to their stations and assess the damage."

"Guess that's my cue." On still shaky legs, she started for the door.

His hand on her arm stopped her from advancing further. That and the hesitant expression on his
"Amelia-"

"Later." This wasn't something they could hash out now. How they had managed to even forget that there was a dangerous situation outside, she wasn't even sure. What was it McCoy had said? A response to shock. Well, the shock was fading now, replaced with purpose and duty. On both their parts. "We have other things to focus on right now."

"This-" He waved a hand between them. "-isn't over. We gotta talk about this."

"I know." He seemed to relax at that and Amelia smiled, reaching out to grasp his hand. Not only could she not ignore the physical response to his proximity, she also couldn't ignore the fact that she had accepted him. Especially after turning him down over a week ago. "I'll come see you."

McCoy only nodded, his heated gaze trained on her. She had to go or else neither of them would get any work done. On her short walk back to her quarters, the captain made his announcement, issuing an order that all hands report to their station for damage assessment. He didn't get into detail about their victory, but made it clear that the Klingons had no intention of reigniting the battle.

After a quick sonic shower, Amelia donned her brown uniform, knowing that she'd be elbow high in dirt once she was back in the hydroponics bay. She didn't even dare to let herself recount what had just happened in the med-bay.

There would be time enough for that later...

Along the walk, she found her hand ghosting at the empty slot on her belt. At some point during the fight, she'd lost her communicator. It seemed like the least of her worries, though, since she'd spent weeks without one upon her arrival. Still... not having it felt like she was missing a part of her uniform.

Some areas of the ship were relatively untouched while others had been cordoned off for hull repair. When she made it to the hydroponics bay, she found a team of engineers already inside. Scotty was among them, pointing towards the blast wall.

"-don'na care if you have to go outside the ship to do it. This wall stays down." As usual, he was animated as he talked, waving his hands. She figured his look of agitation came from having to deal with the damage to his 'baby'.

"Scotty?" She called out to him.

He turned abruptly on his heel, the lines around his eyes fading slightly. "'Melia! I was gettin' worried 'bout ya." As he walked towards her he kicked some ash on the floor, waving at the fluttering debris. "Did ya start a fire?"

"Lever was frozen." He gave her a quick nod at the explanation, not pushing for more. With a quick jerk of her head she indicated to the huddled group of engineers. "What's with the crew?"

"Hull is ruptured. We're lockin' the wall until we get to the space station for repairs." The Andorian space station? That was at least 45 days away.

She frowned. "I see. Should I hold off on setting the bay back to working condition?"

"Not a bad idea. We'll need to move the plants in the back." Amelia shot a glance behind Scotty, watching as a few of the engineers began to unlock the plant beds from the floor. Her brow furrowed as she looked back to Scotty, but she didn't keep the expression on for long. It wasn't his fault.
"Oh, found this in your ice room." He reached into his pocket, pulling out a small device. Her communicator. The silver casing was dented on the side and when she flipped it open she saw a button missing. "It's a wee dinged up, but in working condition. Can't say the same for the room, though."

"That bad?" She asked, clipping her communicator to her belt and starting the short walk to the Andorian environment. The inside had water pooling on the floor and streaks of black running up the wall. A few wires were hanging from the interior panel.

Behind her, Scotty leaned in. "Fire damaged some of the controls. By tomorrow it'll be the same temp as the primary environment."

She thought back to when it had been a flourishing Vulcan environment, murmuring, "I guess it wasn't meant to be." There was no point in closing the door now, she thought as she picked up the small trowel on the floor and used it to prop open the door. "I'll help your crew move the plants. Give me something to focus on."

"Appreciate it." The small smile wrinkles against his eyes confirmed that he did. "I've got four more decks to clear and I prob'ly won't be back today."

"How bad is the ship damaged?" His brow furrowed in sadness at her question.

Scotty sighed and scratched a spot above his ear, as if calculating. "She's seen worse. Some tweaking and I'll get her ready for warp in no time. Maybe a couple of days of pulse."

Based on some of the areas she had seen, she would have thought it would take longer. "We don't need to return to Earth for repair? Like the Huron?"

"It's too far, lass. Space station will get us back in shape for the mission." Suddenly, she found herself excited to be heading there. If they had the capability to repair the ship the station must be huge. Knowing that Scotty was pressed for time, she held back further questions.

They parted ways, Scotty heading to the lower decks and herself heading towards the gathered engineers. Unsnapping the shirt cuffs at her wrist, she pushed up her sleeves and began to help with the repair of her hydroponics bay.

**STARDATE 2260.151**

**Beta Quadrant**

*What had they done?* McCoy had never considered himself a man to give in to his body with ease. But seeing Amelia had snapped his control. Instead of opening his mouth and saying something he couldn't take back, he'd shoved her against the wall and *dry humped* her.

Just thinking about it made his head spin. And his body hard.

In order to get the entire event out of his mind, he did what he had always done. He immersed himself into work. He scheduled follow-up appointments, reviewed patient logs, evaluated the patients who had undergone surgery.

Though he submitted the initial patient count, the numbers had to be altered as time passed by. Crew members were found by search teams with every passing moment. Robinson returned to perform another surgery alongside him.

The death count also rose, from three to four. He knew that it would change again, once the sensors
were fully operational and bodies could be detected in space. All he knew for certain was that every
one of the crew members who fell under his command had already reported in.

At least medical was operating at optimal capacity...

Seven hours after the initial attack, McCoy was finally able to walk the med-bay, no longer hindered
by over-due reports. More patients were stirring, hours of rest doing wonders towards their recovery.
Though there were a few that looked upon their rest as unproductive. He made a point to quell that
line of thought on his rounds.

"Doctor McCoy!" Upon hearing his name, he turned towards the source, unsurprised to see an
annoyed Andorian struggling against one of the medics. "Tell them that I am quite well. Tell them I
need to be released."

"Can't do that, Th'eon" McCoy assisted the medic, shoving down on Th'eon's other shoulder and
giving him a hard glare. "You won't even make it two steps before you end up on the floor."

The look the Andorian sent his way said he thought McCoy was a moron. "It is an Antenna, not a
foot."

"Might as well be. The only reason you think you can walk is because I have you so pumped up
with pain killers. You do know that you're missing an inch, right?"

His eyes widened, his blue hand rising to touch the healing nub. "You cannot be serious."

McCoy slapped his hand before the Andorian could reach it. "Don't touch it! The dermal regenerator
helped the surface damage, but the nerve endings are so complex... I want to wait on treatment. Until
we reach the space station. There will be specialists there."

He could tell Th'eon was becoming increasingly agitated and before he could begin struggling
McCoy had a hypospray pressed to the Andorian's neck. Th'eon snarled and slurred, his eyes
beginning to droop. "Bekh zhu."  

McCoy arched a brow and muttered. "I'm going to blame that on the medication." Then, when
Th'eon fell back against the bed, McCoy made a note on his datapadd of the increased sedative.

He headed for the occupied biobeds, re-checking their vitals and current condition. One man, a
member of the navigation crew, had a fractured spinal column. Such an injury would require
planning before any action. As he contemplated the next step, he noticed that the patient was awake,
his eyes open and staring at the ceiling.

He cast a quick glance towards the man's rank. "Chief Roslin? How are you feeling?"

The gaze that was once focused on the ceiling shifted to land on McCoy. The young man looked
tired, but aware. "From the hips up I feel pretty sore." His tone was almost defeated and for a second
McCoy wasn't sure why.

When he reviewed the datapadd he realized why and shot the Chief a reassuring smile. "Well, you're
not paralyzed. You've been given a drug that blocks the nerve signals just before the break in your
vertebrae. We didn't want you to accidentally move and cause further damage."

"What are the chances that you can fix this?" Roslin asked.

"Pretty high, actually. Though, until we do we need to continue disrupting the nervous system. And
we need to take some time to plan the surgery." Chief Roslin gave a slow nod, understanding that
he'd be bedridden for the time being.

"Whatever it takes, Doc." McCoy prepared to leave, but stopped short when Roslin called after him. "Hey, do you have any information on Lieutenant Cerice? She came in with a broken ankle. Support beam fell on her. I wanted to make sure she was alright."

"Lieutenant Cerice?" McCoy tapped away on his datapadd, pulling up her record. Without violating confidentiality, he said, "Treated more than an hour ago and released. Probably hobbling around on crutches in Engineering."

"Good. I felt bad leaving her, but there were lots of people injured in the first strike and-" The chief broke off suddenly. "-Amelia!" McCoy's head shot up from the datapadd. Amelia wasn't injured in the first strike.

A flash of blond at his side startled him, her sudden appearance reminding him of their earlier encounter. McCoy tampered down on his rising emotions as she leaned over the chief and placed her hand on his arm. Soon enough he was fighting jealousy at her concerned tone. "What happened?"

At the question, the chief managed a grin. "Nothing that can't be fixed. Doctor McCoy, this is Amelia Wright." He waved a hand between them at the introduction, then added, "She helped me pull the Lieutenant out."

"Don't be modest." Amelia said with a smile. "You did most the work." Was she flirting? Behind her, McCoy kept himself from scowling.

Roslin gave her a quick once over and the scowl that McCoy had kept from showing finally appeared. "I see you made it unscathed."

"I did." She punctuated the statement with a reassuring tap on the Chief's arm.

"Amelia, this is Doctor Leonard McCoy." She turned now, finally addressing McCoy as Roslin continued the introduction. "He's one of the best Starfleet has."

Despite his annoyance, McCoy smiled at the praise. Amelia only tilted her head, the corner of her mouth turned up. "Is he? Nice to meet you Doctor McCoy."

Amelia held out her hand for a handshake and McCoy took it with a roll of his eyes. Annoyance shifted to amusement at her smile. "Pleasure."

When they broke apart, she craned her neck to see the many bodies resting in the med-bay. She looked apprehensive, as though she had something to ask, but was holding back. Finally, she said, "I guess I'll let you get back to your patients." Casting a glance back to Roslin, she added, "It was good seeing you. I'm sure Doctor McCoy will take good care of you."

McCoy let her get a few steps before he caught up with her. He realized that her presence in the med-bay was an affirmation of her belief that there were still things left unsaid between them. Things neither one of them wanted to put off for long.

She stopped just shy of the sliding doors of the med-bay, waiting for something. She'd shown up. So now it seemed it was his move.

McCoy rubbed the back of his neck and looked to the clock above the doors. When she started to shuffle her feet he took a deep breath and piped up hopefully, "I'm off-shift in thirty."

"Okay. Should I wait in-"
"My quarters." He wasn't sure why he said it, but after contemplating the sudden interruption he realized it was the best of places. Looking at her uniform he could see that she'd put in a hard day as well, dirt, grime, and sweat smeared across the brown fabric. She could do with a bit of relaxation and his room was built for that. Waiting in the med-bay for the next half hour would do her no good, either.

Amelia arched a brow, surprised. "You want me to wait in your room?"

"Unless you wanted me to come to your room, but don't you live in a space the size of a closet?"

She huffed, as if offended by the insult to her room. Crossing her arms, she asked, "Well what do you have?"

"I'm the Chief Medical Officer." McCoy dared a grin and pointed at a smudge of dirt that ran across her neck. "And I have an actual water shower, which you're free to use while I'm finishing up here."

Considering how she'd enjoyed her time in the lake, it made sense that the last point won her over. She bit her lip and nodded, causing a new rush of emotion to course through him. Victory. "What room number?"
Chapter 23

STARDATE 2260.151

Beta Quadrant

Amelia tentatively stepped through the sliding doors of McCoy's quarters. He hadn't been exaggerating when he'd described it. "It's built to take the stress out of a stressful position." It made sense that as the Chief Medical Officer he would have one of the larger rooms on the ship, but compared to her own it was like an apartment.

He had a living room type space, a small love seat and a couple of chairs situated around a coffee table. And there was a desk with three chairs surrounding it, creating a sectioned-off office. Amelia wondered if he held meetings there. On the other side was the bedroom, complete with a queen sized bed and an end table.

But what she was really interested in was the bathroom. In her quarters there was a small sonic shower, which had taken her several days to fully understand. In his quarters he had two showers, one sonic, and one with the promised running water, both separated from the main area with an extension of the wall.

She dropped her backpack on the floor and rummaged through it, pulling out a change of clothes. There was still fifteen minutes left in his shift. Just long enough for her to shower before he returned. And just long enough to think about what she planned on saying.

After fumbling with the controls for a few minutes, she sighed when the stream of water shot out of the shower head, washing away the remnants of a hard day's work. Her mind drifted as she lathered a handful of soap.

Questions arose, some insignificant and some life-altering. What would she do tomorrow in the hydroponics bay? Where did she and McCoy stand as far as a relationship?

And they undoubtedly had a relationship. The sexual tension was there, evidenced by their earlier actions. When she'd first arrived on the ship, she could hardly stand the man. Then he'd put in time and effort in swaying her opinions. Delivering bad news in person. Standing up for her. But most of all, he let her be her. He let her take the risks she needed to take, like when he'd stood beside her in the face of danger. When he trusted her with his life on the USS Huron.

What he didn't seem to trust her with was his emotions. Until today.

McCoy's remark about her virtue still stung, but the more she looked back at it, the more she could see why he'd said it. And why she'd denied him later that day. He was jealous and insecure, the second being a feeling she was all too familiar with as of late. But a single apology, no matter how well worded or delivered, hadn't been enough to ease the hurt his words had caused.

Only time and thorough thought had done that.

Which is why she'd let him touch her in his office and why she'd kissed him back. Because she felt that forgiveness was the only way they could ever have an intimate relationship. And she wanted one. Amelia knew she would never get back the simple life she was torn from. She would never be just a little gardener anymore.
Now, she would be more. She had friends, a family even. And maybe she could have a husband or a lover or someone who simply completed her. For some reason, McCoy fit into her life. Though she didn't doubt there would be times she'd still feel like striking him or he'd lash out verbally in another fit of anger.

A beep sounded in the shower, pulling her back into the present. The stream of water began to slow and she rushed to finish her hair. "Guess conserving water is mandatory." She muttered as she finished, stepping out of the shower.

Water dripped to carpeted floor as she looked around for a towel. When she couldn't find one, she began trying to open cabinets. Of course, the cabinets blended in with the wall, which meant she spent most of the time looking for the cabinets.

Amelia rejoiced when she finally found one, only to open it up and see a neatly organized space with medical equipment. Her smile faded into a scowl.

Behind her the door chimed, signaling that it was about to open. She looked down, reminded that she was naked and dripping water all over McCoy's floor. Her face flushed red and her eyes scanned the room for something, anything, to throw on.

She found that anything hanging on the wall just outside of the bathroom and slipped it over her shoulders as McCoy's door slid open. He took four steps before turning to stare at her in confusion.

"Not that this isn't a fantasy of mine, but why are you wearing my medical coat?"

Her face flushed, an annoyed sigh escaping her. "You're not the only one wondering the answer to that question. Where are your towels?"

The corner of his mouth tilted in amusement as he walked past her. He stopped to stand next to the control panel for the shower. A small drawer slid open to reveal several rolled up towels packed inside. "I'll give you a few minutes."

"Thank you," Amelia called out after him, waiting until he was out of sight.

Quickly, Amelia shrugged off the doctor's jacket and finished drying off. Her undershirt and shorts were speckled with wet spots, but it didn't bother her. She felt clean and refreshed and comfortable. And ready.

When she stepped around the barrier that separated the rooms, she saw that McCoy was changing as well. For a moment his entire back was exposed before he pulled on a white shirt and she caught a glimpse of a few red lines that marred his shoulder. Reminders from earlier...

Amelia hid a smile. "Maybe I should have asked if you were alright."

He craned his head and cocked it to the side, calling over his shoulder, "What's that?"

Feeling bold, she approached him and tapped a finger on his upper back. He tensed in surprise at the contact, confusion filtering across his face. Amelia clarified, "You have scratches on your back."

His teeth showed in a grin. "It was good." His tone was low, almost sensual as he gave her earlier words back to her.

Her head dropped, her cheeks flushed and red. Finally, she tilted her head back and looked up at him. His eyes were on her, his gaze intense as he waited. At first she wasn't quite sure what he was waiting for, but then she figured it was for the conversation they'd promised to have.
Hesitantly, she admitted, "It's been a while for me."

McCoy nodded, his hand rising slowly to rest on her shoulder. The position reminded her of when he'd kissed her in the hydroponics bay. She could tell he remembered it too, because he stroked his thumb across the pulse line in her neck with that same intimate gesture. After a moment he muttered, "Me too."

When he didn't say anything further, she made another admission, her voice soft. "I haven't been in a relationship in a few years."

Her eyes drifted shut as he continued the caress with his thumb and she wished he'd stop doing that because it made her mind fuzzy and her body heightened. Voice still low and a little shaken, he said, "Me either."

She shivered with his fingertips began to kneed her shoulder. "And I honestly don't even know where to start."

"I think we've skipped steps, Amelia."

She caught his hand then, her fingers curling around the pad of his thumb, pressing slightly. The haze in her brain faded and she shot a steady glance at him, seriousness in her tone. "Then let's backtrack and do it right."

His fingers stilled and he grinned. "I don't know, I thought we did it just right the first time."

"McCoy." Amelia chastised him, fighting amusement at his statement.

"Alright." McCoy dropped his hand from her shoulder and took a step back, giving her space to breathe. "Let's start with dinner."

Her eyes darted to the clock, knowing that the red digits meant that the dining hall wasn't serving anything hot. "It's a little late for dinner."

A concerned frown formed on his face as he asked, "Did you eat?" As if on cue, her stomach grumbled. The corner of his mouth twitched.

Her brow rose at his smug expression and her retort was quick and dry. "Did you?"

His gaze shifted to the replicator and, slowly, he started for it. The device beeped as he pressed the control panel and a moment later the smell of broth drifted her way. Her mouth watered and she shot him an appreciative smile as he handed her a bowl of soup and a spoon.

He waved a hand towards the cushioned chairs that surrounded the coffee table and she took a seat along with him. Their knees touched, but she made no move to distance herself. Instead she searched for easy conversation between spoonfuls.

Her eyes drifted to the replicator then back to McCoy. "When I first saw a replicator I thought it was a microwave." Richard had laughed, she remembered with a smile.

McCoy chuckled. "Like the appliance?"

"Yeah. I mean, food came out of it. Must be a microwave, right?"

There was surprise in his tone when he responded with, "I didn't know that people still used microwaves."
"My family was a bit behind on the technology curve." Maybe easy conversation wasn't so easy. She couldn't really discuss much of her past, not without rousing more questions. So, Amelia tuckered her head down and focused on her soup, enjoying the comfortable silence.

After a few minutes McCoy cleared his throat and asked, "Is it good?"

"Perfect." Amelia said as she brought another spoonful to her mouth.

"Yeah. It is." That low tone had returned to his voice, raw enough to cause her to look up and catch him staring at her. He set his bowl down on the table and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees.

The deep breath he took told her that what he was about to say required preparation. She set her own bowl down and waited, her attention devoted to McCoy. "I want you, Amelia." The idea wasn't a surprise so much as the fact that he had said it. But he continued on, his eyes open and almost vulnerable.

"I want more than what happened in my office. I want conversations and dinners and maybe even the occasional chance that I walk through that door and you're wearing my white jacket. And I want... us. I think we could be good together."

"I think so, too." It sounded like a marriage. A commitment. Amelia reached out and set her hand on his knee, her intention to reassure him even if her words made her seem hesitant. She just wasn't sure she was ready for the whole deal. "But let's just start with dinner."

They both retrieved their bowls, resuming with their late night meal. The conversation shifted into easier matters. "How's the hydroponics bay?" At McCoy's question, Amelia looked up to see genuine curiosity on his face.

She gave a sad smile. "Wrecked. Blast wall had to be sealed due to hull damage. And it's going to take weeks to get it back to standard." She didn't mention how the fire she had started destroyed the secondary environment. "How are your patients?"

Cocking his head to the side, his face shifted into pensive. "Some critical, some still need follow-up surgery. Most are stable."

"Anyone I know?"

McCoy sighed. "Th'eon, though I'd wait til tomorrow to visit since I had to sedate him." Then he was almost teasing as he added, "And Roslin, the chief you were fawning over."

Defensively, but with a small smile, she argued, "I was not fawning. And what's wrong with Th'eon?"

"Antenna was severed."

"Is that serious?" As soon as the question left her mouth, her face flushed with embarrassment. Of course it was serious.

But he didn't look at her like she was an idiot, which made her feel better about asking. "I mean... it's an Antenna. Takes nine months to regrow without medical intervention."

"Oh."

"But he'll be fine. We're heading to an Andorian space station so there will be experts there. And I
can start electro-stimulation before we arrive. He's-" A beep sounded from across the room, cutting McCoy's sentence short, and they both turned to glance in that direction. Unnecessarily, he told her, "Communicator."

He set his empty bowl on the coffee table and started for the bedroom. Though she wasn't eavesdropping, she could still hear his side of the conversation. "McCoy." Something soft hit the floor. "How many?" Amelia heard him give a distressed sigh, and her brow furrowed. "I'm on my way." He didn't return for a few minutes, but when he came back into view he was back to wearing his blue uniform.

Apology was clear in his voice when he said, "One of my patients had a series of micro-seizures."

She could tell he didn't want to leave, that he was caught between wanting to remain there with her and the duty he was bound to. Amelia placed a hand on his chest, her smile understanding. "Well you are one of Starfleet's best. Guess you better get to it."

It seemed to be what he needed, because she felt the tensing muscles relax. "Will you be here when I get back?"

The smile faded from her face as she glanced at the clock. Just looking at the red digits made her tired. "It's late. I need sleep."

"Then get some." On a whisper, he added. "Here."

"You want me to sleep in your bed?" Her eyes darted towards the direction of his bedroom, the aches in her muscles becoming more apparent and defined as she took in the sight of the large bed and silk-like sheets. It was awfully tempting and they'd already crossed barriers earlier in the day. What was one more?

"Sweetheart, if it were up to me you wouldn't be alone and we wouldn't be sleeping." She couldn't help the shiver that ran up her spine. "But on my honor, tonight I'll be a perfect gentleman."

"I'll think about it."

"Do that." Then he cupped her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers in a sudden chaste kiss. His breath hit her cheek as he pulled back and she opened her eyes to stare up into his hazel ones. "But if you decide against it, we can just have dinner again tomorrow."

With a final glance back, he left her to think about it.

**STARDATE 2260.152**

**Beta Quadrant**

It was Th'eon. Or course it was Th'eon. McCoy stared down at the Andorian, his gloved hands parting white hair. "Blood flow is compromised. There is a build up of fluid pressing against the brain." He said it for the benefit of Th'eon's file, an audio record of the surgery that was about to occur. Maybe in the future that recording will prevent a series of seizures in another Andorian.

"Laser prepped. Drill positioned." A nurse worked at his side, making verbal notes of their progress. It should have been an easy procedure, but McCoy felt a rising tension in his gut.

Because God forbid anything happened to the Andorian and he had to be the one to tell Amelia.

"Doctor McCoy?" The nurse beside him paused, waiting to begin. When McCoy continued to stare
down at the top of Th'eon's head, the nurse pushed, "We're ready."

*Of course you're ready. You're not the one who'd deal with the grief.* It wasn't the first time McCoy had operated on an acquaintance. Hell, he knew the faces of almost everyone on the damn ship. But still... Th'eon was one of Amelia's closest friends. He'd been the one who showed up when she was admitted for her fever...

He took a deep breath, steadied himself, and switched on the drill. The longer he waited, the greater the chance that this would turn from an easy procedure to a complicated one.

There were moments where he had to move quickly and moments where he had to go agonizingly slow. Though he always performed at his best, he knew he used extra caution with each part of Th'eon's surgery.

Later he'd have to tell her that he'd been called in for Th'eon and then he'd have to apologize to her another time. McCoy had a feeling it wouldn't be the last time 'I'm sorry' came out of his mouth, either.

When it was over and Th'eon's stats had returned to normal, he found himself releasing a heavy sigh of relief. "Sutures in place. Normal blood flow established." He tapped against the control panel and began sanitizing his tools.

His eyes burned, a sign that he'd had them open for far too long. McCoy handed over his datapadd to the nurse at his side, leaving the competent man with the task of finishing the report. He didn't feel like making a mistake, his exhaustion becoming clear with every step towards his office.

