

Nyota's Choice

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Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Alternate Original Series
Relationship:	Nyota Uhura (AOS)/Spock (AOS) , Spock (AOS) & Sarek (AOS)
Character:	Nyota Uhura (AOS) , Spock (AOS) , Sarek (AOS)
Additional Tags:	Vulcan Culture(s) , Family
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Keshta'shivau
Stats:	Published: 2017-10-15 Words: 3,802 Chapters: 1/1

Nyota's Choice

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Summary

Sarek gets married. Nyota has a decision to make.

Notes

Betaed by Laura JV.

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It took Nyota most of a shift to notice it, but there was something up with Spock. They hadn't spent much time together this week—one of the science department's long-running experiments had reached a critical stage, and Nyota was in the middle of a security overhaul of *Enterprise's* computers and communication systems—but he'd been fine from what she'd seen.

Now, however, his posture was just a bit stiffer than normal, his voice more remote. People might think he was icy cold, but really, he was just formal, and with a different set of physical cues than they were used to. Nyota was pretty good at reading him, and he was upset about something.

But not upset enough about it to interfere with his duties, and Nyota had duties of her own. She filed the knowledge away and turned back to her board.

Starfleet software engineers always claimed that they'd tested every possible point of failure for each new piece of code, but in Nyota's experience their imaginations ran far short of what a ship out on frontier might run into. Not to mention, each ship's computer was customized by her crew, to better fit their experiences and needs, and so the Platonic form of a starship Starfleet was testing for didn't actually exist anywhere in the fleet. Fitting it all together and making new code work was always a challenge and a puzzle, and *this* one was almost finished.

But she couldn't quite bring herself back to focus on it properly, so it took a little longer than it should.

It took two days before both of their projects were done, and in that time Spock hadn't relaxed at all. Nyota didn't interfere—she was his girlfriend, not his keeper or his emotional regulator—but it wasn't something to do with the ship, and it wasn't something to do with his experiments, and if it were something to do with Starfleet, Nyota would probably have heard of it by now. (If she hadn't, if it were classified, for example, the captain would probably also be reacting to it.) That left something Vulcan.

The last time something Vulcan had gotten Spock this tense, he'd taken her to the new Vulcan homeworld Keshta'shivau, introduced her to a very elderly, haughty Vulcan woman who had interrogated her about her family, her history, and her career. Then Spock had explained the details of secret Vulcan reproductive biology, the deeply skeevey ways Vulcan culture had formed around it, what that meant in a time when Vulcans were an endangered species and men outnumbered women by a significant margin, and asked her to marry him.

Now, three years later, she still hadn't given him an answer. There were two years left before the *Enterprise's* five-year mission ended and she'd have to answer, one way or the other.

She still was neither his keeper nor responsible for his emotional state. If he wanted to tell her, he would. But Vulcan business left her edgy.

They didn't generally eat together—Spock preferred the traditional Vulcan silence during meals, and Nyota didn't—so it wasn't until after

supper when they were curled up together on Spock's couch that they had time to talk privately.

"You have noticed my preoccupation in the last several days," Spock said, not looking down at her.

"Yup," Nyota said. And here it came.

"My father has remarried." Spock's voice was absolutely flat, no affect at all. Nyota twisted up to look at his face.

"And he didn't let you know beforehand?" Nyota was shocked, but she could feel her stomach relaxing a bit. She'd been more nervous than she thought.

Spock hesitated. "Given the circumstances ... it is likely that was not possible. The death of a bondmate or other serious trauma sometimes speeds up the reproductive cycle. He may have been caught ... off guard."

"Awkward," Nyota said, wincing. "Well, he found someone, even at the last moment, that's good. Better than the alternative."

"Yes." Spock agreed but he still didn't sound certain.

"We knew he needed to remarry eventually," she pointed out. "Vulcan biology being what it is, it's lucky that he's had four years since your Mom died before he had to. Not to mention the need to repopulate the species."

"It is ... illogical in the extreme to react this way," Spock said. "I know the realities and imperatives far better than you do. I am still ... every time I believe I have accepted this, turmoil rises up."

"That sucks," Nyota said. "Who'd he marry?"

"An administrative assistant from the government office, formerly on loan from the Terran government," Spock said. He leaned over and snagged a padd, turning it on and bringing up information before handing it to her.

A young Human woman with medium amber skin and straight black hair smiled out at her. Kamala Siyal. She was—Nyota checked the birth date, just to be sure—she was only a few years older than Nyota herself was, and not quite as old as Spock.

