They always take me early morning, shiptime, when the alien mindlink is strongest.

I slump down as the prison guards strap me into the mindlink cradle. Arms, legs, chest, waist, neck; everything. They lock the back of my prisoner’s harness to the cradle, tightening it until I can’t move an inch. Same as they’ve done to me each week for the past five years. As if I’ve got anywhere else to go.

The hyperbaric chamber seals, goes dark. The atmosphere pressurizes to match a specific alien planet; my ears pop. It’s impossible to get comfortable, but I try anyway. I’m stuck in this hateful harness and the dark-purple prisoner suit that us women of the Viska Prison Ship are forced to wear. But my long silver hair is pulled back into a high ponytail the way I like it, and tattoo-inserts swirl beneath my pale skin. It’s the little things that give some measure of control, when I’ve got none over what happens next.

The microbe-infested water rises up to my chest. I grimace at the salty smell, shivering as the carpet of gel-coated tendrils inside my suit stirs into life, hooking me in. The Polity isn’t allowed to treat human prisoners like this. Not even permanent prisoners guilty of smuggling alien tech owned by warlords. But then, like all the prisoners onboard, they’ve injected me with a small dose of biotech from the alien Skrill. Utterly invisible, if not for the fibre-thin salmon-coloured fuzz growing across my nape.

The way they put it, biologically and psychologically, I’m no longer totally human. So my human rights are forfeit. They’re free to use me as a conduit for the hivemind, transmitted by the chemically rich water from the alien oceans they once swam in. They hope I will reveal the location of dig sites, relics, history — and anything else the Polity feels they can take for themselves.

The fuzz on my neck goes stiff. Mindless chatter, like the distant whirring biomechanical alien machinery, gets louder. Clearer. Faster. Like something on the other side is reaching for me.

I swallow and reach back. My mind’s tugged upwards into a kaleidoscopic ocean. Like I’m swimming. A glittering coral reef, glinting with insane colours, unfolds around me. I did it. I’ve connected to the Skrill hivemind. I feel myself sweeping along the baroque geometries of this alien mind. Bizarre fractals frozen in glass that I can’t possibly process. Dark shapes swim past me. Other aliens? Other minds?

I hear that same low warble, only it’s coming from inside my head. And is somehow forming words.

Felicia? Is that you?

“Paz?” I ask. “I thought you were dead!”

So do I. Colours flash through the murky water, dripping with that wiry humour I love about him. I can’t see him, but I feel him, the texture of his mind. I didn’t think I’d survive,
when the Polity shot our ship down. I woke up in a prison station with this Skrill biotech growing on my skin. They wouldn’t tell me if you survived.

“Well, I did,” I say, laughing. I hold him in my mind’s eye: black-skinned, broad-chested and tall, his surprisingly slender arms wrapping tight around my back from behind, the way he did whenever we watched the distant starlight glittering through the nebulae.

There’s so many people here. Like me, they were ... absorbed into the mindlink. On paper, we’re dead. But in here, I’ve never been more alive.

Even across light years and life and death, we’re together again. My heartbeat skips as I struggle to get closer to him. “So, how do I get out of this human body and join you?” I ask.

The waters darken with displeasure and sadness. I’m sorry, Felicia. Not all minds can be absorbed. Maybe it’s the strain of the biotech they shot into you. But I can’t pull you any farther in; it won’t let me. You’re incompatible.

My heart sinks. “No. There has to be a way. Can’t you ask the aliens?”

It doesn’t work like that. You don’t ... ask them things. They give, sometimes, but that’s it. And for the first time, I recognize the part of him that isn’t human any longer. The alien, distant part of his mind. Maybe he’s just a copy of Paz’s consciousness. Maybe this isn’t the man I love, the big man with whom I explored half the Kav Sector. Water trickles down my chest, and iridescent shapes slice past in graceful arcs.

But that doesn’t mean it’s all hopeless. Our captors took our bodies. But they won’t take our minds.

“Then I’ll come back here,” I say firmly. “Every week. They won’t know I have access. They won’t know I’m with you.”

Felicia! No!

“It’s my choice.”

But if you tell them you have access you’ll be set free!

“I know.”

The waters shimmer with concern. Why stay a prisoner?

“Because I’ll be with you,” I say firmly. “If I leave, you’ll be dead. This way, we’ll all be together.”

Silence. Then: You always were a stubborn girl.

But it won’t be forever. Already, I can feel my connection faltering slightly, unable to keep up or process the bizarre alien nature of this mindspace. How long can I sustain my link? Maybe five years. Maybe five weeks. But the Polity will eventually discover I’ve been lying. I’ll be punished. Thrown into isolation again, at best.

But only my body is imprisoned. Not my mind. Freedom means making any decision, no matter the cost. And through these aliens, I’m free. The man I love more than anyone else in the Universe is right by my side. And I’ll swim in the waters of this hivemind with him as long as I can.

And that’s my choice.

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