

Mirror of the Mind

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Summary

Twenty five years after Khan and the surviving Augments from the Bontany Bay were exiled on Ceti Alpha V, La'an Nonnien Singh must, once again, confront her troubled legacy. Meanwhile in the Mirror Universe her counterpart reconnects with the same relic from her past to stage a coup against the new, peaceful Terran Republic that Spock has established. Their paths converge, and all involved must decide just how much they want to take part in the affairs of another universe.

This is another chapter in the AU where Ceti Alpha V never endured environmental catastrophe.

Notes

-This is a sequel to "That Which You Have Sown"

-Chose not to use archive warnings because I'm posting as I go and not sure just how graphic things will ultimately be.

Chapter 1

It was supposed to be easier, teaching rather than soaring through the galaxy. Yet, as the lead instructor in advanced tactical training, La'an Noonien Singh found her schedule stretched just as thin as when she was stationed on a starship. Some of this was by her own doing, many viewed the shift to academy instructor as a transition to retirement, minimizing their own effort and hoisting off as much work as possible to teaching assistants. La'an couldn't sit by and allow that sort of thing to happen. Ever lesson plan was a perpetual work in progress on the never ending (yet noble) path to perfection, every student assignment she insisted to see with her own eyes. She liked staying busy, she like the predictable routine, yet the wholly unexpected existence of one relative threatened to upset her delicate routine.

Scheduling a meeting had been a challenge in and of itself had been a challenge, but any delays at least had given La'an time to review relevant files and fully consider the choice that lay before her.

KNOWN AUGMENT.

Years ago just seeing those words at the top of a personal record, even applied to someone else, might have cut her deeply. There was still a weight to it, especially considering the fact that she had recently learned that a painful piece of her past had been alive for centuries, living outside of the bounds of Federation records for a quarter century, and had a daughter who wanted to integrate into modern society.

Maya Noonien Singh had been eagerly open and compliant with the release of her records. She was the daughter of Khan Noonien Singh and Marla McGivers, her exact date of birth was unknown but estimated to be twenty four Earth years prior, and everything else was... complicated. Her legal status, her medical history, the details of her recent involvement in Starfleet affairs, it was all difficult to make sense of. Yet, La'an was her next of kin and offered to consider welcoming Maya into her own home... provided that she proved to be a good candidate for release to home arrest, and provided that she seemed agreeable enough to make such an arrangement tolerable.

The room where they met was bright, cold, and nearly empty, furnished only with a desk with chair on each side. La'an had arrived first, sitting in the edge of her seat with her back straight and rigid until Maya was brought in. Damn. She even looked like him, a bit like the man in the old photographs from the history books, but more like the young boy she had seen briefly in Toronto.

He was just a boy. A boy with a capacity to do terrible things. Similarly, Maya was a young woman with agency of her own that she, very recently, had used to do both altruistic and reprehensible things. When Maya was brought in, La'an couldn't decide if she looked better or worse than the image in her file. She looked softer in her face, like she had gained weight in her time of rest and recovery, but there was more exhaustion in her eyes

"Maya." La'an tried to sound warm and welcoming, but instead still sounded stern. What did one even say in a situation like this? She wished she could skip past the usual pleasantries, but cutting straight to business wouldn't work in her best interest. The purpose of this meeting was to build rapport and to get a sense of what Maya was like as a person, beyond what the official records could tell her.

Maya sat down in the chair across the desk from La'an, but said nothing. If La'an had to hazard a guess, she might suppose that the young woman was equally as confused and uncertain about how to approach this interaction. La'an imagined there was always a degree of awkwardness in discovering, well into adulthood, unknown branches of your family tree, only most people didn't also have to wrap their heads around several centuries of separation and the jarring knowledge that an ancient dictator had been secretly alive all along.

"I suppose it might come off as disingenuous and insensitive if I ask how you've been doing." La'an continued,

"Only if you're expecting the usual short, polite response." Maya's voice was soft and hoarse. She didn't only look tired, she sounded tired too.

"Actually, I'd appreciate the candor." La'an leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. "I think transparency is important, so tell me, how are you really doing?"

Maya hesitated before answering, leaning back in her seat and thinking for a moment. "You know, you remind me of him."

A shiver went down La'an's spine. She sat up straight and her eyes opened wide. For years she thought she had made peace with the unpleasant parts of her family history, and while she expected to have that peace challenged throughout this process, she hadn't expected it to be so blunt. A lifetime of convincing herself that she wasn't like him, and now she sat across from someone who could tell her in great detail what she had in common with her infamous ancestor.

"Don't panic like that," Maya added. "I only meant in the way you speak, like everything is so heavy. It's hardly a trait unique to him, if that makes you feel any better."

La'an took a deep breath to regain her composure, but her posture was still stiff and alert. "Well, I hope the similarities end there. But, please, tell me how you've been."

Another pause as Maya thought. "Where even to begin? It's been months, but I still haven't recovered fully from the virus. I have free range to learn and study to better myself, but little energy to do it. All I can tolerate are the daily counseling sessions that leave me feeling worse than when I started and the physical therapy for my shoulder, which is deceptively strenuous."

"Unfortunately, these things often get worse before they get better." La'an knew all too much about this topic. "Healing from trauma is messy. Trust the process."

"Trust the process! How many times have I heard that? I didn't realize I was supposed to be hurt over most of the things I've lived through until someone sat me down and told me it was traumatic. I used to think my life was perfectly normal."

"Maya, understand that I mean this respectfully..." La'an softened a bit. Her spine wasn't quite so straight, and a little warmth found its way into her voice. "...but nothing about your life has been normal."

Maya smiled and shook her head. "I used to think it was normal, but every day I learn more ways in which my life has been so strange and isolated. I wish I had more strength to study. My education is full of gaps, and my understanding of Earth's history is not just biased but completely wrong."

"I can only imagine."

"My history lessons amounted to little more than detailed accounts of Earth's despots over the years, their strengths, and their weaknesses that led to their defeat."

"Everyone's defeat but Khan's, I presume." La'an narrowed her eyes. All the warmth was gone from her voice.

"He wasn't defeated!" Maya leaned forward, defensive.

"You still have biases you need to unlearn. Prioritize that." A tense silence settled over the room. So quickly the conversation had turned from trusting to unfavorable. La'an didn't want to end on a sour note. "I'm sorry. This journey is not going to be an easy one. Your name alone is going to be a burden."

"I have a question for you." Maya had backed down from her defensive posturing. "Of all the generations that led to you, why is it that no one thought to change their name?"

"I can't speak for everyone, but I think it's better to create your own legacy rather than the past define you."

Maya sighed. "Growing up, everything was about legacy and ambition. I'm tired of it. I just want to exist." A pause. "And it feels as though existing is all I'm going to be able to do. No one warned me about how limited my life would be as an augment."

"Don't give up so easily. Exceptions have been made." The warmth in La'an's voice was back.

"Is that how you got into Starfleet?" Maya's tone was half-teasing.

"Actually, no, I was thinking of someone else. I'm removed by enough generations that I couldn't be considered enhanced." It had occurred to her from the onset that getting involved in Maya's life might mean living through another experience with shadows of Una Chin-Riley's court martial. Years ago she accepted the morality of the Federation's ban on genetic engineering and related restrictions without question, but reality, she found, had so much more nuance. "And maybe take a closer look at some of those regulations. You might be in a gray area, as someone who inherited enhancements instead of receiving them through a procedure."

Maya's smile grew. "I've been saying the same thing, but I think my health and recent criminal history will also limit my options." Another pause. Maya looked down. "I shouldn't complain. I'm safe. I'm being treated with respect. That should be enough."

"Maya." La'an spoke softly and leaned forward. "That's the minimum. I think you can do better for yourself." If given the opportunity, Maya could thrive. La'an had read the reports and felt her heart ache for Maya before they had even met: a brilliant mind stuck in a toxic environment where she could never reach her potential.

The two sat in silence for a while, nothing more to say. La'an was the first to speak again. "Unless you have anything else on your mind, I should be going. We'll meet again next week."

"So I haven't frightened you off, then?" Maya teased.

"Not yet you haven't." A slight smile finally appeared on La'an's face. "I've still got hope for you."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Cw:

-Brief reference to noncon

Five months prior, Terran Empire

Desperate times called for desperate measures, and Admiral La'an Noonien Singh was three steps past desperate and creeping into the territory of depraved. The Terran Empire was dying...some might say it had already died now that Commander in Chief Spock insisted on renaming it the Terran Republic and abruptly cutting away all of its power. La'an had not abandoned hope just yet, which was why she took command of the ISS Portland and set in a course for Ceti Alpha V to chase after a wild rumor. She might not be able to retake the Empire on her own, but if the rumors were true, she might be able to earn a powerful ally.

"Admiral, we'll be in orbit over Ceti Alpha V soon," said the helmsman, a young woman with long red hair and a sharp face.

"Very good, lieutenant." La'an turned to address the ship's captain: a willowy woman with round eyes. "Captain Albrecht. I need to consult with you in your ready room. I would like your input as to who should be on the away team."

"Of course."

La'an rose from the command chair, but before the two women could turn to go, the communications office interrupted them.

"Admiral, they're...hailing us."

"That can't be possible." A look of shock and confusion appeared on her face. Khan and the augments had been left with nothing on Ceti Alpha V, a cowardly sidestep from a captain who couldn't defeat them. It wasn't guaranteed that any of them would even have survived, so how in the hell did they have modern communication technology. "Put them on screen."

The viewscreen showed the interior of a ship's bridge, busted and broken as if it had crash landed. That explained everything. In the command chair sat a young woman who bore a resemblance to the old photographs from the historical records.

"This is La'an Noonien Singh, a direct descendant of Khan Noonien Singh, from the Terran Empire." She couldn't bring herself to call it the Terran Republic. "I need to speak to Khan. I have a proposal that might interest him."

The young woman chuckled softly. "Oh, Admiral, I'm afraid you're too late. It's been less than a year since I killed my father and took his place."

Damn. La'an was well aware of the possibility that she might go through the trouble only to find out that Khan had died, but the realization was still jarring. However, all was not lost. This could still turn in her favor. "Impressive. I would be even more honored to work with the woman who usurped the infamous Khan Noonien Singh. Tell me your name."

"Maya."

"Maya, I know almost nothing about you, but I do know that you, your family, every person living on that planet has suffered a grave injustice. You were meant to rule, but instead you were forced to scrape out a meager existence on a harsh planet. I can give you the empire you deserve."

Maya leaned forward with a look of curiosity in her face. "I'm interested, but I need to understand how you are in the position to grant such a thing."

"The Terran Empire is dying, currently led by a man who has stripped it of its power, outlawed long standing traditions, and set it down a path that will surely lead to ruin. I intend to retake the Empire and correct those mistakes, but I cannot do this on my own. I need the advantage of a genetically superior team to back by efforts, and while I would have liked to bring back on of our greatest rulers, I think you have your own unique strengths. For example, you've already staged a successful coup."

"I'm interested. Tell me more."

"I'd like to continue this conversation in person, aboard the ship."

"And while I look forward to this discussion, I'm sure you understand that I'm not comfortable going to your ship alone. I need to be accompanied by a party of five."

"I can't accommodate that. You may bring one escort."

"You can't allow for two?"

"I could turn this ship around, leaving you with nothing but the knowledge that you wasted the only chance you will ever have to rule an

empire because you were too stubborn to cooperate.”

Maya paused, taken aback. “I understand.” She spoke softly, defeated. “One escort it is.”

“Hail us again when you are ready to come aboard. The transporter room will be standing by. End transmission.”

La’an turned her attention back to Captain Albrecht. “Well, Captain, we have guests to greet. To the transporter room.”

Once they were off the bridge and on the turbolift, Albrecht gave La’an and sly look. “I’m surprised. You didn’t see, the least bit disappointed to learn that Khan is dead, unless you hid it well.”

“And I’m surprised you haven’t seen how this is a favorable change, with Khan the best I could hope for is to be the Emperor’s right hand, but this girl is young, inexperienced, and presumably easily manipulated. If the augments are indeed loyal to her, if I can bend her to my will, I can bend them all.”

Albrecht’s smile grew. “And with a scheming mind like that, it’s no surprise you became an admiral.”

“Speaking of scheming...I’ve having trouble reading the dynamics on your ship. I hope you might indulge a few questions.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“Who are your greatest threats?”

“First officer Conroy, and also the helmsman, Reese.”

La’an nodded. It was no surprise that the first officer had his eyes on Albrecht’s command. That was always how it went for those who were close enough to power to taste it. The helmsman, however, seemed unremarkable. “And who is your...consort?” La’an wasn’t sure what Albrecht’s preferences were.

“I haven’t got one,” she answered with a slight shrug.

“Captain!” La’an’s eyes were wide with shock. “Don’t tell me you’ve abandoned tradition because of some new, unenforceable regulation.”

“Of course not, I value tradition just as much as you do. Doctor T’Ralia used to be my woman, but when the novelty of being with a Vulcan wore off no one else held my interest.”

“My advice, Captain, is to stop being so picky and find someone who will suffice. They’ve taken away our agonizers and outlawed promotion by assassination. You have few means left to demonstrate your authority. It would behoove you to use them all to maintain the respect and obedience of your crew.”

“Admiral, you offer sound advice.” Albrecht stepped closer, leaving only inches of space between the two of them, and she looked La’an in the eye. “But it’s more in my nature to submit to one above my station.”

La’an leaned in even closer, raw hunger in her eyes, “That’s a bold proposal, Vivienne.”

“Not yet it isn’t. I wouldn’t give myself to an admiral, but to an emperor?”

A wicked smile appeared on La’an’s face. “How cruel of you to make me wait. Luckily for you, I can be very patient.”

When La’an and Albrecht arrived in the transporter room, the technician greeted them with a Terran salute. “Admiral,” he began, “We just received word that the two augments are ready to beam aboard.”

“Let’s not leave them waiting a moment longer. Beam them aboard.”

The technician shifted his focus to the console and went to work. Moments later, two young women materialized on the transporter platforms: Maya and an unknown augment. Maya’s escort had a long, lean form and held herself with elegance.

La’an, Albrecht, and the technician greeted the pair with a Terran salute before La’an stepped forward. “Maya. It’s an honor and a privilege to have you on board.” She looked toward the other augment. “And who are you?”

“Ekaterina Mikhailova Petrova, or Katya. Maya is my...” she stopped short as Maya narrowed her eyes and gave her a sharp look. “...My most trusted friend”

Well that told La’an just as much about their relationship as if she had openly admitted the truth. However La’an said nothing. Those details did not matter. “An honor to meet you as well.” Simple and professional “I’d like to get straight to business. Come. We will discuss my offer in Captain Albrecht’s ready room.”

Each of the four people gathered around the table brought a unique sense of anticipation to the meeting. Maya tried to seem cool and confident, but it only thinly veiled a youthful sense of excitement. Katya seemed tense and impatient. Captain Albrecht was calm and easy, sitting back and ready to simply was the whole affair unfold around her. La’an, however, had the boldest presence in the room. The commanding gravitas of someone who knew they were in control.

“So, Admiral.” Maya spoke first, ignoring any standards of decorum and respect. “Tell me how you plan to make me an emperor.”

La’an wasn’t sure if it was an act of ignorance from someone who had no idea how the world worked, or if the young woman was trying to

assert control over the situation. Regardless, it didn't faze La'an. "Try not to get too far ahead of yourself. Taking over an empire that spans through many star systems is a more complex task than taking over a single small colony, even if you did defeat one of history's greatest rulers. You aren't ready to be an emperor yet."

"You lured me here with lies!" Enraged, Maya rose from her seat.

"I said what I had to say to earn your confidence." La'an spoke firmly but did not raise her voice. "Let me remind you that you are in no position to make demands. I can easily send the two of you back to Ceti Alpha V and act as if this conversation never happened."

Maya sat back down. "Then what is it you have in mind, and how will it benefit me? Because it's starting to seem like you intend to use me to achieve your own ambitions."

"I want to make myself Emperor, with you as my successor. You're an advanced type of Terran, but you're young and inexperienced with no knowledge of how our society works. Follow my example, learn from me, and when you're ready you will be set up for success. What I ask in return is only cooperation from you and your people. I need a team of your best to stage the coup, and once my position is secured, I will have each and every augment brought to Terra Prime where you all can live as an elite ruling class, just as you deserve."

Maya paused to consider the offer, and she looked toward Katya. The two said nothing, only looked into each others eyes before Katya gave a slight nod.

"I accept your offer, but I have a few unanswered questions. How many of my father's genetic enhancements have survived the generations?"

La'an considered her answer carefully and chose to speak the truth. "None, I'm afraid. Only a few unique genetic markers."

"And, Admiral, do you expect my people to accept a leader who is objectively inferior?"

"I expect them to remember who saved them from exile, and I expect you to help me remind them." Now there was a bite in La'an's voice, her jaw clenched and her patience was wearing thin.

Maya gave Katya one more quick look before she answered. "Understood. What are our next steps?"

"Come back to Terra Prime with me. There we can take time to finalize plans with my supporters and to fill you in on the history and culture of the Terran Empire."

"I have reservations about leaving my people for so long."

"Why? Is your position of power so fragile that you fear they will turn against you in your absence?" La'an taunted.

"No, of course not!" Maya snapped. Katya look toward her and placed a hand on her shoulder, but Maya flinched away. "I only meant...to leave my home and my responsibilities to travel through the stars, and to place my trust in a total stranger..."

"You aren't nervous, Maya, are you?"

"Of course not. This is what I was meant to do."

"Good." La'an stood up, and in turn so did Albrecht, Katya, and Maya. "We'll have you beamed back to the planet, so you can get your affairs in order."

Chapter 3

San Francisco

Over the past week, Maya had proved herself to be unassuming and agreeable. She kept to herself, spending most of her time sleeping, studying, or willfully ignoring the physical therapy exercises she was supposed to be doing. Just as she had said in their first meeting, she seemed content to spend her time learning: delving into computer programming because that was what she wanted and remediating her fractured understanding of Earth's history because that was she needed. However, La'an's personal opinion was that Maya's greatest area of need was her lack of experience and understanding of modern Federation society, but there was very little she could do to correct that so long as she was confined to her home.

La'an had been home from teaching at the Academy for an hour and had not yet seen nor heard from Maya since the evening before. That was normal. She was supposed to be monitoring Maya, but she was hesitant to disturb her some-number-of-greats aunt's erratic and unpredictable sleep schedule when her body seemed to beg for rest at every moment. La'an couldn't imagine living like that. So long as she kept a regular schedule she could trust herself to wake up and fall asleep at the same time. Then again, her body had never been wrecked by a virus engineered to target her genomes.

She stood outside the door to listen, hoping to hear something to suggest that Maya was awake. She could hear the voice of a male actor.

"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue!" Maya was watching Shakespeare.

La'an stood outside the door and rung the chime.

"Come in," Maya answered.

The door slid open, and La'an stepped inside. Maya reclined in the bed, her eyes fixed on a projection on the screen. It was a recording of a production of Hamlet. This was how Maya preferred to take in information: body at rest and mind active.

"I'm listening." Maya's eyes were still fixed on the projection. "I can pay attention best if I'm slightly distracted."

"Am I the distraction, or is Hamlet the distraction?"

"That depends of what you want to talk about."

La'an perched in the edge of the bed and twisted her neck to view the projection. "Nothing in particular." It all seemed very silly: actors speaking in verse, wearing exaggerated makeup, and dressed in costumes that had some basis in old Earth clothing but were stylized to look bolder onstage. "Is this for entertainment or education?"

"Both." Maya still didn't look away. "I love this play. I've had it committed to memory for years, but I've never seen it as it was meant to be seen, and wanted to see how closely the version I was told is to the real one."

"And?"

"Perfect. Too perfect, it's bringing up memories I probably shouldn't revisit."

"If it's reminding you of something painful, you don't need to keep watching."

"No, that's the trouble, it's reminding me of one of my favorite memories, but it's not one I think I should look on fondly."

La'an nodded. Her curiosity was piqued, but she would dare press the issue. "However much or little you want to share, I'm happy to listen."

Maya sat up, a little too quickly, as she had to take a deep breath and close her eyes for a moment. "Computer, stop." The recording paused. Hamlet was stuck on a mid-speech frame that made him look as though he had a painful expression on his face. "It's been ages since I've been asked about my good memories, since I've been on Earth it feels like every interaction I've had is either analysis of or recovery from the painful memories. I would love so much to reminisce about something nice, but you can't tell a soul about this." There was a desperate fire in Maya's eyes that made La'an fearful for what she wanted to share.

"I wouldn't dare betray your confidence."

"I know you speak with my case worker daily." Maya still had that air of desperation in her voice. "I don't want him to know either, I fear if it seems like I have any favorable opinions of my father it might set me back."

"Maya, your trust is more valuable to me than any agreements I've made." Her heart jumped as she braced herself for an uncomfortable disclosure.

Maya looked back to the projection on the ceiling. "Works of classical literature were passed down to us like honored oral traditions. My father, all of the original augments had enough wires to fill a library committed to memory. Recitations were one of the few options for recreation we had. A friend of my father's organized a bare bones staging of the tragedy of Hamlet and wanted me to play the title role. He said it was based on my talent, but I think the real reason was because there weren't enough men interested who were young enough to portray a student prince." Maya shook her head. "That's not what matters. For once in my life my father was proud of me. He coached me through it and was patient and pleased with my progress."

La'an was relieved to hear that, and a bit ashamed that her assumptions turned so dark for no reason, that wasn't fair to Maya to assume that

every memory was stained with trauma. “That’s nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, I’m glad to hear you have happy memories.” She herself had to dig deep to find pleasant memories from her youth.

“I don’t understand why it is that I hated him so much and still miss him so much.” Maya looked away as she spoke, and her voice was soft and distant.

“Grief is complicated. And grief is complicated because life is complicated. You can have good memories about someone you hate and bad memories about someone you love. They can exist together, and one feeling doesn’t cancel another out.”

There was a heavy moment of silence. La’an thought again about the little boy from Toronto, how it was both true that he was a frightened child and a future tyrant. How he could be both cruel and kind to the same person.

Maya sighed and shook her head, “I supposed that if feelings made perfect sense, they wouldn’t be feelings, and we’d all be Vulcans,”

La’an smiled and shook her head. “I’ve spent more time with Vulcans than you have. I wouldn’t say their lives are any less complicated, just different. At any rate, I’m still going to keep this conversation private, and I’d encourage you to enjoy Hamlet without shame or restraint.”

Maya’s eyes lit up, “Would you care to watch with me? I don’t mind starting from the beginning.”

“No thank you, I read it ages ago and don’t see the appeal.” Some saw the theatre as an escape from reality, but La’an could never immerse herself enough to see anything more than actors on a stage. The whole concept was tedious.

“Don’t see the appeal?” Maya spoke with frenzied excitement, eager to draw a skeptic into her obsession. “A young man trying to grieve the loss of a parent and told by everyone around him that he’s out of his mind for a perfectly reasonable reaction, conspiracies, murder, paranoia, insanity, duels...”

“Maya, I have a lot of work to do tonight.” La’an rose to her feet and took a few steps toward the door. Before she left she turned back toward Maya. A small, yet uncharacteristically playful smile curled in her lips. “Goodnight, sweet prince.”

“And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

Chapter 4

Terran Empire

Were all young adults this infuriating, or was it just this one? Maya was arrogant, surely stemming from the fact that she felt entitled to rule an empire and saw her inherited genetic enhancements as a sign of superiority. La'an had encouraged this at first to earn the girl's trust, but after a few months of living and working closely with her, she regretted taking that approach. Sometimes she regretted choosing to work with Maya in the first place. She seemed to want results without putting forth any effort, eyes always distant and glazed over whenever La'an tried to explain any necessary details about the Terran Empire's history and culture.

"Maya." La'an was exasperated. She and Maya sat at the table, PADDs strewn about. Maya slouched in her seat, her eyelids heavy. "Let's talk about something else. You've still never told me the details of how exactly you usurped your father, or why."

"I don't see why the details matter." She avoided looking at La'an when she spoke.

La'an should have expected this. So far Maya had always been frustratingly evasive and cagey when asked even the simplest of questions. "I need insights into your psyche, your motives, your strengths and weaknesses. This could be essential to insure your success as a future emperor."

"He had power, and I wanted it, is that not reason enough? My understanding is that this is the same way anyone accomplishes anything in your empire."

"Then tell me how," La'an pressed. "I've been dying to know just how you pulled off such an incredible feat." Hopefully encouraging Maya's inflated ego would encourage her to open up.

La'an shifted her weight in her seat, and as she considered her answer for a moment she had a nervous look on her face, "In the interest of transparency...it was a collaborative effort."

"These things require cooperation and coordination. I don't think any less of your accomplishment." Of course she hadn't done it on her own, La'an never thought that was the case,

"I...managed to convince a number of my father's inner circle that he needed to be replaced and that I was the best choice." Maya's spine straightened up, and she sat alert.

La'an studied the younger woman closely. Every sign of a person hiding something. "And as his heir, they accepted you?"

Maya looked away and took a deep breath to brace herself. She was definitely hiding something, and she was a terrible liar. "If only it was that simple. I should have been his heir, but instead it was my younger brother."

"And why did he favor your brother?"

"That doesn't matter!" Maya slammed her fist on the table as she shouted. She hit a PADD, shattering the screen and cutting her hand. She turned her head to look up at the ceiling, shaking her hand to chase the pain away.

A smug smile appeared on La'an's face. There was something to uncover here, in time she would. "If you aren't too agitated, I have one more question."

"I can't guarantee that I'm not, but go on." Maya still wasn't looking at La'an, instead looking down to examine her injured hand.

"The reports stated that the augments from the Botany Bay were unwaveringly loyal to Khan. What exactly did you say to convince them to betray him?" Unless Maya had some secret skills as a persuasive orator, something wasn't adding up.

Maya paused, the look of fear on her face was unmistakable. "It didn't take much convincing. After so many years living on Ceti Aloha V, they could see his flaws and only needed someone bold enough to do something about it."

An evasive answer if ever she heard one, but La'an knew better than to press the issue to far all at once. "How very lucky for you." La'an stood. "Take some time to calm yourself, we have a busy afternoon. I have a meeting with Commander in Chief Spock, and I was able to get permission for you to come along. So far as anyone else knows, you're a cousin of mine from the Martian colony. Let me speak for you, less chance that a gap in your knowledge might give you away."

"Wait..." Maya sprang to her feet. "If he trusts you, if it's so easy for you to get an audience with him, then what's the need for all this waiting and planning? Why do you even need me, if you can, with so little effort get close enough to slit his throat?"

"Maya, for someone who has successfully staged a coup you seem hopelessly clueless. It takes more than a successful assassination, one must also either subdue or replace an entire power structure and take necessary measures to ensure political stability. These things can't be rushed."

"Of course," Maya conceded.

"And later tonight we have a meeting with some associates of mine, the leaders of the Society for Terran Traditions. With them, there is no need to hide your identity, but it would still be in your best interest to let me do the talking."

"Third assassination attempt this week," Doctor McCoy grumbled as he knelt beside an unconscious man, scanning him with a tricorder, "I'm

getting too old for this shit.”

“Be that as it may, Doctor,” the Vulcan began. “There are few people I can trust. You fill a role no one else can.”

“Wish I didn’t have to…” Slowly and carefully he got back to his feet. This was a man who should have retired years ago. “Look, Spock, I know you’re trying to set a good example, and I admire it, but maybe if these men are trying to kill you, you might deter them a little bit more if you responded with something stronger than a Vulcan nerve pinch. These guys clearly aren’t going to be receptive to the non-violent approach. That sounds more ‘logical’ to me.”

“Commitment to my ideals is only one of many factors that influence my choices, Doctor. Within this man’s memories is information. If he had assistance, he knows the identity of his co-conspirators. If he worked alone, he knows the vulnerabilities that allowed him to come so close to success.”

“Law of large numbers, Spock. Eventually one of them might get lucky.”

“Or, perhaps, Doctor, with continued practice I will continue to become more and more proficient at foiling their attempts.”

“Well, I hope you’re right. Guess he had better be taken into custody and interrogated once he comes to.”

Security was tighter at the Commander in Chief’s office. In the old days a respected admiral could go where they pleased without question, but Spock was more selective in who he allowed to get close to him. Damn Vulcan coward.

There was a tense moment getting through security with Maya’s forged credentials, but La’an held enough authority and gravitas in her presence that few people dared to question her. As an aide led the pair to Spock’s office, La’an gave Maya a shrewd look, hoping that would be enough to remind the young woman to keep her mouth shut. Maya was highly intelligent, but lacked tact and common sense.

Inside the office seated at the desk was a Vulcan man with gray hair and a tidy beard. He rose from his seat and stepped to the other side of the desk to greet them.

“Commander in Chief, an honor as always.” No Terran salute, Spock didn’t care for it anymore. “And a relief to see you alive and well. I heard about the recent attempt on your life.”

“Assassination attempts, Admiral, are an unfortunate yet constant fact of my life.” Spock answered as he went back around to sit at the desk.

“This is Maya, the cousin I mentioned.” La’an and Maya sat in the chairs on the other side of the desk. “She has talent and ambition that I’m afraid would have wasted on the Martian colony. I’d like to thank you again for giving her this opportunity to see the inner workings of the Terran Republic.”

Spock nodded. “A simple favor to grant. Tell me, Admiral, how are the restorations aboard the Portland progressing?”

“Better than I had expected,” La’an replied. “As you know, Captain Albrecht has an attachment to the old, violent ways, but even she has begun to come around, if reluctantly. Her crew, though, seem to be more forward thinking. I felt a sense of optimism when I spoke to them.” Her response was carefully crafted to give Spock a favorable view of the situation aboard the Portland, but with just enough critique to keep it believable.

“Exactly as I predicted. This is a common occurrence. Those in power fear to lose it without the unjust systems that put them in place, while those who stand to benefit the most embrace reform with open arms.”

“Perfectly understandable,” La’an replied. “Also, I thought I might mention. The Portland’s Chief Medical Officer is a Vulcan, T’Ralia. Do you know her?”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “Admiral. It is not a reasonable assumption to think that I would know every Vulcan.”

“Perhaps not, but Vulcans with successful careers in Starfleet are exceptional.” La’an shrugged.

“In any case, this time your assumption was close to the truth. I have not met T’Ralia, but I do know of her. Her family has a reputation.”

“Oh?” La’an hadn’t felt any genuine curiosity for the personal details of the Portland’s doctor, but now her curiosity was piqued, “What sort of a reputation?”

“Her parents were instrumental in ending several uprisings. I’m curious, what was Doctor T’Ralia’s opinion of the reforms?”

“Favorable.” La’an had not actually spoken a word to the Vulcan doctor, but to admit that might make it seem like she hadn’t done her due diligence aboard the Portland. “She said it was logical to reduce suffering and build a more stable state.”

Again, Spock nodded. “Curious though, that she favors reform when her family had always worked in the Empire’s best interest.”

“I’m sure they found their own way to use logic to justify their actions.” La’an offered,

“Indeed. Admiral that was all I planned to discuss. Was there anything else from your time abroad the Portland that you wished to share?”

La’an shook her head. “Nothing comes to mind, no. As always, we’ll stay in communication.”

“Of course, Admiral.” Spock turned slightly to address Maya. “I hope observing this meeting has been enlightening.”

“It has,” Maya answered, her voice more pleasant and warm than La’an had ever heard. “Thank you for this opportunity.”

Spock stood, and a moment later the two women rose to their feet as well. Instead of the traditional Terran salute he did a gesture with his hand that originated on Vulcan, one that used to be outlawed for being pro-alien, Frankly, La'an found it vulgar.

"Live long and prosper."

La'an and Maya were back at the table, a repeat from that morning with La'an's patience wearing thin and Maya nearly bored to tears. They had several hours until the next meeting, and La'an intended to make good use of them.

"You've met your greatest adversary, Maya. What was your impression of that meeting?"

"A waste of time. It would have been just as effective to send a detailed report."

La'an stood up and took a few steps away to let her frustration dissipate. Coaching along someone so immature and naive was not something she expected to have to do to prepare to retake an empire. "I went to great lengths and assumed great risks to get you in that room. Now tell me what have you learned from your meeting with Spock?"

"You never told me he wasn't Terran."

"I never thought it was necessary. 'Spock' is about as Vulcan as a name can be." This was tedious, navigating the absolute (if perfectly understandable) depths of Maya's ignorance.

"And I've only met one Vulcan before, so I had no way of knowing," Maya pointed out. "Still, it's an important observation, even if it is an obvious one."

"How so?" It was an insult to the Terran Empire to be ruled by a non-Terran, but beyond that Spock's race was a basic, objective fact of his being, in the same way that he had a beard and was tall.

"He has an advantage with aliens that you and I will never have" Maya explained.

"Perhaps, but their opinions have no value when they exist to be conquered and ruled."

"But there's so many of them! Can they really all be controlled by might alone? Or what if they react violently to seeing a leader who famously took pity on them replaced by a Terran?"

"They have been ruled by might alone for centuries. There is no reason to believe that this approach would cease to be effective or that sufficient force would not be able to quell future uprisings."

"And it would still be wise to prepare for possible uprisings rather than arrogantly assume that they pose no threat?"

"Point taken." That was something La'an hadn't considered on her own... maybe working with Maya would be worth the trouble after all. "Tell me what else you learned from meeting Spock."

"He trusts you, without question. Someone tried to kill him this morning, but he met with you and let you bring an unknown guest as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Why is that?" Maya looked toward La'an for an explanation, but La'an remained silent, forcing Maya to puzzle it out on her own. "He must trust you...because of a common history."

La'an nodded. "We served together on the Enterprise, decades ago. Much of his old crew supported his radical views, his rise to power, and his reforms. He made the mistake of thinking anyone who shared an amiable history with him would be receptive to his extreme views. For one who disagreed but wanted to bide their time, blending in was simply a matter of saying the right things. I never agreed with him, but I saw strategic value in keeping my opinions to myself."

"And there are others like you, who Spock trusts?"

Another nod. "A few, yes. And you're going to meet some of them tonight."

"Admiral," Maya asked as they waited for their guests. "Shouldn't you be a bit more secretive about this?"

"Oh no, Maya. No further precautions are necessary. Some of Spock's reforms work in our favor. He guarantees freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. We can gather and criticize him as much as we please without consequence. Of course, planning a coup falls outside of the realm of protected speech, but so long as no records are kept we have plausible deniability."

A chime at the door.

"Come in," La'an called. The door slid open, and the man who stepped inside greeted La'an with a Terran salute, which she returned. Maya also gave her best attempt at a Terran salute.

"Joseph M'Benga. You're the first to arrive. Let me introduce you to Maya Noonien Singh, daughter of Khan Noonien Singh and the new leader of the augmentations on Ceti Alpha V."

Perplexed, M'Benga tilted his head and gave Maya a thoughtful look. "Not who I was expecting to meet, but I trust La'an's judgment."

Hikaru Sulu, Erica Ortegas, and Nyota Uhura also joined them, each with a similar surprised and skeptical response.

It was crowded with all six gathered around a small table meant for four. Their group was small yet powerful.

“As you can see,” La’an began, “We must adapt to a significant change of course. Khan is dead, but in his place we have an allegiance with the woman who was able to overthrow him. The augments are just as loyal to her as they were to her father.”