Grew up in the Sindh province of the South Asian Republic on Earth, high marks in school, prestigious internships in governments across Earth and a few other planets before returning home to the SAR and a plum posting in the SAR national government. On loan to the Federation as one of the rebuilding advisors, recently married to Ambassador Sarek of Keshta'shivau. Very smart, hardworking, very qualified.

Very young.

"She's ..." Nyota trailed off. "That's a big age difference."

"Given the difference in fertility periods and lifespans between Human and Vulcan women, a younger woman would be preferable if he wished to have children, and especially to maximize the amount of time before he becomes a widower again. He will likely still outlive her by some decades."

"I guess," Nyota said. "Very logical, when you put it that way, but I see why you're having trouble with this."

"It is a very logical decision," Spock said, obviously trying to convince himself. "He already knows he can be quite content married to a Human woman, so it would be illogical to marry a Vulcan woman when there is such a shortage. And he must have children, for the good of the species and our House, and choosing a woman with a long period of fertility still in front of her is the sensible thing to do. Without knowing the woman to form an assessment of the suitability of their characters and habits, his reasoning is flawless."

"Still doesn't make it easy to swallow having a step-mother younger than you are," Nyota said.

"No." Spock sighed. "I know he loved my mother. I know she was happy with him, although I never understood why. I know that, had she anticipated such a circumstance, she would definitely have preferred him remarrying when it became necessary to the alternative. And from a certain perspective, the fact that he chose to marry a Human a second time is a great compliment to her—that he found marriage to her congenial enough to wish to replicate as much as possible. Yet I find I cannot quite shake the idea that that my father ..."

"... traded in for a younger model?" Nyota suggested when it was clear he wasn't going to finish the sentence.

"That is *not* what happened." Spock said emphatically. He sighed. "Even though I must confess, to a certain degree it feels like it."

"Well, you'll get over it eventually," Nyota said. "Probably once you can get to know her and give her a chance to be her, whoever she is, and not just the woman who took your mother's place. Just don't be a dick to her in the meantime."

"I am not a—"

"Spock. I love you. But you can totally be a dick sometimes, and you know it."

He shifted, but didn't say anything.

"So! What are the protocols?" Nyota asked. "Do we send a gift? Cards? Flowers? Pledge our undying loyalty?"

That last had been a joke, but judging from the way Spock became even more tense, possibly actually true. Only Vulcans.

"Spock?"

"The obedience to the senior matriarch does not need to be pledged, it is assumed," Spock said.

"Even though she's younger than you are?"

"She is married to the Head of House, and who is also my father, and there are no older women of that line." Spock sighed. "In practice ... much depends on her delicacy. Some matriarchs are deeply involved in arranging the lives of their children and house-children, others less so. And under the circumstances, for the next few years at least as she becomes acclimated to our way of doing things, I doubt she will enforce her prerogatives. On the other hand, she may decide to seize her ground from the first, on the premise that it is easier to do so than to reclaim lost privileges later."

"And because you've never met her, you have no idea which category she's going to fall into," Nyota said, realizing once again that she kept underestimating the complexity and sheer bogglingly elaborate power-plays of Vulcan culture. It was like a mystery, but not the fun kind, the frustrating kind where you never got the clues you needed until it was too late. Most Vulcans seemed to like it, but there were so many parts that were, from a Human perspective, deeply messed up. "Have you tried talking to her?"

"Not yet," Spock said. "Their time of Seclusion is not yet over."

Nyota frowned. "Does that prove it was *pon farr*, or do all Vulcan couples have Seclusion right after they're married?"

"All couples," Spock said, "to prevent exactly that inference. It does not matter, in any case; *that* is one custom I would never bend in the slightest."

"Certainly not with your own father," Nyota said. She didn't want to think about her parents' sex lives, either. "So, best case scenario is she leaves you alone to live your life, and you guys develop a cordial relationship. Worst case scenario is? If she wanted to, what could she do?"

"A great deal," Spock said. "Among other things, it is her right to be part of the process of arranging spouses for the children of her House. And while no one is ever legally required to marry the spouse of their clan and house's choosing, it is ... more difficult to refuse if the matriarch of one's House and the Eldest Mother of one's clan are united in agreement."

"Ouch. You know, Vulcan marriage customs really suck." That was an understatement. She'd learned a lot in the last few years. Even the bits that she understood and thought were probably the best possible way to handle the biological imperatives involved really sucked.

"That is your opinion," Spock said neutrally. They'd had this argument a lot.

"That assumes that she *could* form an alliance with V'Lar," Nyota said. "Your Eldest Mother is not fond of Humans, however much she admits the necessity of them."

