

Don't Look Back in Anger

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Don't Look Back in Anger

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Summary

T'Ralia's parents were loyal to the Terran Empire, and when they died she was taken in by an influential Terran.

This is the story of how a young Vulcan grew up as an outsider in a xenophobic society, earned a respectable place in the world, and came to realize the deep flaws in the world around her.

(It's the origin story of mirror!T'Ralia)

Notes

Ummm, it's dark mirror universe stuff. Tags and rating may be updated because I'm not sure where the hell it's going lol

T'Ralia was briefly featured in "Mirror of the Mind" and her prime version in "That Which You Have Sown"

Loss

It was logical to support the Terran Empire, her parents used to say. That while their situation was unfavorable at best and unsafe at worst, the alternative was to throw one's life away on a lost cause that would only prolong violence and suffering. Even those guided by logic didn't always agree. There were extremists who believe that any open acts of defiance, even when unsuccessful, would slowly break down the Empire in the hopes that maybe their children's children could have a chance at freedom. Her father called it a crude perversion of the old adage "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." These people were her family's enemy, and her parent made a decades-long career of finding the shadows where those people lurked, and while the information they gathered led to a massive uprising being suddenly stopped, they had given their lives for it. Even logical pacifists had a point at which they could be moved to use lethal force.

T'Ralia never thought much of her parents' line of work, but after their death learned that their accomplishments earned them a sort of reverence that Terrans rarely showed toward offworlders. T'Ralia had less than two weeks to process her loss and learn to adapt to life as a homeless twelve year old orphan before she was informed that there was an Imperial ship in orbit and that the director of Imperial Intelligence meant to posthumously honor her parents with a medal of valor.

In every way a person could be out of place, T'Ralia was. Her plain clothing looked inappropriate in a sea of gilded Terran uniforms, and there were no other Vulcans gathered in the ship's assembly hall, only Terrans. She stood beside Director Van Der Broeck a man with whom she was incidentally familiar, as he spoke in a booming voice that dripped with arrogance and gravitas.

"Today we are gathered to honor two of our finest agents who gave their lives in service to the Terran Empire. Sivek and T'Mirin were offworlders who knew their place and worked for most of their lives to ensure the proper rule of order..."

He continued on, nearly shouting, and repeating the same few points over and over with different phrasing: that Imperial rule rested on the backs of obedient subjects, that agents like her parents were the reason colony worlds like Vulcan didn't need to be destroyed, and that in time everyone would fall in line and these little uprisings would be a distant memory.

As he handed the medal to T'Ralia, his bold speech was met with only polite applause. The crowd was dismissed, and T'Ralia wanted only to get out quickly and return to the planet's surface to whatever difficult life she faced, but from behind her she heard Van Den Broeck's voice calling for her.

"T'Ralia. I need to speak to you."

She turned to face the director and saw that his face had softened in a way that sharply contrasted the imposing man from only moments earlier. "I take it your parents informed you of our arrangement?"

T'Ralia raised a perplexed eyebrow. "I was never informed of any arrangements."

"Then your parents misjudged the risks inherent in their line of work. I know you have no surviving family. We agreed that you deserve a better life in Terra Prime." He paused, "I have the necessary documentation, if you don't believe me."

"Am I correct in assuming that even if I am unsatisfied with the documentation I will still be in no place to refuse?"

"It's already been done, T'Ralia." His tone was stern. "I am your legal guardian. If I let you return to the planet, I would be letting my child walk right into danger. You have no family, nowhere to go, and a not insignificant portion of that planet's population thinks your entire family are traitors. Vulcan has nothing left for you."

T'Ralia nodded as she considered this. "Then the logical choice is to stay with you, but I still wish to review the documents."

"Perfectly understandable." The harshness was gone from his voice. "I have one more question. The vegetarian diet, is it a biological necessity, or is it cultural?"

"Cultural."

"Good. I'd hate to have to deal with the hassle of accommodating that."

Van Den Broeck was thorough in his documentation. He had not only the necessary legal documents, but had kept recordings of conversations he had with her parents. This was all her father's idea, and T'Ralia could see the sincerity when he humbled himself and asked what any Terran would see as a massive imposition. There was logic in it, for a person in a dangerous career with no friends and family to look after his child. If there was any deception, the effort and resources required would have been astronomical. There was no logical reason to go to such lengths.

The ship had left Vulcan and began its return journey when the time for the evening meal arrived. Van Den Broeck had insisted on using the meal to celebrate the start of their new family. T'Ralia had been given a new set of clothes: formal attire in dark blue velvet trimmed in gold and red braid. He offered her a warm smile as she joined him at the table. "You know, you nearly look like a Terran girl, aside from the unflattering hair cut. I take it you're decided to trust me now?"

