

All that glitters is not gold

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by [astronaut86](#)

Summary

After her court martial, Una didn't exactly come back to the Enterprise in one piece. How could she?

(or Pelia nudges La'an to look after Una)

Notes

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

Captain Pike's quarters were livelier than they were even for the dinners he hosted. La'an could hardly believe it was possible to have more *cheerfulness* and *enthusiasm* but here she was, clinging to the wall, observing how effortlessly everyone else seemed to connect.

Gatherings weren't exactly something she enjoyed, but she conceded this one wasn't as unbearable as she expected. Mostly because it was a homecoming party for Una. The long table at the center of the room helped, too. It was a sight to behold, crammed to the brim with the strawberry banquet Captain Pike had meticulously curated. The array of dishes was both impressive and overwhelming – from delectable strawberry tarts and salads with strawberry vinaigrette to strawberry-glazed salmon. The strawberry theme extended even to the beverage bar, where a variety of strawberry-infused concoctions awaited exploration.

It was almost too much.

Almost.

La'an held a plate in front of her, nibbling on a strawberry muffin – vaguely impressed that Captain Pike's culinary prowess extended to this.

Not for the first time that evening, La'an's eyes drifted to Una. Every time they did, a distinct pang of guilt seized her chest, settling there like a weight. The discomfort was sharp and icy; somehow intensifying with every stolen glance; clouding the very air she was breathing, making her feel suffocated.

Una had turned herself in. She knew that now.

And yet ...

"Quite inconsiderate of the Captain to make her come to a party so soon, don't you think?" Pelia's voice drifted across La'an's consciousness, jolting her out of her thoughts.

It was hardly the first time Pelia had offered unsolicited commentary; as usual, the remark worked its way under La'an's skin, prickling like an itch that couldn't be ignored.

"She's handling herself just fine," La'an asserted with a subtle roll of her eyes.

"You think?" Pelia persisted. "Her nails look bad."

La'an's lips twitched into a frown at the unexpected comment. Una was a few feet away, just out of La'an's earshot, chatting with Dr. M'Benga. As she laughed at something he said, a radiant smile turned up the corners of her mouth, lifting her eyes. Her whole face seemed to come alive, as if she were the sun, leaving La'an's insides to slither with an unbearable sense of breathlessness.

Una clearly was fine ... wasn't she? But La'an's gaze drifted down to Una's hands. She was clutching a glass with both of them, her fingers intertwined with each other around the front of it.

It was impossible now not to notice the uneven and worn edges of Una's chipped nail polish. The sight made the hairs on the back of La'an's neck stand up, a reaction she couldn't quite rationalize.

"Well, she just got back," La'an said, her voice carrying a note of uncertainty. She wasn't sure if she was now trying to reassure Pelia or herself, her unease coiling tightly like an unwound spring.

Pelia blinked up at La'an, casting a glance that made it obvious she thought La'an was being daft. "If you say so, dear."

La'an bit her bottom lip. Una's nails were always immaculate, just like the rest of her. She knew they were a point of pride for Una, something that made her feel pretty. More importantly, something that made her feel *normal*. But now that Pelia had pointed it out, La'an couldn't *not* see them. She also could not help but notice just how exhausted Una looked. The wrinkles around her eyes were more pronounced, she decided, and her hair far less shiny.

"I guess she looks tired," La'an conceded while placing her half-eaten muffin down on the nearest side table, finding she was no longer hungry.

Pelia snorted, then said bluntly, "She looks like shit."

La'an scowled. Who did Pelia think she was to comment on Una's appearance anyway? And maybe she wasn't wrong ... but she wasn't really right. La'an cleared her throat and crossed her arms over her chest. "*Well*," she started but the words trailed off.

"Someone should check on her. You know, *really*."

That idea startled La'an in a bad sort of way. As guilty as she felt, as grateful as she was that Una was back ... the notion of talking to Una made her skin crawl. She doubted that Una *wanted* to talk to her. What could she even say?

Despite her discomfort, she couldn't deny the concern she now had for Una's well-being. So, she agreed somewhat vaguely, "Someone should."

Pelia raised her eyebrows. "Well fine, I'll do it."

Before she could stop herself, La'an retorted, "Una doesn't even like you."

