

The Desert Between

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The Desert Between

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

Summary

"All Vulcans are constrained. By our biology, by our clans, by our whole society. But women more so than men, and offworlder women married to Vulcan men most of all." Nyota loves Spock. But she can't have him without taking Vulcan culture, too.

Notes

Betaed by [Laura JV](#)

The title is an adaption of The River Between by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

"No," Nyota said. "You're not hitting the final 't' sound hard enough. *Tushat*. Try it again." It was a sign of the times that one of the first phrases taught in Vulcan these days was the ancient, formal, "*I grieve with thee*."

Bei Kangying, one of the Federation aid workers she was tutoring, frowned. "Tushat."

"Much better," Nyota said. It was, though now the final 't' was *too* hard. Still, she only had a few more days with Kangying before the *Enterprise* would arrive would arrive at the new Vulcan homeworld, Keshta'shivau, and they both had other duties in the meantime. She could learn the nuances of pronunciation once she got there. "Try the whole phrase." She didn't allow herself to glance longingly at her bed, tucked away in the corner with a beautiful zebra-print coverlet. As the Enterprise's head of Communications (which included Linguistics, Anthropology, Cryptology, and a few other miscellaneous subdepartments), her schedule left little free time, most of which was taken on this mission by tutoring sessions. She held them in her quarters because they were comfortable, and because the public spaces were generally all in use while the ship was packed to the gills with supplies and aid workers. This late at night, however, a less comfortable environment might have been better.

Kangying sighed, running a hand through her sleek black hair, so much like a Vulcan's. Nyota forced her attention back to Kangying's words. Her pronunciation was ... unique. The Federation had provided quick-teach chemical learning of the main Vulcan language for all aid workers, but the accent it taught left much to be desired, coming from a Human source as it did. When added on top of a pronounced Mandarin accent instead of the Standard English accent it had been designed for, the results were ... mostly comprehensible.

"Thank you," Nyota said in Vulcan. "We will continue the lesson tomorrow at the same time. This one thanks you for your diligence."

"I was horrible, wasn't I," Kangying said in English, making no move to leave.

"Your pronunciation was better earlier," Nyota replied, again in Vulcan. "The hour is late."

"No kidding," Kangying said. "I was hoping to get together with the girls for a game of poker tonight. *That's* not happening now." She gathered her things into her bag and stood up. "Why do we have to learn that phrase, anyway? It's not like they have emotions to grieve *with*."

And that was the other reason Nyota disagreed with the decision to use chemical learning instead of the regular, slower immersion/classroom method—at least when the teaching imprint came from a non-native speaker. "If you'd *read* the information I gave all of the relief workers when you came on board, you would know that there are a few key words that weren't translated properly when we first met Vulcans, and have been mistranslated ever since. 'A'rie'mnu' is one of them. It doesn't mean *suppression* of emotion; it means 'passion's mastery.' Vulcans have very strong, very deep emotions. That's why they need to control them so strictly." She shook her head, remembering some private meetings

with Spock over the year since Vulcan's destruction. "Believe me, they do grieve."

"Oh," Kangying said. "Sorry, I haven't had time to read that yet—we've been so busy getting equipment ready and working on planning."

"Kangying ..." Nyota paused. "The most important thing for the Vulcans right now is the rebuilding of their culture and society, not the building of the new colony's buildings. They named their new homeworld 'rebirth,' and that's exactly what they want to happen. It's surprising that they've let in *any* outworlders live there on a permanent basis, and they're *only* doing it on the assurance that you can fit in to their ways. Regardless of your architectural and construction skills, if you can't learn to respect and live in their culture, they'll ask you to leave. When we drop you off, we'll be picking up almost a third of the first wave of assistance workers."

"You're kidding," Kangying said. "That's pretty illogical. Most of the surviving Vulcans were diplomats and scientists and artists who had been travelling offworld, weren't they? It's not like they have the skills to build and run their new homes and power plants and sanitation stations without our help."

"You're judging that by *human* standards," Nyota said. It would have been much easier for the Federation, and the aid workers, if Vulcans would actually *say* that. But Vulcans considered it rude to state the obvious, as it implied a judgment on the intelligence and logic of the listener, and they did not take into account that what was obvious to someone steeped in Vulcan culture might seem strange and counter-intuitive to a foreigner. Only Nyota's long experience with Spock helped her understand Keshta'shivau's requests, and even she was puzzled by some of them. The Vulcans were being unusually reticent. "To a Vulcan, *being* Vulcan is as much about family and culture and history as it is about being biologically and genetically a member of that species. And within the next few months, if all goes as scheduled, the number of non-Vulcans on Keshta'shivau will equal the number of non-Vulcans on Vulcan at the time of its destruction ... except that instead of being mixed in with over six billion Vulcans, you'll be mixed in with slightly less than ten thousand. They have good reason to fear being culturally overwhelmed, and they're determined not to let it happen. Please be respectful of their wishes."

"I'll try," Kangying said. "And I'll pass that along to my colleagues." She gave a formal bow and switched to Vulcan. "This one thanks you for the lesson."

"It is an honor to serve." Uhura gave the slight nod of a teacher to a student, copied from Spock when he'd first helped her with her conversational Vulcan.

A week later, Nyota had done all she could to improve the language and cultural skills of the various aid workers. They were arriving at Keshta'shivau that morning, and any further instruction could be done by the Vulcans themselves. Living among them would do more than a classroom setting could, anyway.

Nyota was at her post when Enterprise entered the system. She handled the identification with the massive Starfleet defense systems even now being constructed; it would be the most formidable in known space, but no one was calling the Vulcans paranoid for insisting on it. Several other Federation members were clamoring for their own, but all priority construction went to Keshta'shivau. As protocols were still being hammered out, it was a delicate business to assure them *Enterprise* was who its transponder said it was. Once that was done, Vulcan Space Central called to arrange flight paths and orbital parking spots; Nyota connected them with the helm board, and turned her attention to the most time-consuming part of her job, when coming in to port: intelligence gathering.

Given that this was a Vulcan settlement, it was fairly straight-forward. The organized data infrastructure made her job much easier, though she still sorted through it herself rather than trusting the computer's automated filters. The computer searched the datanets for the key words and phrases she'd programmed in, as well as pulling up all the news headlines for the last six months. She scanned the results; nothing unexpected or troubling. Nothing the Captain needed to know immediately. Construction of the council's meeting place was lagging behind schedule due to difficulties encountered mining native stones with which to construct it. The first year's harvest promised to be a good one. Vulcaniforming of the planet's ecology was ongoing, to preserve what little remained of Vulcan's plant and animal life. Debates were ongoing regarding a time-frame to re-open the Vulcan Science Academy. Schedules for evening classes teaching various Vulcan arts and rituals, that were now as endangered as the species. Literally hundreds of marriages announced; unsurprising, given the importance Vulcans placed on marriage and family and the high percentage of adult survivors who were now widowed. Aid workers were now to be referred to as "rebuilding advisors."

A light on her board flashed; the captain was using his chair's communication system. "Bones, we'll be in orbit in fifteen minutes," Kirk said, sitting in the command chair behind her. "You still haven't signed the medical supply list. *I* can't approve transport of our cargo until you do."

"*Hold your horses, Jim,*" Doctor McCoy said over the intercom. "*We just got a few last-minute requests. I think we can fill most of them from ship's stores, but I gotta double-check our inventory. Although I still say that's about a hundred times as many stasis chambers as one colony this size needs.*"

Nyota transferred the most informative and interesting news reports to a file. Then she logged onto the largest discussion forum, predominantly human as Vulcans used such things less often and for different purposes, preferring face-to-face communication when possible.

"Spock, do you know what they want them for?" the Captain asked. Nyota looked up from her work in time to see Spock raise an eyebrow at Kirk.

"Presumably, to put people in stasis," Spock said dryly. He knew more than he was telling, Nyota thought, but Kirk probably didn't know him well enough to spot it. Though that would change, given time, if they kept spending as much time playing chess as they currently did.

In any case, Captain Kirk didn't even try. "You heard the man, Bones." He smirked at the snort audible over the open comm. channel.

"*You'll have the revised medical supply manifest in five minutes.*" McCoy signed off muttering about pointy-eared first officers, and Uhura turned back to her board.