It had been almost two hours since he'd left Amelia in his room. By now she was asleep. Where? He wasn't sure. His eyes drifted to the cot that was snapped against the wall. There was always the option to sleep on it instead. If Amelia was indeed still in his room then he'd risk waking her by returning.

Running a hand across his face, he sighed and made a decision.

It wasn't so much his feet that carried him as it was his heart. He wanted to see her. *Needed* to. There was little her mere presence couldn't cure. Her smile took away his agitation. Her laugh filled him with joy. Her gentle touch sapped his loneliness.

The door to his quarters slid open and he stepped tentatively inside. This was his home, yet he made his way through the dimly lit space with caution. When his eyes landed on his bed, he felt his heart-beat flutter.

Amelia's small form was curled beneath the covers, blond strands spread across his pillow. Aside from his ex-wife, he couldn't remember the last time he'd watched a woman sleep in his bed. The sight before him now sent a thrum of longing through him that would have caught him off guard if he hadn't been braced against the separation wall.

No... it still caught him off guard.

McCoy reached down and slid off his shoes, being careful not to make any noise. He folded his soon discarded pants and set them on the ground, then did the same with his shirt. By the time he began to slide onto the other side of the bed, he was left in nothing but his underwear.

He fought the urge to reach out and pull her to his chest, only succeeding because he knew that it would rouse her and she looked far too peaceful for him to take that chance. So, he settled for turning to his side where the only thing that filled his vision was her.
Eventually, even Amelia faded from view.

A tingling sensation, like tiny pinpricks, spread across his hand. He clenched his fist reflexively and took a deep breath. Something tickled in nose, soft like a feather. His eyes opened into tiny slits, blond hair in front of his face. As he came to, he realized that his hand was asleep because of the weight on his arm.

His other hand was pressed against soft, warm flesh, curling around Amelia's small form to rest on her stomach. Under her shirt.

At some point in the night he must have moved. Or at least he thought until he rotated his head to see that he was still on the edge where he'd fallen asleep. The bundle in his arms shifted, bringing with the motion a sharp reminder that it was morning.

Her backside brushed against his arousal and the hand that he'd rested against her stomach moved to clench her hip. To still her. On your honor. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to pull away, to draw his arm out from under her and leave the warmth of her body.

But he never denied the fact that he could be a selfish man. Just before he rose from the comfort of the bed, he leaned over and placed his lips against an exposed patch of flushed skin on her neck. He smiled when he heard her hum in response.

That was a sound he could get used to.

Slowly, he made his way into the living area, his eyes darting to the clock. Nine hours. He'd been sleeping for nine hours? Maybe that explained why he felt so rested. His gaze shifted to the woman still asleep in the center of the bed. Or maybe she was the reason.

He'd been as honest with her last night as he'd ever been. He'd thrown down his cards and waited to see if she was willing to be in the game. And she'd remained and had dinner with him, even after all the ill words he'd shot her way.

Hell of an effort. Maybe in half a year I'll get a damn potato.

Damn it, girl.

What do you want?

What virtue?

Was it healthy? For him to attempt a relationship with her when he so often hurt her?

She wasn't fragile, though. Amelia was small and she was constantly suffering wounds, but that didn't make her fragile. McCoy wondered if that was the reason he found himself so drawn to her. Because he knew that she'd survive when he messed up and she'd forgive him when he begged for it.

And of course there was that underlying, always present, irresistible attraction.

As he had told her before, he wanted her. Right now he wanted her in the most carnal ways imaginable. But he'd slept for nine hours and he was at least an hour overdue for work. Which meant that he'd have to hold off on acting out any desires until later.

Maybe after dinner.
He contacted the med-bay, letting them know he'd be in within the hour. And then the contacted the hydroponics bay, partly surprised to find there was a crew of engineers already there.

When he finished getting dressed, he replicated two small cups of coffee and set them down on the nightstand by the bed. Then he took a seat beside her, his eyes traveling down her petite form. At some point while he was dressing, she had pushed down the covers to her thighs.

Hesitantly, he trailed the back of his hand down her arm. He didn't want to leave. He didn't want to break the calm of the morning or disturb the peaceful look on her face as she slept. But she was a practical woman and it was almost eleven and if he didn't wake her now then he might just be tempted to lay back down with her.

"Amelia." She stirred at his hushed whisper, her back slowly arching in a stretch. She bumped his hip with her fist, the contact spurring her to open bright blue eyes. Disorientation shifted into recognition. Then she smiled, slow and easy, and his chest felt full. "Morning."

"-ime is it?" Due to her yawning, he only caught the last half of the question.

"1043." The answer sent her from sleepy to alert in less than a millisecond. She jerked upright and he had to lean back in order to avoid getting head-butted. The calm of the morning shattered, and what took it's place was almost comical. "Woah."

Amelia pushed past him, staggering on her feet as she touched the floor. McCoy hid an amused smile and held out the other mug of coffee. "Oh my god." Muttering, she shoved back stray strands of hair and took the coffee. "You should have thrown water on me or something."

This time, the grin broke through. "Didn't know that was an option."

"It is when I sleep past eight." As she gathered her things, his eyes drifted to the bed and the rumpled blankets and sheets. They hadn't had sex, but the night before had been just as intimate. Maybe even more so than the interlude in his office.

It screamed of companionship and trust, both things that he'd been lacking in his life for quite some time. He placed his palm against the spot Amelia had been occupying.

From across the room, his door chimed, the sound sending him straight to his feet. Amelia was still in the bathroom getting dressed. His brow furrowed as it chimed a second time. Whoever it was would have to wait.

Or not.

The door slid open and McCoy set his mug down to jog to the door. Jim came into view as he stepped inside McCoy's quarters. The captain only make it a couple strides in before McCoy placed a firm hand against his chest. "Out." He growled, his eyes darting towards the bathroom. Pissed that Jim had barged into his home, he growled again, "What's wrong with you?"

Surprised, Jim took two steps back until he was in the corridor. "Me? I get to the med-bay this morning and my Chief Medical Officer isn't there. And you think there's something wrong with me? Did you forget that we were attacked yesterday, Bones?"

"Hard to forget since I had five surgeries yesterday, Jim." He opened his hand and held it in front of the captain's face for emphasis. "Five! I was there til two this morning. Forgive me if I'm not punctual today."

Jim rocked on his feet, a knowing look passing across his face. "So, this has nothing to do with
Amelia Wright staying the night?"

"What are-"

"Sensors are back up. And she's standing behind you." McCoy spun around and sure enough, Amelia was standing at his back. At least she was dressed in her uniform instead of her undershirt. Her hand gripped her backpack, like she was anxious to leave.

Tentatively, she waved at Jim. "Morning, Captain Kirk."

"Good to see you're not dead." Her head cocked to the side in confusion at Jim's statement. McCoy wondered if he should give her the full story on that later. Probably not...

"Yeah... I'm just gonna go." Before he could make a sound, she was pushing past him and Jim, heading off through the corridor. McCoy kept his eyes on her until she was out of sight. Then he turned a narrow glare on Kirk.

"Now look what you did." Huffing, he turned his back on Jim and finished gathering his equipment. When he finished, he started for the door. Jim kept pace at his side as they headed towards the med-bay.

"Man, she has got you good. Wow." There were plenty of topics he enjoyed discussing with Jim, but for some reason Amelia didn't seem to be one of them. His spine went stiff while Jim verbally poked at him.

"Save it, Jim. I'm not in the mood."

"I don't know, the way you were watching her go I'd say you're plenty in the mood." McCoy only scowled in response.
Chapter 24

STARDATE 2492.198

M. J. Archer Base Camp

Antarctica

Eli watched as the Chief Commander gathered a set of datapadds and started for the door. What had she done? What had they done? He followed after her, shock giving way to anger. "Commander!
He wasn't prone to giving in to impulse, but before he could stop himself, he shouted at her back, "What did you do!? Years. Years of work went into this project. Why would you alter the program?"

The Vulcan ceased her march towards the command room, her gaze narrow as she turned it on him. When she spoke, it was slow, like she was speaking to a child, and it only served to heighten Eli's righteous anger.

"Do not forget that it was I who convinced the Federation of Planets to agree to this project in the first place. There are reasons behind my actions. Reasons you will soon be aware of. The entire fate of this Federation rests on the success of my alteration of the program. You cannot even begin to understand the sacrifices that have been made to ensure that pod's development. To ensure it's flight."

"I've worked with you on this project for seven years, T'Janis. Many of us haven't left Antarctica in the past five. We have all made sacrifices." Eli sighed, his anger draining away. There was no arguing with a Vulcan. Their train of thought was based on logic, which made it almost impossible to change their views. She didn't see her sabotage as sabotage. She saw it as... the right thing to do. The logical thing to do.

"Soon you will understand." T'Janis turned on her heel, leaving Eli with no choice but to follow. If she planned on explaining herself to the command group, then he intended to be there. He was an inspector, after all, her appointed second.

When he entered the command room, he was surprised to see the Vulcan delegates already present and seated, their expressions pensive and strangely hopeful. As they glanced at T'Janis, unspoken questions in their eyes, Eli realized that they already knew.

He cocked his head to the side and saw Admiral Cooper whispering with the Vulcan Ambassador as he pointed in his direction. The Admiral nodded, as if giving permission for Eli to remain. Even through his confusion, Eli walked forward to have a seat at the round table.

Ambassador Soren was the first to break the silence of the room, his question directed at the Chief Commander. "Were we successful?"

T'Janis did not even spare Eli a glance as she responded, "The pod reached it's destination. We will need to review the video feed before we can know for certain." Of course. The pod's external video feed would show the landing and departure. Even as they gathered in the command room the inspection team would be reviewing the recordings.

Admiral Cooper took in a deep breath as he gazed at the occupants in the room. "As of now we are the only seven people who are aware of the pod's mission. Commander Jefferson, I understand that you are directly under the command Chief Commander T'Janis?"
"Yes, Sir." After his recent outburst, Eli wondered how long he would remain under her command.

The Admiral continued, "We are going to allow you access to this information because your assistance will be vital during the second stage of the retrieval. Understand that under no circumstances are you authorized to share what you are about to discover with any individual who is outside of this room."

His head tilted as confusion shifted into utter disarray. What the hell were they talking about? Retrieval? Second Stage? "What information? Sir, what is it that we are doing?"

"In two years Earth will enter into a global war. During this war a virus will be released that will kill 80 percent of the world's population. This virus will reach New Vulcan and continue to spread causing elimination of the Vulcan race. Andorians will be spared, due to their physiology, however by then the damage will be done. The Federation will be crippled."

At the Admiral's admission, Eli turned to T'Janis for confirmation. The only thing he received was a quick nod in return.

"How do we know this?" He directed the question at the Chief Commander.

"Because Project Pon Izau was a success and we were warned beforehand." T'Janis didn't clarify who had warned them, but based upon the actions already taken by the Vulcan there was little doubt that the source was a reliable one.

"How is time travel going to stop this war?"

"It won't." Even the Vulcan delegation looked grim at this knowledge. "It will, however, stop the virus. During the Eugenics War, Augments modified the flu virus commonly referred to as the Spanish Flu, one of the deadliest strains known to man. That modified strain was tested on two thousand people. Less than thirty survived. This is the same virus that will be used two years from now."

Disrupting the timeline over a simple virus made no sense. The reward, in Eli's mind, didn't even begin to outweigh the risks. They could have compromised their entire existence. "That still doesn't explain the need for time travel. Why not just create a vaccination?"

"We've already tried. So far no one has survived either the virus or the vaccination." No one? How many people have they already sacrificed to stop this virus? Eli glanced from the Admiral to the Chief Commander, their sullen expression implying that it had been a significant number.

T'Janis spoke next, her tone straight-forward as always, "We need a subject who survived the initial virus."

Surprised, Eli asked, "During the Eugenics War?" That was 500 years ago...

"Yes."

"The Augments may have been ruthless, but they were ideal record keepers. T'Janis was responsible for selecting candidates from the original thirty. We narrowed it down to ten based on their potential for affecting the timeline. Lack of children, lack of family, the nature of their historical achievements. Every detail we could gather was taken into account to find suitable subjects."

"So. Where is your subject?" The look the Admiral sent his way didn't inspire any confidence.

"We're not even certain who the subject is anymore. Because we pulled them from the timeline, we no longer have a record of them ever receiving the virus. Every note we made no longer exists. The only thing we know is that the pod was rerouted. All that implies is that we did find a candidate."
But no one had arrived with the captains of the pod, which meant that the person had been outside of the pod. "How do we track down a person that has been misplaced in time?"

T'Janis rested one of her datapads on the table, pulling up a diagram of the pod. Calculations ran in the upper right corner and she indicated to a line of streaming numbers. "There is a twenty-seven year window of where the subject could have landed. Too close and they would have been here in Antarctica. Too far and they would be dead. We'll search through the Starfleet database and pull records of reported time travel. Then we intercept them and bring them here. Once they are in our custody we will administer the virus and create a stable vaccination after it has run its course."

"So not only did we rip someone from their time, but we plan on doing it twice? And then we'll give them one of the deadliest viruses we've ever encountered."

"Considering how many lives have already been lost attempting to create a vaccination, this is a far better alternative. The subject is one person over the billions who will die otherwise." Eli's back stiffened at the implications. They'd been willing to sacrifice much more than billions of lives. There had been a reason the pod was supposed to land in Antarctica and that was to avoid creating a ripple effect of change.

But it was done now. They had already altered the pod's destination and somewhere in time was a stranded human. A subject they still needed to prevent humanity's demise.

Eli sighed. "So what is it that you need me to do?"

T'Janis slid the datapadd to rest in front of Eli. "We need you to find our subject."

"And if I can't?" Should he even try? If Earth is destined to suffer such a devastating loss then who was he to stop it? Who was he to be part of a group that would purposefully change the course of the universe?

After a moment's pause, the Admiral stood from his chair and set a steel gaze on Eli. "If we can't then we move to candidate number two and try again."

**STARDATE 2260.157**

**Beta Quadrant**

"Miss Wright? Miss Wright, do you understand the Federation Credit system?" Understand it? Of course she didn't understand it. She'd only used it once and that was just before last Christmas when she'd gotten a gift for Richard. And technically she hadn't even been the one to actually do the transaction.

Amelia pinched the bridge of her nose as she released an annoyed sigh. "I swear, Spock, if you call me Miss Wright one more time, I'm going to take this credit chip and shove it-"

"There is no need to be frustrated." He was using his 'horse' tone again, the one a person used when trying to calm a stallion. How he managed to sound condescending and calming at the same time befuddled her. "Once you get a chance to use the system then it will be much easier to understand it."

She dropped her hand from her face and tilted her head, shooting the Vulcan the most annoyed glare she could muster. "What am I going to use money for, Spock?"

"Once we reached Azeta Prime there will be many vendors with which you can negotiate. Federation credits are quite valuable to several alien races. And even if you do not wish to use
credits, you can always trade." Okay. So maybe there could be a use for money in the middle of the galaxy.

Some of her frustration faded on a long, exhaled sigh. "Okay. So how many credits do I have?"

"You have 250 credits." What was that in dollars, again? Spock continued on, explaining the allocation system in further detail. Hadn't they just gone over this?

She stopped him when he started to mention the space station, a place they wouldn't even reach for another month. "What can 250 credits buy?"

"A night's stay in a lower class hotel plus four meals. Of course it is all dependent on the planet's economy." Which meant that if she was stuck on a commerce planet for longer than a day she would be essentially homeless.

Amelia frowned. "So... you're saying I'm broke?"

"Well, as you stated, what are you going to use money for?" She couldn't tell if he was trying to be funny, or if it was one of those moments of ironic humor that just passed over his head. In either case, she didn't laugh. When she just continued to stare up at him in a mixture of displeasure and impatience, he continued with topics he considered of more importance. "Now, onto history. What is first contact?"

She knew this. Richard had actually discussed the event known as first contact with her. "Cocker flew a ship capable of warp. Vulcans saw it."

"Cochrane. Zefram Cochrane." He corrected with a raised brow. "What year did this occur and what was the name of the ship?"

"2063." Amelia paused on the second part of the question. Something to do with Arizona. She snapped her fingers and exclaimed, "Phoenix!"

"Better." Condescending ass...

It wasn't that these sessions with Spock were difficult. In fact, he made it almost like kindergarten. Complete with requests for bathroom breaks. They studied for at least four hours every week. He explained the system of government and quizzed her on conversions. Then there were times where he asked her about the past, his genuine curiosity almost making up for every other time he made her feel like an invalid.

"Amelia." His use of her first name brought her sharply back to the present. "Perhaps we should continue at another time. You seem distracted."

"No." The automatic denial came with a quick shake of her head, but a second later she realized that she was distracted. For all he'd done, she owed him honesty. "Yes. I'm sorry, Spock. It's just... I remember when Reagen was elected and training drills during the cold war. I remember the fall of the Berlin wall and I remember reading the paper on July 15th 1992 and learning that the US was being invaded. It's the history I know. I'm almost 31, Spock. Learning another lifetime of history just isn't going to happen for me."

His hand fell on her shoulder, the act startling her. Aside from the occasional guiding of her elbow and their combat tactics sessions, he didn't touch her. Amelia turned a wide gaze on him, surprised to see Spock's mouth set in a firm line of determination. "It will. We have five years to prepare you for returning to Earth. You should be able to function and that includes conversations on primary events in history. I will not allow you to return at a disadvantage."
Amelia nodded. "Okay. I'll keep trying."

His features shifted, the slightest of relaxation across his face. "I believe you will." Then he gathered his datapadd and gestured towards the door. "We should get dinner."

Dinner.

Dinner! Amelia's eyes darted to the clock above the door, a groan escaping her as she read the digits. "I'm late." Late for dinner with McCoy. Again. It seemed their schedules had yet to align, unlike their interests. The first night after their talk she'd lost track of time while sitting in the med-bay with Th'eon. The second night there was a memorial ceremony.

She'd caught him for lunch the third day, but Scotty had interrupted and pulled her aside for their combat-tactics class. He'd only been mildly annoyed and just a touch jealous, but she promised that she'd make it up to him. And at that promise he seemed more than willing to wait.

At least she was only late by a few minutes. Ten at most.

Spock seemed to understand and gave her a curt nod, stating that they would meet again for a briefing on Azeta Prime, the planet that the Enterprise was slowly approaching. News of Azeta Prime had shifted moral in a better direction. With the crew's recent loss, it seemed that the Captain wanted to reinforce the mission of exploration. Because that's what six people had died for...

Amelia pushed the thought of death outside of her mind as she entered the dining hall. She didn't want to ruin her dinner with McCoy. Not when everything seemed stacked against them as of late.

As always, she glanced towards the serving line first. Th'eon stood on the other side, looking almost comical with the crown of his head fully wrapped in white, one blue antenna sticking out. At least he was back on his feet.

When he caught her staring, he pointed to the far end of the dining hall. She followed his gaze to see McCoy leaning over a datapadd. A smile crossed her face when she saw that he'd already grabbed her dinner, two trays sitting in front of him.

He didn't look up from his datapadd as she approached, a scowl on his face as he angrily tapped at the device.

"You're gonna break that thing." At her words, the lines in his forehead disappeared as he shifted in his seat. His gaze traveled up her legs to land at her face. Since their bout in his office, he hadn't hid his interest in her. Even now she could see the changes in his demeanor in response to her presence.

His posture improved. His voice dropped. And he touched her. The palm of his hand pressed gently against her hip, guiding her to the chair as he pointed at the datapadd with his other hand. "That's the plan."

She grinned, taking a seat and pulling up her tray. "What did it ever do to you?"

"Won't let me change the ship's calendar. You'd think I could get access to that, but, no, Chief Medical Officer status only gets me a shower." And an extra large room with an extra large bed. She wondered if he'd intentionally led her thoughts in that direction.

Amelia also wondered if the datapadd was the only thing that had him frustrated. In an effort to ease him, she placed a hand on his arm. "Sorry I'm late."

McCoy only shrugged. "Jim said you were with Spock. Sponsorship problems?"
"Something like that." McCoy's brow lifted at the vague answer. She couldn't exactly tell him that she was getting history lessons, so she settled for, "He was telling me about how I get paid. Being a first time contractor and all." The answer seemed to satisfy him. "So, what's wrong with the calendar."

"I'm trying to set up that emergency response class. You're on the roster, by the way."

Her fork full of pasta stopped short of her mouth as she tilted her head to glance his way. "Am I?"

"As much trouble as you get into, I'd be held for negligence if I didn't put you in the class." It would have been more offensive if he hadn't said it with a small grin.

"I'll have you know I carry a first aid kit every time I leave this ship." Band-aids and all. "And I was a model Girl Scout."

"They teach you how to use a transfusion kit in Girl Scouts? Because that's day one." She didn't even know what a transfusion kit looked like, much less how to use one. Her interest in the class grew at the thought of learning something new.

"Are you teaching the class?"

"Just tactical surgery and a brief pathology segment. Medics will teach the rest." Oh. Just tactical surgery? Amelia smiled in silent laughter at the idea of taking a class on tactical surgery. What did tactical surgery even mean?

She figured she would save her questions for later, instead focusing on events sooner to come. At the mention of Azeta Prime, he perked up. It seemed they both were looking forward to going planet-side. Amelia wanted the experience and McCoy probably just wanted to get off the ship. Either way, it looked as though they would be on ground at the same time.

For a solid twenty minutes it was just them having a conversation over dinner. Work. Parts of their past. It was easy and comfortable, but underneath it all she felt tension building.

They weren't together, not in a traditional sense. They made plans for dinner and plans to spend time with one another, but plans for the future remained unspoken. Most of that was her fault. She'd told him that night in his room that they would take it one step at a time. The tension that she felt between them told her that the next step was coming.

Sex.

Oh, Amelia wanted to have sex with him. That fact was undeniable and even a sentiment she knew McCoy returned. The matter was when. And when they crossed that line would she still be the same independent woman she'd fought so hard to become. Or would she depend on McCoy? On something only he could give her?

She realized that the conversation had faded and they were sitting in silence in the dining hall, her dinner devoured and McCoy's steady gaze focused on her. All it would take was just a simple request for her to join him in his room.

**STARDATE 2260.157**

**Beta Quadrant**

He'd never wanted anything in his life as much as he wanted Amelia in that moment. It hit him at random times throughout the day, too. This driving need he'd been without for years. Maybe it was
the wait that was causing it to occur more frequently.

He clenched the edge of the table in his hand, struggling to calm his nerves. If he waited another day, would it make the experience of her coming to him that much better? Of course he’d desired her since the first time he’d seen her. And five months later the built up tension had resulted in a complete loss of control in his office.

It was hard to believe that their erratic schedules of late had yet to align. Until tonight. She wasn't needed in the hydroponics bay and he was already off-duty. His eyes drifted to where she sat next to him at the table. Her meal was finished, as was his own. Just as he reached out to clasp her hand, the communicator at his hip chirped. *Damn it all to hell!*

The sudden noise startled her just as much as it aggravated him. McCoy clasped the offending device in his palm and brought it up to his ear. He growled into it, "McCoy."

"*Doctor McCoy, you are needed in the brig.*" Spock. He had a sudden mental image of strangling the pointy eared bastard. Apparently the image took precedence over responding because after a moment of silence, Spock said again, "*Doctor McCoy?*"

McCoy sighed, shooting Amelia an apologetic glance as he said, "On my way."

It would have been difficult to miss the way her smile faltered. "Work?"

"Always."

McCoy reached for his tray, but her hand on his arm caught him first. "I'll get it. Go on." The acceptance on her face made it easier to step away. It was one of the things he liked most about her. She didn't whine for attention or attempt to manipulate him through guilt. She simply accepted.

He could love her.

The thought came to him as he was standing in the turbo-lift on his way to the brig. It was one of those stray thoughts that the second it hit, nothing could erase it. McCoy sucked in a deep breath, his hand reaching for the wall of the turbo-lift in an attempt to steady himself.

*Where the hell had that come from?*

Couldn't two people just be together without crossing that one line of emotional connection? The one line that there was no going back from?

He didn't have time to process it as the doors to the lift opened to reveal Spock, the source of McCoy's earlier agitation. He briefly wondered how he looked, braced against the wall, his mouth open in shock. But the Vulcan didn't judge, simply stepped to the side so McCoy could enter the brig.

Just with a single step, McCoy found himself back in doctor mode. "When did we get a prisoner?"

"This crew member was the one with the stolen phaser rifle." McCoy recalled the search that had taken place while he was on the planet with the colonists. Though he hadn't heard much, there had been rumors of a misplaced weapon.