Pelia chuckled, her amusement evident in the curve of her lips. "Oh dear. Una doesn't like it when she isn't the smartest one in the room," Pelia said matter-of-factly. "It's my wisdom that she doesn't like."

"And you think she'd like mine?" La'an asked-practically huffed-incredulously.

"Do you have any?" Pelia questioned, sounding genuinely confused.

La'an scowled as a quiet rage rushed through her body. Pelia's casual dismissal stung more than she was willing to admit, even as her gnawing sense of inadequacy intensified. "That's not the point," she protested weakly.

Pelia nodded. "Exactly." La'an sighed with exasperation. "Not everyone is her favorite, you know."

Was she even that? They were friends but La'an wasn't sure she'd go so far as to presume she held such an esteemed place for Una. Una had always felt just out of reach. She now knew why, of course. But even knowing there was a reason didn't keep La'an from feeling like she gave more than she ever got. Like Una was still keeping parts of herself hidden. Like she always would.

La'an had wondered for a while if Una just thought of her as a sad puzzle, one she could never quite put together because pieces were missing; but unable to let go because of her drive for perfection.

"Maybe," La'an said.

Pelia shrugged and said, as if it were the most obvious thing, "You're each other's constellations, aren't you?"

La'an's squinted at the older woman, and her brow furrowed at the nonsensical statement. "What does that even mean?"

Pelia rolled her eyes. "Just that when people look at the stars, some of them just see the light. Few understand the story."

Her annoyance deepened, and her jaw tightened as she tried not to act on the desire to just shake the clarity out of Pelia. "Fine, I'll talk to her," La'an said at last. Just about anything would be better than having to endure anymore of Pelia's nonsense.

It took La'an another day to wrap her head around asking Una how she was doing.

Well.

It wasn't so much that concept was foreign (*it was*) as it was building the courage to do so. If there was anything La'an hated it was talking about feelings – hers or anyone else's. It felt particularly awful when Una was that someone else.

But once she was at the threshold of Una's quarters, quite literally staring up at Una, La'an couldn't ignore the noticeable change in Una's appearance. The impact was far more pronounced than La'an had perceived at the party. She really did look *different* in a way that made La'an

wince and squirm inwardly.

Una's once-lustrous, silky hair hung listlessly, robbed of its former sheen, clinging to her shoulders as though the life had been sucked out of it. This close up, La'an could tell that Una's skin was pale and ashy. Even Una's bright blue eyes, usually so warm, appeared dimmed somehow. Deep lines etched around them, like delicate scars, betraying her weariness.

She wasn't even wearing makeup. That fact hadn't registered immediately, overshadowed by Una's overall exhaustion. But what struck her the most were still Una's hands. Hands made-up of long, slender fingers that were inherently elegant. A feral part of La'an's brain dared to entertain the thought that, with their remarkable length, Una's fingers harbored a certain potential—a potential that, until this moment, La'an had deliberately refused to acknowledge. The realization slithered around in her thoughts, stirring a dimension of herself she absolutely wasn't ready to explore.

Why was she even thinking that?

It was the messy varnish that she was actually supposed to be looking at. The shimmering gold, so inherently Una, being fractured was the most startling thing about her. As if a piece of her essence had been momentarily erased.

She wasn't sure how long they had stood there like that. Una on one side of the doorway; La'an on the other. Finally remembering herself, La'an asked with a slight wince, "Can I come in, chief?"

"I'm not good company," Una said flatly. But even as she said it, she stepped aside, allowing La'an to enter. The air inside was thick with an unspoken sadness that hung between them like a heavy, oppressive cloud.

It was quite strange for La'an to feel as if *she* were walking on fragile glass around *Una*. She was never more aware of the fact that it was usually Una doing that for her than she was right then. She'd meant it earlier, when she'd told Una the ship hadn't been the same without her. But something bothered her about it – that little touch Una had given her. As if *Una* had been comforting La'an ... But that was exactly what had happened, wasn't it? Una *had* comforted her, even though it was Una who had just returned from weeks of imprisonment.

Because Una always did that, didn't she? Somehow, Una always made La'an feel like she had somewhere she belonged. It didn't even matter how Una felt—she consistently put aside her own concerns to ensure La'an's well-being. Every single time.