“Bullshit!” Ortega interrupted. While everyone else had a similar sense of decorum as if they in the captain’s ready room on a star ship, Ortega acted more like she was in a crowded bar. “You promised to bring back Khan, and instead you show up with some random kid and a story that’s impossible to prove.”

“I have medical records to prove her genetic heritage.” La’an remained calm in spite of the outburst.

“Medical records can be forged. I still don’t believe it,”

“Erica Ortega, have you forgot the vow we took?” La’an taunted. “If you abandon the cause, your life is forfeit. I can reasonably claim that I killed any one of you in self defense after an attempt on my life.”

Silence.

“Hey, I’m not abandoning anything.” Ortega held up her hands in a sign of defeat. “I just think this seems like a long, elaborate waste of time.”

“I think you might change your mind once we have a team of augments on our side.” La’an spoke with calm control. “Maya and I will be returning to Ceti Alpha V to collect them, and in the mean time I need each of you to prepare for our return. Uhura, the credentials you forged for Maya allowed her to get right into Spock’s office. We will need falsified documents for the augments, nothing complicated, just enough to prove identity.”

Uhura nodded.

“Sulu and Ortega I need detailed information on every assassination attempt in the past year. M’Benga, when the augments arrive, you will advise Mayaon how best to command them. Those are your orders. If there are no further questions, I have no need to take any more of your time.”

Sulu had left just before Ortega, so she had to walk at a clipped pace to catch up with him. The air was cool and damp from recent rain, and moving quickly even for a short stretch made her hear flutter, and unwelcome reminder that her youth was behind her.

“Hey, Hikarku!” She called.

Sulu stopped and turned to face Ortega, “You know, most people don’t call me by my first name.” His voice was cold and flat.

“It’s not a problem, is it?” Damn. She was trying to build an alliance, and might have already messed it up with such a tiny mistake,

“Usually, yes, but I admire your boldness.” He took a step closer, and a sly smile appeared on his face. “And what about you? Erica or Ortega?”

“Look, that’s not what’s important.” Should have just called him Sulu like everyone else. “What did you think about everything La’an said? Do you believe it all?”

“It’s far fetched. A little too far fetched.”

“Exactly. And I don’t think someone who cooks up wild stories is the best choice to be emperor.” This might take less convincing than she thought. Maybe the others might think La’an was out of her mind too,

“I agree, but I don’t think we should try to remove her just yet. Let her do the hard work, and once the throne is within her grasp...”

“...Take it out from under her nose.”

Chapter 5

San Francisco

One step forward, two steps back. As the weeks passed by La'an had seen some improvements in Maya's state, but also a number of setbacks. Her health seemed to be improving (or at least she had learned to work through it). She was sleeping less, venturing outside of her room more, and no longer had that exhausted look in her eyes. Emotionally, however, she seemed...stuck. When they had first met Maya had said that her only desire was to exist, and so far she showed no signs of wanting anything more. No goals, no plans, no dreams. She had already been granted permission to leave her home under certain controlled circumstances, and yet she still hadn't gone anywhere. It was heartbreaking, to see someone with so much potential admit defeat.

Today was a rare day, when Maya was awake before La'an (her sleep schedule was still unpredictable), sitting at the table with a number of PADDs scattered around her and a cup of coffee in her hand. La'an offered her a warm smile. Maybe today would be the lucky day, when Maya would begin to feel a change of heart and have a bit more motivation.

"Nice to see you awake early." La'an tried to sound warm and welcoming, but feared she came off disingenuous.

"Still awake from the night before," Maya corrected. "I wanted to finish a speed-read of *The Silmarillion* but wasn't as speedy as I had hoped to be."

"Still impressive." La'an was not familiar with that book. She only knew it was high fantasy, and that was enough for her to have little interest in it. "You might want to find the time to get some rest. I have a short day, and I'd like to make plans."

"I'm not interested." Maya still hadn't looked up from her PADD

"At least listen to my offer. You said that you spent your whole life itching to live on Earth and create a better life for yourself, and now that you have the chance you refuse to do anything with it."

"And what is there for me to do other than sit here and read?" She finally set down her PADD to look La'an in the eye. "I have a criminal record, I'm in poor health, and it's technically not legal for a person like me to exist in the Federation. There was nothing for me on Ceti Alpha V, and there's little more for me on Earth, but most of it I can access without stepping foot outside. I have more potential if I conserve my energy. But, please, tell me what plans you have in mind to get me off of my ass and out into the world."

La'an hesitated now. Her idea seemed silly now, even though she had just recently thought it was brilliant. She spoke softly, almost ashamed. It seemed trivial. "How would you like to join me this evening to see a Shakespearean play?" A different approach to try to coax Maya out of her shell, luring her out with something that she knew would appeal to her. "It's not *Hamlet*, but I thought you might still be interested."

"Which play?" Maya warmed back up, genuinely curious.

"It had a Roman name...Titus...something."

Maya let out a laugh. "Titus Andronicus?!"

La'an had a confused look on her face. "I...take it you're not interested."

"La'an, have you read *Titus Andronicus*?"

"No, and I know nothing about it."

"I think the best way to describe it is that while *Hamlet* was my favorite play, *Titus Andronicus* was my father's. I'm still interested. I want to see if they can make it look convincing on stage when...No, I don't want to give anything away. I want to know what you think going in without any expectations."

"I don't know whether I should be excited or nervous." Mostly, La'an was relieved she found a way to get Maya out of the house

"Both. This isn't a play for the faint of heart."

The air was cold and damp as La'an and Maya walked to the nearest transporter station. Even though they had plenty of time to spare, La'an felt nervous because they might not be so early as she had planned. Maya slept up until the last minute and always moved slowly (both in mind and body) after waking, needing extra time to recover after rest.

"Do we have to travel by transporter?" Maya groaned as they walked, She was a few paces behind La'an, struggling to keep up even though La'an tried to moderate her pace.

"There's no other way, I'm afraid, not with our time frame," La'an explained. "Besides, this is the most common way to get around. If you're going to live in the modern world, you will need to get used to it."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it."

The pair stepped into the building and onto the transporter pads. La'an stole a quick glance at Maya before the transporter energized. In spite of her complaints, Maya didn't show any outward sign of distress. At home she let herself be more honest and vulnerable, but now she seemed to be hiding perceived signs of weakness, much like when they first met.

The transporter station faded away, but it wasn't the theater that appeared in its place. Instead they materialized in a bright white room which seemed to be infinite. The room was empty, as from a pair of humans, one male and one female. They were dressed in unusual clothing: black jumpsuits accented with gold and, oddly, a badge with the Starfleet delta.

"Oh dear," The female gasped, feigning that she was shocked and scandalized. "I think we're a bit too fashion forward for our current guests."

"An easy fix, fortunately." The male snapped his fingers, and in an instant their clothing transformed into Starfleet uniforms that La'an and Maya recognized, the tailored maroon jackets with black trousers.

Maya backed away, inching closer to La'an. "Safest way to travel? How do you explain this?"

"Fear not," the female spoke. "This was no transporter accident. I brought you here."

"We brought you here," the male snapped, correcting her. "My associate and I have taken interest in the two of you, and have a little wager. I think you humans might call it a gentleman's bet."

"And who, may I ask, are you?" La'an demanded. She was frustrated, yet remained calm. After years of exploring the galaxy aboard a starship, she had seen more than her fair share of things that seemed impossible, but she thought those days were long behind her.

"Names complicate matters, don't they? I'm sure the two of you know all about that. But I suppose you need to have some moniker to use to refer to the two of us. Q will suffice." He glanced to his associate. "For both of us."

"Very well, Q. What of your wager?" La'an pressed.

"We've taken interest in the two of you." This time the female Q spoke. "Direct descendants of humanity's worst tyrant, yet working so hard, each in your own way to overcome a troubled legacy. I find it endearing, the human drive to craft their own destiny."

"And I find it futile and tedious," the male Q added with an eye roll. "I'm convinced that your altruism and compassion comes not from an intrinsic human drive to do good but from having the good fortune to live in a society that encourages such values."

"Not me," Maya spoke up. She tried to sound brave, but there was a little shake in her voice. La'an's heart ached for her. As a Starfleet officer, she had seen so many weird and wild phenomenon. Maya was not only a civilian, but someone with little experience outside of a primitive home planet. "I spent most of my life surrounded by brutal tyrants, and I still learned how to have a sound sense of morality."

"Dumb luck." The male Q had a condescending tone, as if he was speaking to an annoying child. "I know your story as well as you do. You were hurt, you found comfort with your father's sworn enemies, and you aligned your moral compass with their own."

Bewildered, Maya backed even further away, backing into La'an and giving herself a start.

The female Q stepped forward. "We want to see what might happen when you, quite literally, come face to face with the worst version of yourself. Will you retain your sense of selflessness, or will you succumb to your own darker impulses?"

"Good luck." The male Q added. "I'm afraid you'll need it."

Before La'an or Maya could react or ask a single question, the white room dissolved away to reveal the transporter room of the ISS Portland.

"Captain Albrecht!" The technician shouted. "There's...four of them."

"I have eyes, Lieutenant, I can see that," the captain answered, irritated. "What matters is why and how."

The captain and the transporter technician wore Starfleet uniforms, but instead of the usual delta symbol, they had the image of Earth layered over a sword. More alarming was that La'an and Maya saw doubles of themselves standing next to them on the transporter pads. They were perfectly matched, down to the complex braids in La'an's gray hair and the slightly smaller size of Maya's weaker left arm. While both Mayas and the original La'an reacted with fearful shock, jumping back and staring at their counterpart with wide eyes, the new La'an took command of the situation. She drew her phaser and aimed it at her counterpart.

"I know what's happened, though I can't say why or how. Normally, this is highly classified information, but I see no need to hide the truth from those who have seen it. There's another reality, like our own but weaker, softer. This isn't the first contamination. Regulations are clear. Anyone found crossing over from the other universe must be destroyed without further question. After these two have been dealt with, no one can speak of this incident again."

"Wait!" The new Maya begged. After the initial shock wore off, she kept her eyes on her double, curious and enthralled. Still La'an kept her phaser aimed at the intruders. "Don't you see the value in having a perfect double? Each of us could be in two places at once, wouldn't that make your plans to retake the Terran Empire much simpler?"

"Your suggestion will only work if their absolute loyalty can be assured."

"You have my loyalty," the original Maya replied, desperate. La'an gave her a sharp look.

The Terran La'an still did not lower her weapon. "And will I still have it when there's not a phaser pointed at you?"

"If you kill her, you can forget about our allegiance!" the Terran Maya shouted,

That was it. That was what made the Terran La'an lower her weapon and give Maya a nasty look. "Don't throw away your chance to rule the Empire over something trivial."

“If it’s so trivial, why can’t I keep her around?”

The Terran La’an and Maya stared each other down for a tense moment before La’an relented. “It’s a small thing, I suppose I can grant it.”

“I’ll only cooperate if you can promise my La’an’s safety too,” Maya pleaded.

The Terran La’an smirked. “So, you’re a little negotiator too? I shouldn’t be surprised.” She looked toward her counterpart. “And what about you?” Do you agree to help rebuild the Terran Empire?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but it seems I have no choice but to comply.” Despite her initial shock, La’an was now able to address her Terran counterpart with bold confidence: Her back straight and head held tall.

“Not an enthusiastic answer, but I’ll take it. Captain, find quarters for our guests.” The Terran La’an ordered “Be sure they’re comfortable, I’m sure I’ll hear no end of it if Maya doesn’t think they’ve been treated well enough. And one more thing, Captain, Lieutenant...No one can know of this unless absolutely necessary. Do not tell anyone about these unexpected guests without my express permission. The very existence of this other universe is still classified information.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Captain Albrecht answered with a nod.

The technician nodded as well. “Understood.”

Chapter 6

“For all of her threats, I think the other La’an might actually trust us,” Maya said as she skimmed through files on the computer console, testing just how much access she and La’an had. “They have fewer restrictions than Albrecht did the last time I was on this ship...the other version of this ship...and Albrecht wanted to trust me even though she knew she shouldn’t.” Maya began to feel unwell. The Albrecht from her universe was dead in part because Maya had betrayed her optimistic trust, and though she hadn’t yet spoken a word to this Albrecht, she had a feeling that this wasn’t the same warm, gentle woman.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that, Maya. These people are violent and paranoid, I’m sure they have all manner of secret surveillance. I’d recommend even being careful in what we talk about to one another.”

“Right, of course,” Maya dismissed La’an’s warning, eyes still focused on the computer console. “Come here, I want you to try something.” La’an complied, taking a few steps to stand behind Maya and look over her shoulder. “Try to access anything restricted. Seriously, anything. Ship systems, life support, anything you can think of.”

“Whatever you have in mind, Maya, I don’t think it’s a good idea to hack into their systems. I’m sure our usage is being monitored.”

“I haven’t hacked anything yet, and I don’t need to. La’an, you’re an admiral here. You have the same security clearance, the same voice, the same fingerprints and retinal scans. If you had the right uniform, you could pass as her if you wanted to.” Maya stepped away from the computer to give La’an space to work, but La’an did not take it. Maya began to pace, in a sense of frenzy of energy that La’an had not yet seen. “We could take control of the ship easily.”

“To what end, Maya? We have no goal, we have no way of knowing what our goal even should be or for what reason Q sent us here, or how to get back where we belong. The best course of action is to lay low, stay safe, and try to lessen our impact on this universe.”

Defeated, Maya sat on the bed and collapsed back. The day had been a draining one, and La’an’s reluctance drained the frenetic energy that allowed her to power through. “What do you mean, ‘lessen our impact?’”

“Maybe it doesn’t even apply in this situation, but I’d rather err on the side of caution. Starfleet has strict regulations about interference in the affairs of new cultures or temporal displacement. Technically, this alternate universe is neither.” La’an hated to discourage Maya’s sudden burst of active motivation, but as things stood now it seemed like a futile effort.

“So you want to sit back and wait quietly until some unknown opportunity presents itself?” Maya answered with a heavy sigh.

“Not quite. I’m going to take this time to research this Terran Empire and see if anything proves enlightening. Even if they are monitoring us that closely, innocent curiosity is a reasonable alibi.” La’an took a step toward the computer console and began to browse through some files, searching for historical databases.

“The other La’an said that people have come over from our universe before.” Maya was still full of frenetic energy, speaking quickly and starting to pace the room “You can access all of the classified files that she can, what if the records have any information on how they got here?”

“I’ll look into it, but only if I’m confident I can cover my tracks.”

There was a chime at the door. “Come in,” La’an answered.

The door slid open, and Captain Albrecht stepped inside and gave a Terran salute. “I don’t usually do this sort of work on my own.” The door closed behind her. “But the admiral insists on secrecy, so it seemed unwise to send one of my security officers in my place. Your counterparts wish to consult with you.”

As Captain Albrecht led the pair through the corridors of the Portland, Maya felt an overwhelming sense of distress. She had walked the corridors of an identical ship twice before under very different circumstances. The first time she did things she would come to regret deeply, the second time she tried to set those wrongs right but nearly broke herself in the process.

Maya kept her composure until the three of them were alone in the turbolift. She couldn’t help herself from thinking about the Albrecht from her world, the one who died because of her actions (though not by her hand). Maya hadn’t spoken with this captain enough to have a sense of how she differed from the Vivienne Albrecht that she knew. Just thinking about it made her heart ache.

“Maya,” Albrecht said, both coldness and curiosity in her eyes. “Why do you seem so nervous around me?”

Maya said nothing.

“Does it have to do with the other version of me?” Albrecht asked, her voice disarmingly playful.

Again, Maya said nothing.

Albrecht leaned close. She was the same height as Maya, but something about her presence made it feel as though she towered over her. “Something she did to you?”

“Something I did to her.” Maya looked away and spoke softly.

“Oh?” Albrecht still had that twisted sense of playful curiosity. “What sort of thing did you do to her? I’d love to know.”

“Captain Albrecht stand down!” La’an snapped.

All of the playfulness was gone from Captain Albrecht, replaced instead with anger. "Let me remind you that you have no authority here. Your counterpart may be an admiral, but you are nothing more than a foreigner whose usefulness is yet to be determined."

After Albrecht led them into the ready room, where the Terran Maya and La'an were waiting, she gave them a Terran salute. The two women rose from their seats and saluted the captain back. The Terran Maya never took her eyes off her double.

"Well," The Terran La'an spoke. "This is your home now. You should observe our customs."

Maya and La'an exchanged a nervous look before they gave their closest imitation of the salute.

"Needs practice, but that's to be expected." The Terran La'an sat down, and all others present followed her lead. "I need to know the fundamental differences between your world and ours." She turned her attention to Maya. "My Maya has been frustratingly evasive every time I ask about how she managed to kill and usurp Khan. I'm sure the details differ, but I'm hopeful that you might be more agreeable."

"Our universes aren't as similar as you might think." Maya had calmed a bit, but was still nervous to look at Captain Albrecht. I never took my father's place, and while I set into motion actions that led to his death, I didn't kill him." She looked to Albrecht. "She did." A moment of silence as everyone gathered looked toward Captain Albrecht. Maya turned her own attention back to her Terran counterpart. "How did you do it, though? I'm surprised you were able to pull it off, with all of the disadvantages we each had living among the augments."

"I had no disadvantages!" the Terran Maya shouted as she sprang to her feet.

"You're lying! I bet you're lying about killing him too!"

"I don't have the patience for any of this, stop it!" The Terran La'an commanded. She barely raised her voice, but spoke so boldly that both of the younger women instantly fell silent. "We are en route to Ceti Alpha V. We will be forming a team of augments who I was led to understand are loyal to Maya, and they will assist us in taking back the Terran Empire from Spock. If there has been any deception, I suggest you come clean now because the truth will come out in time. If there are no further questions, you are all dismissed."

"Understood, Admiral." Albrecht replied. "I will escort our guests back to their quarters."

"Wait..." The Terran Maya called. "I need to speak privately with...myself."

"We'll wait outside." The Terran La'an answered. "Don't take too long."

Once the door was shut behind them, the Terran Maya walked around the table like a shark circling its prey. She didn't speak until she stood uncomfortably close to her counterpart, who instinctively backed away.

"You know, you intrigue me." the Terran Maya began.

"I could have guessed that from the start."

"You also frighten me."

"If I frighten you, it's because the truth frightens you. You haven't told anyone that you're only half augment, have you? Are you scared that your new friends are going to think less of you just like everyone else?"

"No, not that, and I think I'm entitled to a bit of privacy regarding my personal details." the Terran Maya took a moment to pause and study her double. "It's when I look at you, something is broken. Like everything that filled me with rage filled you with sorrow."

"We aren't the same person, no matter how much we seem to be alike. But...did you really do it? And how?"

The Terran Maya nodded. "I'd like to keep a few secrets, but, yes. I did. With some help from Suzette, my mother, Katya..."

Maya had no words. This started off like a wild nightmare, but now it just might turn into a beautiful dream. She forgot any curiosity she had about her double, any desire to take control of her situation and find a way home. "They're still alive in this universe?"

The Terran Maya nodded. Her counterpart was so overwhelmed with grief, shock, and somehow hope that the room began to spin and she collapsed back into her seat. The Terran Maya stepped behind her and gently placed her hands on her shoulders to comfort her. "I'm sorry to hear your universe hasn't been so kind to you. I've had my own hardships, but things are finally turning around. La'an is going to endorse me as emperor, and if you cooperate you will be at my side."

Maya froze as a shiver went down her spine. "I should go. I need to rest."

"Consider it."

Maya didn't look back once she stepped out of the ready room and joined Captain Albrecht and La'an. She walked with them in silence, her heart racing and breath shallow as she walked back through the ship, but she tried her best to hide any outward signs of distress. She kept her composure until she and La'an were safely back inside in their quarters, where she collapsed on the bed and closed her eyes. Even with eyes shut, the room was spinning. Concerned, La'an rushed to her side and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What did she tell you?" La'an asked softly.

"Nothing important." Maya's eyes were still closed. "And everything...I don't know how to start." She took a few deep breaths before she opened her eyes, but she still did not look at La'an. "Albrecht isn't the only person who's still alive here, La'an. Some of the people who I actually cared about, including my mother and my old lover."

La'an's heart jumped. She had lived through almost this exact scenario, to fall for someone in one reality, to lose them, and to be haunted by a stranger with their face. That was decades ago, and until this very moment, La'an thought that she had moved on. She had shed her tears and allowed herself to heal, but wounds of the heart are easily reopened.

“Maya...” La'an's voice was soft and weak as she searched for the right words to say that could do justice to her twisted up feelings without revealing too much. She had disclosed this secret before, but wasn't sure if this situation was enough to justify doing it again. “I can't share any details, but I need you to trust and believe me when I say that I have lived through something very similar, and that the advice I give comes from my own experience and mistakes.” La'an spoke with weight behind her words.

Maya opened her eyes and slowly sat up.

La'an paused before she went on, carefully considering each word. “Your loved ones aren't alive out there. These are different people, no more like the people you cared about than the other versions of ourselves are to us. Ignore whatever your heart is telling you, these are separate people, and to get them mixed up will only hurt you.”

Maya looked away and took a few deep breaths before she responded. “You've been in Starfleet for ages, I'm sure you've seen people die.” She didn't wait for a response. “People you cared about? Have you watched powerlessly as the one person who meant the most to you died?”

Silence. La'an looked away and nodded. She had survived that exact scenario as a child.

“Then maybe show some understanding when I'm trying to find some closure.”

“I still don't think you seek them out,” La'an said with a sigh as she rose to her feet. “Do whatever you need to do to work through your feelings. I want to make good use of the time we have and learn more about this Terran Empire. I can do it on my own if you need space, but you are a faster reader and learner than I am.”

“Am I really?” There was a hint of disbelief in Maya's voice, but also of hopeful optimism. This was a young woman who wanted praise but felt undeserving.

“Yes, and I can't stand that you don't believe it.”

“It's like...there are all these branches, but they intersect at certain points with our history before they branch off again.” Maya didn't look away from the screen as she spoke, eyes scanning each line of text rapidly. La'an hadn't said a word, simply looking over Maya's shoulder and struggling to keep up. “Does that make any sense?”

“I understand what you're trying to explain, but I'm at a loss for specific examples. You outpaced me in the third paragraph.”

“And I'm sure there are more examples that I've missed because I still have so many gaps in my knowledge of Earth's history. Here's one, First Contact with the Vulcans. It's almost exactly the same. Zefram Cochrane's first warp flight was on the same day. The same Vulcan ship visited, but instead of welcoming them Cochrane killed them.”

“Jump ahead to more recent history, I want to know more about the current political climate.”

“Several centuries of conquest, regular uprising from conquered worlds...Oh. It's Spock.”

Maya stopped scrolling when she reached a photograph of a familiar Vulcan. He wasn't, however, identical to the man they knew. This one had grown a beard.

“Spock rose to power recently,” Maya continued. “Whoever wrote this doesn't seem to care for him, or his reforms.”

“Not surprising. I'll review it in my own time, but I'm sure it's horribly biased. If only we could get a more balanced take.”

Maya stopped scrolling and rose to her feet. “We can, though. The ship's doctor is a Vulcan. She's bound to have a more impartial view.”

“The ship's doctor on the Portland from our universe was a Vulcan.” La'an corrected “We can't be sure just how much our timelines have converged, not when people have lived in one universe and died in another.”

A half smile appeared on Maya's face. “Check the crew manifest, Admiral, this should be easy enough to confirm.”

“No.” La'an shook her head and stepped back. “No, I don't like this at all. It isn't worth the risk. Nobody on board is supposed to know we even exist.”

“They said that, but what have they done to enforce it? There's no guard outside the door, you can use the admiral's security clearance to open the door, if anyone sees me, they'll probably assume that I'm the other Maya. I can imitate her well enough if I need to, she acts like my brother used to.”

“You would need a plausible reason for going to sickbay.”

“Did you see her left arm? She's had the same injuries I have and probably hates physical therapy as much as I do.”

“And an excuse to question the doctor about Terran society,”

“I want an accurate view of my future subjects.”

La'an looked down and rubbed her temples. “I need to think about this.”

“Will I never be good enough for you either?” Maya hadn’t raised her voice, but she threw her hands in the air and backed away. “When I needed rest, you constantly pushed me to be more active and motivated, and now that I am trying to take action, you’re begging me to sit on my hands.”

La’an fell silent and rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m sorry. It’s not a bad idea, really. Just think it through a little more. We can discuss it.”

Eventually, Maya and La’an came to an agreement, with contingencies upon contingencies. Maya found that the layout of the Terran Portland was the same as the Portland that she had experienced. She did cross paths with the crew and found that it was sufficient to offer a stern look and a Terran salute. She encountered no resistance until she reached sickbay.

There she saw the same Vulcan doctor, with the same neatly braided black hair who greeted her with the Terran salute. Maya tried to keep a stern look on her face as she returned the salute.

“I would like another examination of my left shoulder, Doctor,” Maya demanded, trying to speak with the same gravitas that she heard her counterpart and her brother use.

“Of course,” The Vulcan doctor answered with a nod.

Maya perched on the edge of the nearest bio bed, her spine straight and shoulders tense as she began to fear that maybe there might be something that medical tricorder would pick up to reveal a difference between herself and her Terran counterpart.

“I don’t mean to criticize your choices, Maya.” The Vulcan doctor Maya remembered from her universe had been so much bolder. With each other person in this reality being the nastiest version of themselves, it was especially alarming to see that this universe’s version of Doctor T’Ralia was so meek. “But the pain and weakness you are experiencing are part of the healing process, which can be mitigated with regular mild exercises.”

Maya nodded. “Nothing worth having is easy, I suppose. May I ask you some...sensitive questions?”

T’Ralia froze but spoke freely “You are at liberty to ask anything you please.”

“I’m meant to rule this empire, but I understand so little about it. Please, I want honesty, and anything you share will be kept with the same degree of confidence as you have with your patients.”

T’Ralia nodded but said nothing. The T’Ralia that Maya knew had all the same Vulcan coldness, but at least was more responsive.

“What do you think of Spock’s reforms?”

“He is abandoning Terran tradition too quickly.”

“That’s not what I expected to hear from a Vulcan. I thought his reforms were meant to help you and the other non-Terrans..”

“To be frank, Maya, it seems to me as though you are trying to persuade me into giving a certain answer.”

“Maybe.” Maya conceded. “But it’s been a challenge for La’an and I to get a feel for where we stand. She hasn’t had her eyes set on conquest until very recently, and I only want an objective view too.”

“Does everyone aboard this ship have the same favorable view of Captain Albrecht and her choices?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Cant or wont?”

“Does it matter, when I’m trying to take control of my subjects? What do you think of Spock and his reforms?”

Doctor T’Ralia fell silent and looked away.

“Again, anything you say is in confidence. I wouldn’t forget the doctor who fixed my injured arm. I don’t blame you for keeping your opinions private, but what do you know of the crew?”

“Captain Albrecht would have a more accurate account of the crew and where they stand.”

“I’m afraid not. She wants to give the impression that she has unyielding control, and I don’t blame her. I want a sense of reality.”

“There are members of the crew who are more in favor of Spock’s reforms.” T’Ralia answered, “While I don’t align myself with any side, I am reluctant to give name and details, for fear of my own safety. I can tell you that they haven’t been discreet. Look and listen for anyone who challenges Captain Albrecht, they likely support Spock as well,”

“And what of the general population? Do they favor Spock?”

T’Ralia hesitated, her eyes wide as she thought to formulate a safe, diplomatic answer. “Opinions vary wildly, but the people with the most power have the most uncharitable views. Assassination attempts are a regular occurrence. Among non-Terrans, however, Spock is a hero. His policies ensure their equitable treatment, where previously the people from conquered worlds were subjugated.”

“Doctor, it almost sounds to me like you favor Spock after all.”

T’Ralia froze. “No. My opinions do not align with the majority of non-Terrans. You asked for an impartial explanation, which I have given. The Empire has treated me well. My loyalty lies with Captain Albrecht, with Admiral La’an, and with you.”

“Thank you for that reassurance. And if you do decide to share any names of the dissenting crew members, please let me know.”

Maya left sickbay feeling both triumphant and frustrated with herself. There could be possible allies on this ship, but she had possibly set up a trap for them without realizing it. She wasn't thinking about her double when she spoke to Doctor T'Ralia, and it hadn't occurred to her until it was too late that the doctor might give those names to the wrong Maya.

As she walked back to her quarters, Maya ruminated on her new knowledge, trying to think of how she could put it to use. She was absorbed in her own mind so deeply that at first she didn't realize it, when she turned a corner and stood in front of the woman with the same face as hers.

With long, steady strides, the Terran Maya closed the space between them. Maya inched back until she found herself backed up against a wall, and her heart began to race.

“Bold of you to be wandering about the ship when you know your existence is supposed to be a secret.” she purred.

“Captain Albrecht should have taken more precautions, then. I didn't think she had anything in common with the Albrecht from my universe, but it seems they're both too trusting.”

“And what about you and I?” The Terran Maya pressed one hand against the wall next to her counterpart's head. “What would you say we have in common?”

“I haven't given you a moment's thought.” She answered with venom in her voice. “But I'd say you're more like my brother than like me. You're self-absorbed, mercurial, and manipulative.”

“And so are you.” She paused to let the other version of herself take in this information, a twisted grin on her face. “I think I've got you figured out. You're just as manipulative as I am, but where I overpower people, you bend them to your will by making them pity you.”

“You don't know me!” Maya tried to dash away, but the Terran Maya grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her closer.

“I know what I need to know. Didn't you spend your childhood dreaming of leaving Ceti Alpha V and having all of the power and luxury you knew you deserved? Weren't you told every day that you deserved to rule the stars?”

“I used to long for that, before I realized that I would never be good enough.” She looked down, speaking softly.

“And how sad that you simply admitted defeat. I hope you continue to consider my offer. We have great potential that shouldn't be wasted. Go. We'll have to make a tricky explanation if anyone sees that there are two of us.”

Maya returned to her quarters to find La'an focused on the computer console. She looked up from her work and turned toward Maya. “Well?”

“Good news and bad news.” Maya sat on the bed, still feeling as though she had been pushing herself too hard today without taking enough time to rest and recover. “More people approve of Spock than those history records led us to believe. I think Doctor T'Ralia might be in favor of him too, but she didn't say it directly.”

“And the bad news?”

“I ran into the other Maya, so I suspect we might face more restrictions soon.”

La'an sighed. “Then I need to read these files quickly, before the Admiral finds a way to lock me out of this classified information.” She went back to work, silently reading.

“La'an...” Maya asked. “Do you think I'm manipulative and mercurial?”

La'an did not look away from the computer. “I have taught hundreds of cadets near your age. Everyone under the age of twenty six is manipulative and mercurial. Anyway, The details are hazy, but I did find out more about the other times our universes crossed over. The first...I can hardly make sense of it, there's references to some technology that I have never heard of. The second involved the crew of the Enterprise and occurred due to a very specific transporter accident. No mention of Q anywhere, and I've never heard of them in our universe either.”

“So we have to replicate that transporter accident?” Maya guessed.

“I'm not entirely sure that's possible.” La'an skimmed back through the document as she replied. “These were very specific circumstances, I don't know if they can be reproduced, and I certainly don't know how it could be done”

“So...maybe Q is our only hope? He called it a gentleman's bet, whether humans are inherently good. If we can satisfy the conditions of the bet and prove that we have intrinsic morality.”

“You describe a task that is both vague and impossible,” La'an rolled her eyes.

“Is it, though. The Terrans finally have a benevolent leader whose life and legacy is in danger. If we save Spock, we save the Terrans, prove ourselves to Q, and get sent home in time to see Titus Andronicus.”

“This sounds too far fetched.” La'an shook her head. “The transporter is a safer bet.”

Chapter 7

Normally Terrans with traditional views didn't come to a place like this, but that was why Ortega chose it. No chance of running into someone who might betray them, and because Ortega fully expected La'an to make good on her threats, the fewer people who recognized them the better.

The bar was dark, loud, and crowded with non-Terrans, with a live band playing music with lyrics that sounded nothing like any Terran language she had ever heard before. Horrific. Only a few years ago such open expressions would have been outlawed. It seemed like they had been bolder and freer in how the aliens lived their lives since Spock came to power. Ortega might have stood out as the only Terran present, but her appearance and demeanor blended right in. She wore a black leather jacket, and kept to herself, hunched over a beer that was already half finished. This was odd, she was never the early one...maybe Sulu didn't have the balls to stand up to La'an anyway.

"Charming little place you picked to meet." That voice, dripping with sarcasm, was unmistakable, even if it was difficult to hear over the music..

Ortega turned to face Sulu and offered him a sly smile. No Terran salute, that sort of thing wouldn't be welcome here. "Safest place for us. Had to pick somewhere where I knew we wouldn't run into anyone, and I don't think anyone could overhear us. Now stop complaining and get yourself a damn beer."

"I'm not sure I could stomach anything served here." Sulu held his head high as he perched on the barstool.

"It's not awful. Fermented barley and hops is fermented barley and hops," Ortega shrugged.

"I don't want to spend any more time here than necessary," Sulu continued. "So I suggest we get right to it."

"Right." Ortega took a long sip from her beer. "So La'an has been cagey as hell about her plans, which makes it well nigh impossible to work against her. All we know is that she's off in space and claims that she's going to come back with a band of genetically enhanced supermen to do her bidding. I'm not even sure if such a group of people exist. The rumors of Khan's survival were tough for me to believe from the start, and without seeing proof, I'm beginning to think it might have been all part of La'an's imagination."

"Oh, believe me, they exist, and Khan survived all those years." Sulu answered coolly as he waved to get the Andorian bartender's attention. "One more..." He glanced to Ortega's beer. "Of those. Anyway, I was on the Enterprise myself when it happened. We found Khan's ship, Kirk tried to recruit him as an ally just the same as La'an hoped to do, and when Kirk realized he couldn't control Khan he abandoned him and the augments on some harsh planet to die. They survived in space for hundreds of years, but did they survive for twenty five years on Ceti Alpha V? Who knows. It was supposed to be a death sentence." The bartender returned with Sulu's beer. He took one sip and wrinkled his nose.

Ortega sat back to digest this new information. "Damn. I thought she made the whole thing up."

"Not everything, but it seems too convenient for Khan to be dead but for his followers to be alive and well and eagerly swearing their allegiance to an outworlder with the same last name." Sulu tried to have another sip of beer but looked as though he nearly choked on it. "I wouldn't be surprised if she went out there and found nothing."

"I know, me too, but what I can't puzzle out is why she's left Terra Prime if there are no augments to bring back here."

"You don't think she's fled, do you?"

"Naw, no way. La'an isn't a coward, and it would have been stupid to announce her departure like that. No, I think she's got some friends out in the distant colonies who she's going to bring back and claim that they're enhanced, or something like that." Another sip of beer. She was almost done with this one. "So, I think we should let her take the throne and then expose her, revealing that her and the kid not only built themselves up on a pile of lies but also that La'an is completely delusional."

"And the more La'an trusts us, the easier it will be to betray her." A wicked smile curled onto Sulu's face.

"Bingo. Prove that her little friends are just regular Terrans, and the whole thing crumbles." Ortega took one more sip to finish her beer. "I've got one more question for you."

"Go ahead."

"I know you served with Spock on the Enterprise, so did I years before. Never once did he show any sign of any anti-Terran ideals, or anything odd at all. When did he change? It wasn't while I knew him."