"V'Lar is not my Eldest Mother," Spock said. "She is *acting* as the Eldest Mother of my clan until such time as we have a woman sufficiently experienced to fill the role. T'Pau was my Eldest Mother, and also the matriarch of my House."

Nyota patted his arm in acknowledgement of the point, however little it mattered. V'Lar was the one they had to deal with. "In any case, there's no point in fretting about it until they're out of Seclusion."

"There is not," Spock said. He changed the subject. "How did the update integration go?"

"Nothing major, but a lot of interesting issues," Nyota said, relieved at the subject change. "And looking at the pattern, I think that Starfleet is taking sensor processing in a direction that will be harder and harder to reconcile with your settings from here on out." *This* was the sort of thing she loved, this was what she had trained for and dedicated her life to: the challenges of communication between species and the computers that enabled (and sometimes hindered) it.

Spock scowled. "With my settings and adjustments, Enterprise's subspace scanner processing is the most efficient in the Fleet. As I have showed them repeatedly."

"There are other things to consider," Nyota pointed out, playing Devil's Advocate although she agreed with him. "Here, let me show you what I'm talking about." She pulled up the notes she'd made during the process and they spent a pleasant evening arguing about computer code. If she could have Spock with her, in this world, for the rest of their lives, she'd marry him in a heartbeat. But that wasn't one of the options he would choose. His family and species had first claim, and she couldn't ever forget that.

A few days later, Sarek and Kamala were out of Seclusion and Spock arranged for a subspace call, with Nyota present, in which he and his father were painfully formal with each other and Nyota had no chance to take a measure of the woman who was now pretty much her mother-in-law.

So a few days after *that* she arranged a call to Kamala Siyal, just the two of them, Humans together.

"Thank you for reaching out," Kamala said. "I want to get to know you and Spock—we're going to be family, and hopefully that will go well—but I just felt so awkward, and everything is in flux right now. My job is changing, I'm learning to live with Sarek (and he with me), we've moved into married housing but are looking at starting to build a House residence ... come to think of it, we should probably ask you and Spock for your input on what the residence should look like. It's going to be your home, too."

"That would be much appreciated," Nyota said. "I hope you're adjusting well? It must be such a big change."

"Oh, it is, it's massive," said Kamala. "Although, part of it is Sarek adjusting to *me*. I don't think he'd consciously realized that because Amanda and I are very different people, we will obviously be different to live with. There was a lot of 'But Amanda—' the first few days. I have a lot of respect for her, and she and Sarek had both worked out some good compromises that I'm happy to live with, for the most part. But

not all of them, and we're still working out what the new boundaries and compromises are going to be."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Nyota said. Working out the cultural compromises had been hard enough with Spock, and she hadn't had to worry about stepping into a dead woman's shoes.

"It has been," Kamala said. "But the nice thing about Sarek is that I know he's always listening thoughtfully, even when he disagrees."

Nyota raised her brows at that picture of Sarek. "That ... has not been my experience of him," she said. "At least, not when it comes to Spock."

"Really?" Kamala said. "Huh. Difference between a wife and a child, I suppose."

"Not that Spock is a child any longer," Nyota pointed out.

Kamala made a face. "I know," she said. "That is *so weird*. Having a stepchild older than I am! I don't really like thinking about that."

"You're going to have to, considering the powers the matriarch of the House has over the members of it," Nyota said.

"I know, I know," Kamala said. "I thought my grandfather's grumbling about tradition and authority were ridiculous, and Vulcans are even worse! I've been studying this, and there are a lot of places where even the most stodgy conservative Vulcan has to admit that the matriarch can delegate decisions to her juniors, by which I mean she can say 'it's your life and your decisions, do whatever you want.' And even where she can't, I've no intention of ever wielding that authority. It's medieval!"

"Can't argue with you there," Nyota said. "Spock will be relieved to hear it."

"Please pass it on for me," Kamala said. She hesitated. "I don't want to gossip, or ask you to give up a confidence," she said slowly. "But I know there's bad blood of some sort between Spock and Sarek, and I've already put my foot in things a few times and would prefer it if I at least knew where the land mines were."

Nyota thought for a bit. "I've only ever heard Spock's side," she said, "and I don't..." She thought some more. "I don't want to prejudice you, and I don't want to break any confidences, but some of this you need to know, because I'm assuming that you're planning on having kids?"

Kamala nodded. "Yes. We figured a year or two to become used to one another first."