The person responsible was currently standing beyond a shield, confined to a moderately sized cell. He was seated against the back wall, his knees pressed against his chest as he rested his head on crossed arms. He didn't look ill, though.
McCoy turned back to Spock. "What's wrong with him?"

"He has been refusing to eat. As of this morning he has entered a state of delirium." That would mean he hadn't eaten for at least a week. As McCoy looked around he noticed another strange circumstance. The brig was practically empty, a sole guard standing watch at the far end of the room.

Looking back at Spock, he asked, "What about hydration?"

"Two days ago he was given intravenous fluids." Did they want him to fit the prisoner with a nutrition unit? McCoy glanced towards the biobed situated in the brig, his eyes scanning the supplies already laid out.

Before he could ask Spock anything else, a loud thud sounded throughout the room. The prisoner had moved to his feet, his fist against the shield. He was talking, but his words were silent. Spock's hand drifted towards a button on the communicator, sound suddenly transmitting out of the cell. "-terrorist on this ship! You have to let me talk to the captain! I know my rights!"

"You are not entitled to a consult with the Captain. You have already dismissed your legal counsel. Your request to speak with Admiral Everett has been processed. All of your rights have been observed per Starfleet regulations." Admiral Everett? McCoy wondered where he had heard that name before.

"I have orders!" At that, Spock turned off the transmitter. McCoy's brow rose in suspicion.

In response to McCoy's silence, Spock said, "As I mentioned, he is in a state of delirium. Would you like for him to be rendered unconscious for the procedure?"

"Is he violent?"

"No."

McCoy shrugged. "Then don't." Though the question did raise flags. "Unless there's another reason for knocking him out?"

Spock didn't answer, his hand back on the transmitter. "I am going to lower the shield to your cell. Do not attempt to fight Doctor McCoy or I will use force against you. Do not divulge sensitive information or I will use force against you. Do you understand?"

"She'll kill you all!" With a single sentence, the shield was down and Spock was placing his hand on the man's shoulder. He fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

Startled by Spock's use of the Vulcan nerve pinch, McCoy's mouth dropped open. Staring between the two, he asked, "You going to tell me what that was about?"

"I'm afraid that is not possible at the moment." Spock, with his superior strength, easily lifted the unconscious man and carried him towards the biobed.

He growled in anger, "Spock-"

"For your own benefit, I suggest that you focus on the Lieutenant's health." For his own benefit? That was a strange choice of words. As though the reason Spock wouldn't give up the information was personal.

The anger in his voice came through, his words clipped and low. "I'm a part of this ship's senior command staff. If we have a terrorist on board, don't you think I should be aware of it."
"If there was a threat you would be one of the first informed. Fortunately, the only terrorist on this ship is right here and he is already in custody." Briefly, McCoy got the impression that Spock was lying. But Vulcans didn't lie. Instead it would have been more like an omission.

Instead of pushing the subject, he approached the biobed, his hands reaching for the nutrition unit. He'd pump the prisoner up with everything needed for survival, but other than that he didn't plan on doing much else.

One of the few choices an arrested officer had left was their option to not eat, which meant that McCoy's intervention was merely to keep him alive for trial. He knew he'd be back in the brig before the month was out.

Once he was finished with the unit and the prisoner had been moved back into his cell, McCoy turned to glare at Spock. "I'll have to report the physical confrontation. You don't nerve pinch a guy who has nowhere to go."

"If that is your decision I will not object." It may have been an empty threat but damn him for not putting up a fight. At least then McCoy might have been able to figure out what this whole situation was about.

He kept a leveled glare focused on the Vulcan, even as they walked side by side to the turbo-lift. "This isn't over. You can't keep information from me on a ship this small. Not when all we have is each other."

"Once we arrive at the space station he will be transferred into Federation custody and our part in his detention will be over." The way he said 'our' made McCoy think that he meant 'your'. Another slight omission?

"Who is 'she', Spock?" She'll kill you all. Delirium or not, the prisoner had seemed sure of that fact.

"That, I cannot tell you."

"Who are you trying to keep safe?" At that, Spock tilted his head.

"The person he was ordered to kill, Doctor McCoy." McCoy's spine went stiff, his mouth went tight. Of course. Life aboard the Enterprise was anything but boring...
Chapter 25

STARDATE 2260.159

Beta Quadrant

Azeta Prime

"70 credits?!!" Amelia scowled, not because she felt like she was being cheated, but rather because she had no idea if she was being cheated. A single bill from her time period had sold for just 300 credits. Wasn't that a collector's item?

The alien in front of her only nodded, the eye in his forehead squinting in impatience. Or it seemed like impatience. It was hard to tell with the way his other two eyes were focused in different directions. At her back, McCoy finally spoke up. "Come on. It's a cheap holograph box. It's worth 40 at most."

The item in question didn't appear to be cheap, though Amelia took McCoy's words at face value, trusting his judgment. She picked up the small box once more, the glass screen so clear it would have been hard to believe that it even existed if her hand wasn't pressed against it. In the center a flower bloomed, slowly shifting into a new color while the petals extended and changed shape.

Within moments a new flower had taken place of the old one.

Amelia made a point to appear disinterested as she set the box back on the vendor's table. McCoy's hand landed on her shoulder as she turned away, his touch just firm enough to keep her from going back. That and his added whisper, "Four, three, two-"

The alien behind her sighed. "Very well. 50 credits."

A slow victorious grin spread on her face and when she cast a glance up at McCoy, she saw that same expression mirrored on his own. They made a good team as hagglers. As she completed the transaction, her partner wandered to the next tent, his eyes scanning the merchandise laid upon tables.

Azeta Prime's capital city reminded her of one large flea market. Apparently, in celebration of a national festival, it was common for business to gather along the sidewalks just before a night of parades and fireworks.

They had picked an exciting time for shore leave.

The main streets were flooded with vendors and tents, each displaying their own unique cultures. There were vendors who specialized in fabrics, from silk to cotton-like materials. There were vendors who specialized in elaborate display knives and swords. Then there were vendors like the one she'd just dealt with who pawned little techno-trinkets.

One of her first purchases had been an addition to her limited wardrobe. It had been well worth the 80 credits, the soft fabric gentle against her skin. When McCoy had caught up with her after handling some business with Jim, he'd taken in the sleeveless black blouse and loose fitted black trousers with a slow approving smile.

"Gorgeous," He had told her, then he'd taken her hand. She'd thought the same thing of him in his brown short sleeve button up and cargo pants, looking a little less professional and more roguish.
Amelia shoved the holograph box in her backpack and made her way over to McCoy. He was standing in front of a table of small porcelain animals, his eyes scanning the assortment. "What'cha looking for?"

"Something for Joanna. Might not be able to be there for her, but I can try and bring something back." Amelia cocked her head. He didn't mention his daughter very often, the subject an obvious sore spot. It was spoken of as often as her own parents. Sure, they had glossed over their pasts, but the specifics rarely entered into the conversation. Parents and siblings and, in his case, a child and an ex-wife.

He was in his late thirties, so the fact that he'd been married once before wasn't a deal breaker. In fact, she felt that it made him complete. He knew what he would get into with a long-term relationship. He knew what the risks could possibly be.

Amelia turned back to the table and as she looked at the fragile menagerie she realized that such pieces could have been found in her room as a little girl.

Tiny horse-like animals. Miniature cats. At her side, McCoy picked up a piece from the center his hands cradling it with care. Upon closer inspection, Amelia could see that it was a bear of some kind. It's back was slightly hunched, it's mouth opened in a snarl. It looked vicious and exciting and McCoy seemed to recognize it.

Catching her confused look, he held it out to her. "It's a sehlat."

"What's a sehlat?"

Her hands traced the ridged back of the figurine as he explained, "It's an animal from the planet Vulcan. Right now there is a conversation effort in San Fransisco dedicated to rebuilding their population. Last I heard they hadn't been able to breed them. If they can't find a way then in less than a decade this might be an extinct species."

Amelia frowned and handed it back. "That's kind of sad." And it was. Spock had spoke briefly of the destruction of his home planet, another history lesson. Despite the fact that he was Vulcan and had such a grip on his emotions, she had almost felt his sorrow.

An entire planet just... gone.

McCoy's words drew her from the depressing though. "Yeah. It is. But Joanna wrote a paper on them for school so I think she'll like it." Then he paid for the porcelain sehlat and they started off towards the main road.

His arm fell across her shoulders as they walked, a touch possessive and a touch protective. When they encountered a new alien race, McCoy was quick to educate her. A grin formed when she realized he was doing it in an effort to showcase his knowledge. A subconscious boast...

Her eyes caught a fruit stand, her hand tugging at McCoy's arm to guide him that direction. He cut short his description of the unique Denobulan physiology and followed after her. Amelia picked up the first fruit within reach, bringing it up to her nose for a quick sniff.

It smelled like a peach, though it looked anything but with it's thick blue peel. She gave it a gentle squeeze, surprised to find it soft. From the corner of her eye she saw McCoy pointing at it. "Gotta be careful with that."

"Oh," Amelia raised a brow and set the fruit back down. "What is it?"
"Looks like a Sahara plum."

"Why's it called that? Does it grow in the Sahara?" Not long after the words escaped her did she realize how ridiculous the question was. They were light years from the Sahara.

But he didn't call her out on it. Instead he said, "No. Makes you feel like you're standing in it. Heats you up like you wouldn't believe." He plucked a different fruit from a basket, handing it to her for inspection. "Now this... this is an interesting one."

It looked more like an orange and she was surprised when it smelled like one too. "Yeah? What does it do?"

"Makes you amorous. Excited." His voice dropped as he stared at her. "Aroused. They're sold for quite a bit on Earth, being such a sought after import."

The stand's vendor approached and Amelia gave herself a mental pat on the back that she didn't flinch at the strange bumps that ran across his neck and chin. He pointed to the fruit in McCoy's hand and nodded. "Yula fruit. Good for first dates."

The insulted look that McCoy shot the vendor's way was hard to miss. "I think I can get this one on my own, buddy." Amelia hid her grin that formed at his confidence.

"What's the point of exploring alien planets if you can't get a deal on exotic fruits?" She tapped his side with her elbow. "We should try it."

"Honey, you eat that and you'll be trying new things all night long. And probably the next day, too." She flushed at that, setting the yula fruit back in the basket. He was right about one thing. He could get her all on his own.

Amelia adjusted the backpack on her shoulders as McCoy finished another purchase. When he joined her in the street, his hand found hers almost instantly. It wasn't entirely done out of affection, a crowd forming at the far end of the road. A parade was supposed to be en-route and the way he clasped her hand in his own was an effort to tether her as they navigated the crowd.

At one point he had released her, a member of the crowd breaking through their grip like they were in a game of red rover. But a second later, his other hand came around to clasp her upper arm.

He pulled her tight against him, simply standing the street as strangers rushed around them. A palm landed on her lower back, drawing her closer still. It reminded her of that time on the lake, when he'd saved her from falling.

She wasn't the only one who seemed to recall the experience either. McCoy's breathing was rapid against her ear, his hand dropping lower still to cup her backside in a mimic of when he'd caught her. It wasn't as though anyone would notice, the swarm around them too focused on the activity in the center of the road.

She drew back when the crowd began to thin out, her gaze drifting up to focus on McCoy's face. The intensity in his hazel eyes caused heat to blossom in her face. It was easy to feel wanted when he looked at her that way.

It was easy to want him back.

They had come quite a ways since the first time they'd met. His accusation of her being a biological hazard came to mind and her mouth tilted at the corner. For a biological hazard he was certainly holding her close...
"What is it about you?" His words were soft and slow and even a touch confused.

As confused as her own when she asked, "What do you mean?"

"You draw everyone to you. God, even Spock can't say a critical thing about you." A thumb brushed the corner of her mouth.

"That's funny. I used to spend so much time keeping everyone away. Before Starfleet I only had a couple of friends. Now I have more than I can count and... and I have you." And she did have him. McCoy had drawn her in as well with his own form of tenderness. She had seen the worst and best of him. She'd been at the brunt end of his anger and at the brunt end of his passion. Slowly, she raised a hand to his cheek. "Maybe I'm just making up for lost time."

"I know the feeling." Then he leaned in, uncaring of the crowd around them. His lips brushed hers, sweet and, eventually, thorough. He'd kissed her just a handful of times and every time it was different. First in apology, second in desperation, and third in desire.

Every time was unique, much like the moments that defined their relationship.

Someone bumped into her shoulder, and they broke apart, their bodies drifting away from each other. The moment passed and his hands fell away from her. With a heavy sigh, he muttered, "Guess it's time to meet up with the others."

The others. Scotty had been bragging about the nightlife on Azeta Prime, arranging a gathering at one of the popular 'pubs'. She wasn't sure what time it was, but the sun was setting in the distance which meant that night wasn't far off.

McCoy's fingers once again found her own, a gentle tug pulling her towards the direction of the bar. As people with casual wear were heading towards the parade, more with exotic clothing was filtering into a tall building.

A sign hung just above the door, neon characters standing out against the white brick. She didn't know what it meant, the alien language as foreign as Hebrew. McCoy didn't seem confused by it, giving a nod as he read the glowing words. "This is it."

He guided her inside and almost instantly Amelia was assaulted with the steady thrum of loud music. The man at her side didn't look pleased either, his narrowed eyes scanning the crowd for Scotty. Amelia spotted him first, red hair and a white face standing out in the midst of alien patrons.

As they headed further into the pub, Amelia noticed that the inside of the room was quieter than the outskirts, perhaps in an effort to draw in crowds from outside. Whatever the reason, she was grateful that her ears got a reprieve.

While she found a table, McCoy headed for the bar. Scotty saw her as she took a seat, sending her a wave. A haphazard wave that almost struck the red-skinned woman hanging on his arm. Just after his brief acknowledgment of Amelia, Scotty turned back around to a small gaggle of women, his loud voice carrying across the room, "Aye, Lass. It'sa 'ummincat-or. Lemme call mah ship. Beam us right up! Who else want'sa tour?"

"Dear God," McCoy exclaimed, a drink in each hand as he approached their table, "he's drunk already!"

Amelia laughed. "You can take the man out of Scotland, but you can't take Scotland out of the man." Turning away from Scotty, Amelia faced McCoy and took the drink offered her way. "Thanks." It
was sweet, but still carried with it a sharp alcoholic taste that burned on the way down.

Over her glass, she kept her gaze on McCoy who steadily sipped what looked like a beer. He seemed more relaxed now, his gaze slowly scanning the crowd, then her, then back on the crowd. She wasn't sure who else Scotty had invited, but considering how few people she actually associated with aboard the Enterprise there was a high chance that she wouldn't know them.

Spock and Kirk were still on board the ship. Th'eon couldn't travel just yet due to his injury. And she was pretty sure Mark was in a different social circle.

Surprisingly, the first person to walk their way was indeed a familiar face. Her dark skin was sprinkled with some kind of glitter, her hair high on top her head. Amelia recalled meeting her in the turbolift her very first day on the Enterprise.

She greeted McCoy first with a wide smile and a wave. "Doctor McCoy!"

"Lieutenant Uhura." He nodded and held up his glass. Uhura's head tilted, her gaze drifting from McCoy to Amelia. The smile on her face seemed to warm.

"And you brought our resident horticulturist." Uhura shot Amelia a wink, sending a subtle signal of approval. "Good to see you again Amelia."

"You too." Amelia raised her glass just as McCoy had done, earning her a quick tap of Uhura's glass.

"Seeing as you and I are the only ladies-" Breaking off mid sentence, Uhura plucked the glass from Amelia's hand and set it on the table along with her own, "-we should find ourselves some handsome and exotic men to entice." Though Amelia didn't know the woman well, she was beginning to see Uhura had spunk.

Spunk that McCoy didn't seem to appreciate. His responding grumble was a quick, "Aren't you seeing Spock?"

Uhura didn't waiver, her grin as wide as ever. It was a shame Amelia hadn't spent time with the woman before now, her like for the woman increasing by the moment. "It's only a dance."

Just a dance? Amelia tilted her head, catching McCoy's gaze. The possessive glare hidden within sparked her own independence. It was, after all, just a dance. And later they would have all night to themselves. Wasn't she supposed to be taking steps forward? Experiencing new things?

She found herself giving Uhura a hasty nod as she rose from her seat. "Why not?"

"You girls have fun." His words might have said one thing, but the look McCoy was shooting at Uhura said another entirely. Amelia grinned at his attempt to temper that jealous nature.

She dropped her lips to McCoy's cheek, whispering, "I'll be back soon."

**STARDATE 2260.159**

**Beta Quadrant**

**Azeta Prime**

*I'll be back soon.* McCoy sipped on his second beer, wondering just what Amelia's definition of *soon* was. It certainly wasn't a few minutes. It certainly wasn't ten. From across the room he
watched as she danced with Uhura, the two rotating out partners throughout songs. Partners that included young native Azetian males just primed for a good time.

He knew he could step in at any time, but aside from the jealousy he felt at watching her with other men, he felt the stir of something else. Amelia's skin was glistening with thin sheen of sweat, her neck and face flushed from exertion. The thin material of her shirt clung to her like a second skin. Watching her like this was almost as exciting as watching her bathe in the lake, a memory that had already intruded earlier in the day.

Though they hadn't expressly stated what later would entail, he knew it would end with her in his room at the resort. Why not let her go? Especially when she looked so damn beautiful in the distance. The conversation they had shared in the midst of the parade came back to him and his own face flushed. Not only did she wreck havoc on his control, she always drew out the sap in him. The man that wanted to express exactly what was on his mind. Of course that also bit him in the ass on occasion.

His voyeurism of Amelia was interrupted by an abrupt slap on the back. Hard enough to shake him in his chair, but not hard enough to injure. Before he even turned, he knew it had been Montgomery Scott, the strong accent coming a moment later. "She's a keeper, that one."

McCoy didn't even pretend to not catch his meaning, his eyes darting between Scotty and Amelia. The scowl on his face faded as he watched her. "Yeah. She is."

Behind him, Scotty took a seat in an empty stool at the table. "Guess you two got o'er your row."

Sending a sharp look his way, McCoy asked, "What?"

"Row. Fight. Lover's quarrel."

McCoy's brow furrowed at the clarification. "Don't tell me she talks to you about us."

"Aye, that she does. All the time." Scotty's voice raised in pitch, a mock of a female's voice, "Oh Scotty, Leonard has such an amazing body. 'Oh Scotty, Leonard is such an ass. Oh Scotty, but the sex is just amazing.' All the time, Leonard this, Leonard that. To be honest, I'm real sick of it."

The Scotsman's mouth was quirked upwards in a comical grin, exaggerated slightly by his drunken state. For a brief second McCoy had actually believe him until Scotty had chosen to use his first name. Amelia had never once called him Leonard...

In the midst of McCoy's stunned silence, Scotty laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, confessing, "Don't be daft, McCoy. I just know 'er. That's all. She'd never kiss 'n tell."

McCoy just snorted and took a long swig of his beer before saying, "You're real funny, Scott."

"Had my eye on her meself you know." He hadn't been the only one. McCoy recalled Jim's feeble attempt at flirting. "But.. I think she was just waiting for-"

"I said. Back. Off!" The voice across the room reached his ears, not because it was loud, but because he was so in tune with it. McCoy jumped to his feet, Scotty right behind him. His eyes sought her out on the dance floor.

The sight before him sent a thrum of concern straight through him. Amelia was squared off, facing one of her earlier dance partners, a good 30 centimeters of height difference between the two. The taller male also had at least a hundred pounds on her.
But she held her ground, her palm flat against the man's chest to keep distance them. Behind her stood Uhura, looking startled, but not frightened. Though McCoy was well aware that Uhura was combat proficient, he still felt the need to intervene.

Before he took a step their way, the man moved closer to Amelia. It was apparently the wrong direction. Her other palm came up, a quick strike delivered straight to the man's sternum. The Azetian stumbled back in surprise, just before his eyes narrowed in anger.

The drunk Scotsman at McCoy's back barked out, "Spock taught her that one."

McCoy ground his teeth together as his feet finally caught up with his fury. All this empowering should have come with warnings attached. Like the fact that an Azetian's sternum was a damn recharge button. With less than ten strides he made himself a buffer, positioned firmly between Amelia and the Azetian male.

"She told you to back off!" Someone tugged at his arm, but McCoy didn't dare take his eyes off the alien in front of him. If he had, he might have missed the sudden tensing in the man's shoulder and he just might have ended up with a dislocated jaw when the Azetian swung his fist at his face.

Instead, he jerked back, catching a mild blow against his cheek.

He knew that the skin hadn't broken, but by the end of the night he was sure to be sporting a bruise. McCoy's mind raced, thoughts of how this could have happened had he not intervened. Thoughts of how his actions were a reflection of Starfleet. But most of all... thoughts of what he'd read in medical journals.

Azetian nervous system has three major weak points. Primarily the Sympathetic Nerve. Impact causes cramping in knee and elbow joints. Location...Collar bone. Right side. His train of thought came to a sudden jarring stop in an instant.

"McCoy!" Someone was shouting at him, tugging at his shoulders. His back hurt, a pain he was forced to experience as he came to his senses. How had he ended up on the floor? Dizziness followed and he touched a hand to his brow, his fingers coming away slick with blood.

He might have avoided the brunt of the first punch, but he sure as hell hadn't avoided the second. Confusion gave way to anger as Scotty called out, "Get off the lass, ya brute!"

The sound of flesh hitting flesh startled him into standing, but through cloudy vision he could barely make out the chaos around him. It was an all out brawl, complete with the occasional chair flying across the room.

The Azetian male was being pulled off of Amelia with the help of Scotty. Uhura was tugging the hair of some new woman trying to get a few hits in. McCoy wasn't sure who to help, his eyes darting between the sparring pairs.

A hard hit at his back had him stumbling forward, his gaze torn from Amelia to the person who'd just slammed into him. Or two people. A human and an Orion rolled on the floor, fists flying as they wrestled.

A hand clasped against his arm and he clenched his fist, prepared to strike. A flash of blond brought that instinct to a standstill, Amelia's wide eyes surveying the damage around them. "Guess we won't get a dance, will we?"

Stunned, he shouted the first thing that came to mind. "You started a bar fight!"
"Me? You're the one stepping in. I had it under control." Under control? He gave her an incredulous glare.

"Does this look under control to you?!" He waved his hands around him, but before he could point out one thing in particular, his gaze drifted past Amelia to see a man rushing their direction. "Lookout!"

She dove out of the way, taking him down with her. Automatically, his arm wrapped around her to keep her from hitting the floor. Not that it did much good, her momentum pulling him on top of her. Against his chest he could feel her shaking, causing him to go stiff in concern. That is until he lifted himself up and found that she was shaking with laughter. "You know, McCoy... there are much easier ways of getting me under you."

"Ha!" His bark only resulted in an amused smile. "You think this was easy? You're the most difficult person I've ever met."

"Well, you know what they say. Takes one to know one." Before he could retort, he saw two pairs of legs approaching, the attached bodies too engaged in combat to notice McCoy and Amelia on the floor. He gripped her arm and rolled to his back, taking her with him to avoid getting trampled. Just as soon as they were out of the danger zone, hands began pulling them from the floor.

Scotty and Uhura. The two looked a little worse for wear, Scotty was already sporting a black eye and Uhura's hair more than frazzled. McCoy could only imagine how he looked, clothes filthy and his face splotched with bruises.

But Amelia... she didn't have a scratch on her. Sure, her clothes were a little torn and just as dirty as his own, but her exposed skin was unmarred. When her bright blue eyes met his, he heard the words she never had to voice.

_Let's get the hell out of here._

Within seconds he had his bag slung over his shoulder and Amelia's hand clenched in his own as they stumbled out of the pub. Scotty and Uhura weren't too far behind, drunken laughter reaching his ears. Without the music and the strobe lights, he found his headache starting to fade.

At least until the fireworks began...

Upon the first colorful explosion, Amelia sighed, Uhura gasped, Scotty whistled, and McCoy groaned.

**STARDATE 2260.159**

**Beta Quadrant**

**Azeta Prime**

Amelia had never once imagined this was how her trip to Azeta Prime would go. Sure, the shopping had all been part of the mental image and she had been more than ecstatic to share that experience with McCoy, but what happened afterwards...