"At first Spock was unremarkable. Talented, ambitious, but nothing that made him stand out in a bad way. The change was sudden, as if something radical was injected into his brain."

The two Qs stood alone in the empty white room. The female Q had a broad grin on her face, her back straight, and her arms held behind her back. Meanwhile, the male Q did not look nearly so confident: his brow furrowed, shoulders rolled forward, resting his chin on the back of one hand.

"They're close to a breakthrough," the female Q teased. "So, are you still feeling so sure about your experimental evil universe?"

"Don't celebrate so soon." The male Q scolded as he stood straighter. "They haven't been but a few hours, not nearly enough time for moral

barriers to begin to decay.”

“How long then? Do you want to sit back watching and waiting in the hope that someone will eventually break down? Even with all the time in the universe to spare, I don’t have the patience for it.”

“Oh no, That shouldn’t be necessary. I only want to see how they react to seeing the worst possible version of themselves. It shouldn’t be long. Remember, the Terran Empire has its first peaceful leader, and these people are so repulsed by the idea of compassion that they are actively working to overthrow him. Our transplants might not be able to resist the lure of that kind of power. Few humans can.”

“And if they can?”

“Spock is saved! The Terran Republic is saved! They all live happily ever after for two years until the Klingons and Cardassians come. We know all the possible outcomes. Peace and equity for the Terrans leads to centuries of enslavement, keeping their fascist rule protects the Terrans for a few more years.” The male Q’s eyes brightened “And what if they knew that? Make the right choice, protect the man who wears the same face as your dear friend, save the world, and doom humanity for centuries. Isn’t that delicious?”

“I’m not following. Do I win if Spock is saved or killed?”

“My dear, you are so young and simple. There are no winners. Not in this universe.”

Maya couldn’t sleep, but that was hardly unusual, her sleep schedule was always wild and unpredictable. With nothing else to do to pass the time, she went back to the computer console. Maya had little interest in learning more about the Terran Empire, instead she poked around to see how much this ship was like the Portland from her own universe, how much her experiences from that ship would work to her advantage. Albrecht hadn’t yet gone to the trouble of adding in any additional security measures, so for now her access was the same. With a little creative programming, Maya might even be able to protect the access she currently had.

She Straightened out her spine and rolled her head to work out some tightness in her neck, and out of the corner of her eye she spotted someone who wasn’t supposed to be there. Maya turned around and sprang to her feet. The male Q was standing right in front of her.

“La’an!” She shouted. Q did not flinch.

“She can’t hear you, but you have nothing to be afraid of. I only want to talk.” he cooed.

“About what?”

“About how you are so close to solving my puzzle, and yet so frightfully unaware of the implications of your actions.”

“You know what we were talking about earlier? About saving Spock and the Republic?”

“All that and more. I also know what happens to the Terrans if Spock dies.”

“What happens if he dies?” Maya’s eyes were wide and curious.

“Hardly anything. La’an becomes emperor and does away with Spock’s reforms. The Terra Republic is barely acknowledged in the history books>”

“And if he lives?”

“I think that’s something best experienced rather than explained.” Q gestured toward the door. “Your answers lie just outside.”

Q vanished, and Maya’s gaze was focused squarely on the door. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but she tried to talk herself out of these fearful feelings. This was a dream, there was nothing on the other side of the door except the empty corridor, or if it was real Q was playing mind games. She walked slowly toward the door, but when it slid open it was not the ship’s corridor that she saw. It was a city, burning. Maya took a deep breath, as long as she was still in the room she was safe, but then the room dissolved around her.

She had seen so little of San Francisco, but the city was unmistakable even with the destruction and chaos. Panic began to set in. Maya was alone in a warzone.

“Q!” She screamed as she looked around. No sign of him, but again she shouted. “Q! What have you done?”

Acting on instinct Maya began to run, searching for Q, or La’an, or any familiar face. The air was hot and thick with smoke, and Maya had hardly covered a few meters before her chest felt too tight and too hungry for air to keep going. She stopped, doubled over and gasping for air.

“Terran!” A deep male voice shouted at her. Maya looked up to see two Klingons standing in front of her. She hadn’t seen a Klingon in person before, only photographs from her studies of recent history. “Your kind isn’t supposed to be out unaccompanied.”

“Forgive my mistake,” Maya teased with an eye roll.

The Klingons didn’t appreciate her sarcasm. One knocked her to the ground and aimed his phaser at her, but the other grabbed his partner’s arm to hold him back. “Wait! That’s not just any Terran. That’s one of the ones who saved Spock. The regent has special plans for them.”

“How are you so sure? All Terrans look alike. All I see is a bug ready to be crushed.”

“Show some restraint, bringing her to the Regent will bring us both great honor!”

While the two Klingons argued, Maya tried to quietly sneak away, but she could not escape detection. The Klingons chased after her,

grabbing her roughly by the shoulders. “I wonder what the Regent wants, to thank her for saving a leader so easy to destroy or to make an example of someone the Terrans look up to?”

Maya struggled to break free, but the Klingon was at least as strong as an augment. She smashed the back of her head into the Klingon’s face, and while the move was not as effective as it might have been against a human, but it was enough to throw off the Klingon’s balance enough that he loosed his grip when he tried to recover. That was enough of an opening for Maya to wiggle away and break into a sprint. Her lungs burned, but adrenaline let her push through.

She didn’t dare stop to look back, to see if the Klingons were following close behind or if she had lost them already. Maya turned around a corner...and found herself back in her quarters. The nightmare was over, but Maya was still reeling. There would be no sleeping tonight after that.

Chapter 8

Simultaneously, Maya was too tired to function and too full of energy to allow herself to slow down. La'an was right, they shouldn't get involved in the affairs of this universe. Just when Maya was learning how to sort out right from wrong, just starting to feel secure about the choices she made, a vision that lasted only a few minutes had her questioning everything. She was stuck in a rumination spiral, twisted up and worrying over unintended consequences, tearing herself up over what act of heroic kindness might set into motion some unpredictable tragedy, not just in this universe but in her own as well.

Her head was in a fog, but she tried to stay alert and she scanned line after line of the computer console. The best thing for them to do was to get out of here before they could mess up anything else, these people could be left to deal with their own problems in their own way, but Maya wanted nothing to do with it. She didn't have La'an's security clearances, so there was little she could do to investigate that transporter accident or the circumstances under which it happened. Instead she worked to fill out her knowledge of how this technology worked in the first place, starting with the most basic explanations geared toward children and working her way up to technical manuals and publications from scientists who developed the technology. All this work, but no reward. Nothing she read suggested that it was even theoretically possible to cross the barrier between different realities, and her detailed knowledge only made her feel more uneasy about using this supposedly safe way to travel.

She kept her focus and didn't look up even as she heard footsteps behind her.

"Have you slept at all?" La'an asked.

Maya shook her head. "Couldn't sleep no matter how much I need to. I need you to pull up those files again, the ones about the other time the universes crossed over. I've been reading up on transporter technology, and I think I can come up with a way to get us home if I had more information."

La'an crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Just a little while ago you seemed convinced that the best course of action was to save the Terran Republic to convince Q that we deserved to be sent home."

"Changed my mind. While I couldn't sleep I realized that you were right. We don't know what Q wants, we don't belong here, we need to get out quickly, and the only way we know how to do that is via transporter."

"Maya, go to sleep." La'an rested one hand on Maya's shoulder. "I appreciate your effort, but there's no need to get so worked up over this. We can't do anything until we're close enough to Terra Prime to be in transporter range."

Maya stepped away from the console, and once her eyes were away from the screen the room began to spin and the fog that filled her head grew thicker. La'an was right. "I just want to be ready when the time comes."

First Officer Conroy was the sort of person who, by his own admission, would avoid medical attention even if he was on the brink of death. For that reason, T'Ralia found it curious when he entered sickbay of his own volition and seemingly healthy and uninjured. The Portland's sickbay was empty for now, giving Doctor T'Ralia a few quiet minutes to write reports and organize her workspace.

"Commander?" She asked. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, yes." He answered. Conroy was visually the opposite of Captain Albrecht: short and squat with a wide body. "I want to talk to you about something. How long will you be alone here?"

"Until I have an unexpected patient," T'Ralia answered. "Otherwise my schedule is free for two hours."

"Shouldn't take that long." Conroy's eyes darted around and he lowered his voice. "Rumor has it that you've been involved with the captain again."

"I have." Her answer was plain and flat.

"Rumor also has it that you aren't happy with that arrangement." Conroy stepped closer, but he was shorter than T'Ralia and hard to tilt his neck to look up at her.

"No, it is not my preference." T'Ralia looked down for a moment, but held her head back up, concerned she had already shown too much emotion. "If I was in a position to refuse I would have."

"A delicate way to describe it." Conroy shook his head. "I can help you. I deserved to be in the captain's chair, but lately I haven't been able to get close to Albrecht without the admiral breathing down my throat. You're the captain's woman. Every night you're alone with her in a vulnerable position."

"I have to decline your offer." T'Ralia spoke with a bit more confidence now her chin up. "While being rid of Albrecht would improve my life, if the captain dies, I am obligated to go to you, an arrangement I find much less favorable."

Conroy narrowed his eyes. "I assure you the feeling is mutual, which is why I would release you from that obligation."

T'Ralia paused to consider. "This would be a tempting offer, if I could trust that you will be true to your word. However, I cannot ignore the possibility that you might retract this promise."

"Can't blame you for being suspicious," Conroy chuckled, crossing his arms. He inched back from T'Ralia. "I think you've spent too long as

the only Vulcan on this ship, you're starting to think like a Terran."

"Thinking like a Terran has assured my survival and success, Commander," T'Ralia explained.

"At any rate, I think Albrecht might not be with us much longer. Since she's been cozy with the admiral, she's been ignoring the goings on of her ship and seems oblivious to the threats and discontent beneath her. My offer still stands no matter whose hand she dies by, but I thought you might like the satisfaction of doing the deed yourself."

"Understood, Commander. I will consider it."

Weeks had passed since Conroy had met with Doctor T'Ralia, and yet nothing had happened, they were still cruising toward Ceti Alpha V as planned. Whether T'Ralia didn't care for his plan outright or whether she was biding her time remained to be seen, but Conroy knew better than to not pursue all of his options. Sending out this communication was a risk, but the potential for reward was great enough to warrant it, and this mode was still less dangerous than trying to coordinate an in person meeting. One didn't become executive officer without observing and learning from the mistakes of others, and for that reason Conroy knew what precautions to take. He had stolen the personal PADD from some ensign to draft his message, took extra measures to send the message over an encrypted channel and to program it to erase any evidence after a short span of time. He sent it only to people he knew were just as dissatisfied with Albrecht as he was, just as likely to adhere to the old ways, for there were some who disliked her but were also pro-reform. His recipients included T'Ralia, Helmsman Reese, and chief science officer Yamada. The message was terse and to the point.

If you are reading this, whether you have tried to hide your feelings or not, it is known that you share the same distaste for Captain Albrecht as I do. Whoever ends her life will be rewarded for their effort with a guaranteed position as First Officer.

He didn't sign his name, an attempt at plausible deniability even though he knew his name was already over it, no one else could offer such a rank. It was just another calculated risk. A bit of competition always helped to motivate a person, and the promise of a desirable prize all the more.

Chapter 9

Along the journey to Ceti Alpha V, La'an and Maya were kept mostly in the dark. They were confined to quarters and didn't dare to try to use La'an's security clearance again. No need to waste such a valuable asset only to be caught sneaking out and find themselves with tighter restrictions. The days turned into a hazy blur, with each running into another with the same endless march of work without progress: researching, brainstorming, hitting a wall, and starting over again. The only thing that punctuated the tedium were the regular visits from Captain Albrecht where she would ask a few prying questions about their universe before updating them on their ETA to Ceti Alpha V.

This time, the chime on the door came earlier than usual, taking La'an by surprise. She wasn't doing anything she would mind if the captain saw, but it sent a jolt through her body and made her spring to her feet.

"Don't be nervous." Captain Albrecht stood in the door frame, leaning against one side. "I have good news. Where's Maya? I want to tell her myself."

"She's asleep. You know she's unwell, it can take some time for her to wake and become fully alert." La'an crossed her arms. Their frequent meetings with Albrecht wore on her patience, for they accomplished nothing but wasting time.

"Then wake her and replicate a pot of strong coffee." Albrecht gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "We're in orbit over Ceti Alpha V, and as soon as your counterparts have assembled their team of augments and beamed them aboard we're having a meeting in my ready room."

"And you're sure you want them to know about...us?" Deep in her heart, La'an knew this was a point they were progressing toward, but because they had been secretive with the crew, she began to expect that they would be just as secretive with the augments. Even after so many years and so much work to preserve her peace, and she still had those moments that stung so deeply when they reminded her of her family legacy. She felt queasy at the thought of sitting in the same room as people who obediently followed Khan.

"To be frank, I'm not sure how I feel about it, but the admiral insists that the two of you are part of the plan and that everyone involved in the coup needs to be present."

"Understood. Give us a few minutes."

Captain Albrecht's ready room was filled to capacity. Around the table sat Albrecht, Conroy, both versions of La'an and Maya, Katya, and Suzette Ling. Eight more augments crowded around the table. Each augment glanced from one copy of Maya and La'an to the other with looks of shock and confusion, and some whispered amongst themselves.

Maya recognized each of them and wasn't surprised that these were the people who supported her counterpart's coup. The versions of these people from her own universe had either been more sympathetic to her or more critical of Khan. Only one of them mattered though. Katya sat across the table from her and next to the Terran Maya. Maya couldn't find the willpower to try to be discreet. She couldn't take her eyes off of Katya, enchanted by just how much this woman was like her old lover, not just in her appearance but her mannerisms, the way she moved. The way she gave sweet looks to the Terran La'an made her heart jump. Was she feeling jealousy toward...herself? La'an—her La'an—gave her a sharp look. Maya blushed and shrank down in her seat. She hadn't realized that she had been so obvious.

"I should begin by addressing the most obvious concern I'm sure you all have noticed," The Terran La'an began. "There are two of us."

"Thank you, Admiral, for stating the obvious." Suzette leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms. She was one of three older augments present, the others young adults who had been born on Ceti Alpha V. "What I'm more interested in is the why and how you have a pair of clones."

"Not quite clones." the Terran La'an explained. "But if it helps to understand, that's not a terrible way to think of it. I realize what I'm about to explain might sound far-fetched, but our universe is not the only reality to exist. There's one that mirrors our own, almost the same but inverted in key ways, and through some accident that I cannot explain, these doubles found themselves here.":

"Bullshit."

"How much advanced technology have you seen that seems impossible?" the Terran La'an pressed. "Warp travel, transporters, modern medicine? You were frozen in time for hundreds of years and accepted it with an open mind." She looked around the room to address all of the other augments as well. "The same goes for the youngest of you, to live on a primitive planet and one day find yourselves invited about a starship. All I ask for is that same open mind, or at least to keep your skepticism to yourself. Explain it to yourself in whatever way makes sense, but this is our reality."

She paused again and looked around the room. No one showed any sign of wanting to say anything more, not even Suzette Ling.

"Good. I must also ask for secrecy here. Do not discuss this with the crew, the very existence of the other universe is highly classified. I'm sure I don't need to explain the strategic advantage in having a perfect double..." the Terran La'an continued.

"They aren't perfect, though." Suzette pointed at Maya. "This one's heavier."

That comment made Maya look away, finally, from Katya to study her Terran counterpart. She had never paid much attention to her size and shape beyond an awareness that she was shorter and smaller than her peers. Recovering on Earth, she could tell that she was softer and fuller, but saw it as a sign of much needed rest and healing.

"Not by much, and no one is going to be seeing either of them long enough to make a detailed comparison." The Terran La'an corrected. "Now, if no further explanations are needed, I would like to discuss our preliminary plans. I have a team on Terra Prime who will be working

closely with us.” She addressed the augments. “Nyota Uhura and Joseph M’Benga will be in contact with you as soon as we are in range. They know the details of security requirements and have been investigating vulnerabilities that could be exploited.” She looked at her counterpart again, a sly smile forming on her lips. “Of course, none of this could be accomplished without someone on the inside who Spock trusts. One Admiral Noonien Singh to arrange an innocuous meeting with Spock and distract him while the other uses her security clearance to invite in our new allies.”

“I’m not going along with this.” La’an shook her head.

“I’m afraid you don’t have a choice.” The Terran Maya teased with a half smile. “Admiral, I mentioned another strategic advantage I could provide. Now, Katya.”

From underneath the table, Katya produced a sealed jar that contained a small creature, its body covered with armored plates. “The secret to our success.” Katya explained. “With a Ceti eel in your head you won’t be able to refuse any order.” Katya gave Maya a thoughtful look/ “Francesca would have loved to be here to explain herself, but she just had her baby boy and had to stay behind.”

“So that’s how you did it?” Maya glared at her Terran counterpart, pointing an accusing finger. “You didn’t defeat him on your own merit, you just broke a few minds with a few well placed eels!”

The Terran Maya slammed both palms on the table and lunged forward. “I still thought to do it and did it successfully. It was by my own merit regardless of my methods.”

Maya looked to La’an and took a firm grip on her upper arm, her fingertips sinking into the older woman’s skin. “Please,” she begged. She tried to keep her composure, but her eyes glistened as she held back tears. “The Ceti eels destroy everything you are from the inside out. I’ve seen it happen. They killed my mother. They nearly killed Captain Albrecht. Please believe me, it’s better to give in and comply on your own terms.”

For a moment, La’an looked into Maya’s desperate eyes before wiggling her arm free from Maya’s surprisingly strong grasp. “Very well, No extreme measures are necessary. You have my cooperation.”

“What a relief,” The Terran La’an sighed. “I was hoping to keep your mind intact and not have to worry about losing you too soon.” She stood, spine straight and shoulders broad. “We will continue to have these consultations regularly as we approach Terra Prime. I recommend that all augments take advantage of the ship’s databases to learn as much as possible about the Terran Empire. As promised you and your kin will enjoy elevated status as an elite ruling class. If there are no further questions, you are all dismissed.”

Silence. The Terran La’an stood, followed by Captain Albrecht who gave her a Terran salute. That was the sign that the meeting was over, and as the augments began to move toward the door, the Terran Maya quickly stood up and spoke out. “I need to speak privately with my double again, and with Katya.”

“Keep it brief.” The Terran La’an commanded as she stepped outside the door.

Once the three of them were alone, Katya studied the new version of her lover, looking her up and down and licking her lips. “I can see what Suzette meant, but I think I like it. Her breasts are bigger.”

“That’s not why we’re here.” The Terran Maya said.

Maya had her back toward the door and was already inching back toward it. “You want to scold me again for daring to criticize you?”

“No, in fact, just like before, I’m intrigued by how similar we are. You guessed my strategy when everyone else thought I was being difficult and cagey. But I want to know, how did Mother die in your universe.”

A heavy moment of silence passed. Maya tried to look everywhere but at her counterpart, eyes nervously flitting around the room. “She wasn’t your mother, no more than your mother was mine. I was very young, I hardly remember. We didn’t yet know what the Ceti eels could do...” Maya stopped, her breathing heavy, but both her double and Katya stared her down, demanding information without saying a word. “Please don’t make me go on.”

The Terran Maya nodded, moving around the table to close the space between them. At the same time, Katya came around from the other side. The two of them were like sharks circling their prey, eyes fixing on their target. Maya wanted to shrink away but was closed in.

“Have you given my offer any more consideration?” The Terran Maya cooed, close enough that she could put a hand on her double’s shoulder.

“I’ve realized that you might be right, that maybe letting the Republic endure isn’t in the Terran’s best interest.” Even after what she saw, it pained Maya to admit it. She had met the other version of Spock, he had shown her compassion...but this was not the same person.

“Honestly, I don’t give a damn about what’s in the Terrans’ best interest so long as I can rule them,” The Terran Maya’s hand crept high, leaving her counterpart’s shoulder to graze the side of her neck. Too bold, the other Maya pulled away. “But I won’t complain about the reasoning so long as you’re on my side.”

“I don’t know that I’m on your side!” This was too much, Maya couldn’t escape through either side, couldn’t back away, but she could go forward, lunging between the two women.

Katya rushed to her side, keeping her hands to herself but leaning close. “If you agree with the ends, why not help us achieve it? You and I could be the right and left hands of the Emperor.”

“No...No.” Maya insisted. “I’ll cooperate so long as it keeps me safe, but I don’t belong here, I need to return to my own world/”

“What a pity, but I suppose I shouldn’t ask for too much. Go.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

CW: discussions about/references to noncon

The knife was under the pillow, though T'Ralia had not yet decided if she would use it. She had dismissed Conroy's suggestion at first, coming to the conclusion that her own situation was not so unpleasant as to justify killing or the upheaval removing a captain would cause. She lived and worked with Terrans, sometimes she thought like they thought, yet she had never felt the impulse to be moved to violence by any slight inconvenience. However, Conroy's new offer made the endeavor seem a bit more logical. T'Ralia had no interest in being First Officer, but that position would put her close enough to become captain if Conroy were to meet an unfortunate end. Ambition was not her motivator, but to take command of the ship, if she could act quickly could end this coup before it started. Spock was right, and T'Ralia came to the same conclusions. With the old ways, the Terran Empire was unstable, doomed to fail in a matter of decades.

T'Ralia laid back on the bed in the captain's quarters, as she waited for Albrecht to arrive, her typical routine lately. She was dressed in a sheer black silk robe that displayed her body. Her dark hung loose down to her shoulder blades, wavy from being worn in tight braids all day.. Her uniform was neatly folded at the edge of the bed. While she waited she continued to weigh out her options, considering every possible outcome and calculating in her head the odds that each of those outcomes would come to pass. Even if she was the captain, she would have to deal with a very determined admiral who would be well within her rights to take command of the Portland if anything went against her well-laid plans. It was a delicate balance.

There was no chime at the door when Albrecht entered. Why would she, coming back to her own quarters? In her right hand, the captain held a bottle of champagne and in the other a pair of flutes. T'Ralia sat up, her eyes on the captain as she moved into the room. She had no feelings of desire toward Captain Albrecht, but from the first time they were involved she learned that Albrecht preferred even feigned interest

"It might be a bit early to celebrate," Albrecht set down the flutes and began to uncork the bottle. While she was usually an elegant woman, her struggles to open the bottle were decidedly awkward. She squeezed the bottle under one arm to hold it steady and popped the cork with her other hand. After a brief struggle, the cork shot out and hit the ceiling. Albrecht held the bottle away from her body as a stream of bubbles flowed out. A nervous half smile as she tried to recover and pour the champagne, the glasses filled to overflowing with effervescent foam that dissolved away within seconds. "But I'm thrilled with how things are going, especially considering my initial skepticism." She offered a glass to T'Ralia, who took it and held it delicately in her hand. "Have you ever been drunk before?"

T'Ralia perched on the edge of the bed. "Drunk? No, but I have been mildly intoxicated under very similar circumstances." She took a small sip of champagne. "Three years ago, when you first became captain."

"I had nearly forgotten about that. I nearly put my eye out with the cork that night, didn't I?" Albrecht sat on a nearby chair and set her glass down on the desk before she began to slip off her boots. "Did you think we'd make it this far, back when the admiral first came on board?"

"I thought her assertions seemed highly improbable, but not completely impossible." T'Ralia showed no difference in her mannerism,

"What an objective way to look at it." Albrecht leaned back and silently studied the Vulcan for a moment, licking her lips. "But I've been thinking. I was always so dissatisfied back when we were first involved, I have a few suggestions."

"What do you have in mind?" T'Ralia leaned to prop herself on one side, imitating what she thought was a human approximation of sensuality. In the past, Captain Albrecht had always responded favorably to such displays.

"In bed you were so cold and clinical, except for the one time when you were in Pon Farr and I thought you were going to literally use every bit of your Vulcan strength to tear me apart." She reached to pick up her glass again and took another long sip, slowly crossing and uncrossing her legs.

"Captain, I'm afraid you will have to wait nearly five years until my next Pon Farr."

"I know," Albrecht sighed. She rose from her chair and sat next to T'Ralia on the bed, placing a hand on the Vulcan's thigh. "But tell me, doctor, is there any way to make it come about artificially?"

T'Ralia considered her answer carefully. "It's theoretically possible, but the risk of death is high."

"I don't give a damn, I can replace you. But for now..." Albrecht drank down the rest of her champagne and swung her legs around to straddle T'Ralia as she threw her glass to the floor, where it shattered and any remaining liquid turned into a bubbling mess "Surely you remember what it was like, losing that careful control you always have over yourself. I bet you could do it on your own if you wanted to, if you weren't afraid of being no better than an emotional, illogical Terran."

T'Ralia saw her chance, and she took it. She threw her glass against the wall, grabbed Albrecht's shoulders and pinned her down. This was not losing control, but a calculated move. She had to act now, while Albrecht was not likely to fight back against an attack, and she behaved like someone eager for rough sex, only a half hearted attempt to playfully struggle even as T'Ralia's hand closed around her throat. With her free hand, T'Ralia pulled the knife from under the pillow and held the blade to Albrecht's throat. In that moment, Albrecht realized that this wasn't part of some rough play and panic filled her eyes.

"Wait, T'Ralia!" She begged. For all of her bravado, when her life was in immediate danger she was just as frail and frightened as anyone.

“Think about if this is what you want. You’re the captain’s woman now. If you kill me, you’ll go to Conroy, and he won’t be as gentle as I was.”

“Conroy and I have discussed this outcome. He agreed to release me from this obligation.”

“And if he lied to manipulate you?” Albrecht’s eyes were wide and wild, her eyes glistening with tears, and her whole body shaking.

“My ambitions are set to captaincy. I intend to deal with him in the same way that I am about to deal with you.” Those were the final words T’Ralia spoke to Captain Albrecht before she slit the captain’s throat. For another moment, T’Ralia kept the captain pinned down the bed, waiting until she was sure the woman lost enough blood that she would not be making another move, even if she did make a few final, desperate gasps for air.

She didn’t look back at the body before she picked her communicator out from the pile of her neatly folded clothes. “T’Ralia to Conroy.”

“Go ahead.”

“Captain Albrecht is dead. Congratulations on your promotion.”

T’Ralia had quickly changed back into her uniform before now-Captain Conroy arrived with the Admiral, but she didn’t have enough time to re-braid her hair, and dark uncombed waves hung loosely down her back. Conroy smiled and chuckled to himself as he studied the lifeless, bloody body on the bed, his hands clasped behind his back. “Well, done, Doctor! I was beginning to think I’d be having the conversation with someone else, it took you long enough to act.”

“Your final offer was what moved me to action, Captain. With the offer to become First Officer, it would be illogical for me to refuse the opportunity.”

“Leave it to a Vulcan to find a logical reason to murder, and after Spock I thought your kind cared more for altruism and ‘the needs of the many.’” the Terran La’an added. She wore her usual stern expression, her posture tall and rigid as ever, and seemed entirely unbothered by the sight of a murdered body. This was not her first time witnessing such an assassination, and she approached it as if it were an unremarkable occurrence.

“I still have personal ambitions, Admiral,” T’Ralia explained her motives with the same plain and easy coolheadedness one might use to explain the solution to a complex math equation. “However, I am moved to follow them by logic rather than by passion. My relationship with Albrecht put me in an ideal position to easily end her life.”

“If she was unable to defend herself from your attack, she deserved this fate, but I can’t help but feel a sense of disappointment. She agreed to submit to me once I become emperor.” La’an narrowed her eyes and gave Conroy a sideways glance and spoke through clenched teeth. “I will not be extending the same offer to you.”

“No hard feelings, Admiral,” Conroy kept his demeanor cool and professional. “You still have my loyalty and my oath to support your ambitions by any means necessary. I hold the same contempt for Spock and his weakening of the Empire as you do, and I only hope you will remember the assistance I gave.”

“Of course,” La’an nodded. “You, your crew, the augments, my associates on Terra Prime...Restoring the Empire has not been a solitary effort, and you have my promise that those who made it possible will be honored and rewarded to the best of my ability, and those who dared to defy me will be punished in turn.” Her eyes narrowed on T’Ralia. “Which brings me to you, Vulcan. As the new executive officer, personnel matters are under your jurisdiction. Captain Albrecht liked to act as though every member of her crew had her unyielding loyalty, but I’ve been around long enough to know that even the best captain cannot know everyone and everything. Investigate and observe, I want any signs of dissent reported to me directly so I can deal with them myself.”

“Understood, Captain,” T’Ralia answered with an obedient nod.

“Admiral, permission to speak freely,” Conroy spoke up, stepping closer to the admiral. He was much shorter than her (though his frame was considerably wider), and the way he puffed out his chest and tilted his head to look up at her made him look like an annoyed little brother.

“Go ahead, Captain.” La’an rolled her eyes. She leaned toward, which exaggerated their height difference. “But choose your words wisely. I have free reign to take your ship right out from under your nose, and I will not hesitate to use that authority to my own advantage.

“I only mean to say that I think I should be the first to know if any of *my* crew on *my* ship have any...troubling inclinations.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would agree.” La’an clasped her hands behind her back and stepped away, turning her back on Conroy and pacing the room as she spoke. “However, our circumstances are far from ordinary. This is deeper than one of your crewman being dissatisfied with their captain, they would be defying their future emperor. Not only do I require perfect compliance to successfully carry out this coup, but I want to start my reign already having set the precedent of swiftly and thoroughly punishing disloyalty.”

“Duly noted, Admiral.” Conroy nodded. Once again he scanned the room, his gaze landing on Albrecht’s dead body before he wrinkled his nose. “Let’s get someone to clean up this mess. I’m going to moving into these quarters soon, and I’d prefer not to see the blood stains of my predecessor or to smell her corpse.”

Chapter 11

Albrecht hadn't come by for her usual status report today. La'an didn't think anything of it, one thing that remained the same between both universes was that running a ship was enough to keep a person busy and preoccupied. Captain Albrecht wasn't only running a ship, she was also a key player in staging a coup. Checking in on a pair of prisoners when there was no real reason to give status updates had to be a low priority. No news was good news, there was no reason to believe that they weren't still en route to Terra Prime, and La'an was mildly relieved to have a brief respite from the captain's taunting.

Maya hadn't taken the absence quite so well. She had barely calmed down to rest since the meeting, still constantly glued to the computer console, getting defensive at any attempts to have a conversation. The more time they spent in this universe, the more agitated Maya became. Getting out of here was the best she could hope for.

"We won't be able to do it alone." As usual, Maya did not look away from the computer. "Neither of us know enough about transporters on our own, and we would need to reach the transporter room and complete the necessary modifications while avoiding detection. We need allies, ideally someone with the correct knowledge and who can be trusted."

"And, how, Maya, do you plan to find such an ally?" La'an sighed. "I'm even sure such a person exists."

"They might, I'm sure not every person on this ship agrees with Albrecht and is eager to take part in a coup." Maya explained. "The Terran Empire keeps detailed personnel records, which can be accessed with your security clearance. Finding a potential ally is simply a matter of finding someone flagged with suspicious behavior."

"It sounds risky and inexact." La'an crossed her arms. This happened at least once a day, when La'an found herself trying to talk Maya out of doing something stupid. Superior intellect, but lacking in sense just like any other twenty four year old. "I want to get back home as much as you do, but acting recklessly will get us killed."

"You might change your mind once you see just how in depth these records are. Here's what it says about you. Admiral La'an Noonien Singh. Descendant of Khan Noonien Singh. Graduated top of her class, but highly suspected to have killed the only student who outperformed her. Served on the ISS Enterprise under Captain Pike until James T. Kirk murdered Pike and took his place....Damn. She was later married to Kirk, but it lasted less than a year. Honestly, from what I've seen I'm surprised she didn't kill him when they decided to cut it off."

"Not if she felt the same way about Jim as I did." La'an mumbled, looking away. Decades had passed, another universe, another timeline, and somehow Jim still managed to make her heart ache.

"What?" Maya finally looked away from the computer, her head tilted to one side.

"Nothing." La'an shook her head. This wasn't her Jim either. Her Jim didn't exist and was only a youthful dalliance. It was foolish to still get so broken apart over it. "What else does it say?"

"That she earned the rank of admiral by crushing an Andorian uprising. And if you're really bored, there's also a detailed description of every disagreement and grievance she's had over the course of her career..."

"That's enough." La'an bit her lip before she went on. She placed her hands on Maya's shoulders, trying both to comfort her and hopefully peel her attention away from the computer for an uncomfortable conversation. "Maya...I don't want to press the issue if it's truly something you aren't comfortable sharing, but what did they say to you after the last meeting? You've clearly been upset by it."

"It doesn't matter!" Maya snapped, wiggling away from La'an touch. She still didn't look up, but her eyes stopped scanning the screen. "I can't stand being in this universe another moment. There's a stranger with my face who is everything I've been working not to become, hanging on to a perfect copy of a lover who I watched die, and they won't leave me alone. I first thought I wanted to stay around long enough to save Spock and be the hero, but we're not meant to be here. Someone else can be that hero."

La'an fell silent and stepped away, looking down at the ground for just a moment before there was a chime at the door. This must be Captain Albrecht.

"Come in," La'an answered with a heavy sigh. She was in no mood for this.

The door slid open, but on the other side it was not Captain Albrecht but instead a Vulcan woman.

"Doctor T'Ralia?" Maya rose to her feet, but stood up too quickly and had to sit back down to keep her head from spinning.

T'Ralia simply nodded before she stepped inside through the door. "I wanted to inform you myself of some recent changes onboard the ship." She took a moment to look from La'an to Maya. "I already know that you are doubles of the other La'an and Maya. Captain Albrecht tried to be secretive about your existence, but the truth was not difficult to uncover. What I don't understand, however, is how and why."

"Parallel universe." La'an shrugged. She knew how far fetched it sounded, but truly it was no worse than any of the other strange things she had witnessed from her days aboard a starship. "We haven't exactly figured how or why we ended up here either."

T'Ralia raised an eyebrow. "Curious."

"And what about the changes?" La'an asked.

"A shift in the chain of command. Captain Albrecht has been killed, Conroy is the new captain, and I am now first officer." T'Ralia took a

few long strides into the room and glanced down at the computer console. The Terran La'an's personnel file was still open. "I predict that this change will have little effect on the two of you, as Conroy is loyal to Admiral Noonien Singh and intends to follow the same course of action that Albrecht agreed to. However, my promotion does afford me more freedom to investigate and satisfy my curiosities."

"What curiosities?" Maya asked. She didn't stand up again, but she did sit more upright, shoulders tense.

"What is your involvement in the coup that your alternates are planning?"

"Unwilling accomplices, coerced into participating." La'an replied. "Strategically, your La'an intends to use us to give her and Maya a way to be in two places at once."

"And your intention is to cooperate?"

"Our intention is to get out of here before it comes to that." Maya stood up, careful this time to not rise too quickly.

"Maya!" La'an snapped.

"There is no need to be alarmed. I have no intention of sharing your plans. I suspect our goals may align."

"You want to help us return home?" Maya asked.

"I want you to help end this coup before it begins, and in return I will do anything in my power to see you return to your own universe."

Maya shook her head. "I still don't think we should get involved."

"Are you serious?" La'an took a step closer to Maya. "Just a minute ago you were desperate for an ally, and now you refuse our only chance to find one."