The computer hadn't found enough 'loaded' words to trip its alert threshold, but there was some troubling mouthing-off in the forums, largely from people who resented being asked to leave. Some rather nasty ethnic slurs, of the type that were supposed to be in the Federation's past but still came out in times of stress. Odd, though; more sexual innuendo than she'd expect. Probably just sour grapes, but they'd be aboard Enterprise for a week or so, and the Captain should be aware of the situation. She copied some of the more inflammatory threads to the news file she'd compiled, and sent copies to the Captain, First Officer, the department heads, and the queue for their next transmission to Starfleet Headquarters. She checked the ship's status: they were now in orbit and beaming down supplies and personnel.

Once that was done, she secured her board and transferred communication control to the helm. There was little for a communications officer to do in a friendly port, since the computer could handle switchboard functionality when nothing required particular diplomacy or finesse, and Space Central and the Starfleet defense network between them had a closer ear on the stellar area than any single starship could manage.

"Communications is on port watch, sir," Nyota said, standing.

"Navigation is as well, Captain," said Ensign Chekov in his thick Russian accent. She'd offered to help him learn to speak purer English once, but he'd given her a scandalized look and declined her offer. It still annoyed her; it regularly interfered in his work with the computer and other non-native speakers.

Captain Kirk punched the ship-wide hail button on his armrest. "Effective immediately, all personnel not needed for port watch are released for rebuilding efforts for the duration of *Enterprise's* stay at Keshta'shivau. Report to the central coordination area for your assignments, those of you who don't have them already." He toggled the channel closed, and stood. "Mister Sulu, you have the conn."

"Aye, sir," Hikaru said.

Like most of the Enterprise crew, Nyota had been assigned to work on the defense grid; she spent the rest of the day (and a good share of the night) installing communications and computer gear in the planetary defense center, stopping only for short breaks to eat. It would be a grand and advanced facility when completed. Out of deference to Vulcan aesthetics, the building itself was mostly made out of stone (albeit with plenty of easily-accessed channels for running cables and wiring and pipes) instead of prefabricated plastic and metal, as had originally been proposed. Nyota liked it. The juxtaposition of ancient-looking stone with gleaming computers fit her impression of Vulcans. If it could only be made fully functional quickly, it would be perfect. *Enterprise* would only be in the system for a few days, but a determined starship crew could accomplish quite a bit in only a few days, when they put their mind to it. That night, she slept in a bunk in the dormitory for transient workers, not bothering to beam back to Enterprise.

Morning came early, the next day; Nyota was not, by nature, an early riser, though Starfleet seemed bound and determined to teach her otherwise. Spock was already at work when she reached the main control center. "Lieutenant. The primary targeting computer is not interfacing with the main network at the projected efficiency and a level three diagnostic has not been sufficient to find the problem." He did not look up from the console he was working on. Nyota didn't let it bother her.

"Do you want me to open it up while you run your diagnostic?" she asked, heading toward the appropriate panel. Targeting was not her specialty, but computer maintenance and upkeep were shared between communications, sciences, and engineering, depending on the situation, and this was probably not a problem with the targeting systems themselves.

"That would be appreciated."

Nyota popped the access panel off of the main targeting console. "Looks fine at a first glance," she said, reaching into the tool-bag for the maintenance tricorder. Attaching the leads to the central processor, she studied the preliminary read-outs. It appeared to be functioning properly. "Run a test signal," she said. He did. "Everything went through all right on this end," she said, looking up at him.

Spock frowned. "There was a 6.092% degradation of signal," he said. It didn't sound like much, but in the chaos and damage of battle it could be significant. "The fault does not appear to be in the main network. If it is not in the console, it must be in the connection between them. Possibly even in the interfaces with other systems."

Nyota winced. That was a lot of wiring to check. And the superconducting fiber-optic cabling Starfleet used as 'wires' didn't always show flaws on casual inspection. "I'll start here, you start there, meet in the middle?"

"Agreed."

It took them another three hours of companionable work to figure out that the problem was not in the wiring, but in the manufacturer's design of the data processing nodes, which did not quite match Starfleet's specifications and hence were not quite capable of what was being required of them.

"They'll have to check everything we've gotten from that manufacturer," Nyota said, stretching out the kinks that came from crawling around in machinery and crawl spaces. "It could put construction back weeks."

"Months," Spock corrected her. "There is no other processing node available with the required capacity in the required size. All other options would be too big to fit in the spaces available. Something will have to be designed." He stood and removed his work coverall, revealing his standard uniform underneath.

Nyota groaned. "Wonderful. Just what we need. Still, could have been worse—this could have been caught only after everything was put together."

"Indeed," Spock said. "It is now time for the mid-day break, which I believe humans call the 'siesta.' Would you care for lunch?"

"Sounds great," Nyota said, rolling her neck to work some of the kinks out. She'd worked through siesta yesterday—after all, the control center

was air-conditioned—but after the morning's frustrations she could use a break. "Just let me get changed."

It took her two minutes to get out of her work coverall and back into the uniform miniskirt, and another five to touch up her face and hair. Spock wouldn't care, but she liked to look good.

To her surprise, instead of going to the base's cafeteria, he led her to the main entrance, through the airlock/security gate and out into the heat of the day. Nyota squinted a little at the sun's harsh glare, wishing she'd thought to bring her sunglasses. Spock, of course, didn't notice; with a Vulcan's inner eyelid, he didn't *need* sunglasses. He did, however, shake his head as they left the climate controlled defense center; Vulcans weren't as well-equipped to handle sudden pressure changes as Humans were. A few swallows, and Nyota's ears had equalized. The tension in Spock's frame took longer to dissipate.

He would not appreciate notice of his difficulty, so Nyota craned her head around, studying her surroundings. It was her first time outside since beaming down. "I'm amazed how far they've gotten with the Government Hall," she said, looking through the maze of prefab, temporary buildings to the massive stone edifice of the new administrative building. It didn't look quite like pictures she'd seen of public buildings on Vulcan; however, it did fit the landscape, or would when the prefab buildings around it were removed. "It looks almost completed. When we were here a few months ago, they hadn't done more than excavated the basement."

"The outer shell is nearly complete," Spock said. "It will be some time before the interior is ready for use, however. And longer still before all has been finished—aesthetics must currently fall well behind new construction in priority."

"Still, that's fast work," Nyota said.

Spock acknowledged that with a nod. "There is much to be done, but there are many dedicated people to do it."

"Yes," Nyota said, looking around the busy streets. People were beginning to leave their outdoor work in the heat of the day, and head indoors for lunch and less strenuous tasks. Still, there was a lot going on. On her left was another stone building, the shell of one, at any rate, about half-done. A woman climbed out of a forklift and gave Nyota a cheery wave. It was Kangying. Nyota smiled, and returned it, watching as Kangying went over to meet with her crew, many of whom Nyota had tutored on this trip or the previous one. Bette, Florencia, Terri, Neema, Kasia, Raquelle, Tsheppo, Maryam, Fatima, Raheleh, Sophie, Caleb, Theresia, Nida, Ana, Sarmin, Jamal, Kanta, Ines, Ning, Garielle, Zahira, Mimouna, Charlotte, Maria, Tor, Heirani. She wondered how they were settling in.

"We have learned that proper orientation to our ways and integration into the community is vital to the success of the rebuilding advisors," Spock said, following her gaze. "It is best if that orientation includes leadership from those who have already integrated into the community."

"Logical," Nyota said, concentrating on keeping her breathing even in the thin air, long deep breaths to get the most oxygen possible out of each breath. If she'd known they were going to be taking a walk outside, she would have gotten a shot of tri-ox before leaving. Keshta'shivau's air pressure was slightly greater than that of Vulcan, but still only equivalent to that found at high altitudes on Earth. She hoped the walk wouldn't be long.

Spock led her down a side street and stopped at a single-family unit, identical to the ones found at any Federation relief effort, distinguishable only by its number. Where Humans would have personalized even temporary dwellings, none of the housing units on the street had been decorated or adorned in any way. Vulcans considered it illogical to waste such things on temporary structures when work could be done towards the completion of permanent ones. Spock pressed the announcer. "Spock and Nyota."

Nyota glanced at him. Vulcans were normally punctilious about using offworlders' own formal naming conventions; she didn't know what the significance was of him using 'Nyota' instead of 'Lieutenant Uhura.'