"Right. Well, the thing is, I don't know what kind of a husband Sarek is, but he wasn't that good a father," Nyota said. "He was under a lot of pressure because he married a Human, and Spock faced a lot of bigotry because he was half-Human, and Sarek's response was basically to raise the stakes and try to make Spock the most perfect Vulcan ever so that the detractors would see he wasn't 'contaminated' by his mother. Didn't work, of course, but it meant Sarek spent Spock's childhood trying to be the perfect Vulcan, to such an extent that after the Devastation, when Sarek told Spock that he had loved Amanda, Spock was honestly surprised. Not to mention that it felt, to Spock, like Sarek thought his Human half was a problem or something to be ashamed of, which Spock ... never responded well to, for obvious reasons, given how much he loved his mother. And Spock's so used to criticism from his father, and not ever being good enough, that he reacts to that even when Sarek genuinely isn't trying to criticize. Which Sarek doesn't take well, himself."

"Ouch," Kamala said. "So what would you suggest I look for?"

"Make sure he's more supportive and understanding this time around," Nyota said. "Make sure he doesn't just let bigotry pass unremarked, so your kids think he agrees with it. Hell, I don't know, maybe he's learned from his mistakes. Maybe the large numbers of exogamous marriages on Keshta'shivau will lessen the pressure. But you need to know what to watch for."

"Thank you, that is very helpful," Kamala said. She looked off to the side. "I don't suppose you ever met Amanda, yourself?" She was trying to be casual, but Nyota didn't quite buy it.

"Sorry," Nyota said. "Spock and I weren't at the meeting-the-parents stage before the Devastation, certainly not given that they lived on a different planet and Spock and Sarek hadn't spoken since Spock joined Starfleet. He describes her as very warm, gracious, and the perfect mother, though I don't know how much of that is eulogizing the dead."

"Eulogizing the dead," Kamala said. "I don't want to compete with a dead woman; there's no way to win." She gave a small smile. "Guess I'll just have to be myself, instead."

"Sarek did love Amanda," Nyota said, "but that's no reason he can't love you, too, surely?"

"I don't believe he loves me," Kamala said thoughtfully. "I don't believe I'm in love with him, either. I could be, I very easily could be, and I think that's true of him, as well. But we were just getting to know each other when ..." she blushed.

"Right, got it, I know of Vulcan biology," Nyota said.

"I knew I would have regretted it if I didn't step up," Kamala said. "I'd have always wondered what might have been. But on the other hand, when I said yes, I'd never really taken the time to think about the dead wife and the adult son and all the realities of what it would be like to be *part* of Vulcan culture, not just an observer of it ..."

There were reasons Nyota hadn't married Spock despite how much she loved him, and how much he loved her. Vulcan biology was about ten percent of those reasons, Vulcan culture being the other 90%. And she didn't even have to deal with a predecessor. (T'Pol didn't count, given that Spock hadn't seen her since they were seven.) "Well, if you have any trouble or need any advice, please contact me," Nyota said. "I'll be happy to help. Unless it's about Sarek and Spock disagreeing about something, I try to stay out of those as much as possible."

"That's probably wise advice," Kamala said. "Thank you."

After that, the conversation turned to a more general discussion of Vulcan culture and politics and what was happening on Keshta'shivau these days.

Overall, Nyota liked the other woman, but she'd never step into her shoes, and not just because she wasn't all that fond of Sarek.

A few years ago, Spock had explained to her some of the hidden dark parts of Vulcan culture. Not the sex stuff, which they were so ashamed of; the way their society put people in boxes and curtailed so many basic freedoms, like the freedom to choose who to marry. And he'd asked her if she'd be willing to marry him even knowing those restrictions. And said she had five years to give him an answer.

She was pretty sure she'd *never* be willing to subject herself to Vulcan custom the way she'd have to to marry Spock. This whole situation—Kamala, rushed into a marriage she hadn't understood the implications of by Vulcan biology; Spock, worried and upset because Vulcan culture gave a stranger younger than him so much power over his life—was just the icing on the cake. How many hidden traps lurked deep in Vulcan culture, waiting to trap Kamala up? How informed a decision could it have possibly been, under the circumstances?

How many would be lurking for Nyota, if she made that choice? She knew more than just about any Human woman who wasn't already married to a Vulcan, but there were still surprises. Things Spock took for granted, or thought were obvious.

No. She couldn't marry Spock, much as she loved him. She'd have to tell him soon.

Nyota had worked hard to create herself and her life exactly the way she wanted it. She had the stars, and she had languages, and she had new things to learn every day, with every new planet the ship visited. She had freedom, and friends, and everything she'd ever wanted. She wasn't giving that up, not even for the man she loved.

But they had time together, at least some time, before he would have to marry. Before he might choose to leave Starfleet and go back to the new Vulcan homeworld. Time to decide what other forms their relationship might take. It would have to be enough.

End Notes

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