"I'm sorry!" Maya snapped. She threw her hands in the air and began to pace the room, her speech growing quicker and more frantic with each word. "I'm afraid of getting involved in this universe. I'm afraid of what might come to pass for the Terrans if we have too much influence here." She stopped herself and took a deep breath. La'an's brow was furrowed with worry, but T'Ralia was as impossible to read as ever. "I'm sorry. Doctor. I'll accept your offer and your help, but only because we have no other choice."

"I accept too," La'an agreed.

"Thank you both. We will be maintaining contact as we approach Terra Prime."

"Of course. Thank you again, Doctor, and goodbye." La'an said.

There was no precedent for the position T'Ralia found herself in, filling the role of both chief medical officer and executive officer. If her plans went accordingly, she would not be torn between these two positions for long, but for now she had to balance them carefully. She worked in sickbay, ready to see any unexpected patients if they needed her, but her attention was on her PADD, reading documents and filling out paperwork relevant to her new position. Until the sound of approaching footsteps caught her attention. She looked up to see a young Andorian man enter, doubled over in pain. His face was swollen and bruised with blue blood flowing from his nose.

"Ensign Shyraal." T'Ralia rushed to the Andorian's side. She acted with a sense of urgency, but still remained cool and calm. "Please have a seat on the biobed."

Shyraal followed the doctor's directions, his movements slow and stiff. "It's not that big of a deal, Doctor." His speech was slurred, likely from swelling and pain in the mouth. "I could probably sleep it off, but the bastards broke one of my teeth."

"You were in a fight." T'Ralia examined the patient with her tricorder, checking for any unseen injuries such as a concussion.

"I got beat up, I'd hardly call it a fair fight when it was three against one."

"Open your mouth." T'Ralia examined the broken tooth, a lower left molar, as best she could through all the blood. Shyraal's explanation confirmed a suspicion she had. Larsen, Pavlova, and Suzuki: a trio of rage-filled Terrans who had a history of committing acts of violence against non-Terrans yet never suffering any consequences for their hateful actions.

Once T'Ralia pulled away and Shyraal could speak again he shook his head. "It was naive to think that once Spock was in charge everything would change overnight, but on this damn ship it's the same old Terran Empire. I don't know if you understand how bad it can be. I always thought Vulcans had an advantage, not looking so different from them."

"I'm the executive officer now." T'Ralia set down her tricorder and picked up a dermal regenerator to begin repairing her patient's cuts and bruises. His broken tooth might be a greater priority, but they could not continue this conversation once dental work was underway. "You can report any personnel grievances to me, and you have my assurance that I will protect your anonymity."

Shyraal shook his head. "It's a nice idea, but I can't let myself feel hopeful about this. Those three won't stop unless they get thrown out an airlock. Don't push things too far too soon. Remember, you still have to answer to Conroy, and he's just as bad as Albrecht."

"If I am successful in my plans, then in time I will answer only to Admiral Noonien Singh."

Shyraal leaned in closer, eyes open wide. "You're going to kill Conroy too?"

"I have not yet decided if I will kill him by my own hand or recruit an accomplice, but yes, my goal is to take command of the ship and stop

the coup before we return to Terra Prime. The admiral would undo all of the progress that Spock has made and re-create a fascist world that is not only unsafe to non-Terrans but also unstable and unpredictable to each individual living within the Empire.”

“You don’t have to convince me. I’m on your side and I’ll do whatever it takes to get you in the captain’s chair and to protect Spock. I’ll even kill Conroy myself if you need me to. The admiral too, even though she scares the shit out of me.”

“I appreciate your allegiance. Now, I hate to cut this conversation short, but I would like to repair that tooth and cannot do it while you are talking.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

CW:

- Torture
- Heavy implications of non-con
- Heavy implications of selfcest

T'Ralia's offer wasn't good enough. If Spock was saved the Terrans were doomed, but she couldn't stand to take an active part in his assassination either. The best option was to remove the element of choice entirely. If she was out of this universe before any of these events came to pass, she would be blameless. There was a twinge of sadness to it, she had gotten on well enough with the Spock from her world based on their brief interactions, but as La'an never hesitated to point out, this was not the same person. The Spock she knew shared the same name and face but nothing more.

Maya waited until La'an fell asleep and went back to work on her computer console. With the lights in their quarters off, the screen emitted a soft glow as she read rapidly through personnel files. Two hours of work and she found what she needed, her short list. Ensign Shyraal, an Andorian who worked in engineering and had a record of getting into fights with traditionally minded Terrans. Lieutenant Butler, a science officer whose parents were executed for sedition; nothing in her file suggested that she shared their inclinations, but it was still noteworthy. Lieutenant Junior Grade Martinez, a warp core specialist recently disciplined for defying orders. La'an's credentials also allowed her to view shift rotations. Martinez and Shyraal should be ending their shift just now. If she could find them, this was the best time to talk, but La'an's warnings still lingered in the back of her mind. This was inexact and uncertain.

With La'an's security clearance Maya was able to get the door open and step out into the corridor. This wasn't the first time she ventured, without permission, out into this ship with a flimsy plan. The other time, though, she had less of a plan and no prior knowledge to help her on her way. She tried to walk with purpose and confidence: Back straight, shoulders back, chin high. If she seemed like she was meant to be there and acted like she knew what she was doing and where she was going, she was less likely to attract suspicion.

She only encountered three officers before she reached the turbolift, each barely acknowledged her, only giving a Terran salute before they went on their way. Once she was inside the lift, Maya allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief. She could only hope that the rest of her plan would go so smoothly. Maya tried to input her destination of main engineering, but the lift did not move. Instead, an error message appeared on a panel on the wall.

"Access restricted."

Frustrated, Maya smacked the wall with an open palm, then quickly pulled it away and shook out the pain. La'an could get her there, so long as the computer couldn't tell the difference between her and her Terran double she could do anything an Admiral could, but there would be no convincing her. Best to go try to get some sleep and regroup in the morning, either with a different plan or a better strategy to beg La'an for help. She input the command for the turbolift doors to open, and when she saw who was on the other side her heart jumped. It was Suzette Ling, and she had a wicked half smile on her face.

"How strange. I didn't think you were brave enough to be out of bed and sneaking around. I was told that you were meant to be confined to quarters and to be secretive about your existence." Suzette purred.

"You've mistaken me for my double." Maya stood tall and proud but her heart raced as she tried to speak with bold, heavy gravitas, the same way her brother, her father, and her Terran double spoke. "Now I demand an apology. You are speaking to the heir of Khan, show the proper respect."

"What a valiant effort." Suzette crossed her arms and tilted her body to one side. "But it's easier to tell the two of you apart than you might think. You're clearly the heavier one, and you speak like you're doing a poor imitation of her. Now be cooperative and tell me what you're up to."

"I don't owe you any explanations." Maya spat.

"Is that so?" Suzette narrowed her eyes before she grabbed Maya by the arm and yanked her out of the turbolift and into the corridor. "You're supposed to be confined to quarters, so you had better have a damn good reason. Now, you can explain yourself to me, or you can explain yourself to the captain and the admiral, and I doubt if they will be as understanding."

Maya looked into Suzette's eyes. In her universe, Suzette was one of the few augments from Ceti Alpha V who treated her with respect and kindness. This version was colder and harsher, but Maya wanted so desperately to trust her. "I was..." For a moment she swore she could see some of the warmth and kindness from the Suzette she knew. "Trying to find a way home. I don't belong here, I'm only going to get in the way of your coup, surely you understand."

Suzette's smile grew. "Oh, Maya, I understand." Her voice was saccharine sweet, but she still kept a tight grip on Maya's arm. "You've never felt like you belonged anywhere did you? Your counterpart used to feel the same way before she blossomed and realized her true potential..." A sudden change in Suzette's tone as she abandoned sweetness for sharp acidity. "So you can talk through it with her." Suzette began down the corridor, dragging Maya along with her.

"Suzette, wait!" Maya pleaded. She tried to break free but was no match for Suzette's enhanced strength. "My plan wasn't going to work,

anyway, I've given up on it."

Suzette said nothing and didn't even look at Maya as she forcibly led her. Maya was surprised at just how close her and La'an's Terran counterpart's quarters were to her own. All this time she had assumed they were living in another part of the ship when truly they were right around the corner. She had walked past this very door without knowing who lived on the other side each time she went down the corridor to catch the turbolift.

Standing outside the door to the Terran Maya's quarters, not only was Maya's heart racing, but legs shook and her stomach turned. La'an had been right. This was a stupid, poorly thought-out plan and now she would have to face brutal consequences.

Suzette rang the door chime and waited for a response. Silence. "Maya! Wake up! This is important."

"Come in." The Terran Maya answered in a voice marked with impatience and annoyance. While a star ship ran at all hours, there was still a distinct day/night cycle that each person kept according to their schedule.

The door slid open, and Suzette pushed Maya inside. Maya couldn't keep her balance and fell to her hands and knees. As she tried to pick herself up off the ground, she looked up to her Terran counterpart who stood in front of her. The Terran Maya was dressed in a long silk nightgown, her dark wavy hair hanging loose. Katya was there too, hanging back. She still sat in bed covering herself with the blankets, her eyelids heavy and hair uncombed.

"Your copy has been trying to stage a grand escape." Suzette explained. "I thought you might like to deal with her disobedience yourself."

"I see." The Terran Maya crossed her arms, eyes narrowed on her double. "Get La'an."

"La'an had nothing to do with this!" Maya begged. No one else deserved to suffer because of her mistake. "She thought the whole idea was foolish. Leave her out of this!"

"I didn't mean your La'an," The Terran Maya hissed. With a few long, quick strides she closed the space between them and began to slowly circle her counterpart. Her eyes were fixed on the copy of herself, studying every inch of her. "I thought I had you figured out. I thought we had more in common than you dared to admit, but now you vex me. I have offered you everything you could want, everything to which you are entitled, and yet you push me away. What is it you had back there that you are so eager to return to?"

Maya looked her Terran double in the eye for a moment before she felt a jolt of fear and quickly turned away. What did she have? A world that was, while safer, almost as unwelcoming to a half-augment as Ceti Alpha V? Poor health? Restrictions on her freedoms and her ability to live a full life? In truth, her safety, her friendship with La'an, and her access to knowledge were the most tangible improvements.

"Can't think of anything?" The Terran Maya teased and placed her hands on her hips. "Or at least not anything grand enough to move you to defend your situation." She stopped her circling, standing behind her counterpart and leaning in close. She placed her hands on Maya's shoulder and whispered in her ear, close enough that Maya could feel the heat of her breath. "Tell me exactly what your life was like and what you hope to return to."

"I was living with La'an." Maya looked straight ahead and tried not to flinch. "I was...on house arrest, essentially, but beginning to earn a little more independence."

"Oh?" The Terran Maya raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. "What did you do? I hope it was worth it."

"I tried to take control of a ship, this ship's alternate, in fact, and all of the assault and tampering with Starfleet equipment necessary to achieve that end." Some of her fear subsided. Over the past few months she had been asked to explain her crimes so many times that it was now part of a comfortable routine. "I also had a change of heart soon after, helped Starfleet, and ended up saving hundreds of lives, so I might have a few mitigating factors working in my favor."

The Terran Maya shook her head as she stepped away. "A better kind of human, a genetically superior princess, and they made you into a prisoner. What a sad state your world is in."

"That's part of what complicates matters. Genetic engineering is strictly forbidden in my world. Legally, I shouldn't exist, but La'an thinks mine is a unique case with special concerns."

The Terran Maya took a few steps around to face her double from the front. "A prisoner, a second class citizen, and you can't even think of what you had to value in your own universe?"

"Stop it!" Maya backed away. She knew what was happening now, the Terran Maya was trying to manipulate her. "Earth was a massive improvement. I was safe, I was surrounded by people who treated me with dignity and respect no matter what they thought about who I was or what I did." McCoy, La'an, Albrecht, T'Ralia...only a handful of people (one of them dead) who had shown her more compassion in a short span of time than anyone one Ceti Alpha V did in a lifetime.

"Everything you listed will come to those who demand it. It is better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven."

Maya rolled her eyes. "You sound like Father."

"That was my intent. He was right about a few things."

A chime at the door. "Come in," the Terran Maya called. The door slid open and both Mayas turned to see Suzette Ling and the Terran La'an standing in the door frame. La'an, too, had clearly been awoken unexpectedly. While she had at least taken the time to change into her uniform, instead of neat little braids her long gray hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, and her eyes were heavy. She stepped inside, the door closed behind her, and she gave both Mayas a stern look.

“Honestly I’m surprised we’ve made it this far without any unpleasant incidents from our...esteemed guests.” The Terran La’an closed the space between her and Maya, cupped the young woman’s chin in her hand, and turned her head to force Maya to look into her eyes. Maya’s eyes were wide and fearful, even though she fought to not show any sign of weakness. She didn’t try to look away from La’an’s gaze. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been dragged out of bed to attend to a disciplinary matter.”

“La’an.” The Terran Maya spoke this time and stepped beside La’an, and she reached out to touch her upper arm. “I trust your judgment to punish her as you see fit, but please don’t kill her. I’ve gotten quite attached, and I think she could be swayed.”

“Not to worry, killing her would work against my best interests. I still need the cooperation of the other La’an. Wand too much hostility toward her little friend would turn her into an enemy.” La’an turned her head to address Katya. “Get dressed and leave us. Take Suzette and...go for a walk. Anything. It doesn’t matter.”

“No.” Katya inched forward in bed, still covering herself with the blanket. “I’m strong enough to stay and watch. It won’t bother me.”

“I don’t doubt that you are. It’s the privacy we require. This is an issue between Maya—both of them—and myself.”

Katya said nothing else, quickly grabbing clothes from a pile on the ground and throwing them on her slender frame. She left without another word, and also without waiting for Suzette, who trailed behind her.

The Terran La’an watched them go, and once the door shut behind Suzette she turned her attention back to Maya. “I’m curious. I’ve been told by my Maya and the augments that I remind them of Khan. Would you make the same comparison, given your differing experiences?”

“You’re worse.”

“Good.” The Terran La’an let go of Maya’s chin and stepped away. She reached for a device that was clipped to her belt, not a phaser or communicator, something Maya had never seen before. “You’re lucky. Some of Spock’s reforms outlawed the most effective means of discipline, but I’m nostalgic enough to keep an agonizer for my own purposes. He called it inhumane, but I find it much more merciful and civilized than any alternatives. Be grateful I don’t have to resort to ancient, medieval methods. No bodily harm, no lasting damage, only pain.”

The Terran La’an aimed the device at Maya and activated it. An explosion of searing hot pain burst through Maya’s body. She fell to the ground and screamed with such force that her throat was raw. The pain seemed to surge on for hours until it finally ceased. Maya collapsed in a limp heap on the ground, shaking and gasping for air.

“That was only one quarter power for ten seconds, and here I expected a half augment to have a stronger constitution.” La’an taunted.

“I don’t need to know what full power feels like,” Maya spoke between labored breaths. “I’ve learned my lesson. I was wrong. You have my full cooperation.”

“No one breaks that easily.” La’an activated the agonizer again, set to a higher intensity and for a longer duration. Her face remained stern and stoic as she watched Maya scream and writhe on the floor in pain. This was not her first time inflicting unspeakable pain on someone, nor would it be the last. “No one breaks until they have lost all sense of self.””

Maya couldn’t guess how long it had been before the Terran La’an had turned off the agonizer for more than a moment. Even then, Maya expected another onslaught of pain to begin. She laid face down on the floor and had no desire to get up, every fiber of her being feeling as though it had been ripped apart. Her heart raced, and her instincts told her to run as if from danger, but she didn’t have the strength to move.

The Terran Maya knelt beside her and laid a hand on the back of her head. Her touch was soft and gentle, but Maya still flinched away. “Are you ready to cooperate?” she cooed.

Maya nodded. Words seemed too difficult to form.

“I believe you. All I need is for you to prove your obedience to me.” Her fingertips trailed down the back of her double’s neck, down her spine, and stopped at the small of her back where she traced little circles. “It would be a lovely status symbol, to have an exact copy of yourself as a concubine.”

Maya closed her eyes and nodded. She was lucid enough to know what her Terran counterpart was suggesting, and while she wanted no part of it, she couldn’t bring herself to refuse. Too exhausted, too frightened to invite another round with the agonizer. She had no more energy or will for anything other than the path of least resistance.

“Say it.” The Terran Maya nearly spat out her words.

“Yes.” Just forming that one word felt like a chore. Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth, and her speech was slurred.

“Yes, what?” The Terran Maya demanded as she traced her fingertips back up her counterpart’s spine.

“Yes, I...” Her throat was tight, but somehow she forced out the words. “Yes, I will...submit myself to you and do anything you ask.”

The Terran Maya chuckled softly and curled her fingers into her double’s hair. “Not to worry, I know how worn out you are. You don’t have to do anything. Let me take care of you.” She looked toward La’an “Leave us.”

“What a shame,” she sighed. “I would have liked to stay and help. I value a meek lover, and Albrecht gone I fear I might not find someone to suit my tastes for quite some time.” The Terran La’an offered no other protests, and left without looking back.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

CW:

This deals with the aftermath of the non-con from the previous chapter

Panic. La'an woke up, and Maya was nowhere to be found. Not asleep, not hunched over the computer console, not using the 'fresher. Nowhere.

"Stupid, stupid girl," La'an mumbled as she quickly dressed. There was a great risk to herself to go wandering the ship, but a greater risk to Maya to be left to her own devices and her poorly planned schemes. Before she left, La'an skimmed the computer console to look for a clue of where Maya might be. She had been looking at shift rotations before she left, maybe trying to catch someone as they finished their day's work? A little more digging and she could probably guess who, but the last shift ended four hours ago. That was too long to be gone just to meet someone for a chat.

There was a chime on the door. La'an sighed. She didn't have time for this. "Come in." She turned to face the door, and when it opened she saw her Terran double standing in the door frame.

"You will stand and salute me, La'an," she demanded as she stepped inside and the door closed behind her.

"Forgive me for forgetting my manners, Admiral." La'an did stand up, but not because it was demanded of her. Rather, she wanted to address her alternate eye to eye, as an equal. "It's the furthest thing from my mind when I'm deeply concerned for the safety of my companion."

"And that's what I came here to talk to you about." The Terran La'an moved into the room with long, powerful strides, filling the space with a powerful presence. She stopped by the computer console and glanced down at the screen. "Whether its due to youthful bravado or a sense of arrogance from having an altered genome, one thing both Mayas have in common is a frustrating aversion to planning their actions."

"What happened to her?" La'an's heart raced, her face began to feel hot, and she clenched her fists. An urgent sense of danger began to creep in as she began to see the other La'an as a direct threat.

"Not to worry, She should be relatively safe. She said that you had nothing to do with her escape attempt, and while I have reasons to believe her, I won't leave any stone uncovered." Her attention went back to the computer, skimming through the shift rotations before flipping through a few other documents that Maya had recently read. "Especially when it looks like you've been using my credentials to access every file on the ship."

"I won't say a word until you tell me what happened to her."

"Nothing she didn't deserve." The Terran La'an didn't look up, still searching through the computer's history. "But it was a mistake to trust the two of you to stay together. She will be spending the remainder of our journey with her counterpart. Believe me, they've taken a liking to each other."

La'an didn't like that answer, all this dodging and avoiding a direct answer left her mind free to speculate, and she didn't like the dark place her mind wandered off to when she tried to guess what might have happened.

"Look at me!" She shouted, grabbing her Terran counterpart by the shoulder and forcing her to turn to face her. "Look at me and tell me what you've done to her!"

Choosing an aggressive strategy proved to be a mistake. The Terran La'an broke free from her counterpart's grasp and with a fluid motion grabbed La'an by her shirt to pull her close and turned La'an so that her back faced her, drew the knife from her belt, and held the blade of her weapon to La'an's throat. "Allow me to remind you again that you are in no position to make demands. My plans might require you to act as my double, but I can alter them if I must."

La'an had escaped, unarmed from a knife fight before, she knew what to do. She smashed the back of her skull into her Terran counterpart's head. That wasn't enough to knock her opponent off balance, so she also thrust her elbow back to strike her opponent in the abdomen. The two women were perfectly matched in strength, experience and technique, but La'an earned herself a slight advantage, enough to take hold of the Terran La'an's wrist and push her knife arm inches away from her throat.

The two were locked in a stalemate, equal forces pushing in opposition but making no progress until La'an stole an advantage by stomping on her opponents foot. The Terran La'an had the same high pain tolerance that she did, but the unexpected move caught her off guard just enough that her strength wavered for just a moment, long enough for La'an to twist her counterpart's arm into an unnatural angle that forced her to loosen her grip on her weapon and gave La'an the opportunity to wrestle the knife from her hand.

She had to move fast, well aware that the Terran La'an still had a phaser. Just as the Terran La'an had done to her when their altercation began, La'an grabbed her counterpart's collar and yanked her around to hold the blade against her throat. "Now who's in a position to make demands? Tell me what you've done to Maya."

"Unimaginable pain, but no bodily harm. I don't know if you have that technology in your world."

“We don’t need it where I’m from. Is that all you did to her?”

“That’s all I did to her. I don’t know what happened after, but I have reason to believe my Maya’s intentions were on pleasure rather than pain.” As the Terran La’an spoke, La’an could feel her opponent’s arm begin to move, the arm that was closest to her phaser. La’an didn’t give her the chance to reach it, swiftly pulling the knife away from her throat and thrusting it into her lower abdomen. Her intent was only to injure, not to kill. She held her opponent still and let her bleed out until she was sure that the Terran La’an would be weakened enough to not pose a threat.

La’an let go, and her Terran double collapsed to the ground on all fours, weak and shaking. She bent down to take the communicator and the phaser from her belt. “La’an to Doctor T’Ralia. I am in my counterpart’s quarters.” She had to pretend to be the Terran La’an in case she was overheard. “We had an altercation. She needs immediate medical attention and sedation. I want to keep her alive for now.”

The Terran La’an gasped for air. “Go ahead and kill me. At least grant me the dignity of a clean death.”

“If that’s what you want, then I am less inclined to grant it.” She knelt beside her Terran counterpart. For all of the time she had faced death herself, the first time as a young child, seeing her mirror image hanging onto life by a thread stirred up an uncomfortable reminder of her own mortality. No matter how cruel her counterpart might be, she couldn’t stomach the thought of watching her die.

“Coward. Give me back my knife and let me do it myself rather than live with the shame of defeat.”

“Absolutely not.”

The door opened without the courtesy of a chime, and Doctor T’Ralia rushed in. She didn’t offer any pleasantries before she knelt beside the patient and began to work, first with a hypospray full of sedatives and then with a dermal regenerator to repair the stab wound. “I see I reached the correct conclusion that you were the La’an from the other universe, and this woman is the Terran?”

La’an nodded. “Is it only that she’s wearing a Terran uniform that gave it away?”

“No. It is highly unlikely that a Terran with a brutal sense of ambition like La’an would spare the life of an opponent. I trust that you had good reason to spare hers.”

“A number of reasons. It seemed as though I was watching myself get killed, I’m afraid of having too much outside influence on your world, and I don’t want to lose any knowledge or information she might have.”

“Your first appeal is purely emotional, the second is a moot point because you have already interfered, but your third point is logical.”

“Can you keep her sedated indefinitely?”

“A safer, more secure option would be to store her in the buffer of sickbay’s emergency transporter.”

La’an had heard that strategy before. “Perfect. Whatever it takes. Get her out of here, and as far as anyone else is concerned I’m her and she’s dead.”

T’Ralia took a moment to process La’an’s convoluted explanation. “Understood, Admiral Noonien Singh.”

As soon as T’Ralia left with the patient. La’an bolted out the door and down the corridor. She was too late to save Maya from the worst of the suffering, but damned if she would let her endure another moment of it. She walked as quickly as she could without breaking into a run, ignored the crew who she passed as they offered a respectful Terran salute, but was stopped by an unexpected yet familiar voice that called out to her from behind.

“Admiral Noonien Singh. The Terran uniform suits you.”

La’an turned to face the male Q. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Don’t you, though? Take a turn around the corner and you’ll see an ensign frozen mid-stride. Time has stopped, no one can hear us, and any sense of urgency is nothing more than a product of your own mind.” Q clasped his hands behind his back as he walked closer, studying La’an carefully. “I think the gold of an Emperor’s regalia might suit you even better.”

“I have no intention of taking my alternate’s place, I thought that would have been made clear by the fact that I didn’t kill her when I easily could have.”

“But of course, a beautiful glimpse of compassion from a descendant of one of Earth’s worst fascist dictators. At least, that’s what it looks like on the surface. Maybe you want to kill her but pragmatic reasons, not altruism, are holding you back.”

“And maybe I don’t give a damn about these games you’re trying to play.”

“Dear Admiral, you’ve been playing in my game from the start. This whole universe is my game. You are poised to become the Terran Emperor. Your whole life you have denied your legacy, maybe it’s time to embrace it.”

“Whatever you seem to know, you don’t know my heart. I’m not like him. Maya isn’t like him, and if you think something will make either of us snap, you’re going to be sorely disappointed.”

“Don’t be so sure until you’ve spoken to her yourself.” With a flash of light, Q vanished.

La’an began to walk again, slowly and uncertain. She breathed a sigh of relief when she turned the corner and saw the ensign Q had mentioned, walking normally, and only stopping to give her a Terran salute, which La’an actually returned. If she was going to convince

anyone else that she was the other La'an, she had to put some effort into it.

Soon she stood outside the door to the Terran Maya's quarters. She took a deep breath before she rang the chime, bracing herself for what she might see on the other side of the door. No response. "Maya. I need to speak to you immediately."

"Just a moment. I thought you were going to give me more time."

A wave of panic and nausea hit La'an. "Now, Maya!"

A few tense moments panicked before the doors slid open. The Terran Maya stood just on the other side in a silk nightgown, her hair wild and tousled. "Why so urgent? You didn't change your mind about taking part, did you?"

"What?" a moment of realization. La'an wrinkled her nose in disgust. "No, no. absolutely not!" She pushed the Terran Maya out of the way as she rushed into the room. "What have you done to her?"

The Terran Maya recovered her balance and glared at La'an with narrowed eyes. "You aren't the right La'an. I'll call for Captain Conroy... anyone...they'll put you in your place."

La'an gritted her teeth and tried to remain calm as she drew her phaser. "I'm the only La'an now, and if you make one wrong move then she'll be the only Maya. I normally wouldn't use lethal force unless absolutely necessary, but I noticed that Terran phasers only have one setting: vaporize."

The Terran Maya's shoulders were hunched forward, and she held her hands up in front of her as a sign of retreat, but she still tried to stand her ground. "You're bluffing. The people from your world are too soft for that."

Without hesitation, La'an aimed her phaser at the ground beside Terran Maya's feet. She jumped frantically to the side as the spot on the ground burned, twisted, and melted into a blackened mess. The Terran Maya stared at the scorched, smoldering spot on the floor before looking back to La'an...who had her phaser aimed back at her.

"Are you willing to test that theory?" She demanded. The Terran Maya simply shook her head. "Good. Get on your knees."

The Terran Maya complied, hands still up and open as she lowered herself to kneel on the floor. La'an kept her phaser aimed at her as she came closer and walked behind her. At the very last moment, La'an holstered her phaser, only because she needed both hands to tear a length of fabric from her jacket to bind the Terran Maya's hands behind her back.

Her opponent, however, took advantage of that moment of vulnerability. She dived down to roll away, but La'an acted quickly enough to tackle her. The Terran Maya had the advantages of youth and advanced strength and speed, but La'an had decades of experience and well-practiced technique. Still, the Terran Maya had the strength to wiggle her way free and get back to her feet, but La'an grabbed her ankle, pulled her down, and she fell to the ground face down. Once she was down, La'an drew her weapon again and kept it aimed at the Terran Maya as she rose back to her feet. "We can keep playing this game, but as long as I'm the one with the phaser, it's a game you're going to lose."

"Maybe if you weren't afraid to use it."

La'an placed one foot on the Terran Maya's upper back, right between the shoulder blades. She didn't press hard enough to cause injury, just to hold her down. "I don't want to use it, but I will if you force my hand." Now that she was sure her opponent was secure, she finished what she started a little while ago. She holstered her phaser, finished tearing the strip of fabric, and knelt down (one knee still holding down the Terran Maya) to tie her hands tightly behind her back. Once she was done, La'an grabbed her communicator and flipped it open.

"Admiral Noonien Singh to Doctor T'Ralia."

"Go ahead."

"Can you store another person in the transporter's buffer?"

"No. The data storage and energy resources are already approaching their limit."

Damn. that would complicate things. "Understood. Come to Maya's quarters anyway. She needs a trusted doctor."

"Understood."

La'an looked up and took a moment to regroup and think of an alternate, and unfortunately less ideal, plan. "Admiral Noonien Singh to security."

"Go ahead."

"I need three of your best men to come immediately to Maya's quarters and detain her. She's been behaving erratically and can't be trusted"

"Understood, Admiral. On our way."

"And I cannot stress this enough, do not use lethal force. I need her to win the favor of the augments, and I believe I can convince her to see reason." No response. "This is a direct order from an admiral, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes Admiral."

La'an dug her knee harder in the Terran Maya's back and still kept her phaser aimed in place. "I'm going to great lengths to preserve your life. Don't be stupid enough to force me to use my weapon." She turned her head just enough to see the bed. A human shaped form hid under the covers with a tuft of dark hair sticking out at the top. "Maya...I'm not ignoring you. I just need to take care of her first." La'an heard a soft, pained moan. She wasn't sure if she was relieved to hear a response or heartbroken to hear one that was so anguished and pitiful.

The security team arrived soon. There was no chime at the door, the three men burst in and rushed toward the Terran Maya. La'an rose to her feet, wincing because her joints ached and creaked, a reminder that she really was getting too old for this. The trio rushed toward the Terran Maya, one restraining her on each side while the third watched and was ready to offer backup if needed. La'an clasped her hands behind her back and watched with a stern look on her face. "Be gentle. I still need her." From what she saw, however, the Terran Maya wasn't giving them much of a chance to treat her gently. She struggled like a feral animal, kicking, biting, and screaming. La'an stood still and kept up the demeanor of the stern admiral until the door slid back closed behind them.

"Maya!" In that moment, her tough exterior broke down and she rushed to the side of the bed to kneel beside Maya. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry. I don't even want to ask what happened." She rested a gentle, comforting hand on Maya's head, but Maya flinched and rolled away.

"Don't touch me! And I didn't endure anything that I didn't deserve. I broke the rules, I brought this on myself."

"No...Maya, no. Whatever they told you, this wasn't your fault." She looked down. Words were so hard to form. What could you even say to someone who had every reason to be inconsolable? "Anything you need as far as help and comfort, I will be happy to do it. Doctor T'Ralia is on her way."

"I don't need a doctor. I don't need anything but space." Maya slowly sat up, still covering herself with the blanket. Her eyes were half open, and her head was hung heavy. "Let me get dressed." La'an walked away and turned her back. "I know you and her and different people, but I can't stand to look at you. I don't think I could stand to look at my own reflection either."

"I understand." La'an was quiet and distant, memories of her own horrific trauma creeping back. A bit of empathy and common ground would help, but not if meant she couldn't stay present.

"Do you, though?" La'an turned to look back to Maya, who was dressed again and perching on the edge of the bed. "Why didn't you kill her?"

"Didn't you tell me you agreed that we should minimize our impact on this world?"

"That doesn't matter. I don't care about what happens to this world anymore."

"I can't blame you for feeling that way, but killing for revenge is barbaric. The Terran Empire may be stuck in violent ways, but Earth, the Federation, we've moved on to a more humane way of life, and I can't stand to abandon that."

"Damn. Then that proves it, doesn't it?" Maya stood up and walked to the window to watch the stars fly by. She still looked weak and unsteady and leaned against the wall. "I must be just as heartless and barbaric as my father and every other augment from Ceti Alpha V. All this time I've taken secret pride in the fact that no one who hurt me is still alive to tell about it, but now there are two survivors. You must think I'm a monster"

"No, not at all. I'd feel the same way if our roles were reversed. They're the monsters, not you."

"Yet you've got out of your way to let them live."

"I'm trying to be bigger. Doctor T'Ralia will be here soon. I think you should at least talk to her."

"I can't stand to be in this room another moment."

A very reasonable request. "La'an to T'Ralia."

"Go ahead."

"Stay put. We'll meet you in sickbay instead."

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

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

Terra Prime

Ortegas had to switch up the places where she secretly met with Sulu. The first bar had been perfect, and while they hadn't attracted suspicion (so far as she could tell) the regulars were beginning to recognize them. That was more attention than Ortegas wanted to attract, but luckily she had a long list of seedy San Francisco bars where no one gave much of a damn who came and went. This one, while not the most secretive (her list was running out) was easily the oddest. The walls were painted in odd mis-matched colors, and shelves along the walls displayed strange knick-knacks from decades past. Not valuable or even visually appealing antiques, just odd, brightly colored...crap.

Sulu had beat her here this time. After their first meeting he seemed to have a little more faith and trust in her and showed some more initiative, arriving early more often than not. She took a seat on the barstool next to him and waved to the barkeep.

"Once again, you've outdone yourself with these meeting places. How ever do you find such bizarre places?"

The bartender (a Terran this time) looked toward Ortegas. "A beer and a shot of whiskey." She looked back to Sulu. "Just wait till you check out the waterbed in the back. Back in my academy days, I had this crazy ex-girlfriend. We had this running competition where we kept trying to outdo each other on who could find the weirdest place to get drunk."

"I take it you won, and I hope my daughter never finds these places.."

"No idea who won, we were always too drunk to remember, and the relationship ended with a nasty fight. Don't remember who won the fight either." The bartender returned with her shot and the beer. Ortegas drank down the whiskey and chased it with a long draw from her beer. "Anyway, The Portland should be getting into communication range now, and we haven't heard anything from La'an"

"They are only just beginning to be in range, by optimistic calculations. I wouldn't think anything of it yet, but be wary."

"Yeah, well, I still don't like it." Another long sip of beer. "I'm sure she's hiding something."

"Erica Ortegas and Hikaru Sulu." Ortegas and Sulu both turned on their barstools to face a woman in an Imperial Starfleet uniform.

"Um...Can I help you, Captain?" Ortegas asked, a perplexed eyebrow raised, This wasn't the sort of place people dared to come in uniform, and she had never seen this woman before.

"A pleasure to meet the two of you. You may call me Q."

"Right..." Ortegas answered. "Look, Captain Q, The two of us were trying to have a private conversation."

"I know. Look around you, and you'll see that there is no better time nor place to speak in the utmost secrecy."

Ortegas and Sulu indulged Q and examined their surroundings. Everyone was frozen in time.

"I take it you're more the Imperial Starfleet captain you appear to be," Sulu guessed.

"You could say that," Q shrugged. "Think of me as an observer."

"Well, observer, we'd like a little privacy." Ortegas snapped.

"It's a little late for that request to be honored. I know that the two of you are conspiring with Admiral Noonien-Singh to overthrow Spock. I also know that you have a little conspiracy of your own to turn against the Admiral when the time suits you right."

"How the hell did you find that out?" Ortegas jumped up from her barstool and clenched her fists, ready to fight Q if she had to.

"Fear not, Ortegas." Q held a hand with an open palm out in front of her body. "I am not here to judge, nor to take part."

"Then why make yourself known at all?" Sulu asked as he crossed his arms.

"I'm not here to take part, but I'm not above influencing. I want you to see all the angles, as I can. What do you think will happen if Spock is assassinated?"