It was about time that La'an returned the favor. Not that La'an was any good at keeping the score even. When La'an had finally repaid Una by rescuing her from Kiley-279, Una had turned right around and pushed her out of the way of a Gorn attack.

But while La'an had never been locked up, she was intimately familiar with what prolonged solitude did to a person. How aloneless was both a shield to protect against external threads and a relentless blade that cut into your soul forever. How those tendrils of loneliness never truly dissipated, persisting even in a crowd, with one person, and, most painfully, when that person was your someone, the one you cared about more than anything. How that enduring ache was a testament to the fact that one could never, quite get over it.

Without uttering a word, La'an moved to press against the small of Una's back, guiding the taller woman to the chair in front of her vanity. Once Una settled into it, La'an took a deep breath and began to rummage through Una's things. It wasn't hard to immediately find the tray of nail care tools. Una was meticulously organized. It was one of the things she loved about her; why they got along so well. Even though she rarely took care of own hands, La'an knew how to do this because Una had shown her all those years ago.

La'an took one of Una's hands in her own, inspecting it closer. She couldn't help but notice the subtle way Una's fingers trembled ever so slightly. As she worked, a tangible silence enveloped them, punctuated only by the occasional clink of tools against the tray. La'an moved with deliberate precision, her every motion calculated as she cared for Una's nails—filing them into smooth, clean lines, delicately removing the broken varnish, soaking each hand, and gently pushing back her cuticles.

Then came the massage. La'an felt more unsure about this step, but she was determined to give Una all the care she deserved. She started with the stroking movement, applying pressure to Una's wrist and moving up to her elbow and back down again. La'an looked up and noticed Una watching her intently in the mirror.

"Is this okay?" La'an asked, uncertainty lacing her voice.

Una nodded. "More than okay," Una said softly. "It feels nice."

La'an flushed under the praise but diligently moved to the other arm to do the same. When it came time to move on to massaging Una's fingers, La'an hesitated. She locked eyes with Una in the mirror again. "May I?" she asked while gently taking hold of one of her index fingers.

"Please," Una said.

As La'an began the delicate massage of Una's fingers, she noticed the room growing oddly warm. Una's fingertips seemed to respond to La'an's gentle pressure, each stroke sending a wave of relaxation through Una. The mirror captured her reactions, allowing La'an to witness the way her eyes fluttered momentarily, the subtle transformation of her mouth with every soft sight that escaped. It was enough to make La'an's insides twist in ways she tried not to think about and cause her pulse to quicken for reasons she refused to examine.

Yet, as she continued the massage, La'an found herself indulging in her desire to elicit every appreciative hum she could from Una. The notes of contentment reverberated through the room, and each delicious vibration hit La'an right in the chest, sending shivers through her spine she only prayed Una didn't notice. La'an couldn't help but become acutely aware of the sensation of Una's fingers, soft and warm, between her own. How she suddenly was entertaining what they might feel like if they were on her body instead.

But she shouldn't be thinking any of that, not least of all because this moment was supposed to be about offering comfort. Yet, the yearning persisted, no matter how much she chastised herself.

Eventually, Una's voice broke the spell of silence, "You're good at this."

The compliment made her feel caught out, as if Una could read her mind. La'an couldn't look up—didn't trust herself to meet Una's gaze.

"Thanks," La'an mumbled, her voice a touch unsteady even to her own ears. She cleared her throat before continuing, "I mean, I remember you showing me this and ... I guess it stuck."

Una chuckled softly, her laughter dancing in the air for a fleeting moment. Then, she gently withdrew her hands from La'an's grasp, leaving behind a momentary chill that enveloped La'an. She suppressed the urge to reach out and reclaim them.

"Base coat?" Una prodded.

La'an forced herself to focus on the task at hand, rummaging through Una's products until she found it. She applied it carefully, pleased with how steady her hands seemed to be despite the tumult of racing thoughts and the unsteady beating of her heart. Then she used the drying tool to prepare them for the varnish.

"Ever think about other lives?" Una asked.

Caught off guard, La'an hesitated before responding wryly, "Not really. I've got enough on my plate in this one." There was no point in dwelling on how things *might have been* if something else had happened. The past was immutable; she could barely contend with it as it was. Tormenting herself with other possibilities was a door she wasn't about to open. And she didn't want to dwell on it, so she busied herself with selecting one of Una's many bottles of gold paint.