She probably should have never hit that man, but she'd been far too angry to stop herself. And instead of taking the cautious approach, she made use of the defensive moves Spock had shown her no less than two weeks prior. Defensive moves that McCoy explained were practically useless against the male she'd faced.
With each step, they left the pub far behind them along with the adrenaline that had been coursing during the tumble. Then the fireworks started and Amelia found herself coming to a stop to stare up at the burning light.

She probably would have stayed there for the entire show, had she not noticed McCoy flinch at the booming noise. Perhaps it was time to retire for the night. She squeezed the hand that gently clasped her own, shooting him a small smile when he turned her way.

Together, they started off towards the resort, leaving Scotty and Uhura behind. Amelia was sure they would see them again the next day, so she kept her farewell short. The rest of their walk was fairly quiet, save for the occasional firework in the distance.

When she followed him down the hallway leading to his room, he didn't question it. And when she stepped into the room after him and dropped her bag on the floor, the only thing he did was smile. A smile that she returned until the lights were on.

Her smile shifted into a shocked open gawk. "Oh my god, your face!" In the brighter lighting of the room she could see that his entire left cheek was covered in purple. On the other side was a cut that ran across his brow, but to her relief it was no longer bleeding.

"Just what every man wants to hear." McCoy muttered, a weary smile on his face. Though he didn't look insulted, she knew that she'd chosen her words poorly.

"No. No. I mean... let me take care of that. I've got some Neosporin." Amelia was already rifling through her backpack, pulling out the small first-aid kit from the bottom.

As her back, McCoy asked. "Neosporin?"

"Triple-Antibiotic." She paused, wondering if they still used stuff like Neosporin. Of course they do. Not everyone has fancy medical devices at home. "Unless you have a dermal regenerator around."

He scoffed, "The one time I need it..."

Palming the antibiotic, a wet wipe, and a band-aid, she turned her attention back to McCoy, waving a hand at his brown shirt. "You should take your shirt off so I can check you over."

Amused, he responded, "I thought I was the doctor in this relationship."

"Not tonight. Unlike you, I'm injury free. Now off with the shirt."

"Yes, Ma'am." He hesitated before reaching down to grasp the hem of his shirt, watching Amelia intently before tugging it free from his jeans. With the slow exposure of bare flesh, Amelia felt her mouth watering. She wasn't sure how long she stood there just looking at him, but it was long enough for him to feel the need to speak, his voice husky and low, "You keep staring at me like that and this examination is going to get cut short."

"Guess I better get to it then." She started with the cut on his eye, her hands only a touch shaky as she ripped open the wet wipe. Carefully, she turned his head cleaning the dried blood that had caked on the side of his face. When it was gone, she placed a small drop of Neosporin ointment on the band-aid and set it gently across his brow. Even the 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle' decal on the band-aid didn't detract from his manly features.

And very much a man he was. As her eyes wandered, so did her hands. Her fingertips slid down the side of his face, tracing the curve of his jaw. She heard his breath catch, but he made no movements toward her. Her palms crossed over his broad shoulders, her gaze so focused that she could see the
flex of muscles as she stimulated the nerves.

There was a bruise on his side, almost as large as a softball, and she kept her hands clear of it, unwilling to cause him pain.

Because McCoy had suffered enough. Amelia had spent her entire adult life learning how to nurture and even though she’d applied that knowledge only to plants, she wondered if it was merely training for this point. If every time she had failed it had prepared her for this one success.

In that moment, where her hand slid back around to rest on his chest, she wondered if every tribulation she had faced had made her strong enough to survive loving McCoy.

Mindlessly, her fingers trailed across his chest, brushing over cinnamon colored peaks. A groan escaped him, breaking the prolonged silence as his larger hand covered hers to still it against his chest. His other hand caught her chin, lifting her gaze to meet his own.

In a simultaneous rush of motion, they gravitated towards one another, lips meeting in mutual want. Amelia gasped against his mouth as his hands began their own investigation, palms sliding down her sides towards her backside that he so often fondled.

The firm touch sent ripples of anticipation through her, tiny quakes running down her spine. It was hard enough to focus, his mouth trailing away from her own and down her neck. The dual assault pulled a whimper from her.

At the sound, McCoy pulled away and gripped her hips, guiding her backwards towards the bed. Her knees hit the mattress and she fell back. They weren’t separated for long, McCoy quickly climbing above her, his weight supported on his hands and knees.

He stared down at her, his eyes hooded as he silently asked for permission. The only response she gave him was to reach down to the hem of her shirt and pull it up over her head. Cool air flowed over her, but she made no move to cover herself.

There was no need to be shy. No fear of his reaction. Because Amelia was well aware that he desired her.

Before her shirt hit the floor, his hands were on her. His touch started at her throat, his fingertips grazing that sensitive spot that always pulled a reaction from her. A smile filtered across his face when she let out a gasp of pleasure. Though the sound was nothing compared to the raspy moan that tore from her throat when his mouth latched onto her breast.

His age showed through as he put experience to work, playing her body like a musical instrument. His touch was firm when needed, gentle when desired. He coaxed her until all she wanted was the feel of his flesh against her own.

Unwilling to endure further torture, Amelia trailed her hands down his chest until they reached the button on his pants. Another low groan of anticipation escaped him as she fumbled with the snap, her fingers sliding across sensitive skin.

As soon as the sound of success echoed through the room, his hands left her to finish the task. While McCoy pushed the material down his legs, she worked on her own bottoms and within moments they were both naked and flush against one another.

Amelia arched against him, her eyes drifting closed in pleasure at the simple feel of him against. Warm and hard and velvety. His breath was hot against her ear, his breathing rapid. Slowly, he shifted, his sex pressing against her own.
His hand fell to her thigh to slide it higher on his hip, preparing her, opening her. Once more, he pulled back to meet her gaze, that request for permission ever present.

Her whisper came quick, "I need you."

McCoy's mouth met her own, swallowing her cry as he drove forward, filling her. The dam of silence broke, his words raspy and broken as he moved against her. Within her. Words of adoration and affection mumbled against her skin.

She rocked with him, each thrust taking her just a little higher, the pressure low in her core building. It was reminiscent of their shared experience in his office, blind need driving them towards satisfaction.

"So... good." He groaned against her neck, his teeth catching the skin lightly. Reflexively, she clenched around him at the rush of pleasure. Through her haze she knew he'd felt it, another word brushing across her flesh. "Amelia."

Eventually, the words stopped, gasps and moans taking their place. Her knees rose higher, bringing him deeper. His pace increased, each thrust harder than the last. Her breath caught in her throat when he caught her ear in his teeth, giving it a gentle tug while his fingers did the same with the peak of her chest.

The response was instantaneous, pleasure ripping down her spine, her back arching with the intensity. This time he didn't capture her cry, her moan echoing through the room. His pace turned erratic, his hand gripping her hip to take over the pace and position.

McCoy followed within seconds, a low groan vibrating her neck as he pushed hard against her, every muscle within reach tensed.

Coming down from her haze, she began to hear his heavy breathing, his forehead braced against her shoulder. Tilting her head, she placed her lips against the cut on his brow.

When he finally caught his breath, he rolled onto his back, tugging her along with him. Satisfied. Content. There was really no accurate word for how she felt as she stretched out against McCoy's side.

All she knew for certain was that it felt like home.
Chapter 26

STARDATE 2260.160

Beta Quadrant

Azeta Prime

Light touches drifted across her bare back, teasing caresses that drew her from darkness. Fingertips slid lower, curving down the globes of her backside to sink boldly between her legs. The gentle tease shifted into a firmer touch, her parter aware that she was waking. Her partner more than eager...

"McCoy..." Amelia gasped against his chest, her head tilting back so she could land an open gaze on his face. His brow was furrowed in slight impatience, as though he'd been waiting for quite some time for her to rouse. At her hip she could feel him twitch, causing a feminine grin to spread across her face. Oh, he was eager all right.

With ease, he rolled her from him, a soft moan of denial escaping her as his hand withdrew from the apex of her thighs. A moment later he was flush against her back, whispering against her shoulder, "Waking up with you naked on top of me... I can't think of anything else but this."

Then he thrust into her wetness, a pleasurable cry escaping her throat as he filled her. It didn't take long, his expert hands plucking and stroking along her front. With every caress, her body began to rock harder in tandem with his.

His thumb circled just above where they joined, firm rotations bringing her to the brink until she cried out his name and went tight against him. His answering growl came moments later in a rough broken 'Amelia', his hand gripping her hip to keep her still while he set the pace.

It was a wonderful wake-up call.

McCoy panted against her back, his lips trailing up her neck. "You know you're going to be in my quarters now. There's no way in hell I'll give this up."

Arching a brow, Amelia propped herself up on her elbow, looking down at her satisfied lover. "McCoy, are you asking me to move in with you?"

He leaned up with her, curling an arm around her stomach and nuzzling the crook of her neck. She felt him grin. "More like demanding."

Dinner, conversations and the occasional chance that she'd be wearing his coat. Isn't that what he had asked for? Amelia smiled in remembrance, feeling, for the first time in a while, like that was a very real possibility.

In a rare rush of coyness, Amelia said, "I'll think about it." It earned her a quick kiss on a bare shoulder.

"Do that." McCoy gave a reluctant groan and rolled away from her to put his feet on the floor. Over his shoulder, he said, "I'm going to draw a bath."

Just the idea of a bath had her sighing. "A bath sounds fantastic." He gave her a nod then started for the bathroom. She watched his backside as he left, the corner of her mouth lifting in a smile. The sight was enough to stir her recently quelled desires once more.
Within minutes she joined him, soon nestled between his longer legs, the depth of the tub allowing for the water to lap at her neck. This time, she explored him thoroughly in an exchange of touches and kisses. She took her time in learning what he liked, smiled as he gasped and grinned when he growled. Until he'd had enough of her teasing, impatiently tugging at her hips and wordlessly demanding that she ride him hard.

"Are we planning on staying in all day?" Amelia murmured against his chest as they lay sprawled and wet atop the covers.

"That depends on whether or not you get dressed." McCoy dropped a lazy kiss against her bare shoulder, the scruff on his face tickling her skin. Though it was his next words that caused her to shiver. "You stay naked then we won't be going anywhere for a while."

She smiled, her fingertips trailing down the center of his chest to his navel. Her wandering hand was caught in a firm grip before she could move it any lower and she tilted her head back to catch his heated stare. McCoy gave a sigh and muttered, "And you say I'm insatiable."

He tapped her bottom, rolling out from under her. As he set his feet on the floor, he called over his shoulder, "If you expect another round, then I need to get my strength up. Let's get some lunch." At the mention of food, Amelia's stomach growled, reminding her that neither of them had eaten dinner. Or breakfast.

"Yeah. Food does sound like a good idea." While McCoy grabbed a small bag and retreated to the bathroom, Amelia rummaged through her backpack for a change of clothes. She settled on her blue jeans and one of her white undershirts. It was cool enough outside to warrant pants, but she'd go without her flannel shirt for once.

The door chimed just as she pulled the shirt over her head. A frown spread as she glanced at the door in confusion. She hadn't been expecting anyone and certainly McCoy would have mentioned it if he'd invited someone. Her gaze darted to the closed bathroom door.

Just in case it wasn't someone who spoke English, she grabbed her communicator before heading towards the door. When it slid open, she was surprised to see a uniformed Kirk and Spock standing in the hallway.

Her back went stiff as she glanced between the two. Not because of Spock's sullen expression, but because of Kirk's knowing one. The captain stared at her as though he'd never seen her before, his eyes wider than usual.

She should have known this was coming. As soon as Spock learned the truth it was only a matter of time before that information reached the ship's captain. She just wondered how much the First Officer had divulged and why.

Behind her, she heard the bathroom door open and the heavy footsteps of McCoy's approach. Before he came within earshot she found herself whispering, her voice pleading, "Don't tell him."

"It's going to come out sooner or later, Amelia." In that moment, she knew that Kirk was right. The fact that even the captain was aware of her true identity was a reminder that this secret is not one she can keep.

Amelia simply sighed and said, "He needs to hear it from me."

"I needed to hear it from you." Too late for that now.

"Hear what?" McCoy, catching the end of their conversation, piped up as he cast a confused glance
between Amelia and Kirk. His gaze briefly passed over Spock, the confused expression intensifying.

"I'm afraid Amelia's shore leave is being cut short. There's a situation in the hydroponics bay." Even if she hadn't known it was a lie, she would have been able to tell by the way Spock tilted his head to glare disapprovingly at Kirk.

"And it can't wait two days?" McCoy's irritated huff earned him a shoulder shrug.

Kirk managed a wry grin. "Plants might be dead by then."

"Let me get my things." Spock said nothing, simply turned on his heel and headed down the hall. All she got from Kirk was a quick nod of approval before he started after the Vulcan.

When they were gone, Amelia went to her backpack, her thoughts occupied with what was soon to come. She needed to sit down with Kirk and tell him everything, or whatever hadn't already been shared by Spock.

Behind her she heard McCoy close the door. Then he was at her side, a frown pulled at the side of his face. "I'll go back with you."

No. If he came back with her then there wouldn't be chance for her to talk to Kirk alone. He'd be there simply out of curiosity. Amelia shook her head, shoving clothes back into her bag. "You should stay. Enjoy yourself and your shore leave."

"I was enjoying myself." It wasn't petulant or said in a huff. It was just a fact, followed with a wave towards the door. "And now the person I was enjoying myself with is leaving. So I'll be leaving too."

She knew she shouldn't be getting irritated with him because he didn't know what was actually happening. But she did feel irritated and that came through as she rubbed a hand over her eyes and sighed. "Fine."

"Fine?" He blocked her as she started for the door, her backpack on her shoulder. "Amelia, what is wrong with you?"

That question... she didn't even know how to begin to address it. She'd had sex with him, for one, and though that had seemed like a wonderful decision at the time the truth still hung between them. Amelia found herself staring straight ahead at that invisible barrier.

She met his gaze, the confusion there sapping the fight inside her. He was confused because she'd made the conscious choice to lie to him. It wasn't fair, not when he'd tried so hard to be honest with her.

The truth died in her throat and her gaze drifted to the floor. "This was a mistake."

She went to walk around him, but his hand caught her arm. The confusion was gone, replaced with steel, his voice low. "It was a lot of things, but it wasn't a mistake."

Amelia jerked her arm from his grip. "You don't know anything about me, McCoy!"

"I know enough!" It wasn't anger that made his voice rise. It was frustration and fear, a combination that always seemed to make him volatile when it came to her.

"No, you don't, which is why this was a terrible idea. I was delusional to think this could work. That I could ever find anything normal after everything I've been through."
He didn't block her path this time, simply called at her back as she headed to the door. "Whatever it is, we can get past it. We haven't fought this hard to get here for nothing."

She wished that were true. With all her being she wished that it was as simple as getting past it. Amelia glanced towards the door, considering her options. He was going to find out and when he did he'd look at her like Kirk had.

Like she was a liar.

The lies had to end there. In the room where they had changed the very nature of their relationship. Amelia tilted her head, her tone just as firm as McCoy's had been when he told her they hadn't fought so hard for nothing.

"I was born in 1962."

A beat passed, his mouth tightening at the corners. "What?"

"I was born. In. 1962. The year 1962. July 5th 1962. Not a Stardate, just good ole' month, day, and year. We'd barely made it to the moon, much less another another planet. The only aliens I knew were Mexicans that crossed the border." With every word she watched his expression change from frustrated to concerned.

Another long beat. "How long have you thought this?"

She almost laughed at how clinical he sounded. "You think I'm crazy."

"Confused." Because God-forbid he call a patient crazy to their face. "Not crazy."

"I'm neither. I'm a time-traveler."

This time it was McCoy who looked to the door as an escape. "I'm getting Spock." He was in doctor mode now, assessing how best to treat her. His touch on her shoulder was reassuring, but not affectionate. His words were calming, but not personal.

"He knows." Amelia hoped that knowledge would ease McCoy. "He's known since before he became my sponsor."

It went through one ear and out the other. "We can get you help."

"I'm not crazy, McCoy. This happened to me seven months ago. A ship capable of time travel caught me in a chroniton wave and pulled me to the future. To here. I landed in Denver where I was hit by a hover car. I was interrogated by a Betazoid. All of this is in the redacted portion of my file. I was accused of working for Khan Singh since I was alive just before the Eugenics war began. That's the reason I was placed aboard the Enterprise. For my protection. I know how this sounds, but-"

"Do you?" He interrupted her, "Do you really?"

"I lived it and even I think it's a little crazy." He eyed her carefully, reached out to touch her shoulder. The hand never landed though because he withdrew suddenly, his expression guarded, and started for the door.

"I'm getting Spock." And then he did. Whatever words were exchanged between the doctor, the captain, and the first officer were too low for Amelia to hear. But she knew the content, because a few minutes later she was being escorted back to the ship and McCoy was nowhere in sight.
"It's true, Bones." Amelia wasn't crazy. She wasn't delusional. She was a goddamn time traveler...

His palms landed on the wall, as if he could garner strength from the structure. It hadn't even been half an hour since she'd been in his arms, but it felt like ages ago. There was no warmth in his chest, the swell replaced with bitter cold.

She'd lied to him. She'd made him believe in the possibility of a future.

And God help him since that fact was being pushed out of his mind by ways he could save Amelia's ass from the situation she was in.

"There's a standing warrant out for her to be placed into Federation Custody." Jim's words haunted him, had sent the rational side of his brain into a melt-down.

"What the hell is she being accused of?" The bark he'd sent back hadn't been met with reprisal, but instead a tortured gaze.

"Crimes against the State. Terrorism. Bones... they want to try her for the attacks in London and San Francisco."

"Doctor McCoy?" Spock's voice, steady as always, had him clenching his jaw. Of course the Vulcan was managing to keep it together. Instead of turning to face him, McCoy just remained leaning against the ship's corridor wall. Without ample preparation, there was no telling what he might do to the man who'd kept this from him. "Doctor McCoy, we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that we cannot maintain custody of Miss Wright."

That did it.

Pain radiated through his hand and wrist, an instant punishment for the blow he landed against Spock's cheek. What made it worse was that he knew the Vulcan had let him land it.

McCoy's vision blurred, his breath catching in his throat as he tried to orientate himself to the sudden change in position. And the rapid changing of his emotions. "You knew!" Anger. Bitter anger laced his voice as he shouted in the hall and stared at the bruise forming on Spock's face. He was so far gone that even the green tinted skin didn't make him feel any better. "You knew and you didn't tell me!"

Spock shot him a narrowed glare, whether that annoyance was for the punch or his shouting, McCoy wasn't sure. "This is not something we can discuss here. We must report to the ready room."

The desire to hit him again rose; however, he also knew that Spock was right. Later he could yell. Later he could take out his anger and maybe create a second bruise on the other side of Spock's face. But for now he, they, had to deal with the problem at hand.

Ten minutes later they stood in the ready room, the long table surrounded with just a select few. Spock, Sulu, Uhura, and Scotty. All members of the senior staff. All trustworthy enough. And based on the confused glances McCoy saw them sending to one another, none of them knew Amelia's secret yet.
His hands clenched the back of one of the many chairs in the room, fingers pressing so hard that his knuckles were white. Spock, thankfully, had kept his mouth closed since they had arrived. Though on the other hand, the silence allowed his mind to wander.

She really was disaster incarnate.

She'd come into his life all heated and appealing and managed to draw out what was left of the kind man inside him. And the lies had slipped through pretty smiles. He had been deceived by innocent eyes and a beautiful face.

Damn her.

Damn her for making him feel. Damn her for breaking him when it had already taken so long for him to recover. Damn her for the fact that even through all that, he still wouldn't let her face this alone.

The doors behind him slid open, the hissing sound pulling him from the dark thoughts he had previously been unable to ignore. Jim walked in first, shoulders straight and looking every part the captain. Then again, McCoy knew him better than most. He could see the concern in his friend's eyes. Even Jim, the master of facing the unknown, was worried.

His back went stiff when Amelia came next. She was once more dressed in the white uniform she so often wore, except there was an addition to it. Around her wrist was a thick silver band with colored lights. She might have well have walked in wearing a set of leg irons.

Someone sucked in a sharp breath and McCoy turned to see that it was Scotty. His eyes were wide as they narrowed in on the restriction band. In just a few moments, everyone else caught sight of the device.

Please have some kind of plan, Jim...

The Captain was the first to break the silence of the room. "Five hours ago I received an order to place Amelia Wright under arrest on charges of terrorism. All of you are going to act as witnesses to the fact that she has restricted access to the ship." He gave a quick wave towards the silver band. "Considering her work in the hydroponics bay is essential she will not be placed in the brig, and she will be allowed access to the cargo bay. When we finish this meeting, that is the only thing you will be placing in your reports. Do you understand?"

Uhura and Sulu both nodded, while Scotty simply stared at Jim with an appalled glare. "You canno' be serious, sir. You know that lass is no terrorist."

Instead of answering, Jim looked to Spock, who answered for the captain. "I have no doubt that you have come across Miss Wright's personnel file. The reason her file is redacted is because her arrival on the Enterprise was orchestrated to ensure her safety. Miss Wright is from the twentieth century. She was unwilling transported from the year 1992 to the year 2259. Because she was alive during the year Khan began his genocide of humans, some higher ranking members of Starfleet believe that she is allied with Augments."

"What?!" Again, Scotty shouted his disbelief.

Uhura, on the other hand, simply glanced between Jim and Spock. "Based on the fact that she's here, I'm guessing that neither of you agree."

"No." For once the Vulcan's voice betrayed an emotion. Conviction. "The Captain and I stand by her innocence. However, we were given the order and it is our duty to see it carried out. While we are in transit to the Andorian Space Station I will be attempting to garner support to see the order
dismissed. Fortunately for us, there are many on Earth who stand with Miss Wright."

The silent member of the room finally spoke, his tone laced with concern. McCoy turned his head to glance at Sulu as the once Captain asked, "Sir, why are you telling us? This could be classified as treason."

"Because I trust you." Jim leveled his gaze at Sulu. "I trust you to fulfill this task should anything happen to me and you are left at the helm." There was much unspoken in that statement. McCoy wondered if there was a risk that the Captain would face reprimand for his actions, to include being removed from his post.

Considering he was Amelia's best chance at getting out of this, McCoy hoped that wouldn't be the case.

While McCoy fought frustration, Jim continued and turned to look at Uhura. "I trust you to monitor communications and ensure that our efforts are not thwarted." Then, finally, Scotty. "And I trust you to get us to that station so I can confront the man who's doing this. Amelia hasn't been with us for very long, but several of you know that she's loyal to this ship. That she is honest and kind. And that she would risk her life for any one of you."

There was no moment of silence. Their faith in Jim was obvious when they all asked, simultaneously. "How soon do ya' need us to be there, sir?" "Who do you want me to contact, sir?" "Is there anything else you need me to do, sir?"

McCoy released a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. Cautiously, his eyes drifted towards Amelia, who was still standing behind Jim.

It took all of his will not to move from his spot behind the chair when he noticed the gloss in her eyes. How was it that he could go from the feeling of betrayal to the need to protect her in a heartbeat?

Orders were dished out, but McCoy didn't watch as each person received them, his vision filled only with Amelia and the way her shoulder shook with each word. "Two weeks. I need Commander Richard O'Shea on the line as soon as possible. Get notice to the space station that I will want a locked bay. No one gets on the Enterprise without my approval. And I need three rotating guards on her to keep her safe. For now, that is all."

A quick chorus of "Aye aye, sir" was the only response just before they began filing out of the room to leave Spock, Jim, Amelia, and himself.

He didn't hold back then, his feet carrying him before his brain could process.

McCoy's hand caught her upper arm, a grasp that she was more than familiar with at this point. At his back he could feel someone clutching his uniform shirt. Jim's weak attempt at stopping him did nothing.

Whatever well she had inside of her burst as he tugged her against him, his arms locking tight around her. "I'm sorry..." Her shoulders shook with sobs, her hands fisting in the material at his collar.

Anger brimmed under a surface of fear. Fear for her. "Damn it, Amelia." He wondered if he would ever stop saying those words to her. He wondered if he would ever want to... "I told you that you were disaster."

He ignored the stares he was certain that Spock and Jim were giving him. He ignored the words they exchanged at his back. He ignored everything except the crying woman in his arms and the way his
heart was breaking.
Chapter 27

STARDATE 2260.160

Beta Quadrant

He gripped her so hard that it hurt, his arms locking her in place. She cried against his chest, unable to do anything else as she watched her future collapse around her. Though the hold was almost painful, she accepted his comfort, that comfort that had been his greatest redeeming factor.