"Someone worthy takes his place and the Empire regains its former glory." Sulu answered with a shrug.

"Not entirely wrong, but only single thread in a complex tapestry." Q snapped her fingers. With a flash of light she vanished.

Ortegas gave Sulu a bewildered look. "Well, that was...odd."

"Indeed."

Ortegas took another sip from her beer, and only a moment later men in the golden armor of the Imperial Guard burst in.

"There they are!" one shouted.

Before Ortega and Sulu could react, the guardsmen swarmed them. Sulu and Ortega tried to run, but they were quickly surrounded, and with the numerous guards armed to the teeth, there was no sense in fighting back. The pair held their hands up in surrender.

“Hikaru Sulu and Erica Ortega,” A middle aged woman spoke as she stepped forward. The insignia on her armor indicated that she was captain of the guard. “Admiral Noonien-Singh was wrong to trust the two of you.”

“Wait...What the entire fuck?” She glanced at Sulu. He looked just as confused as surprised, but he did a better job of keeping it to himself “How is she emperor already?”

The captain narrowed her eyes. “She’s been emperor for nearly a year now, and that’s no way to speak to an augment. Do you, like so many others need to be reminded that we are far superior to Terrans?”

“I’m sorry, Ortega is very drunk.” Sulu lied, still cool and calm even as a bead of nervous sweat formed on his brow.

“Yeah...I’m drunk...” Ortega couldn’t help but roll her eyes. “And yea, I guess it has been a year, but here’s the thing. We never did anything to work against La’an. We didn’t like her. We may have talked about taking action, but we never got so far as to do a damn thing.”

“So you admit to thought-crime, which is still a capital offense.”

“Wait..dammit..no!” The guards swarmed around them. With so many armed and highly trained guards against only two unprepared people, Ortega and Sulu were overpowered easily, and everything went black.

Ortega came to inside a tiny cell with her head on fire, her vision blurry, and her wrists bound. That seemed redundant, but she couldn’t help but admire that sense of preparedness. Whoever detained her realized that she was the sort of person to try to make a break for it at the first opportunity.

“Sulu!” She called out. Nothing but silence. Maybe he got away, but it was more likely they were keeping him somewhere else. What she did hear was footsteps, heavy boots echoing in and empty hallway. They came closer and closer, and soon Ortega caught sight of the captain of the guard from before.

The woman stopped in front of her cell and clasped her hands behind her back. “Well, I hope your crimes were worth it.”

“Yeah, definitely. Look...I think one of your men gave me a concussion, and I’m still a little drunk. If I’m supposed to know who you are... sorry, I’m drawing a blank.”

“Suzette Ling. Survivor of the Eurgenics Wars. Right hand to Emperor La’an Noonien-Singh.”

“Right. Now I remember.” She didn’t. She had never seen this woman before in her life. “I thought the kid was supposed to be her right hand, though.”

“Maya is still too young and experienced, but it doesn’t matter. I don’t owe you any explanations. You won’t be around much longer.”

Suzette went to the control panel and entered a few commands to lower the forcefield. Ortega saw her chance and tried to sprint away, but Suzette was faster, caught her, and pulled her in close to whisper in her ear. “I’m stronger, faster, and smarter than you could ever imagine. This entire complex is filled with more augments like me, and we are all devoted to the task of bringing you to the emperor for execution. If you have any sense, you will accept your fate with dignity.”

“I don’t think so!” Ortega continued to struggle even though she couldn’t break free. She didn’t back down even as Suzette dragged her through twisting corridors, and out into a massive, packed auditorium. Bright stage lights blared in her eyes for a moment until she adjusted enough to see her surroundings clearly. Another guard had brought Sulu from the other side of the stage. In the center La’an sat upon a golden throne, dressed in the best Imperial finery, and more guards—including that kid, Maya—surrounded her.

La’an stood from her throne, and the crowd cheered. “Today two traitors will be brought to justice!” More cheers. Ortega looked toward Sulu. They locked eyes with a shared look of desperation, but neither had any kind of escape plan. “I once trusted these two, Erica Ortega and Hikaru Sulu. They swore to see me rise to power and betrayed me. My subjects, let this be a lesson to you. Trust no one.”

She took a few steps forward, drew the phaser from her belt and aimed it at the back of Ortega’s head. Ortega closed her eyes, and she heard phaser fire, but was both relieved and pleasantly surprised to still be alive. She turned her head back as much as she could and saw a smoldering mass where Emperor La’an once stood. Further back she saw Maya with her phaser still drawn.

“You follow a false emperor!” Maya shouted. “No matter what she told you, she is not the heir of Khan, I am. After centuries of removal from his superior genetics she was no better than an average Terran. Khan was my father. He ruled one quarter of earth in his time, and I will continue his legacy with an empire that will extend beyond the stars!”

A still, heavy moment. The crowd did not respond immediately, but a wave of gasps and murmurs began to rise. These were not the cheers that greeted La’an, these were sounds of shock and disapproval. Some people from the front of the auditorium rose from their seats and rushed to climb onto the stage, where they were met with little resistance. The guards moved to surround and protect Maya, and Ortega and Sulu saw their opportunity. They ran from the stage, twisting and turning through the complex corridors until they found a way outside. Chaos had already erupted out there too: fighting fires, people breaking anything they could get their hands on. Ortega and Sulu ducked into an alley, and after a flash of light they found themselves back at the same bar as before. Time was not frozen anymore, and the only difference was that they were short of breath and sweating...a strange thing for a pair who had done nothing but sit at a barstool.

“Sulu...Did you see all of that, or am I losing my mind?” Ortega asked through labored breaths. Her eyes darted around the bar, checking that everything was really back in place and that Q or the Imperial guards weren’t still lurking in some corner.

“I was about to ask the same. So, do we abandon this endeavor?”

“No, no, that’s not what I got out of all that.” Ortega drank the rest of her beer in one long draw. She’d need a few more after that. “We just can’t get caught.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the bar is a Mirror Universe version of Kozy Kar.

Chapter 15

Conroy liked to think of himself as a moderately progressive man. While he didn't see non-Terrans as true equals, and he couldn't support Spock's extreme reforms, his views were more charitable than most. In their own way, he thought each individual—regardless of their species—had their own strengths, their own advantages that they brought to the proverbial table, and sometimes he could convince himself to have an open mind to try to learn from people who weren't just like him. Furthermore, he wasn't fond of needless killing just to assert his dominance or make an example of someone. Oh, he had murdered plenty of times, but each had a good reason. Such an outlook had practical advantages as well. The less likely people thought you were to end your life, the less likely they were to end your own.

Ensign Shyraal was one such non-Terran who Conroy thought he could learn from. He had heard that the Andorian had impressive skills in martial arts and wanted not only to see it for himself but to experience it, so he arranged for the two of them to spar together. Once he gave it a bit more thought, he realized that Shyraal might be an ideal sparring partner. The two of them were close in height and in size...something that made it difficult for Conroy to find someone who was a fair match. Conroy had an open mind toward learning from the Andorian, but in his heart he still had a feeling that he would win in the end.

He arrived a few minutes late, a power play to leave the ensign waiting, just to remind him who had more important things to do and places to be. Ensign Shyraal was waiting, dressed in black athletic attire. His shirt was sleeveless, and as he gave the Terran salute Conroy noticed that the young Andorian was significantly more muscular than the drape of his uniform jacket led him to believe.

"Captain." Shyraal also offered a polite bow. "I'm honored that you wanted to spar with me."

Conroy returned his bow. "If the rumors I've heard are true, I think the honor might be mine."

The two men took a starting stance. Physically, they were evenly matched with strength and speed, but they had different experiences and different training. Their bout was more like a game of chess fought with bodies, a competition of one strategy against another. Each fighter employed a skilled dance of feints, dodges, and blocks.

Shyraal began to show signs of exhaustion first. The expression on his face didn't change, and he still had the endurance to keep up his strength and speed, but his breathing was heavier and his face turned a brighter shade of blue, the way a Terran's might flush red or a Vulcan's green. Just as he predicted, Conroy felt as though this match was his. He couldn't help but move with a bit of cocky bravado, his strategy beginning to neglect defensive choices.

But then the damn Andorian started fighting dirty.

Shyraal reached in to grab Conroy by the collar of his shirt and pulled him in close. With his free hand he pulled a hidden knife from his boot and held the blade against Conroy's throat.

"Doctor T'Ralia sends her regards." Shyraal pressed the blade in firmly, and Conroy began to feel the sting of its edge against his flesh. "And if she was here, I think she might thank you." Shyraal dragged the knife across Conroy's throat. The flesh tore easily, cold steel creating a waterfall of hot, red blood. "You made her first officer, which means she's captain now."

Shyraal didn't stop to clean off Conroy's blood before leaving the practice room. He did try to wipe off as much as he could on his shirt, but streaks and splatters of red (making it clear that the blood was not his own) lingered on his face and hands. The front of his shirt was wet, but the black fabric hid just what it was wet with. He walked with a sense of confidence and purpose that he had never felt before: spine straight, shoulders back, head tall, and a half-smile on his face. As he moved through the ship's corridors, the crew he encountered would freeze with a look of shock that a moment later turned into a quiet nod of approval and a Terran nod. A successful assassination would always guarantee respect aboard an Imperial ship, and these people didn't even know who it was that Shyraal killed.

He had to tell T'Ralia first, and so he went to sickbay. She was almost alone there, her only company was the patient she attended to, a young woman. T'Ralia paused her work to stare at Shyraal when he entered, her dark eyes darting from one smear of red blood to the next.

"I'm not hurt. This isn't my blood," Shyraal explained, still standing just inside the doorway.

"Clearly. I take it there is a badly injured Terran somewhere on the ship who needs immediate medical attention." T'Ralia asked. Vulcans were notoriously difficult to read, but if he had to hazard a guess, he'd say that T'Ralia was annoyed. Well, if that was the case what welcome news this would be.

"Not anymore. He's dead." He took a few more steps inside. Shyraal still held himself with confidence, but his shoulders relaxed a bit. "I thought you might like to be the first to know, Captain."

T'Ralia stepped away from the biobed and moved closer to him. She stood tall with her shoulders broad, as if she was trying to prevent him from coming further into sickbay and closer to her patient. "I hope you didn't put yourself at undue risk on my behalf."

"Not at all. I had an opportunity I would have been an idiot to let slip by."

"Understood. I would like to talk more later, but my patient requires privacy."

"Of course Captain." Shyraal gave a Terran salute.

"Please, no more of that when we're in private. Do what you must to keep up appearances in public, but I have no taste for that display."

"Well, I don't have much more taste for 'Live long and prosper.'" Vulcans and Andorians working together...unusual but not unheard of.

“Yes, Captain will suffice.”

“Yes, Captain.”

There was a chime at La’an’s door. After so much time waiting anxiously, unable to focus on anything but the waiting, hearing that sound was enough to make all the tension she felt sudden snap. La’an felt a jolt surge through her body and had to take a deep breath to calm herself before answering. “Come in.” Her voice was still tense and tight.

When she saw Maya standing in the door frame, La’an breathed a sigh of relief so intense her shoulders heaved. “Good to see you again.”

Maya narrowed her eyes. “Why are you acting like you expected something terrible to happen to me again?” She collapsed back on the bed.

“I’ve been worried, and I can’t break myself out of it.”

“Because you have so much to worry about.” Maya stared at the ceiling as she spoke. “Anyway, I’m glad I spoke to Doctor T’Ralia like you suggested. I didn’t need medical attention, I’m uninjured, but talking everything over with a Vulcan was more comforting than I expected. No sympathetic noises, no acting like I’m suddenly fragile, just an objective observer. And she and I have shared the same sort of trauma.”

“Maya.” La’an spoke softly yet firmly. “You can’t go telling other people’s secrets, even to someone you trust.”

“It isn’t a secret. She made it seem like everyone on board knows about her and Albrecht.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

Maya sat up. “Noted, but I don’t think she’s going to care about it too much. She’s captain now. Some Andorian killed Conroy.”

La’an gasped. “Really?”

Maya nodded. “Things might begin to turn around.”

Chapter 16

T'Ralia had rarely spent time on the bridge before now. Sickbay was her domain until now, but because of a rare sequence of events, even with so little experience she stepped onto the bridge for the first time as the captain. This was temporary. After this coup was stopped she would resign, if that was even possible. No one retired in the Terran Empire. They simply worked until they were assassinated...another very real possibility. Being captain put a target on her back, being a Vulcan captain attracted the distaste of more xenophobic Terrans, and championing Spock's reforms would be another mark against her. It would be not only illogical but also naive to not expect attempts on her life.

La'an stood beside her when she stepped on the bridge, She had settled effortlessly into imitating the place of her Terran double and had not yet attracted any attention. T'Ralia's first appearance on the bridge as captain was met with a mixed response. Most showed the proper etiquette, standing to salute their captain, their third captain in a short span of time. A handful, however, only turned to stare at her with disdain. This was to be expected. T'Ralia was unfazed.

The helmsman, Elias Reese, made his distaste a little more obvious. He stood and turned to face T'Ralia, but instead of a salute he crossed his arms. His eyes were narrow and his nose wrinkled. "I'm not about to start taking orders from a Vulcan."

T'Ralia was ready to handle the disagreement with the calm diplomacy of logic, but La'an intervened with a strategy that was decidedly more Terran. La'an drew her phaser and aimed it at Reese. "You might defy a Vulcan captain, but what about a Terran admiral? I stand with Captain T'Ralia and whatever choices she makes to command this ship. This is your only warning. As an admiral I am well within my rights to put down disobedience with lethal force." After a moment of hesitation, Reese gave a slow and sheepish salute. La'an glanced at each of the officers who had failed to show T'Ralia the customary respect. "This is the only warning for all of you."

Each officer silently returned to work at their stations, and T'Ralia sat on the command chair. She was only here, only had made any motions to be here to stop this coup. Otherwise, she did not belong here. It was not logical for a doctor with no command experience to be in charge of a starship.

"Lieutenant Reese," She began. "What is our estimated time of arrival to Terra Prime?"

"Five standard days...Captain." Reese was hesitant to call her 'captain' but at least he was acting compliant.

A reasonable pace, but a lot could happen in five days. In that time she would have to keep up the illusion that they were going forward with the coup as planned and hide the fact that Admiral Noonien-Singh had traded places with her double from the other universe. Not only the crew needed to be convinced, but also the ten augments on board.

"Can our speed be increased?" Arriving sooner would give them the opportunity to catch any co-conspirators on Terra Prime off guard.

"I can take a day off of that easily, but any more and you'll need to talk with engineering to be sure we can do it."

"Noted. Do what you can. Lieutenant." T'Ralia turned her head and looked slightly behind her to where La'an stood. "Admiral. I would like to consult with you in my ready room."

"Of course, Captain."

"Commander Vasquez, the bridge was yours." She had hardly spoken to her executive officer yet and only knew him by name and appearance.

T'Ralia rose from the command chair, and the two women turned to go to the ready room.

"Well, Captain." La'an had not bothered to sit down. She stood across the table from T'Ralia with her hands clasped behind her back. "We have four days, maybe less, to stop a coup that seems to have been in motion for years."

"My choice was a logical one. Less time to prepare is a disadvantage, to be sure, but we have a full crew and ten augments who could turn the tables against us. It is illogical and foolish to assume that they will not become suspicious. The less time we spend among them, the less likely we are to experience a catastrophic failure."

La'an nodded. "I've been reading through your La'an's personal logs. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the information she kept in her own memory, but I did find some key points. Her inner circle is made up of people she and Spock served with on the Enterprise: Nyota Uhura, Joseph M'Benga, and Hikaru Sulu. She has a meeting planned for one week from now. Her notes were purposefully vague, but I have a hunch that this may be the date they plan to take action."

"Acting on a hunch is risky and illogical, but if the date was recorded, it must be important. We are close enough to Terra Prime to be in communication range. I will contact Spock to warn him."

"And that means those co-conspirators are probably waiting to hear from me too." La'an sighed and shook her head. "I've put so much work into convincing Maya that the people she recognized are not the same people she knew and cared about, but it's still difficult for me to imagine people who used to be my friends now becoming my enemies."

"You would do well to remember the same advice that you gave her. Those people were never your friends, they are different people entirely who have always been working against your interests."

La'an gave a half smile. "Well, that is the most logical way to look at it. Unfortunately, the human heart has a hard time accepting logic."

"So I have noticed. Is there anything else you wish to discuss before we return to the bridge.?"

“Yes, actually. I don’t think we can afford to ignore the possibility that if things go wrong we might have to face ten angry augments trying to take control of the ship.”

“Do you think their enhanced strength and intellect are enough of an advantage to allow only ten individuals to take the ship?” T’Ralia asked

“Absolutely.” La’an nodded. “And that’s not even considering that they may be able to sway some of the crew to take their side. They want this coup to go forward so they will become a ruling class again. A significant number of your crew want the same in order to get rid of Spock and undo his reforms. With the same goal, they’re likely to work together.”

“Understood. What do you suggest?”

“We need to talk to Maya. She knows them well, and not long ago, in our universe, she help regain control of this ship’s counterpart from augments.”

T’Ralia sat down and input a few commands into the nearby computer screen. “I would like to complete this conversation as quickly and discreetly as possible. Stepping away from my command post for an extended, private conversation might raise suspicion. We can speak to Maya remotely.”

“I’m not even sure if she’ll be awake.” La’an stepped behind T’Ralia and bent slightly to be in view of the screen. “She never kept a predictable schedule even before...”

“Captain?” Maya’s voice spoke, but the screen still showed the plain image of the Terran insignia. Her voice sounded strained and hoarse. “I don’t want to appear on screen, will that be a problem?”

“No, of course not,” La’an answered as she took a seat. “Anything that helps you.”

“We want to talk about how you helped defeat the augments aboard the Portland in your universe.”

“What more is there to discuss? The details are all in my records, which La’an had read in great detail. She can tell you everything about what happened.”

The transmission cut off. La’an rubbed her temples. “Try again.”

After T’Ralia entered the commands, La’an spoke firmly yet gently. “Maya, please. You’re exceptional because in spite of your background you wanted to be a better person. Please don’t give up on that just because you’re hurting. We only want a few minutes of your time.”

“They made a virus that targeted our genetic markers so we would be weakened, and I was used as the vector.”

“Can we try that?” La’an asked T’Ralia.

The captain shook her head. “Four days is not enough time to synthesize a virus.”

“I wouldn’t agree to it anyway!” Maya sounded desperate and frantic. “I still haven’t recovered fully from the first time. It wasn’t meant to be lethal, but I think another exposure would kill me, and it would put La’an at risk too.” Maya went silent, but she did not yet end the transmission. “Your transporters can track the genetic markers. Just beam them into space and be done with it. Starfleet wasn’t too keen on taking such direct and deadly measures, but this is a different Starfleet.”

“Only if all other options are exhausted.” La’an replied. “I don’t want to kill more people here than absolutely necessary. We are better than that.”

“There is a way to control them from the inside, quite literally!” All of the frenetic energy was gone from Maya’s voice, but there was still a bitter note. “I think beaming them into space would be the kinder option.”

“The Ceti eels?” La’an guessed.

“Almost as lethal as getting spaced, but a far worse way to die. In our universe, Doctor T’Ralia created an antidote, but its only side effect was brain damage.”

“A difficult choice to make, but if we could target only a few key individuals...”

“La’an, no, it’s not going to work.” Maya was speaking rapidly again, as if her words couldn’t keep up with her thoughts. “We can’t get to the eels, we can’t get close enough to anyone to use them, and we don’t know what to expect on Terra Prime. It’s pointless.”

“I thought you wanted to have a positive impact, Maya! Why not do something to help the Terrans instead of giving up?”

“Because it doesn’t matter, and it won’t have an impact! You stop this coup, you save Spock, but what happens next? Another coup? Some threat from the outside? I may have agreed to help, but let it be known that I think it’s a worthless endeavor.”

Silence. She had ended the transmission.

La’an looked toward T’Ralia. “I’m sorry for that. I didn’t mean to waste your time. I don’t know what came over her, but it was a change that happened even before she was hurt. At first she acted as if we were brought here to save the galaxy, but then she became aggressively apathetic.”

“Regardless, I found her information and insights valuable,” T’Ralia answered as she stood. “I think it’s time we returned to the bridge.”

Chapter 17

T'Ralia was the third captain to stay in these quarters in such a short span of time, and already she was considering her options for moving out. Her only hesitation was the concern that it might be perceived by her crew as a sign of weakness or a cause for suspicion, but if she wanted to she could give the order to trade quarters with anyone she chose. She had no need for the extra space and comfort and would have been content to stay anywhere safe and private. This space, however, stirred memories she would prefer to forget, and recalling those memories presented new challenges when it came to controlling her emotions.

Now was not the time to lose sight of her mental discipline. Her goals required the utmost focus and self control. To dwell on the past, on things that have already happened and could not be changed was illogical. Equally illogical was to feel a sense of perceived danger by simply occupying this space. Nothing within these walls would harm her, and she decided it was best to stay here if only to prove it to herself. With that added evidence, the logic could not be denied.

She had to take some time to center herself before she contacted Spock. A few minutes of silent meditation refreshed her mind to help ensure that he could speak to Spock with her best focus and clarity. T'Ralia sat at the desk and entered the commands into the computer. It was early morning on Terra Prime.

"Doctor T'Ralia." Spock raised a perplexed eyebrow. The Vulcan face did not have as many emotional tells as a Terran, but this expression was one that could often be read on Spock's face: an indicator of surprise or intrigue. "This call is unexpected, but not unwelcome."

"It's Captain T'Ralia now. There have been several sudden personnel changes aboard the Portland. We will be arriving at Terra Prime in approximately four days."

"Captain...I was unaware that the Portland had orders to return to Terra Prime so soon."

"Another one of many changes on board. Admiral Noonien-Singh has been using the Portland for her own ends to attempt a coup. Your life is in danger."

"My life is always in danger, Captain. What I fail to understand is why Admiral Noonien-Singh needed a ship to achieve this end."

"She used the ship to chase after a rumor which proved to be true. Her intent was to bring back Khan Noonien-Singh from his exile on Ceti Alpha V and recruit his assistance to retake the Terran Empire."

"I recall Khan from when the Enterprise found the Botnay Bay, a dangerous ally to have. Am I correct in assuming that she achieved this goal?"

"No. Khan was killed by his daughter, who Admiral Noonien-Singh recruited, in addition to ten Augments from Ceti Alpha V."

Spock nodded. "I met with Admiral Noonien-Singh before she rejoined you on the Portland. She introduced me to a young woman who she said was her cousin. I presume this young woman must, in fact, be Khan's daughter. And now Admiral Noonien-Singh and the Augments will be arriving in four days' time to make an attempt on my life."

"Not exactly. Understand that what I am about to say will seem highly improbable." T'Ralia paused as she considered the best way to explain the situation. "There was a...complication. When La'an and Khan's daughter, Maya, beamed aboard after their time together on Terra Prime, they were accompanied by...duplicates of themselves from a different universe."

Again, Spock simply nodded. No raised eyebrow, no sign of surprise. "However improbable this situation may seem, I believe you without question. In part because you have no logical reason to take such liberties with the truth and in part because I have encountered individuals from the other universe. In fact, it was the alternate to Captain Kirk who first inspired me to reform the Terran Empire. I imagine this pair will be valuable allies."

"They have already proven to be just that. The alternate La'an helped to detain her counterpart and is acting in her place. In some ways, the odds have tilted in our favor, however I still stand against ten hostile augments and a suspicious crew. I would have preferred to send the augments back to Ceti Alpha V and eliminate that threat, but I cannot do so without attracting the ire of my crew, putting my life in danger, and jeopardizing the entire endeavor."

"I understand. Continue on your course to Terra Prime. If you can prevent anyone from leaving the ship, that may suffice as a temporary measure."

"The admiral has co-conspirators waiting on Terra Prime. We found their names in her personal logs: Joseph M'Benga, Hikaru Sulu, Erica Ortegas, and Nyota Uhura."

There was a momentary change in Spock's face that looked both shocked and pained, but he recovered quickly. "I seem to have made an error in judgment. These were all people I thought I could trust. Admiral Noonien-Singh as well. I served with all of them aboard the Enterprise."

"I have found that it is not logical to trust any Terran."

"It is also not logical to think in absolutes, Captain, but my recent experiences do align with your observations."

"The admiral has a meeting planned with them one week from today. We have reason to believe that is the date on which they plan to attempt the coup."

"Noted. I will add increased security measures."

“I will keep in contact with you.”

“Understood. End transmission.”

La’an returned to the quarters she shared with Maya and braced herself for an uncomfortable confrontation. If Maya had been so abrasive over remote communications, she surely would be even worse in person. When she entered she found Maya in her usual position laying on the bed and staring blankly at the ceiling.

“I suppose you have more plans you’re begging me to help with.” Maya said with a heavy sigh, eyes still on the ceiling.

“Not quite.” Honestly what she had in mind might be a more difficult subject to broach. “I’m not going to pressure you to do anything you aren’t comfortable with, but in order to keep up this charade, I need to start staying in the other La’an’s quarters.”

“Do whatever you need to.”

“I’m sorry. I hate to leave you alone.” La’an shook her head.

Maya sat straight up. “Why is that? Because you think I’m frail and weak just because I’ve been hurt?” She raised her voice, practically shouting. “I thought I had left the place where everyone around me thought I was frail and weak.”

“Honestly it’s because I’m afraid if you aren’t carefully supervised, you’re going to do something stupid.” La’an struggled not to shout back, and she had to stop herself from sharing everything on her mind. For such an intelligent person, Maya had very little sense. “And why must you always assume that everyone searching for some sort of weakness?”

Maya flopped back on the bed. “Because they are! Everyone on Ceti Alpha V, everyone in this universe...on Earth they might not have admitted it, but believe me, it often felt like everyone around me was playing a game of ‘Find what’s wrong with Maya.’”

La’an fell silent, and a still moment that seemed to last an eternity passed before she spoke. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Everything that’s happened to me has been the result of my own foolish mistakes.”

“That isn’t true!”

Another heavy silence.

“If you need to go, then go. If you’re found out, then everything is ruined.”

La’an took a few steps toward the door and stopped. “I’m not abandoning you.”

“Just leave.”

La’an was still reeling from her last interaction with Maya, wondering if she had made the right choice. She felt out of place and awkward in the Terran La’an’s quarters, but she would have to find the same kind of bold confidence that she had on the bridge. A twinge of nervousness hit her as she sat at the desk and entered the commands to contact Erica Ortega. She had carefully considered just who of the Terran conspirators to contact. The one she had known the best in her universe was the best choice. It meant that there might be more points of common ground, but it also meant that the other Ortega might have a keener eye in discerning her to be a fake.

“You’re a bit late, Admiral,” Ortega taunted, crossing her arms. The woman who appeared on the screen was an exact copy of the Erica Ortega that La’an knew: her graying hair still cropped close in the same style she had from their days on the Enterprise, and she had the same effervescent energy of someone decades younger.

“Apologies. We are a bit behind schedule but are on track to arrive at Terra Prime in six days.” A gamble, to stretch out their ETA to enhance the element of surprise when they arrived in only four days’ time.

“Would have liked a little notice. We’re going to be cutting it close.”

“We were out of range and had engine issues. If I had a way of contacting you I would have. Now, I trust that your preparations on Terra Prime are still going according to plan.”

“Oh, yeah, everything’s fine, Admiral. Uhura has some of the credentials ready from the names and pictures you sent, but she’s going to need biometrics once everyone gets here. You know, retinal scans, fingerprints, voice.”

“I had expected that. We will get to work on that as soon as we arrive. Anything else?”

“She’s been working with M’Benga. Their plan is to have just two or three slip right in and take out some key security points.”

“Did you see the reports that Sulu sent?”

Damn. She hadn’t seen any such reports. The Terran La’an must have hid them well. “I received them, but have only had the time for a quick glance. I’ll be studying them in great detail over the coming days.”

“Good luck with that, because there is a *lot* in there.” Ortega looked away as scratched the back of her neck. “You know I owe you an apology, from back when I last saw you. I guess I was just shocked that you came back and didn’t bring Khan like you promised. I let it get to me and wasn’t at my best.” Her words sounded sincere, but she averted her eyes the entire time. Ortega was hiding something, or felt a

sense of shame. La'an was itching to know just what happened at that meeting.

“Apology accepted. Many things haven't gone as planned, and it would be naive to think they would. Try to keep a flexible and open mind, we're in the home stretch.”

“Always a level-headed outlook, I appreciate it.”

“Of course. End transmission.”

Chapter 18

To all true Terrans,

This ship, much like the Terran Empire itself, has been corrupted into something unrecognizable and unsustainable. Over and over we see Terrans, the rightful rulers of the galaxy, replaced and pushed aside by inferior outworlders. This injustice will not be tolerated. Any friends of the Terran Empire who wish to take action are invited to a meeting tonight in cargo bay 3 at 2100 hours. Of course, secrecy and discretion are highly advised.

While Elias Reese didn't go so far as to invite every Terran on the ship, he did cast a wide net. He felt as though it was hardly a risk, sure that most would either agree with him or not care enough to make a fuss about it.

He had arrived early and spent those few solitary minutes pacing with his hands clasped behind his back. In his mind he speculated as to who he might see at this meeting. Soon, they began to trickle in, most arriving a minute or two early but a few arrived just in time. Before he began, he took a moment to count the heads of everyone gathered. Fifteen altogether, most of whom were people he recognized and respected, but there were a few new faces too. It was a smaller turnout than he expected, but enough to get the job done.

"Thank you, everyone, for gathering here tonight," Reese began as the group formed a semi-circle around him. "It gives me hope to see that you all support the true glory of the Terran Empire, even if our numbers are lower than I would like."

"To be fair, you don't need this many people to kill a captain." An ensign spoke up. Reese did not recognize her. "Conroy and T'Ralia did it with only one accomplice each."

Reese narrowed his eyes. "Know your place, Ensign...?"

"Fitzpatrick." She slumped her shoulders, gone was the cavalier attitude she had only moments ago.

"I've seen more assassinations and many, many more failed assassination attempts than you have, Ensign Fitzpatrick. I know what must be done to ensure success. Besides, this is about more than removing the Vulcan captain." He paused to survey the small crowd, sure to address them as a whole. "This is about removing every member of this crew who does not share our beliefs, even if that means that the fifteen of us are the only remaining crew. Albrecht made that mistake. She didn't purge the pro-reforms, and she got killed by the Vulcan she used to fuck."

"And what about Admiral Noonien-Singh?" Lieutenant Burton spoke up this time. He was a science officer, Reese often sparred with him. "She seems to be on the captain's side."

"If the admiral needs to be removed, she will be removed. For now I'm uncertain of her motives, but I think her own ambitions are her priority. Her goals align with our own. She seems to be on good terms with the captain, but I imagine that's only because the captain is cooperating for now and that she isn't picky about her allies. If that were to change, I imagine the admiral would stand beside us."

"Then shouldn't we wait until after the coup?" Burton asked again. "See that through, then take back the ship?"

"Oh no." Reese took a step closer to Burton. "I don't trust T'Ralia no matter how she acts with the admiral, and I have a feeling that if something goes wrong it will be solely her fault. We have four days to take back the ship. Whoever kills the Vulcan will be a hero of the Terran Empire."

"Stupid decisions my ass," Maya muttered. She rolled to the side and began to sit up, moving slowly, careful as to not trigger another dizzy spell. La'an's harsh words had the opposite of their intended effect. Instead of forcing her to calm down and think before acting, Maya felt agitated, eager to jump into action and prove herself to be useful. Just like before, always feeling the need to prove herself because she was always pushed to the side.

She went to the computer console again, trying to find something worthwhile to do that would keep her mind busy. The uncomfortable thoughts were quieter when her mind was too occupied to give them room to grow. However, without La'an's credentials her access was frustratingly limited. The information she needed was blocked, but that had never stopped her before. She knew these systems well enough, the technology was identical to what she had learned in her universe. The first time, months ago, learning how to bypass Starfleet computer security took hours of careful concentration, but with so much more knowledge and experience she broke through after only a few minutes.

There it was, the information she needed. Katya's quarters were nearby. While it had been odd to learn that the other La'an and Maya had been just around the corner from them all along, it was even stranger to think that Katya had been just as close as well. No matter what La'an had said, no matter what she tried to tell herself, Maya still couldn't quite separate this woman from her old lover, the one who she had watched die. That made it sting all the more when, each time they interacted, Katya spoke cruelly to her. It was a painful inversion of one of the only kind people from Ceti Alpha V.

Maya stood up straight and clasped her hands behind her head. La'an would say this was a stupid idea. If her half brother was still alive, he'd call it a stupid idea too. But was it? Maybe it was just moving to action when no one else would...when no one else could. Who else had the same kind of advantage when dealing with Katya? Ideally, Katya would mistake her for the Terran Maya, her own lover, but even if that failed she still had expressed an interest in her.

She sat back on the edge of the bed. That was what gave her pause, thinking about enduring unwelcome advances from the Terran Katya. She took a few deep breaths. Stopping this coup wasn't going to be easy for anyone, she could make a few sacrifices. Maya stretched her back as she got back on her feet. She went to the closet and put on a jacket that La'an had left behind. Suzette had been able to easily tell her apart from the Terran Maya, so Katya might be able to do the same, so Maya chose to hide the shape of her body.

She paused at the door, taking one final moment to consider her actions. It was risky, but the potential reward was massive, and no one else could do it. It wasn't stupid. She stepped through the doors and out into the corridor once again. Katya's quarters were a short walk away, in the other direction from where the Terran Maya stayed. It sent a shiver down her spine to think about how many times one or the other must have walked past her very door to see one another.

Maya paused again outside the door. It wasn't yet too late to change her mind and turn back. She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was strong enough and capable enough to see this through before she rang the chime on the door.

"Katya," she called, already questioning if she sounded the part. "It's Maya, I've been dying to see you."

Hardly a moment passed before the door slid open and Katya stood just inside the frame. It seemed that the Terran La'an had already found little ways to show the augments that she meant to make them an elite class. The Katya that Maya had known looked just as rough and raw as anyone trying to survive on Ceti Alpha V, but this version, even in her short stint aboard the Portland, was polished like a gem: Fine clothes, neatly styled hair...everything enhanced the elegance and grace that Katya had always had.

Katya grabbed Maya by the wrist and dragged her into the room. The door closed behind her.

"It's about time. You've been neglecting me terribly." Katya placed a gentle hand on Maya's cheek, closed her eyes, and leaned in to kiss her. Maya closed her own eyes and tilted her head to accept and wrapped her arms around Katya's waist. On the outside she seemed eager, but on the inside she was conflicted, feeling a swirl of conflicting emotions. Everything reminded her of her Katya and made her want to cling desperately to this moment and any other moments they might share together before she went back to her own universe. At the same time, the woman frightened her and seemed just as eager and capable to hurt her in the way the Terran Maya had.

Maya pulled away just enough for their lips to separate. "I am so sorry. I've been busy."

"Busy playing, quite literally, with yourself?" Katya teased.

Maya's heart jumped, and she felt a wave of nausea, but she tried to keep her composure. "Busy planning to take over an Empire. We only have four days."

Katya kissed her again, just a quick peck. "Every time I come to your quarters you aren't there. I've been worried."

"La'an has been taking every moment of my time, teaching me about the Terran Empire, formulating plans."