The door slid open, and a wave of cool air passed over them. Spock walked inside, and Nyota followed him, sighing with relief at being out of the hot sun. She looked to their host, standing properly in the middle of the room, and blinked in surprise. It was not a Vulcan. Their host was a human woman named Jalila, who had been in the first wave of aid workers. Nyota had coached her in Vulcan language and culture. Jalila had worn the hijab at the time. Now she wore Vulcan robes: a flowing, translucent robe in the mottled colors of a desert sunrise over a gray dress, with a coordinating scarf on her head. They were as modest and concealing as her hijab had been, but—for someone who clung to their own traditional dress despite prevailing fashions, to adopt another culture's clothing?

Jalila bowed to Spock, but addressed Nyota. "Nyota Uhura, be welcome to this house."

"Thank you," Nyota said, unsure of the proper protocol. She turned to Spock, who looked ... tense.

"I will be back to escort you when you are done here," he said. He was out the door before Nyota could collect herself enough to ask him (politely and gently, given that they were not alone) what the hell was going on.

Spock was going to be in serious trouble when she next saw him. But no time for that now, and she was damned if she was going to seem out of her depth. She pasted a smile on her face and turned to Jalila. "It's wonderful to see you again, Jalila. How have you been?"

"Very well, thank you," Jalila said, returning her smile. "I am going to be married."

"Really?" Nyota said, surprised. As far as she knew, Jalila hadn't been seeing anyone when she came to Keshta'shivau six months ago. "Congratulations. Is he one of the aid workers?"

Jalila laughed. "In a sense," she said. "He is Vulcan, an architect who was a member of the team who designed Government Hall. I'm a foreman on the main construction team there, we work together. Today's my day off."

"That's nice," Nyota said, blinking, thanking her communications training for keeping the surprise off her face. In the centuries since Vulcans made first contact with Humans, there had been barely a handful of marriages between the two species, most of which had resulted in the Vulcan being cast out of Vulcan society. Now, less than a year after their home planet had been destroyed, that was changing?

"Come," Jalila said, leading her across the room to the front bedroom. But as the door opened for the two women, Nyota saw that it had been set up as a small sitting room, lavishly decorated by the standards of newly-colonized Keshta'shivau. The floor was covered with rugs, and the walls hidden behind tapestries. Across the room, seated on the only chair, was the oldest Vulcan woman Nyota had ever seen in person. Her face was seamed with age, and her eyes held the tranquility younger Vulcans only aspired to. Her gown was ornately embroidered, and her head was uncovered save for a piece of jewelry that almost resembled a crown.

Jalila bowed at the threshold and spoke in Vulcan. "With respect, Eldest Mother, I present Nyota Uhura."

Nyota bowed low. Little was known about the role of clan 'eldest mothers' in Vulcan society, except that they were immensely powerful and rarely seen by outworlders. The legendary T'Pol had been an eldest mother. Spock hadn't given her *any* preparation or warning for this. She was going to kill him.

Jalila turned to her. "Nyota Uhura, be known to Lady V'Ral, Eldest Mother of the Clan of the Eye."

Nyota had never heard of the Clan of the Eye before, but Vulcan family and clan names tended to be unpronounceable to Humans, and until now Vulcans had seemed content to simply omit them when dealing with offworlders. Maybe they gave translations to Human clan members. Nyota bowed again, hoping she wasn't making too many protocol mistakes. "This one is honored to meet you, Lady."

A small table was spread before Lady V'Ral. In front of her were three ottomans with tables. At one of the ottomans sat a middle-aged Vulcan woman with a matron's narrow skullcap under her headscarf and robes less elaborate than Lady V'Ral's dress but more so than Jalila's. She watched the proceedings with a sharp eye, but said nothing, nor was she introduced. Nyota was reminded of the historical costume dramas she had enjoyed in her youth; the way the room was arranged made V'Ral look like a queen holding court, and she had the self-confidence and innate authority to make it look natural, instead of play-acting or posturing.

"Life in the desert is offered." Jalila spoke in the most formal of ritual dialects.

Nyota turned to see Jalila holding up an elegant glass full of water. Normal visitors were offered juice or tea as refreshment when they first entered a home; water was reserved for close family and honored guests. Nyota took it and drank a small sip. If the protocols for water were the same as for juice, it meant she had no pressing business and would stay as long as she was welcome. Jalila led her to the middle ottoman; Nyota sat, expecting Jalila to take the one remaining, but instead she left.

Leaving Nyota in the room with two women who had not yet said a word.

For Vulcans, conversation was begun by the one of highest rank. And rank was determined largely by age. Nyota bit her tongue.

It was only a few seconds (but felt much longer) when Jalila returned and seated herself. Behind her, two young Vulcan boys entered, carrying trays covered with dishes. They served Lady V'Ral first, and then Nyota, the unnamed matron, and Jalila. The four women ate in silence; Vulcans did not speak during meals, unless they were purposely and pointedly making allowances for outworlders in their midst. The food, at least, showed some consideration for Human dietary needs and tastes. The meal gave Nyota far more time than she wanted to wonder what in the world was going on. Vulcan women had been less likely than men to pursue careers that took them off Vulcan; over sixty-five percent of the adult survivors were male. People had noticed that most of the aid workers accepted to Keshta'shivau were human females. Few Andorians or Tellarites (and no one from the newer members of the Federation) had volunteered, so the Human majority was to be expected. The gender skew had given rise to a variety of wild rumors, about which the Vulcans had remained silent. Until now, Nyota had discounted the rumors. She was very glad she had taken the time to change and clean up.

At last, the boys returned to collect the dishes, and Nyota hoped they would finally get around to telling her why she was there.

"You are from the Kenya region of the United States of Africa." Lady V'Ral fixed her cool eyes on Nyota. "Speak of your family."

Vulcans don't do small talk, Nyota reminded herself. At least she used the main, every-day dialect, and not one of the more obscure ones. "My parents are Alhamisi and M'Umbha Mahia Uhura. My father is a Kikuyu, raised on a farm. He was the youngest son, so he left the farm to work in Nairobi as a lawyer. My mother is a Luhya, of the Kabras, an archaeologist with tenure at Kenyatta University. She raised my two brothers and I in her faith, the Society of Friends—Quakers—although I have not sought out a meeting house since joining Starfleet. At home we spoke Kikuyu and Luhya, and sometimes Swahili, so that we would know our heritage, and at school we learned Standard English. I was tri-lingual from birth." It made learning languages so much easier for her than for many of her Human colleagues in Starfleet. "I have two brothers; one is a government bureaucrat and engaged to be married. The other is still in school." What else would a Vulcan want to know? History was important to them. "I had an ancestor who fought in the Land and Freedom Army—what non-Kenyan history books call the Mau Mau Uprising—and another who fought against them in the King's African Rifles."

"At the age of sixteen, you had a coming of age ritual in which you speared a mechanical lion," Lady V'Ral said. "Is that a ritual of your father's people, or your mother's?"

Nyota hesitated. Where had Lady V'Ral learned of that? She didn't think she'd mentioned it to Spock, and it wasn't in her Starfleet file. "Both. And neither." She cocked her head; she suspected that, for all that she'd found out about the mechanical lion, Lady V'Ral would not know much African history. She'd had to explain her heritage to Academy classmates so many times, why it was so important to her. Now she would give the speech in Vulcan. "The two centuries before First Contact and the forming of the united Earth government were not kind to Africa, or those who live there. We were colonized by Europeans who saw us in need of 'civilizing,' who saw our cultures and religions as inferior. When we won our freedom, the old ways of life and leadership were in shambles, and national boundaries cut across language and clan lines. Warlords and fanatics and men of greed were everywhere, causing violence and genocide and famine. And also we suffered an epidemic of a terrible disease, called AIDS. So many died, young and old alike. Then came World War Three. Of all the continents, Africa was the least affected by it ... but it was not a good time for anyone. And now the modern Earth is culturally led by the Western descendants of the colonialists. Their cultural imperialism is gentler than their ancestors, and less insistent on its own way, but it is more pervasive. And we are less equipped to defend ourselves, because so much has been lost already."

Spock had not known the history, but he had understood without the need for justifications. "We preserve what we have left, revive what we can, and sometimes create anew to fill in the gaps. Many things that were unique to one tribe or language group have been shared with others, so that the whole may be reinforced and strengthened. The ritual lion hunt comes from the Maasai, but it is now shared among much of Eastern Africa and has been for several generations."