"I believe that the arrangement was made legitimately and with full consent. I have yet to pass judgment on your character," she answered as a Kelpian servant served the food and poured red wine into Van Den Broeck's glass. T'Ralia looked down at the plate: some kind of grain, some kind of green vegetables, and some kind of meat. T'Ralia recognized none of it.

She began to sample the vegetables, and Van Den Broeck wasted no time before he began to interrupt her with questions. "Tell me what your education was like."

T'Ralia set down her fork. "I had no formal education, but my mother values knowledge and made the best attempt with the resources she had....forgive me, I find this conversation unpleasant. The Vulcan custom is to consume a meal in silence."

He took a sip of wine. "And you have new customs to learn. The sooner you adapt the better."

He gave her an expectant look, and T'Ralia never broke eye contact as she cut a small bite of meat and ate it in spite of the instinctual reaction that made her feel as though she was trying to consume something inedible.

"But, anyway, I, too, value knowledge. I'm hopeful that once the gaps in your education have been addressed I can get you into a top academy, even though they don't normally admit offworlders."

There was a lull in conversation station, which T'Ralia used to focus on her food. The meat she avoided, but the vegetables and grains were palatable if unfamiliar.

Van Den Broeck set down his fork and had another sip of wine. "Tell me what you think of the Kelpian."

Again T'Ralia raised a perplexed eyebrow. "We did not interact. I cannot yet..."

"That's not what I meant."

For all of the control she usually had over her emotions, she couldn't keep an expression of shock from appearing on her face. There was no logic in ending a life for food when equally nutritious and more sustainable options were readily available. To consume a sentient life form was unthinkable. He knew that this was the first she would be eating meat, and he served Kelpian. Without uttering a word, he mocked her.

"Director Van Den Broeck." She began.

"I'm your father now."

"Father. I have the sudden suspicion that you are trying to mold me into a different person. Someone more Terran."

"Nothing like that." Fine clothes, fine food, and fine wine yet there was still something uncivilized about the way he talked between mouthfuls of food and gestured with his fork. "I don't mind that you're logical and emotionless, if that's really what you want. I can see the advantages in always keeping a cool head. All I want is to be sure that you're behaving in a way that's a little more acceptable. Now finish your dinner, a Kelpian died for that meal."

Apex Predator

It was early summer when T'Ralia arrived on Terra Prime, but San Francisco felt like the depths of winter. People, she was convinced, were not meant to live on this planet, at least not now after centuries of devastation left the sky heavy and filled with dark clouds and the air cold and damp.

After months of testing and private tutoring, T'Ralia was ready to start her first term at a proper Terran school. Even the middle school uniforms in this planet were ornate: grey wool with trim in gold braid, and her sleek black hair had grown longer (though, Van Den Broeck still said it looked "all too Vulcan"). He escorted her to school on her first day of class and sent her off with the most heartfelt words he could manage.

"I went to great lengths to get you here, T'Ralia. They had to change admission policy for you. Prove that all the effort was worthwhile."

"Yes, Father."

Van Den Broeck reached out to put a comforting hand on T'Ralia's shoulder, but she pulled away. Ever since her parents' death T'Ralia had been starved for touch, but she had no interest in what little Van Den Broeck offered.

Her morning was uneventful. Math and physics she expected to excel in. Terran literature was entirely unfamiliar, but at least the other students would also be reading and studying those works for the first time. Lunch, she dreaded, as she still was uncomfortable with the Terran habit of using meal time as a social activity. She sat alone at an empty table with the expectation that she would be disturbed, but before she began to eat a group of three girls approached.

"Excuse you." The girl who spoke couldn't possibly be more than two years older than T'Ralia, but she carried herself like a child trying to seem very mature. "This is our table."

T'Ralia stood and picked up her tray. "Pardon my mistake. I was unaware." She tried to step away, but the girl blocked her.

"Beg for forgiveness, Vulcan."

"I offered a sincere apology, was that not satisfactory?" Her calm demeanor was a stark contrast to the way the Terran girl began to seethe.

Apparently not. The Terran dropped her tray hard on the table and shoved T'Ralia with both her hands. T'Ralia lost her balance and dropped her own tray, but she recovered quickly and slammed the Terran onto the table. As she held her down, T'Ralia whispered in her ear, still calm and steady. "I have three times your strength. I would advise you not to start an altercation that you cannot finish."

T'Ralia released her, and when she stood there was a trickle of blood from her nose and food caked in her hair. She was in a daze as she looked around in shock at every face that stared at her: peers who once respected her and now witnessed her undignified defeat.

Silence hung heavy and tense until one boy dared to shout out. "Holy shit!" He was lanky and pale with his hair shaved on the sides and back and growing wild and curly on top. "That Vulcan kid just beat up Karen Hadley!"