"And when will the rest of us be able to hear those plans?"

"Soon. Once everything is finalized." Maya pulled Katya in closer and kissed her again. "And I'll be able to give you the attention you deserve again soon too. For now, regrettably, I have to ask you a practical question."

"Oh? Can't it wait a bit?"

"I'm afraid not." She kissed Katya again, conflicted as to whether she was enjoying herself or thought the whole thing was horribly wrong. "Whatever happened to the Ceti eels?"

"You don't remember?" Katya pulled away. "You went with me when we surrendered them to the lab."

Dammit. Caught in her lie. Maya couldn't keep a nervous smile from creeping on her face as she quickly planned her recovery. "I know...I know, I just hadn't thought about them in so long. I wanted to be sure."

"Why such sudden interest in the Ceti eels?" Katya crossed her arms. All traces of flirty playfulness were gone from her voice. This question was a serious one.

"I'm asking on La'an's behalf. She's concerned about the crew. Some key officers are suspected to be working against us and need to be controlled." Maya was uncomfortably aware of how her voice sounded. When she had leaned too hard into imitating her Terran counterpart, she was called out by Suzette, but her own natural way of speaking lacked the gravity she needed.

"Oh?" Katya narrowed her eyes. "I thought torture and assassination were more her style."

Maya's heart began to race. Katya was beginning to suspect her. "She thought this way seemed cleaner and was curious to see what they are capable of before we reach Terra Prime."

Katya gave her a hard look before she answered, and she crossed her arms. "Very well. Tell La'an that she can find the Ceti eels in containment in the lab. She's an admiral, she can use the ship's resources as she sees fit."

"And she's going to be emperor."

"Not for long if we have anything to do about it," Katya added with a sly half smile.

"But of course. I'd like to stay, but..."

"...But you've got an empire to claim," Katya answered with a sigh.

Maya nodded and turned to leave. Just before she went through the door, she turned around and went back to Katya, giving her a kiss on the cheek to say goodbye.

Katya stood frozen once the door closed behind Maya. Damn girl had nearly fooled her until she started asking about the Ceti eels. The content of her alibi almost sounded plausible, but the delivery was poor: the pauses, the way her eyes darted around as if she was scrambling to think up a story on the spot. Katya had let her go, she wouldn't have the chance to do much more harm, not if Katya acted quickly.

She waited a few more minutes, as crossing paths with the other Maya would complicate her plans, but once she chose to act she moved with purpose, taking quick, long strides. First, she went to her Maya's quarters, just to check on more time, but there was no answer when she rang the chime. She checked La'an's quarters too, and just as expected there was no reply. The admiral had good reason to be anywhere on the ship, but where else might Maya be?

Still walking with her purposeful pace, Katya turned and went back toward her quarters, thinking through who she could ask or where she could go to find out where her Maya was or if she was still alive. A possible solution presented itself as an Imperial Starfleet officer—an ensign who looked to be close to her age—crossed paths with her.

Katya grabbed the ensign by the collar and pulled her in close. "Tell me, are there prisoners in the brig?"

"There are always prisoners in the brig." For someone who was being threatened, the ensign remained remarkably calm.

"A woman my age. Tan skin, long wavy black hair."

"I wouldn't know, I'm not in security!" Now the signs of fear began to settle in. The ensign's eyes grew wider, and she spoke through a clenched jaw.

"Can you take me there?"

"I'm on duty, I have other places to be."

"I'll speak to Admiral Noonien-Singh myself, you won't suffer any consequences. Tell me your name."

"Corin Fitzpatrick."

Katya let go of Fitzpatrick's collar. "Forgive my outburst." She tried to calm herself, but her tone was still sharp and acidic. "I hope we can work together with a bit more civility."

"It's fine. I'm not out here trying to piss off any augments."

Fitzpatrick led her to the brig. The dimly lit hall was lined with tiny cells. Most were empty, but a handful held members of the crew who were being disciplined. They each sat meekly on the floor: bruised, bloody, and with a dull look in their eyes. La'an must have gone easy on the other Maya for her to recover so quickly.

"Try not to touch the force fields," Fitzpatrick warned. "They're lethal."

In the last cell in the row, Katya saw who she was looking for.

"Maya!" Katya sprinted over and knelt on the floor in front of Maya's cell. Her lover laid in a heap on the floor, her dark hair spread around her. She turned her head to look up at the security officer who guarded the prisoners.

"What have you done to her?" She demanded.

"Only sedated her. Had to be done, she's like a wild animal." The officer answered with a shrug.

"I command you to release her!"

"And just who are you to be giving orders?"

"An augment, an improved Terran who has been promised a place of honor in your society!"

"So, nobody." The guard crossed his arms

"I will be back with Admiral Noonien-Singh, and you will regret defying me."

The officer stepped closer and leaned forward to tower over Katya. "I'll take my chances."

Fitzpatrick walked toward Katya to stand beside her. She extended a hand to help Katya get back to her feet. "Come on. We can come back with the admiral."

Katya ignored Fitzpatrick's extended hand and rose back up to her feet on her own. She didn't look back at the guard or at Fitzpatrick as she turned and walked past them without another word. Fitzpatrick took a few quick steps to catch up.

"Can I ask you a question?" Fitzpatrick asked in a hushed voice.

"You just did." Katya mirrored her soft tone, but didn't look at the ensign as she answered. "But go ahead."

"Some of us worry that the new captain might not be working in the Terran Empire's best orders. We'd appreciate having the allegiance of an augment. Your goals might be compatible with ours. It's awfully suspicious, what happened to your friend."

"Awfully suspicious indeed."

Chapter 19

Four days. That was all La'an had. With an admiral's security clearance, little was off limits to her research: classified documents, detailed records, but what she really wanted was to see those reports that Sulu was supposed to have sent. She sifted for hours through the Terran La'an's communication records. Whatever was in those reports, the information was well hidden: either encrypted away in some secret spot, or disguised with an unassuming title, or perhaps her counterpart had destroyed the evidence after reading the reports. The last possibility was a likely one, but La'an was not ready to resign herself to that.

She straightened out her spine and rolled her head from side to side to break up some of the tension in her shoulders and neck, but she couldn't allow herself to take a longer break, not with time so limited. What she did indulge in was a bit of side work, to try to clear her head from the mystery of the missing documents. Personnel files. Time to see what Ortegas had been up to in this universe.

Like so many others in this universe, the basic biographical remained the same. Erica Ortegas was born in the same year, in the same place, was a famously skilled pilot, and served on the Enterprise. Unlike the Ortegas from her universe, who earned distinctions serving in the Klingon war, this version was highly decorated for suppressing an Andorian uprising. La'an wondered if it was the same uprising where her own counterpart had earned commendations.

Hikaru Sulu. In both universes he served on the Enterprise after La'an was transferred. She had met him once before, and so she was less able to tell where his history differed from the Sulu from her own universe. He was security chief on the Enterprise, which meant his career path was different from the Sulu from her universe. The man she met was a helmsman and later a captain of his own ship. He had a daughter in her early twenties, though, just like the Sulu she knew.

There was a chime on the door. La'an stood up and stretched as she wondered just who might stand on the other side of the door. If it was T'Ralia or Maya she could relax a bit and be herself. Anyone else, however, and she would have to keep up the facade that she was the Terran La'an.

"Come in"

The door slid open, and on the other side stood someone she was not expecting. Katya, the augment girl who was involved with the Terran Maya stood on the other side. La'an could not guess why she would come to speak with her. Katya gave her a Terran salute before rushing inside.

"What exactly has happened to Maya?" She demanded as she rushed closer to La'an with a sense of urgency. Katya was panicked, with her eyes wild.

La'an was not ready for such a confrontation, but still she remained calm. "I'm going to need more specific details before I can answer."

"Maya is in the brig and under heavy sedation. I don't know what happened, but I need you to go back down there with me, get her out, and punish whoever is responsible."

Damn. La'an had hoped they might be able to last longer before their charade was found out. Still, she managed to hide any concern or distress she felt behind a stern face: a technique she had plenty of practice with in her own universe. "I understand your concern, but let me assure you that you were mistaken. I'm sure what you saw was disturbing, but that was not your Maya. That was the double. She was so distressed from being disciplined that she became violent." It hurt to say that. To talk about Maya's trauma as if it was an inconvenience, and to tell a lie that differed so sharply from the truth of how she was really processing everything.

"You're lying!" Katya snapped. "I spoke to her, the other Maya, and I could tell it was her. She didn't know things she should have known, she wasn't acting quite right, she didn't look quite right."

La'an felt as though the air had been knocked out of her. Only a few hours had passed, and Maya had already flown in the face of every warning that she had given. "Don't be paranoid, Katya, what reason do I have to make the two of them switch places?"

"Maya hasn't been in her quarters. The imposter said that she was spending all her time with you, planning the coup, but now she isn't here either." Katya had been inching closer with each word, forcing La'an to back up to keep a comfortable distance between them until she was nearly backed against a wall.

"Her shoulder has been hurting again." La'an began forming her cover on the spot. "You might check sickbay." It wasn't a perfect excuse, but it could at least buy her a few minutes time.

Katya narrowed her eyes. "I don't believe you."

"Then go and check yourself." La'an stepped forward, no longer allowing herself to be manipulated. Another step closer, and Katya was the one forced to back up.

"Oh, I will, Admiral," Katya taunted. "I will, and I will be right back when I find that she isn't there."

Another step forward to force Katya closer to the door. "Then I will eagerly await your return."

After a quick glare, Katya turned and left. La'an stood and waited, giving her a head start. Once she was sure Katya was well ahead, she was going to march right down to Maya's quarters to have a very serious talk with her.

The science laboratory...Maya recalled its location in the ship's layouts she had studied. She might have left her encounter with Katya feeling

uncertain, but so long as she could control the Ceti eels, she could control the augments and the entire ship. Resorting to this still felt wrong and dirty, but Maya kept reminding herself that these were different people who played by a different rule book. They were willing and eager to do unspeakable things to achieve their ends, she couldn't keep up unless she went to the same extremes.

She walked through the corridors at a clipped pace, ignoring everyone she encountered until she reached the laboratory. Once the doors slid open, she couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder. Maya had never seen the inside of a 23rd century lab before, at least not one that was functioning. She had seen the wreckage of the Toyotomi when it crashed on Ceti Alpha V, but the few times she had been on a ship (including her universe's counterpart to this one) she had no reason to step inside the laboratory. Maya stood just inside the doorframe and couldn't help but take in her surroundings with a wide-eyed sense of wonder. So many instruments and monitors, the purpose of which she could not begin to guess.

"Can I help you?" One officer was at work at this hour, a middle-aged Terran woman with curly blond hair. She looked toward Maya, but continued her work with a tricorder, analyzing some samples in petri dishes.

"Yes." Maya tried quickly to regain her composure. "I need the Ceti eels."

"You must be one of the augments," she guessed, still more focused on her work than the conversation.

"You insult me. I am the heir of Khan." Maya leaned into her exaggerated imitation of her Terran counterpart. This woman was not someone the Terran Maya would have known well, she didn't have to worry about mimicking her double so precisely.

"Apologies. I meant no offense." Just a moment more work before she reached a stopping point and put down her tricorder. "What do you need them for?"

"It is no concern of yours. Admiral Noonien-Singh sent me, do I need to tell her that you weren't cooperating?"

"No need for any of that. I was going to give you what you want anyway." The woman went to a panel on the wall and input a few commands into the command panel. A storage drawer opened up, and from that she pulled out a sealed specimen jar. "I just wanted to know if there was anything I needed to include in my records." She offered the jar to Maya. "They might be sluggish for a bit coming out of stasis, but I assure you the specimens are alive and healthy."

Maya took the jar and held it at eye level to examine the eels inside. There were two adults, still motionless, but the separation between each of the armored scales indicated that they were both teeming with young larvae ready to harvest.

"Thank you, this is exactly what the Admiral needs."

"An honor to help." The science officer gave a Terran salute as a farewell, and Maya turned to leave.

Maya had a spring in her step as she retraced the same path she took, not back to her own quarters, but to La'an's...to where the Terran La'an had been staying before her La'an had dealt with her. She had the same sense of urgency that she had when she walked to the laboratory, but she felt completely different. Instead of anxious and agitated, she had a sense of excited hope that she hadn't felt since before Q had shown her those glimpses of what the Terran future might look like.

She rang the chime on the door and finally allowed a broad grin to curl onto her face. No need to hide her excitement from La'an.

"Come in." La'an's sounded exasperated, but that did not lessen Maya's excitement.

"I have fantastic news." Maya began speaking before she was fully in the door, and she held the specimen jar with the still motionless Ceti eels proudly in front of her.

"I hope your news is fantastic enough to cancel out my dreadful news." La'an was still seated and rubbed her temples. She had not yet looked at Maya.

Maya set the jar on the desk and rushed to La'an's side. "What happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." Still La'an did not stand, but she at least turned her head to look at Maya. "Why is it that Katya came to me, so sure that she had seen you and not your counterpart that she began to investigate and found the Terran version of you in the brig?"

"I had my reasons for speaking to her." Maya began to inch back toward the door.

"Did you?" La'an stood up. "After so many times I warned you to think through your actions, that you do a disservice to your intellect by behaving so impulsively, and you've jeopardized everything by going to see your old lover!"

"She's not my lover!" Maya kept herself from raising her voice, but she clenched her jaw and her hands curled into tight fists. "Damned if I wasn't painfully conflicted every moment I spent in her presence, but that woman wasn't the same Katya who I loved and watched die. Besides, I had my reasons." She reached out to grab the jar with the Ceti eels. "We have their secret weapon. I thought this was what you wanted."

"Maya..." La'an sighed and turned away. "Are you prepared to use this weapon, which you have risked so much to get? You were the one who had the most hesitation."

"And why are you hesitating now?"

"You're the one who needs to think about the consequences of your actions. You've put us in a difficult situation. I hadn't thought Katya was much of a threat before, but if she knows too much she may need to be subdued, and those eels might be our only option."

Maya set the jar on the desk and looked down at her feet. “I thought you wanted to get out here without killing anyone unless it was absolutely necessary.”

“I still do, but my hand may be forced. And I’m starting to feel a bit confused about just where you stand. You took a great and unnecessary risk to get the Ceti eels, you proudly show them off, and yet when I suggest using them you balk at the idea.”

Maya shook her head. “I like the idea but hate the reality. It sounds elegant, doesn’t it? To invisibly infiltrate the mind of your enemy? I can let myself think about that angle for a little while until I remember the people who I saw die horribly and painfully from these damn things. Maybe some of these Terrans and Augments deserve such a fate, but Katya doesn’t.”

“You can’t make a judgment on her character based on the Katya you knew.”

“I’m not making any judgment calls. I’ll leave you to do what you please with them. Just make your decision soon. Once they’ve woken back up, they’ll only be small enough to be usable for another day or so.”

No more words. Maya simply turned to go.

Chapter 20

La'an meant to dive back into those computer files, scouring the Terran La'an's records for some more information that might help. She couldn't focus, though. Her eyes moved across the screen, seeing the words but not reading them, forcing her to backtrack over and over just to read a sentence or two. Her mind wasn't present. Too much worry, fear, and anger. Maya really had gone and made a mess of everything. La'an tilted her head back and caught sight of the specimen jar...or maybe she hadn't. She reached out to pick up the jar and examine the two creatures within. They were just starting to move again.

"Well, well, well." a familiar male voice taunted from behind her. La'an sprang to her feet and almost fumbled the jar in her hands.

"Careful not to drop it," Q teased. "Those Ceti eels will be fully awake soon, and they're nasty little creatures."

La'an set down the jar. Her stance was tall and rigid and her eyes narrowed on Q. "Get out. Now."

"Threatening an omnipotent being? How quaint. I find it so charming that humans still have that primitive instinct to react violently to that which they don't understand. Humans, Terrans, Augments, all of them really the same at their deep, dark little core...and it's become apparent that you are no different from any of them."

"Whatever little mind game you want to play this time, I'm not in the mood for this, and I certainly don't have the time." La'an placed the jar on the desk and turned her attention back to the computer. She was even more distracted than before, but still made a good show of skimming the screen and ignoring Q.

"Don't you, though?" Q asked as he stepped closer. "You have to carefully consider the next steps of your strategy, and I am here to offer assistance."

"I am more than capable of doing that on my own, thanks." Still La'an did not look up, even though she was sure it must be obvious she wasn't retaining a single word.

"I find it curious..." Q continued on regardless and began to pace the room. "...That no matter how much you try to convince yourself that you're better than the Terrans you're slowly becoming more and more like them.. You were so committed to finding your way out of here without taking a single life, yet here you are giving serious consideration to a very lethal, very brutal solution."

La'an looked up from the computer, but still did not turn to face Q. "A few deaths of carefully selected individuals versus all out violence with the odds stacked sorely against us."

"Ah yes, a few lives lost and filed away under 'acceptable risk.' Do you know who else held such a cold, calculating regard for human life?"

"Stop it Q. Ultimately, more lives will be saved."

"It's too perfect. 'The ends justify the means.' A favorite slogan of every conqueror and dictator throughout history, including none other than Khan Noonien-Singh."

La'an rose to her feet and turned to face Q. She was surprised to see how close behind her he had been standing all this time. "I know you're trying to break me down, but it won't work."

"Maybe it already has. I think living among Terrans has made you more like your famed ancestor. Or maybe it's only bringing out something that was already lurking deep inside you."

Her blood boiled for just an instant before she forced herself to calm down. He wanted her to lose her temper, and she wasn't going to give him that satisfaction. "Keep talking as much as you please. I'm not engaging in this anymore."

"As you wish, La'an Noonien-Singh. Whatever choice you make, I hope you can live with all the repercussions." With a flash of bright, white light Q was gone.

Just like the night before Reese arrived early to the meeting, but this time he was not the first person to gather in the cargo bay. Two commanders had arrived first, and even though they outranked him, they greeted him with a Terran salute as if he was their superior. He could feel his ego grow, and a slight half smile curled in the corners of his mouth. He really was doing great work for the Empire.

At 2100 almost everyone had arrived. Everyone except for Ensign Fitzpatrick. It was only to be expected that some might realize they didn't have the stomach for what needed to be done, he could only hope that Fitzpatrick had the sense to keep her damn mouth shut. He was ready to begin when the cargo bay doors opened one more time. On the other side stood Ensign Fitzpatrick with a large group of people behind her... they were augments. He counted them as they filed into the cargo bay. One, two, three...all ten augments present at his meeting and ready to join his cause. Oh, how the tables have turned!

"Welcome, esteemed guests!" Reese called out with open arms. "To what do we owe the honor of your presence?"

"A common goal." The augment who spoke up was a middle aged woman. "We aren't going to Terra Prime unless we can be assured the place in the ruling class that we were promised, and with the way things are going on the ship, we need a pro-Terran crew to ensure the completion of that goal."

Reese nodded. "And you will have everything you were promised. May I ask your name?"

"Suzette Ling. I was one of the original augments who fled Terra Prime and survived for two hundred years aboard the Botany Bay lost in

space.”

Reese nodded. “Impressive. Am I correct in assuming that the older augments are the original crew and the younger ones were born on Ceti Alpha V?”

“That’s correct.”

“Then allow me to apologize for the injustice done to you, for both generations were wronged.” Reese moved through the crowd, standing close enough to Suzette to address her personally. “One group who ruled the world only to be suddenly forced into exile, and their children, who should have been royalty, grew up knowing nothing but a difficult, primitive life,”

“No need to apologize. You weren’t responsible for any of our hardship. In fact, we owe you our gratitude for taking measures to correct those injustices.”

Reese turned and walked back to where he could more easily speak to the entire crowd, hands clasped behind his back and his shoulders straight. “We need to take the ship back from that Vulcan.” He glanced back to Suzette and the group of augments. “Your assistance would be greatly appreciated. Allies with enhanced strength and intellect would give us an undeniable advantage.”

“We can take control of the ship easily,” Suzette answered, giving a sly look to her fellow augments. “Some of us very nearly took the Enterprise. We’ve learned from our previous mistakes, and that time we didn’t have the assistance of the ship’s crew.”

“Very good. Our first goal is to kill the Vulcan captain. We may need to take care of her first officer too. I don’t know where Vasquez stands in any of this, so I’m not ready to reserve judgment.” Reese paused to let his words sink in and watched as the gathered crowd gave silent nods of approval and understanding.

“There may be a few complications,” Suzette interrupted. “The crew was meant to be kept in the dark about this, but there was ... a contamination.” Perplexed looks all around. “Admiral Noonien-Singh and Maya Noonien-Singh, an augment, have doubles of themselves aboard the ship. They were allowed to live because we thought they would be valuable allies, but it seems they might be working against us. I know this seems far-fetched, but this is the reality of our situation.”

“Then kill the doubles too,” Reese waved a dismissive hand and shook his head. “Simple solution.”

“Not quite. The admiral may have been compromised. It’s unclear if the admiral working aboard our ship is the real admiral or the duplicate.”

“Then kill her regardless. If she’s not the real Admiral Noonien-Singh all the more reason to get rid of her out of an abundance of caution, and if she was the real one, I think it’s a worthwhile risk. We need a worthy emperor, it doesn’t need to be her even if the whole thing was her idea.” Reese sighed.

Suzette shook her head. “Such simple thinking, but I should have expected that from an inferior being. I hate to admit this, her genome is so diluted that she has none of Khan’s enhancements and is no better than you or any other common Terran, but we need Admiral Noonien-Singh. The Terrans will see us only as outsiders looking to conquer. I know our tale of returning from centuries past to reclaim our rightful place is hard to believe. We need the backing of someone who the Terran Empire will accept, someone who has a respectable position and the surname of history’s greatest ruler. Even if this isn’t the real La’an, it would be preferable to coerce her to cooperate with us rather than kill her.”

“Duly noted.” Reese replied. He looked back to the crowd, addressing them as a whole again. “We now only have three days to achieve our goal. We are still on track to reach Terra Prime, so T’Ralia is clearly committed to keeping up her charade. Time is limited. I want T’Ralia and Vasquez dead before our meeting tomorrow night to give us enough time to shift our focus to seeing this coup through to completion. Work in teams. Vulcans have the upperhand in strength, and we don’t know what measures she’s taking to protect herself.” One last time he looked to Suzette and the augments to give them their orders. “I leave it to you to decide what to do about the Admiral, regardless of which version of the woman we’re actually dealing with.” And again he looked toward the whole crowd and felt a swell of pride to see that they all had inspired looks of confidence on their faces. “These are your orders. Have faith, take action, and with any luck the next time we meet we’ll have a new captain who values tradition and will keep us on track to restoring the Terran Empire to its full glory. Long live the Terran Empire!”

“Long live the Terran Empire!” the entire crowd repeated in unison. Reese gave a proud nod of approval, and as a sign of farewell they saluted him, again, in unison.

Chapter 21

Maya couldn't guess how long she had been lying back in bed, staring at the ceiling. Her thoughts were racing in her head, but her body was exhausted, and her limbs felt too heavy to move. She hated this. Nothing to occupy her mind, nothing to push aside the painful thoughts and memories that tried to twist through her head, and worst of all nothing to make her feel at all useful or competent. Each time she tried to take action she made everything worse, and the list of "things Maya can't get right" only grew.

There was a chime on the door. "Come in," she answered. Truthfully, she was in no mood to talk to anyone, but she welcomed the break in the monotony. The door slid open, but Maya did not move.

"I think I may have a plan to start setting things right." La'an said, still standing in the door frame. Maya sat up, quicker than she should have, and saw that she held the jar with the Ceti eels in her hands.

"Good luck with that. My understanding was that I very thoroughly ruined everything."

"There's no need to give up hope." La'an stepped inside, and the door closed behind her. She sounded gentle, even encouraging. "I need your help. How would you like to set a trap?"

"I take it I'm the bait," Maya teased, a little more brightness returning to her mood. "Who are we trying to trap?"

"Suzette Ling. She seemed to be in charge, even if the other Maya acted like she was the leader herself."

Maya looked down at the Ceti eel in the jar and could easily guess what La'an had in mind.. They were fully awake now, squirming and moving around the jar to look for an escape. "A little while ago, I wouldn't have wanted to harm her. In our universe she was one of the few augments who were kind to me, but here..." Maya stopped. She didn't want to say what was on her mind, how someone she wanted to trust caused her to experience the worst night of her life. "I wouldn't shed a tear for her."

"Glad to have your cooperation. We need to meet Captain T'Ralia in sickbay, we have everything planned out. We only need for you to follow directions."

"Wait..." Maya stood up, again too quickly even though she hadn't yet recovered from sitting up too quickly. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples to keep the room from spinning. "Now I have to be the one to tell you to slow down and think before acting. She's far stronger and faster than you can imagine, so how do you play to restrain her long enough to give the eel a chance to get inside her head?"

"The captain suggested sedatives."

Maya smiled. "Hope she's got something strong enough."

There were no patients in sickbay, but it wasn't quite empty. Captain T'Ralia was there, along with a muscular Andorian man and an almost as muscular Terran woman. The trio stood gathered close to one another near the entrance. Clearly they were expecting La'an and Maya.

"Admiral Noonien-Singh, Maya. I would like you to meet Ensign Shyraal and Lieutenant Vinneau."

"A pleasure and an honor. Especially you, Ensign. I still don't approve of Terran methods, but I still want to thank you for your role in T'Ralia's promotion." She offered a slight but respectful bow of her head.

Shyraal's eyes widened and he tilted his head ever so slightly as if he was unaccustomed to such a show of reverence. "Approve or not, I had no alternative."

"I understand. and when we aren't trying to keep up appearances I prefer to simply be called La'an."

"Very well, La'an." T'Ralia answered. "We each have a part to play in subduing Suzette Ling. Shyraal and Vinneau are both known for strength and skill in martial arts. La'an, I understand you have the same talents."

"I have the training, yes, but I'm long past my peak," La'an replied with a shrug. "What I have been doing is tinkering with a phaser to give it lower energy settings. I should have a reliable heavy stun."

"Stun won't do anything to her," Maya interrupted.

"Why not just do a Vulcan neck pinch?" Vinneau asked.

"That won't affect her either," Maya answered again.

"Correct/" T'Ralia took charge of the conversation again. "Our greatest odds of success are for the four of us to physically restrain her long enough for me to administer the sedative." T'Ralia gave Maya a pointed look. "I have prepared a higher dose in anticipation of Suzette's augmented physiology."

"And what is my role in this?" Maya asked. "Beyond just being the bait."

"It's not much beyond that." La'an replied. "You're here to lure Suzette to sickbay. If she thinks you're the Terran Maya, she comes to help you, if she doesn't she comes to catch you."

"Simple enough. Is she on the way?"

“Not yet.” T’Ralia looked to each of the people gathered in sickbay to confirm that they were ready. She took the communicator off of her belt. “Captain T’Ralia to Suzette Ling.”

“Go ahead.”

“I need you to come to sickbay. Immediately.”

“Shouldn’t you be on the bridge, Captain? At any rate, why do I need to go to sickbay? I am uninjured.”

“I am off duty. I have been using my spare time to continue to treat my established patients who require individualized care. Your health is not my present concern, but Maya Noonien-Singh’s

“Oh?” Suzette sounded interested, curious.

“Her shoulder has been reinjured. I understand that you were the first to treat her initial injury. Your insights would be appreciated.”

“Is that so?” There was something sly and taunting in her voice. “I’ll be right there, Captain. Or should I say Doctor?”

“Either will suffice. “T’Ralia out.”

“It sounds like she already suspects us,” La’an pointed out.

“Indeed,” T’Ralia agreed. “Expect extreme hostility.”

La’an scanned the area, making final tweaks to her strategy before giving her orders. “Maya. Sit and wait on the biobed on the far side of sickbay.” She pointed to the exact location. “Two of us will take cover on either side of the entrance, ready to restrain Suzette the moment she arrives. Maya, do you know if Suzette is right or left handed?”

“Right handed.”

“T’Ralia and Vinneau will be on the right, Shyraal and I on the left. Position everyone, Suzette will be here any moment.”

The anxious waiting drove Maya up the walls. She sat silently on the biobed and watched the others. They seemed calm yet alert, and Maya envied them for it. Maya could hardly remember a time when she wasn’t hiding a storm of frenetic energy, and all of the hardships from this universe only made it worse. Her mind ran faster than unaugmented humans, she knew that, to be able to tolerate stillness just seemed foreign.

Her heart jumped when she heard the doors to sickbay slide open. Her spine went stiff and straight, but she exhaled a sigh of relief to see that the person who entered was only a Terran crewman who was unsteady on his feet and gripping his stomach in pain.

T’Ralia moved from her position to speak to the man. “I’m sorry, but unless this is a medical emergency, I cannot give you my full attention at this time. Am I correct in assuming you are experiencing severe nausea?”

“Yes, doctor...captain,” he answered in between dry heaves.

T’Ralia set down the hypospray with the sedative and picked up a different one from the nearby table. “Any other symptoms?” The patient shook his head.

“Come back in an hour. For now I need you to leave immediately.”

The patient turned to go, and T’Ralia began to walk back to her position by the door. Before she was back, however, the doors slid open again. T’Ralia froze for just a moment before she clutched the hypospray with the sedative. On the other side of the door stood Suzette Ling, her narrowed eyes glaring directly at Maya.

“Bold of you to think I’d be so easy to fool.” Suzette drew her phaser and aimed at Maya, the three who were still waiting on either side of the door pounding in like a pincer on either side. Shyraal and La’an were able to take control of her left arm, but Vinneau on her own was unable to hold her on the right side. She still hung on tenaciously to Suzette’s right forearm to keep her from firing her phaser. In the chaos, the queasy crewman ducked for cover behind a desk, and Maya dived off of the biobed to hide behind it.

Suzette fired her phaser and, thanks to Vinneau’s interference, she only hit a computer console. The burst of energy made the console burst into an explosion of sparks and shrapnel. The three who had Suzette restrained struggled, but soon T’Ralia was close enough to inject the sedative into her neck. She fought for only a few more seconds before her body went limp. La’an stepped away and let Shyraal and Vinneau hold up Suzette’s limp body.

“She’s under sedation now. It worked. It’s safe to come out now.”

The queasy crewman could be heard dry heaving. He probably wasn’t moving any time soon.

“Let me know when it’s done.” Maya answered from behind the biobed. She couldn’t stand to see another mind taken over, even if it was sure to be much more peaceful if the victim was sedated. Those damn things killed her mother, she made choices that led to the Albrecht from her universe having her mind utterly broken with those. She knew it was necessary, that was why she took such risks to be sure they had them, but the thought still made her uneasy. “I’m sorry. I’m too weak for this.”

“It isn’t weakness, Maya.” Footsteps. Maya peeked out from behind the biobed to see La’an walking toward the desk to pick up the jar that contained the Ceti eels. She dived back to her hiding place. Her heart began to race, and her breathing became rapid and shallow. She closed her eyes and made herself focus on taking slow, deep breaths.

Damn her enhanced senses! Only half augment, but she could still hear La'an unscrew the lid of the jar. She could hear the forceps reaching in to pluck out a larval eel, but that was it. Even worse was the silence that followed. She knew what was happening in the silence and could imagine what was happening. The eel was crawling into Suzette's ear. If she hadn't been sedated, she would be screaming in pain.

"It's done." La'an finally said. Her voice was firm, yet gentle.

Maya still had her eyes closed. "I don't think I can stand yet. Once she's out of sedation, you can ask her anything. She can't lie in this state."

"Captain, I'd rather not waste time waiting for it to wear off. Do you have an antidote?" La'an asked.

"I do. One moment please." T'Ralia crossed the room and punched a few commands into a wall console. With a new hypospray in hand she crossed back to Suzette and injected the antidote into her neck.

She was still limp and groggy but she lifted her head.

"Can you speak?" T'Ralia asked.

"I can." Her speech was slurred.

"How did you know this wasn't the Maya from your universe?" La'an asked.

"Katya told me."

"Do the other augments know?"

Suzette nodded. "Yes, and fifteen members of the crew who are planning a mutiny."

La'an stepped back and gave T'Ralia a concerned look.

"Fifteen?" T'Ralia asked. "That is a significant number. Do you have the names of those crew members?"

"Helmsman Reese, Ensign Fitzpatrick...those are the only names I know, but I could identify photos from a crew roster."

"We'll get to work on that soon." La'an replied. "Who do you think I am, the La'an from your universe or the other?"

"I can't be certain, but after talking to Katya, I think you're from the other universe."

La'an looked away. That meant others might suspect her too. "I'm going to release you as soon as you're strong enough to walk on your own. Keep your place as the leader of the augments, do whatever you can to keep them from taking any action."

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Cw: references to the non-con from previous chapters

While Suzette Ling was off dealing with the imposter Maya from the other universe, Katya was tasked with freeing the Terran counterpart. Of course, she couldn't do it on her own, Reese accompanied her to the brig to add some Terran authority to her demands. Katya had questioned what authority a helmsman had on matters of security, but Reese assured her that a few firm words and a phaser were sometimes all the authority that a person needed. They moved quickly past the other prisoners, their pace steadily increasing with each step. Both wanted to lead the way, both too proud to follow.

The same guard from the last time Katya came down here was on duty. He glanced from Katya to Reese and back to Katya before he spoke, and he predicted what she was going to ask. "The answer is still no. Orders came from the admiral, and unless I hear directly from her, I'm not changing my mind."

"Lieutenant," Reese began. "We have reason to believe that the admiral has been compromised and can no longer be trusted."

The guard widened his stance. "And until I see proof of that myself I'm not disobeying orders."

Reese drew his phaser and aimed it at the guard's chest. "Would you rather disobey those orders or die?"

The guard didn't flinch. He drew his own weapon and aimed it at Reese, looking the helmsman dead in the eye. Katya let her self-preservation instinct override her pride and backed up a few steps to stand behind Reese.

"You really think I haven't had a phaser pointed at me before? I've probably faced death more times than you have, helmsman. What is it you do all day, sitting safely on the bridge and making the ship go? Why, I bet you've never..."

Reese fired his phaser, and with a sudden burst of energy the guard vanished. No struggle, no corpse...what an elegant way to get rid of a person. "Should have shot me instead of rambling." Reese stepped over to the console and punched in some commands. The forcefield to the Terran Maya's cell deactivated, and Katya rushed to her lover's side and knelt beside her.

"Maya..." she whispered as she ran her fingers through her lover's hair, but there was no response. Katya helped ease Maya up to a sitting position, but her body was limp. She was only lucid enough to try to lift her heavy head to look at Katya. "We'll get you set right soon. They're going to pay for this." She turned her head to speak to Reese. "She needs to get to sickbay. With any luck, Suzette will have already taken care of the imposters."

"And maybe the Vulcan too," Reese added.

Katya supported Maya around the waist and lifted her from the floor as she stood. They were close in size, with Katya a bit taller and leaner. The weight was not a struggle for her, but controlling a limp human body was more of a challenge than she anticipated.

Reese rushed over and came to Maya's other side to help support her. "Here. I've got her."

"Don't insult me!" Katya snapped. She took all Maya's weight herself and held Maya's motionless body in her arms. Even though she was handled roughly, she was still barely alert. Her only response was to moan softly. "I'm much stronger than you."

