

Unstuck in Time

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Unstuck in Time

by [Planxty](#)

Summary

Those who control the past control the future...

With antagonistic agents trying to influence the outcome of the Eugenics Wars, a reluctant participant must travel back to the 1990s to ensure that Khan and the other Augments escape Earth, lest the future take a bleak turn.

(It's 90s nostalgia against a backdrop of a eugenics dystopia, what more do you want?)

Notes

HOKAY. SO. If you've been following along in this series, you may have noticed that I *did* mention La'an traveling back in time to save Baby Khan as in SNW...I didn't say WHEN that happened though, and I've already unraveled canon like a kitten with a ball of yarn. Repeat to yourself it's just a show, I should really just relax.

For those who are just entering this series, brief summary and other canon divergence notes at the end of chapter one.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

*December 2304
Bellingham, WA*

“Your nephew’s case is a complicated one.”

Words Maya had heard before, directed at herself instead of her ward. Fourteen years ago she was half-Augment for a wild world trying to learn how to live in modern society, and she had a case worker who didn’t know what to do with her. For the past four years, it was her nephew’s turn to face the same challenges. Enzo carried in his DNA the infamous legacy of genetic engineering. He was wildly intelligent and did most of his academic work as advanced independent study, but in spite of spending his years on earth playing catch up he still lagged in social skills and had a defiant personality. She had been naive to hope that he could at least make it through his first semester of high school without incident.

“I really shouldn’t be saying this.” The principal leaned forward and gave Maya a pointed look. “But I have wondered if maybe Enzo would be better off being homeschooled.”

Maya had been too full of anxious, frenetic energy to focus during this meeting, but those words came like a slap in the face. She gripped the arms of her chair tightly and clenched her jaw but tried to remain calm.

“I know he has trouble behaving appropriately, but hiding him away isn’t going to help him.”

“That’s not what I was suggesting..”

“Isn’t it, though?” Maya raised her voice. She found it harder to remain calm. “Because I know what it’s like to have people try to sweep you under the rug like a dirty little secret, and I’ve lived through the hostility this planet feels toward us.”

“Miss Noonien-Singh....” The principal spoke with firm authority, like she was addressing a student.

“My name is Maya.” Maya spoke just as firmly. This was not an invitation to be on a familiar first-name basis. This was a demonstration of her distaste for her father’s legacy.

“Maya. The purpose of this meeting is not to discuss your own difficulties.”

“Why not when they’re perfectly relevant?” She paused to take a deep breath. Her blood ran hot and she had to fight the urge to shout. “He had a hard start to life and is trying to find his place on a planet that constantly reminds him of how different he is. I don’t think it’s unreasonable for him to not be perfectly well-adjusted.”

“At the same time, I think it would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that his challenges may not be the result of his environment.”

“No...” This was more than a slap in the face. This was an outright attack that gripped something primal deep inside her and twisted this small middle-aged woman into a menacing threat. Maya stood up and held her hands in front of her. “I can’t have this conversation alone. I’m sorry. We’ll reschedule when I can have Saavik accompany me.” Her partner’s grounded Vulcan logic was exactly what she needed.

“Maya...”

“I’m sorry. I need space...goodbye.”

The principal called her name two more times, but Maya ignored her as she walked at a clipped pace down the hall and out into the crisp, cold air.

In the late afternoon, the sun hung low in the horizon, hazy behind a veil of low, misty clouds that made it feel as though night was creeping on sooner than it had any right to. Maya closed her eyes and tried to forget about how poorly the meeting had gone and instead tried to focus on her surroundings: the cold, damp air, the first few drops of rain falling on her head. It would probably be raining in full force on the bicycle ride home, and while she could have managed a transport home instead, Maya still preferred people-powered modes of transit: a holdover from spending most her life on a primitive planet, and it would help clear her head. Even in bad weather.

She heard the swirling sound of a person materializing from transport and opened her eyes. A tall man in a gray uniform now stood in front of her.

“Maya Noonien-Singh,” He began: stern, all business. Maya stepped back. She had never seen this man before. He had no reason to know her name. “I’m Agent Carmack from the Department of Temporal Investigations.. We need to talk.”

Maya inched back further. “What does the DTI want with me?” She wasn’t Starfleet, she had never traveled through time, and the fact that she couldn’t guess why this man was here made her feel all the more panicked.

“We’re in need of assistance. Something no one else can provide. If you can come with me to a more secure location...”

“Forget it.” Maya pushed past him and rushed toward her bike, and while she tried to make her escape, the man flipped open his communicator.

“Two to beam up.”

The next thing Maya knew she materialized on a transporter pad in an unknown location. She studied her surroundings in shock before she lunged at Carmack. It took all her self-control not to lay her hands on him.

“You tricked me!” She shouted.

Carmack remained calm. “Technically I abducted you. Now that you’re here, will you listen to my offer?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“I already know what your answer will be, so not exactly. All I ask is that you listen, and I’ll have you sent straight back.”

“Fine.”

Carmack led Maya down the hall and into an office. The architectural style reminded her of Starfleet Headquarters, which led her to believe she was in San Francisco, but with the windowless interior she had little confidence to back that hypothesis. Carmack sat down at the desk and gestured to the chair across from him, and Maya perched on her seat with her spine rigid and her eyes wide and alert.

“I’d rather not waste time on small talk and pleasantries…”

“Didn’t think wasting time made much difference to you.”

“It makes a difference,” Carmack explained, “In that it wears on my patiences. As do little quips about time, I’ve heard them all before.” He took a little breath and leaned back in his seat. “We have reason to suspect that antagonistic temporal agents will attempt to interfere with the launch of the Botany Bay.”

“And the fact that I exist proves that they didn’t succeed.” Maya moved to get out of her seat, but Carmack’s stern look made her freeze.

“They didn’t succeed because you were there to stop them.”

Maya looked away and blinked. Carmack’s statement—conveniently—could neither be confirmed nor denied. “Why me?”

“At the height of the Eugenics Wars in the 1990s, much of Earth began to implement a caste system based on genetics. You would be part of a privileged class and have access and rights our own agents would not.”

Maya still wasn’t convinced, but she wasn’t ready to bolt out the door and find her own way home just yet. She looked away and scratched the back of her neck. “And I suppose there’s a reason it has to be me and not La’an or one of her other ancestors?”

“Too much genetic drift. We’re talking about a time where a person’s genome was their entire reputation and checked at every turn.”

Maya leaned back and took a deep breath, trying to process everything she had been told. “While I have an obvious interest in seeing my father survive long enough to meet my mother, I’m not sure how this would be important enough to impact the future.”

Carmack sighed and shook his head. “To be honest, neither do we. What we can be sure about is if this event is attracting so much attention, if it doesn’t go forward as planned it’s bound to result in a weakened Earth, and possibly a weakened federation. My own hypothesis is that if the Augment world leaders meet a brutal, violent end rather than quietly disappear they could be made into martyrs and the resulting fighting and power void might lead to extended world wars.” He paused to reach under his desk and produced a small black device which he set on the desk in front of Maya. “I’d prefer not to have that hypothesis tested.”

Maya stared at the device and tried to get a sense of grounding as her thoughts raced. Her father against all odds had survived for centuries lost in space. She had gone from subsistence living on a primitive planet to living in a world with technology that seemed magical. She had been sent by a god-like being into an evil parallel universe. This, however, was a step too far. She shook her head and looked back up at Carmack. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can do this.”

“Take this anyway.” He slid the device closer to her. “For when you make up your mind. It will take you where you need to be and shield you from temporal disturbances.”

When. Not if.

Maya paused, still staring at the device, before she took it and slipped it into the pocket of her leather jacket.

“We can send you straight home,” Carmack continued. “It looked like the weather was about to turn back there.”

“Actually, I’d rather go back to the school and bike home.” Maya’s hand was still in her pocket, curled around the device. “I need the time to sort through my thoughts, even in the rain.”

Carmack nodded. “Whatever you need.”

Maya materialized outside the school, and just as Carmack had predicted, the rain had begun in full force and the clouds darkened the sky against the setting sun. After taking a deep breath to brace herself, Maya got on her bike and began the long journey home through the dark and the rain. She was soaked by the time she arrived at home and stepped through the door, but at least her leather jacket helped to keep her upper body dry.

Inside the air was warm and hot; Maya conceded to let Saavik set the environmental controls to her preferences while she visited, and coming

in from the elements she welcomed the change. Enzo was still out at a friend's home practicing with his band (talented as they were, Maya was grateful to not have a group of young musicians practicing in her home) and so she didn't hesitate to start stripping out of her wet clothes. Saavik sat on the couch reaching from a PADD and lifted an eyebrow as she watched her partner enter. Her belly swelled, a visual reminder that soon Saavik would soon be returning to Vulcan to have her child.

"Did your meeting have a satisfactory outcome?" she asked

"Absolutely not." Maya began to let down her soaking hair. Dark waves streaked with gray fell to her shoulders. Only a year ago her first gray strands began to grow in, something else she could thank her father for. When she was young his hair turned from black to silver in a space of a year. "I had to end it early before I lost my temper. I rescheduled it, though, and I need you there. I could use a logical perspective." She sat beside Saavik and held her hand to let Saavik's calming presence soothe her mind.

With her mind so troubled, Maya was ready for the day to be over. She retired for the night early, before Enzo returned home. As usual, Saavik laid beside her to enjoy physical closeness with her human partner until she fell asleep. Feeling Saavik's pregnant belly only gave her one more thing to worry about. Maya would not be going to Vulcan with her. Tural, Saavik's bondmate insisted on raising his child on Vulcan, and with his well-known distaste for Saavik's human partner, Maya doubted if she would ever meet her lover's child.

She couldn't calm her mind, and after a few minutes of shifting around and trying to drift off, she had to accept that sleep wasn't going to happen now. "This isn't going to happen." she said as she sat up. "I need some air."

Maya got dressed quickly, grabbed her jacket on the way out, and slipped out into the night air. The rain had stopped, but the air was still damp and heavy. As she began to make her way around the block, she shoved her hands into her pockets. The device Carmack gave her was still inside.

Chapter End Notes

This is an AU where the destruction of Ceti Alpha V was delayed by 30 years, and Khan and his followers thrived there for a good while. Maya is Khan and Marla's daughter and had a hard life as the only half-augment. She defected to the Federation, had an adventure with La'an in the mirror universe, went back to Ceti Alpha V to rescue her nephew, and ended up in a relationship with Saavik (who also has a Vulcan partner, who's her child's father).

feel free to ask questions, I feel like the conspiracy board meme

Chapter 2

Maya didn't mind the cold, wet air. One advantage of growing up without modern technologies and comfort was that she was well accustomed to feeling the changes in the weather and the seasons. She had no destination in mind but itched for some sort of goal or direction, something to keep her mind from getting stuck in a spiral with all her new worries: Saavik's baby, Enzo's situation at school, and (most pressing of all) this looming decision to work with the DTI... Which somehow wasn't an actual decision to make. Or was something she had already made up her mind about. Or would make up her mind about. None of it made sense.

As she made her way around the block, Maya kept her hands buried in her pockets, her fingers still curved around Carmack's device. It was still early, so if she wanted to go somewhere or do something she would have no shortage of options. The thought did cross her mind that if she took a longer walk she could go to her favorite bar, calm herself with a beer or two, and maybe enjoy some pleasant company (even if her troubles weren't ones she was in any position to share), but Maya dismissed the idea. She needed to sort herself out without the help of hops and barley.

Instead she settled for exploring the neighborhood and taking the time to puzzle out her situation. Out of everything on her mind, the only one that needed attention now was her business with the DTI. It haunted her, the way Carmack had told her she had already been there, in the past. Maya slumped down on a bench and closed her eyes as she tried to make sense of it, how she had already done something and not done it yet at the same time, or how the past could be tampered with yet people could still have a conversation about it in the future, or even if any of this mattered at all. She slipped her hands out of her pockets to fiddle with her ring as she thought, but instead of soothing her mind it instead drew her focus to Saavik and her child. The ring had been a gift from Saavik, a small gesture Saavik had meant to honor an Earth tradition, even though Maya had grown up far from earth.

Maya opened her eyes, slid her hand back into her pocket, and gripped the device in her pocket tighter and took a deep breath before she stood up. This wasn't a choice she was prepared to make tonight, so she began to walk home.

While she was no closer to her decision, the short walk calmed her mind, at least enough to where she felt like she could sleep on it and approach the issue with a clear head in the morning. Drowsiness began to settle in, and she felt a cozy sense of relief when she stood just outside the door to her building. However, her access code did not open the door, and she was greeted with a flash of light and an angry buzz. Maya furrowed her brows in frustration and tried the code again with the same outcome, and again (entering the code slower and with added attention). She closed her eyes tight and clenched her jaw to hold back a scream of frustration. That was the right code, but now she was trapped outside with no way of getting in. She leaned against the wall and ran her fingers through her hair. Someone was bound to come by eventually.

"Human!" a gruff male voice shouted behind her. Maya nearly jumped as she turned to face the stranger, and when she saw the two men behind her she felt another surge of shocking surprise. Romulans. In military uniforms. Panic crept in as Maya tried to recall if she had ever seen or heard of a Romulan living on Earth (with the exception of Saavik, who was only half and acted more like a full Vulcan). Something was not right, but Maya tried to remain calm. The Romulans had phasers and an intimidating, authoritative air.

"I'm not interested in your excuses. If you have a work permit, we will leave you be," the Romulan continued.

"Dare I ask what happens if I have no idea what you're talking about?" Maya studied the pair of Romulans as she spoke. They hadn't made any move to suggest they were prepared to draw their weapons. She was fast, but not fast enough to outrun phaser fire if they were ready to shoot. "I'm just trying to get home."

One Romulan placed a hand on his phaser. "So you live in a sector that's restricted to humans?"

Shit.

A wave of nausea swirled in Maya's belly. This is what Carmack warned her about, the world changed as if everything had been put out of place while her back was turned. Her eyes darted from one Romulan to the other. There was no escape. "Bold of you to assume that I'm a human." Maya kept her eyes on the Romulans as she slid her hand back into her pocket. She could get out of here if she didn't give these men a reason to use their weapons.

"Keep your hands where I can see them!" One shouted as he drew his phaser. Maya complied without hesitation, removing her hand from her pockets and holding them open in front of herself. "Out after curfew, in a restricted sector with no credentials, and behaving threateningly. More than enough reason to kill you on the spot, but luckily for you I'm in no mood to spend the rest of the night filling out forms."

The other Romulan pulled his communicator from the clip on his belt. "Headquarters. Indeed to beam back with a prisoner. Be prepared to process her.

Moments later her surroundings dissolved away to be replaced with the interior of a building unlike any place Maya had seen on earth. The walls were dark and gray with green accents on the door frames and windows, and painted on the wall across from the transporter pads was a green bird of prey with its wings outstretched. This may have been Earth, but the Romulans controlled it now.

The Romulan woman who handled Maya's intake was more polite than the men who arrested her, or perhaps she was too preoccupied to take the effort to flaunt her authority. Maya sat across the desk from her and tried to plan out her escape as the Romulan woman stared at her computer console with her brow furrowed. There were guards with phasers, so the device in her pocket would only help if she could activate it discreetly enough to not attract attention.

"Again, your name?" the Romulan woman asked, beleaguered.