For all of the uproar that the fight caused, T'Ralia never heard another word about it, at least not expressly. Terran adults seemed content to sit back and let their children violently work out their disagreements on their own. The other children had quiet ways of acknowledging the sudden shift in power, like a respectful nod as they passed in the hall, and Karen had grown withdrawn and quiet. Her friends had abandoned her.

She moved through the halls between classes when a slim girl with light brown skin and coily hair cut in front of her to block her path. "T'Ralia. I need to speak to you," Her tone was forceful. T'Ralia had never introduced herself to this person, it seemed her reputation proceeded her.

"Go on."

The girl leaned in close and whispered harshly. "You need an ally. Sooner or later someone is going to try to challenge you."

T'Ralia had never wanted any of this, her actions were a logical response to a threat of violence. The possibility of bodily harm was the only thing that made her wish to avoid such a confrontation, her pride would not be hurt in defeat. "Are you threatening me or offering advice?"

"Neither." Her voice was still soft but less forceful. "I'm looking out for my own interests. I'm an outsider too, and I want to be on your side."

"I will consider it. We haven't formally met, I don't yet know your name."

"Micheal Burnham."

Together they were unstoppable. Despite Micheal's warnings, weeks passed without any challenge. Instead, their peers found subtle ways to try to get a little closer. Was Micheal a friend? Maybe not. Her father (either of them) believed that it was foolish enough to care about a person enough to call them a friend. Still, she felt closer to Micheal and trusted her more than anyone else on the planet. It eased the sense of isolation.

Students vied for a spot at their table, in the same way they once vied to be close to Karen and her friends. Micheal, however, was less

discerning in who she chose to let into her inner circle. When T'Ralia arrived one day, only one spot remained. Micheal stood up and crossed her arms before T'Ralia had a chance to set down her tray.

"I don't need you anymore. You aren't welcome here."

T'Ralia blinked. She wasn't hurt, but this was unexpected. "I seem to recall that you felt like an outsider before we formed our alliance."

Micheal narrowed her eyes. "That's quite a way to twist the truth. When I said you aren't welcome here, I don't mean just this table. You don't belong in this school or on this planet. I'd say you're only here because Van Den Broeck wanted to show off his new pet."

T'Ralia shrank back. She had no reason to lash out, there was no logic in escalating hurtful words to violence, and the way Micheal stood still and unyielding seemed to prove that she understood she was safe so long as she didn't make the first move. Without another word, T'Ralia turned to find another spot.

They had all been correct. Terrans were not to be trusted, and once again T'Ralia was alone aside from the telepathic link that joined her to the Vulcan boy she was bonded to at the age of seven, and she doubted if she would ever see him again.

Obstacles

T'Ralia's third year at the Imperial Starfleet Academy had reached an end, and these years were spent much like those of her primary education: working twice as hard to prove herself worthy in the eyes of her Terran peers, living according to their customs, trusting no one, and deferring to Van Den Broeck's advice at every turn and without question. The latter had proven to not be the most logical choice. His judgment was usually sound, but his insistence that she follow the command track seemed to be more about his own vanity than a fair assessment of his daughter's skills or her best interest. A decision had been made, and it was best to share this development in person.

High-ranking and loyal Terrans like Van Den Broeck lived in luxury accommodations in San Francisco. The interior was dark in color with warm, dim light that reflected in a glow off of the gilded accents. A Kelpian servant led T'Ralia to Van Den Broeck's study where he waited seated at his desk. Behind him were shelves packed full of the trinkets of a man who fancied himself a conqueror: skulls (most animals, but some from people of assorted species), artifacts from cultures across the galaxy, and ancient weapons.

"T'Ralia." He set down his PADD but did not stand to greet her. "I must admit this is a pleasant surprise. You've never been one for social calls. Have a seat. Can I get you a drink or anything?"

"No," she answered as she sat across from him. "My visit has a specific purpose, and I do not plan to stay for long."

"News you wanted to share in person?"

"Yes. I have reached the conclusion that the command track is not a suitable choice. I am changing the trajectory of my education."

Van Den Broeck curled one hand into a fist and looked away. He clenched his jaw, and the muscles in his neck grew tense. "And it took you this long to realize this? Tell me, where is the logic in taking a wild change in direction when you were so close to completion?"

"I came to inform, not to seek permission, ." While Van Den Broeck fought to hold back anger, T'Ralia was as calm as the moment she stepped through the door. "I have suspected this for a while, but did not want to accept the truth. It is not logical to pursue a career where one's best talents will not be best utilized."

Van Den Broeck let out a beleaguered sigh. "Then tell me, where would your talents be best put to use?"

"Medical."

He slammed a fist on the table and took a deep breath to try to steady himself. "Three years wasted. You're practically starting over, and the additional schooling..."

"The pursuit of knowledge is never a waste, even if it is not directly applicable."