"I'm sorry." There were no other words. There were no excuses. It was over.

"Damn it, Amelia." He swore, as he always did when he was frustrated and angry and couldn't find anything better to say. She would have laughed, had she not felt him trembling. "I told you that you were disaster."

She really was.

When she was 15 she had been the sole survivor of an accident that claimed her entire family. The dark cloud that had formed over her that day had finally ceased keeping its distance. It poured not only over her, but over those she held closest to her. Especially the man who refused to loosen his hold on her.

McCoy, though unpredictable early on, was now a force she understood. He kept a wide berth from people that threatened his comfort zone, which had once included herself. It tore at her heart that the moment he had let her in, she would soon be ripped away.

It had to be done quickly, like a band-aid, or else he might never heal...

Slowly, she shifted her hands so they were no longer fisted in his uniform. Her palms went flat across his chest, each movement tentative until she tilted her head back to stare up at him. "I want you to go."

"Amelia-"

"No." She pushed against him, with just enough force to cause his hold to slacken. Just knowing the words that would come made her throat tight, but she voiced them anyway, despite how shaky they were. "Maybe now you can get the fact that you will never understand me. I really was a fool to think this could work. And so were you. You're too jaded and I'm... I'm not even supposed to be here."

His arms fell away from her, his jaw ticking as he took a step back. How easy it had become to read him. There was a flash of disbelief, followed quickly by that familiar agitation. His brows drew together and his nostrils flared.

"Like hell," he growled, "I knew coming into this that you were hiding something. I accepted that. Unconditionally."

Amelia couldn't even count the number of times she'd been able to send him running, but for once it seemed that he was staying right in place. "Look around you, McCoy. I come with conditions. I am being arrested for terrorism!"

"A crime I know you didn't commit!"
A few hours ago he couldn't have even told her when she was born. "I told you, you don't know anything about me."

He moved faster than she could counter, his hands on her once more. The touch was desperate, a palm against her nape, thumb tilting her head back so he could stare down at her. It wasn't forceful like his embrace, but rather pleading.

When he spoke again, his voice was just higher than a whisper, "And I told you that I know enough. Yeah, I'm furious that you lied and that you kept this from me, but, damn it, I'll get over it. And if I can't understand you now then I'll learn to. Amelia-' he broke off, drawing in a long ragged breath, "-Amelia, I am not so jaded that I can't see past this and see you for who you are."

Her eyes flooded once more. The desire to ask him 'who is that?' rose, but before she could, Kirk took the lapse of silence and spoke first.

"Bones. Now might not be a good time for-"

McCoy's gaze never left hers as he responded, "It's as good a time as any seeing as she's going to be under guard the minute I leave. Hell, I'd be happier if you two would get out, but I'm guessing that isn't an option."

Their other audience member, Spock, interjected with, "No, it is not."

"McCoy," Amelia turned her head, pressing her cheek against the blue fabric of his shirt. Even as she sought the closeness, she managed, "You need to let me go."

"That's not going to happen. I may have to walk out that door, but I will not let you go." As if to emphasize, he wrapped an arm loosely across her shoulders.

She'd expected him to be angry if he ever found out the secret she carried. She'd expected him to shut her out and revert back to being the bitter and cold man she'd first met. She hadn't expected him to continue holding her through it all...

"I don't want to be the one who hurts you."

"Then fight this-" he gripped the steel band around her wrist, the cuff that represented how trapped she felt, "-just as hard as you've fought everything else in your path." The hand cupping her wrist drew her palm up and rested it flat against the center of his chest. Underneath was the pulsing beat of his heart, so strong that she could feel it through every barrier. "I can't take back some of the things I've said. And you can't take back some of the things you didn't. Don't deny us the chance to make up for that."

The resistance she'd garnered melted away and she pressed herself closer to him. "Okay." On that one word, she felt him exhale a sigh of relief.

It must have been contagious, because just as he sighed, so did she. And then there was another small huff from the man at McCoy's back, followed by Kirk exclaiming, "As much as I'd like to witness confessions of deep feelings, we have work we need to do."

McCoy gave her arm one last squeeze before stepping away, his attention finally drawn to something other than her. In an instant she watched his mannerisms return to that of the Officer. Looking at Kirk, he told him, "Give me an update if there is any change." On Kirk's nod, McCoy left the room, casting one quick glance back as the doors slid closed.

Though he was no longer in the room, Amelia didn't feel alone. And though she wouldn't be joining
McCoy in his quarters any time soon, she knew that he would be waiting. Until then, she would focus and fight, as he had asked her to.

For the next several days she was occupied in the hydroponics bay. Her hands hurt and her body ached, but her mind was far from tired. The Enterprise had another four years left before it returned to Earth which meant she had to get the bay prepared to need minimal supervision. Jenna could easily handle the environment. Mark could adjust the hydroponics systems. And Th'eon could transfer the ready vegetables.

It wasn't pessimism that had her preparing for the chance that she would be transferred. It was her love of the ship and how she didn't want to see it falter in the case of her absence.

There were others, she was sure, who would also pick up the slack that her absence would create.

A loud crack sounded, forcing her back to her task. The pipe in her hand had split, tightened to the point where the tension became too much for the pipe to bear. Amelia cursed as she ripped it off the coupling, then cursed some more when she caught sight of the red smear across the pipe. The sight must have pushed aside the numbness in her hand because a moment later she felt a twinge of pain across palm.

"I'll get the kit." Crewman Kim, her day guard, said with a sigh before heading towards the bay wall. As he left, Amelia turned from her kneeling position to sit with her back against the plant bed. Her gaze, wavering with exhaustion, drifted across the room.

She'd managed to get a lot of work done in just a few days. She'd converted the tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers to a water system instead of a soil one. They would take longer to produce, but it would make management easier since the water could be recycled and automatically supplied with nutrients. Then again, they wouldn't taste as good.

With her uninjured hand, she reached for the hydroponics bay datapadd, the schematics for the new system still displayed on the screen. She made a note that the pipes were brittle as well as lightweight and spare pipes should be stored in the bay.

While she was typing more notes, Crewman Kim returned with a dermal regenerator. "You need to slow down." It sounded like a reprimand and for the first time in hours Amelia found herself smiling. It might have been wry and a little forced, but it was still a smile.

Tilting her head, she asked, "Do you eat a lot of vegetables?"

He waved the device across her hand, watching as the wound sealed closed. "Sure do."

As he snapped the regenerator back into its case, Amelia stood and started for small pile of tools and materials. "Then you don't need me to slow down." Driving the point home, she began the process of connecting the pipes once more. "I'm scheduled to be transferred as soon as we arrive at the space station. I've got to get these plants on a near automated schedule because who's gonna grow your tomatoes when I'm gone?"

"If you drop dead on my watch then I won't be eating vegetables anyway. Just inmate rations."

Well, he wasn't wrong. And because of that she did slow down. It took another few hours for her to finish the new mounted water system for the corn. Unfortunately, it was still soil based, but there was little she could do to change that. Mark would just have to take care of it on his weekly visits along with the potatoes and lettuce.

More notes were logged in the datapadd, schedules explained. Amelia had to calculate the number of
nutrients needed for a month and how often they would be replaced. If someone followed the schedule then the Enterprise would continue to have fresh produce for at least two years.

After that they would need a new horticulturist or a new system.

She was docking the datapadd in it's compartment when the bay doors slid open. It caught her attention, as well as Kim's, since the doors no longer opened automatically. Not while she was wearing the restriction band around her wrist.

The Crewman blocked her view an instant later, putting himself between her and the door. It was an unnecessary precaution since the men who entered were friends not foes. She felt hopeful seeing the captain and his first officer.

"Crewman Kim, take a post in the corridor." Spock's command was obeyed without hesitation, the man stepping outside the bay to leave Amelia alone with Spock and Kirk.

She glanced between the two, that hopeful feeling fading as she noted the frustrated look on Kirk's face and the wary look on Spock's. "What is it?"

"We have been unable to reach Commander O'Shea. We did, however, get word from Captain O'Shea." That should have been good news, but based on their expressions she knew that wasn't the case. When she said nothing, Spock continued, "The order for your arrest came from Admiral Everett. He is the acting Chief of Starfleet Security as the current Chief is recovering from a traumatic brain injury."

Her palm flew to her chest, her eyes wide in confusion. Amelia didn't hide the shock from her voice when she asked, "You're telling me that one of the highest ranking members of your military ordered my arrest? Why the hell would he do that?"

"Because two of his sons were killed in the London bombings and he's pissed. Not only is he pushing for this, but he's got a following made up of Starfleet personnel who also lost family members." Like the O'Shea brothers who had lost their sister. Or Salo who had also lost someone he'd loved. Or Kirk and Spock.

How many enemies had she made just from being pulled forward in time? "Is that how he -Admiral Everett- knew about me? From someone like Salo?" Eyes shifting between the two, Amelia could see that was the answer. When she spoke next, her voice was hollow. "You're not going to be able to revoke the order are you?"

"It is-" Spock paused, as if he was searching for the right word, "-unlikely." Unlikely. How difficult had it been for the Vulcan to avoid using the word impossible?

"Okay. I've got-" Slowly, she walked towards the compartment that held the hydroponics bay datapadd. There was so much work to be done. Pulling it out, she continued, "I have the datapadd here... it's got schedules and stuff. The plants will be, should be, fine. I have some time left... to finish eve-"

The padd was ripped from her hand, an agitated Kirk tossing it to the table by the door. She jumped when it impacted, but refused to meet Kirk's glare as he said, "Amelia, listen to me. We're not giving up. We still have untapped resources."

Her eyes drifted closed as she mentally counted in an effort to calm herself. When her lungs filled with air and her body no longer thought it was suffocating, she managed to turn and face them both, "The head of security wants me in prison. There's a man here on this ship who wants to kill me! And
to top it off I have no defense for this. There is no alibi. I *was* alive during the reign of Khan. I *did* transport to a secure installation in Denver."

"That is incorrect." As if an idea had just occurred to him, she heard a touch of eagerness lacing his words. When Kirk sharply twisted around to face the Vulcan, she realized she wasn't imagining it. "You do have an alibi. You weren't here when the attacks occurred."

Having *that* alibi didn't seem to matter before. Amelia lightly scoffed, "I'm the only one who knows that."

In a familiar manner, Spock's brow rose. "For the moment." The Vulcan turned to Kirk, giving him a level stare as he stated, "Before we arrive at the Andorian Space Station I would like to write my own testimony."

Amelia, sounding just as tired as she felt, countered, "Spock, you don't even know what happened."

"I will once you grant me consent to perform a Vulcan mind-meld." He touched the tips of his long fingers together, his words slow and carefully chosen. Amelia briefly remembered her initial interrogation and how they had once discussed bringing in a Vulcan. It seemed that this was why... that they possessed a special ability. "As Vulcans are touch-telepaths we can connect our minds with other beings. In essence, it will allow me to see your memories."

Fingers snapped and Amelia whipped her head around to look at Kirk who exclaimed, "That... is the best thing I've heard all day." That previous look of frustration on the captain's face was gone now, replaced with that fleeting feeling she'd experienced earlier. Hope.

"Crewman Kim will escort her to the med-bay. I will contact Doctor McCoy and have him prepare a neural scan to ensure that the meld will not cause her harm." McCoy. A small smile spread across her face at the thought of seeing him.

Their encounters since her initial arrest had been fleeting. They ate dinner in the med-bay once, only because she'd needed to have a medical scan done for reasons McCoy never fully explained. She later realized that it was probably a ploy to make sure she wasn't being mistreated. He had stared down Kim like he'd strangle the kid if he sent her one sideways glare.

And she was seeing him with good news... or hopeful news anyway, which made her smile grow just a little more.

**STARDATE 2260.163**

**Beta Quadrant**

It took every ounce of his control not to seek her out. While he fought the primitive desire, he busied himself with work. There were still patients to see who needed post-checkups after the attack on the Enterprise. Jim had also loaded him up with tasks, more than likely designed to keep him from setting foot out of the med-bay.

It was fairly effective...

What little spare time McCoy had he dedicated to reaching out to a few contacts that were on Earth. He began with Frank, who proved to be a good choice. Frank, being the Commander of Personnel at the Academy, had his share of influence. His long-time friend had ended their conversation with a promise to find out the status of Admiral Everett's appointment.

If there was a chance that the man was in power without correct authorization, then the order could
be dismissed. That thought was one of the few that kept McCoy's spirits up as the approach to the space station closed in.

Eleven days. That was all they had to right this wrong.

The countdown was on his mind when his communicator went off. With a quick glance at the display, he flipped it open and barked, "Tell me you have good news?"

"I require the med-bay to be prepared for a neural scan. Evacuate any non-essential personnel and increase the security level." The only reason they would want an increase in security is if they were bringing in a prisoner. Why in the world did Amelia require a neural scan?

The possibilities filtered through his mind in rapid succession. Seizures. Head injury. Unconsciousness. Migraine. The doctor in him kept his voice even as he asked, "What's going on, Spock?"

"We will explain when we arrive." Even though the Vulcan couldn't see it, McCoy sneered when the connection ended on a beep.

"Useless green-blooded..." He trailed off as he started for the door panel. As he input the code to raise security, he called out to the nurse on the other side of the med-bay. "We have an incoming inmate. Start getting patients out of here and then prep a bio-bed for a full scan."

It took less than ten minutes to have the entire room evacuated, and for another four McCoy was left standing alone in an empty med-bay as he held a datapadd containing Amelia's medical file.

Her last full scan was performed when she'd experienced complications from the xeno-series. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he was interrogating her for answers about her past. Unconsciously, his fingers traced the x-ray that revealed the three steel implants on her ribs.

1962. The year of her birth. That meant she would have had the surgery around 1977.

Her recovery would have been painful. The incisions made for the braces that held her ribs in place would have taken at least a month to heal. The collapsed lung she probably suffered would have caused her pain every time she breathed. She most likely had a series of infections following the ordeal. And that was with the best technology had to offer at the time.

He was just about to input notes detailing his assumptions when the door chimed, signaling a request for entry.

Uncaring that he appeared anxious, he jogged to the door and allowed them inside. Jim, Spock, and Amelia filed into the room, silent until the doors slid closed.

His eyes went to her immediately, searching for injury. It was an automatic reaction now, her uncanny ability to get injured having trained him. When he could see none, he sent a glare at Spock and snapped, "You plan on filling me in?"

"Miss Wright has consented to a Vulcan mind-meld. I would like for you to ensure that such an act will not cause her harm."

This was their answer?

His mouth dropped open, his eyes darting to Jim to check for any sign that this was some kind of joke. The captain read him in an instant, sighing, "He's serious, Bones."
"You can't be." They couldn't possibly be serious. "You want to enter her mind? What for?"

"So I can give a written testimony detailing the events surrounding her arrival in our time." McCoy wondered how much weight Spock's testimony would carry. He had been an instructor at the academy. Hell, he could have been captain if he had wanted it. But was it worth the risk?

He turned to Amelia, catching a flash of uncertainty. "Amelia-"

Just as quickly as the uncertainty appeared, it was gone. "I've already been warned of the risks. And I've accepted them." How could she even know what she was consenting to? Spock would know every detail of her, could potentially corrupt her mind with one lapse of that Vulcan control. "McCoy... this is all we have."

She could end up in a coma. She could be traumatized by resurfaced memories. She could be traumatized by Spock's memories. There was also the chance that the Vulcan could accidentally alter her physiology, slow her heart or stop her breathing.

But it was all they had at the moment. And he planned on being by her side for the entire process, monitoring both Spock and Amelia as they connected on a telepathic level.

So, he went ahead and performed the scan. Wireless electrodes were placed on each of them, both for the brain and heart. It took an hour for him to review all the data, to determine that Amelia was low risk for complications.

Spock asked once more for her consent before placing his fingers to her temple and cheek. "My mind to your mind. My thoughts to your thoughts..."

**STARDATE 2260.163**

**Beta Quadrant**

*What is this?* It felt like a dream. Though she could see, there was no clear definition to the world around her. Blurs bled into shadows and emptiness suddenly became solid. Her sense of touch was just as hazy as her sense of sight, enough to feel *something* yet not be able to tell what that something was. Really, the only clear thing in her mind was Spock. His presence, his voice, his temperament.

*This is you. Your mind.* As he spoke -thought- the scene around her shifted to become clearer. Somehow he was attempting to organize the chaos that surrounded them.

*It's... a mess.*

He laughed, or it seemed like a laugh. Whatever connection they shared glittered with humor that originated from him. *It's human. There is no order. Not yet anyway.*

*How do you... what do we need to do?* Just as she thought it, she was pulled to another place, images and emotions appearing and fading. A brief flash of McCoy accompanied with a deep sense of longing. *What are you doing?*

*I am searching for your memories.* As though there was a thread attached to the image of McCoy, Spock grasped at it and tugged. Amelia, unable to do anything else, followed. *It is easier to begin from the most recent and move back.*

Though Spock had told her that the act was considered intimate, she hadn't realized how much so until the memories came forth. Her and McCoy in their room on Azeta Prime. A night with nothing between them. Amelia's insides flushed with heat, strong as the moment she had originally
experienced it.

As quickly as the image had come, it faded into the next. She was standing next to McCoy at the market as he held the sehlat carving. Confusion accompanied this one, the very same feeling she had experienced when she’d looked upon the animal.

Then there was fear. Panic. The Enterprise was being fired upon as she raced to the hydroponics bay. *The plants. I have to save the plants.* Pain followed as she looked upon her hands, the burns severe. But at least she had saved the plants...

McCoy kissing her in the hydroponics bay. Passion mingled with anger.

Spock flashed before her. Interrogated her in a turbo-lift. Again there was panic, but beneath that there was relief. *I'm not alone.*

She stood in a field, looking up at a sky with stars she couldn't recognize. She felt contentment and pride. The people at camp Georgia would have crops the next season. An image of the Enterprise came to view as she gaze up at a steady light in the sky. Amazement that mankind could create such things...

An accented voice called out to her, *Change is inevitable, Lass.* Sorrow as she sat and drank to excess with Scotty in the observation deck. Hilarity as she laughed when she caught sight of Kirk's bruised face.

Fear overwhelmed her as she looked down the barrel of a disruptor pistol. The only thing that kept her from being paralyzed was the device in her hand. A Nausiccan shield generator. A deep sense of trust ran through her as she looked up at the man in a blue uniform, her savior on multiple occasions. *I'll survive.*

McCoy walking into her bay, delivering news of the Huron. Sitting on the kitchen counter as she smiled at Th'eon, gossiping the day away. Frustration as she tried to adjust the maturation modifier. Loneliness as she listened to the beach boys.

Some memories were lingered upon, while others just flew by. Some were present and some were past. There were moments she wished to stop, just to re-experience those few flashes of happiness and contentment. But Spock tugged her along with a quick reminder, *the past cannot replace the present.*

Another image of Spock as he wielded blades and cut down killer vines. The fear of approaching death as she inhaled salt-water, but it was okay because she'd seen more in her lifetime than she could have ever dreamed.

Richard. This memory was important. It signified her time on Earth just after her arrival. She walked beside him on an open deck. *I won't make it a week on a starship.* Anticipation settled in her gut as she looked up towards space.

An interrogation room. A Betazoid. Salo. Richard again. A scientist sketching out a design. Her throat itched, remnants of her surgery. She felt a consuming sense of loss. Everyone she knew was dead...

The desert.

*Here!* Whether it was her or Spock, she wasn't sure, but the memory was brought further into focus. Her eyes drifted to the rear-view mirror, catching sight of a swaying dog-wood tree. *Henry.* Daylight faded as the sun set. A coyote ran out onto the road, forcing her to slam on her brakes. The truck
died. In the distance she saw the ball of light. What the hell? Someone might be hurt.

She grabs the first aid kit and her backpack. The newspaper remains in the passenger seat of the truck, dated July 15th, 1992. New York City declares martial law...

It's as though she's living the event a second time. Her breath catches, her mind races with possibilities.

She runs towards the ball, concerned that inside someone is dying. It levitates, stopping her in place. Rings of light appear. This isn't normal. Then the thing explodes. Her eardrums burst. Her body feels like it is on fire and being ripped apart. She lands on concrete and a car almost takes her head off...

She sees John. She buys a truck. She goes to college. She gets her GED.

She's in a car and her mother is screaming and her dad looks terrified. Daddy.

She's sitting in a garden. Little hands and little feet coated in soil. Her yellow dress is filthy, but she's smiling. Her mother's laughing. Her daddy is handing her potted sunflowers, which find their way in pre-shoveled holes in the ground. It was a perfect day.

The memory stills, like a photograph.

Amelia gazes upon the portrait, her eyes filled to the brim with tears. This is your first memory, Spock tells her. She wonders how she could have forgotten such a wonderful sight. The image fades and instead of fighting the inevitable, she finds herself following Spock as he draws out of her mind.
"Based upon the records kept by the Augments, the subject would have been between the ages of 25 and 50. We're looking for any note of time-travel between the year 2240 and 2280. We have less than three days to find our subject before we plan a second mission. Remember, this person is misplaced in time. We want to correct this error as soon as possible. Do you each understand?"

The small team of analysts surrounding Commander Eli Jefferson kept their attention solely on him. Each one was vetted carefully before being brought on to the team designed to track down Subject One. Each one would carry with them this secret until the day they die.

They nodded their affirmation, heading off to begin the search, while Eli returned to the command room to observe the pod's modification. The cloaking system needed to have a full diagnostic. Then there was the fact that it emitted a mile wide chroniton wave, which meant additional dampeners needed to be installed.

Two years. Theoretically it was an infinite amount of time since the development of the pod was complete. Eli wondered how many missions were attempted after the start of the war which would soon engulf the galaxy. Was T'Janis just a single mission of many or was she the only mission? Was another pod ever created?

The questions were just as endless as the possibilities.

But rather than focus on the idea of multiple missions, Eli committed himself to the search for Subject One. His team consolidated a list of historical databases that had survived multiple purges. If someone had jumped through time it was likely that their presence would create controversy.

News articles were the first to be examined and filtered, followed by classified Starfleet files, and then academic publications. They even ran an algorithm against mental hospital records and the prison system records.

The results were overwhelming and ranged from a sub-par tabloid article to a full mental evaluation of a self proclaimed time-traveler. There were photographs of people with artifacts they claimed to be brought with them from the past or future and there were doctored videos of time travel ships in action.

Sorting fact from fiction required a mixture of AI intervention and unique filtering programming. It dwindled the findings from a staggering 12,000 to a manageable 800. Those final results were divided between each member of the team.

Eli concentrated on the Starfleet records, using a decryption program to access the classified files. Many of them made references to the attack on Vulcan and the ship that Ambassador Spock had piloted. Considering the nature of the Pon Izau program he had seen the name on more than one occasion. In essence, the Ambassador had written the book on what not to do when traveling through time...
He pushed those reports aside, frustration building as he closed in on the last few years of the possible time-frame. Too many false positives...

"Commander!" A shout from the other side of the command room had Eli's attention instantly. One of their younger analyst, Lieutenant Jones, was holding a datapadd, his eyes wide with excitement.

He jogged, taking the device from the young man as Jones stated, "I think I found something."

*Something* was not an entirely accurate description.

Displayed on the datapadd was a detailed sketch with written annotations depicting various parts of the drawing. One word stood out above the rest, underlined twice. *Chroniton Drive*. There, dated two hundred years before it's creation, was the pod.

Some of the annotations were incorrect. The rings were described as a shield, but in reality they were the energy source for the drive. And the pod itself was not sized accurately. Whoever had made the drawing had thought the pod much larger than it actually was. Despite the errors, it was clear that this person had seen the pod.

They had found the subject...

Eli looked up from the datapadd, meeting Jones' still excited gaze, "Where did you get this?"

"It was tagged with a match for the pod's design. It's an academic publication published in 2271. A collection of works for a Doctor Jacob Jefferson." Jones paused, as if he was just as taken aback as Eli by their matching last names. "He was a Starfleet Engineer who studied chroniton particles. In fact, he attempted to recreate the design, but the technology wasn't there for any success."

Later he could concern himself with the ramifications of talking to a man who might possibly be his ancestor. Later he would document the experience as yet another rule of what *not* to do. "Pull the team off the search. Tell them I want everything they can get me for the year 2271. We need Starfleet uniforms. Basic equipment. And get me a short list of the best dates to intercept Doctor Jefferson."