Katya carried Maya all the way to sickbay on her own, and even carrying the extra weight she kept a brisk pace, always a few steps ahead of Reese. Inside sickbay the imposter Maya sat on a biobed talking with Doctor T'Ralia. They both turned to look over to the sudden and unexpected interruption. Maya was wide eyed and alert, and while T'Ralia's response was less pronounced, clearly she was still surprised.

Reese drew his phaser and aimed it at T'Ralia. "Tell me, has Suzette Ling been here yet?"

T'Ralia remained calm as she answered, and she held her hands up with her palms open to show that she meant to pose no threat. "She has, and she has left already."

"Curious that she let you live." Reese narrowed her eyes. "I won't make that same mistake." He fired his phaser, and after a burst of energy, T'Ralia was vaporized.

In that same instant, Maya leapt up from the biobed and let out a guttural scream. She began to breathe rapidly as she stared at the empty spot on the ground where T'Ralia once stood. Her knees began to shake, and she doubled over and gripped the edge of the bed for support.

"Shall I take care of the imposter too?" Reese asked Katya.

Katya shook her head. "No, our Maya is quite attached to her, let it be her call, and she might have some information for us." Katya gently laid the Terran on a nearby biobed and walked closer to the other Maya. She stood with her shoulders back and her hands clasped behind her back. "Tell me what happened when Suzette was here."

"Nothing happened." Maya was still doubled over. She forced herself to turn her head to look at Katya as she spoke. "I had trouble with my shoulder, T'Ralia wanted to consult with her. They spoke, T'Ralia treated my shoulder, and Suzette left."

Katya narrowed her eyes. “You’re hiding something. Where is La’an?”

“Which La’an?”

“Both.”

“I don’t know.”

“Liar!” Katya heard movement from the biobed where the Terran Maya lay. “We’ll get to the bottom of this soon.” She rushed to her lover’s side. The Terran Maya propped herself up on her elbows, and Katya leaned in close and placed a hand behind her upper back to help support her. “Careful, you’re still under heavy sedation. Can you speak?”

The Terran Maya nodded, her head heavy. “I last remember...” Her speech slurred. “La’an, the other one...”

“Shhh...” Katya kissed the top of her lover’s head. “This isn’t urgent. You don’t need to explain anything until you’re feeling more yourself.” Katya looked up toward Reese. “Unless you can tell me a good reason for you to stay, I’d like for you to leave us.”

“I should be getting back to the bridge soon, anyway.. Vasquez is captain now, and I haven’t decided where he stands with us.” With that, he turned to go.

Katya perched on the edge of the biobed and sat in silence with the Terran Maya for a few minutes. She held her lover’s heavy head to her chest and stroked her hair.

“You should go,” Maya mumbled, her speech still slow and slurred. “You should go. I don’t like that you can see me in this state.”

“I don’t think any less of you. You’ll be back to normal soon once everything wears off.” Katya kissed her head again.

Katya nodded and glanced over at the other Maya. She was still doubled over, breathing heavily and shaking. “What should I do about her?”

The Terran Maya craned her neck to try to look around past Katya’s shoulders to catch sight of her counterpart. “She doesn’t matter. Let her stay, we’ll deal with her later.”

Katya kissed the top of her head once again. “I’ll be back in an hour.” She eased her lover back down to lie on the biobed and gave her one last kiss. “Rest well.”

After Katya left, a few still, silent minutes passed before the Terran Maya moved. She tried to prop herself up on her elbows again, but could only stay in that position for a moment before she collapsed back down on her back. Though she had poor control over her limbs, she outstretched an arm and beckoned her counterpart to come closer. “Come here,” she called. “Don’t worry, I’m in no state to do anything to you.”

The other Maya stood straight up and stared at her Terran counterpart, but she did not move any closer, frozen in fear. Only her eyes moved, a quick glance to the jar on the desk where the Ceti eels skittered around the inside searching for an escape. She took a deep breath, her eyes fixed at the creatures in the jar. She felt as though she was reliving the final moments before she killed her brother, the only moment where she would have enough of an advantage to take action and rid herself of her tormentor. This time, though, she felt more hesitation. To break the mind of a woman who wore her own face and carried parallel memories, and to cause that same person to die a horrific death...the thought of it, the fact that she was even entertaining the idea made her feel as if she was literally betraying herself.

But this was her only chance to act. T’Ralia was gone, the crew would be taking the steps to ensure that the coup was seen to completion, but if they controlled both the Terran Maya and Suzette they would control the augments. Maya picked up the jar and forceps and took another deep breath. She had to blink a few times to keep tears from forming in her eyes, and she walked toward her Terran counterpart, hiding the jar behind her back. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, just to herself.

The Terran Maya’s eyes were closed. Maya walked to her bedside. She shifted the jar and forceps to one hand and used her free hand to stroke her counterpart’s cheek. “I want you to know that I forgive you.”

The Terran Maya opened her eyes and smiled. “I knew you would. I could tell you enjoyed every minute, too ashamed to admit it.” Her speech was clearer. Maybe it was too late.

“You’re right.” If the Terran Maya wasn’t still partially sedated she might have seen through the lie. It hurt Maya to take this strategy, but this was temporary. “I think it’s time I took care of you.”

She tried to keep the jar out of a direct line of sight and she climbed up onto the biobed and straddled the Terran Maya. The Terran Maya gave her a heavy-lidded look before closing her eyes again. Maya acted quickly, removing the lid to the jar and reaching between the eel’s armored plating to pluck out a small larva. She was able to work quickly, but not silently. The Terran Maya’s eyes snapped open, and the moment she saw what was happening she began to fight back.

She still had poor control of her body, but she bucked and flailed to try to knock the other Maya off of her. Maya gripped her Terran counterpart’s body tightly with her knees, and let go of the jar holding the mature eels to hold the Terran Maya tightly by the throat. She placed the eel just below the Terran Maya’s ear and held her still as the tiny creature crawled inside.

The Terran Maya let out a scream so loud that it must have been heard throughout the whole ship. Her anguish lasted less than a minute before her screams abruptly stopped. She was still and pliant, no sign that she had felt any pain.

The other Maya hopped down off the biobed, her breathing still heavy, head still spinning.

“What have I done?” she whispered. Maya looked away and began to blink again, but this time she couldn’t stop a few tears from glistening

in her eyes. “Katya will be back in an hour. Tell her...” Damn. Maya was a terrible liar even if her mind wasn’t weighed down. “Tell her that La’an is...dealing with me.” That might send her off searching for La’an, but La’an was better able to handle herself.

Maya glanced down to the empty jar that fell to the ground, and her heart sank. She picked up the jar and began to frantically search sickbay for the missing eels. One she found under a bio-bed, which she plucked up by the tail and contained safely back in the jar. The other...she searched and searched, but it was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Good news everyone! This is my NaNo project, and I have hit 50k! On a more serious note, since I've been posting as I go, some stuff ended up more graphic than planned. Tags are in the process of being updated. CW for this chapter are in the end notes because spoilers

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

Maya had wasted so much time searching, and still the missing eel was nowhere to be found. She couldn't stay here and search forever, her hour was nearly up and Katya would be back soon. For a moment, she paused to consider the risks and rewards of her options. If she stayed and searched, it was only a chance she might find what she was looking for, but she would also risk incurring Katya's rage and suffering whatever consequences she would deem appropriate. If she left before finding the eel, she shuddered to think what might happen with a Ceti eel at large somewhere in the ship. It could wreak havoc on its own, and if it fell into the wrong hands.

No...no, she had to get out of here. Katya would probably kill her for what she did to her Terran counterpart. Maya grabbed the jar that held the one accounted for eel and rushed out of sickbay. She was practically running through the corridors, at one point taking a wrong turn before she remembered that La'an was staying in the Terran La'an's quarters. Once she stood outside La'an's door she rang the chime and tried desperately to calm herself down. She forced herself to take deep, slow breaths, but she still felt like every inch of her body was on fire.

"La'an!" She called. She thought she would be able to speak calmly, but she sounded frantic and panicked. "It's Maya, please, we need to talk. I've ruined everything...again."

"Come in," La'an replied. When the door opened, La'an stood just on the other side. She took the jar from Maya's hands and held it up to get a better look. La'an narrowed her eyes to see that there was only one eel inside, but she said nothing about it. "We have an advantage now, it might not be so bad as you think."

Maya sat on the bed and slumped forward to hold her head in her hands. "You shouldn't have trusted me." She shook her head. "Terrible things happen to everyone who trusts me, and it's usually my fault."

"I'm not entertaining that kind of talk." La'an had given up on trying to sound gentle and encouraging. She stood in front of Maya with her hands clasped behind her back. "If there's a problem, I only want to know what happened so we can come up with a solution."

Even though her head felt like a lead weight and forming words felt like she was trying to break through a solid wall, Maya lifted her head to answer. "T'Ralia's dead."

The color ran from La'an's face. She grabbed a chair and dragged it over so she could sit across from Maya, leaning forward and resting her hands on her knees. "That...is deeply concerning." Now she was soft and gentle again. "But that wasn't your fault."

"They know I'm not the other Maya, and they took her out of the brig."

La'an held a hand over her mouth and looked away. That small gesture was enough to hit Maya with another wave of panic. Their plan was unraveling, and even though La'an kept her composure, she was clearly concerned. "Who's 'they?'"

"Katya and the man who killed T'Ralia...I think he was a pilot. I don't remember his name."

La'an nodded. "Do you know if they suspect me?"

Maya shook her head. "No idea...maybe." She hung her head again, and again, the words just didn't want to form. "La'an, I did something very wrong."

La'an leaned forward and put a hand on Maya's shoulder. "If it was done to defend your life or to stop the coup, it might be justifiable."

"I'm going to be responsible for her death, the other Maya." She stopped and took a few deep breaths, trying to gather up the thoughts that swirled in fragments around her. "She's got a Ceti eel in her head now." Maya sprang to her feet and began to pace the room. "And I don't know why I feel so torn up inside about it, when using them in the first place was my idea, when I helped you infect Suzette Ling with one."

La'an took a deep breath. "There's nothing wrong with having complicated feelings. I can't imagine how difficult that must have been to do, but I think in spite of what went wrong we may still have an advantage. If we control both Suzette and the other Maya, we may well be able to control the augments."

"I thought I was better than this, I was trying to be better, but I think all I've learned is that there is still this deep, terrible instinct that I have to seize every advantage without giving a damn about the consequences or ethics."

"Maya, calm down." La'an stood up too and walked to Maya's side. She placed another gentle hand on Maya's shoulder, but Maya pulled away. "Our methods have been a little more brutal than I would like, but that's what we must do in order to keep up with these people."

"It's more than that, La'an, it's so much more than that." Maya shook her head. "It's something that's always been deep inside me, just like it was in my brother, and my father, and is probably in you too."

"Maya!" La'an shouted, loud and suddenly enough that Maya froze and stared wide eyed. "I'm sorry." She took a little breath before abruptly changing the topic. "I noticed...there is only one Ceti eel in the jar you brought back."

Maya said nothing. She walked silently back to the bed, sat down and hung her head again. When she spoke, it was barely above a whisper. "I lost it."

"You what?"

"I lost it!" She tilted her head back up and looked La'an right in the eyes. "I made an idiotic mistake, I lost it, and I have no idea where in the ship it might be crawling around by now."

La'an looked away and sighed before she sat beside Maya. "Well, that complicates matters, but as long as we can reach Terra Prime, we can still stop the coup and set everything back in order."

"It doesn't matter." Maya looked down again. "Nothing we do here will help the Terrans in the long run."

"Is that really what you think? Spock dismantled a fascist empire, and you think preserving his work won't make a difference?"

"I know it won't." Maya sighed, pausing to think of how to describe what she had seen without sounding like she was out of her mind. "Q showed me what happens if Spock lives. The Terrans will be conquered and enslaved."

La'an sat in silent thought. "I've had another encounter with Q as well. He's playing mind games, trying to manipulate us. There's a certain outcome he wants, and he's not above cheating to see it come to pass. The vision he showed you may not be true, and even if it was..." She paused again, considering her words. "I don't want to get into too many details, but I've seen firsthand that things that were meant to happen, important points of the timeline, tend to happen regardless of interference. It could be that the Terrans could end up at the same outcome regardless. Saving Spock at least buys them a few years of peace and equality before the fall."

Maya tried to force herself to smile, but she was given a sudden start when the door slid open. No chime, no asking permission, just Katya standing on the other side of the door holding something behind her back and her eyes narrowed.

La'an rose to her feet. "That door was locked!"

Katya shrugged. "Your security systems are easy to bypass, and the code was only four digits."

"You have a lot of nerve to barge in on an admiral."

"Are you an admiral, though?" Katya teased as she walked inside. "I mean, maybe you are in your world, but you don't actually hold any authority in the Terran empire, do you?"

"Bold of you to challenge my authority." With a few fast, long strides La'an closed the distance between the two of them. Katya was almost as tall as La'an, but La'an had a broader frame and had the more impressive presence.

"I know what you did to Maya," Katya accused. She puffed out her chest and tried to be just as intimidating right back at La'an before she revealed what she had been concealing behind her back: a jar containing the missing Ceti eel. "And I'm going to find you what you did with the real La'an as well."

La'an acted quickly, grabbing Katya by the shoulders. She turned Katya around and pulled her in close so she could wrap her arms around Katya to restrain her, and as they struggled Katya dropped the jar to the ground. While La'an was unmatched in technique and experienced, Katya had speed, strength, and youth on her side. She managed to wiggle down and out of La'an's hold and began to run out of the open door. La'an and Maya chased after her, but neither could match her speed. Maya, however, took matters into her own hands. She snatched the phaser off of La'an's belt, aimed it at Katya and fired. For the second time, Maya saw her lover die, this time by her own hand.

"La'an..." she whispered as she lowered her weapon. She never took her eyes off the spot where Katya had stood the moment before she was vaporized. "What have I done?"

"You did what you had to do."

La'an's communicator chimed. She took it off of her belt and flipped it open. "Bridge to Admiral Noonien-Singh."

"Go ahead."

"We've arrived in orbit over Terra Prime sooner than expected."

"Good. Have the transporter room prepare to beam Maya and myself back to my home. We will be there shortly."

"Understood."

"Noonien-Singh out." She gave Maya a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry. We'll have time to mourn later. We've got a coup to stop."

On the way to the transporter room, Maya tried to tell herself that this nightmare would be over soon. For all of their setbacks, things were mostly on track, and their challenges about this ship were behind them. When the doors to the transporter room slid open, however, what Maya saw made her feel as if she was kicked in the stomach.

La'an and Maya expected to see only the transporter operator, but instead they were greeted by the augments, almost all of them. Suzette Ling, the Terran Maya, and (of course) Katya were notably absent. A young man had a phaser drawn and aimed at Maya and La'an, who held their

hands up in surrender.

“It must be frustrating, to know how close you were to succeeding in your little plan.” He began as he walked closer. Even though he spoke to both women, he gave more of his attention to Maya. “I might have liked to take revenge for what you did to Suzette and the real Maya, but before you broke Suzette’s mind she did offer us some valuable advice: that we can’t hope to control the Terran Empire without the allegiance of someone who already holds influence within the Empire.”

“It’s hard to argue with a phaser pointed at your head.” La’an conceded. “We will comply.”

Maya gave La’an a sharp look, and La’an responded with an even sharper one.

“Very good. If we are successful, maybe we can find a reason to spare your lives. To the transporter pads, our associates on Terra Prime will be waiting” La’an and Maya followed this order, hands still up in surrender. The young man turned to speak to the transporter technician. “Astrid and I will beam down with these two, and then you can send down the rest of them.”

La’an’s home—in either universe—was not meant to hold so many people. Her accommodations were comfortable for one person living alone and suitable for two people who didn’t have many belongings or the need for spacious living quarters. Now fourteen people were crammed in the small main room: La’an and Maya, eight augments, and the four co-conspirators.

Even in tight, crowded quarters Erica Ortega managed to find enough room to pace the floor, her brow furrowed and resting her chin thoughtfully on her hand. “I still don’t buy any of this crap.” She addressed the entire room, but looked to Sulu more than anyone else present. “So there’s a whole nother universe, and La’an and the kid are imposters...from a whole nother universe.”

“If it helps, Erica,” Uhura began. She sat at the table with La’an, M’Benga, and Sulu. Everyone else stood or sat on the floor. “I’ve been to the other universe, traded places with my double, and was treated like a criminal. I can’t help but wonder what she was up to over here.” She glared at Sulu. “Because once everything was set right, this one was convinced I wanted to sleep with him.” Sulu pursed his lips, and M’Benga stifled a chuckle.

“Fine!” Ortega threw up her hands in defeat. “I don’t buy it, but I’ll go along with it. We definitely need La’an, we maybe need the kid, and so long as we’re getting rid of them in the end I guess it doesn’t make much difference.” She looked to her co-conspirators. “So. We only have a few days, how are the preparations going?”

“I can get the biometrics I need from the augments before I leave tonight and have their credentials ready to go early tomorrow” Uhura replied.

“And after she’s done with that I plan to stay late to discuss strategy.” M’Benga added. “I want to do it as cleanly as possible. My original plan was for the augments to provide support while La’an quietly slipped into Spock’s office to kill him herself, but I’m not sure this woman can be trusted to carry out such a task.”

“We have a few more days, more than enough time to adapt if you put your mind to it.” Sulu replied.

“Well, there’s a lot of work to do. La’an. Sulu and I need to speak to you. Privately.” She jerked her head toward the bedroom door. “M’Benga too, it won’t take long.”

“Ortega, are you sure?” Sulu asked.

“Trust me, we need him.” Ortega answered as she began to walk toward the bedroom. Sulu and M’Benga followed behind, with La’an trailing behind. Everyone’s eyes were on her, and instead of her usual proud posture she slumped her shoulders. La’an felt small in a way she hadn’t felt since she was a young child.

The door closed behind her, and Ortega took command of the situation. “Computer, soundproof the room.”

“The room is soundproofed. Soundproofing will remain in effect until disabled.” Even in this brutal universe, the computer’s voice was bright and cheery.

“Have a seat at the desk,” Ortega commanded, and La’an complied, though she moved slowly and maintained eye contact with Ortega the entire time.

“I’ll admit, we don’t have much information about what exactly happened aboard the Portland.” Sulu crossed the room to stand on the opposite side of the desk from La’an. “But what we do know is that Captain Albrecht and the real Admiral Noonien-Singh treated you with respect and hospitality, when they would have been well within their rights to kill you on sight. And how did you repay that hospitality? By creating chaos! The ISS Portland is on its fourth captain since the real La’an left Terra Prime, including a short stint with a pro-reform Vulcan in command of the ship. I also heard from Awais, the young man who’s made himself the augments’ new leader, that you killed three of them too.”

La’an took a deep breath. She was going to have to try to talk truth and reason to someone whose mind was already made up. “We had no hand in the assassinations onboard the Portland, I assure you any hostility was present before we were. And the only augment either of us killed was Katya. The other two were still alive.”

“Put out of their misery as soon as the others knew what you did to break their minds.” Ortega added.

“Your actions must have consequences, La’an.” Sulu continued. “We’ve determined that you need a reminder that will stay with you every day of the rest of your life, short though it may be. We don’t plan on keeping you around after you become emperor.”

“No one told me about that.” M’Benga interrupted. “What happens after you kill her?”

“Either Sulu or I become Emperor, depending on who wins the inevitable fight,” Ortegás answered with a shrug.”

M’Benga shook his head and chuckled. “Right.”

“La’an.” Sulu went on, looking La’an in the eye. “Place your right hand on the table.”

She realized what he intended to do and was gripped with self-preservation induced panic. She stood up, pushed the chair out of the way, and backed away. “No...absolutely not!”

M’Benga came up behind her and took hold of her shoulders to hold her still and force her back into the chair while Ortegás yanked her arm from her side and held it down on the desk’s surface. She never stopped fighting back even as Sulu drew a massive knife and with one swift blow severed her hand at the wrist.

Fiery pain surge through La’an’s body, and she screamed with such force that tears streamed “down her eyes and her throat went raw. She only dared to look down at the desk for a moment, just long enough to see the sickening, bloody, gap between her wrist and hand.

“Don’t let her bleed too long,” Ortegás advised M’Benga. “Remember, we need her alive.”

Chapter End Notes

This one...got a lot darker. CW for violence and limb amputation oof.

Chapter 24

They had left La'an alone overnight, that was their first mistake. She spent much of the night lying on the floor, face down with the stump where her right hand used to be hidden beneath her body. After M'Benga sealed up the wound, most of the pain subsided, but what bothered her more was the alarming feeling that her hand wasn't there even though it felt like it should be. That and the anxiety, which came in waves, of knowing that she now had to find a way to escape her captors and still stop the coup. She hadn't given up, though, she had survived more desperate situations. As long as she was breathing, she'd still be fighting.

Slowly, she eased herself up to her feet, another wave of anxious nausea hit her the moment she realized there was no right hand to prop herself up on, and yet another when she caught sight of her own severed hand was still on the desk. Once she was on her feet she took a moment to steady herself and walked slowly back to the desk. Before she sat down she angrily brushed the severed hand off of the desk and onto the floor. She couldn't stand to look at it another moment.

La'an went to work at the computer console, awkward and uncertain with her left hand, and several times she caught herself trying to use a limb that wasn't there. Her eyes were fixed on the screen, and her heart raced as she waited for a response. At this hour, it was unlikely that she would get a response, but if she waited she might miss her chance entirely.

She breathed a sigh of relief to see Spock appear on the screen. "Glad to see you, I was afraid I might not get any response at this hour."

"Recently I have been on high alert." Spock answered. "And as a Vulcan I require less sleep."

"Spock..." La'an's voice was soft yet stern. "Things have gone...bad. Beyond bad, terrible. T'Ralia was killed, I'm on Terra Prime, but they know I'm not the right La'an. I'm not sure what I can do to protect you, but you need to start expecting them now. I don't know that they're still planning to keep their original schedule."

Spock nodded. "Your warning is greatly appreciated. I will take the appropriate security measures. However, before we continue this conversation, I have a question for you."

"Go on."

"It has occurred to me that I have no definitive proof as to which version of La'an you are." His voice was as calm and even as ever. Spock wasn't accusing her of anything, he was pursuing a logical path.

"That's going to be a challenge, Spock," La'an replied, still both soft and stern. "We haven't actually spent any time together. Any memories I share with Spock...well, they aren't your memoirs."

"I am aware of that fact." Spock answered. "You knew Doctor McCoy." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, but not well. We briefly served together aboard the Enterprise before I was transferred, but I don't understand what he has to do with anything."

"I shared a mindmeld with the Doctor McCoy from your universe. I know his memories."

La'an leaned back in her seat and looked up as she tried to recall a distinct memory. Only one came to mind. It made her feel foolish just to think about what happened, but this was not the time to hold back on account of her ego. "I sprained my wrist bowling, and for days I tried to ignore it and told myself it wasn't that bad. It was only after Uhura saw how swollen it was and insisted it needed treatment that I even went to sickbay." She smiled, just a bit. It had been so embarrassing when this happened that she had tried to forget it entirely, but now recalling it brought her a sense of fond nostalgia. "McCoy scolded me harshly for it and ranted about how the smartest people are sometimes also the stupidest."

Spock nodded. "That happened. It seems impractical to me that the Enterprise from your universe had such amenities as a regulation bowling alley, yet your account is accurate to McCoy's memory."

"So you're satisfied with my answer?"

"I am."

"Then I suppose that's everything for now." La'an sighed. "I wish I could do more, but I'm held captive in my own home...Maybe if I had more evidence against the co-conspirators." La'an was beginning to think out loud "Uhura has been at work making false credentials for the augments. Ortegas and Sulu were researching classified security details. I don't know that they left any evidence, or if it's enough to justify a full investigation."

"Your warning was sufficient, and I will investigate this other information. If there is sufficient evidence, that may be enough to stop this coup before it begins."

"I'll try to keep you updated as best as I can, but I doubt if I'll have many more opportunities."

"Understood. End transmission."

La'an knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, so she stayed at the desk with her undivided focus on the computer console. Her heart raced. If Ortegas or Sulu barged in at an inopportune time and caught her she might lose her only remaining hand, but this was all she could do to save Spock and the Terran republic. She searched through the Terran La'an personal files, especially her communications. Most of them were mundane and administrative, the sort of correspondence that she was accustomed to back home, but one caught her attention: a folder with

communications from Uhura and Sulu. La'an was not surprised to see that it was under tight security. Opening it would require retinal scans (which she could pass) and voice authorization (which she could only pass if she knew the correct code. La'an leaned back in her seat and stared at the ceiling. Of course it wouldn't be that simple. She went back to work. In her days as a security expert, La'an learned her fair share about computer security and how to bypass it, but if her counterpart was nearly as thorough as she was, this would be no easy feat.

La'an worked until she began to see the first rays of morning sun peeking in through the window. She had been lucky so far, but surely one of her captors would be back again soon, so she left her seat and went to collapse on the bed.

Without so much as a courtesy chime, the door slid open. La'an couldn't guess how long she had been lying sleepless in bed, maybe an hour or two based on the changes in the light coming in through the window.

"Wake up, sleepy head." Ortega called, teasing. Sulu was standing beside her. "Hope you slept well."

"Not a wink. Losing a hand doesn't exactly put one in a restful mood." La'an sat up.

"Fair enough." Ortega shrugged. "Brush your hair and clean up the blood, we need you to arrange a meeting with Spock."

"I'll comply, but only if I have time to speak to Maya first...privately."

"Why? So the two of you can scheme together and plan your escape?" Sulu asked as he stepped through the door and into the room.

"That wasn't my intention. I need to speak to her, with a chaperone, then."

"Fine," Ortega sighed with a roll of her eyes. She turned to go.

Once Ortega was gone, Sulu walked into the room to stand beside the bed. He wore a wicked smile on his face, and dried blood still speckled his uniform. La'an rose to her feet to stand facing him, trying to stand up straight and dignified in spite of...everything.

"I trust you're recovering well," he taunted.

"Better than expected. M'Benga's skills in this universe are just as good as in my own."

"That's too bad," Sulu sighed. "I had hoped you might suffer a little while longer."

La'an narrowed her eyes at him, but in that moment she caught sight of Maya standing in the doorway and forgot all of the hurt that had been done to her.

"Maya!" She pushed past Sulu and rushed to Maya's side. "Are you alright?" She placed her remaining hand on Maya's shoulder. "Did they hurt you?"

"No, I..." Her eyes grew wide and fixed on the stump where La'an's hand used to be. She shrank back and gasped as she covered her mouth with her hand. "What happened?"

"Nothing besides the obvious." La'an dismissively waved her left hand in the air. "What matters more to me is your safety."

"I'm fine. They locked me in the spare bedroom. I couldn't sleep, so I spent the night at the computer console..." Maya paused and glanced to Sulu and then Ortega. She was hiding something from them. "Reading Shakespeare. Hamlet. The verse is all the same, but I imagine the interpretation of the text differs vastly. I'd be curious to know how the Terrans interpret the ending."

There had to be some hidden message, but La'an was not enough of a Shakespeare scholar to parse it out. "Remind me how it ends, I haven't read it in decades."

"The Danish royal family is so caught up with their personal problems that they ignore foreign threats. When the Norwegian prince arrives he finds that they've all killed each other, and he takes the Danish crown for himself."

Now she understood. Infighting and a myopic focus on ego and personal gain, that could give them the advantage. Ortega and Sulu were working toward a common goal but would be at each other's throats; they couldn't both be the new emperor. M'Benga seemed to think the idea of one of them becoming emperor was nearly laughable, and La'an was sure the augments were ripe for some violent disagreements of their own after having a revolving door of temporary leaders after Khan was killed.

"I'm sure Fortinbras must be a highly respected character, then, for being so opportunistic." La'an answered with a knowing nod.

"We don't have time for this!" Ortega held her hands in front of her in frustration. She turned to Maya. "Get out of here. We have business to take care of."

For the second time La'an sat in front of the computer console to contact Spock. Because she had spoken to him before, she was confident that he would know she was acting under duress, and so she was agreeable and compliant with the instructions that Ortega and Sulu gave her.

"Admiral Noonien-Singh." Spock began. It was barely perceptible, but he raised one eyebrow just a bit. "This is sooner than when I planned to speak with you."

"Yes. We arrived back to Terra Prime ahead of schedule." She glanced to Ortega, who stood just out of view. It was a small signal, hopefully enough to show Spock that she was not alone and not acting on her own. "We need to schedule a meeting at once. Tomorrow evening."

“Admiral, that is on extremely short notice.”

“I know, but this is an urgent matter.” She glanced toward Ortigas again. “When I was back on the Portland there was great upheaval, more anti-Republic actions than I had initially seen. I fear that this may extend well beyond the crew of that one ship.”

“This is cause for concern. Can this discussion not be done remotely?” As Spock spoke, La’an studied him carefully for any signs that he understood what was happening on her end, but Vulcans were notoriously hard to read.

“Due to certain sensitive information, I’m afraid this meeting needs to happen in person.”

“I understand.” Spock leaned forward and looked directly into her eyes. La’an felt as though he was trying to speak more personally. “It is regrettable that such an urgent meeting is necessary, but I understand the gravity of the situation. I will make myself available for a meeting tomorrow evening.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow. End transmission.”

Chapter 25

The door to La'an's room closed behind Maya, and at once an augment rushed to her side and escorted her back to the spare room. This augment was a young woman named Saoirse Butler. In her own universe, Saoirse had a nasty attitude toward everyone and everything, and judging from the sour look on her face, the Terran version probably didn't have a more optimistic outlook. That could work to her advantage.

Saoirse didn't say a word or even look at Maya, but once she turned to leave and go about her own business, Maya called after her. "Saoirse, wait! I need to speak to you."

Saoirse stopped to turn toward Maya and glared with narrowed eyes. "I don't have time for this."

"That is no way to speak to the heir of Khan!" Maya raised her voice and took a few long, quick strides to stand uncomfortably close to Saoirse. She stood with her chest out and head high, but because she was much shorter than Saoirse she looked less intimidating and more like a child trying to stand up to an older sibling.

"You're no one." Saoirse was not intimidated. She still stood tall and steady and spoke calmly.

"Am I though? I may come from a different world, but no one else alive, anywhere, has both this blood in their veins and his enhancements in their genome. If you were loyal to the other Maya, you should be loyal to me as well. My claim is just as legitimate as hers was."

"I won't pledge my loyalty to you," Saoirse answered. "But I will indulge your request so long as you don't take too much of my time."

A half smile curled onto Maya's face and she eased away from Saoirse, stepping back to a distance more comfortable for conversation. "I only require a few minutes. I'm just curious about some of the ways your Ceti Alpha V differed from my own."

"In what ways?" Saoirse's demeanor had not warmed up any, even if she was acting a bit more agreeable.

"Mostly how interpersonal dynamics differ. I couldn't help but notice that nearly everyone the other Maya chose to bring from Ceti Alpha V is so young. Why is that?" A safer, simpler question to test. One that didn't matter, that she had her own ideas about the answer.

Saoirse let out a dismissive sigh that rolled through her upper body and made her shoulders slump. "I thought that would be too obvious to warrant asking. When the real Maya rose up against her father, alliances were made largely along generational lines. While most of our elders did accept her, few were able to earn her trust."

"That's what I expected, I only wanted confirmation," Maya replied with a nod. Saoirse may have seemed annoyed by her questions, but at least she was receptive and not holding back anything with her answers. That was enough to encourage Maya to question further. "I'm also curious to know a little more about you."

"Oh?" Saoirse straightened her shoulders and opened her eyes a little wider. "Why, were we friends in your universe? Because in this one I could barely stand you."

"And yet you were trusted enough to be in the inner circle?"

"I liked the promise of being at the top of the Terran Empire much more than I disliked Maya."

That sounded like the Saoirse she knew. "In my universe it seemed like you disliked everyone." Maya took a few steps away and spoke casually, not to accuse or criticize but simply offer a neutral description. "Least of all Awais Patil. I'm surprised the two of you never killed each other, in either universe."

"As am I. He's arrogant, entitled, doesn't think through his actions."

Good. Saoirse was taking the bait. "Why do you follow him, then?"

"Excuse me?" Saoirse narrowed her eyes again.

"I'm sorry. I meant no offense." Maya held up her hands and shook her head. "It's more...that I don't understand why he seems to have taken charge. I expedited Katya to take over for your Maya because of their relationship, and Suzette for her experience. But what claim does he have?"

"Only that he wants power." Saoirse rolled her eyes just thinking about it.

"Does that seem right to you?" Maya took a few steps closer to Saoirse again and mirrored her posture and expression as best she could, eyes narrow and hands clasped behind her back. This time she meant to be accusatory. "Does that even make sense?"

Saoirse opened her mouth as if to speak, but she paused and blinked instead. "Maya, I think you've taken enough of my time." Without another word she turned and left.

After a few more hours, La'an and Maya were retrieved to join the rest of the group. Joseph M'Benga stood at one end, ready and at attention like a slider. He wore a stern look on his face, looked straight ahead, and had a commanding presence even without saying a word. Everyone else—augments and Terrans alike—faced him, mostly standing, but a few sat where they could find some space.

He stayed dead still and only moved his eye to watch as La'an and Maya were brought into the room. A space at the table had been saved for La'an, and Maya sat on the floor. She wasn't concerned with being dignified here. She had been pushing herself too hard ever since she left her own universe and knew she would have no respite until everything was set back in order.

M'Benga addressed the entire group. "Now that we are all here, I'd like to get started right away. We can't waste time, not when we are thirty-six hours away from storming the capitol and taking back the empire. Awais. You have your orders, as we discussed this morning. Brief your people at your earliest convenience. As for La'an..."

"Wait!" Saoirse's voice rang out. She stood in the back of the room but pushed her way forward. "I'd like to set into motion a vote of no confidence. Awais is not fit to lead us."

Awais pointing an accusing finger at Saoirse. "You have no right!"

"That's enough!" M'Benga shouted, but he lowered his voice back to its usually commanding yet respectable tone. "There is no time for any of this, Awais, get control of your people."

"No. I refuse to comply with his leadership." Saoirse looked around to the other augments. "Surely I'm not the only one who thinks this coup will fail Awais in any position of authority?"

"I agree," An older augment spoke up. After Suzette Ling succumbed to the Ceti eel, he was one of only two remaining augments from the prior generation. "He has no experience and is so full of bravado his mind is clouded."

"Stand down, old man!" Awais shouted. Within moments the entire room erupted into a heated argument: augments shouting at each other and M'Benga trying to shout over all of them to make them stop. The verbal fight soon became physical when Awais pushed Saoirse out of the way to get closer to the older augment, and the situation escalated instantly from there. Punches were thrown, people pushed over furniture. In the chaos, Maya managed to look La'an in the eye and glanced to the door. No one noticed them leave.

Once they were out in the hall they broke into a sprint. This was the first time Maya had really pushed herself physically since her illness, and she was now aware of the fact that she had a body whose strength and ability far outpaced her energy. Still, she kept up with La'an until she reached the end of the hall and were nearly ready to dash down the stairs, but a commanding voice made them stop short.

"It's over La'an." The pair turned around to see Erica Ortigas with her phaser at the ready, and both women held their hands up in a sign of surrender. "Do as I say or I vaporize the kid." Ortigas kept her phaser aimed at Maya as she walked closer. "You know, I chased after the two of you because I thought I'd be made a hero if I brought you back, but the minute I walked through that door, I knew I could do better. I don't need any of them, maybe we have better chances if we don't send in the whole army. All I need is someone who can get me close to Spock."