"Maya Noonien-Singh." She didn't see the need to give a false name, there would be nothing about her in those databases either way.

“And you have lost your identification?” She did not look up as she worked.

“I never had any.”

The Romulan looked up. “That isn’t possible. Our record keeping practices are too precise to make such a mistake.” She pressed a button on the console. “Commander. I need your assistance.”

“On my way,” a female voice answered. There was something eerily familiar about it.

The Romulan went back to work as if staring down the screen would somehow yield the information she wanted. Maya took a deep breath and began to slowly slide her hand back into her pocket.

“Hands where I can see them!” a guard shouted.

Damn.

The door on the far side of the room chimed and slid open, and when the commander stepped inside, Maya was hit with the jarring realization as to why the voice sounded so familiar.

“Saavik?!” she blurted out.

The commander turned her head and raised a curious eyebrow. Just like the Saavike Maya knew, this woman was pregnant. The only obvious difference was that this Saavik wore a Romulan uniform and had a look of displeasure on her face instead of one of cool, calm logic.

“I don’t understand how or why a human criminal would know my name, but I suggest you show more respect by not speaking out of turn.”

“Commander,” the Romulan woman began. “I cannot confirm this human’s identity. She has no identification credentials and her name isn’t in any of the databases.”

“This is what you disturbed me for?” Saavik leaned over the other woman’s shoulder to see the screen. “She has clearly given a false name. Run a biometric scan to find out who she is, and in the future, if there is a brain in your head, it would behoove you to use it.” Saavik straightened up and stepped away, but paused when Maya dared to call to her.

“”You know, I know a little about you. You deserve better than this.”

Saavik narrowed her eyes. “Did I or did I not just tell you to stop talking out of turn?”

“Oh, you did, but I still thought you might like to know that I think you should be commanding a starship and conquering planets instead of punishing human petty criminals. Shame you’ve been held back so much by being half-Vulcan.”

Saavik moved around the desk to stand beside Maya and leaned over her. “You’re a bold one to make up such slander to simply insult me.” Though she denied these allegations, the way she clenched her jaw suggested that Maya had hit a nerve.

Maya slipped a hand back into her pocket, but no one shouted at her to stop. With Saavik so close to her, would they decide it was worth the risk of friendly fire to use their phasers? “Is it also slander, or is it true that your baby’s father is a Vulcan named Tural?”

Saavik said nothing but simply seethed and stared down Maya. Maya did not break her steady eye contact as she felt around to activate the device in her pocket. As the room dissolved away, she could hear the fading sounds of shouting and phaser fire.

Chapter 3

The interior of the Romulan building faded away to be replaced by a city exterior. Carmack never told her where or when exactly she'd be sent, but it had to be in the 1990s. The cool, wet weather reminded her of her hometown, but after beaming through time, space, and alternate timelines it seemed like a futile effort to try to guess.

"Holy fucking shit dude!"

Maya turned to see a pair of teenage boys in tattered clothes standing down the alley from her and staring at her.

"That acid you gave me just made some chick that looks like your mom appear."

"No way, man! I see her too!"

Maya raised an eyebrow and glanced from one young man to the other. "Stay off the drugs, son. You've too few brain cells to afford to lose any more."

Without another word Maya turned to go and began to weave around the city's blocks to put some distance between herself and the boys who had seen her materialize. She hadn't been in the altered future long enough to find out where the timeline diverged, and she didn't know enough about the era to guess what even that might have been. This was when her father hit his peak, but the history lessons he gave were less about objective facts and more about reminiscing about his glory days.

So, once again, Maya wandered the city streets without a purpose or direction until she stood in front of a bar with a sign that read "Bellingham Social House: Open Mic Tonight." Well, at least she knew where she was. As she opened the door and stepped inside, Maya's first impression was that Bellingham of the 1990s was what Bellingham of 2304 was trying to be. The room was dimly lit and smoky, with beer signs and band posters with frayed edges covering the walls. In the corner a woman with a round face and curly red hair played an acoustic guitar and sang:

"...I wish I was like you. Easily amused..."

Maya went to the bar and waved to the bartender: a lanky man with long stringy hair.

"What IPAs do you have?" she asked, raising her voice to be heard over the music.

"What?"

"An IPA...it's a beer."

"All we got is Ranier."

"That's fine."

"Are you gonna close out or keep it open?"

"Am I going to what?"

"How are you paying?"

Well. That complicated things. Maya shrank back and darted her eyes from left to right to check and see if anyone else had witnessed this embarrassing moment. The bartender's unblinking gaze was more than enough of an audience. "Never mind."

Maya turned her back on the bartender and sighed as she listened to the music and tried to regroup. The singer's voice cracked, and she played the wrong chord. While she was able to recover, her rhythm was off and her voice shook. Well, there was no need for Maya to stay here to take up space and listen to bad music, so she made her way to the door.

"You suck!" A man shouted from the audience as he threw an empty beer can at the stage. "Cobain is dead and rolling in his grave!"

Maya tried to avoid him, but the man was unsteady on his feet. He stumbled wildly backwards and grabbed Maya by the upper left arm. Something uncontrollable snapped within her and brought her instincts back to a time where her life had been in danger. She pushed the drunk man away and knocked him to the ground. He was only down for a moment before he sprang back on his feet and swung a fist at Maya's face. Maya was faster, though, and stopped him by grabbing his wrist and yanking his arm behind his back.

"What the fuck are you?" he slurred as he struggled to break free. "Some kind of Aug?"

"Can't accept that a woman kicked your ass, can you?" Maya taunted.

As they fought, the bartender rushed over to them and tried to pull Maya off of the drunk man. Only then did Maya let him go. There was no need for further violence.

"Get out." The bartender ordered. "Both of you. Now. I'm not calling the cops."

The drunk man scrambled to his feet and ran out. Maya moved slowly, feeling every eye in the now silent bar staring at her. It was raining when she stepped outside and walked just to the end of the block, hoping that this altercation wouldn't have some unintended effect on the future.

“Hey...” A gentle voice called from behind her. Maya turned to see the singer from earlier, guitar case on her back. She wore a bright red raincoat that clashed with her red hair and pink face. “I’m glad you beat that guy up, but I also understand why you both had to be kicked out.”

“No hard feelings.” Maya shrugged. “Violence is bad for business.”

“It’s more than that. There aren’t many places left where Augs haven’t tried to take over, but at the same time they’d shut down the place if an Aug was made to feel unsafe. Better to cut it off quickly.”

So this was the world her father left behind. “Do you think I’m an...Aug?”

The singer shrugged. “I don’t know. You don’t seem like it, but you do seem like the sort of person who tries to get closer to them for your own benefit. Like, the kind of person who would marry one or have their kids enhanced.” She looked down and shook her head. “Sorry. But I do appreciate what you did, no matter what kind of person you are. My name’s Iris. I can give you a ride home if you need it.”

Maya shook her head. “Thanks, but I don’t exactly have a home to return to. I’m Maya.”

Iris let out a little laugh and smirked. “Then there’s no way you’re an Aug. If you were, you wouldn’t be homeless in Bellingham, you’d be a rocket scientist in Seattle making nukes and space ships for Boeing and bringing home the big bucks. Come on, I’m parked around the block. You can crash at my place tonight.”

While they walked Iris reached into her coat pocket to take out a small white and red carton. “Cigarette?” She opened the top of the box and extended it toward Maya.

Maya froze. Was there some unwritten etiquette rule from this era that forbid turning down tobacco when offered? Better not risk it. “Yes, please.” She pulled a cigarette from the pack and held it awkwardly between her thumb and forefinger. Iris took a cigarette for herself and held it between her lips as she returned the pack to her pocket and took out a plastic lighter. She ignited the lighter and held it toward Maya, shielding the flame with her other hand. Maya leaned forward toward the flame, holding the cigarette in her mouth (still with her thumb and forefinger) and she inhaled deeply to light the tip. The moment the smoke hit her body, her lungs seized up and she began to cough and choke.

Iris lit her own cigarette. It seemed so easy and natural the way she did it. “You always smoke like you’re trying to light up a joint?” she teased,

Maya cleared her throat. “To be honest, I’m not much of a smoker.”

“Clearly. I’m in the burgundy Cutlass.”

There was only one burgundy car parked on the street, otherwise Maya would have been clueless as to which vehicle was a Cutlass. The paint job was scratched and faded, and the back of the car was covered in stickers with witty phrases. “Drop acid, not bombs!” “Legalize!” (Legalize...what?) “Indecision 96: Not picking the lesser evil.” “Jesus loves you, but everyone else thinks you’re an asshole.”

She waited by the passenger door as Iris unlocked the door and put her guitar in the back seat, and she tried to take another drag of her cigarette, imitating the way Iris did it: holding the cigarette between her index and middle finger and not breathing in quite so deep. It was a bit more tolerable this way.

The inside of Iris’s car had a burnt, ashy smell, the tray in the center console was filled with ash and cigarette butts, and the floor was littered with crushed beer cans and food wrappers. “Sorry for the mess,” Iris said as she put the key in the ignition and started the car. Maya studied her closely as she operated controls that seemed needlessly complicated. Nothing about this century was the least bit intuitive. When the car started, a booming male voice with an ominous tone came in over the radio.

“In 1993 Timothy Cutberth wrongly sentenced a seventeen year old Augment to death and called it a ‘sloppy mistake.’” Do we really want to know what sloppy mistakes he might make in the White House?” A heavy pause. “Timothy Cutberth would kill a child.” After an ominous few chords of music, the voice switched to a professional sounding female voice Maya knew she had heard before. “I’m Runa Hassing, and I approve this message.”

Iris pulled out of the parking spot and began down the road. “Can’t wait for this election to be over. We’ve got to choose between a fascist Aug and an idiot jackass.”

Maya wasn’t listening. Not to Iris and not to the other advertisements that played to the radio, though she did catch snippets about tire sales and appliance repairs. She knew Runa Hassing, one of the Augments who escaped earth and survived for centuries in suspended animation aboard the Botany Bay.

“Got quiet over there. You weren’t planning on voting for Hassing, were you?”

“Definitely not.”

The pair fell quiet as a guitar riff and a voiceover with an echo effect signaled the end of the ad break.

“You’re listening to 92.9 KISM rock block.”

A new song began.

“I don’t practice Santeria. I ain’t got no crystal ball. Well I had a million dollars, but I...I spent it all...”

“Damn.” Iris drummed on the steering wheel with his fingertips. “And here I was about to believe that conspiracy theory that they don’t play

good music anymore because the government thinks it's too dangerous."

"This sounds like what my nephew listens to." Maya took a drag on her cigarette. She wanted to let it burn out and be done with it, but once she learned to take in the smoke without feeling like she was burning from the inside she felt a compulsion to keep bringing the cigarette to her lips.

"And what about you, Maya, what do you listen to?"

Enzo was fond of twentieth century music, but Maya couldn't keep track of it. Older music, though, that she knew well. "Tchaikovsky."

"What, like the dude with the cannons?"

"Among other things, but yes. You're not wrong."

They spent the rest of their ride enjoying the music that played. Maya wanted to remember recommendations to give to Enzo when this whole thing was over and she was back where she belonged, but one song played right after another with no announcement as to the name of the artist or the title of the song. After a short drive, Iris parked the car on the street in front of a dilapidated apartment building.

"Don't worry," Iris said as she opened the door and stepped out of the car. "The inside isn't so bad."

Iris let Maya inside, and Maya wondered what had been meant by "not so bad." The lights in the narrow hallway flickered, and even in the dim, uneven light the carpet on the floor was discolored. Iris opened the door to apartment 117, and Maya was hit with a cloud of smoke. This smelled different than the tobacco smoke: dense and green and sappy. In the living room a large bearded man sat in a threadbare recliner. In front of him was a primitive monitor, with a glassy curved screen built into thick, black housing. His eyes were fixed, unblinking on the screen where two pixelated characters fought each other, and Maya noticed that the controller in his hands controlled one of the characters.

"FINISH HIM!" a voice from the screen announced. The man leaned forward and furiously punched buttons on his controller. His character pulled the skull and spinal column from his opponent's body, and the bearded man held up his arms in triumph.

"Seth. This is Maya, she's crashing here tonight."

Seth turned his head. "Does she smoke weed?"

Not this again. "Weed?"

"Weed. Pot. Marijuana. Do you smoke it?"

"Only a little."

"Cool, I'll roll another joint."

Maya looked to Iris, "While he's taking care of that, do you have a computer I can use?"

"I mean, yeah, but it's been acting up." Iris shrugged.

"Let me see what I can do, as payment for letting me stay the night."

"Sure. It's in my room on the left."

Maya went through the door on the left, into a tiny bedroom that was so cluttered with piles of dirty laundry that the floor was barely visible. She sat in front of the computer at the desk and began to feel around on each button until a static buzz indicated some sign of life. The screen illuminated bright blue with white text that read:

Windows

A fatal encryption OE has occurred at 0028 : C0034B23. The current application will be terminated.

- *Press any key to terminate the current application.*
- *Press CTRL+ALT+DEL again to restart your computer. You will lose any unsaved information in all applications*

Press any key to continue_

That sounded serious. Maya looked down at the keyboard and hit a random key. The screen went dark, a chime sounded, and an image of a clouded sky with the words "Windows 95" appeared. The sky image was replaced by a patterned background with various icons. Maya touched a fingertip to an icon. She felt static electricity through the screen, but nothing happened. Back to the keyboard. She punched a few keys, but still nothing. It was then that she noticed a controller connected to the keyboard with a cord. She placed her hand on it and saw an arrow on the screen move. Perfect.

She moved the arrow to an icon and pressed the button. A new screen opened that read “America Online.” After Maya began to run the program the computer emitted jarring, blaring sounds and beeps. Well, if the computer wasn’t broken before, it was now.

But then the sounds stopped, a page with icons for news, weather, sport, entertainment, and mail open.

“Welcome!” A friendly voice called. “You’ve got mail!”

Maya clicked on “News.” October 29, 1996. Now she at least had a date. She scanned the headlines.

“Runa Hassing leads in the polls.”

“Gas shortage continues.”

“Mysterious activity at Boeing launch site.” Perfect. Maya clicked on the article and skimmed the text.

Photographers recently captured images of what appears to be a new DY-100 class spacecraft staged at the Boeing launch site in Seattle. There have been no recent records of new construction or projected flight plans. Boeing representative and presidential candidate Runa Hassing declined to comment.

Simple. Sorting this out would just be a matter of getting to Seattle and making sure that launch went according to plan. “Computer,” she began. “Show me the location of the Boeing launch site in Seattle.” Nothing, but after some clicking and experimenting Maya managed to find a map, which she studied to commit to memory.

She got up and went back to the living room. Seth had his game paused, and Iris sat on the couch. Maya took a seat beside her, and Seth lit a hand-rolled cigarette. He took two long drags before passing it to Maya. She took one hit and immediately doubled over coughing before passing it to Iris.

“I think that’s enough,” she said as she gasped for air.

Iris and Seth made quick work of the joint, even as they skipped over Maya in the rotation. She turned her attention to the books on the table in front of her: magazines with photos of guitars on the cover, a notebook, a newspaper with a photo of an exploding building on the front and headline that read “Death Toll Rising in Attack on Las Vegas,” and *The Path to Perfection* by Runa Hassing.

Maya picked up the book by Hassing and studied the cover. “Didn’t think you would have one of her books.”