The team shifted focus with ease, allowing Eli a brief reprieve as he went to locate T'Janis, datapadd under his arm.

He found her in the pod chamber, overseeing the installation of more dampeners. His eyes drifted over the room, noting that the maintenance team was in full swing. It wouldn't take longer than a day for the process to be complete. For as long as it had taken to begin the project, things were now moving almost too fast for him to keep up with.

When T'Janis caught sight of him, she ceased giving orders and approached. "Have you succeeded?"

Eli smiled, "We did. We found a man who drew a schematic of the pod." He handed over the datapadd, watching as she gave it a quick once over. Just as he had been surprised by the accuracy of the drawing, so was she. "If he is not our subject then he will at least know who is."

"I will prepare the virus for transport." She handed back the datapadd. "What year will the launch be scheduled for?"

"2271." On this, she didn't seem so surprised. "Or 2272 depending on our window."

T'Janis gave him a sharp nod, then turned to issue a few more orders at the technicians behind her. As they complied, she returned her attention to him. "We will need a universal translator and an encryption kit."
"And personal cloaks." Getting around undetected would be a must. Eli didn't plan on spending any
time being detained by Starfleet security. "There is a long list of what we should take, but space is
already limited. We won't be able to bring a full infiltration kit. Who are you placing on the
manifest?"

"Captain Parcell will pilot while you and I retrieve the Subject." That was it? The three of them were
supposed to save humanity?

The thought weighed heavy on him as he left the pod chamber, remaining throughout the day. He
worried that he would be the weak member of the team, something that had never crossed his mind
when he'd been on the inspection team. He worried that they wouldn't find their subject and the
future would play out as it already had, with an advanced flu virus killing of the Vulcan race and
most of the terrans.

But the concerns had to be pushed aside, because his mind couldn't wander too far as he prepared all
their equipment. Each item was carefully selected and tested, ensuring working order. Their new
uniforms were all fitted, personal shields delicately reshaped into shining silver emblems on their
breasts.

His rank remained as a Commander, but the insignia was different. His uniform changed from white
to blue, the symbol for the Science Division proudly adorned. T'Janis became a Captain, though
from what they had learned it seemed that it carried with it the same duties that were already
expected of her.

Unconsciously, Eli rubbed a patch of red skin on his palm, where underneath rested a newly
implanted temporal receiver. Should they also wind up lost in time, the temporal receiver would be
their only hope of getting home. He silently prayed that the device would be removed upon their
return and that particular threat be removed with it.

Within twenty-four hours they found themselves once more in the pod chamber, waiting as the
technicians installed the virus containment field.

Beyond Eli's worry and fear, he felt the building of another emotion, one that set his heart thudding
in his breast as he looked upon the pristine white paneling of the pod.

Excitement.

The entirety of his adult life had been spent studying the science behind time-travel. For years he had
watched the progression of the Council as they debated whether or not to allow the construction of a
time-travel ship. And for the past five years he had watched a dream come to life from the ground up.

Now he would live that dream. He would jump through time. Despite the circumstances that
surrounded it, he couldn't help but feel eager to step into the ship and be teleported to a different era.

That heady mixture of fear, uncertainty, and excitement intensified as the technicians began filing out
of the pod chamber, their work complete.

The virus was contained. They had received their brief. The Captain had his destination
programmed.

It was time...

Eli entered the pod after T'Janis and Parcell, his hands shaking as he took a seat behind them and
began snapping the safety restraints together. T'Janis, quite familiar with the operation of the pod,
needed little guidance from Captain Parcell as they began the sequence.
As he adjusted his headset, he glanced around the interior of the pod. He'd seen it a hundred times, inspected it just as many, yet today it felt like he was seeing it for the first time.

The announcement for the countdown was heard over his earpiece and he watched as Matthew and T'Janis simultaneously flipped switches.

"Powering ring generator. Sealing hatch." There was a hiss as the entrance to the pod expanded, forcing any gaps to be closed. A few shutters slid together, locking the pod's panels in place.

The earpiece chimed again, another announcement of the countdown. Those three minutes had seemed to have lasted longer when he'd been in the observation room.

"Time to hover. Engaging thrusters." His stomach clenched when he felt the rise of the pod, even though he knew it was just half a meter over the ground. Matthew continued on, seeming immune to the weird sensation the hovering craft was causing. "Establishing ring one."

There was no indication that the rings were active, other than a blinking light on the control panel. Eli realized that's why Matthew had asked how it looked the first time they'd jumped.

"Ring two." A long pause. "Ring three." Ring four. Ring five. Chroniton Drive activation. The steps blurred together. Eli held his breath.

"Launch in five, four, three, two, one."

**STARDATE 2271.197**

**Moraine Park, Colorado**

He vomited the moment he stepped out of the pod, his stomach still churning even minutes after the powering down sequence had been complete. Behind him, Matthew laughed while T'Janis stared in subtle Vulcan repulsion.

Eli briefly wondered how the Captain was smiling, then remembered the fact that the intensity of Matthew's training had probably made him immune to the effects of time-travel. Effects which caused his insides to feel twisted and his head to feel light.

"Some warning," Eli managed as he tried to catch his breath, "would have been appreciated."

"Can't prepare you for that, I'm afraid." Matthew smirked and entered back inside the pod, returning with a pouch of water. As he tossed it to Eli, he took a long glance at the scene around them. "Sure is beautiful out here, isn't it?"

At Matthew's question, Eli took stock of the world around them. It wasn't very different than their own, of course, but after spending many years isolated in the snowy wilderness of Antarctica, he found a heavy appreciation for the expanse of grassy mountains.

And also of the simple cabin home that rested no more than a kilometer from where the pod had landed.

The three of them immediately began to look for any signs of activity outside of the house, any indication that their sudden arrival had been noticed. Eli doubted that was the case, however, as the pod behind him was cloaked and, even standing just a few meters away, Eli could barely make out that it was there.

Still, after finishing off the water and regaining his bearings, Eli pulled out his datapadd and began
running the interception program to see if the transport sensors for the region had detected their
arrival. He reported back to T'Janis when no such detection was returned by the program.

"Then I do believe it is time to meet Doctor Jefferson and find out if he is the man we are searching
for." On T'Janis' order, Eli and her set forward towards the house, while Matthew remained with the
pod.

The journey was short by design. When they had planned for their travel to the past they hadn't
wanted to spend much time on foot or in a vehicle. Which is why they had set the arrival time to just
after 1800. Dinnertime.

Doctor Jefferson should be settling in and his wife and son would still be at a primary education
sponsored sports event, if the information they had found was correct. The convenience of his home
had not escaped them.

Eli had given a sigh of relief when he learned that bypassing Starfleet security wouldn't be as great of
a concern as they had originally thought.

Jefferson's home was isolated and so was he.

The front door of the house was fitted with surveillance equipment, as were most homes in that time.
Eli considered disabling it, asking T'Janis, "Is it a good idea to allow our presence here to be
recorded?"

"If we interfere with the device, he will most likely alert the authorities. No, in this case we should
proceed in a non-aggressive manner." On that, Eli located the door panel and pressed the button that
signaled their presence to the occupant.

There was no retinal scan, nor voice recognition software, unlike what was found in most domiciles
of their own time. The door simply slid open to reveal a man in civilian attire.

He looked just like the picture that had been in his publication. Brown hair, brown eyes, and
relatively young for a doctor who had published a lengthy book filled with his work. There was a
flash of confusion across his face as he glanced between the two, his gaze seeming more surprised by
T'Janis than by Eli. Eli attributed that to the fact that she was a Vulcan and it wasn't common for
Vulcans to conduct business at the home.

And though he was confused, Jacob wasn’t wary. His voice was polite and warm when he addressed
them, "Captain," he gave a brief look at their insignias, "Commander. How can I help you?"

This was it, the opportunity that they had traveled 200 years for. Eli held up his datapadd, the
schematic of the pod visible on the screen. His gaze was locked on Jacob, searching for any display
of emotion as the man shifted his attention to the drawing.

There was nothing except that still present confusion, "You're here about the publication?"

"No. We are here because of this design. Did you see this ship?" At this, Jacob's expression of
puzzlement vanished, replaced with that wariness they had expected on arrival. He glanced past
them, towards the empty yard, as if searching for something or someone.

When he found no sign of it, he stepped away from the entrance of the house and waved them
forward. "Why don't you come in."

They complied, following him inside the house. It opened immediately into a living area, just as
modest as the outside of the house. It was quite... individual. Comfortable couches. Photographs on
the wall. Eli almost wished he could spend more time taking it in. It made his life in the future seem so sterile.

But the task at hand demanded their attention.

Jacob gave another small wave, indicating towards the couch in the living room. While they took a seat there, Jacob sat across from them in a wooden chair. He remained silent for a moment, his head tilted in thought, before finally turning his eyes back onto Eli and T'Janis.

"So, you want to know about the time-travel pod?" Jacob asked, as he pointed towards the datapadd.

Eli wasn't sure if he should confirm or deny that knowledge. They were already treading a very fine line of the Temporal Prime Directive. It prompted him to respond, "Are you certain that is what you saw?"

Jacob, obvious to Eli's attempt at misdirection, gave a small smile. "I didn't see that ship. But, I have a feeling you have." Astute. After just a few minutes of sizing them up, Jacob had already figured them out. He leaned forward in the wooded chair, his hand gesturing to the area that surrounded them. "This entire area is transporter locked. You didn't come in a hover craft. And any normal ship would have been visible and detected. Though you did walk, you didn't walk far based on the conditions of your boots and clothes. So... it's your ship, isn't it?"

"Yes." T'Janis broke in before Eli could form a denial.

"Commander!" The sharp tone of his voice had her sending him an instant look of reprimand. The anger he felt was sudden and bright. For years she had stressed the importance of preserving the time-line. She had written a large portion of the directive.

And now she was violating half of it with a single answer.

Jacob simply shrugged and commented, "Her rank says Captain."

Rather than address Jacob's observation, T'Janis kept her attention on Eli. "If the truth will encourage the answers we came for then we will provide it." His anger dimmed.

When T'Janis seemed content with Eli's growing stability, she continued to address Jacob. "However, we will not give you anything that can be used to alter the events already established in this time. This meeting will be short and you will not use it to your academic advantage. Now, if you did not see that ship, who did?"

The man tilted his head and clicked his tongue, "You have to understand that the information you are asking for is classified."

T'Janis countered, "And you must understand that we have already violated the Temporal Prime Directive. We would not be here without great concern for the future of mankind."

When Jacob made no indication of speaking, Eli interjected, "You're an intelligent man. I am certain that you can weigh the risks of telling us what we need to know."

"Alright." Jacob leaned back in his chair, his arms crossing over his chest. The earlier wariness faded into a faraway stare, "Twelve years ago I was stationed at Shipyard Grant in Denver with the Science Development Unit. We got a call one night that a woman had bypassed every security measure at that installation by transporting to the middle of the compound and the Chief Security Officer wanted to know how the hell that happened. Turns out, she hadn't transported after all. She'd been pulled by a chroniton wake. Her name was Amelia Wright and she was born in 1962. I
remember because it's really hard to forget meeting your first time-traveler. She... She's the one who described that ship to me."

Amelia Wright. How ironic. The Wright brothers were known for their contribution to flight. And Amelia Earhart was recognized for her flight across the Atlantic. Of all the people who could have been their subject, her name alone set her apart. As if it were fate's design...

Eli processed the story, then started when he realized the tense that Jacob had used. "Was?"

The doctor frowned, his crossed arms falling open. "Amelia died about seven months after that. The official report stated that she attempted to escape before she could appear on trial for crimes of terrorism and during the attempt she was killed."

T'Janis raised a brow, "You do not believe this?"

The look Jacob shot them said it was clear he didn't. "To be honest, I didn't know Amelia until after she had died. When I first met her it was way too brief. I'm a scientist, curious by nature. The time she lived through... lots of those records were destroyed during the Eugenics War. So, before she set off on the Enterprise, I had a friend give her a datapadd and told her to record whatever she could. Talk about her life. The day to day. After I got word that she had died, I figured that was it, what she knew died with her. But, four years later, a man shows up at my door, hands me that datapadd and tells me he's there to 'let the dead die'. After watching her videos... I don't believe that she attempted to escape. I think she was assassinated."

Assassinated. The subject had been pulled from the time of the Eugenics war only to be assassinated. Though the information unsettled Eli, he understood that it meant little. With the pod they could easily circumvent the original time-line. In fact it would almost be beneficial that Amelia did not have ties to the time-line she landed in.

While he thought of ways they could prevent the subject's death, T'Janis continued the conversation with Jacob.

"And you did not come forward with this information?"

He gave them another look, as though the answer to that was also obvious. "Amelia's situation was classified from the beginning. Several of us, of the original team that helped to integrate her, had hoped that one day it would be released, but after her death there was no chance in that happening. Most of her records were purged. No logs on the Enterprise. No logs at Shipyard Grant. Really... I think one of the few things left is that datapadd and sometimes it seems more like fiction rather than fact. Coming forward wouldn't have done anything."

No logs meant their search was limited. Limited to what Jacob had in his possession. Eli stood abruptly, staring the doctor and the Vulcan. "Would you let us have that datapadd?" It was their answer. Everything they needed rested within the device. Timestamps. Locations. And the added benefit of them learning about Amelia Wright.

Jacob stood as well, then headed into another room. When he returned a few minutes later, he was carrying a small item covered in fabric. For a moment, he seemed hesitant to hand it over, his arm half extended towards Eli. His gaze narrowed, then relaxed, as though his thoughts had led him towards an answer.

He placed the datapadd in Eli's upturned hands and met his eyes, asking, "Are you going to save her?"
"No." Eli shook his head, powering up the device, "She is going to save us."
Chapter 29

STARDATE 2260.174

Beta Quadrant

Andorian Space Station

Abandon status - ELE - Council warned - Retrieve AMELIA WRIGHT - Deliver on station

The message on his console was unencrypted, though considering it was sent across a secured channel it was unlikely that there would be an attempt to intercept. The male reading it frowned, scanned the single line again, and searched for clues that there was more to follow before continuing on to break down each segment of the command.

Abandon status. After years of work integrating himself into the crew of the Enterprise, positioning himself in an ideal location to disseminate and retrieve information while gaining the confidence of key crew members, it was now time for him to move on. What the message called for would not allow him to be subversive. It would require exposing himself as a member of the Federation's Counter-Intelligence Unit in the FSA because there was simply no time to prepare for concealment.

ELE. Extinction Level Event. It explained why the Federation hadn't encrypted the message, the fear that he wouldn't decode the message in time too great. His brow furrowed as he recalled the last time they had received such a warning. The attack on Vulcan, destruction of an entire planet. At least this time the council had received the notice far enough in advance to react.

Retrieve Amelia Wright. That... that threw him off more than anything. Amelia, their resident horticulturist, was a sought after commodity lately. The command crew of the ship had done their damnedest to ensure that her current state as a terrorist suspect was kept under wraps, but with his status as a counter-intelligence officer he still learned of it. So far, he had assumed she was being set-up, a fact that was bound to come to light once the trial began, but now... now he truly wondered if she was indeed a member of a terrorist organization.

No. The denial came just as soon as the thought crossed his mind. If she was that good then he wouldn't stand a chance at retrieving her. He wouldn't be able to control an asset that well trained. It had to be something else.

In the end, it made no difference. Orders were orders and his time was limited.

Carefully, he closed the computer console and secured it with an alpha-numerical code before slipping it into his locker. His eyes flickered to the clock, mentally calculating the amount of time he had left. Less than thirty minutes until docking. He gave a small sigh, realizing that his window of interception was short.

Amelia was most likely going to be transferred into Starfleet custody on the brig, but as far as he knew she wasn't being held there. Last he had seen her she was being held in her quarters when she wasn't under guard at the hydroponics bay.

He spared another glance at the clock. He'd missed lunch, that was for sure. The thought irritated him more than it should have as he started towards his bunk. Flipping his mattress over, he pulled a multi-tool from underneath. With a twist of his wrist, a blade swung out.
Within moments he had removed the wall panel next to his bunk.

The Enterprise’s transporter system could detect and disable weapons, but he hadn’t arrived on board the ship via the transporter. No… he had returned on a shuttle with several other contractors after his scheduled leave was over before the mission launch. And the box he had carried on board was of exceptional design, a Federation secret that only a select few knew of.

Lined with a modified form of Kironide, it would hide the contents from almost all prying equipment.

He popped it open, for the first time since being on the Enterprise, and scanned the items inside. A Starfleet phaser. A Klingon disruptor. An Andorian ushaan-tor.

His hand hovered across the Andorian ice blade for a moment before he clenched it into a fist and shifted to grab the phaser. It was the best weapon for the task. No one needed to die for this retrieval, nor was he prepared to engage in hand-to-hand combat, not while he was still recovering from the injury sustained during the ship’s battle with the Klingons.

Quickly, he set the phaser to stun, snapped it against his belt, and shoved the case full of weapons back into the hidden panel behind his bunk. It felt strange having the gun on his hip because for so long information had been his weapon.

Shared information, seemingly insignificant, added together could create a very large picture. Was Starfleet strong? Would morale pull them through a war? Where were the weak points? Are humans a threat? Are Vulcans? What about Andorians? Traitors? Is there a chance of dissent?

Contractors?

Amelia Wright. He briefly recalled writing a report concerning the woman shortly after they had met, citing her as valuable after her unique acceptance by the command crew. An unknowing player in the intelligence game...

One more quick look at the clock. Fifteen minutes. The ship rocked with the start of the docking process. She would be moved soon. With little time to waste, he went to the computer console next to the door of his quarters and input a series of numbers.

"Computer, activate protocol Command Access Four-Nine-Zero-Delta."

There was no verbal response, but his communicator chirped twice, indicating that the program was active. Wherever the communicator went, no door would refuse him access. He now had the same freedom across the ship as the Captain did, for at least half and hour.

As he made his way across the Enterprise, he ignored the pressure that built in his chest, one he associated with guilt. This was the hard part of working in counter-intelligence. He had spent years getting to know people, playing the game to earn trust, embedding himself into their lives. Friends. Family. There was no way to avoid the attachment that came from such an extended assignment.

Which meant the guilt that came with betraying them all was also unavoidable.

It was also very unusual. Guilt was a hard feeling to embrace for his kind, for they did not generally trust enough to form the bonds required to feel it. But he had spent so much time around humans, had been practically raised by them, that even despite his occupation or race, he could not cut himself off completely.

The phaser, once concealed against his hip under his shirt, was soon clenched in his hand as he
stepped into the corridor where Amelia's quarters were located. She would be shocked, confused, and angry. But if she was as innocent as he believed she would listen if he barked orders at her.

He slowed his stride as he approached, effortlessly slowed his breathing to appear calm. It had been so long since he had conducted field work of this nature.

There were only two guards standing outside her door, both men that he knew by name. They barely had time to open their mouths before he brought up the phaser and shot them, one after another, bodies thudding as they hit the floor.

He stepped over them, sparing a glance down to see if they had vital sign monitors on their wrists. When he saw none, he continued towards her quarters. He did not need to press any buttons on the security panel that had been installed outside her door, the communicator at his side chirping a short series of beeps before the door slid open.

Amelia stood in the center, her eyes wide in that shock he had predicted. In her hands she held a datapadd, the device hovering above her shoulder like she was prepared to use it as a weapon. Her gaze darted past him, to the bodies of her guards on the floor.

Immediately, he supplied in defense, "They're fine, Amelia-dear. Stunned. I need you to come with me."

Confusion followed. "Th'eon... What the hell are you doing?"

**STARDATE 2260.174**

**Beta Quadrant**

**Andorian Space Station**

Amelia sat at her desk, the datapadd Richard had passed on to her, what seemed like a lifetime ago, resting in front of her. Her final video was complete, a dictation of what to do with the datapadd once she handed it over. Soon she'd pass her personal belongings over to Spock, save the datapadd, which she intended to leave to McCoy.

McCoy. Determined McCoy. He'd begged her to fight the charges, but that was a fight she would not be able to stage aboard the Enterprise. He knew it. Kirk knew it.

"The testimony I presented has been logged, however Starfleet has yet to withdraw the warrant." Spock had delivered the news with an expression of sorrow she rarely saw, or maybe she was just more open to it since the mind-meld. When she hadn't said anything in response, he added, "We will continue to gather character testimony from the members of the crew."

She wasn't sure if he had already done that or not, having been unable to interact with her few friends on board since the charges were levied against her. No... the only people she really saw were her guards, Spock, and, occasionally, the Captain. And none of them usually came bearing good news.

Maybe that wouldn't be the case when they came after docking. Already she could feel the shaking of the ship, the decrease in speed and the slight changes in direction. Though she didn't know for certain that it signaled their approach to the space station, she assumed that was the reason for the ship's behavior.

Her hand clutched around the datapadd, her other hand reaching for the strap on her backpack that rested on the floor. She froze when she heard a set of thuds just beyond her door, her backpack
forgotten as she turned to face the origin of the noise.

Fingers tightening around the datapadd, she gave an uneasy glance around the room for anything that could be used to defend herself. It was supposed to be a secret that she was facing charges of terrorism, but Amelia held no illusions that such a secret could be kept in such an isolated environment. The countdown for an attempt on her life began the moment that Starfleet placed her under arrest. Hence the two guards that stood outside her room, as much for her protection as everyone else’s.

The door hissed, signaling its impending opening and she raised the datapadd over her shoulder. It'd be shame to break it, months of recorded videos and letters, but at least she would have a chance at survival. At the first glance of blue standing in the hallway, her narrowed gaze widened in shock.

Th'eon stood over the bodies of her guards, his hands up and palms spread. The gun in his hand clearly betrayed the innocence he was attempting to convey. He spoke quickly, sensing her obvious need to know what was going on. "They're fine, Amelia-dear. Stunned. I need you to come with me."

The statement may have seemed to him like it would answer all the unspoken questions, but in reality it only served to spur more. Amelia made no attempt to hide the confusion in her voice as she asked, "Th'eon... What the hell are you doing?!" Her gaze darted between him and the phaser in his hand, a weapon she had become quite familiar with. "And what are you doing with a gun?!"

"I am a member of the Federation's counter intelligence unit. I have been ordered to deliver you to the Federation Council." He holstered the phaser, moving forward to clasp a hand on her arm. His grip never landed, Amelia jerking back just as quickly to put space between them.

For more than a moment Amelia was certain that the man in front of her wasn't her friend. She'd cooked with him. Shared stories with him. For months she'd depended on him for some sense of stability in this new and unfamiliar world, but for that entire time he had lied to her.

Her dismay must have shown on her face because Th'eon was quick to speak, his tone pleading, "Amelia, I know this is a shock to you and you have every right to be upset, but I need you to trust me. My lies protect this entire ship, this family."

Lies. She couldn't ignore that he wasn't the only liar in the room. For those months that he had played a part, so had she. Amelia Wright, born in 2229. Whatever their reasons were, it didn't make them bad people, or bad friends. It just made them... *them*. Her lies had never changed the core of who she was just like Th'eon's lies never changed the core of who he was.

Which meant she couldn't take the opportunity of escape that he was, in a way, presenting. Amelia Wright may not have been born in 2229 but one thing true to her nature was that she always faced the road before her. "I can't run, Th'eon. I have to answer these charges."

"Whatever concern you are to Starfleet, it pales in comparison to the vital importance you are to the Federation. The Federation Council has been warned of an Extinction Level Event and for some reason they felt it necessary to pull me from a position that took years to establish just to bring you to them. Now... we can talk along the way, but we must leave this ship." The tone in his voice begged her compliance, but she remained rooted to her place in the room.

She weighed the outcomes, knowing that if she went with him, it would set Starfleet against her. But he was saying that a higher organization wanted her more. To prevent something. Something important enough to expose Th'eon.
The Federation knew. There was little doubt in her mind as she carefully went over the scenario she was faced with. The Federation knew the real reason she was pulled from her time-line. It was the only thing that made sense, really. Why would they care about some time-line stray unless her value came directly from that?

Answers were there, just beyond reach, but Th'eon was offering her a way to get there.

Run. Fight. Find the Truth...

After just a minute of contemplation she finally reached out and clasped his hand. "Alright. Let's get out of here." And, at the last second, she reached down to grab the strap of her backpack. If she was going to face trouble... she wanted that damn first aid kid.