"I went to great lengths to get you there, to prove that a Vulcan could be suited for command."

"And for that, I am still grateful."

Van Den Broeck clenched his jaw again. He hadn't yet raised his voice, but there was a sharpness in every word. "Have you considered how this reflects on me, to make such a sudden and wild change to follow a less prestigious path?"

"Your ego is not relevant, Father, and neither is mine."

He closed his eyes and took another deep breath. "I almost wish you would argue back, it's like talking to a wall. Your mind is made up. I hope you made the right choice; I can't imagine any Terran who would be willing to let you operate on them. Good luck in all this, T'Ralia."

"Luck will not determine my success, Father. My own hard work will." She stood up and offered Van Den Broeck a polite nod. "That was all I wished to discuss. I should go."

In time, Van Den Broeck came around. He could admit that there was a certain glory and prestige in the medical profession, and after a short lull in communication he was back to his old self, with constant contact and an unshakable desire to be a guiding hand in his adult child's life. And T'Ralia was right. This was a better use of her talents. She thrived, with a mind more suited toward medicine and a new burst of enthusiastic motivation that she hadn't experienced in her previous area of study. She worked hard to dispel the prejudice that was baked into Terran culture, and while she usually succeeded, one instructor was stubbornly set in her ways.

Alejandra Caro taught advanced neuroanatomy. She was a small Terran with a shrill voice who from the start gave T'Ralia nasty looks and graded her according to a stricter standard. However, the inconsistencies were small. T'Ralia did not call attention to it because Caro could reasonably use plausible deniability as an alibi until she marked T'Ralia poorly on an exam where she had made few errors.

As the other students filed out of the lecture hall, T'Ralia moved against the crowd to speak with Caro, who looked up at her with a look of annoyance on her face as she gathered up her belongings.

"I wish to discuss the recent midterm," T'Ralia began.

"Cadet Van Den Broeck," Caro began with a sigh. "I made it clear from the start, I don't negotiate."

"I do not wish to negotiate. If I have made mistakes, I hope to learn from them."

"You've only made one mistake, and that was joining my class." She wasn't speaking in her usual voice, each word was easy and measured as

if she was waiting for the chance to say those words.

“If I have been treated unfairly, I will need to inform my father.”

“Is that really what you want to do?” Caro’s tone shifted, now taunting. “Because to me that seems like it would only prove that you can’t accomplish anything without him.”

She was right. Every success T’Ralia experienced was due to her adoptive father’s support and assistance. “Regardless, he values transparency, and I will be informing him.”

Hot Blooded

On the first day of her first assignment of the ISS Custer T'Ralia dropped off her personal belongings in her quarters and reported to sickbay twenty seven minutes and nineteen seconds ahead of schedule. A Terran man with olive skin looked up from his work—presumably Chief Medical Officer Andrew Galanis. He gave her a confused look.

“And just who the devil are you?” he asked.

“T'Ralia Van Den Broeck. I arrived early.”

Galanis rose from his seat and walked toward her, looking her over with a critical eye. “No...this must be some kind of joke. I thought it was bad enough that the only other damn doctor on this ship was going to be someone so new, but with a Dutch name at least assumed you would be Terran.”

“It's Flemish,” T'Ralia corrected. “And my first name is unmistakably Vulcan.”

He narrowed his eyes and stepped closer. “I take it you studied the history of this vessel?”

“I did.” If Galanis was trying to intimidate T'Ralia, it had no effect.

“Tell me if you noticed anything that stood out.”

“Captain Kimetto holds the record for the longest captaincy of a single vessel.”

“And the fewest attempts on his life. In fact, if you had dug a little deeper you might have seen that this vessel has had few assassination attempts and fewer successes. Department heads hold their position for a long time. Can you guess why?”

“No, sir, I lack sufficient information to make an inference.”

Again, he stepped closer so they were only inches apart. They were close in height, so their noses were only inches away, and T'Ralia could feel his breath. “Threats from below are eliminated before they have the chance to become threats.”

“Allow me to reassure you, Doctor, I have no ambition to take your position. As you said yourself, I lack experience. I would be setting myself up for failure.”

Galanis placed one hand on the handle of the dagger strapped to his thigh, but he made no move to draw it. “If you were to be disposed of, I might hope to have a more suitable replacement. Don't give me any reasons to think any less of you.”

“Understood.”

“Brig to Doctor Van Den Broeck.”

“Go ahead,” T'Ralia responded. She could predict what this request would be about: some prisoner who was tortured to the brink of death who needed to be brought back to some vague semblance of health. Galanis considered this sort of work to be beneath him and was all too eager to offload this work on his Vulcan colleague. He never made another direct threat toward her, but T'Ralia never forgot the first one.

“A prisoner needs medical attention immediately.”