“Ugh.” Iris finished the joint with a long draw and put it out in the ash tray on the table. “My mom sent me that. She eats that shit up. I’ve only been hanging on to that because I’m waiting for a chance to burn it.”

Maya opened to a random page and, out of curiosity, began to read.

...Those who do not share our genes will only hold back the progress of humanity and must be eliminated over the course of no fewer than three generations...

Runa’s words if ever she read them. Maya set the book down on the table and shook her head. “About what I was expecting.”

“Well...” Iris stood up and stretched. “I have work in the morning, so I’m going to bed. Good night. By the way, the sofa pulls out if you wanna get more comfortable.”

“Heh,” Seth chuckled. “Pulls out.”

Iris rolled her eyes. “Goodnight Seth. Hopefully overnight you will mature past the age of twelve.”

“Not likely.” When Iris turned to go, Seth looked over to Maya. “Are you looking to get up early too, or are you up for a few rounds of Mortal Kombat?”

Maya shrugged. “Well, I’ve never played before, I’m probably terrible.”

“Can’t be any worse than Iris.” Seth smirk

There was no harm in enjoying herself until she could form a plan to get to Seattle, but she only played three rounds where she was quickly defeated before Seth grew bored, declared that Maya still wasn’t as weak a player as Iris, and dozed off in his chair. Maya was still full of energy, so instead of setting up the mattress and trying to sleep she reached for Hassing’s book again and flipped through the pages as if some clue would reveal itself, some hint at what was going on in Seattle. All she found was more unhinged ramblings of Hassing’s eugenics manifesto, and she regretted every word she read. She thumbed through the magazines but had little interest in them (though she couldn’t help but wonder what Enzo would think to see antique music magazines for himself), but she gave the most attention to the newspaper. This time was when her father’s empire was at its peak, but the picture he painted of Earth in this century was very different from reality. Every article was about war, violence, and economic devastation. Her father’s gilded empire of order and luxury, it would seem, was restricted to only a small caste of elites.

She stood up, stretched, and walked around the apartment. Seth snored loudly, and Maya was confident that even if she turned the game back on with full volume he would not be disturbed. On the kitchen counter she noticed Iris had left the keys to her Cutlass. That was her ticket to Seattle.

Chapter 4

She should have paid more attention to Iris's driving. Nothing made any sense.

Maya sat in the driver's seat of the burgundy Cutlass with the key in her hand and no clue how to get the thing to move. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and tried to remember every step that Iris had taken when trying to get the vehicle to obey her command. First she put the key in the ignition and turned it...With a low rumble, the Cutlass came to life, the lights on the dashboard illuminated, and the radio began to play more advertisements.

"Runa Hassing prides herself on her carefully crafted genetic makeup, but has steadfastly refused to disclose a full genetic report. What could she be hiding in her DNA? What else could she be hiding? ...This message is paid for by the Council on Biological Advancement."

After a few minutes of fumbling around with every lever and button, Maya figured out how to make the car lurch forward. She dared to press down the accelerator with a bit more confidence but crashed into the car parked in front of her, which set off the ear-splitting beeps and blares of the car's alarm. She put the Cutlass in reverse only to have the same thing happen to the car behind her. At this point, there was no use worrying over any further damage she might cause, so she inched back and forth out of her parking spot, bumping into both other cars a few more times before she was free and clear on the open road.

Maya moved slowly down the road, gripping the steering wheel tightly and terrified of being too enthusiastic with her speed again. While she had the maps she studied committed to memory, relating them to real space proved to be a challenge. She meandered the streets of Bellingham to get her bearings and found more and more evidence that the glorious age of the Augments...wasn't: buildings with boarded up windows, families living on the street, people drinking out of liquor bottles concealed in brown paper bags... She passed a building with an illuminated yellow sign with black letters that read "Pawn Shop: We Buy Gold!" Despite the late hour, the lights were still on inside. Well, she wouldn't get much further in 1996 without any currency.

She pulled into the parking lot and didn't bother taking the time to correct that she parked the car so that it straddled the white line between two spaces. The parking lot was empty aside from one man sitting on the hood of his car and smoking a cigarette. His eyes were fixed on the dented Cutlass as Maya opened the door and stepped outside.

"Hey, dumbass!" he called as he flicked his ashes. "Maybe get a coloring book and practice staying inside the lines."

Maya said nothing, she only gave him a disgusted look before she slammed the door shut and rushed into the shop. Inside the shop was brightly lit by ceiling lights that hummed and flickered, with all manner of merchandise for sale: musical instruments, speaker systems, computers, and furniture. An exhausted looking man stood behind the counter, which had a glass display case full of watches and jewelry.

"You buy gold?"

"That's what the sign says, isn't it?"

"So gold is valuable on this planet?"

The man raised an eyebrow. "Yeah...what planet are you from where it's not."

"Clearly not this one." Maya struggled to pull the ring off of her swollen finger and set it on the counter. "I need to sell this immediately." Saavik would see the logic in this choice.

The man picked up the ring and began to examine it. "So eager to sell. If it hadn't been stuck on your finger, I might wonder if it was stolen."

"I'm eager because...Because my wife kicked me out, and I have nothing else."

The man stared at her in silence for a moment. "Your...wife?"

"Her name is Iris."

"Right, sure. Do you want cash or credit?"

"Cash, please."

The man busied himself with some paperwork in the back, and Maya filled the time browsing the watches in the case. "By the way, I'm trying to get to Seattle to stay with my family. Do you know how to get to the I-5 from here?"

"Seattle?" The man passed over a receipt and an envelope of cash. "They've still got the city under lockdown. No one's allowed in without a special permit...or maybe if they're an Aug."

"You sound very sure that I'm not either."

"Yeah, that's because you pulled up in a car that looks like an elephant sat on it and were desperate to sell your lover's ring, but I'll write the directions down for you. Now is there anything else I can do for you?"

"That's all, thanks." Maya shoved the envelope into her jacket pocket and rushed out of the shop. The man from earlier was still there, and Maya kept her head down as she tried her best to ignore him as she opened the door and climbed back into the Cutlass. This time she felt more confident operating the vehicle...until she pressed on the gas and discovered the car was set in drive instead of reverse, and she crashed into a signpost before she could stop the car. The man with the cigarette must be laughing his head off.

She swerved through the parking lot and back to the road, now bold enough to go a little faster, but she was still on high alert with every muscle in her body tense. Each time another vehicle came close to her, she felt a jolt of panic, but when she finally reached the highway she began to relax. There were few cars on the road at this hour (but they flew by much faster than the modest speed she maintained), fewer distractions, and nothing but a long, uninterrupted stretch of pavement. Ninety miles to Seattle, she might as well sit back and try to enjoy the music of the late twentieth century.

The soundtrack of her overland journey with unfamiliar music, the likes of which she had never heard before. It piqued her curiosity, and as she sped down this lonely stretch of highway, Maya thought deeply about the ultimate fate of these songs and the artists who created them. Did they simply fade from relevance, or were they among the pieces of art and culture lost in the wars that marked this chapter of Earth's history? Every song is heard for one last time, and every name spoken a final time...Even a name as infamous as Khan Noonien-Singh.

Her introspective thoughts faded away as she came to the end of a line of slowly moving cars, and she turned down the volume on the radio to pay attention. Ahead, there was a checkpoint with a sign overhead that read "Seattle Controlled Zone. All persons and vehicles subject to search." The line inched forward as one car after another was cleared through the checkpoint, and Maya sank down in her seat as her heart began to race with panic. She had no identification documents and no record that she existed. All she had was her trust in Agent Carmack that her DNA would serve as her credentials.

One car remained in front of her. The driver stuck their hand out of the window and placed a finger on a glowing pad. The pad illuminated green, a guard spoke briefly to the driver, and the gate opened to allow the car through. Maya took a deep breath when she pulled up to the checkpoint and held it as she placed a trembling finger on the pad. The pad illuminated green, but the gate did not rise.

"What the...?" the guard blurted out.

"Is something wrong?" Maya tried to feign surprise.

"I'm going to need to see your license."

"Is my superior genetic profile not enough to allow entry?" Maya tried to imitate some of the arrogant gravitas with which her father used to speak. It turned her stomach to hear such words coming from her own mouth, and she feared she laid on the act too heavily.

"It is, but I'm getting an error. You're in the genetic database, but it's not showing any identifying information. I still need to verify a name, city of residence, and date of birth."

Maya took a deep breath. Using her real first name was fine with musicians who lived in rundown apartments, but this interaction required a bit more discretion. "Elise Khavari. Bellingham, Washington. September 17, nineteen fifty-eight."

"Unfortunately, Miss Khavari, I can't simply take you on your word." It was clear that the guard was growing more irritated with each passing moment.

"You insult me."

"It's the law."

Maya took a deep breath and shook her head. There would be no talking her way out of this. "I haven't got one."

"You mean you don't have a driver's license?"

She looked away and took a deep breath. "It was stolen."

"Right. I'm going to need you to pull over to the left over there." The guard pressed a button on his radio and spoke into it. "I'm gonna need backup on a full search."

Maya hesitated, but after getting an impatient look from the guard she pulled over, maneuvering the vehicle in a lurching and awkward manner. The guard stepped out from behind his booth and walked to the driver's side of the car, where he was joined by his partner. He leaned in close to the open window, and a slight wicked smile curled onto his face. Something about this whole ordeal seemed to give him a sense of delight.

"So. Your license was stolen. I don't suppose the thief made off with the vehicle registration too?"

"It might be around here somewhere."

"Open the glove compartment."

Maya didn't know what he meant by "glove compartment," but she followed his eyes to the latched compartment on the right side of the dashboard and opened it. The inside of the glove compartment was just as cluttered as the rest of the car. Maya couldn't guess what was what, so she handed over all of the contents: papers and documents, bits of trash, and a few of Iris's personal belongings. The guard flipped through the pile and held up a clear bag full of green buds.

"You know, most people don't hand over their drugs so willingly."

Shit. Maya shrank back in her seat. She didn't understand the full gravity of this situation, but the grave look on the man's face and his accusatory tone gave her all of the clues she needed.

"I didn't know that was in there."

"Sure you didn't." He handed the pile off to his partner. "Run these." He looked back to Maya as his partner stepped away. "What brings

you to Seattle.”

“I have family here. They work for Boeing.”

“And who’s Iris Almeida?”

“My roommate.”

“Right.”

His partner returned, and he stepped away to have a few quick words. Maya couldn’t hear the beginning of their conversation, but she caught pieces of it after the partner disagreed strongly enough to raise his voice.

“...You sure you wanna do that? She’s still an Aug?”

“She’s also driving a stolen car with at least an eighth of marijuana.” He stepped back to the window. “Get out of the car.”

Another deep breath, and Maya opened the door and stepped outside. She hadn’t expected the first guard to move so quickly, grabbing her by the lower arm and trying to take her other arm to restrain her. However, Maya was faster and stronger. She whipped her head backwards to smash the back of her skull into his nose, and while he was caught off guard by the sudden pain she broke free from his grasp. He was incapacitated for now, doubled over and covering his bleeding nose with his hand, but his partner had his pistol drawn and aimed at Maya.

“Stand down!” he shouted. “I’m well within my rights to shoot, but I’m in no mood to deal with the fallout of killing an Augment.”

Maya held her hands up in a sign of defeat, and she offered no resistance as she allowed the men to handcuff her and load her into the back of a police car.

Chapter 5

Maya put up no further resistance, not because she accepted defeat but because she had sense enough to know she had little chance of success unless she waited for a better opportunity. Law enforcement at the end of the twentieth century was nothing if not thorough: fingerprints, retinal scan, hair sample, cheek swab, and bloodwork. The tired looking woman was sure something would confirm her identity, and Maya simply nodded in silence as she went through the process.

She was kept in a holding cell while the tests were processed, and in the cell next to her she could hear an obviously drunk man shouting and rambling in a voice so slurred that his words sounded like nonsense. He then began to vomit loudly. Maya might have been able to block it out if not for the smell.

A man approached. He also wore a police badge on his shirt, but he was neatly dressed in a crisp white shirt with a tie, his black hair was slicked back, and he had a thick mustache.

“Miss Khavari.” His tone was serious. “We need to talk.”

As a precaution, Maya was handcuffed before she was led to a dimly lit room with a table and two chairs. The mustachioed man sat down, and Maya sat across from him.

The man rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “I have never seen a case like yours. You have genetic markers that have never been used in this country, no identifying information in any of our databases, and there is no one by the name of Elise Khavari alive in Bellingham or anywhere in the United States.”

Maya said nothing. She was unsurprised by this outcome, but still had no response to support her case.

“Now, to me this all sounds suspicious as hell, especially for someone who assaulted an officer of the law while driving a stolen car full of drugs. If it was all up to me, I’d say you’re clearly a spy, but this isn’t up to me. Apparently, there’s too great of a chance of provoking foreign powers and giving another enemy of the United States reason to be openly hostile. We can’t cut you loose in Seattle, but you will be staying in more comfortable accommodations.”

“May I ask which foreign powers?” In her heart she knew, but she wanted to hear it.

“The Khan Empire.”

Compared to the state of the one apartment she had seen, Maya could only guess that these must be luxury accommodations by this century’s standards, a gilded cage. The room was clean and spacious, and the hotel was built up to the edge of the pier. Looking down from the window, only the sea was visible below: a possible escape route if not for the monitor strapped to her ankle.

Her fiddling with the electronics in Iris’s apartment, she had learned that the “power” button controlled contemporary devices, and she turned on the television to hear the now-familiar static hum before the picture illuminated the screen.

Another advertisement. A white, heterosexual couple played with a smiling baby over a soothing voiceover. “You want what’s best for your new baby, not only now, but for her future too. As the leader in genetic enhancements, Pacific Advanced Family Genetics can give your bundle of joy the advantages she needs to live the most successful life. Financing plans are available.” Maya wondered what might happen to anyone who defaulted on that debt.

And another. The spokesman was a large man with long hair and a beard streaked with gray. He wore a three piece suit that looked like it would burst at the seams if he moved too quickly. “This weekend only! Come on down to the Furniture Depot for the sale of the century.” Photos of furniture sets appeared on screen as upbeat music played, and the spokesman appeared again. “See ya there! And be sure to ask for Sasquatch!”

That was the end of them, and the program began: an animated show where the stylized characters were drawn with yellow skin. It didn’t catch Maya’s attention, and watching it wouldn’t get her any closer to escape. She searched the room for anything that might help her, but found little more than various forms of literature: A Bible and The Book of Mormon in a drawer by the bed, a directory of local businesses, and a binder with hotel information. She mindlessly flipped through the latter and stopped on the room service menu.

Of all the unfamiliar technology, the telephone at least was intuitive. Maya cautiously picked up the receiver and pressed the button labeled “room service” and marked with a picture of a fork. The phone rang once before someone answered on the other end.

“Room service, how can I help you?”

“Can you hear me?” She was nearly shouting.

“Ummm, yeah...No need to shout.”

“Can I have the prime rib and a bottle of champagne?”

“How would you like that steak prepared?”

“However you recommend.”

“Medium rare. I just need your room number.”

“Three seven five.”

“One moment...wait. Ma’am, I’m sorry. There’s been a hold placed on any charges to this room. You’ll have to pay when it’s delivered.”

“That’s fine, I have cash.”