"Yet you have left your homeland, and your people, to travel among the stars with people alien to you." There was a challenge in V'Ral's body language, in the position of her shoulders and hands and the tilt of her head, though her voice remained calm and her eyes didn't change. Nyota was glad she'd spent so much time around Spock, learning Vulcan body language.

"Cultures are different, but the people who give them life are people like any other," Nyota said. She held herself very still, spine straight. In a human it would signify over-formality, perhaps discomfort. To a Vulcan, it indicated maturity, certainty, calm. "I am fascinated both by the differences and the similarities. I wish to understand, and I am skilled in languages, which are a fundamental part of any culture. My talents and my interests can best be served in Starfleet. And I have two brothers who have remained in Kenya and keep the traditions of our people, along with many cousins on both sides. I carry the honor of my family by serving the greater good." It was true, and consonant with Vulcan culture, and she didn't think Lady V'Ral would understand the lure of the stars.

The interrogation had gone on long enough, but taking initiative in conversation would be a tricky business given their relative ages and statuses, if Nyota didn't want to offend. She switched to a more formal dialect. "May this one ask a question?"

"Speak."

"Is Spock of your clan?"

"No women of the House of Surak yet live," V'Ral said. She lowered her gaze—out of respect to the dead, perhaps? "They have been allied to the Clan of the Eye since they bore another name, before Surak. The Eye shall act for them until they have an Eldest Mother of their own. We act thus for several of the surviving clans and houses." She looked directly at Nyota again. "What will you do when your five years on Enterprise are done?"

"I'm not sure," Nyota said, taken aback by the change of topic. "That's several years off, and it depends on what happens in the mean time. If the Federation is at war with the Romulans by then, for example, my own personal preferences won't be very relevant—I'll go where Starfleet sends me. And Starfleet's needs will be a major factor in any case. I would like another starship posting, though perhaps after some time off to spend at home with my family. I might do more academic work—being the chief communications officer on a starship gives me plenty of research opportunities, but they can't be predicted ahead of time. Or I might work more closely with Starfleet Intelligence—they're always looking for good linguists. There's no way of knowing."

"Will you teach?"

Nyota eyed Lady V'Ral. Hadn't she been *listening*? "I suppose that's one option," Nyota said, and it was; but she hadn't envisioned teaching until she was too old for a position on a front-line starship.

"Tell me of the Society of Friends," V'Ral said.

Nyota took a breath and launched into an explanation of her faith, where it came from, what it was like to grow up with, and how she melded her pacifist beliefs with her Starfleet service. (This, too, was a speech she had practically memorized, for religion was a curiosity on a mostly-secular Earth.) The interview continued on after that for some time, though not as long as it felt like. Lady V'Ral's questions covered a wide variety of subjects, and while Nyota believed she had behaved creditably, she still wanted to know why the *hell* Spock hadn't even warned her.

At last, Jalila stood and escorted Nyota out into the main room of the house, where she was not surprised to see Spock waiting, dressed in dark formal Vulcan robes that Nyota had never seen him wear. He stood at their approach, and his glance between them seemed almost ... nervous?

"She will see you now," Jalila told him.

Spock bowed and walked into the audience chamber without speaking. Nyota opened her mouth to get his attention, but thought better of it. She probably didn't want an audience for the conversation they needed to have.

She turned to Jalila instead. "Would you mind telling me what's going on?"

Jalila looked away. "I'm sorry we sort of blindsided you, Nyota. That was not my choice, or Spock's; Lady V'Ral insisted."

"Am I right in assuming that she was vetting me as a potential wife for Spock?" Nyota pressed.

"Of course." Jalila looked back at her, studying her face intently.

"That's more than a *bit* premature," Nyota said. "Whatever my relationship with Spock may be, my career is just getting started. I'm nowhere *near* ready to settle down. Spock knows that, and he respects that."

"Are you familiar with the Silences?"

Nyota frowned. "Of course. There are certain subjects Vulcans simply don't talk about, and asking about them is extremely rude. What about them?"

Jalila sighed. "I am supposed to break one of the Silences for you. But I think you need to hear this from Spock, Vulcan gender politics be damned." She slid a hand into a pocket, pulled out a card with a com code. "Call me afterwards, if you need to talk."

"You're not reassuring me," Nyota said, taking the card.

"Good," Jalila said. "I'd hate to mislead you." She rapped on the door to the audience chamber.

Spock had evidently been waiting; he stepped through mere seconds later. "You ... have told her already?" he said. Nyota had never heard that note of uncertainty in his voice.

"No," Jalila said. "I think it would be better coming from you."

Spock blinked, drawing back slightly. "But you are a woman."

"Yes, and I am delegating this to you," Jalila replied. "I am here for my perspective as a human. And as a human, this is the kind of thing that should come from you, not an intermediary. If you need a private space to talk, we have a room here for you to use."

"That will not be necessary," Spock said stiffly.

"Then I will leave you to talk," Jalila said. She smiled at Nyota, and left.

"What is it, Spock," Nyota said softly. Her anger had largely been replaced by curiosity; whatever was going on, she was clearly missing something major. "Talk to me."

Spock swallowed. "Perhaps we should beam up to the Enterprise," he said. "My quarters are ... private."

"What about our afternoon work shifts?" Nyota said.

"We are off duty for the day," Spock said. "I did not know how long this would take."

"Okay," Nyota said slowly. So, he'd known about this in time to change the shift assignments and concealed the change from her.

He pulled out his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise. Two to beam up."

In his quarters, Spock busied himself lighting candles, incense Nyota hadn't known he had, fussing with them far beyond necessary. The quarters were larger than Nyota's, an actual suite with a bedroom and a 'living' room that doubled as Spock's office. Copies of Vulcan art and weaponry adorned the walls; after the destruction of Vulcan, Spock had donated the originals to his people, but these replicas were high enough quality Nyota wouldn't have seen the difference if she hadn't helped him pack up the originals.

Nyota watched him fuss for a few minutes before interrupting. "I understand that talking about the Silences is difficult. Would it make it easier to start with something else? How about why V'Ral thought we were ready to talk about marriage, when you know I won't be ready to think about that for a while?"

Spock stilled, but didn't turn to face her. "That is ... not 'something else,' Nyota," he said softly. "I may not have time to wait. I'm sorry."

"What?" Nyota sat down on one of his chairs in shock. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I could not explain why without breaking the Silences," Spock said. He walked to the other chair and sat in it without ever quite looking at her.

Questions burned on the tip of Nyota's tongue, but she held them back; long experience had taught her that in some things Spock needed to take his own time. They way he wouldn't meet her eyes, the uncharacteristic tension in his hands ... Vulcans were normally so direct. In a human she would have called it shame.

"It is called Pon Farr," Spock said at last.

Nyota waited for him to say more. "I don't know those words," she said, when it became obvious he would not. They weren't familiar at all; she couldn't even hazard a guess as to derivation or related words.

"No," Spock said. "We do not speak of it, even among ourselves. It is ... a time of burning. Fever. In another ancient language, 'rapture.' Madness." He swallowed.

Nyota let out a breath. To a Vulcan, madness was the deepest fear. Control of their bodies and minds was drilled into them practically from birth. No wonder they tried to ignore this. Or perhaps that control was a reaction against it. It would make a fascinating chicken-and-egg sociology study, if the Vulcans would ever allow it. "This is something ... biological?"

Spock nodded. His breathing had sped up, slightly. For him, it was a shocking lapse of control.

"Do you go into heat?" she asked, as gently as she could. She longed to touch him, to comfort him with all the reassuring thoughts and emotions she could project, but that might derail his thoughts. She didn't know if he would be able to do this twice.

"Yes. It is a seven year cycle, that begins when a Vulcan reaches full physical adulthood—generally between thirty and sixty years of age." His voice was low, rasping. "I had hoped to be spared, but ... my counterpart says that will not be the case. It is why we are betrothed in childhood—so that when the madness comes, we will already have a mate." The words came faster, as if spilling over a dam. "We are drawn back to our ancestral places, to our mates. It starts slowly, irritability, lapses in control, attention deficits. Lost time. Then the madness comes—plak tow, the blood fever—and we are lost. The bond is to ensure that the fever comes to both, and to assure that neither are injured, for we do not know our own strength, but we feel our bondmate's pain, and so avoid it." He stopped talking, swallowed again.

"Were you betrothed?" Nyota kept her voice even, gentle. She needed information, couldn't afford to spook or distract him.