“On my way.” T'Ralia gathered her gear and supplies and left sickbay. The ISS Custer was in orbit over Vulcan where uprisings were regrouping. Proximity to her home planet was...trying. T'Ralia had no particular attachment to the place she once called home or the people who lived there, but she could feel the closeness to the bondmate she left behind. He burned with his first Pon Farr, and their connection affected her in a way that made it difficult for T'Ralia to concentrate and to keep control of her emotions.

The prisoner sat slumped on the floor, staring ahead with an intense gaze. T'Ralia did not recognize him after so long and with his face bruised and bloody, but the link they shared told her what she needed to know. This was her bondmate, Stellek, and he was deep in the blood fever.

“No idea what happened,” a guard explained. T'Ralia kept her eyes on Stellek, and he slowly turned his head to look toward her. “He's completely unresponsive.”

“This man is very ill.” T'Ralia did not take her eyes off of Stellek. “He will die soon without medical intervention, and any information he knows will perish with him. I can treat him, but I require privacy. Send him to my quarters.”

“You know I can't do that.”

T'Ralia closed her eyes and took a deep breath. If not for his phaser, T'Ralia had the strength to kill this man, and she felt a creeping impulse to make the attempt regardless. “Then what can you accommodate?”

“I can leave you alone for a bit.”

She closed her eyes again. What was supposed to happen in a traditional marriage ceremony would be carried out in a prison cell where even if the guard stepped away there would be no hiding the true nature of this ‘medical intervention.’

“That will be sufficient.” T’Ralia answered. She knew not to ask for too much from Terrans.

Without another word, the guard lowered the forcefield and turned to go. Stellek rose to his feet, and T’Ralia approached him with hurried steps. Stellek reached out to cradle T’Ralia’s face in his hands to initiate the mind meld, and soon they were one in both mind and body for the first time.

The experience was overwhelming, not the sex so much as the look inside the enemy’s mind. She saw Stellek’s reasoning, saw the horror that he had endured while she lived a sheltered life. She took a deep breath to steady her thoughts. Her reaction was emotional. Logic was still on her parents’ side. Rebellion would only prolong suffering. Obedience would end it.

“Your logic is flawed.” That was all she had to say as she straightened her clothes and hair. “But I will keep secret what I saw when we melded.”

“I could say the same to you, but I can understand the circumstances under which you reached your convictions.” Stellek was back to himself, aside from the bruises on his swollen face. T’Ralia did not offer to heal those, lest she be reprimanded for being too kind to a prisoner. “I knew your family favored the Empire, but I did not expect you to live as if you were trying to become Terran.”

“I am not trying to become Terran. Live long and prosper.” T’Ralia had no more words as she turned to go. In her heart, she knew he was right, and it went back further than anything Director Van Den Broeck instilled in her. Her native tongue was Terran Standard, spoken by her parents in her childhood home, and she knew little of the Vulcan language and could read none of it. She never learned the Vulcan nerve pinch or how to initiate a mind meld, and her parents thought it was more important that she learn the history of the Terran Empire rather than that of her own planet. Stellek could be right about one thing, and wrong about others.

Over the following days, T’Ralia developed a distaste for anything that reminded her of how un-Vulcan she was. She used her adoptive father’s Flemish surname, ate meat, and knew little of her own culture. In meditation, she tried to clear these thoughts from her mind. Perhaps Stellek meant to plant seeds of doubt.

She was immersed in work at her desk when Galanis returned to sickbay. He leaned against the doorframe with a sly smile on his face. “You know, the other day I heard a rather unsavory rumor about you, and by now I’ve heard it so many times that I wonder if it must be true.”

“What was the nature of this rumor?” This was inevitable. Her encounter with Stellek had not been sufficiently private.

Galanis moved to stand across the desk from T’Ralia. He placed his hands on the surface and leaned closer. “You and the prisoner.”

“You mean the patient I treated, as I was instructed.

“You know what I mean. Was that an old flame, or are you some kind of slut?” His voice was harsh.

“I have never seen that man before.” To admit to any past history with Stellek would invite undue suspicion.

Galanis straightened up, and his hands curled into fists. “I don’t believe you.”

“Vulcans do not lie,” T’Ralia lied.

He rushed around to the other side of the desk to grab T’Ralia’s upper arm and pull her to her feet. “Literally sleeping with the enemy, it makes you look bad no matter how you try to explain it, and I’ve been looking for a good reason to get rid of you.”

His right hand was on her, his dominant hand. T’Ralia was quick enough to take the dagger that was strapped to his thigh. Restrained, she had fewer options for a swift and effective attack but was able to thrust the blade into his lower abdomen. The shock and pain made Galanish cry out and double over, clutching his wound as red blood poured out. Before he could recover, T’Ralia pushed him backwards onto the desk and held the blade against his throat.