“Wonderful. Someone will be up soon.”

Maya began to scroll through the channels, hoping to find more information about where and when she was and what she might need to do to insure the Botany Bay made it into space. Mostly, there were more advertisements, Sasquatch’s broad face appeared about once every five minutes. She stopped when she saw footage of a warzone. Broken, and barely recognizable in the wreckage were the remains of landmarks only seen in very old photographs. This was London, but it looked like no one would be living there for a long time.

In the bottom corner of the screen were the words “Fox News,” and headlines ran across the bottom of the screen: “Photographer who captured secret Boeing footage arrested.” “Unemployment on the rise.” “Birthing program challenged in New Hampshire.” “Florida Man tries to fight hurricane with a machete.”

The footage shifted to one side of the screen, and on the other side a sharply dressed reporter (from the safety of a studio) appeared. “I’m not saying this wasn’t a tragedy, but I think it’s in our best interest if The New British Empire and the Khan Empire are at each other’s throats. Let them blow each other up, so long as they stay away from us, I don’t care what happens.”

A horrific outlook, but not entirely wrong. That still didn’t help her. She switched to another channel, more news. The screen was split between a reporter and a guest speaker. Maya caught them mid-debate.

“...All I’m saying is that I don’t think Hassing is fit to be president, not after she funneled campaign funds into the pockets of Boeing shareholders...”

“Allegedly! Nothing has been proven.”

“Regardless, if she’s got that kind of authority at Boeing, I’d feel better about her as a candidate if she spent less on experimental space ships and nuclear weapons and more on safety and security of passenger aircraft...”

Maya sat at the foot of the bed and watched them debate, amused at how they balanced on the fine line between discussion and argument, sometimes raising their voices and talking over one another but never shouting. What intrigued her more was the advertisements. Video based entertainment and information she understood, but segments designed to entice people to spend money were wholly foreign. Highlights included an appliance repair technician who seemed to really love appliances, a competing genetics lab that took a darker approach to their message, men with sculpted physiques modeling underwear, announcements for future broadcasts, Sasquatch and the Furniture Depot again, bail bondsmen, and attractive people drinking tequila. Their approaches were just as varied: humor, sex appeal, fear mongering, and attention grabbing sounds and colors. She could have watched, unblinking, for hours if not for the knock at the door.

“Room service,” the voice in the hall called.

“Coming,” she answered as she hopped off the bed and went to open the door. She held the door open for the server, who placed the tray on the table by the window. Maya produced the envelope of cash from her pocket and passed it over.

The server opened the envelope and glanced at the bills inside without counting them. “Ma’am, this is...”

“Take it. All of it.”

“Thanks.” He gave her a nod before he left. “I really appreciate it.”

“And I appreciate your hard work.”

When she was alone again, Maya sat at the table and first began to examine the steak knife. Flimsy, but it would have to work. She lifted the cover from the plate. While she had no appetite, years of subsistence living made her feel guilty about wasting food, and besides she had no way of knowing when her next meal would be. She began to cut into the steak—awfully tough for medium-rare—and ate it quickly. The mashed potatoes and green beans she left behind.

Maya turned her attention back to the television and scrolled back through the channels. It frustrated her, being unable to choose any piece of media to play on a whim. What she wanted was Tchaikovsky’s “Overture of 1812,” the Toreador from Carmen, Odile’s act 3 coda, or even a paso doble. She stopped when she reached a broadcast of a male dancer moving to a Celtic beat. He wore a billowing white shirt and tight pants, and while his feet were swift and percussive, his upper body was proud and rigid. Perfect.

She turned the volume up all the way, but backed off the moment she realized that disturbing her neighbors would bring more interruptions. With the steak knife in her hand, she crossed to the door and put on the latch before she sat on the bed, crossed one ankle over her lap, and enjoyed the sound of tapping feet and bodhran drums as she sawed through the thick strap on the ankle monitor.

With the flimsy steak knife it was harder work than she expected, and she broke free just in time for the finale: the two lead dancers were flanked by the entire ensemble dancing in a row, in perfect unison. Maya triumphantly flexed her liberated ankle before she went back to the table, buried the monitor in the pile of mashed potatoes, covered the plate, and picked up the champagne bottle. She lifted it and swung it to consider its heft. This might work. Maybe.

Maya went back to the phone on the bedside table, picked up the receiver, and pressed the room service button again. The other end rang once before the same voice answered.

“Room service, how can I help you?”

“I just finished my meal, what should I do with the dishes?”

“If you leave them outside your door, someone will come by soon to pick them up.”

“Thank you, I’ll do that.”

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, not now.”

“Have a good night.”

Maya kept the champagne and the knife, but put the tray outside the door and latched it behind her. The dancers were still tapping away while took a few practice swings with the champagne bottle, and she took a deep breath and a strong stance before using the bottle like a club to break the window.

The bottle shattered and released a burst of foamy champagne, but the window only cracked. Maya resisted the urge to let out a scream of frustration and instead grabbed a chair and unleashed her fury, bashing it against the window with all her might. The glass shattered, and she kicked away the final shards to give herself a safer exit point. She paused for a moment to look down into the dark waters and silently hoped that her father’s genetic enhancements would protect her from hypothermia before she jumped into Puget Sound.

Chapter 6

Maya plunged into the icy water with a forceful impact and felt the pain of so many frozen knives piercing into every inch of her skin. She couldn't move for the pain and cold and sank lower into the water until a primal instinct, starving for air and desperate to survive, compelled her to tear through the frigid water and swim to the surface. Her head broke the water's surface and she gasped for air before diving back under. Maya tried to stay below the surface, bobbing up for air as little as she could tolerate and using each moment with her head above the water to scout out a place to climb out.

She was under the pier and pulled herself out on some scaffolding. In the crisp October air and soft rain, getting out of the water gave her no relief from the cold. Her body shook and shivered as she clawed her way up the pier and struggled to find steady footing on a structure slick with seawater. By the time she pulled herself up onto the pier, her bad left shoulder seared with pain. She was not alone. A few people were out walking on the pier, staring in shock at the woman who emerged from the sea. Maya ignored them and walked away as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, no need to draw attention to herself.

A young woman raced to her side. "Woah, what happened?" She asked. "Are you alright?"

Maya kept walking and did not look at the woman as she answered. "Don't worry about it."

Maya wandered deeper into the city to get her bearings and relate the real world to the map in her head. She resisted the urge to run, well aware that it would draw even more stares.. Not far from the waterfront she came across an abandoned structure, a large warehouse with a green roof and the sides open to the air. Above it in red letters were the words "Public Market."

She went inside to see a sprawling expanse with all the evidence of a marketplace that had not been used in years. On the walls and hanging from the ceiling were worn out signs for all manner of food vendors: shellfish, fruit, dairy, butchers, and specialties like pies and sandwiches. In the open hall was a maze of broken shelves and stands where vendors would have once sold their wares. Maya was careful not to get lost inside, keeping a mental map in her head as she emerged on the other side.

In the short span of time that Maya explored the old market, the gentle rain became a downpour. She still shivered and felt the cold down to the marrow, but was grateful for the foul weather, it meant that no one would look twice at her. With no other options, she had to go the rest of the way to Boeing on foot. She shoved her hands into her pockets, kept her head down and tried to block out the cold, wind, and wet, focused solely on putting one foot in front of the other...

...Until salvation came in the form of a lone bicycle left unlocked on a bike rack. It was small, maybe meant for a preteen, and painted hot pink, but it would move her faster than her own two feet. Maya had to pedal with her knees set wide, she rode against the wind, and her fingers grew numb from the cold. She cleared her mind and tried to focus squarely on traveling along the mental map in her head, the steady rhythm of each pedal push keeping time. Journeying deeper into the city revealed that Seattle in 1996 was far worse off than Bellingham, all the more unsettling when one stopped to realize that this crumbling city was also home to the influential Augment Runa Hassing and the company that would give a few dozen Augments the chance to escape Earth at its darkest hour.

Seattle's derelict remnants of a once proud downtown to a massive airfield—larger than the maps had led her to believe. Worse yet, her maps did not tell her where exactly the front entrance was, and the armed guards and razor wire. She followed behind a car—it was black, cleaner, and newer looking than most of the vehicles she had seen in town—on a narrow road that turned a corner and led to a security checkpoint like the one at the city limits. The driver in front of her stopped, had their finger scanned, and the gate opened to let them through.

Maya stopped at the gate, placed her finger on the pad, and (just like before) the lights illuminated green, but the gate did not rise. The security guard looked down at her from his booth with a perplexed look on his face.

"I have an appointment with Runa Hassing," Maya explained.

"I'm sure you do." He took the radio from his belt and spoke into it. "Need a little guidance here, I've got an Augment who says she has an appointment with Hassing."

"And?" The other voice came in over faint static. "Hassing was very clear, if any augments show up you let them in, no questions asked."

"Yeah, but this one has a warrant for her arrest."

"Let the cops deal with it! If Hassing finds out that you went against her orders we're both gonna lose our jobs."

"Copy that." He handed Maya a lanyard with a visitor pass and opened the gate. "You know where you're going?"

"No, I've never been here before."

"Take the second left."

Maya began to pedal again, grateful when the office building came into view because it meant she would soon be able to get off of this awkward, uncomfortable bike. She ditched the bike on patch of grass in front of the building and passed a man on a cigarette break on the way inside. Unpleasant though her first and only experience with tobacco had been, something deep inside wished she could have a cigarette too.

The interior of Boeing's headquarters was like a step ahead several centuries. The main atrium was wide open and brightly lit with clean straight lines and decorated sparsely with models of aircraft. Compared to the slums and abandoned buildings of the city, it was clear where the people of this century chose to use their resources. A corporation run by Augments was more deserving than people who needed food and shelter.

She went to the front desk, and the receptionist—a woman with blond hair in a sleek bun—gave her the same confused look as the security guard outside.

“I have an appointment with Runa Hassing,” she explained.

The receptionist turned her attention to the computer and began to search through the files. “I don’t see any appointments scheduled for the day.”

Maya leaned in closer, put both hands on the table, and gave her best imitation of an entitled, arrogant Augment. “I was led to believe that as an Augment I would be granted an audience with her, no questions asked, and both you and the security personnel have been asking too many questions.”

“One moment, let me call her secretary. What’s your name?”

“Elise Khavari.”

The receptionist picked up the phone and dialed a number. She kept an eye on Maya the entire time. “I have someone here, an Augment.” Her voice was hushed and sheepish, as if she had to tread carefully with what she said and how she spoke. Maya had heard that tone before, when her mother feared her father’s wrath. “She says she has an appointment, but it’s not in the books.” A pause as the receptionist listened to the person on the other end. “Elise…Kimani.”

“Khavari.” Maya imitated the annoyance and frustration of a person whose name was often mispronounced.

“Kafari.” Another pause. “Alright. I’ll send up the security file too.” She hung up the phone and tried to offer Maya a polite half-smile. “You can go on up. It’s on the third floor, to the left”

“Thanks,” Maya said with a little nod before she turned to go. For that moment, she forgot the arrogant augment act.

The elevators were on the far side of the atrium, and while they had all of the intuitiveness, speed, and efficiency of her century…only with their own special twentieth century flair. The car was glass on the curved side that faced the exterior to give the rider a view of the sprawling campus: more office buildings and warehouses, and in the distance an airfield. Inside, soft, soothing music played, and when the elevator stopped a chime rang and a friendly recorded voice announced. “Third floor.”

The elevator doors opened to reveal a wide hallway. Maya turned left and opened a frosted glass door with a sign that read “Runa Hassing - Chief Operating Officer.” This wasn’t Hassing’s office, but a waiting room of sorts, with exotic potted plants and a desk where a young, frightened looking man sat. He hardly looked like he was out of his teens.

“Are you Elise…Kifari?” he asked, each word nervous and uncertain.

“Khavari, yes.”

“Okay. Great. Yeah, you can go on in.”

Maya went in through another frosted glass door and into a wide open office that seemed to be spacious just for the fact of taking up space. The windows ran from floor to ceiling, and the space was empty save for the desk, chair, and a few more ornamental plants. Runa Hassing sat at the desk, almost unrecognizable compared to the woman Maya remembered from Ceti Alpha V. She was smartly dressed, her face was fuller and softer, and her red hair was cropped short and neat.

“Miss Khavari.” Runa spoke politely yet firmly and seemed as though she was annoyed at the whole ordeal. “Please have a seat, I hope Devon wasn’t too unprofessional.”

“No,” Maya answered as she sat down, and her heart raced. She had no plan and true to form was rushing headlong into something she had given zero thought. “He was fine.”

“He’s an unpaid intern, working for college credit.”

“Maybe if you paid him he might act more professional.”

Runa narrowed her eyes. “You’re very bold to barge in without an appointment and to criticize me. What’s the purpose of your visit? You aren’t on the list.”

“Why have a list if you’re going to be so insistent on letting in every Augment anyway?” Maya tried to calm herself and regain some self control. She had no plan, but to sit her and criticize the person she needed to work with wouldn’t help.

“Again, what is your purpose?”

“I have a great interest in seeing your new DY100 launch as planned.”

The color drained from Runa’s face, but she recovered quickly. “You mean the Mars expedition?”

“If that’s what you’re calling it, then yes. The Mars expedition. Mars, I’m sure, is where you’re planning on going.”

Hassing narrowed her eyes. Instead of responding, she turned to her computer and browsed through some files. She leaned in close, inches away from the screen to read, and squinted one eye and closed the other. Was this the great genetic secret Runa Hassing was trying to hide? That in spite of her Final Solution ramblings, she had her own slight defect?

“You must be aware, Miss Khavari, of how suspicious you must seem. You have a warrant out for your arrest, you show up uninvited and ask prying questions about secret projects, and you have very distinct foreign genetic markers.”

“I’m telling you, I’ve lived my whole life in Bellingham!”

“Then why, Miss Khavari, do you have the same Canadian markers as Khan Noonien-Singh?”

Maya blinked. “Canadian?!” She had always assumed that her father’s origins would be closer to the seat of his empire: India or maybe Southern Asia, but he never spoke of his start to life or anything before he established himself as a world leader. It’s harder to present yourself as a powerful superhuman when you acknowledge that every person starts life as a naked, helpless infant. “Look, I don’t know how to convince you to believe me, but I am absolutely on your side.”

As Maya pleaded, Runa reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a pistol. “I think someone else will be a better judge of that.” She kept her weapon pointed at Maya while she pressed a button on her desk. “Ling. I need a jet prepared and a flight plan approved. You will be escorting a guest of ours to New Delhi.”

Chapter 7

Maya knew Suzette Ling from Ceti Alpha V, or maybe it would be more accurate to say that she would know her, centuries from now (Maya was slowly realizing that the truthful telling of her life story would become very complicated once this whole ordeal was behind her). Suzette was one of the more level-headed of Khan's associates, one of the few who would see it in her heart to treat Khan's half-breed daughter with the same respect and dignity she showed toward any Augment. And, yet, this was the last person Maya wanted to spend hours alone with. In the future, Suzette would die by Maya's hand.

It was a blessing, then, that Suzette was content to spend the entirety of the flight sitting in silence and that any of Maya's anxieties could be explained away by the present situation. This was supposed to be a luxury jet, but Maya found it to be the most uncomfortable and nerve-racking way to travel. She had traveled faster than the speed of light, but in a starship one didn't feel the sudden acceleration of takeoff, hear the roar of the engines, or feel the changes of pressure in their ears. Turbulence could only be felt when something was going wrong, so every tiny bump gave Maya a jolt of panic.