"T'Pring died on Vulcan." Spock met her eyes for the first time. "I hoped my Time would never come. We had not met since we were seven, but I had reason to believe she found our betrothal ... less than satisfactory, and would be pleased to be released. But it would have been illogical to do so until either I had a relationship with another who might bond with me, or it was clear I would be spared."

Nyota nodded, shoving down her feelings of betrayal—he'd been engaged the whole time she'd known him, and he'd never even *hinted*. She forced herself to look at it from his perspective. "Right," she said. "And if you'd told me about T'Pring, I wouldn't have understood why you wouldn't break it off with her unless you broke the Silences and told me about this." Different species, and sometimes different societies within those species, had different mores, which were required study at the Academy. Sex and intimate relations were one of the major topics for all species except Vulcans. Nyota hadn't worried much about it, since Spock tended to be fairly straightforward and willing to talk things through. Now, she wondered what else she was missing. And when it would blow up in her face.

"I apologize for the deception, but it was necessary," Spock said earnestly.

Nyota nodded. "I understand," she said. At least, she accepted that Spock had genuinely believed it to be necessary. "May I ask what happens if you *don't* have a bondmate?"

Spock dropped his gaze. "Some—the most disciplined—can control their symptoms through meditation. There were also ... there is no word for it in English; the closest would be 'courtesan.' Or perhaps 'temple prostitute,' though the word 'prostitute' has entirely the wrong connotations. But only one survived." He hesitated. "In some cases, ritual combat to the death can shock the survivor out of the plak tow, though this method of handling the condition is obviously to be avoided if at all possible."

"You can't tell me that modern, post-Reformation Vulcans engage in ritual combat to the death, Spock," Nyota said, shocked.

"It was ... exceedingly rare, on Vulcan," Spock said. "It will be common on Keshta'shivau, unless wives are found for all the widows and widowers. There will be no other option; the madness demands a mate, and those unbonded will challenge as they enter plak tow, the final stage of pon farr. They will not be rational enough to stop themselves."

"Can't you just ... lock them up until it's over?" Nyota stared at the weapons on the wall. It was an elegant display. She had assumed—the whole Federation had assumed—that such things were merely remnants of the past, pre-Surak. That their prominent display in many homes and clan holdings was merely artistic. Did Vulcans have them because they expected them to be *used*?

Spock nodded slowly. "Yes. But ... they will almost certainly die, for few of them will be able to manage the discipline necessary to meditate through it. Particularly those of middle age, whose drives are strongest."

Nyota bit her lip. "So, it's not just 'going into heat' like a terrestrial mammal. It's literally mate or die."

"Yes."

"I don't suppose bonding men together would work?" Nyota asked. Although Vulcans never discussed sex, there was enough pre-Reform love poetry with homo-erotic overtones that homosexuality couldn't be unknown among them.

Spock shook his head. "The desire is instinctual. For those few who are genuinely homosexual, it will work, and it is being done; but even those who may in saner times find both genders appealing will seek out the opposite sex in their madness."

"And polygamy?" Whatever cultural biases Vulcans had, it was better than the alternative.

Spock raised an eyebrow, but answered without hesitation. "Besides the impossibility of sustaining more than one marriage bond at a time, when one husband went into Pon Farr, the wife would as well, and that would trigger the Pon Farr of the other husband. The two would see one another as rivals, and fight."

"So, basically, there's a lot more hardwired in Vulcan sexuality than in Human," Nyota said. For a species so intent on controlling their biology, that seemed strange. Though perhaps their sexuality caused the desire for greater control over what they could. "That's why so many of the aid workers are unmarried Human women," she said. "It's because more Vulcan men survived than women, and you're hoping to marry them off now before things start falling apart. After all the adult unmarried or widowed Vulcan women who survived are married off, you'll still have what, two thousand unmarried adult males? Out of a population of ten thousand? You screened the volunteer worker applicants looking for Human women from traditional and non-Western cultures who would be more likely to accept and understand Vulcan traditions. And that's why you throw out those who don't fit in—you're not looking for people who can learn to keep their heads down and do their job until the first phase of construction is complete, you're looking for women who can integrate completely for life." The whole system—the kind of cold-blooded calculation, the manipulation of everyone involved, the use and abuse of the trust of people who came to help, not to be remoulded into the building blocks of a new society. The use of sentient beings as tools—Nyota felt her gorge rising.

She thought back over the intelligence she'd gathered when they were pulling into orbit. "And the Vulcan Science Academy—your people are pushing so hard to get it up and running again quickly. How many of those offworld professors you'll have to hire will be women? How many of the students you accept? That's a pool of highly intelligent, dedicated women right there. There have been rumors you're looking for wives, but I thought that was just that—rumors and innuendo, the kinds of stories people make up about Vulcans to make them seem less mysterious." She snorted. Now, *now* she understood some of those vitriolic threads on the message boards. Now, she agreed with them. "It's not rumor, is it."

"No. It is not."

"That can't be your whole plan," Nyota said. Starfleet had trained her to put aside her emotions, to think tactically, strategically. It was actually harder to do now than it had been when fighting Nero; now there was no shock or adrenaline to push other concerns to the side. But she had to be clear-headed. There would be time to fall apart later; she didn't know how willing Spock would be to answer questions later. And she *hated* that she wasn't sure of him, anymore. "You can't possibly expect to get enough acceptable Human women willing to marry Vulcans, not if

you've only got seven years before you've got to get *every single adult Vulcan* married off." She thought back to the conversation she'd overheard the day before, on the Bridge. "That's what all those stasis chambers are for, isn't it? They're for the ones who aren't lucky enough to find brides."

Spock nodded. "Yes. Although it will only work if the symptoms of Pon Farr are detected in its earliest stage; in the middle and later stages, the body's metabolism is altered to such a degree that the shock of being put into stasis—and then revived from it—may very likely kill. But it is still a better option than the challenge. The first generation of children born will have more females than males, to address the current gender imbalance."

Nyota squeezed her eyes shut, pinching the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off the headache she could feel growing behind her eyes. Between the day's stress (not least of which was keeping her temper firmly under control) and the changes in air pressure and temperature, it was shaping up to be a big one. "Will that be you, if I don't marry you? Kept in stasis forty years to marry a woman who hasn't even been born yet?"

"Unlikely," Spock said. "Given my clan and lineage, there will be much effort to find a suitable wife before my Time comes. It is those of lesser rank who will be most likely to need the stasis chambers." His voice was even and normal, as if the idea that his blood made him somehow more worthy to live than other people was simply to be *expected*. If there were no stasis chambers, if being unmarried were truly a death sentence, would Vulcans make the decision on who was worthy of a mate any differently? "If I do not find a mate, my time in stasis will likely be closer to twenty years than forty. I am told by my counterpart that I will probably have almost a decade before my Time comes, although given the differences in the timeline he cannot predict the exact date with any certainty. And as the bond triggers Pon Farr in one's mate, the ones kept in stasis may be released as soon as their intended brides are judged physically and mentally ready, even if their first Pon Farr would not naturally occur until later."

"Wow, that sounds *really* appealing," Nyota said, hiding her reaction behind sarcasm. It was appalling, even knowing where they were coming from. Even if it was flawlessly logical. *Because* it was flawlessly logical, actually. These were people's lives they were arranging. Those hypothetical girls would be real people, people who were even now being bred for the sole purpose of marrying, and would be sent to marry husbands they'd never met as young as they possibly could be. That it was a matter of life and death did not change what it would do to those girls. She tried to remember her cultural diversity training from the Academy. It was difficult, particularly since *her* life was one they were trying to arrange.

"Circumstances are far from ideal," Spock said somberly. "Our bodies are far from ideal. But wishful thinking will not change the reality of it." He swallowed, then looked up, finally meeting her eyes. "Nyota, I do not wish to pressure you."

"It's kind of unavoidable, under the *circumstances*," Nyota replied. "You tell me you could literally *die* if I don't marry you, and then say you don't want to pressure me?"

The ghost of a smile crossed his lips. "I will not be in danger for some time. Given the current statistics for Starfleet officers serving aboard starships, there is the distinct probability that the whole subject will be rendered moot by the death of one or both of us some time during the coming five-year mission."

Nyota snorted. "That doesn't exactly make things *better*, Spock."