“Your mistake was making your intentions known.”

She slit Galanis’s throat, and with that one action she became the new chief medical officer.

The Captain's Woman

Chapter Notes

Content warning: this is the one with the dubcon

Captain Kimetto served an unprecedented fifteen years in command of the ISS Custer. The few challenges to his authority were handled swiftly, but nobody could escape the inevitability of death, certainly not a Terran in a position of power. The threat did not come from within, but from his wife who poisoned him when she came aboard to visit. Rumor had it she had been seeing his brother for years. His replacement could not match his unyielding command, and over the years the Custer went through a constant revolving door of new captains. Most of T'Ralia's work involved patching up botched assassination attempts.

Even Director Van Den Broeck met an end that was unsurprising but in an unexpected way. He survived opponents who tried to stab, poison, drown, and smother him but in the end fell victim to his own failing health. Terrans who lived long enough to die of old age were a rarity, and with his passing T'Ralia felt a sense of isolation that was in some way liberating. She had no one except her bondmate, the rebel. Miraculously, T'Ralia never sensed his death, though a quick execution would have been more merciful than whatever the Terran Empire had in store for a political prisoner like him.

With Van Den Broeck gone, T'Ralia found herself motivated to reclaim some of the things he had taken from her. She followed a vegetarian diet again like when she was very young, stopped using his surname except in official documents and began to style her hair in elaborate braids the way her mother used to. She wanted to learn more of the Vulcan language and her people's history, but in the Terran Empire, resources for such a pursuit were hard to come by.

Every seven years she could feel Steltek burn, and each time she expected to be the last until the blood fever subsided to indicate that he had found relief with someone else. Her life carried on without him, and up among the stars her life was affected little by what went on down on the planets. Steltek had been right about something else: The Terran Empire was not sustainable. The uprisings were more frequent, better organized, and longer lasting. It wasn't just the colony worlds, but even the Terrans began to demand fairness and equality. The rumor was that a Vulcan was in charge of the movement. Briefly, T'Ralia wondered if it might have been Steltek, but there were also rumors that this Vulcan was half-Terran.

Nothing she had yet seen in the Terran Empire prepared her for her next assignment about the ISS Portland. It was a newly commissioned ship whose crew skewed young and full of fiery rage. T'Ralia managed to keep to herself and stay out of their scheming. Another trait this crew shared was their foolhardy arrogance, the sort of arrogance that kept a person from admitting they were sick or hurt until they were knocking on death's door.

The Portland's captain, Elaine Kettering, was especially proud, and never stepped foot in sickbay until she was doubled over, shaking, and gripping her abdomen in a feeble attempt to hold back the red blood that flowed from several stab wounds. She collapsed to the ground, and T'Ralia rushed to her side, but Kettering shrank away.

"I don't want you!" She snapped.

"I am the only doctor awake at this hour," T'Ralia explained. "I can awaken someone else, but the more time is wasted, the lower your odds of survival will be."

"Never mind." Kettering forced herself to get back to her feet and stumbled to the door. "I'll sleep it off, and don't worry about the man who did this to me, I at least finished him off."

T'Ralia watched her leave, but did not stop her, it would do no good. . How very Terran to risk death for the sake of a racist belief.

The next day was uneventful until Vivienne Albrecht paid a visit to sickbay. Albrecht was an elegant woman with a willowy form and round eyes. The last time T'Ralia saw her she was the first officer, but now she wore a captain's uniform. She had a sly smile on her face and a confident swagger as she walked toward T'Ralia.

"I take it Kettering died from her wounds," T'Ralia said, flatly.

Albrecht nodded and came close enough to T'Ralia to touch her arm. "Meyer came through for me, even though he got himself killed in the process."

T'Ralia raised a perplexed eyebrow. "Then I suppose congratulations are in order, but I do not understand why you felt the need to inform me."

"I inherited Kettering's consort, but I don't want him." She squeezed T'Ralia's arm, not a gentle sign of affection, but strong enough to dig in her fingernails. "I want you to be the captain's woman."

T'Ralia felt her heart jump. This was a great honor, but one that she did not desire and was in no place to refuse. "Thank you, Captain." Her voice was calm and measured. "This is unexpected."

Albrecht squeezed T'Ralia's arm tighter and clenched her jaw. "That isn't an answer."

T'Ralia paused and closed her eyes for a moment as she took a deep breath. "I accept."

"Good." Albrecht released her grip and smiled playfully. "I knew you would make the sensible choice."

T'Ralia was grateful for the upbringing she had, but her knowledge and understanding of logic and emotional control stopped short when she was twelve years of age. Standing outside the door to the captain's quarters she found it difficult to hold back the creeping fear and tension that tried to grow inside her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. No harm would come her way. To obey was logical.