With no way to pass the time and no desire to start a conversation, Maya drifted off for some much needed rest. After getting caught in the whirlwind of 1996, she hadn't had a chance to sleep since...hundreds of years in the future. However, she only dozed off for a few minutes before a slight bump of rough air startled her awake. Her eyes snapped open wide, and she gripped the arms of the chair tightly with her fingers digging into the upholstery.

"Don't fly often, do you?" Suzette teased, an amused smirk on her face. In some ways this was very much the same woman she knew (would know?), but it seemed that time and paying penance on Ceti Alpha V had (would?) humble her.

"Never."

They did not speak again for the duration of the flight. Maya spent the remaining hours in fitful sleep, slipping in and out of consciousness. None of it was restful, it only made her head heavy and dizzy, more weary than if she hadn't let herself sleep at all. She made the mistake of looking out the window as the jet began its descent and felt another surge of panic. The ground...it was getting closer and closer, and Maya did not trust this shaky little vessel to land safely and smoothly. Again, she gripped the arms of her chair tightly and sat rigid and upright as she tried to calm herself with deep, steady breaths. For just a moment she opened her eyes again only to see that Suzette was still watching her with a smirk on her face.

The jolt of the wheels hitting the ground made Maya's eyes snap open with shock, and her sheer panic did not subside until the jet slowed to a gentle crawl.

"You can breathe easy again," Suzette spoke softly, but there was still a taunting bite in her voice. "You're back on Terra Firma."

Armed guards in suits and dark sunglasses escorted Maya and Suzette from the jet to the private car. Maya didn't feel much better to be back on "Terra Firma." Her anxiety had faded, but she felt a sense of malaise and exhaustion that was entirely foreign. The afternoon sun blazed overhead: Delhi in October was nothing like coastal Washington. There was still a heavy sense of wetness in the air, but in the Pacific Northwest it was the sort of cold damp that cut through your flesh and chilled you to the core. Here, though, the sultry humidity felt like steam seeped from the earth itself.

Suzette was just as tight lipped on the car ride, but this time Maya was allowed to smoke a cigarette out the cracked window. She still found the smell and taste repulsive, but now she smoked just as naturally as Iris did, and found that a few puffs helped to soothe her mind.

All these wars between these nation states who were willing to turn one another into dust, but they were really all the same, only with their own local flavor. Just like in Seattle, the clean, state of the art arfield gave way to overcrowded slums. Suzette blocked them out by reading a newspaper, but Maya made a point of taking it all in. What she knew of this part of history was what her father told her, from his point of view as a ruler who convinced himself he was doing right by the people under his thumb. If he was doing so well, though, he wouldn't have felt the need to flee to the stars with no destination, and everything Maya saw led her to believe that the Khan Empire was on the decline.

The city faded into an open field of manicured grass, with a grand palace in the distance. All those people living practically on top of each other, and how many could have lived in this stretch of land that existed only to distance Khan from his unaugmented subjects? The thought made Maya seethe. The Khan she knew from Ceti Alpha V at least was practical, but she could see no pragmatism in such a vulgar display of power. Though she swore the cigarette before was the last one, Maya lit another. She rolled down the window a bit further and took longer, stronger draws. It didn't calm her heart the way she expected, but it was a distraction, and Maya began to understand why people of this century solved so many of their problems with chain smoking. The car stopped in front of the palace, and waiting outside to greet them was another Augment who Maya knew front Ceti Alpha V in the future, Joaquin.

Like Hassing, Joaquin was close to unrecognizable. Centuries from now Maya would know him as a wild and unhinged Augment, but the man who stood before her was polished and well-pressed. His hair was clipped short, he wore a well-tailored suit, and had massive rings on his fingers. His eyes, though, still had that wild fire that chilled her to the marrow. He narrowed his eyes and studied Maya as she stepped out of the car. His gaze made her uneasy, enough to fuel a creeping fear that he had his fair share of suspicions about her. Maya looked him in the eye as she took the final drag of her cigarette, dropped the butt on the ground, and stepped in it to put it out.

He turned his attention to Suzette. "So this is the woman who is suspected to share The Great Khan's genetics?"

Ugh. At least her father stopped making people call him The Great Khan by the time she was born.

"Confirmed, by the United States Department of Biometrics." Suzette answered.

"I have hesitations about trusting a foreign entity. The tests will be repeated." Joaquin turned back to Maya. He tried to soften his face, but the wild fire still burned in his eyes. "Come. You will be shown to the guest quarters."

If the exterior of Khan's palace was ornate, the inside was exquisite. Every inch of the walls, floors and ceiling were decorated in a way that displayed not only great beauty but also great wealth. The floors were paved with colorful tiles in elaborate geometric patterns, the walls lined with mirrors with gilded frames, but most mesmerizing of all was the ceilings, with their murals and sparkling chandeliers. Each room depicted the story of its own epic tale: of battles, legends, and fables. Maya craned her neck as she walked, to try to follow the stories overhead.

She was led by a servant through these winding, resplendent halls by a servant and into a guest room. Here, some expense had been spared. These were still luxury accommodations that put even her Seattle hotel room to shame, but the design was simple rather than ornate. The blue and gold color scheme was understated and echoed through the silk bedding, upholstery, and curtains, and the room had large windows and a small balcony.

The servant did not give Maya a moment of rest before setting about to help her with bathing, dressing, and setting her hair. In spite of Maya's protests and refusals, she stayed silent and persisted. Maya wondered if it was a malfunction in the universal translator, why she never responded, or (more troublingly) if this was how she was instructed to behave. When her work was completed to satisfaction, she gave Maya a polite bow.

She wanted to collapse into bed (finery, jewelry, and all) until she caught sight of her own reflection and gasped. The sight was enough to give her a sudden burst of energy that made her forget her exhaustion. It was a version of herself that she had never seen before: dressed in pink and gold silk and glittering with gold and gems. Was this how she was meant to be? She was in the home of a fascist who would one day become her own abusive father, and she liked it. She was reminded of old memories, when her father told her that she was meant to be a princess, when all she wanted was his approval. Her own reflection was enchanting and alarming, and Maya could not look away until she heard a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called, and Suzette Ling opened the door.

"I'm here for your bloodwork," Suzette explained as she stepped inside. "Have a seat."

"I'm surprised you don't have someone else to do this for you." Maya sat in an upholstered chair and offered up an arm so her forearm was exposed and facing out.

"I don't mind it." Suzette sat in the other chair, across from Maya with a small table between them, and she began to prepare. "I've been fascinated with this sort of work for as long as I can remember. Ever since...well, to put it bluntly, ever since I was growing up in the lab, but this was never my purpose."

Maya turned away and closed her eyes, hoping she only looked like a person uncomfortable over the sight of their own blood. Her stomach turned. This woman had been the kindest of the Augments of Ceti Alpha V. She had always taken it upon herself to be the first to help with setting broken bones or birthing babies. This was a person with not only a brilliant mind but also her own talents and hopes and dreams that would never be realized because she was meant to fulfill a different purpose. Her greatest mistake was to side with Khan, a mistake that would eventually cost her her life.

"May I ask what you make of all this? I mean, of me? Joaquin doesn't seem to trust me."

"I don't recall him telling you his name."

Dammit. "I happened to overhear it."

Suzette gave her a pointed look but seemed to accept her explanation. "I'm reserving my judgment for now," Suzette answered as she cleaned up and packed away her supplies. "But The Great Khan is convinced that you're some sort of relative, and he insisted on keeping his family close by."

"So this is a gilded cage?"

"That's a cynical way to describe a man who greatly values his family. Would you prefer to return to Seattle and get arrested the moment you set foot on US soil?"

"Point taken." Even though Seattle was where she needed to be, no matter the circumstances.

"He would like to meet you and introduce you to his family. Now, if you feel you're ready."

"Can I have a beer and another cigarette to calm my nerves first?"

Suzette narrowed her eyes. The look on her face was all the answer Maya needed.

Chapter 8

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. She was supposed to discreetly slip discreetly into 1996, ensure that the Botany Bay launched as scheduled, and slip back home. She had already been too conspicuous by stealing cars, getting arrested, and swimming in Puget Sound, but strange criminal activity in a big twentieth century city faded into the background. Now she was moments away from meeting her father, centuries before she would be born: this man who frightened her to the core and never failed to catch her in a lie. She was at a greater risk now than when she had been arrested in Seattle.

Suzette led Maya back through the ornate halls of the palace and gave Maya a sideways glance. Maya took shallow breaths, and her posture was tense and rigid. "You aren't nervous, are you?"

"I think anyone with any sense would be intimidated to meet Khan...The Great Khan." She couldn't say her father's preferred title without sounding sarcastic.

"I'm sure you understand why it serves him to have a harder public image. The real man is far more gentle."

What a lie!

Suzette led Maya to an open courtyard with more colorful tiles paving the ground and a fountain in the center. There Khan waited with his family: a woman, five children under the age of thirteen, and a pair of Afghan hounds that sat still and elegant like majestic canine statues. Joaquin was also present—sitting by his right side, and Khan seemed to pay more attention to him than to the woman Maya guessed was his wife.

Khan stood to greet her. Maya had never seen her father like this, looking every bit like an emperor: dressed in silk with his black hair slicked back. What she found more jarring, however, was that he seemed to look...happy.

"Elise Khavari, welcome to my home."

This was surreal. Maya had nothing to say, too dizzy and disoriented to respond.

"You will show the proper respect to The Great Khan and bow," Joaquin commanded. He did not rise from his seat.

"Oh no, there is no need for that. Elise is one of us, biologically a member of the family."

Maya stared wide-eyed and silent, well aware that each person present expected a response. He considered her an equal. For the first time, her father saw her as an equal, and only because he had no idea who she was. "I'm sorry. I've had a long and exhausting day, and this is shocking news. I was never told about the nature of my genetic enhancements."

"Then, please, sit and tell me more about yourself. I have my own hypothesis, and am curious to learn if it is compatible with reality."

"There is little to tell." As she sat down at Khan's left side she invented a plausible backstory for Elise Khavari. "I lived my whole life in Bellingham, north of Seattle. I was adopted as a baby and raised by a single mother. My mother always refused to tell me exact origins, she insisted it didn't matter." She paused to study Khan's face as he listened. His thoughtful expression suggested that he at least was giving her consideration. "And who do you think I am?"

"A failed experiment." So much for being an equal, she was still a failure in his eyes. "An imperfect embryo that should have been destroyed but was secretly salvaged by a scientist who had more compassion than professional integrity."

"Compassion is a liability." Maya repeated words she would hear her father would often say himself.

Khan gave her a pointed look and a nod. "And also an asset, for a man who wishes to have others to his will, something that those in charge of your country seem to have forgotten."

Maya tilted her head. "I don't understand." Bellingham and Seattle in this year were in a sad state, but it seemed like the rest of the world wasn't much better off.

"Surely you haven't fallen for the propaganda? Sanctuary districts, forced births and sterilization, debtors prisons, young men killed in the street because of the color of their skin.. You will find none of that in my empire."

"And yet you seem to be on friendly terms with Runa Hassing."

"Hassing and I have similar goals, and she has the means to accomplish them. However, I disagree with her insistence that improvement of the human race must be rapid. Sudden change is often poorly tolerated and unsustainable."

"How pragmatic," Maya muttered.

Joaquin still stared with fire in his eyes. "I'm still not convinced that you can be trusted."

Khan placed a calming hand on Joaquin's shoulder. "In the interest of transparency, I, too, cannot shake the distinct feeling that you know more than you are letting on."

Even before she was born her father could sniff out her deception. "Everyone has something to hide. All I have is my assurance that my goals are aligned with your own."

“And which goals might that be?”

“The improvement of humanity, of course.” Even to say the words hurt, but it was a necessary step to earn build rapport with The Great Khan.

Khan introduced Maya to his wife Aariya and their children Chaarani, Nadir, and Saina. There were also his two “half breed bastards” as he described them: Cesar and Adrian, and the two dogs: Julius and Augustus. Khan dismissed his family to speak privately with Maya and to let the dogs run and play in the courtyard. Elegant though they were when sitting still, at play they were all dog as they drank from the fountain and chased each other with their tongues hanging out. Maya wondered if they had been genetically engineered too.

“If it helps you, Elise, to have a way to describe our relationship” Khan began when they were alone. “I would say that you are most like a sister to me.” One of the dogs trotted up and rested his head on Khan’s lap. So much for dogs being an excellent judge of character.

“I’m surprised you trust me. Joaquin doesn’t care for me at all, and you seem to value his opinion.”

“I do, but it is in his nature to be untrusting.” Khan scratched the dog behind the ear, and the dog did a sideways glance so the edge of the whites of his eyes were visible. “He is suspicious of my wife, my young children, and possibly even my dogs. He may change his opinion of you when the updated test results arrive. As for myself, I see the potential in you to be a valuable ally.”

“The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them,” Maya noted, a quote that someone shared with her shortly before she betrayed them.

“Ernest Hemmingway,” Khan added. “A man with a remarkable life, though I found his writing simplistic.”

“I still enjoyed A Farewell to Arms, when the man who deserts the army to be with his wife and unborn child only to lose them both.”

Khan paused to give Maya a pointed look. Her literary reference may have been too on the nose, but if it bothered Khan he hid it well. “My legacy is important to me. I have become increasingly aware that I will not be here forever. I have an empire to leave to my children, and now my sister.”

A knot formed in the back of Maya’s throat. “You speak like a man who knows he’s going to die.” Or a man who planned to abandon all of his problems and leave his family to clean up the mess.

“Every man dies, to ignore this fact and fail to account for it is a sign of extreme foolishness, but I do wish to discuss such a morbid topic. I want to know more about you and your life in Bellingham.”

“I repair computers and compete in ballroom dance.” No need for more lies, Elise could have the same career and hobbies as Maya, even if computer repair looked vastly different in this century.

“A simple and unambitious life for a superior woman.”

“It’s a peaceful life.” Heaven forbid that an Augment find a way to be content without conquering worlds.

“And tell me more about your dancing, what titles have you won?”

Already the assumption that a dancer with The Great Khan’s genetics would be a champion. “First in Pacific Northwest region, second in the world.”

“Only second?”

Still not good enough. She should have lied. “My partner was unenhanced and no doubt held me back.” In reality, Maya found Bea to be the stronger dancer. She had years of ballet starting in childhood, a strong work ethic, and had a positive outlook on the learning process that was improving one’s craft. Maya, however, never danced until well into adulthood and felt every mistake as a blow to her ego.

“How unfortunate.” The dog left his master’s side and went to lap up more water from the fountain. “Which dances do you favor?”

A moment of panic. Maya wasn’t familiar with all of the ways her sport evolved from one century to another. “Paso doble, Viennese waltz, Argentine tango...” Those she was mostly sure originated on Earth. “If I never had to dance another foxtrot, I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Joaquin is known for dancing a spectacular paso doble. I will be hosting a gala in a few days. I would like to see the two of you perform together.”

Maya’s heart jumped. She had hoped to avoid the man who found her existence highly suspicious, not to spend time working closely with him “I don’t think he’d like that at all, to be honest.”