"I know." Spock sobered. "Given a choice, I would choose you, Nyota. But I have always known that this has little to do with my choices. I must marry, and it must be a woman who understands Vulcan culture, for I cannot turn my back on my people. But I would not see you ... constrained, unless that were truly your desire."

"And I would be constrained as your wife?" Vulcan culture made a lovely pattern to look at, Nyota had always known. Certainly, there were novels and plays enough about pre-Reform Vulcan history, and modern Vulcan society was always lifted up as an example of what a world could be. Nyota herself had always been fascinated by it, more so since becoming involved with Spock. But she was realizing that it was quite different to experience from the inside. What had it done to Spock, growing up like that? What would it do to any children they might have, to grow up ... constrained?

"All Vulcans are constrained. By our biology, by our clans, by our whole society. But women more so than men, and offworlder women married to Vulcan men most of all." He looked aside, and Nyota followed his gaze to a holo of his mother that sat on his desk. "I know that my mother sometimes struggled with her place, but she learned to flourish in her own way, within Vulcan society and yet not consumed by it. By the time of her death, she was greatly respected. You could do the same, but only if that were truly your choice."

Lady Amanda stared out at Nyota from her picture, a smiling Human woman in Vulcan robes. Nyota forced down an automatic rejection of all that Spock was proposing. She needed information, and she didn't want to close off options in the heat of the moment. "If I choose to marry you, what would happen?"

"We would form a light telepathic link, a betrothal bond, and continue with our service aboard Enterprise until my first Pon Farr. Then we would be expected to live on Keshta'shivau and raise a family. That obligation might be put off for a time, but given the short fertile span of Human females, not for long. Given your linguistic abilities and the research opportunities afforded by your post on Enterprise, I have no doubt that you would by that point have sufficient stature in your field to take a position as an adjunct professor at the Vulcan Science Academy, which would allow you to continue your career as a civilian. If you preferred to stay in Starfleet, you would be assigned to the defense installation or Space Central."

It seemed he had their life together all planned out. "And if I wanted to stay on a ship or another starbase or planet?"

He hesitated. "It would be possible, but only if our children were raised in a Vulcan community. If one did not exist where we were stationed, the clan would make arrangements for someone here on Keshta'shivau to take them while we were offworld."

Nyota held on to her temper with both hands. "And if I wanted them raised as Humans? In Africa, with *my* family?"

Spock shook his head. "Nyota, any children I have will very likely have mostly Vulcan characteristics. It is how I was engineered. Even leaving aside Pon Farr, Vulcan mental abilities and emotional volatility would require them to be raised with the Vulcan Disciplines. Anything else would be ... cruel. And probably crippling. They would be free to choose the Human path as adults, as I was, but the Disciplines cannot be learned in adulthood."

"Even though you're half human yourself?" Nyota said, skeptically. "Our children would be three-quarters human."

"Given the choices of the team of geneticists who assisted my parents, quite probably," Spock said.

"All right," Nyota said, unconvinced but not wanting to get sucked into that argument. She took a deep breath. She had to know what all the options were. "And what if I choose *not* to marry you?"

"A wife will be found for me," Spock said. "As I am already half-human, I anticipate a ninety-eight point seven percent probability that she would be a Vulcan, with that probability approaching certainty if you give a definitively negative answer within the next month. This would not necessarily affect my relationship with you; given that most Vulcans are betrothed in childhood, and divorce is extremely rare, long-term committed extra-marital liaisons have a place in Vulcan society, though they are hardly common or encouraged. This is particularly true prior to the first Pon Farr and the strengthening of the bond that accompanies it. Whether I would choose to remain in Starfleet after that point, I cannot say at this time, though it seems likely." He paused. "If we were to remain lovers, and were to have children together, they would still need to be raised as Vulcans. In that case, it is likely that my wife would raise them along with her own children."

"Wow, *that* sounds appealing. Would I even get to visit them?" Nyota reminded herself that this was all purely hypothetical, and in any case she didn't even know if she *wanted* children. Most of her shock and pity had worn off, and she was reminded heavily of her earlier interview with Lady V'Ral. And not in a good way. She held on to her temper firmly. None of this was Spock's fault—except that he hadn't told her before now—and taking it out on him wouldn't help.

"Of course," Spock said. "As long as you did not interfere with their training, you would be welcome to visit as much as you liked. As my ... there is no word in Standard; 'mistress' has entirely the wrong connotations. As my lover, you would have a formal position within the clan, though lesser than that of my wife. And given that we would likely spend very little time on Keshta'shivau, it would allow you the freedom to choose how much or how little of Vulcan culture you wished to adopt."

Nyota wasn't sure whether he was dangling the prospect of new words in front of her to distract her or not; in any case, no matter how curious she was, she was not going to be sidetracked. "And if for some reason they can't find you a bride now, you go into stasis for twenty years to wait for a child-bride to grow up." She folded her arms. "How long do I have to think about this?"

"I must know your answer by the end of the five year mission," Spock said. "The extended home leave we will have at that time would be ideal to make other arrangements, if your answer is negative, and I will need to be prepared in case my Time comes earlier than anticipated. An earlier answer would, of course, be preferred."

"Five years. Okay." Nyota nodded. It had seemed like such a long time, when Enterprise left dock. Why they were giving her that much time, she didn't know, but she could only be grateful. She hesitated, gathering her thoughts. "Spock. You know I love you." What she knew of him, anyway; but she would never have believed he would go along with something like this, until today. What else didn't she know of him?

"Yes."

She took strength from the certainty in his words. "I just don't know if I can take Vulcan."

"I understand," Spock said. It was his turn to gather his thoughts. "I love you, Nyota," he said at last. "But I would rather set you free than bind you where you did not wish to be."

Nyota blinked back tears. It was only the second time he had said he loved her aloud, though he had sometimes projected the emotion to her when they touched. Would she ever be able to hear him say it again without remembering this conversation? She doubted it. And the pun in that last statement—Spock's speech was too precise for it to be accidental. She wondered what words he would have used had they had this conversation in Vulcan, instead of Standard. She took a breath, held it, let it out, visualizing all her fear and anger flowing out with it, leaving nothing but peace. She placed her hand on his cheek. "Thank you," she said gently, "for being honest, and telling me everything. I know it was difficult, but I would rather know the whole score than live in a fantasy world. I can't give you an answer now; I don't know when I will be able to. But I will respect your confidences, and the Silences."

"Thank you." Spock took her hand in his, placed a kiss in it.

Nyota controlled the urge to yank it back, let her hurt take form. She could tell from the jerk of his fingers that he felt it anyway.

Nyota stopped by her quarters to take a painkiller for her headache, retrieve her music library, and change, before heading to the gym. Her favorite treadmill was unoccupied and she adjusted to her liking. She was reaching out to key it on, when she hesitated. She didn't want the even whirl of a treadmill under her feet, standing still while pretending to move. She wanted to *go*. More than anything, she wanted to be back on her grandfather's farm in Nyeri, on the slopes of Mount Kenya, with the sky above stretching out so wide. As a girl, when she had been troubled or needed to think, she had gone there, and would set out in the morning down dusty roads past lush fields, feet pounding the ground for kilometers, each frustration and care driven out by the rhythm of her feet and left behind. Leaving herself open to the beauty of the world around her—people, plants, animals, land, and most especially the sky, that infinite wonder calling her upward and onwards even while her feet stayed rooted in the soil of her heritage.

Keshta'shivau had wide skies and dusty roads, but she could not run there. The air was too thin for that prolonged exertion, even with Tri-Ox.

Nyota put the earbuds in her ears and turned on a playlist of songs her mother sang, the songs of their people. She walked out into the corridor

and began to run.

Over an hour later, Nyota came back to her room bathed in sweat and faintly ashamed. Before joining Starfleet, that would not have been a long run. Even while in the Academy, she had made time for regular runs through and around and outside of San Francisco. Starfleet training was supposed to make you *more* fit, not less; but it was hard to work up any enthusiasm for running long distances on a treadmill, and she was so busy.

At home, as a child, an hour's run would have been sufficient to work through any problem, any anger, or at least exhaust her so that it didn't seem as bad. She couldn't tell if the failure of this run to do the same was because Enterprise's corridors were less therapeutic, or because this problem—this anger—was bigger than any childish frustration.