"Come in!" Albrecht called from inside as the door slid open, and T'Ralia stepped in. Albrecht was still in uniform but had taken off her shoes. "I was almost afraid you changed your mind."

"I had work to finish, and it took longer than expected."

"I suppose I should get used to that, I imagine you're very busy, but no matter." Albrecht crossed to the desk where there was a bottle of champagne and two glasses, and T'Ralia followed close behind. "Now is the time to celebrate. I eliminated Kettering, and through no effort of my own." Albrecht began to uncork the bottle, but found the cork more tightly jammed in than expected. She tried to keep graceful dignity as she worked to free it, but in an instant the pressure launched it out and sent it flying past her ear. Albrecht clutched her heart and shrieked before letting out a bright laugh. "Did you see that? Nearly put my eye out!"

T'Ralia was still flat and unaffected. "An advantage in choosing to keep a doctor by your side."

Albrecht began to pour the champagne, which bubbled wildly inside the glasses. "I can think of many advantages in keeping you close by. This agreement, I've been a captain's woman myself, I want you to understand it's about more than just sex. It's about companionship, someone I can trust." She took a glass in each hand and offered one to T'Ralia.

"You trust me?" T'Ralia asked as she took her glass.

"I distrust you less than most. A doctor isn't going to try to steal the captaincy from me." Albrecht sat in the chair at her desk and took her first sip of champagne. "Sit. On the floor beside me."

T'Ralia obeyed, and Albrecht began to work loose the braids in her hair with her free hand. "Have you ever been with a Terran before?"

"I have not." T'Ralia kept looking straight ahead.

"Is that why you hesitated? Are you frightened?"

"I am not frightened." Now T'Ralia leaned her head back to look up at Albrecht. "I find the idea of having sex with you repulsive."

The insult seemed to have no effect on Albrecht. "I can change your mind."

Stellek burned again. Over the years T'Ralia learned how to manage it. She knew nothing of what sort of life Stellek lived, but he had been in a situation where the issue had been able to be resolved quickly, but this time was different. He burned for longer than before, each passing hour bringing him closer to the point where he might die if he could not find relief. His smoldering desires drove T'Ralia mad, and when added to the worry she felt over her bondmate her emotional control was compromised.

T'Ralia kept herself together until she was alone in the captain's quarters waiting for Albrecht to arrive. She sat at the desk, rested her elbows on the desk, and leaned forward as she closed her eyes in meditation.

She didn't have enough time alone to get any closer to regaining self control when the door slid open and Albrecht stepped inside.

"T'Ralia?" There was a confused look on Albrecht's face. "What happened?"

T'Ralia forced herself to look up, but only moved her eyes. "Captain?" Her tone was harsh and forceful in a way that sounded foreign to her usual calm and measured nature. "I cannot control myself. For your own safety, you should leave me alone for at least an hour."

"Oh?" Albrecht did not heed the warning and instead walked forward with a playful sway in her hips. She placed both hands on the desk opposite T'Ralia and leaned forward. "Can't control yourself how?"

T'Ralia still found the captain unpalatable. She had the distinctive Terran stench about her, sweated more than most, and thought herself to be a skillful lover when in fact she was awkward and clumsy in bed. Yet, somehow, with no other options, this was who T'Ralia desired: the curve of her breasts, the way her long wavy hair hung over her shoulder... T'Ralia closed her eyes and took a deep breath before she answered with one word. "Sexually." She hoped there would be no more questions. She did not have the patience to explain this, not to an outsider.

Albrecht lifted her body up so she was on her hands and knees on the desk. "That doesn't sound like a problem at all."

T'Ralia lost what little self control she had. She sprang forward to knock Albrecht backward off the desk and tackled her. "I am still lucid, but not for long. I cannot predict what I might do."

The whole time, Albrecht never showed a sign of fear. Instead, she was excited. "Please...this is my preference. You can't do anything to me I wouldn't want."

Albrecht fell into a deep sleep when they were done, but T'Ralia was still tense and alert as she lay beside her. Her own lusts were satisfied, but Stellek burned for another hour before finding relief of his own just in time to survive another Pon Farr. T'Ralia's tension did not ease

even after she sensed her bondmate's return to safety. Captain Albrecht would have questions when she woke, questions that T'Ralia did not wish to discuss with a Terran.

Chapter 6

The Terran Empire was changing at its core, but aboard the ISS Portland one would not guess. Captain Albrecht insisted that the reforms (which challenge the very core of Terran culture and behavior) would remain a short lived trend and that in the far reaches of deep space such measures would be entirely unenforceable. She stood tall and spoke proudly, but T'Ralia could see the little signs of stress. Albrecht spoke less, had tired bags under her eyes, and carried tension in her shoulders.