"Again," La'an answered, trying her best to remain calm. "I can't argue with a phaser set to vaporize."

"La'an, no!" Maya pleaded as she sharply turned her head to face La'an "Don't give up just to spare me. I'm not important."

"I haven't given up, Maya. Neither of us can do anything if we're dead." She glanced back at Maya and tried to offer a comforting smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Sp much blind optimism! Is everyone from your universe like this? Nevermind, don't answer that. We're a little ahead of schedule, but it's time to pay Spock a visit."

Chapter 26

Ortegas gave Maya and La'an no opportunity to escape. She wasn't bold enough to walk all the way to the transporter station with her phaser drawn, but she kept her right hand on her weapon and insisted they walk one either side of her. They drew little attention to themselves until they reached the station, and the technician greeted La'an and Ortegas with a Terran salute. Ortegas gave La'an a quick sideways glance. As an Admiral, she was supposed to be the one in charge.

"We're going to the Capitol," La'an commanded. The technician stole a glance at the stump where her hand used to be, but the glare La'an gave him in return was enough to prevent him from asking any questions.

"Of course, Admiral, but you should know, there are new security measures in place. I can't get you into the building itself, at least not until further notice."

"Only a minor inconvenience," La'an answered. "As close as you can get us is acceptable."

The trio stepped onto the transporter pads, and once they were in place, the technician entered some commands into the console, and all three banished.

They materialized several meters away from the Capitol. Even though Spock had begun to reshape the ideals of the Terran Empire, he built the Republic on its old infrastructure, and in some places the old aesthetics could still be seen. The exterior walls of the capitol were dark and laid in with gilded filigree in sharp geometric designs, and it was surrounded by ornamental grounds.

"The gardens used to be bigger," Ortegas explained as they crossed the grounds. She still walked between her two captives and kept a hand on her phaser. "Spock said that usable space being left open was 'illogical,' or something like that. And all the plants were poisonous."

Just outside the entrance they were greeted by a security guard. No Terran salute, only a slight but respectful bow of the head. While the old guards of the Terran Emperor wore showy golden armor, those entrusted with protecting Spock's life wore more utilitarian attire: simple gray uniforms with black armor.

"Admiral," he began. He gave all his attention to La'an. They recognized each other, as this man had been in the security rotation on a handful of La'an's prior visits. "My apologies, but we've had some recent protocol changes. I can't admit anyone without an appointment, and you weren't on today's schedule."

"I'm not used to not getting what I want," La'an played the part of her Terran counterpart well as she took a step closer, but the guard showed no signs of backing down. As she spoke, Ortegas did a quick scan of the guards outside the building. "Surely there's someone I can speak to. This is an urgent matter."

"No exceptions."

"I don't think you understand." La'an inched even closer and tried her best to imitate the entitled, demanding tone of her Terran counterpart. "Ortegas and I have been Spock's close friends for decades. There are few people he trusts as much as us."

"I know, Admiral, and I'm sorry, but..."

"And what if I told you that we need to speak to him because we have information on a very real threat?" Ortegas spoke up to interrupt this time, and she pointed an accusing finger at the guard.

The guard narrowed his eyes and he considered the offer. "I'll let you speak with the security chief." He glanced to Maya. "Not her."

"Why not?" Ortegas demanded. "Maya is Admiral Noonien-Singh's cousin, and she's got information as well. You can trust her just as much as us."

"As an unknown civilian, she lacks the proper security clearance, and she doesn't have the same rapport with Spock. You can state your case to the security chief, but I can't let her in." He narrowed his eyes on Ortegas and let his gaze drift down to the phaser on her belt. "You'll have to leave your weapons behind. Including knives, I've lost count of how many people who don't think a blade counts as a weapon."

"Absolutely not!" Ortegas snapped as she instinctively moved her right hand to the hilt of her knife. "Phasers, I understand, but carrying a dagger is a time-honored Terran tradition. Only a coward would disarm everyone around him because he can't defend himself."

"Be that as it may, I still can't allow it. Either leave your weapons behind, or you can forget about speaking to the security chief."

Ortegas furrowed her brow. "I don't like it all, but if you won't give us any other choice." She glanced to La'an. "Well, Admiral, what do you think?"

"I don't appreciate being treated with such suspicion, but as Ortegas said you've left us with no choice." La'an replied.

The guard gave a slow nod. "Come along then." He beckoned for La'an and Ortegas to follow him then turned and took his first few steps toward the entrance.

Before she followed, Ortegas turned to Maya and pointed a finger at her. "Stay right here."

The two women stayed close behind the guard. La'an managed to move with quiet confidence, hardly different from the way she usually carried herself, except that she kept her injured arm folded and tucked close to her body. Ortegas, however, couldn't help but let her right hand rest on her phaser.

Maya watched as La'an and Ortega ascended the stairs. She kept her eyes on them until they disappeared from view behind the doors, and not a moment later she rushed over to another security guard. "Sir!" She called. "You have to stop Ortega! She can't be trusted."

The guard turned toward her and crossed his arms. "And why are you only mentioning this now?"

"Because she had a phaser, and I'm not ready to die." Maya took a deep breath and ran her hands through her hair as she tried to think of the best, quickest, and most believable way to describe the situation. "Ortega is going to use La'an to get close to Spock and kill him."

The man raised an eyebrow. "So La'an can't be trusted either?"

"No, no that's not it at all." Maya looked up and rubbed the back of her neck, how could she explain any clearer? When she continued, she spoke rapidly. "Ortega has been threatening her and coerced her into it. I'm sure La'an has some exit strategy, but she'll need support. And Ortega isn't the only threat. Uhura, Sulu, M'Benga, and eight genetically enhanced augments...they've all been planning to assassinate Spock and reinstate the Terran Empire."

"Those are some pretty bold accusations. What evidence do you have?"

Maya opened her mouth to speak, but stayed silent for a moment. All she had was her own testimony. "I overheard them planning everything."

"So, no concrete proof?"

Maya ran her fingers through her hair again and let out a frustrated sigh. "If I'm wrong, you have nothing to lose, if I'm right your entire society is likely to fall back into fascism."

The guard crossed his arms. "I'll inform the chief of security immediately and see what he has to say. In the meantime I suggest you stay out of the way."

"Don't have to tell me twice." With that, Maya turned to walk back across the grounds at a clipped pace. To where, she did not know. She couldn't guess how similar the layout of this place was to Earth, but that knowledge would have been of little use with her own lack of experience getting around the planet she now called home. As she wandered the streets, her mind raced. Maybe the chief of security would believe her, and maybe La'an would find a way to save herself and Spock, but there were still about a dozen other would be assassins at large. By now it would have raised suspicion that Ortega had not dragged them back, and from what Maya had seen the Terrans she didn't take them to be the sort to bide their time and wait before going to extremes. Every time Maya tried to take action her poorly conceived plans backfired horribly, but no one else knew about this threat. The poorly conceived plans would have to do.

Maya rushed toward the first person she saw: a tall Terran woman with pale skin and red hair. "Excuse me! I need your help." The stranger tried to back away, but Maya grabbed her arm in an instinctive act of desperation. The woman tried to pull away, but she couldn't match the strength of Maya's grip. "I just need to know where the nearest transporter station is."

The woman wrinkled her nose. "Five blocks to the left."

Maya let go of her arm, and the woman shrank back. "That was all I needed. Thank you." She dashed off again, blocking out her surroundings and thoughts to focus solely on putting one foot in front of the other until she entered the station. Maya's eyes were wild and she was short of breath, which caused the technician to stare at her with a raised eyebrow.

"May I help you?" he asked, flatly.

"Yes, actually." Maya took a deep breath to steady herself and gather her reeling thoughts. This man was a Vulcan, which might make him more sympathetic to her cause. There was no time to try to get a feel for who this person was or where he stood. "I'm trying to stop a coup, and I think you might be the only person who can help me."

There was no perceptible change in the Vulcan's face, but he did give an understanding nod. "Recently, there have been many attempts on Commander in Chief Spock's life. It would be illogical to allow him to come to harm by inaction."

Maya breathed a sigh of relief and shook her head. That was the easy part, to convince him to protect Spock. The challenge would be in explaining everything else. She took a deep, grounding breath. "I'm sure this attempt is under very different circumstances..." Another deep breath. The Vulcan was still listening attentively. "Hikaru Sulu, Nyota Uhura, and Joseph M'Benga are planning a coup, and they have the cooperation of eight genetically engineered augments." Giving the minimum made everything more believable. It wasn't necessary to go into detail about alternate universes or Khan and his followers surviving in space for hundreds of years.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "That is unusual. How did you come by this information?"

Another sigh. "It's a long story, but what matters is that I'm one of the augments. I don't agree with them, and I was forced to go along with their schemes against my will."

"Understood, but I fail to understand how I can be of assistance."

"We share genetic markers, enough that your transporter's sensors can differentiate us from unmodified humans...Terrans. I know it can work, I've seen it done before. You can use my scans as a template, and then find them and beam them..." she paused. Not long ago she had suggested beaming them all into space, but when the time came to make the decision she couldn't bring herself to do it. "...I don't know, to some deserted island, or anywhere uninhabited on this planet, if such a place even exists."

"What you suggest is theoretically possible, but highly impractical. To select a handful of individuals with a few genetic markers would require a precise location."

“If we’re lucky they’re still at La’an’s home, and if we’re not they’re right outside the capitol, is that precise enough?” Maya was growing impatient.

“Perhaps. I will need to have a scan of your genetic profile to determine how strongly the scanners can detect these markers, but before we proceed I have concerns on my own.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m sure you understand that it is logical to have some suspicions about the validity of these claims...”

“Just do a damn mind meld!” Maya held her hands up in defeat.

Again, the Vulcan raised his eyebrow. “Most Terrans do not consent to melding so freely.”

“I don’t like the idea, but I have nothing to hide. I’ve done a mind meld before, and I hated every minute of it. If there’s any other way I can convince you that I’m telling the truth, let me know, but I have no proof other than my word.”

The Vulcan considered this for a moment before he stepped from behind the console and approached Maya. “I cannot in good conscience perform a mind meld without full and unquestioning consent.”

“And I’m giving you my full consent. I can complain about something and still agree to it.”

“Very well.” The Vulcan stepped closer and reached out to place his fingertips on the side of Maya’s face. “I advise you to try to control your emotions, especially feelings of fear and worry.”

Maya closed her eyes and tried to breathe slowly and deeply. She reminded herself that no matter how unpleasant the last mind meld was, she had been safe. The same would be true this time, and now she knew what to expect.

“Your mind to my mind, your thoughts to my thoughts...”

Her mind became one with the Vulcan’s—Sirit was his name, she now knew. While it was still uncomfortable to share every thought and secret with someone she just met, this was easier to endure than her first meld. Sirit had access to all of her private memories and thoughts but had the tact to ignore anything but the relevant information. He saw how she and La’an were brought here from their own universe, everything that happened aboard the ISS Portland, the meetings with the augments and the conspirators, and how their escape was foiled by Ortegas. When Sirit took his hand away and stepped back, Maya’s heart was racing.

“I have the information I need.” Sirit went back to console and began to work. “Please step on the transporter pad.”

Maya’s heart was still racing as she stepped on the platform. “This won’t talk long, will it?”

“Only a few seconds. Energizing.” With a beam of light, Maya vanished and then reappeared. Even after she re-materialized Sirit still did not look up from his work. Curious, Maya walked over to stand behind him and look over his shoulder to try to make sense of what he was doing. “I’m detecting only seven Augment biosigns. They’re just outside the capitol.”

“Then get them out of there!” Maya leaned closer and scanned the displays on the console and tried to make sense of what Sirit was doing. “Send them...somewhere, anywhere that won’t kill them instantly.”

“Point to point teleportation is a precise and delicate maneuver. I cannot do it without exact coordinates for the destination. Furthermore, one of the augments is unaccounted for.”

“Probably killed during their infighting,” Maya guessed. She stepped away from the console and looked up to the ceiling. They couldn’t spare another moment. “I don’t want to send them into space, but what other option do we have?”

“This is a penal colony in New Zealand, I suggest we send them there.”

Maya nodded. “Yes, yes that’s perfect. Do it.” It wasn’t perfect. Seven furious augments suddenly displaced and imprisoned, that might cause more violence than beaming them into space to die, but it felt easier on her conscience.

Maya kept a bit more distance between herself and Sirit, but she still watched him closely, trying to figure out just what he was doing and how much longer it would be until the augments were no longer their problem.

“I have beamed four of the augments to New Zealand.”

“And what about the other three?” Maya stepped up close again and leaned in to read the display. In this moment she realized that she would have to take Sirit’s word on trust alone; she couldn’t make sense of anything she saw. “Why can’t you get rid of them too?”

“The Capitol is shielded to prevent unauthorized transport. The most logical conclusion is that they have made it inside. It is also logical to conclude that Sulu, M’Benga, and Uhura are with them.”

The room began to spin, and knots formed in Maya’s stomach. She stepped away to lean against the wall, sure she couldn’t stay upright if she had to support her own body. “So...that’s it then.”

“Not necessarily,” Sirit answered. Through everything the Vulcan, unsurprisingly, remained calm and unfazed. “We do not know what is happening inside the Capitol, or what will happen.”

“There’s nothing more that I can do, at least.” Maya let herself slide down the wall to sit on the floor, trying to feel grounded even though

everything felt as though it was falling apart. There would be no more poorly thought out, wildly impulsive schemes, that sort of thing was certain to get her killed. “Do you mind if I stay here? I have nowhere safe to go.”

Sirit nodded. “You may stay as long as you need.”

Chapter 27

La'an followed the guard quietly and without hesitation, but instead her head her mind was racing, trying to plan her strategy on the spot. Her and Ortega being unarmed actually proved to be an advantage. Ortega would need to quickly and quietly procure a weapon for her scheme to work, and La'an had the skill to take Ortega in unarmed combat...at least she would have if she still had her dominant hand.

Security Chief Palmer was a wall of a man: tall and broad with golden tan skin and inky black hair that he wore cropped close. He sat at his desk with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face, and Ortega and La'an sat across from him. Clearly, he was not pleased to have his routine interrupted. The inside of his office was similar to the rest of the Capitol in appearance: old Terran infrastructure mostly stripped of its grandeur.

"Well," he began. "I hear you have some information that may be of use. We've been expecting another assassination attempt and have reason to believe that this one will be a more concerted attempt."

Ortega gave La'an a sharp look before she answered. "Yes, sir, this is about that exactly. We know who is behind the coup and need to tell Spock ourselves."

"I can't accommodate that. Any information you have, you can tell me, and I will relay it to Spock and anyone else who needs to know."

"That's unacceptable!" Ortega leaned forward and placed the palms of her hands flat on the desk. "Everything that has happened since we've arrived has been unacceptable! We've been treated like criminals! We served with Spock, we are among his most trusted friends."

"Erica." La'an spoke calmly yet firmly. She caught Ortega's attention and settled her enough to encourage her to stand down. "This man would not be chief of security if Spock did not have the utmost trust and respect for him."

"I guess you're right." Ortega sat back in her seat and let out a long breath. "Do you know Hikaru Sulu?"

Palmer nodded. "I met him once. He served with Spock too, right?"

Ortega nodded. "We recently found out that he's been staging a coup. Unfortunately the only evidence we have is our word, but given the current circumstances that seems like it might be enough to start an investigation. We also have names of some of his co-conspirators: Nyota Uhura, Joseph M'Benga..."

"And Erica Ortega." La'an interrupted.

Ortega sprang to her feet with such speed and intensity that she knocked her chair to the floor. "La'an, what the fuck?"

Palmer drew his phaser. He aimed it at Ortega, but kept his eyes on La'an. La'an stood up as well, but she remained calm and steady.

La'an held up the stump where her right hand used to be. "I realize it may be hard for you to believe that I wasn't involved, but I assure you that any compliance was against my will. You can detain me or deal with me however you see fit, I won't resist. I only ask that you tell Spock I was here. I was the one who initially warned him about this threat." She paused, well aware that what she was about to say would sound absurd without any context. "Tell Spock that I never did go bowling again after Doctor McCoy healed my injury. He'll know what it means."

With his free hand, Palmer reached for the communicator on his belt, but before he could flip it open the clamor of alarm klaxon tore through the air. Ortega took advantage of the diversion and bolted toward the door, but Palmer was quick with his weapon. He fired his phaser and hit Ortega directly between the shoulderblades. La'an gasped, expecting to see this twisted copy of her old friend be instantly vaporized, but instead Ortega simply collapsed to the ground. Shocked, La'an stared down at her for a moment then looked back to Palmer.

"Yours has a stun setting? The phasers on the Portland could only vaporize."

"One of Spock's reforms, but it's taken longer to implement and is difficult to enforce."

"Wait...Sulu might have genetically enhanced augments with him. They can't be stunned, you have to set your phaser to kill."

"That seems like an extreme measure for a far-fetched claim, Admiral" Palmer answered, impatient.

"I know, but Spock was expecting this, he'll be understanding."

"Got it, Admiral." Palmer stepped to just the edge of the door, his weapon ready just in case he would need it the moment he stepped into the hall. "Wait here, Admiral, I'll be sure you'll be protected."

"Like hell you will!" La'an snapped. "Get me a weapon, I'm not about to sit back and do nothing."

A slight smile curled onto Palmer's face. "It's probably not advisable to put an admiral in danger, but I'll take all the help I can get."

They hadn't gone to the capitol all at once, ten people traveling to the Capitol all together would raise too many questions and would need an airtight explanation. Sulu went first, with two young augments who resembled him closely enough that he could pass them off as his nephews. He gave himself enough of a lead time to get past security and to ensure that the others would not encounter any obstacles. Then, Uhura would join him with two more augments, and M'Benga with the final three a little while later. Regrettably, Awais had been killed as a result of their infighting. One less augment was an unfortunate disadvantage, but a loose cannon like him was a liability. It might be better to have him out of the way early on.

That was how their plan was supposed to go, but by the time Uhura arrived Sulu was still arguing with the security guard. She wore a scowl on her face, but managed to keep her cool. “Hikaru...” She placed a hand gently on Sulu’s shoulder to calm him. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“A grave and inexcusable insult to my character.” Sulu glanced at Uhura as he spoke. “We have an appointment and the appropriate credentials, yet this man is still refused our admission.”

“Is that so?” Uhura teased, placing her hands on her hips. “Do you have any idea who we are?”

“Yes, in fact, your reputation precedes you, and therein lies the problem. Both of you have been implicated in a plot against Spock.”

Sulu stepped closer. “By whom?”

“I can’t say that, but I can say that because this informant had no proof I am willing to simply let you go.”

Nyota stepped closer to the guard and smiled slyly. There was a swagger in her step, and hunger in her eyes. Even well into her fifties, Uhura was still a strikingly beautiful woman and not afraid to use her looks to her advantage. “What a shame,” she cooed. She stood directly in front of him and placed a hand on each of his shoulders. “I bet there have been a lot of such reporting going around lately. It must be hard to tell which ones are true.” Her right hand slid down from his shoulder and in one swift move she took the phaser from his belt and fired it into his abdomen. Much to her surprise he didn’t vaporize but simply collapsed to the ground.

Uhura tossed the weapon to an augment, Saoirse. “They’ve weakened their phasers, that should help us.”

The remaining guards sprang into action, Uhura was ready with her own weapon first. She fired at the nearest guard, and because her phaser was, in accordance with the old Terran traditions, only set to vaporize, he vanished with a burst of light. Meanwhile, Saoirse fumbled with her own weapon, trying to figure out how to get it out of heavy stun, but she did not have enough time to make the adjustment. Another guard’s phaser was pointed directly at her, and so she fired her weapon even though it only stunned the man.

While the flurry of phaser fire was underway, M’Benga and his group of augments beamed in to the capitol grounds. “Dammit.” he muttered as he took the lead and joined the fray.

They had started evenly matched for numbers, but with the ruthless fighting of Sulu, Uhura, and M’Benga combined with the enhanced strength and speed of the augments, they overpowered the guards and soon stood right outside the Capitol doors. The first hurdle was almost cleared, even if the plan had already fallen apart. They were on the steps when the distinctive sounds and twinkling lights caught Sulu’s attention.

“No...no, no, no... Get inside! Now!” Without hesitation, Uhura, M’Benga, and the three remaining augments sprinted inside, and Sulu stayed back to watch helplessly as four of the augments disappeared. To where, he could not guess. Five times as strong as the average Terra, extremely intelligent, resistant to injury...none of that seemed like it would make much difference now that his superhuman army was reduced to three. Worse yet, only one of them had managed to procure a weapon in the prior struggle.

La’an let Palmer take the lead. She had never set foot inside this building before and was totally unaware of the different security measures, and she lacked confidence in her own abilities: holding a phaser in her left hand felt wrong. Palmer did give her a curious look when volunteered to take a supporting, another subtle insight into how the Terran La’an’s personality differed from her own. Before they left the office, Palmer stood at the edge of the door frame and scanned the hall from this protected position. The hall was clear, and so he and La’an set out, pressed against the wall and moving with alert caution.

“The intruders haven’t gotten far past the entrance,” Palmer explained. “If we’re lucky things should be quiet for a bit, but don’t let your guard down.”

Just as predicted, they encountered little activity as they moved through the halls, only the occasional encounter with other security personnel, to whom Palmer passed on the same advice that La’an had given him about setting phasers to kill. When they heard the first shot of nearby phaser fire they froze and held their breath to listen. “Closer than I expected.” Palmer whispered. “Be ready.”

Palmer stayed pressed against the wall and peeked around the corner for just a moment. “They’re around the corner.” He was still whispering. “Sulu, M’Benga, and Ortega and three others.”

“Augments, and far fewer than I expected.” La’an whispered back. “Take them out first.”

Palmer nodded, and with his weapon ready he came around the corner just long enough to fire. He hit one augment who fell lifeless to the floor, but Sulu was just as quick with his phaser. Sulu fired his own weapon, and Palmer was instantly vaporized.

La’an hung back and took a deep, steadying breath. They would be coming this way soon, she was still outnumbered, and if she was killed everything would be lost. She turned the corner to fire, but with her awkward left hand she missed. La’an tried again, aiming at an augment, and while she didn’t stay out from behind cover long enough to see what happened she heard another body fall to the floor. One augment left, and then it was only three regular, aging people against whatever remained of Spock’s security detail/

With renewed confidence, La’an turned the corner one more time, but before she could fire her weapon, the remaining augment—the young woman who had been arguing earlier, Saoirse—fired first. It was a hit to La’an’s shoulder and after a quick burst of pain, everything went black.

Chapter 28

La'an opened her eyes. She was lying face down on the floor, and she knew exactly what had happened. This wasn't her first time being stunned by a phaser, though after years of slowing down to teach at Starfleet Academy, it had been a while. She stayed still, and took a few deep breaths; she knew that the first few minutes after coming to had to be taken slow and easy. Slowly, she tried to sit up and forgot that her right hand was missing, which set off a wave of nausea and panic when she moved to support her weight on an appendage that wasn't there. Still, she made herself sit up upright even though her head was spinning and her body was heavy.

She heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and she closed her eyes. She was in no state to defend herself, but with only three augments accounted for, La'an was well aware of the possibility that the others might be coming. As the footsteps came closer, she forced herself to rise to her feet, even though her knees wobbled, she couldn't straighten her spine, and she had to lean against the wall for support. She breathed a sigh of relief to see that it was only a pair of security guards, but they had their phasers aimed at her. It seemed they were not being picky about who they deemed to be a threat.

As a sigh of surrender, she held up her left hand and the stump where her right hand used to be. "I'm on your side, I'm here to protect Spock." La'an made an effort to speak clearly, but her speech was slurred. "They stunned me. If you don't believe me, you can stun me again. I won't resist."

The guards kept their phasers targeted on her until one spoke. "I believe you. Find somewhere safe to wait."

La'an shook her head and tried to stand upright. "I'd rather see this to completion. I should be back to myself soon. You can leave me behind if I can't keep up."

The two guards looked at one another, then back at La'an. "Very well, but we've got our eyes on you."

"Good." La'an straightened out her spine. She still didn't feel quite herself, but she was close enough to push through and fake it.

All that stood in their way was a locked door. Sulu had tried guessing the code, Uhura had tried bypassing the lock, but neither were met with success. M'Benga stood off to the side and rubbed his temples, but Saoirse carefully watched the other two work.

"I might be able to help." Her voice was bright and eager.

"I appreciate the offer," Uhura answered, her tone nurturing but also patronizing. "But you've never seen anything like this before."

Saoirse pushed her aside. "It's only a four digit code with basic encryption, don't insult my intellect." Her fingers flew and she worked at the keypad, and the doors to Spock's office slid open.

Their phasers were ready, but as the door opened both Spock and McCoy had their own phasers drawn.

"Our weapons are set to kill." Spock spoke in an even tone, but he raised his voice. This was a man who made a logical choice to use the volume of his voice to assert his dominance. "This is your last chance to stand down before your lives are forfeit."

"Is that so?" Sulu taunted. "I thought you were a pacifist."

"Yes, but my death at the hands of assassins would result in even greater death and suffering. I can justify four deaths to prevent that inevitability." He fired his weapon at Sulu, and the man he used to serve with, the man he used to trust collapsed to the ground. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

McCoy acted quickly, firing his weapon on M'Benga. Uhura still had her weapon ready, and as she prepared to fire on Spock he dived behind the desk. McCoy fired his weapon again and hit Uhura, who also collapsed in a sad pile. Only Saoirse remained. She held her phaser in front of her, but her hands shook, and her eyes were wide and wild.

"If you stand down now," Spock began. He still spoke firmly. "You will be shown mercy."

"I might not have much of a claim to the Imperial throne on my own, but I came here to rule this Empire. This is my genetic destiny, and I will fulfill it or die trying."

Before either McCoy or Spock could act, the sound of phaser fire erupted from the other side of the door and Saoirse collapsed. As she fell, La'an and the two security guards could be seen on the other side of the door, La'an had her phaser still aimed. "Regrettably, she died trying. Only the kill setting works on augments."

Spock breathed a sigh of relief and for a moment showed an almost human response until he caught McCoy giving him a sideways look and a smirk.

Spock regained his usual Vulcan composure to address the guards. "Take Sulu, M'Benga, and Uhura into custody. Quickly, the stun should be wearing off soon."

"I'm surprised you lied about the phaser settings." McCoy still had a smirk on his face.

"I exaggerated. It was logical." Spock looked to La'an. "I owe you my deepest gratitude. Without your assistance, it is likely that I would be dead, and the new Terran Republic would have fallen."

La'an looked around her, trying to sort out the thoughts and feelings that swirled around her. She should have felt safe, but she still felt as though a threat lurked just past behind her shoulder. "I wouldn't celebrate just yet. There are still a number of the Portland's crew who want

to kill you, and I can't imagine they're alone."

Spock simply nodded. "Sudden change is understandably met with resistance from those who benefited from the old systems. I will never be without threats to my life, the same may be true for my successor, but perhaps their successor will have a greater sense of security. In the meantime I will have to address each threat as it arises."

La'an forced a smile, more for herself than anyone, she knew a Vulcan would find no comfort in a more pleasant expression. "Cautious and realistic optimism, I can appreciate that, it reminds me of the Spock I knew." La'an paused, not sure how to transition to the pressing topic on her mind until she remembered that a Vulcan would not be offended by an abrupt change of topic, so long as the new topic was a relevant issue. "I was hoping you might have more information about the transporter accident that caused the first crossing between our universes."

"I do," Spock answered as he crossed to his desk and began to work at the computer console. "Forgive me for being reluctant to leave my office. I am sending the files and procedures to a transporter technician who I trust. His name is Sirit, and he works at a transporter station nearby. This is a delicate procedure, but Sirit has the necessary skills."

"Well, be sure to tell Sirit he may need to wait a while. I have no idea where Maya is, or if she's safe..."

"Sirit has responded. Maya is with him."

La'an's forced smile turned real and reached her eyes. "Wonderful!"

"He is ready to beam you to the station at your leave."

"Spock, I mean no offense, but I'm ready to leave this universe forever."

"No offense taken, I understand."

"I'm ready." La'an held up her left hand and gave the traditional Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper."

Spock returned the salute. "Live long and prosper, La'an"

Mere seconds passed before La'an was overtaken by a glimmer of lights and vanished from Spock's office.

Chapter 29

La'an materialized in the transporter station, and the moment she saw Maya she rushed over. At the same time Maya picked herself up off the floor and moved to close the distance between the two of them. La'an embraced the younger woman, a gesture of triumph more than affection, which took Maya by surprise. Her own arms were limp by her sides, and her shoulders stiff. La'an let go and eased back, but she still kept her hands on Maya's shoulders. "I was afraid of what might have happened to you."

Maya looked down. "Well, I've lived through worse."

"No matter. It's over, Maya. It's finally over. Sulu, Ortegas, Uhura, and M'Benga have been arrested, at least three of the augments have been killed, and I saw no sign of the others."

Sirit had been ignoring their overt emotional display as he worked at his console. "That is because I sent them to New Zealand, at Maya's suggestion."

"I finally had a good idea," Maya added with a smug smile. She wiggled away from La'an's grip on her shoulders and stepped back to just beside Sirit so she could peek over and watch him work.

"Spock has sent me the information needed to modify the transporter to allow for inter-universe travel. The modifications should be completed soon." Still, he did not look up as he spoke.

"It's almost over," Maya said with a sigh, mostly to herself.

"For you, perhaps," Sirit continued. "This is unlikely to be last attempt on Spock's life." He fell silent as he finished his work and finally he looked up to speak to La'an. "It is done."

"Sirit, thank you. You played an essential role in all this. I hope you get the recognition and credit you deserve." La'an and Maya stepped in the transporter pads.

"I was acting in accordance with logic. Live long and prosper." Sirit gave them a Vulcan salute before his attention went back to the console. "Energizing."

The interior of the transporter station faded away, but La'an and Maya did not materialize in their own universe. Instead, they once again stood in the empty white room and found themselves face to face with both Qs.

"Well done!" The male Q held his arms open and spoke brightly. "You saved the day, though only time will tell if your actions were really in the Terran's best interests."

"Then send us back home," La'an growled through clenched teeth.

"Soon enough." This time the female Q spoke, "We're having trouble determining who won our little bet. You certainly tried to survive your time in the Terran Empire with as little bloodshed as possible, which is commendable, but..."

"...But it seems they had their influence on you. Both of you played by the rules of their twisted little game: murder, lies, manipulation..."

"And what about rape and mutilation?" Maya snapped. La'an and both Qs paused to stare at her. No one seemed to be expecting such an outburst "Because I gathered such things are a regular part of Terran life, but we never stooped that low." Her eyes opened up as if she had a sudden realization, and she stepped closer to the male Q. "No one wins your games, except for you. You set out to prove that we are just as wicked as the Terrans, but that hardly seems to matter when the Q are far worse!"

"Oh?" Q showed no sign of anger. Instead he chuckled and let a cat-like smile creep onto his face, "A bold accusation! And what is the basis for it, Maya Noonien-Singh, heir to Earth's worst tyrant?"

"To start, the suffering we endured, all for the sake of your bet." La'an answered, crossing her arms.

"I see why you might blame us, but we have only observed, not interfered." The female Q answered. "Any action taken by the Terrans was done by their own volition."

"Bullshit!" Maya shouted. Her breathing was shallow and rapid, and her hands clenched into fists. "You let it happen! You could have stopped it!"

La'an rushed to her side and wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders before she gave both Qs a sharp look. "I doubt this discussion is going to reach a satisfying conclusion. Perhaps we can simply agree that everyone, including life forms such as yourselves, is nothing more than a vessel that can be filled with good or ill."

"A simple understanding from a simple life form, but I tire of this game." Without another word Q snapped his fingers. The white room was gone, and Maya and La'an once again stood in the transporter room. La'an quickly hid her right arm behind her back in the hopes that it would conceal her missing hand.

The technician breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Maya and La'an materialize. "I am so sorry...there was an issue with the signal. Everything is fine, but I'm going to take this system offline for a full diagnostic. You can follow me to another transporter room, I'll get you to the theatre in time."

Maya looked around in wide eyed panic. "No...no I can't...I'm sorry, I'm...unwell." Without looking back, Maya dashed away and ran into

the night.

“Maya!” La’an called as she chased after her. When Maya stopped she doubled over and struggled to catch her breath.

“I’m sorry,” she answered through labored breaths, “I need to go home, I can’t stomach the idea of sitting through Titus Andronicus when we’ve just lived through it,”

“It’s that bad?”

Maya forced a smile. “Fourteen deaths, three amputations, one rape, and one act of cannibalism.” Maya continued with a theatrical affectation. “I have done a thousand dreadful things. As willingly as one would kill a fly; And nothing grieves me heartily indeed but that I cannot do ten thousand more.”

“That does sound very Terran. I want to put all this behind us. Come, let’s go home.”

Six months had passed since their time in the other universe, and with so much anguish that had to be kept secret the journey to healing and moving on was a challenging one. La’an was able to get a prosthetic for the hand she lost and was grateful that the doctor respected her privacy enough to not press the issue of how it happened, aside from relevant information about the mechanism of injury. The replacement was highly realistic in appearance, function, and sensation, but something about it still felt foreign.

Maya’s wounds were invisible, and with no one to share her burden even more difficult to heal. She skipped back to the same state she was in when they first met at the rehabilitation center: withdrawn, quiet, plagued by fatigue and dizzy spells. Initially, La’an had suggested that Maya speak to Doctor McCoy, as he had been to the other universe himself, but Maya couldn’t stand the idea of convincing him to come out of retirement again and move from Atlanta just to listen to her problems. There was only so far that La’an could press the issue.

Even living in the same home, they had few moments where they crossed paths. Early one morning La’an sat at the table reviewing the day’s lesson plans. Even at such an early hour, La’an’s appearance was still neat and tidy.

In sharp contrast was Maya, stumbling out of her room with her hair uncombed (and probably neglected for several days) and her eyelids heavy.

La’an looked up from her work. “I suppose congratulations are in order.”

Maya raised a perplexed eyebrow as she sank into a chair. “What for?”

“You should really keep up with communications from your case worker. You’ve been granted the freedom to go anywhere on Earth. No chaperone, no tracking, no questions asked so long as you stay on the planet.”

Maya tilted her head back to look at the ceiling. “Forgive my lack of enthusiasm, but I find it hard to be excited when I can’t think of where to go or what to do.”

“When I have the time, we can plan something special, but for today...go on a walk, get coffee, go to the waterfront and watch the sea lions. If you’re really at a loss, you have enough time to get ready and go to work with me.”

Maya kept staring at the ceiling. “I’d rather go back to Ceti Alpha V than go to Starfleet Academy.”

“Surely you can’t mean that.”

Maya sat up straight again. “Can you really not imagine why I’m repulsed by the idea of being reminded of everything I can never have?”

La’an bit her lip and began to tidy up her workspace. “Forgot I mentioned it, but I do think if you advocate for yourself you might find more opportunities open to you.” She stood up, pushed in her chairs and began to gather her belongings. “But for now I think you should focus on seeing more of the world. I don’t want to come home and find out that you haven’t gone anywhere.”

Maya forced a smile. “Any recommendations for lunch?”

La’an smirked. “No. I think you’ll learn more from going out and discovering something on your own.”

Maya’s smile reached her eyes. “If I get hopelessly lost I’m blaming you.”

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