She'd only ever seen him in his role as the Enterprise's chef, but as they made their way expertly across the ship, she realized that he was born for this. He stunned anyone that came into their path, never once letting go of her hand as they navigated corridors and turbo-lifts. She was near out of breath, but he wasn't struggling, even while missing half an antenna. Heart pumping, she heard roaring in her ears which drowned out the commands Th'eon issued to the computer.

They had just made it onto the docking bay when a loud blare sounded through the ship's communication system. The sound had Th'eon stiffening just before he pulled her down behind some crates in the docking bay.

Unnecessarily, Amelia commented, "I have a feeling that has something to do with us."

"That is a correct assessment, Amelia-dear. They are initiating a lock-down procedure. If we are seen, they will shoot to stun." For the first time since Th'eon had revealed himself to her he looked concerned. Sad even. He'd blown his cover, destroyed relationships, and now it might be for a failed mission.

Answers... beyond the docking bay doors. They just had to make it a few hundred meters. But there were too many guards, roving, searching for them. Some had phasers, some had more rifle type weapons. Even if she and Th'eon were both fighters there was no way to make it into the space station.

Amelia clutched the strap of her backpack. Just when she was certain that her building panic would reach the surface, she felt a surreal calmness pass over her. You know how to defend yourself, Ms. Wright. You have the tools. Now clear your mind and think. An echo in her mind. A stoic voice that belonged to another.

She trusted that voice, knew that he could fight, that his mind was quicker and devoid of the chaos that plagued humanity. And even though he wasn't really there, his essence remained in her mind, determined to protect her.

"Alright, Spock. What do you got for me?"

I think the better question is 'What is it that you have with you'?

She had an Andorian, but by the look on Th'eon's face she could tell that he hadn't come up with a solution yet either. She had a datapadd, but that was as useful as her first aid- The first aid kit in her backpack!

Amelia quietly let the backpack slip off her shoulder so she could tug it open. She wasn't looking for millennia-old nick-knacks or sap or a band-aid.
She was looking for a shield that could protect them all the way to the connection corridor between the Enterprise and the Space Station. Amelia palmed the Nausicaan Shield Generator, flipped it over in her hand to thumb the power switch. Lights around the device came to life, signaling that it was in working order.

"It will only protect one of us," Th'eon said over her shoulder.

Amelia opened her mouth to argue, but realized that he was right. Though it had protected both her and McCoy while on board the Huron, they had been hugging at the time, close enough to both be within the shield's radius. That simply wasn't possible now. She and Th'eon needed to run and dodge, separate to keep the guards from corralling them.

She stared at the Andorian, taking in every feature she could. It was likely that she would never see him again. The way his mouth turned down into a grim frown told her just as much. He'd brought her this far… and not just on their escape run. He'd been the Alien who made her feel at home. He'd guided her growth by being so extraordinarily different in appearance and yet human-like. Acceptance. Humor. Family.

A family that she was leaving. "What do I do, Th'eon?"

"You survive. But more than that, you live." A blue hand fell over her own, resting atop the Nausicaan Shield Generator. Without resisting she let him take it from her hand, only so he could snap it against her uniform belt. "Once you are on the station, Take the first right you come to. Someone will meet you. They will be wearing a Federation insignia on their breast pocket. Stop for no one. Defend yourself. The Federation needs you, Amelia Wright."

There were no goodbyes. No hugs. There was only a small grin on the Andorian's face as he stood from their hiding spot behind the crates and began firing at the guards.

Amelia ran.

Blasts from the phasers dissipated against the shield's wall, distracting flares of color and light just millimeters from her skin. Her eyes darted from dropping bodies to the open corridor that led into the station. Calls across communicators were made, shouts to security and the bridge and... well… Amelia wasn't quite sure.

All she knew for certain was that the blast doors were closing to seal off her exit. But she was too close to be stopped now.

Amelia tossed the backpack, left it behind with the stunned guards and a possibly stunned Andorian spy. She dropped the datapadd too, unwilling to let it stand between her and the answers that the Federation had.

Then she jumped between the small opening that grew ever smaller and glanced back to see the Enterprise seal itself from its ward. Maybe later she'd have time to think about the ramifications, but not now. Now... now she had to take the first right.

Amelia looked away from the ship to glance down the corridor of the space station. Her feet carried her down the long hallway, eyes searching for that Federation insignia.

She found it when she turned on her heel and Amelia couldn't help the sudden onslaught of tears when she saw the man in front of her.
Richard O'Shea.

Behind him were two other men, both wearing the globe and wreath on their breasts and carrying phaser rifles. Apparently the Federation was bracing for a confrontation.

"Thank God," Richard let out a harsh sigh of relief, stepping forward immediately to embrace her. "We were worried we wouldn't get to you in time."

Amelia only allowed herself to draw strength from him for a short moment before pulling back, wide eyes scanning his. Though her questions were too numerous to voice at once, she started with, "We? What's going on."

"I don't even know where to begin." While Richard guided her further into the space station, the two guards he'd brought with him took their place at the flanks. Amelia, still processing the entirety of the situation, stumbled to keep up with the small group while still honing in on Richard's words.

"After the warrant was issued I reached out to the Federation to get me transport to intercept the Enterprise. But I'm not the only one interested in making sure you get out of this alive. Our ship was stalled about two hours ago when a chroniton wave was detected. Two people boarded and said they were responsible for dropping you in this time-line. Honestly, I wouldn't have believed them, but our visitors from the future had some convincing evidence. Including the record of your death and some video logs you made. The Federation put in for a stall on the warrant, but the people behind this... witch-hunt aren't going to be stopped by protocol."

Amelia frowned. Not only at what he had said, but what he hadn't. "Th'eon said there was a reason I was pulled. Something about extinction."

"From what we've been told you were alive during the Eugenics war and for a great deal of time afterward. During the original time-line you went on to be part of an experiment led by the augments. You survived a modified form of the Spanish Flu, one of the deadliest viruses in our recorded history." A future she never experienced. A future she'd been saved from.

Did that timeline even matter now? Amelia shook her head, "But that's the past! It's over now."

"According to our visitors from the future, that same virus will be modified again and used to wipe out the entire Vulcan population, what remains of it anyway, and most of the Human one." Richard paused, halted in on his heel, then he stunned her by pulling her into a quick and tight embrace. A goodbye if she's ever felt one. "You won't be going back to Earth to face trial, Amelia. But you won't be staying here, either."

For a moment she could feel the same sadness that showed on Richard's face when she pulled away. A brother she'd barely had time to know was telling her that their paths were parting. "They want to take me with them, don't they? The people who brought me here."

"Yes. They think you can save them, that what kept you alive in the past will keep them alive in the future." This was it. The truth. The reason. Amelia's destiny was not to remain on the Enterprise. It wasn't to fall in love or make her way across the galaxy. It wasn't to heal the wounds made from a car crash millennia ago. It was to get sick and survive.

Survive.

She'd had plenty of practice surviving.

She might as well get a tattoo of the word and forget ever introducing herself again, Amelia Wright, the Survivor.
But Amelia was reaching the end of her rope when it came to surviving. What was it that Th'eon had told her to do? Live? Briefly, she wondered if he had known this was coming, had planted the seed she needed to thrive and remain rooted firmly where she was. So when she met his gaze she made sure that her face showed ever bit of resolve she felt. "I'm not leaving, Richard. I'm not losing anything else. Not the people I love. Not this new life."

Amelia smiled at him, what seemed like the first smile she'd shown in weeks, and reached out to take his hand.

But the contact never came. Light flared around her and shocked the smile right off of her face. Richard fell to the ground, a heavy sounding thud echoing in the corridor. The guards beside her were moving, firing back at a threat Amelia had yet to see, but could hear plainly.

"I told them that you were dangerous!" It had been months since she'd heard that voice and it was filled with just as much rage and hatred as it had been the first time.

She didn't look at Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Salo, most of her attention going to the still form of Richard. You are in combat, Ms. Wright. Do not ignore the enemy. Spock's voice echoed in her mind, a commanding presence once again. The voice wasn't wrong. Whether Richard was dead or alive, she couldn't determine that now. The guards he had brought with him were still shooting at Salo and his own men.

Her eyes adjusted to the random flares of landed shots, spots in her vision clearing so she could see down the space station corridor.

You need to move forward. Eliminate the primary threat.

Tactics. She'd never been good at those. Sure, she could solve a problem or two given the right tools, but she wasn't a tactician. Spock, however, was an exceptional one. He knew how to move through a corridor while receiving fire. He knew how to take a man down in a single move. Center of the chest. Hard. His thoughts. Her motions.

Amelia's body hurt, stings in her hands and arms as she thwarted blows and landed her own. But she didn't actually feel it. Compartmentalization. Spock was good at that too.

Maybe it was because their mind-meld was so recent that the residual presence of the Vulcan was still so strong. Whatever the reason, desperation or necessity... it had saved her twice in the span of twenty minutes.

**STARDATE 2260.174**

**Beta Quadrant**

**Andorian Space Station**

"What do you mean "she's gone"?" McCoy shouted over the sound of the blaring alarms as he and Jim jogged through the corridors. Where they were headed, he had no clue, but it seemed clear that his captain had a destination in mind.

"I mean she's not on the ship anymore, Bones! Hence the music you currently hear." While they continued across the ship, a few roving guards joined them to form a mobile assault team. Though no one had called it such, McCoy could tell they were prepping for a fight just by the number of phasers that surrounded them.

"You had guards on her. A tracker. You couldn't transport her as soon as the guards were found
unconscious? You were supposed to protect her!” Aside from a sharp glare, Jim ignored McCoy's criticisms.

Instead, he focused on the Vulcan approaching their small team. "Commander Spock. What do we know?"

"One of the crew members assisted in her escape using a primary command code." Escape? Command code? McCoy's brow furrowed in confusion. The only two people who knew those codes were standing beside him. Spock handed over a datapadd to Jim and McCoy was able to catch enough of a glimpse to know exactly who was featured on the display.

Before Jim could ask, McCoy shouted, "How the hell would Th'eon have a command code?!"

Spock's brow lifted a touch, whether in some bizarre form of Vulcan Humor or at his tone, McCoy couldn't tell. "Because he is a member of the Federation's Counter Intelligence unit." Of course. "Essentially, he is a spy."

McCoy kept his 'I told you so' in check by focusing on his growing anger at the situation. "We'll have to deal with that later. Do we know where she is?"

"I do not know, Doctor." McCoy scowled again. *Did anyone know anything?*

It only took them a couple of minutes to make it to the docking bay where Th'eon was taken down. At the set of closed blast doors was an engineer working to undo some damage to the interior console. Spock immediately moved to question the Andorian. Jim left to speak with security. And McCoy… McCoy just stared at the closed docking bay doors as if they would magically open.

Beyond the barrier was Amelia. Somewhere. Running from the threat of a treason charge, maybe. Or towards something else. Maybe. He ran through a list of reasons for the next minute or so.

Sixty seconds seemed to last a lifetime, broken by the loud grinding of metal as the doors were forced open. His feet were moving before he could stop them. As he passed one of the security personnel he grabbed their phaser and set it to stun.

He wasn't certain what was louder. The sounds of shouting and footfall at his back or the fighting further up the corridor. Phaser fire rang out, blasts of light illumined the corridor. Men were calling out orders.

Jim and Spock caught up to him as he rounded the corner of the hall, the scene before him bringing them to a quick halt.

At least twenty people blocked their path, a mixture of badges, crests, and uniforms all showing various allegiances. The only person who bore none was Amelia, who stood in the center, fists flying as she took down Starfleet personnel. Behind her was a small contingency of Federation agents, facing their own threats.

It was chaos.

"Everybody get on the ground!" Jim's sudden command was followed by phase rifle fire, stun shots striking the men that separated them from Amelia Wright. It didn't seem to matter that they could have been the good guys.

McCoy figured they could just sort it out later.

As Jim's shots made their mark, the fighting came to a swift close. The Starfleet personnel laid down
their phasers, the Federation group holstered theirs, and two people from the rear of the group stepped forward. And Amelia… Amelia still stood in the center, breathing hard as her head turning to look down each end of the corridor and at each group by her side.

A human man and a Vulcan woman bearing unusual Starfleet insignias pushed past the group. They barely cast a glance towards McCoy's group as most of their attention was focused on Amelia.

The Vulcan appraised her with a curt nod, then turned her direction to the man at her side. "It's her."

"Of course it is," the man replied, still staring at Amelia with a focused gaze. Then he smiled warmly at her and held out his hand. "Hello, Amelia Wright. My name is Eli Jefferson and I'm from the year 2492 and you have no idea how glad we are that you're not dead."
Chapter 30

STARDATE 2260.174

Beta Quadrant

Andorian Space Station

"Hello, Amelia Wright. My name is Eli Jefferson and I'm from the year 2492. You have no idea how glad we are that you're not dead." The man, Eli, reached out a hand towards Amelia. Whatever contact he intended to make never happened, though. One moment she was staring at him and then, one moment later, she was lying unmoving on the ground.

Surprisingly, Spock was the first to launch into action. He stepped over other bodies, unconscious ones McCoy hoped, and knelt down next to Amelia. The Vulcan's eyes drifted closed as he pressed two fingers to her temple.

McCoy briefly struggled between his desire to check on her personally and his duty to the rest of the people in the corridor. In the end, duty won. She would not have wanted him to ignore them for her sake. Moving from person to person, McCoy checked their vital signs and identified them. The three parties involved in the short-lived fight soon became apparent.

There was a team led by Lieutenant Commander Salo, charged with carrying out the original warrant for Amelia Wright. There was another team led by Commander O'Shea, with updated orders to take Amelia Wright into protective custody within the Federation. And, of course, the crew of the Enterprise.

McCoy frowned as he processed that information. Why would she run when the protective order trumped the warrant? Why had she left the safety of the Enterprise?

Because she wouldn't have made it if Salo got her first. The bodies on the ground proved just how far Salo would go to take her out.

"No." The word left his mouth as the tricorder in his hand signaled more than unconsciousness. At least one of the bodies on the floor was dead.

McCoy looked to Amelia, still unmoving. Still being treated by Spock. Then he looked back to the commander, touched his fingers to the man's neck. For what little he knew of Amelia and Richard's relationship he recognized, without a doubt, that this truth was going to leave another life-long scar. He knelt there, probably far longer than he should have, by the corpse of Commander Richard O'Shea. If Amelia wasn't able to take this place of mourning, then he would just do it for her. An ache formed in his jaw as he clenched his teeth together in frustration and anger.

All of this… and for what?

Another doctor appeared in the corner of his vision, wearing the federation uniform and emblem. Whoever they were, they released a heavy sigh when they confirmed McCoy's reading. "We'll take him back with us and handle the notification."

Maybe it was the doctor's statement that spurred everyone else into conversation. Or maybe McCoy had just been turning everyone else out. But all at once the questions and demands seemed to start.
"She will be kept under the care of the Federation. Amelia Wright is too important for us to leave her on the Enterprise." The man from the future didn't sound angry, simply unwavering. Convicted.

Jim on the other hand had more than enough bite in his tone to make up for it. "I don't think you understand, Jefferson. Amelia is our ward. And you won't be taking her anywhere. I mean, look at this mess!"

"Captain." Spock this time, "Miss Wright made the choice to turn towards the Federation. We should respect that decision."

"The hell we should." McCoy's mouth was open and moving before he could stop it. "She's safer with us."

The female Vulcan who had been standing next to Eli leveled a hard stare in his direction. Knowing Vulcans it wasn't anger in her eyes. It was blatant annoyance. After years of dealing with Spock, he found that the look barely bothered him.

"Doctor McCoy, before we altered the path of history she was going to die on this day. The Captain of the Enterprise was going to escort her to the custody of Lieutenant Commander Salo and then, while in transport, he was going to execute her. Luckily for her we intervened."

A snort escaped him. "None of this is Luck. You jacked up the timeline. You pulled her from her home. Placed her here. In literally the second worst time period for someone who lived during the Eugenics war. Don't act like you are her savior. You were the ones who put the gun in Salo's hand. And you got people killed in the process." He moved then, practically pushing Spock out of the way as he went to a knee.

She was dead weight in his arms, but still easy enough to carry. McCoy tried not to think of how the stress of her situation had eaten away what little fat she use to have. However, most of what went through his mind was that she was here. In his arms. Safe for at least another moment.

He cast a sideways glance at Spock, whose damn eyebrow was up. He could see the Vulcan thinking of a solution so, for once, McCoy kept his mouth shut.

"It appears we are at an impasse. The crew of the Enterprise will not allow Miss Wright to be taken. And the Federation has all the answers she, and we, require. May I suggest we compromise and join you wherever you plan on taking her?"

Eli and the female Vulcan shared a brief look, before turning their attention back to Spock. "I'm afraid that where she needs to go, you can't. We planned on taking her back with us."

McCoy unconsciously pulled Amelia closer. "To the future?" Like hell that was an option.

Eli's words were slow and measured, "Did you ever consider that this is larger than just you? Than just her? Amelia carries within her the capability to save humanity, and the Vulcans, and the Romulans and more species in the Federation than we can estimate. This is not about one person. This is about the survival of the Federation. Of the peace we have created."

No. McCoy glanced down at the woman in his arms, pale and lithe and small. Too small for this weight on her shoulders.

It was the Andorian who called it that day so long ago in the med-bay.

"She's life, doctor."
The answer to that ever-present question of "why" came to him, the only reason that someone from the future would pull someone from the past. Physiology. Never knowledge, no, because Amelia knew so little in comparison to the rest of those born in this century. But she came to them from a time before the xeno-series. Before closed surgery. She came before the great eugenics wars and modified illnesses and altered babies and clones.

"It's a virus, isn't it." Eli's swift head turn towards McCoy proved the statement's truth. "And she lived during the Eugenics War. Which means there is only one virus she would have been exposed to that is deadly enough to wipe out Humans. Or the Vulcan race."

The female Vulcan gave a short nod and supplemented, "The Augmented Spanish Influenza."

His chest felt tight and his face hot. Anger and Fear. "You can't give her that. She will die! Even with modern medicine she would not make it."

"No. Amelia was one of the survivors, part of the two percent," Eli said as he stepped closer to McCoy. Stepped closer to Amelia. The man glanced down at her, with a very odd look of reverence. "Which is why it is so important that we take her."

"You can't force her to go." But McCoy couldn't force her to stay…

"No," but Eli nodded in agreement. "We will ask her to come with us. She will agree."

McCoy bristled, snapping back, "And how do you know that?"

"Because we read her data-padd journal and watched her video entries. She is not the kind of person to allow others to die."

He could sense Jim relenting, could see the understanding on his face. And Spock had a small frown on his face, one that spoke volumes of the sympathy he felt. The Vulcan wouldn't stand for another genocide.

And McCoy… he wouldn't let her go. Not physically. Not emotionally. He'd come so close before, allowing the charade of the warrant continue. Now Richard O'Shea was dead and it could have just as easily been Amelia.

There had to be an answer. A compromise.

Something available now. In this timeline.

Something onboard the Enterprise.

"I'm a virologist!" Eli jumped at McCoy's sudden outburst, then processed what he had said. He wore a small look of confusion and waved his hand in dismissal, "We have plenty of those. We don't need another. Besides, you will be needed here."

"No. I mean… My field of study is virology. My work with Starfleet also includes research and testing of viruses. Vaccinations. Epidemics. The Enterprise has everything on board to handle outbreaks." They controlled the meningitis at the colony. It was part of the flagship's package to handle such disasters. "If you have the virus… I could give it to her and you can walk away with the antibodies."

He hated the thought. Would never risk it under normal circumstances. Under almost any circumstance. But their backs were to the wall. McCoy knew without a doubt that the woman in his arms would agree to this. Would go to the future if it meant saving people. So… he
would take the risk with her if that's what was required.

Already, his mind was racing with what needed to be done. How carefully she'd need to be monitored. How long she'd need to suffer through one of the deadliest viruses that mankind had ever seen.

"It's too risky," Eli argued, "If the quarantine fails we risk the space station and the Enterprise. It's too important to history to take that chance."

"We will evacuate the ship." Jim. McCoy released a breath he hadn't realized he'd be holding. His Captain support the decision. "And we can orbit the station until this is over."

Eli turned towards the female Vulcan once more, "Commander. Perhaps we should consider it."

A few long moments passed before there was any answer. "It has been considered." The Vulcan paused and leveled her gaze on McCoy, "If you truly feel it can be done, we will attempt the trial on board the Enterprise."

STARDATE 2260.175

Beta Quadrant

USS Enterprise

Sharp pain pierced her skull as the bright lights swarmed her vision. When it cleared, Amelia could recognize the walls of the med-bay and the familiar sounds of the equipment that rested within. She hadn't even fully woken when she felt a hand grab her own.

"Damn it, woman. You will be the death of me." Harsh and annoyed. The corner of her mouth twitched upwards at McCoy's voice. She smiled a little further when her eyes landed on his face. He wasn't smiling as brightly, but she could still sense his relief. "You fainted. Spock said it was an overload. Mind-meld... stuff. Do you remember what happened?"

"The Federation came for me." Came with answers.

McCoy snorted, not hiding his distaste for her decision. "More like you went to them."

He worked around her, moving equipment while occasionally glancing her way. His usual focus was disrupted, but she couldn't blame him. Strobe like flashing randomly appeared above the door and she could hear a faint siren-like alarm from beyond the med-bay walls. It would have made anyone lose concentration under the circumstances.

It took her a moment to figure out what it meant, mostly because it had been so long since they had went through emergency drills. "They're evacuating the ship?"

"Yeah."

"What… what does it mean?" They weren't under attack. She couldn't have been unconscious for more than an hour or so and they'd been plenty safe at the Space Station.

"It means you're about to go through hell for the next few days." Brow furrowed, she stared at him, not hiding the confusion at his statement. McCoy stopped moving equipment and returned to her side. "Amelia… when you lived in your original timeline you were exposed to a very specific virus. The modified 1918 Spanish Flu. The Augments tested this virus on humans across the United States in 1995, but it killed too many for it to be useful. I mean, dead people don't make good slaves. You
The Extinction Level Event. "Richard said the same thing. That they wanted to take me back with them. Or forward…"

"To be fair only two percent of people infected ever survived that virus. Twenty or so out of one thousand. With enough vectors the virus could be deadly enough to wipe out humanity. I can see why they would take the risk. Especially when no one in the future has the capability to create the antibodies."

"I don't want to go with them. But I won't let people die." Realization dawned. What he was doing. Why the ship was being evacuated. Why he looked concerned, but didn't react like she was going anywhere. "You're going to do it, aren't you? That's why they are evacuating the ship."

"That is correct." A new voice in the room. Amelia turned to see a man –Eli Jefferson – she recalled meeting recently. She realized then that Eli was holding something. A silver globe with a visible seam along the middle. He handled it with care, walking slowly as he entered the med-bay. McCoy reacted to it with just as much caution. A dangerous thing. A deadly thing. "And it is your decision to make. You will not be forced."

"I know." Amelia looked towards McCoy. "I'll do it." From the look on his face, he hadn't expected her to choose otherwise.

From then on, the two doctors spoke in quiet tones, not for fear of her hearing, but for the simple reason that the gravity of the situation made them feel pressured into silence. Quarantine shields were set into place, curtains were dropped. The far side of the med-bay was transitioned into a small room with clear walls.

It would be her home for the next few days.

It might even be her grave. Two percent, they had said…

Amelia removed her clothes when McCoy asked. He took off her wrist monitor to replace it with a more advanced model, one that could alert him to more subtle changes. He listed off everything that would get a reading, but she barely understood half of it. Basically it would tell him if she was dying.

She slipped on a blue hospital gown, watched as McCoy's hands shook while he did a sweep of the quarantine zone. Amelia wasn't sure if that made her feel better or worse. He cared enough about her to be affected. But also… he cared enough to be affected.

Everything around her seemed to happen at a snail's pace. Eli placed the small silver globe inside the clear room, along with a syringe and some other small pieces of equipment, IVs and towels. McCoy stuck some diodes onto her chest and back. More monitors.

Apparently they were trying to do a partial recreation of the care she received while one of the Augment subjects. They had to be careful not to do too little. They also couldn't do too much. Certain stages of the flu had to occur or else she would never develop the proper antibodies. McCoy broke it down for her, but just like with the equipment she could understand less than half.

She wanted to know more about what was going on outside. Salo. Richard. Th'eon. But McCoy had told her that it was better to wait on that, to focus on the task at hand.

Eventually, Captain Kirk arrived to make some final announcements.