“Consider it a chance to build rapport with one of the most valued members of my inner circle,” Khan answered with a slight smile. “I understand that the past few days have been trying. Please, use the remainder of the day to rest.”

Back in her room, Maya wasted no time in letting down her hair and tearing off the fine jewelry. So much gold and gems, and she left it all in a messy clump on the table. She collapsed into a chair. She needed rest, but while her body was exhausted her mind was on fire with so much to process. Five children. Five half-siblings who would die centuries before she was born, whose names and lives would be lost to history. One of them, at least, would have children of their own and eventually that line would lead to La’an, but otherwise? After the Eugenics Wars, the world did not look kindly on Augments.

A troubling thought popped into Maya’s head. What if she was the one who was meant to become La’an’s ancestor? Was she meant to stay behind in the 1990s to start a new life and a new family? Maya closed her eyes and tilted her head back. This was too much to think about, but also too much to accept without question.

There was a knock on the door. Maya was in no mood to see anyone, but she sighed and replied with a beleaguered “Come in.” She expected Suzette Ling again, but felt a jolt of surprise to see Chaarani, Khan’s oldest child and technically Maya’s older sister even though she was probably about thirteen.

Maya sat up straighter and tried to force a polite smile. Even with her rotten mood, the least she could do for a child was to offer warmth and kindness.

Charani gave Maya a perplexed look as she glanced at Maya’s disheveled hair and the mess of jewelry on the table. “Have I disturbed you?”

“Not at all.” Maya tried to sound friendly even though speaking one on one with her sister was someone more uncomfortable than speaking to her father. “I’m very tired, but it’s fine. Do you want to talk?”

Charani nodded her head and entered the room to sit on the other chair. She had so much poise and elegance, a glaring example of how Khan’s Earth children were so different from his children from Ceti Alpha V. Maya and Arjun grew up acting like feral animals and fighting every time they were near one another.

“You and I are family, or at least Father seems to think so.”

“And what do you think?” Chaarani leaned back with her eyes wide. Maya knew that look, this was someone who wasn’t used to their opinions being considered. “I won’t be offended if you disagree, and I won’t tell Khan either. Believe me, it’s not in my best interest to plant seeds of doubt in his mind.”

“I…think it’s far-fetched, but the evidence is sound, and I have no real reason to doubt it.” Chaarani forced a nervous smile. “And I want to believe it because I think you can help me in a way that no one else can.”

Maya leaned in. There was a hint of distant fear in the girl’s voice. “I’m not sure I can do much of anything for you, but I’ll listen.”

Charani looked down and took a little breath. “I am the heir of The Great Khan, and I feel I may need to fulfill that role sooner than I expected.”

“Why? Is something wrong?” Maya spoke with gentle warmth. This child suspected something, and Maya itched to know exactly what.

“No!” Chaarani snapped. “No, of course not. It’s…only a feeling I have, and it might amount to nothing, but if it does come to pass. I think I would value your guidance.”

A shiver went down Maya’s spine. Just when she had finished convincing herself that she wasn’t meant to stay behind in 1996 after all, this poor girl who seemed to have figured out that she would soon be saddled with a crumbling empire came to her to beg for help.

“Charani.” Maya spoke firmly now and looked the girl in the eye. “I’m sure I know much less about ruling an empire than you do. Your father has advisors whose whole purpose is give guidance.”

“I have a feeling they might be unavailable as well.”

Damn, She had to know.

“Your mother?”

“I would prefer to have another member of Khan’s line at my side.”

“Charani.” She spoke even more firmly, the same voice she used when she tried to urge her nephew to get himself together and finally do that overdue homework. “I’m honored that you trust me enough to ask this, but I need to return to Seattle. I can’t say why any more than you can explain why you feel so sure that you’re about to become a teenage empress, but I need you to believe that this is more important than I can describe.”

Charani considered this, a look of confused shock on her face. “You’re turning down a great honor…”

“The work I need to do in Seattle is much more important.”

Charani stood up. “Well, that was all I wanted to ask. I suppose I should see you again, but I hope you’ll at least give my offer more consideration.”

“I can’t promise anything. Goodbye, Chaarani.”

“Goodbye.”

Maya watched Chaarani leave, and the moment the door closed behind her, she rose from her chair and stumbled over to collapse on the bed. Her mind and body were worn thin, but her thoughts and feelings were too heavy to let her rest. For Chaarani, she felt an uncomfortable mix of pity and jealousy. The situation she would face (and so young) was not an enviable one, but in this child Maya saw the sort of person she had once wanted to be. Chaarani was the better version of Maya: full Augment, loved and valued by her father, the heir to an empire. What if every time Khan had treated Maya unfairly it was he secretly compared her to this other eldest daughter?

And what of the two half-Augment children? Were they like her, less loved by their father and constantly put down for being genetically impure? Or did living on a planet full of regular humans give them enough of an elevated status to where parental disappointment and unmatched sibling rivalry were less of a burden to bear? Maya rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. For the first time since she had spoken to Carmack she felt a sense of stillness and calm, but she still found it unsettling. She couldn’t sense Saavik through their bond, something that she had been aware of the entire span of time she had spent in this year, but only now had the space to process it and feel so

utterly alone. Was Saavik feeling just as alone and wondering what happened to her bondmate, or would this whole ordeal end with Maya returning to the very moment she left her own time?

Maya took long, deep breaths, and even though those uncomfortable thoughts never quieted, they at least (in time) subsided to allow her to drift into a heavy sleep.

Chapter 9

Somehow the thought of being alone with Joaquin was more nerve-wracking than speaking alone with her father. Khan wanted to believe that she was Elise Khavari and had nothing to hide, but from the start Joaquin searched for reasons to doubt her.

The clothing she had been provided was more sensible than the colorful silk finery: a black tank top and calf-length skirt and tan sandals with low heels. As she was led through the halls of the palace her anxiety grew. What if the differences in technique and artistry evolved too much over the centuries? These were the times when gender roles were more strictly adhered to. Maya had danced with partners of all genders but always led. Now she would have to do everything backwards, on the other foot, and with a high enough proficiency level to convince a skeptic that she had been one placement off from becoming a world champion.

The rehearsal space was an empty banquet hall with polished wooden floors and chandeliers on the ceiling. Joaquin was already waiting for her, standing by a table near the wall and stretching with his back arched and his arms reaching over and behind him to hold his foot so his body made the shape of a ring. Even for rehearsal, he wore a low-cut silk shirt, dress pants, and a new set of rings on his fingers. The look of cool confidence on his face suggested that he was more interested in showing off than in warming up. After pulling his leg deeper into the stretch, he eased out of the position and crossed the room to greet Maya.

“Well.” He opened his arms in a welcoming gesture. “I suppose I owe you an apology. Your test results are in, and it seems that you do, in fact have a genetic relation to The Great Khan.”

“So you trust me now?”

“Oh no,” he stifled a chuckle. “I doubt if I will ever trust you. I am slow to warm up to new people as a rule, and I still think there’s something strange about you, but for now I must put my personal feelings aside. The Great Khan wishes for us to work together, and so we shall.”

He went back to the table and began to press buttons and adjust dials on a large electronic device that Maya now knew enough to understand that it was used for playing audio. Music began to play, and it was definitely not a paso doble.

“Enter from that corner,” he continued as he pointed. “Pardon the inconvenience, I haven’t yet been able to find a recording that fits my taste on CD. On the day we will have a live band.”

Maya and Joaquin took their positions and stood poised and elegant waiting for begin. There was a pause in the music before the next track began: a familiar paso doble, *Espana Cani*. The two dancers rushed toward each other with bold and graceful strides, and when they joined one another, Maya tried to forget her instincts and let Joaquin lead and give her little verbal cues.

“You hesitate,” Joaquin said as he led Maya into a turn. “As if you doubt yourself.”

“I’m adapting to a new partner, and the floor is slick.” But he was right. She had to think carefully about movements that would be second nature if their roles were reversed.

Joaquin took her by the hand and pulled her in close. “Your fingers...I don’t like the way you hold them. It breaks the line.”

“It’s how I was taught.” They pressed close for a moment before arching their backs to lean away from one another.

“Second place fingers.” Joaquin swiftly glided away from Maya and leapt into a high tour jete while Maya chased after him with a series of chaines turns. They rejoined and returned to the closed position. “When did you place second? I don’t recall seeing you at any of the championships.”

“I’m surprised you paid any attention to the first to come in last place,” Maya teased to deflect the question. “But it was in 1980.”

“Sixteen years since your last placement. No wonder you dance poorly.”

Even in this century she wasn’t good enough.

As the final bars of music played, the pair made a dramatic finish where Joaquin made one more quick leap before both dancers took a dynamic pose. They held position for a moment after the music finished and only released it after the next track began to play. Joaquin went back to the table and pressed a button on the electronic device. As Maya returned to her starting position she could hear a soft mechanical whirr and then an angry series of clicks and skips.

“God damn it!” Joaquin pressed another button, and the device ejected a small cassette that had erupted a tangle of thin tape. He looked toward Maya. “Well? Don’t just stand there, fix it.”

Maya rushed over and took the broken cassette in her cupped hands, holding it as if it were so fragile it might shatter into dust. She looked down at the tangled mess as if it was a delicate baby bird fallen from the nest.

“I thought you were some kind of repair expert.” He took a pencil from the table and offered it to her. Perplexed, Maya looked from the pencil to the tape in her hands and back to the pencil before she realized she was meant to wind it back together.

“Sometimes improper use can make things beyond hope of repair,” she answered as she took the pencil, slipped it into the hole on the cassette and carefully began to wind it back. The tape looked so thin, she feared she might snap it and make the whole thing worse.

Joaquin watched over her with his arms crossed as she tried to fix the tape. “Who was your mother?”

Maya looked up, surprised by the sudden change in topic. “Esther Khavari. Why does it matter?”

“I’m curious to investigate if Esther ever actually worked at the Noonien-Singh Institute.”

She looked back down at her work and did not look up when she answered. Most of the tape was wound back into its casing already. “That might not have always been her name, I imagine if she did something so extreme as stealing experimental embryos, she would have put in some effort to hide her identity. And also, I’m not even sure if the person who stole me from the lab was even the same person who raised me. This is all new for me too.”

“It can still be confirmed, if any embryos were stolen in the first place.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know anything about that. I wasn’t born yet.” Maya wound up the last bit of slack and offered the cassette back to Joaquin. “Hopefully this helps. I’d like to go again, as you pointed out, I need a lot of practice.”

Chapter 10

After four days of living in Khan's palace, Maya found a new rhythm to life and began to feel a sense of normalcy, like this was now her home too. She responded to the name Elise like second nature and sometimes had to stop and remind herself that she was not Elise Khavari and that this woman never existed. Her new life was comfortable and easy. Most of her waking hours were spent practicing with Joaquin (who began to keep his suspicions to himself and kept his mouth shut unless he was correcting her dancing) and every evening she attended formal dinners with Khan and his family and discussed fine art, literature, and music. She knew his tastes and found it easy to build rapport with him, something that had never happened when he knew her for who she really was. That feeling that maybe she was meant to stay behind in this century kept trying to creep back in.

This twentieth century life was beautiful and leisurely. There were moments when she forgot her purpose and stopped scheming a plan to get out of here and back to Seattle to see that the launch would go off without incident. There were moments that she forgot all the ugliness she had seen in this century: the slums, the violent police officers, the devastating war. Maya now understood something that once baffled her: how people living through such trying times could turn a blind eye to the suffering around them. It was easy to ignore hardship when you lived a charmed life and were well removed from the worst of it.

One more day remained until Khan's gala. After that, Maya promised herself she would get back on track. She would impress him with her dancing, he would be in high spirits, and maybe she could earn enough trust to reveal a little more of the truth. Just enough to highlight the gravity of the situation: that she knew he meant to leave Earth, that this course of action was the best one, and that she had reason to believe that endeavor might be compromised.

Over dinner Maya had enjoyed more wine than she intended and felt a joyful glow as she walked the halls of the palace to return to her room. She hated the fact that she would miss this place, but the ornate beauty was unmatched in her own century. While there were carefully preserved historic sites from the ornate past, in time humanity would move on from the desire to display wealth and opulence.

However her high spirits crashed in an instant when she turned a corner to see Joaquin waiting outside of her door with his arms crossed and a sour look on his face. A shiver shot down Maya's spine. He had never bothered to seek her out outside of their rehearsals.

"Elise." He stepped forward. "If that really is your name... We need to talk."

Maya inched backward, her heart racing and her spine stiff. "What about?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm determined to find out who and what you really are."

"Careful," Maya taunted, her usual response to feeling threatened. "I don't think The Great Khan would appreciate you questioning his interpretation of the matter."

Joaquin stepped forward and towered over Maya. Her bravado was gone as she was reminded of the way her brother used to intimidate her. "Is it questioning when I have proof? There was only one viable embryo that went missing from the Noonien-Singh Institute."

"I suppose that embryo was me. That would seem to confirm Khan's theory."

"That embryo was male,"

"You're quick to assume I wasn't born male," Maya snapped. Being under duress disintegrated what little impulse control she had.

"I don't have the patience for this!" Joaquin spat. He lunged forward and grabbed her shoulders. "Who the hell are you and what are you hiding?"

Panic and a primal fear for her life took hold. Maya squirmed to try to break free but couldn't overcome his strength. She moved swiftly to knee Joaquin below the belt, and while he recovered from the sudden pain, Maya made her escape and sprinted back to her room where she locked the door behind her.

She slid down to collapse on the floor with her back pressed against the door and hung her head, and she breathed heavily as waves of anxiety crashed on her from multiple angles. Another impulsive mistake with far-reaching consequences, and her mind spiraled into playing out the worst possible outcome: fears that she would no longer be welcome here, that her father would come with more prying questions, or that her entire mission would fail.

And what about all of these people who she was meeting for the first time? Joaquin, Suzette Ling, Runa Hassing, her own father... what impact would it have when Maya Noonien-Singh was born on Ceti Alpha V and would grow each day to resemble Elise Khavari more and more? She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths before she rose back to her feet and crossed to the window. The night was dark, but she couldn't see the stars for the hazy light in the sky, and she found herself wanting another cigarette. Damn Iris for offering her that first one.

She arched her back to stretch and sat on the bed to kick off her shoes. What she needed was rest, but her mind was too active. She hated herself for getting distracted by this luxurious life and was no closer to finding out what Carmack meant for her to do, let alone to implement it, but there was nothing more that she could do tonight but to play along. Maya flopped backwards on the bed and stared at the ceiling. She doubted if her performance would still be on for tomorrow night, but if it was she needed to be well rested.

Maya felt as though she had only dozed off for a few minutes before she was awoken by a knock on the door. She was still dressed from the night before, but the morning light was coming in through the window.

“Come in,” she called as she sat up and scooted to perch at the foot of the bed. When the door opened, she expected to see the servant who never spoke a word, but instead it was Suzette Ling with a bottle of champagne, two glasses, and a smile on her face that made her eyes light up.

“Sorry for waking you up.”

“You didn’t wake me up,” Maya lied.

Suzette tilted her head and gave Maya a curious look. “I know it’s early, but I thought you might like to go ahead and celebrate.”

Now Maya returned that curious look. “What exactly are we celebrating?”