Albrecht walked at a brisk pace as she entered sickbay. "Doctor Van Den Broeck," she called. This was unusual/ Albrecht only ever called her by her given name. "Are you alone? We need to talk about something personal."

"I am alone, yes." T'Ralia was seated at her desk and did not rise to greet the captain.

Albrecht perched on the edge of the desk. "It seems the reformers are more thorough and persistent than I expected. We're taking a detour to Starbase 12 for what they're calling an inspection but what will surely turn into an interrogation. I want everyone to seem to be above reproach until everything settles down and goes back to normal."

"Understood." This news did not concern T'Ralia. Steltek may have said that she was trying to become Terran, but the only time she had taken part in their worst traditions her hand had been forced. It was logical.

"And because 'everyone' includes myself, I have to release you from your obligation to me, and if ever it comes up, the whole thing was your idea."

T'Ralia raised an eyebrow. "Understood. I take it this is a temporary measure." Albrecht had been possessive and proud, such a sudden change was unexpected.

"No. The novelty of sleeping with you has long since worn off," she sighed as she stood.

"Likewise." T'Ralia had hoped this day would come for years, when this woman would grow tired of her and move on to someone else, but she felt no sense of relief, only instability when faced with this unmistakable evidence that everything she knew was changing at once.

Albrecht gave her an incredulous look. "You've always had a smart mouth for a Vulcan."

"Captain/." Her voice was stern. "To be frank, it would behoove you to keep such thoughts to yourself during the upcoming inspection."

"And it would behoove you, Doctor, to realize that you are in a position to ruin a great many Terrans. Be careful what you say."

The ISS Portland approached Starbase 12, and while most of her crew felt tension and fear, T'Ralia was calm and unemotional as ever. She had nothing to hide, but something did seem out of the ordinary: she could sense her bondmate. Steltek was on the starbase, but T'Ralia could not guess why. The time for T'Ralia's interview came and she felt no fear, no need to rehearse in her head what she wanted to say, no shred of nervousness until the office door slid open and she saw who sat on the other side of the desk.

"Steltek?" Once again the sight of her bondmate caught T'Ralia off guard and tested her ability to retain control over her emotions. Of all the people in the galaxy who might find some fault, some reason to have her stripped of rank and disgraced she sat across from the one who was most likely and most motivated to do so. She tried to regain her composure. "Your presence here is unexpected."

Steltek raised an eyebrow. "My survival was a direct result of my valued status to the reform movement. I thought you might have reached that conclusion on your own."

"The purpose of this meeting is to assess adherence to Imperial Starfleet reforms. It was logical for me to expect a member of Starfleet."

"An outside perspective was desired."

T'Ralia gave a small nod. "I take it you have already reviewed my service records. You may ask anything."

"A mind meld would be both more accurate and efficient."

"I refuse."

Steltek raised a perplexed eyebrow. "And your logical reason for refusal?"

"I have thought that I wish to keep private."

"One might become curious as to the nature of these hidden thoughts."

"I have endured trauma that I do not wish to re-live when talking would be sufficient. If your force me into a mind meld against my will, you will be no better than the Terrans who harmed me."

A heavy moment of silence passed as the two Vulcans stared each other down. Steltek was the first to relent.

"Very well," he said. "I stand by my initial assessment of your character, but aside from your loyalty to the Terran Empire, there is little you have done that is morally reprehensible."

"My loyalty was based on the logical desire to preserve my safety. Over the years I have come to realize that you were right, the Empire was

not sustainable. And about my morally reprehensible actions, you may ask. I can justify all of them.”

Stellek paused briefly to glance down at his PADD. “You killed a superior to take his position.”

“I responded with lethal force to a direct threat on my life.”

“Which would be a logical course of action if you had any evidence in your favor?”

“I have only my word and logic. I had no desire to become Chief Medical Officer when I killed Doctor Galanis. I was too inexperienced to be suited for the position.”

Stellek nodded and made a note. “I would also like to know your opinion of Captain Albrecht?”

T’Ralia felt a jolt but remained calm. “In what regard?”

“I understand you were the captain’s woman, surely she confided in you regarding the recent changes.”

“You will have a better understanding of where she stands on the matter when you speak to her yourself.” Too evasive of an answer, she couldn’t leave that without further elaboration. “She finds it unnecessary and bothersome but understands the value in compliance.”

Stellek looked at his PADD and kept his eyes down as he answered. “I suppose one cannot expect more from a Terran who would force a person into an intimate relationship.”

“Albrecht never forced me!” T’Ralia snapped. Stellek raised an eyebrow, and as she calmed herself she realized once again that he had been right about her. Obeying a Terran authority was more important to her than revealing a truth that would expose a grave injustice. There was one moment when T’Ralia could have corrected herself, but T’Ralia let it go. To disobey was too great of an obstacle. “I pursued her myself. I wanted to be the captain’s woman.”

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