Una nodded thoughtfully. "I've always been good at finding contentment in the present."

La'an dipped the tiny brush into the varnish, careful not to let any excess drip. As she began applying the gold paint to Una's nails, she couldn't help but let Una's words linger in the air. La'an was not good at *contentment*, generally, and didn't know how she could begin to respond to that. She favored being as busy as possible, so it wasn't a worry.

Una sat quietly as La'an continued to paint her nails a shimmering gold. The room filled with the delicate scent of the varnish, and the silence almost felt cozy.

But it only stretched for a time before Una spoke again, her voice that sort of gentle that made La'an want to hide. "I used to think about the 'what ifs,'" Una said wistfully, making La'an wonder if she had spent time thinking about that while she had been in confinement. "But as I've gotten older, I've found solace in the moments where I can appreciate what is right in front of me."

La'an's hand froze mid-stroke, the brush hovering over Una's partially painted nail as the tips of her ears started feeling absurdly hot. What did that even mean? Why was it so ... vague and yet *so* ... pointed, all at once? Why did she feel like a sudden gust of wind could knock her over?

For a moment, she struggled to find a response—any response—and she tried to cover up her lack of one by forcing herself to continue painting Una's nail. After she finished that one, she glanced at Una, uncertainty etched on her face. "What do you mean, Chief?" La'an asked finally, her voice a tad too casual, as if she were desperately trying to hide how affected she was by Una's words.

Una met La'an's gaze, her eyes softening. "Just that you being here really makes a difference. I appreciate it more than you know."

The sincerity in Una's words touched a chord in her. It made her feel pleased and embarrassed and a little awkward, all at once. She could feel a warmth spreading on her face, and her neck was hot. She stared down at Una's nails with intensity as she finished the last stroke.

As she closed up the bottle of gold paint, La'an fidgeted with the cap, her fingers tracing the edge nervously. The desire to reciprocate Una's sentiments hovered in the air around her but the words felt elusive, fluttering just out of reach. It felt so hard to even try reaching for them, and her throat constricted at the thought of uttering them, as if the act itself would expose some part of her that wasn't supposed to be seen.

She took a steadying breath and opened her mouth, forcing herself to say the thing. "It uh ... goes both ways," she said quietly. "I know I'm not good at expressing it but ... having you around makes a difference for me, too."

The admission felt like a fragile bridge in the quiet room. La'an could almost hear the echo of her own words as she waited for Una to respond. When she did, she turned in her chair and reached out to softly grab La'an by the elbow, turning her around to look at her directly. A soft smile on her face. "We make a good team, don't we?"

La'an felt a subtle wave of disappointment sweep through and knock the bridge over as Una's words settled in. Evidently, they weren't having the conversation La'an convinced herself they were—which, *of course not*. La'an's unmet expectations had been ... well. It didn't matter, did it? Whatever it was she had been projecting onto Una was unfair, especially right now.

"Yeah, Chief," La'an replied, her throat feeling tight. "The best team."

By then, Una had set to inspecting her freshly varnished nails. She seemed pleased with La'an's effort, admiring the bold glow of the solid gold paint. Slowly, one of her more radiant smiles broke across her lips.

"Thank you, La'an," Una said quietly, her voice carrying an emotion that La'an couldn't quite place. "I needed this."

There was some emphasis in those words that made La'an almost think Una meant something else. But whatever else she could have meant went right out of La'an's mind when she looked up at Una. The glassy sheen misting her blue eyes startled La'an. The depth of the feelings reflected there made La'an shift on her heels, and she rubbed the back of her neck to keep herself from fidgeting.

"Any—anytime, chief," she stammered.

Una nodded as she rubbed the very corner of one of her eyes. “I’ll let you get back to your duties, La’an.”

But Una probably knew that La’an’s shift was over, so La’an could only presume that was Una’s way of saying she needed time to herself again. As she turned to leave, she felt something strange coil in her chest. It was like a subtle warmth unfurled within the quiet corridors of La’an’s being, leaving behind a soft glow on the edges of her consciousness.

For the first time in a long time, that empty void within her felt slightly less lonely.

End Notes

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