“Sorry, I guess you had no way of learning the news.” Suzette set the glasses on the table and began to uncork the bottle by tucking it securely under her arm and working the cork loose with her other hand. Maya rose from the bed and sat at the table. “Runa Hassing won the election.” The champagne opened with a bold pop, and a stream of bubbles flowed out.

“What election?”

“The presidential election in your country.” Suzette looked and sounded as though she was explaining something blindingly obvious. “I won’t lie, it seemed like the opposition was going to overwhelm our strategies.” As she spoke, Suzette poured the champagne.

“May I ask about those strategies?” Maya took a glass and felt a growing tightness in her chest.

“Nothing you need to worry yourself over.” Suzette took a dainty sip of champagne and sat down. “Only a bit of insurance. I’m sure you’ve seen that most don’t easily accept the rule of law when it comes to biological superiority. I doubt Hassing’s victory could have been assured if she played by the rules. A necessary evil, but for the greater good.”

Maya played along and sipped her champagne. “Good for her,” she mumbled. So it wasn’t enough for these people to cheat biology, they had to cheat the system too.

“I probably shouldn’t say anything, but with the way the wars have been going, many of us had taken on a pessimistic view of the state of the world.” Suzette took another sip. “But maybe things aren’t so bleak after all.”

Maya was mid sip as she listened, and her throat closed up when she tried to swallow. The champagne in her mouth came back up, and she scrambled to blot the mess away with her sleeve. “Excuse me...it went down the wrong way.” Carmack didn’t tell her about this. He made it sound like there would be sabotage, not like the Augments would simply have a change of heart. She cleared her throat. “I hate to ruin the moment, but maybe temper your optimism. I’ve spent a lot of time with the common people. I doubt if they’ll accept Hassing so easily. This wouldn’t be the first time extremists tried to use violence to reverse an election, if it came to that.” Or maybe it would be? Her understanding of this period of time was hazy.

Suzette tilted her head and gave Maya a curious look. “A problem for Hassing to solve herself if it arises. For now, I’d simply like to enjoy tonight’s gala with a new celebratory purpose.”

Maya looked down and shook her head. “Don’t think I’ll be able to enjoy it as planned. Last night I fought bitterly with Joaquin.”

Suzette nodded, “I did hear about that. Luckily, he cares more about pleasing The Great Khan than anything and can put aside your disagreement long enough to fulfill your commitment.”

“Wish I could do the same.” Maya sighed. “But I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“I’m sure the two of you can put on a brave face for one night before you go back to hating each other.”

“And I need more rest if I’m going to pull that off.”

“I understand.” Suzette stood up. “Should I leave the bottle?”

“Please don’t, I shouldn’t be drinking so much before the performance.” Another sip of champagne. She did intend on finishing just the one glass. Maybe it would help her to relax.

“Sensible. Get good rest.”

Suzette turned to go, but Maya called after her. “Wait...before you go.” She paused to consider the best phrasing that would reach the balance between being vague enough to not reveal too much and direct enough to convey her point. “I really don’t mean to ruin the mood with my pessimism, but I don’t think any snap decision should be made yet. If you have any plans in place in case things do take a turn for the worst, I don’t think you should abandon them just yet.”

Suzette narrowed her eyes and took a step back toward Maya. “Elise.” And another step. “Why were you at Boeing headquarters?”

“I wanted to speak with Runa Hassing.” An evasive answer if she ever gave one.

“You’re going to need to be more specific.” She crossed her arms and stood up a little straighter.

A gaping hole in her story that Maya hadn’t bothered to fill. “I was in trouble with the law in Seattle, for unfair reasons. I hoped the most prominent Augment in the country would take pity on me and use her sway to help me.”

“I do hope Joaquin was mistaken, being so wary of you.”

“The Great Khan trusts me. Is that not enough?” The cult-like hold her father had over these people could be used to her advantage.

“It should be, but it still doesn't feel like enough.” Once again, Suzette turned to go. “For now, though, I don't want to let this bring down my high spirits. Don't make me regret letting this go.”

“I think you'll regret it more if you don't take my words to heart.”

Suzette gave Maya a pointed look and crossed to the door. “That will remain to be seen.”

Chapter 11

Maya was able to drift off for a quick nap before she was awoken and escorted to the reception hall for one final performance. The hall had been transformed into an even more opulent space. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling with swags of silk draped around it and tables with gilded chairs and crisp white tablecloths were arranged around an open dance floor.

Joaquin was as diplomatic as Maya could hope for. He said nothing as they rehearsed with the live band for the first time and ran through their routine three more times until Khan arrived just in time to catch the last few bars of music. He offered a polite clap and a small nod.

"I believe that will be sufficient." His voice was chipper, but his face was stern: just as difficult to read as he would be on Ceti Alpha V. "Joaquin, you have two hours' time to prepare in any way you see fit. Elise...a moment of your time before you go."

Joaquin shot Maya a smug look before he left, and Maya felt a ball of tension curling inside her. Khan watched Joaquin leave, and when he was gone, Khan stepped closer to Maya and placed a hand on her shoulder. His touch was gentle, but Maya flinched away. She was once again a young child standing in front of a father who thought intimidation was an essential pillar of good parenting. Maya had never succeeded in keeping secrets from her father before.

He looked down at her with a sly smile on his face. Maya knew that look well, the same look he had when he caught her in a lie. "Joaquin and Suzette both spoke to me."

Maya tried to stay brave and calm when she answered, careful to not give validity to his doubts. "About what?"

"Joaquin has deeper concerns about the veracity of your origin story, and Suzette has doubts about your intentions."

Her heart raced, and she worried that she wore all of her fears and doubts on her face. "Their opinions don't concern me, but yours does. What do you make of it?"

"I have proof that you are a blood relation, but while my initial theory may be less plausible, I haven't formed a new one. As for your intentions, I, too, have the impression that you know things you shouldn't and have not revealed your whole story."

Maya took a deep breath. "I haven't been entirely truthful, no." She paused, trying to think of a way to re-earn his trust without revealing too much. She began to speak rapidly, with a genuine air of desperation. "But I'm afraid I can't say anymore, and you won't believe the truth. I only ask that you still find it in your heart to trust me and to believe that I have your best interests in mind. Yours, and your wife's..." she didn't say which one "...and Suzette's, and Runa's and Joaquin's even though he hates me. And mine too, and it's all connected, but I can't explain how."

Maya felt her face grow hot and her fingertips shake, and if she didn't keep careful control of herself she might have begun to cry. In contrast, Khan was calm and stern as ever. "I believe you, about your intentions at least, but I feel more comfortable keeping a close watch on you."

"I understand." She had calmed considerably, but her heart still raced.

"And I am confident more details will reveal themselves in time. For now, though, I wish only to enjoy tonight's celebration and leave such concerns for another time. Use this remaining time to calm yourself, Elise."

Maya turned and took a few steps away before she remembered something Hassing said that sent a jolt down her spine. "Wait...there's something else I want to say."

Khan stopped and turned to look back at her.

"The Mars expedition. Runa Hassing mentioned a Mars expedition. Even if there might be obstacles, or doubts, it needs to go on as planned."

He took another step toward her. "What do you know about the Mars expedition, and why does it interest you?"

"Hassing mentioned it." Not a lie. "I only think that it would mean a great advancement for science and would hate to see humanity miss out. I know enough to understand that the conditions for such a feat have to be just so, it would be a shame if this opportunity was missed."

Khan offered a sage nod. "That I can understand, but due to recent developments, the need for such...scientific advancements may not be so urgent."

"I suppose that's welcome news." Maya's voice was soft and shaky. She struggled to remain calm. "I should go."

Too late. She was too late and someone else had gone and changed Khan's mind. All Maya could do was use the remaining hours to clear her head and hope there was still some way to clean up the mess she was in.

Oddly enough the sensibilities of Latin dance costumes had changed little over the centuries. Conventions of modesty were still the same, and the goal was still to catch the eye and highlight the dancer's movement. Maya was given a dress in a sunny shade of yellow that was deeply embellished with fringe and rhinestones, and she was sure to tuck the device from Agent Carmack discreetly between her breasts. From a distance it would not have looked out of place on the dance floors of the turn of the 24th century, but Maya noticed the little difference in fabric weight and seam placement that made the ensemble feel old-fashioned. It was not lost on her that this garment was likely made on a cut rate from workers paid an insultingly low rate.

Joaquin was also dressed in a manner fitting for the competition stage. His black shirt was not only sheer and dotted with rhinestones but also worn open to the waist. He wore gold chains on his neck and carried himself with an air that suggested that this was how he wanted to appear

all the time.

Khan found great pleasure in leading Elise Khavari around to introduce her to his most trusted friends. Most of these were people who hadn't met her yet, but who she had grown up with: Augments who would flee earth aboard the Botany Bay. There were a handful who were strangers to Maya—presumably Augments who didn't make the cut—and one American gentleman who wore a pin on his lapel of an enameled double helix against an oval circle. Khan pointed out that this man was responsible for Runa Hassing's presidential victory and played a great role in earning elevated social status for Augments.

Her mind and her body ran hot as the guests started their night with casual cocktails. She didn't dare have any more alcohol, but when a few gentlemen stepped outside to smoke Cuban cigars, she happily joined them.

The night air was more pleasant than the sultry daylight sun, and Khan's dogs took full advantage of the milder weather by galloping and chasing each other. Maya's first few puffs of her cigar were far more pleasant than her other experiences with tobacco. There was a rich, warm taste and smell accompanied by a mild headrush, but the rush gained momentum and reminded Maya both that nicotine was a stimulant and that she was not in the headspace to do anything to make her more on edge.

She nearly jumped when, from behind, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and she calmed again when she heard Joaquin's voice whisper in her ear. "Almost showtime. Besides, that's a nasty habit."

Maya wouldn't argue with that, and she was relieved to pass off the rest of her cigar to someone more eager to finish it. Joaquin led her inside and through the cramped back rooms and halls of the palace where the walls were plain and the lights were harsh. As they moved along, Maya felt a sudden surge of panic as she saw a man who looked like Agent Carmack working with the waitstaff. She stopped and stared, and could have convinced herself that this was just an ancestor of his, but the severe look he gave her told her that he, too, was there for a distinct purpose.

Joaquin left her while he continued through the back halls to his own starting position, and Maya felt overwhelmed and alone. Her eyes itched, and she closed them and took deep breaths to hold back the tears. All she could do was focus on one step at a time, and the step right in front of her was to force herself into a mindset when she could put on a good show.

From her hidden spot, she heard her father's voice announcing the performance. His voice was more upbeat and pleasant than Maya had ever heard. If she was going to convince him that he had to flee earth on a space ship to nowhere, she was not going to do it tonight.

One step at a time. She held her head high and stood tall with her shoulders back as she glided to her position on the dance floor. Just as they rehearsed, Maya and Joaquin began at opposite corners of the dance floor and approached each other with bold confidence as the music began. Maya was fully committed to her performance. She forgot any other thoughts that might distract her: the uncertain status of her mission, her distaste for Joaquin, her uncomfortable conversation with Khan...everything except the haunting image of the man with a face like Agent Carmack's.

She tried to forget him, but as Joaquin spun her around the dance floor she kept catching glimpses of him moving through the crowd and serving drinks. In the final bars of music she caught sight of him one more time. He had no serving tray in hand, and the look on his face was even more stern than before. Time slowed down and even though Maya knew what was happening, she couldn't bring herself to do anything but carry on dancing as Carmack reached into his vest and pulled out a pistol.

A white hot surge of pain blasted through Maya's left shoulder, and screams could be heard as Joaquin let Maya drop to the ground. Hot, red blood flowed from the wound, and though Maya's whole body shook she tried to pick herself up off the floor. The best she could manage was to get to her hands and knees. For a moment, she saw the blur of people rushing past to get to safety, and she could hear the sounds of shouting and frantic movement before her weakened body gave out and she collapsed face down on the floor.

Chapter 12

Maya awoke in a hospital bed with tubes injected into the veins in her right arm and her left arm immobilized. The explosion of pain in her injured shoulder hadn't subsided, but instead transformed into the sensation that her entire limb had been crushed. Just as distressing as the pain was the swirling wave of dizziness and nausea. Keeping her eyes open was too much effort, but closing them and trying to go back to sleep offered no relief.

She half listened (and wished for silence) as a soft spoken nurse explained the brutal procedure she had undergone to wire back together her bones and the generous dose of painkillers being pumped into her veins. If this was with the drugs, Maya couldn't imagine the kind of suffering such a weapon could inflict on a person without it...and yet the people of this century were all so fond of their firearms.

The nurse also explained that the shooter was still at large, that witnesses said it was as if he simply vanished in the chaos. Maya didn't doubt that, but she couldn't puzzle out his true motives, how his unexpected attack fit into it, or what the purpose of any of this was. The nurse left, and Maya quickly fell back asleep. Her troubled thoughts weren't enough to break through her foggy mind.

The sound of footsteps woke Maya from her sleep. The nurse was back, but instead of coming to Maya's side to check her vitals, she lingered by the door. "You have a visitor," she stated.

"Who would possibly want to visit me?" Her voice was scratchy and her throat was raw and dry. The only person from this century who seemed to give much of a damn about her was Khan, and Maya knew that he lacked the empathy to consider a hospital visit.

"Chaarani Noonien-Singh."

Right. The teenage girl who had shown an unusual interest in getting to know her. "Send her in."

Chaarani was dressed plainly, and the only indication that she was anything other than an ordinary teen was the glimpse that Maya caught of the armed guards who waited just outside the door. Chaarani stood just inside the door for a moment and forced a smile before she went to sit in the chair beside the bed.

"I like to think that Father would have liked to come and see you himself." She looked down and spoke softly. "But I'm afraid it's too late for that."

God fucking dammit.

"You mean..." With her head drowning in morphine, Maya struggled to collect her thoughts and put them into words. "They shot him too?"

Chaarani snapped her head up. "Oh no! Nothing like that! I mean...he left. I don't know to where."

"To Mars?" Maya offered

When Chaarani spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. "Somehow I have a feeling you know they weren't going to Mars."

"Next time if you're trying to keep a secret, don't give up the truth so easily."

Chaarani's eyes opened wide, and she took a little breath to regain her composure. "To be fair, you revealed your secret too."

Maya chuckled and felt a tightness in her chest that swelled through her whole body. Only her arm was injured, but every cell was exhausted to the core. "I am on too much morphine to be in any state of mind to keep a secret."

"Then tell me why you know."

She chuckled again and felt another spasm in her chest that brought on a coughing fit. Maya could feel the congestion deep in her lungs, but it wouldn't break loose for anything. "That secret I can still keep." She paused to consider her next words. "Father...your father...was...still is...obsessed with the improvement of humanity. If this launch goes as planned, that will ultimately lead to more advancements than you can imagine."

"I don't understand..."

"The less you understand the better." Maya considered the perplexed look on Chaarani's face, and when she continued she spoke with authority and gravitas. "You offered me the chance to be an advisor for you in your father's absence. I'm going to accept that offer by advising you to use all the power that your name and genome grants you to get me out here and on my way to Seattle to see that the launch goes off as planned. And I'll need a gun."

Chaarani blinked before she gave an affirmative nod. "I think I can manage that."

"Good. Now step outside so I can get dressed. I can't waste another minute, I'm leaving with you."

"I don't think..."