She flung herself on the bed, on the zebra-striped coverlet her mother had given her as a little piece of home when she was assigned to the Enterprise. "*Damn* you, Spock," she said, running her fingers through her hair. How could he spring this on her? The biology wasn't his fault, granted; but he'd let his peoples' Silences keep vital information from her. Even that, she could handle. But how could he expect her to give up everything—her culture, her career, and all—to subsume herself in his world. As if none of it *mattered*. As if, compared to his, her heritage was *nothing*. As if the only purpose of her culture was to prepare her to accept Vulcan culture.

Nyota had never been one to box or spar to work out her aggression. But she was seriously contemplating shaking Lieutenant Riley down in Engineering for his darts and using them on a picture of Spock. That he was going along with this ... *breeding* program, as if it were *right*. Or possibly she could find a picture of Lady V'Ral on the 'net somewhere.

She tried to picture herself, twenty years from now, married to Spock, wearing dull Vulcan robes with a narrow skull-cap and a scarf to keep the dust out of her hair instead of beautiful bright colors and a butterfly-like head-wrap. Everything covered up, all the time. Everything restrained and carefully controlled, all the time. With Lady V'Ral hovering to make sure that everything was done in the Vulcan way. Nyota had a sudden flash: her mother, at the wedding, in traditional Luhya ceremonial garb. A brightly-colored grass skirt, necklaces of beads and shells, earrings ... and no top. Not for her mother the concession to requirement for covered breasts, not when wearing her tribal clothing. Not when celebrating her heritage. Nyota pictured Lady V'Ral's face, and laughed.

But Spock ... Spock would feel ashamed. And though she was proud of her mother, she didn't want to hurt Spock, either. Not *seriously*, at any rate, despite the ultimatums he had given her.

He wasn't even ... he didn't even seem to recognize the *possibility* of any kind of compromise. Any long-term relationship would be built solely on Vulcan principles. Everything dominated by his biology, his culture, his status. The biology wasn't his fault. The rest

How could he expect this of her? His mother had gone native, of course, at least outwardly, but his mother had an academic career that had been *helped* by her move to Vulcan and the greater insight into Vulcan language and culture it had given her. Not to mention her frequent travels and exposure to many races through her husband's career—her work on the Universal Translator, particularly the Vulcan/Standard module, had been groundbreaking over the years of her marriage. And not everybody had a strong attachment to the culture and world they grew up with; perhaps it hadn't been that much of a sacrifice. Perhaps she'd fallen in love with Vulcan culture (hard as that was for Nyota to imagine). Perhaps, back in those days before Vulcans were threatened by extinction, there had been more flexibility and compromise possible. Perhaps even now, it was possible, once you were living it and not just hearing it described.

Could she leave everything behind and go to Vulcan? Or share Spock with some Vulcan wife, and send their children to be raised by another woman? Or live without children?

Did she even want to try?

"Hey, Nyota, did you sleep okay last night?"

Nyota looked up from kedgerree the she was pushing around on her plate. "Hey, Christine, what are you up to this morning? Not many people still on the Enterprise."

Christine Chapel gave a shrug as she slid her bowl of fruit onto the table. "There's not that much for the medical staff to do, actually. We got all the supplies down to the hospital yesterday, and you probably know how proprietary Vulcans are about their health issues—they've got their own healers, thank you very much, and some Human doctors and nurses who've taken permanent residence and sworn confidentiality oaths, and they don't need outsiders interfering. Well, they put it more politely than that, but it's pretty clear."

"Yeah," Nyota said with a sigh. "They do like their privacy." For a few minutes she pondered what it would be like to not know what lay behind that privacy. Life had been so much *simpler*. She'd really, really liked her relationship with Spock. It had been intellectually stimulating, surprisingly emotionally rich considering Spock's heritage and character, the sex had been great, the shared music had been fun, and it hadn't interfered with her professional life. Now—no matter what she decided, they'd never go back to that simple understanding they'd had. And how much of that 'simple understanding' had only been in her head? She couldn't wish herself ignorant again, wouldn't even if she could. But, God, she wished Spock had been the man she thought he was.

"But no changing the subject," Christine said. "You don't look as chipper as you normally do in the mornings."

"And 'not chipper' is code for 'like hell,' right?" Nyota said with a smile.

"Well, if you want colorful, I could tell you what Doctor McCoy would call it." Christine stabbed a piece of grapefruit with her fork and took a bite with great enthusiasm, closing her eyes as she chewed.

"Do you two want to be alone?" Nyota said, amused.

"Nice try, but that still won't get you out of talking. Spill."

Nyota sighed. How to explain without bringing up Spock's revelations and breaking the Silences? On the other hand, she could keep it simple. Spock's biology wasn't the only problem, nor even his culture. "I got some news that may affect my future career last night, that's all, Chris. The VSA may be interested in hiring me as an adjunct professor after the mission's over, assuming I do sufficiently interesting research over the next five years." She was damned proud of her academic record; she had reason to be. The idea of getting a job as a bribe to marry Spock turned her stomach, but on the other hand ... it was the *Vulcan Science Academy*.

Chris blinked, almost dropping her fork. "Wow, that's *awesome* news—congratulations! That's quite an honor, even for someone who was top of her class at the Academy. Though I suppose with Vulcan gone, they're scrambling to find faculty, and they always did like to grow their own rather than hire outsiders. Makes sense they'd cherry-pick people early in their career, if they have to start hiring non-alumni."

"I suppose," Nyota said. It was true that one of the complaints about the VSA was that it had been virtually impossible for non-Vulcans to get permanent positions there. The VSA took people early and groomed them to be the best they could possibly be, and then kept the brightest for itself. Unfortunately, few of those best and brightest had been offworld when Vulcan was destroyed, and even fewer had managed to evacuate in time, so they were having to rebuild from the ground up. Her getting a job there would still be nepotism, but ... maybe a less objectionable kind of nepotism. She took a bite of her kedgerree. Not as good as her father's, but much better than the Academy kitchens had managed.

"So what's the problem?" Chris asked.

"Besides the fact that I don't know if I'll want to leave *Enterprise* for a dirtside career?" Nyota said. "That's a biggie all by itself. I've always wanted to serve on a starship, and I'm head of communications on the flagship of the fleet. I'm travelling among the stars, always finding new challenges, and I'm *making a difference* in the galaxy. I'm keeping the Federation safe, I'm helping keep it peaceful by smoothing out misunderstandings. I don't know if I'll want to give that up for academia, even if it is the Vulcan Science Academy." She had loved her classwork and independent research at Starfleet Academy, but she'd been looking forward to space her entire life.

"When do you need to give them an answer?"

"I haven't even been formally asked, yet," Nyota said. "This is all strictly back-channel." Assuming Spock could be trusted to know what was in the works, which he undoubtedly could. If he was uncertain whether or not she'd get the job offer, he wouldn't have mentioned it. Which meant it was up to her to keep her academic standing up while on *Enterprise*, not let it slide when confronted with the day-to-day details of her position as head of Communications. "The formal offer probably won't come until near the end of the mission."

"So what's the problem?" Chris asked. "You've got a couple years to think about it. Maybe you'll find you're not so thrilled with spending five years on a ship and really want to be grounded. Maybe you'll find you love it so much you couldn't stand to leave it. Maybe Starfleet will try to ground you by assigning you to the Academy or a diplomatic mission somewhere. A lot of things can happen. If you want to worry about something, worry about whether or not I'm going to beat you at our next game of Go."

"*That's* not likely," Nyota said with a smirk. "You've never even come *close*."

"But I'm getting better all the time," Chris protested. "And I've been reading up on strategy and things. It's not my fault I only just learned the game while you grew up on it. You just watch out, I'm going to win one of these days."

"Uh-huh," Nyota said. "You think that if it comforts you." She checked the chrono on the wall and groaned. "And now, back to the salt mines. Time to beam down for another glamorous shift of wiring and installing computer parts. If I wanted to be hardware support, I would have chosen Engineering."

"Well," said Chris, "in Starfleet, we go where we're told and do what we're told. If you want sympathy, go talk to a civilian. Look on the bright side—if you take up the VSA's offer, you'll probably never have to do wiring again unless you're designing an experimental apparatus of some sort, and even then you'd probably have grad students to do the grunt work."