"The ship's empty of all non-emergency personnel and we've cleared the space station. The
Federation ship that Jefferson and T'Janis arrived in is on the comms for updates. I guess they want to know if we're successful." Or not. Kirk looked towards Amelia and gave her a questioning look. "Ready?"

She stood at the door to the quarantine, allowed McCoy to do one final check on her vitals. They'd already discussed what would happen soon. They hadn't discussed what she would do right then.

She kissed him. Hard. He held her face, fingers twitching. It brought to mind all the other times they had been this close. The hydroponics bay. His quarters. The hotel room. She could feel his desperation. His fear. And beneath it all a minor promise. Not the last time. It reverberated in her. Someone cleared their throat, but McCoy's hands never left the sides of her face.

"You don't dare die on me, woman." He hissed at her, in that very unique way that reminded her McCoy did in fact have a heart and it demanded that she never leave him. The muscle in his jaw clenched and she knew it was time.

Amelia passed through two clear doorways and settled herself in front of the silver globe. It popped open when she twisted the top and bottom halves against one another. There were three small vials inside. If they had to use the other two… it wouldn't be on her. Laid out on a towel next to the globe were some empty syringes.

It didn't take a doctor to know what to do.

She filled one of the syringes with the liquid inside the vial. She looked out to see McCoy, who was standing opposite of her on the other side of the clear screen. Time seemed to crawl again as she placed the tip of the needle against a clearly drawn x on her forearm. McCoy's work. The mark was perfect.

Normally a doctor would be giving her the injection, but this particular situation made that impossible. One moment of exposure could be enough to start an epidemic. The liquid flowed into her arm, like cool hands reaching through her veins. For some reason she had expected it to hurt, but it stung no more than any vaccination she'd received as a child.

No. The pain didn't start until 48 hours later.

**STARDATE 2260.177**

**Beta Quadrant**

**USS Enterprise**

Her heartrate increased from 80 bmp to 110 over the course of six hours. Some of that was attributed to stress. The rest was undeniably from the virus. Her skin glistened with a sheen of sweat. Amelia described it as uncomfortable, but not unbearable.

The fever set in just after the nineteen hour mark. Incredibly fast for the flu. McCoy sat with Jefferson, reviewing notes they had pulled from historical records. He remembered studying the Modified Spanish Influenza in medical school, had actually written a paper on several of the viruses that the Augments engineered. One didn't get a degree with that focus without thoroughly understanding the potential for Virus-Weaponization.

But all his research into it could only prepare him so much for the reality of what they were facing. Amelia Wright was dying.
She lost more fluid than their IV’s could replace. Her temperature spiked dangerously close to brain damage levels. She had a febrile seizure by the end of the second day. She had a second seizure an hour later. McCoy passed a Synaptic Stabilization Halo through an emergency quarantine window.

It helped him that she was awake and present enough to follow his instructions to fit the halo around her head. Thankfully, it stopped the majority of the seizures…

"I leave my data padd and first aid kit to Leonard McCoy, my Nausicaan Shield Generator to Montgomery Scott, and the jar of sap to James Kirk. To Spock I leave my driver's license." Her voice broke, not just because she started crying, but also because the virus was causing inflammation of her trachea and larynx.

He swore at her, but lord knows that she never listens and that he can't help but be an asshole when he's terrified.

"Amelia." McCoy says her name as he sits beside her, separated by the clear walls of the quarantine chamber. Her cheeks are tinted blue. She's started to suffocate, but she doesn't know it yet. He thinks that because she's looking his way and smiling. McCoy wonders if her lungs are filled with froth and that's why she's failing to get oxygen.

Then the alarms all start to blare and when he looks at her again her eyes are wide open and glassy.

It's been seven days of hell.

And she died.

McCoy jumped from his place on the floor, already spotting the kit he needed. He'd prepared it on day four, after the seizures, knew that her change in circumstances made her survival chances decrease. From two to one… maybe half a percent. Jefferson, aware of what McCoy was about to do, stepped back to the far side of the med-bay, near the corridor entrance.

Preparations had already been made for this circumstance. Emergencies only. Immunities can't be gained from the dead…

The emergency force-field came to life, locking McCoy in next to the quarantine. There was barely a time lapse so the sudden appearance of Jim and Spock next to Jefferson was a surprise. He hadn't expected them to be notified that fast. Then again, they were most likely waiting outside the med-bay with everyone else on board.

"Bones!" The order in Jim's voice was firm and clear. McCoy ignored it.

"Doctor." Spock's voice wasn't as loud, but just as demanding.

Neither one of them risked stopping him and breaking the new quarantine.

He pulled a hazmat mask off the wall, set the seal tight around his face. It fogged once, then cleared as it started to allow in filtered air. McCoy tuned out the shouting behind him, focused on the task at hand. He breached the quarantine and was instantly assaulted with the very cold temperature that had been set inside.

The timeline filtered through his mind. If he became infected then how long would it be before he started having seizures? Before his lungs filled with froth and blood? So many questions.

More importantly, how long ago had Amelia stopped breathing and her heart stopped beating?
He thought about it as he grabbed Amelia's arm, tugging her body away from the makeshift quarantine wall. The kit he brought with him was popped open, supplies laying out in a row. Working as fast as he could, McCoy snapped small boxes onto the diodes on her chest. Her body gave a hard jerk with the first jolt. It wouldn't restart her heart, but it would set the rhythm once he got it going again. He grabbed another instrument, this box larger, and detached a breathing mask to put over her face. It hummed as it pumped oxygen.

Centering his palms between her breasts, he started to push, counting silently. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. McCoy pulled his hands back and her body jerked again.

_They're on the beach. He's turning her to her side and watching water flow from her mouth. He's telling her to breath. She listens._

"You come back to me!" McCoy prayed that she'd listen to him now.

The dead woman on the ground suddenly jerked upright, eyes wide and suddenly full of life and terror. Not so dead anymore.

McCoy felt the breath leave his body, his hands working to pull the pulse units off her before they fired again. He clasped his hand around her wrist, counting, felt her heartbeat under his fingers. Normal. BPM at 100 and lowering by the moment. Satisfied with the results, he pulled the mask off her face.

He met her gaze, those big blue eyes no longer glassy but alert and focused. She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Finally she motioned to him and then towards the door.

McCoy shook his head, "Can't now. I walk out, I risk carrying it with me."

"Plan?" Raspy still. McCoy reached out to touch her throat and examine for damage, but she jerked back and managed a harder, "Don't."

Fine. He'd have to settle for a visual exam. The area around her neck was swollen, a product of the inflammation. Luckily the blue tint in her cheeks was fading, even if slowly. McCoy turned back to the kit he'd packed and pulled out a tricorder. It picked up the readings from her wrist monitor. Temp lower. BPM lower. Basic stats all above the base-line, but not at deaths’ door.

She was probably three days away from being ready for a blood draw. Unfortunately, McCoy's air filter would fail by then, two days max with the active virus in the air. The med-bay was fully equipped to do blood work through a quarantine, but that wouldn't be necessary now as he'd broken the quarantine. He'd just have to do it while inside…

Which is something he came heavily prepared for.

The section of the med-bay the quarantine was located in had a secondary research area. It would be contaminated, but once this was over he could incinerate anything that couldn't be cleared with UV or radiation.

McCoy grabbed the kit off the floor and made his way over to the research access panel. There were culture prep systems and an advanced cellular microscope. He'd be using those almost exclusively once Amelia reached the blood-draw phase.

A second Synaptic halo was also available.

When his air filter failed, it was the first thing he placed over his head. Amelia had started having seizures 48 hours in and he was closing in on that time.
Her recovery was visible. Aside from the single instance of reviving her, McCoy did not intervene in her care. He took her blood, started searching for the active immunities within it. It was a grueling process. Not solely because of the science, but also because the fever had set in and his muscles would randomly spasm. One wrong move could lose him hours of work.

"Tell me what to do." Her words were crystal clear, throat and larynx healed. Good signs.

When McCoy couldn't stand anymore that is exactly what he began to do. He talked her step by step through the process, had her use the projector screen so he could see the microscope results. Blurry, but still recognizable.

The strain had been defeated within her body. Her plasma contained the immunities. He would have laughed had his throat not been on fire. He would have laughed had unconsciousness not claimed him.

"Hey. McCoy. I've got hundreds of potatoes in my hydroponics bay. You can't leave me yet. I need someone to give them to." She was a demanding force. Not in the traditional way of shouting and shoving, but in the way that a dandelion sprouts through concrete. There would be no stopping Amelia Wright from getting to where she needed to be.

So he opened his eyes.

He was laying in one of the med-bay biobeds wearing a blue gown. His uniform was gone, probably a small pile of ash now. For the first time in a while he felt clean. How long had it been? McCoy blinked away the residual sleep, focused on Amelia's face. She was smiling. "I didn't die on you, McCoy." Well… not permanently anyway.

Something squeezed his hand. He tilted his head to see where she had settled her palm into his.

"Glad to see you awake, Doctor." Eli Jefferson appeared behind Amelia, looking over her shoulder to check vitals. It was clear that they were no longer in the quarantine zone.

"What happened?" His voice was rough and strangled, from disuse rather than that fiery inflammation. He coughed against his shoulder and repeated the question a little more clearly.

"You slipped into a coma," Amelia frowned, her free hand moving to rub up and down his arms as if to verify everything was real. It made sense. It's what he would have done. She continued on, "Doctor Jefferson finished creating the vaccine from what you started. They dropped the quarantine once they verified that it was working. You recovered."

He'd been out for a week. Some of it was medically induced, a recommendation from Jefferson, and considering all his faculties were firing correctly McCoy figured it was a good call. The soreness lasted for another few days, along with feeling just plain bone-tired. As Amelia had recovered days before him, she was far more energetic.

While they worked to finish irradiation of the med-bay and full decontamination, he told Amelia the rest of what she'd been wanting to know. He'd been afraid before, worried that the stress might affect her health and at the time they couldn't take those kinds of chances.

"Salo is going to be facing trial for murder."

Amelia shook her head in confusion at his statement. "Murder? Who did he murder?"

"He killed Richard and another federation officer." She shook her head again. This time in denial. When she looked ready to collapse, McCoy did the only thing he could do. He gathered her into his
arms and let her cry against him. "I'm sorry."

She blamed herself for his death. Maybe in the original time-line Richard would have made it to a ripe old age. But in this one he was killed before his time. McCoy reminded her, "He died doing what he felt was right."

And McCoy would be forever grateful to the man for protecting her.

When she finally gathered herself together she broached another matter, "Th'eon?"

"The Federation won't let him stay." The blown cover of a spy couldn't be corrected. "He'll be reassigned to another ship." Of course, she would miss the Andorian.

Two losses. One more lasting. At least she would have time in front of her to grieve, time in a place she called home.
Chapter 31

STARDATE 2260.193

Beta Quadrant

Andorian Space Station

Space exploration waits for no man. Or rather, waits only as long as it is required to.

Once it was entirely clear of the virus, the USS Enterprise returned to the Space Station. Their sudden evacuation and departure had, of course, been the focus of gossip among the crew, but there were only the select few who truly knew what had occurred over the past two weeks. Some reports were marked confidential. Other were marked classified. And some reports were never filed. A large blank space existed in the logs of the Enterprise. Amelia, however, recorded her version of events on her data-padd. For future study one day.

Eli and T'Janis reconnected with the representatives of the Federation soon after the Enterprise re-docked. They carried with them the future of humanity. A future that Amelia would never see. She supposed if something went wrong then maybe they would get another chance to make things right. Isn't that one of the benefits of time travel anyway?

She said goodbye to Th'eon, thankful that she had been granted that request. It turns out that a person gets a favor or two when an ELE comes into play.

_They stood in front of the docking area of a Federation ship, his temporary home until reassignment. At Th'eon's feet were just two bags. Amelia looked him over, noted that his antenna had been treated on the station. Both were in full form now, twitching and rotating. He was wearing a Federation uniform, a jarring difference compared to his chef's clothes. A more disciplined Th'eon than the version she had grown to love._

"So... all this time you were a spy." A good one too as no one on board had even suspected. Well, except maybe McCoy, who had made implications once or twice that the Andorian was as shifty as could be. Amelia didn't think that really counted against the spy's talents.

Th'eon winked at her, "And you, Amelia-Dear, were a time traveler."

"Touche," she said as she smiled at him. "You think we'll see each other again?"

"Our paths are destined to cross. The Captain is always on the Federation radar after all. And I'm guessing you'll keep growing those tomatoes on Earth. I suppose, when I get back, I'll suffer through seeing McCoy to get a batch." She cried. She couldn't help it. And even though the Andorian wasn't really prone to acts of affection, he hugged her anyway.

Th'eon left her with an Andorian Ushaan-tor to remember him by. _And in case that doctor doesn't treat her right._

And then she said goodbye to Richard, whose body would soon be escorted home. There would be a memorial, of course, but she wouldn't be present. It would stars away. Amelia was sure that his brothers would be there. It reminded her of how she hadn't even attended her own parents' funeral. But unlike the time she'd lost them, she was no longer alone. McCoy took leave so that he could be by her side.
Having him with her made it easier to sit in front of her terminal and enter in the request to place a video call. Some beeps sounded and Amelia held her breath until the screen shifted to display the face of Captain Svenquist O'Shea.

His eyes revealed a tiredness that she also felt, but his mouth was turned upwards into a small smile. "Hello, Amelia. How are you doing?" He was a captain, through and through, so it made sense that his first concern was her well-being. She had once been his ward, after all.

She tried to return his small smile, but all that came was a wobble of her mouth and a few new tears. "I think you were right about space not being ready for me."

Of all the reactions she'd expected, she hadn't figured it would be a chuckle. Svenquist laughed, his smile growing. "You know, I'm starting to believe that you were born before your time. I think you were made for space, Amelia Wright."

She thought about that, recognized that, at the end of the day, she was still standing. "I guess it might be growing on me."

Still wearing that small smile, Svenquist nodded, "Richard would like that. He wanted you to be happy. He wanted you to create a new life here."

"I know."

"You and I are no strangers to loss and we both know the best way to get through it is together." It hadn't been what she'd thought when she first met the O'Shea's, but it was a lesson she learned the moment she started to let people back in. With that thought in mind, she cast a quick look at McCoy over her shoulder. A reminder of how much her heart had opened.

Svenquist continued, "So I expect to see you for Christmas when you get back. I know it's a few years down the road, but Richard made me keep my calendar open when you first left. I don't intend to miss that date now."

"I'll be there. And if you ever need to talk…" About Richard. About anything. Amelia didn't expect he'd ever take her up on the offer, but it was extended none-the-less.

"I know." Then Svenquist straightened up in his chair, his next words firmer, more like an order, "You take care of yourself Amelia Wright."

With as much discipline in her voice as she could muster, she answered back, "Will do, Captain."

The connection ended with a few beeps and the terminal view slid back into her desk. A hand landed on her shoulder, giving it a slight squeeze. McCoy wasn't always the best at knowing what to say, but he knew when to be there.

Wordlessly, he guided her out of the chair and towards the door. Together, they made their way to the dining hall. Lunch was just being served, but with the ship still being connected to the Space Station, many crew members were dining off-site.

Luckily, this allowed the Enterprise's newest crew member a chance to be eased into her role. She was blue, not unlike her predecessor. Down the center of her face ran a protruding ridge. McCoy had told her that Hiana was Bolian and was already processed as a Starfleet contractor on board the Andorian Space Station. A convenient and necessary transition.

"Miss Wright." Hiana gave a slight nod of the head towards Amelia, setting a bowl of red 'soup' on her tray. If Amelia was being honest, it looked weird, even if she was sure it would taste delicious.
As she went to move forward, Hiana called out to her, "Thank you for the produce!"

"Anytime!" Amelia called back.

McCoy led them towards the center of the dining hall, where the others waited.

"I think the new diet is going to take some getting used to," Kirk muttered as he tried a spoonful of the soup. Amelia looked down at her own bowl for a longer look. It was thick and gloopy. McCoy grumbled something about vitamins and the captain scowled as he had some more.

"Aye. Tis no 'aggis for sure." Amelia's face scrunched up at Scotty's words, a look reflected on McCoy's face. Haggis would probably never be on the menu. Hopefully.

"I don't know. I think we are due for a change." Across the table a soft female voice sounded. Amelia wasn't sure if Uhura was being philosophical or not, but either way she didn't disagree. A change would be welcome.

They ate together, shared some laughs about memories of pirates and plants. Of colonies and anomalies. A few times Amelia just sat back and listened as they told stories of times before her, of which there were many.

Then the Captain announced that launch was coming up and it was time for station preparations. The crew slowly made their way back on board as Amelia and McCoy headed towards the hydroponics bay.

Mark Dualla had done a fine job in keeping it fully operation during her absence, but she could see he was ready to return to doing a single job instead of two.

McCoy paced by the table at the front of the bay as Amelia started to go over inventory. When he didn't broach the topic on his mind, she did it for him.

"I'll come by later for an exam." He visibly relaxed. Since her exposure to the virus she'd undergone more testing in the past week than in her entire life. Two days before, she blew up on him about how she was sick and tired of all the medical nonsense and she just wanted to get back to work. Other things were said about how if she wasn't a goddamn prisoner of the med-bay then he needed to stop tracking her every move on the ship. Enough expletives left her that even he was left shocked.

"Thank you." The fact that he managed to muster that one up had her smiling. Encouraged, he added, "Last one. I swear."

"Good." She set down her data-padd and walked back over to where he stood. Indicating to her body, Amelia assured him, "I feel fine. I feel great."

Sighing, McCoy placed a hand on her upper arm, "I won't lose you. Not to some residual illness."

"I'm starting to think you have a soft spot for me, McCoy."

"You terrify me, woman." He touched his palms to her face, a move she was quite familiar with. So when he leaned in to kiss her she met him halfway. There was no desperation, no hard pressure and no fear. It was soft and slow and held promise. Like relearning one another. But it was ended far too soon as he pulled back with an annoyed sigh, "Bad timing. Gotta prep the bay for departure."

"So, if I get an all clear on this exam, does that mean…" Amelia waved a hand between them, not particularly subtle. His hands, which had fallen to her shoulders, briefly tightened.
"You couldn't wait until after work to start this?" She kissed him again, laughed against his mouth. McCoy disregarded the chirping on his communicator. Though when hers went off it could no longer be ignored.

She snapped the device off her belt and held it to her ear. "Wright and McCoy," she said into it.

There was an exaggerated sigh on the other end, "And here I was hoping that you wouldn't be a bad influence on Bones."

"I don't know what you mean, Captain."

"Tell him that comms are not optional." The call ended with a beep.

"Guess that's your cue."

"If there isn't adventure that man goes stir-crazy, and he can't launch until the Med-Bay is ready." One more gentle touch of his lips to hers and then he headed out of the hydroponics bay.

She stared at the sliding doors for a while, contemplating their relationship. They didn't define it exactly, just sort of let it be whatever it was. Some days that was McCoy being grouchy and her being understanding. Others it was him being heroic and her being in awe. There were moments when she wondered what exactly it was about McCoy that she found endearing, and then he'd remind her by doing something equally reckless and brilliant.

Her chest felt tight when she thought about those days that he'd spent unconscious with the virus and how she wondered what the ship would be like without him. How integrated he was into her life and the lives of those around him. There wouldn't be grumbling in the cafeteria. Or someone to keep the Captain grounded. There wouldn't be a steady hand on her back.

As much as he'd tried to keep people at a distance, he hadn't succeeded. Not even with her.

Amelia smiled as she turned around to look at the hydroponics bay. It needed repair and love and some stability. A very unique reflection of herself…

**STARDATE 2260.193**

**Beta Quadrant**

**USS Enterprise**

As soon as the last crew member was back on board, they launched. McCoy ran through the standard checks of the Med-bay, did another inventory. While he'd been on leave his medical assistant had restocked the supplies used during the quarantine.

There were moments when he'd be overwhelmed with an image of her, sick and lying on the floor. Or eyes glassy as she stared up at him. He told himself he'd moved some of the beds around due to efficiency, but a part of him recognized that he couldn't stand in the spot she'd died for any length of time.

He wondered what that meant. How far she'd burrowed into him.

And he was still thinking about it when she showed up in his med-bay, almost twelve hours later. She looked tired and was covered in dirt, but her eyes were bright and lively. In one hand she was carrying a bag.
The implication wasn't missed.

"Bit presumptuous," McCoy said as drew a blood sample. When she tilted her head, he pointed to the bag.

"Oh. Well, Doctor, I had high hopes, but if-"

"Now, now, no need to be rash. I suppose we can work something out." He grinned at her and felt his breath catch when she smiled back at him. Smitten. Lost. Christ.

He loved her.

Somehow, he managed to finish the exam. She passed with flying colors. Perfect health.

He told her when they stepped into his room and she dropped her bag to the floor. "I love you. Disaster and all." Then he showed her exactly how much he loved her.

They lay exhausted an hour later, breathing heavily in the dim light of his quarters. Her arm was thrown across his chest, lazy and familiar. Amelia traced patterns on his arm with her fingers. He knew she was still hurting inside, but for this moment he could almost feel her healing.

"I love you too, McCoy. Grump and all."

It was terrifying and exhilarating. Like skydiving. Nothing he would ever do alone, but something he would do with her.

He drifted off to her quiet rhythmic breathing, felt more relaxed that he had in months.

Until hours later when the alarms began blaring and Jim's voice came across the ship.

"Prepare for contact. All hands to Battle stations."

STARDATE 2501.013

M. J. Archer Base Camp

Antarctica

Captain Jefferson reviewed the mission logs, eye scanning the report for any anomalies. Over a hundred jumps in almost a decade and he still found himself checking for tampering. He tapped on the data padd, pulled up the personal report from the pilot.

"Target reached. Stardate 2317.059. Spotted rogue traveler's chroniton signature..." The report continued on to detail the capture of a time traveler who violated the Temporal Prime Directive. Eli didn't miss the irony of having that assignment.

When he completed his review, he marked the mission as successful and filed the record away.

He was just about to open another report when a woman stepped into his office. "Commander?"

"Captain, there is an incoming call for you. From the Domestic Defense Officer." Eli didn't need to answer the call to know what was happening. Nine years ago, after their return with the vaccination, they went to work on establishing Protocol 862. The first stage was a call from the DDO.

Still, he opened his terminal.
"Captain Jefferson. I have a file in my hands that give me strict instructions to contact you. Now, are you going to tell me why that is?" The man was obviously confused, but Eli couldn't blame him. On paper all they did was run a research center in the Antarctic for time travel.

Eli's first question, by the book, "Where did the virus hit?"

"The transport hub in New York City."

"I'm going to send out a mass transport through the emergency system. I need you to shut down all traffic for a one minute window in-" Eli glanced at the time, "-five minutes. Can you do that?"

The DDO turned away from his terminal, spoke to some officers off screen, then returned with, "We can."

There had been many discussions on what they should do with the vaccination. Should they be preemptive and make it a standard inoculation? Should they alert Starfleet? They decided against the inoculation. If they took away this weapon from terrorists there was no knowing what they would use instead.

So they developed Protocol 862.

Eli disconnected the call with the DDO. Stage one was complete.

He walked around the bunker, gathering every crew member he could find and ushered them down the stairs. The lower level was rarely used, which is why it had made the perfect staging ground for the second step.

They had tunneled further into the ground, prepped hundreds of climate controlled crates. Lining the walls were several transporter pods, each one labeled. New York City. London. San Francisco. Dallas. New Dubai. Major hubs across the world.

There were replicator schematics, should the possibility arise that they did not have enough of the live vaccine.

Eli checked the time, then started moving the crates towards the transporter pods. When he was certain that they would make the deadline, he left the team to finish.

Back in his office, he made another call. Across vast distances and solar systems.

To New Vulcan. "Hello, T'Janis."

"Greetings." Unsurprisingly, she wasn't smiling.

"I'm preparing to launch the ships on their maiden voyage. They aren't registered the same so you'll have to work on getting the clearance."

"We will accept their arrival. Thank you."

Short and direct. Ever a Vulcan. Eli placed two more phone calls, to two Starfleet Captains. They were well qualified for the mission, and easily accepted command of the ships. Protocol 862 allowed them to choose their own crew.

Within three days they would take the two ships into the air, transporting with them the future of humanity and the Vulcan race.

Eli pulled up the pictures of the two ships they had commissioned, looked over the pristine lettering
on the side.

**Federation Transport AMELIA WRIGHT**

**Federation Transport LEONARD MCCOY**

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