"They can't keep me here against my will, can they?" Maya tried to fiddle with the IV in her right arm, but the fingers on her left hand were too painful and awkward to be of any use. Instead she brought her arm to her mouth and ripped out the needle with her teeth. Chaarani watched with wide shocked eyes before she darted out of the room.

Maya was unsteady on her feet and only had the use of her non-dominant arm as she wiggled back into the blood stained dance dress, the only

clothing she had. She breathed a sigh of relief to feel that the device from Carmack was still tucked inside, though she doubted if she could trust it to take her back home when the time was right. Her shoes, she didn't bother with,

Chaarani was still wide-eyed when Maya stepped into the hall. Her eyes moved from the blood stains to Maya's bare feet and back to the blood stains. "You're going to need new clothes and a pair of shoes," she said.

"No time for that. I don't mind. Really."

They were met with many shocked stares and some resistance on the way out of the hospital. Most who stood in their way were discouraged by a stern look from one of Chaarani's armed guards, but those who persisted stepped aside when they explained that they were on official business of The Great Khan Empire.

The analgesic effect of the drugs wore off, but the dizziness and brain fog did not, which made the discomfort of air travel all the more difficult to bear, and the searing pain in arm only grew to swallow up her whole body. Anxiety was her only distraction from the pain, and even then it could only take up space in her mind because of the gravity of the situation. The fate of the earth and the Federation weighed on her shoulders, and there was likely little she could do.

She was met in Seattle by a driver in a crisp suit who gave a puzzled glance from the bloodstains to her bare feet but said nothing as he opened the door for her on the passenger side of the black car. He remained silent as he drove, and Maya couldn't stand it.

"Put on the radio." Her voice was quick and frantic. "The news."

After a small nod, the driver turned a knob on the dashboard, and the confident voice of a female news reporter came through.

"President Elect Runa Hassing canceled a scheduled appearance in Los Angeles with only hours of notice and no reason given. When asked for an explanation, aides refused to comment."

Maya took a deep breath and didn't bother listening as the reporter went through a list of common speculations. It didn't matter what these people made of it, Hassing going missing was a promising sign.

The fence that surrounded Boeing headquarters came into view, and Maya felt a sudden jolt of fear. "Let me out here."

The driver turned to look at her. "You sure about that?" The first words he spoke to her.

"It wouldn't be fair if you got involved."

He shrugged as he slowed down and pulled the car to the side of the road. "If that's what you want. The gun's in the glove compartment.:"

The vehicle came to a stop, and Maya grabbed the weapon before she opened the door and stepped out of the car. With a gun in her hand and the ground beneath her bare feet, Maya felt her attitude toward the mission shift from anxiety to the kind of wild desperation that one feels when fighting for survival. As adrenaline surged through her veins, Maya stopped caring about the pain and dizziness and ran along the side of the road at a full sprint.

She reached the security checkpoint to see the same guard who was there the last time. He raised an eyebrow. "You again? I didn't think it was possible, but you look even worse than the last time."

"Yes. I know. I need to see Hassing. Urgently.:"

"New security orders on launch day, I can't let anyone in...certainly not with a firearm."

Some of her fear fluttered away and transformed into excitement. "So it is happening? The Mars expedition?"

"Look, I don't feel like calling the cops, but I will if you don't get out of here."

Point taken. Maya slumped her shoulders and began to back away. After putting some distance between herself and the guard, she turned and began down the road to go back to where the car had pulled over. Her momentary sense of relief was gone, replaced with an even heavier burden that weighed on her and made every sensation all the more intense. The cold air, the pain and dizziness, and the rough ground beneath her feet all dug through her and cut her down to her core. With one last wisp of desperation, Maya looked back toward the Boeing compound and racked her scrambled brains to find some solution.

Or maybe she didn't need that solution.

Plumes of smoke billowed from the far side of the compound, and seconds later the ground shook and a deafening roar filled the air. The plume raced into the sky, and within seconds the smoke cleared and the spectacle was over as quickly as it had begun. Botany Bay launched as planned, and Maya had to trust that everyone who was supposed to escape earth was present on that ship.

She froze for a moment and felt so overwhelmed that she couldn't help but let out a laugh before she reached into her dress to fish Carmack's device out from between her breasts, but she stopped when she heard a car coming from behind that pulled over and stopped nearby. She turned, expecting that her driver saw her and came closer to pick her up, but this was not the same car.

The driver side door opened, and out stepped the American man who she met at Khan's party.

"I hadn't expected to see you out here, Elise Khavari. I expected Carmack to send his agents to interfere, but I hadn't expected one of our own." He held his hands out in a welcoming gesture, but his voice was sharp and accusatory. "Or maybe I should say Maya Noonien-Singh."

“How do you know who I am?” She was too shocked to recall the advice she had given to Chaarani.

“We’ve met, or, rather will meet, centuries from now. I admired your work, but it seems I misunderstood your intentions.”

Maya tried to process her thoughts as she studied this man closely. She was sure she had never seen him before the party. “I don’t understand. What work?” What had she done of note as a computer repair technician or a dancer?

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jason Ruitter. I represent the interests of Augments in the twenty-fourth century. We found that changing the past would have a greater impact than changing the future.” He extended his right hand, but Maya stared at it in disgust. “It may not be too late to turn history in our favor. There are enough of us still on earth. You were brought into this conflict unwillingly, and I am willing to extend one more offer to you to be on the right side of history.”

She stared at his outstretched hand a moment longer before she responded. “I’ve seen the future your interference caused. Earth fell to the Romulans.”

“I’ve seen that future too. Earth won’t be conquered for another one hundred and fifty years. One hundred and fifty years of advancement inspired by the rightful order of biological supremacy. Humanity will become a better species.”

“But not good enough to beat the Romulans.”

“My life will be over by then. I’m less concerned with Earth and more concerned with my place in it.”

Maya’s heart raced, and she felt every cell in her body grow hot as anger and panic swallowed her whole. This man couldn’t be allowed to remain in this century, and Maya had no way of knowing if the device tucked inside her dress could drag a second person back with her. One certain option remained, and Maya clenched her jaw as aimed her gun at him and pulled the trigger.

So much happened in one instant. A loud bang that left her ears ringing burst through the air and the kickback from the shot (which Maya hadn’t expected at all) surged through her arm and made her lose her careful aim. Ruitter still fell to the ground, presumably from shock because there was no blood or any sign of injury.

“Fucking hell!” He shouted as he tried to get back to his feet.

Now that she knew what to expect, Maya braced herself before she fired again, three times just to be sure. He laid crumpled on the ground in a puddle of his own blood. At first he seemed motionless, but then he struggled to lift his head and look his attacker in the eye.

There was no need to stay here a moment longer. Maya tucked her gun underneath her injured left arm and reached down into her dress to activate the device. 1996 faded away.

Chapter 13

Maya materialized in the transporter room of the DTI headquarters where Carmack was waiting for her. She moved quickly to pull the gun out from under her arm and aimed it at Carmack. This time she braced herself with every muscle in her body rigid and tense, ready to pull the trigger.

“Give me a good reason why I shouldn’t do to you what you did to me,” she spat.

Carmack remained calm and unmoved, with his hands clasped behind his back and his feet set wide. “I had hoped you were a better person than to let the late twentieth century’s obsession with gun violence rub off on you so easily.”

His calm demeanor in the face of a lethal threat was disarming. Maya couldn’t harm a person like that. She lowered her weapon and surrendered it to a nearby security officer, and now, even more than on her journey to Seattle or confrontation with Ruiter, she felt exposed and out of place. The room was clean and cold, and the people around her wore crisp gray uniforms: what a contrast to her bare feet and bloody dress.

“Come,” Carmack continued. “I can explain everything.”

Maya followed Carmack to his office, grateful that the halls were empty with no one to see her in such a state, and she sat across from him at the desk.

“Why?” Her voice still had a caustic bite, and she was on high alert even if her impulse for violence subsided. “What did you hope to accomplish by sending me back in time just to attack me?”

“To instill a sense of fear in Khan. To remind him that the world was still very much against his kind and that the outcome of one sham election in one country didn’t change that. And it had to be someone from outside the timeline.”

Maya took a deep breath. It made sense. She didn’t like it, but she had to admit it made sense...and yet it left so many more questions.

“Why not shoot Ruiter?”

“Khan had no attachment to him, and he had begun to make himself a public figure. You were unknown.”

Another deep breath. Carmack had prepared for this meeting well, and Maya was confused and frantic, but still searching for a way to find a flaw in his plan. “There was no way to stop him?”

“If only that had worked one of the seven times I tried. Ruiter had been in the twentieth century for fifteen years, he learned how to play politics like a game of 3D chess, and even before he left his own time he had planned for contingencies upon contingencies. The one thing he hadn’t anticipated was a hard left turn after he thought he clinched his victory.”

More genetically engineered arrogance. It had been her father’s weakness too.

Maya paused, still seething in her anger but she had nothing more to say. “I’m still not ready to forgive you for it.”

“Nor do I expect you to, but I think we will be able to work together in harmony regardless.”

Maya sat up straighter. “Is this another time I’ve already agreed to something?”

“Not yet, but I would like to extend a recruitment offer, if you can promise to learn to be a bit more discreet.”

A faint blush appeared on Maya’s cheeks. “To be fair, you’re partly to blame for giving me no guidance.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. You need medical attention from a provider who can be trusted with the utmost discretion.”

“I have someone in mind, but he’s not going to be happy about being bothered.”

She should have seen a doctor from Carmack’s recommendation. While she felt safer with McCoy than any stranger, his constant commentary became grating, and all Maya could do was sit on the edge of the biobed with her shoulders slumped and listen to it all.

His round, blue eyes were wide, and the worry lines on his forehead deepened as he read his tricorder. “You’ve got a gunshot wound, bones held together with wires like some shoddy repair job, and there’s traces of opiates and nicotine in your bloodstream...just what the hell have you been up to?”

“DTI business.” Maya’s answer was short and business-like. “I spent some time in 1996.”

“Damn...that explains a lot.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Just be more careful.”

Silence fell, and even though Maya found the break in McCoy’s complaining welcome, she felt the weight of a thought that needed to get out of her head. “I...met my father.”

“And?”

“And...” Maya looked down, regretting saying anything because now that she had to go on she felt vulnerable and scared. “He had no idea who I was and respected this person I was pretending to be more than he ever respected me.”

McCoy nodded and said nothing, but this solemn, silent show of understanding was more comforting than any sympathetic noises.

“Do you think he ever figured out that it was me?”

“Well,” he answered with a short sigh. “No one has any way of knowing that, but you’ve hardly aged at all in the fourteen years since he died. I think it’s certainly possible he started to recognize you and piece things together as you grew.”

Maya looked down. “I’d rather he didn’t, it makes it all the worse how he treated me badly.”

A slight yet warm smile appeared on McCoy’s face. “Then I suppose, the good thing about having no proof one way or another is that you’re perfectly justified in believing what you please.”

When Maya materialized in the living room, Saavik was sitting and waiting for her. She looked up, but showed no indication that she was at all surprised to see her partner arrive home in a completely different set of clothes: a new DTI uniform.

“I was informed that you were away on sudden business with the Department of Temporal Investigations,” she explained.

Maya sat beside her partner, and the two pressed their fingertips together. “And I suppose they also told you not to ask any questions because I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“They did, but if you chose to ignore that order, you have my assurance that I will practice a greater sense of discretion.” It was just like Saavik to find great satisfaction in following the rules.

“I’ve seen a lot that I need to process, and I think it would be best explained with a mind meld rather than a conversation.”

Saavik shifted to face Maya and placed a gentle hand on the side of her partner’s face. “Your mind to my mind, your thoughts to my thoughts.”

Chapter 14

2377

San Francisco

One hundred and ten years old, and while the years were finally beginning to catch up with her, Maya still had all the health and vitality of a woman decades younger. She would have been content to live out those decades (mostly) being left alone aside from Carmack roping her into some bizarre mission from time to time...until several of Deep Space Nine's personnel became involved in the Bell Riots and she met Julian Bashir. To Maya, the investigation was only weeks after she began working with the DTI.

For him it was only a few short years ago that they met, but for Maya it had been decades. He was the first Augment she knew, other than her own nephew, who wasn't toxic to the core. He shared with her his private struggles, his fears once his secret was out, and his concern about four Augments who he described as "hospitalized for their own safety." To Maya, however, it sounded more like they were imprisoned. Her heart ached to think how narrowly she and Enzo had escaped a similar fate. Earning trust was a hard road for Maya, and her nephew never quite learned how to behave in a way that was sufficiently normal.

Her conscience urged her to take action, but she couldn't do it as a woman from another century, and she couldn't interfere from the past. She had to wait and think until the appropriate time to arrange formal appeals with the proper Federation authorities in an attempt to change an unjust law. She had no desire to reverse the ban on genetic engineering, only to restore the dignity of those who ended up that way with no say in the matter.

She was not alone. Julian had plenty to say, and Maya often referenced the late Una Chin-Riley—both the exceptions made for her and her exemplary service. Julian's four friends were there to talk—the most talkative and energetic of the group reminded her of Enzo when he was younger—and two of three other women who had been born on Ceti Alpha V and started a new life on Earth when they were teens. The third one submitted her piece in writing, as she had an extreme aversion to being surrounded by people. Enzo was also absent, with no time to spare while he conducted the orchestra for the Mariinsky Ballet and played drums in a David Bowie tribute band.

Like everything else she did, it fell apart in front of her. Maya lacked the charisma and gravitas that helped to make her father famous. The speech she had planned for years turned into a spiraling ramble, and what she hoped might move people to tears only earned a polite clap. She was relieved when the whole thing was over, and was the first to rush out into the hall, where she kicked off her shoes and began to let down her hair.

"Miss Noonien-Singh!" A voice called. Maya turned to see a young man (definitely under twenty) rushing upstream against the flow of people to catch up to her. There was something familiar about him, but she couldn't think of a name to put to this face or recall where she might have seen him.

"I'd rather just be Maya." That was one of the few talking points she knew she remembered to include.

"Sorry. And sorry I missed the whole thing. I hadn't realized it would be a limited audience, and I couldn't make it over after class in time anyway. Can I talk to you for a bit? I have so many questions."

Even younger than she thought. "I'm sorry, I don't have the energy for that now. We can get in touch another time."

"I'd appreciate that. By the way, my name's Jason Ruitter."

Maya's eyes opened wide, and she fought to keep any sign of shock from showing on her face. "Jason." Her tone was stern, and internally her mind raced, weighing the possibilities of affecting both the future and the past. Would blocking him entirely harden his heart or stop him from whatever genetic supremacy path he supposedly would start down? "How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

Still younger than she thought, but still old enough to be a rotten person.

"Jason." A little breath as she planned an evasion. "I'm not entirely comfortable keeping in contact with a child. Send any questions you have in writing, and I will consider it." At best, that gave her a way to ignore him without it seeming intentional.

However, Jason seemed disappointed. "I will. Thank you, Maya."

"Don't worry about it." She turned back and began to walk away without waiting for a response.

"Wait, Maya! Will there be a recording available?"

"Doubt if it'll be open to the public." If Jason said anything more, she didn't hear it, as she vanished into the crowd.

This was what Ruitter had meant when he said they had met before. Back then, close to four hundred years ago but yet in this man's future, he had been a power-hungry weasel, but now he was still just a boy. Just a boy with the same capacity for good and evil as anyone, just like her father once was.