"It's different, for me," Jalila said the next day over lunch. They sat together in a half-finished meeting room in the planetary defense center. There was a folding table and chairs; the room was obviously in use, but only half the panels in the walls and ceiling had been installed, leaving wiring and conduits exposed, and the carpeting had yet to be laid down. Still, it was soundproofed, and a neutral place to talk. "I've made a home here, and would be planning to live here for the foreseeable future whether or not I was marrying Tov. It was Tov himself that was the challenge, for me—I had to decide whether I could live with him, not just in my house but in my head, for the rest of my life. I'd already chosen Keshta'shivau."

"Why?" Nyota asked. "What drew you here?"

Jalila shrugged. "I wanted to help. And I'd always wanted to do a semester exchange as a student, but never was able to arrange it, so I thought this might be a way to do something similar. When I got here, there was a lot that was very different, but there was also much that was like home. The traditions are different, but the ways they surround you aren't. The specific forms the community takes are different, but the support it gives isn't. That's comfortable to me."

"Jalila, you're not even wearing your own *clothes*. You gave up your hijab." Nyota rubbed her nose. "I know how much hassling you got for that on Earth, sometimes. You *told* me, remember? You said you liked the thought of going to a planet where they wouldn't criticize you for keeping the old ways, for keeping your head covered and dressing modestly. Now that's gone?"

"I still dress modestly and keep my head covered," Jalila said, concentrating on cutting up her food.

"If that were all you wanted, there are a lot of Earth styles that aren't a hijab that do the same thing," Nyota pointed out.

"You sound like my mother," Jalila said. "You wouldn't believe what she said, when I told her. *I* didn't quite believe it myself, and I was there."

"You didn't do this to anger your mother, either," Nyota said. "*Please*, Jalila."

Jalila nodded, but didn't speak. Nyota let her gather her thoughts. "I was raised to do my duty," she said at last. "My duty to my family, to my people, to my faith and my culture. And I have always been proud, and done my best to live up to it. It wasn't easy to set that aside, believe me, though you must understand that whatever Lady V'Lar and others of her ilk think, there is a difference between what is said and done in public where they may see and what happens behind closed doors. I haven't abandoned my culture, far from it, though I have adapted it. On Earth, there's so much subtle pressure to conform to the majority culture—you know what that's like. So many of my people, and yours, assimilate quietly, a little more each year. For those of us who want to stay faithful, there's a kind of siege mentality that's hard to break out of."

Nyota nodded; it was much the same in Africa, regardless of the religious differences.

"But I've seen our colonies. The ones that isolate themselves from most of the Federation, who want nothing more than to be left in peace to live out our faith and culture." She smiled. "They're vibrant, Nyota, flourishing and growing. One more Muslim woman won't make or break them. Vulcans have less of a margin. I'm needed here, and I like that. There is so much beauty in Vulcan culture, Nyota, so much that should be preserved. I want to help with that. I want Keshta'shivau to flourish and grow, as my own people have done. And then there's Tov—he needs me, so much. I make a difference, in his life, not just as a mate to help him survive, but as a partner and friend. Am I making sense, or just rambling on?"

"I understand," Nyota said. "At least, a little. I understand wanting to help preserve Vulcan culture, though it seems a high price to pay to do it."

"All things worth doing require some sacrifice," Jalila said. "You just have to decide if it's worth it, to you."

"I see," Nyota said. That was the question. But not one Jalila could help her with. "What about things besides culture?"

Jalila took another bite and washed it down with a swallow of water. "If you're asking about professional draws, well, I like construction, but I was getting bored on Earth. So much these days there is prefabricated, everything the same, and all you do is snap it together like a puzzle piece. There's no craftsmanship to it, no skill. Here—Vulcans don't *do* prefab. Every building is unique, special. I can look at what I've done each day and be proud of it, you know? I've learned so much since I came here. I can't wait to go to work each day and see what we're building. And there's a lifetime's worth of work to be done."

Nyota nodded. She understood Jalila's pride in her work. It was how she felt about her own. "And marriage?"

"If I were back home, my family would be introducing me to suitable men so that I could marry and have children, and I've never had a problem with that—I've always wanted a family of my own, and I've seen enough to know that marrying for "love" is no more a guarantee of happiness and a lasting marriage than marrying the person your family picks out for you. Tov is a good man, and he respects me and I respect him; we work well together, we have similar goals, and we enjoy each other's company. It's a good match. As for the Pon Farr, well," she winked at Nyota, "I have to admit I'm kind of eager to find out just what he's like when he's unleashed."

Nyota gave a small grin. "I know what you mean—did you have that speculation, in the girls' locker rooms in high school—about what passion simmered beneath those cool exteriors?"

Jalila laughed. "Oh, of course, didn't everyone? Those exotic Vulcans—we had one come in to give a lecture on interspecies ethics to the oldest students, tall and dark-skinned and elegant, one year, and of course half the girls went madly in love with him for the next three months. Someone even dug up an old interview Amanda Grayson gave, just after her marriage to Ambassador Sarek, and passed it around. She was asked what it was like married to a little green man—"

"—and she replied that there was nothing little about her husband?" Nyota finished. "I've seen that one." She smiled, before remembering why she'd looked it up; when she'd first realized that Spock returned her interest in him, like any good scientist faced with the unexpected she'd decided research was necessary. She'd looked up anything she could about his parents. Both Sarek and Amanda possessed intimidating biographies—brilliant in their fields, well respected, powerful. That interview, with its humorous innuendo, had convinced her that under the impressive credentials was a woman she'd like to know, and given her more reason to want to get to know Amanda's son. And now Amanda was dead, and Nyota had never met her. And was considering *marrying* her son.

"Well, within the next two years or so, I won't have to guess," Jalila said. "All those girls would be terribly jealous, if they knew." She sobered, a little. "Tov is worried—as much as he can be worried—about what will happen to me, if I will be strong enough to handle it. But the Lady Amanda was just fine, so I'm pretty sure he's worried about nothing. What gave me pause, when the whole thing was explained to me, wasn't the possibility of rough, unbridled sex, it was the telepathic component. That Tov would always know at least a little of what was going through my head, and vice versa. I think that surprised him. Telepathic bonds are normal to him; Pon Farr is shameful. For me, sex with my husband isn't shameful, but telepathic bonds are completely out of my frame of reference. I had to think about that, think hard, before I could decide whether I could stand it. Whether I *wanted* to try it. We have a betrothal bond, at the moment, a lighter version like they use when they betroth children. Normally they wouldn't bother with it for adults, but it's a good way to give this a trial run, because it's less intrusive and more easily broken than a full bond. So far, it's been fine." She looked down at her plate. "I can't tell you too much about it, because so much of what it's like is private between Tov and myself, but if you have questions or concerns about the bond, I will try to answer as much as I can."

"Thank you," Nyota said. "I appreciate that. But Spock and I have touched minds enough that I'm not worried about that part. And I'm certainly not worried about the sex."

"You've melded with him?" Jalila was surprised. "When? Why?"

Nyota didn't answer.

After a few seconds, Jalila's eyes widened. "Oh! Oh." Nyota half expected her to blush, but she didn't.

"If I could marry Spock, and stay in Starfleet with my career on its current track, I'd do it without hesitation," Nyota said. "Pon Farr doesn't worry me, or the telepathy, or anything about Spock himself, except that he's so sure that this is the only way. It's Keshta'shivau that's the sticking point. And the expectations that go with it."

Jalila nodded. "That is something I cannot advise you on. I have found a home here, but I think we are looking for different things."

They didn't talk much for the remainder of the meal.

The evening after they left Keshta'shivau, Nyota sat in her quarters stretched out on her bed reading the latest intelligence reports from across the Romulan Neutral zone—with a paper on the use of noun cases in Andorian poetry as opposed to prose as a treat for later—when her door chime sounded.

"Come in," she said.

It was Spock. He entered and stood just inside the doors wearing a meditation robe, uncomfortable in her private space for the first time in a long time, and Nyota's heart ached at the sight. "Come here," she said with a sigh, patting the bedspread beside her.

He crossed the room without hesitation to join her, she was relieved to note.

They sat in silence for a few minutes while Nyota slowed her breathing and calmed her thoughts. When she felt better able to control the contact, she took his hand in hers and let him feel what she felt—her love for him, her ambivalence for the situation. "I don't know when I'll be able to give you an answer. But I don't want to lose what we have while I think about it."

"I agree," Spock said softly, and sent back a pulse of the love he seldom expressed verbally. "There is time. It would be illogical to waste it, under the circumstances."

Nyota caressed his fingers with her own. *Five years*, she thought. *I have five years*.

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