

The One Great Choice

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The One Great Choice

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Summary

They are not healed yet, but they will be.

Notes

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Thanks so much, guys! You made this fic so much better.

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

T'Shael's decision to accompany Cleante back to Earth was easily made but not, in the end, easily accomplished. Or, at least, quickly attained.

"He did *what*?" Cleante said, appalled. "T'Shael, that's outrageous! The invasion of your privacy—" She shook her head. For a human, it would have been bad. To give out an adult's confidential medical information? To a virtual stranger, however related? She could not imagine how it must be affecting T'Shael, to know that the clan Eldest Mother she had only spoken to a handful of times in her life knew the intimate details of T'Shael's breakdown.

"Cleante, Vulcan privacy taboos do not often align with those of Humans," T'Shael pointed out. "This is one such case. Spock was right, to tell her of my condition and status, both physical and mental. She is my Eldest Mother; she has a right to know. Indeed, she *must* know in order to make informed decisions. And *he* has an obligation to my family to ensure my well-being, now that I have been recovered, for I was injured in his place."

"And *this* is how he chose to do it?" Cleante said. "He couldn't have spoken with you directly and trusted you, as an adult, to make an informed decision about your own well-being?"

"My self-insight and ability to rationally judge my own well-being are precisely the issues in question," T'Shael pointed out. "As you well know." Only a short time had passed since she had emerged from her self-imposed deterioration, yet T'Shael herself did not quite understand the state of mind which had produced it. Every decision had seemed logical at the time, and yet ... she could not reproduce the results. It was a curious feeling—and a *feeling* it was—not to know her own thoughts. She who had been so controlled, even for a Vulcan, now felt like a stranger in her own mind.

"Yes, but!" Cleante began pacing the room. She and T'Shael had arranged to share a suite on the passenger liner which was taking them from *Enterprise* back home, and though the cabins were tiny the day room was larger than their quarters in captivity and much larger than the cabins on *Enterprise*. With only her and T'Shael, it felt—large. Resh and Krn and Jali would have filled it. "And this T'Larn, she can just ... *order* you to stay on Vulcan like that?" The ship which was taking them back to Earth was a liner with a regular run from the Federation's edges in to its core, a run that took it past both Earth and Vulcan. When T'Shael agreed to come with them to Earth, it had been a simple matter to change her reservations. Cleante had not reckoned on T'Shael, an unmarried orphan, having relatives on Vulcan who could compel her to stay.

"Yes," T'Shael said. "The Eldest Mother of a clan has immense authority, when she chooses to use it. T'Pau is one such you will have heard of. T'Larn has no legal power to force me, but were I to choose to disobey ..."

"You'd be ostracized?" Cleante didn't know much about the way Vulcan clans worked—though not for lack of study, in her time in T'lingShar, given how private Vulcans could be—but she knew how important they were.

T'Shael considered. "There are extenuating circumstances," she said. "But I should not wish to test the result."

Cleante sighed and flopped down on the couch next to T'Shael. "Then I suppose we'll have to stay on Vulcan. I hope it won't be long—I can't ask Mother to stay away from her job, and I doubt she'll want to leave me."

"You should go with her," T'Shael said. "You have long wanted to see Earth again. And she should not be forced to choose between her duty to you and her duty to the position that has been entrusted to her."

"T'Shael, I don't want to be just a *duty* to anyone," Cleante said. That had been the problem between her and her mother for years: Cleante had felt like a duty and an afterthought. "And I do want to see Earth, but not without you! I've been a rolling stone for years—flitting from one place to another. At first it was because of my mother's career, but afterwards it was my own choice. T'lingShar was the longest I've lived in one place since I was a young child. I love Egypt, but I don't *need* it. All my life, I've wanted family—someone to love and who loves me—more than I've wanted a place. And now I have that with you. I'm not giving that up!" She faltered. "Unless you don't want me. If it would be better for your therapy or ... or whatever it is they'll have you do, I'll leave. But only if you tell me to."

"I do not know what they will require of me," T'Shael said. "However, your presence would be ... preferable."

"Then it's settled," Cleante said.

"Of course it's not settled!" Jasmine said, looking at her daughter in horror. "I just got you *back*. They put you through enough—you can't have been at home there as a Warrantor, and it was their lack of basic security precautions that allowed you to be kidnapped. You've been through a very traumatic experience! You need support! And you certainly won't get it on Vulcan. A few days' vacation during the ship's layover is one thing. Staying is quite another!"

"T'Shael has been all the support I could need," Cleante said. "I would not have survived without her." She stood, hands clasped, in front of her mother. No matter how old she got, she always felt like she was being called on the carpet when they disagreed. It was a hard habit to shake.

"And I'm very grateful to her," Jasmine said. She looked at her daughter, at the Vulcan-like posture she had adopted, and saw a woman who was almost a stranger. It wasn't the first time she had thought this since Cleante's rescue, but it was the first time she attributed any part of it to T'Shael, instead of their captors. She didn't like it. "But she is a Vulcan and you are a Human. You have emotional needs that can't be fully met on Vulcan, and I'm sure *she* has psychological or telepathic needs that can't be met on Earth. Be reasonable, Cleante!"

"I am, mother!" Cleante sighed. In the first flush of rescue, as emotions ran high, she had so hoped that they could build a new relationship, all the heartache and misunderstanding gone. But they were two very different women, and a better understanding could not wipe away years of disconnect and hurt. She tried to see her mother, not as an unapproachable authority, but as a woman with hopes and fears of her own. How could she explain to Jasmine, whose challenges had ever only been obstacles to overcome, what closeness she and T'Shael had found in that hell?

She took a seat on the couch next to her mother. Jasmine reached out and grasped her hand. Cleante squeezed back—this sort of casual touch was one thing that she had missed, since Krn died. T'Shael had been a tower of strength, but the Vulcan did not invite the physical.

"I only want what's best for you, Cleante," her mother said.

"I know, Mother." Cleante squeezed her hand again. "But I am an adult. Please trust that I can choose what's best for me—and what's best for me is T'Shael. Wherever that may lead."

"She's more important to you than home?" Jasmine said. She eyed her daughter. "After all this time you haven't found out you're bisexual, have you? And with a Vulcan?"

"No!" Cleante huffed a small laugh. Wouldn't things be easier if she were? If she and T'Shael were lovers, everyone would understand. Not the Vulcan part, but they'd accept that T'Shael was her priority. But a 'mere' friend would rank far below the priority of a lover.

Jasmine sighed. "All right. We'll see what we can do."

Although the screens in the cabins were decently sized, more than big enough for the three of them to use together, Jasmine had arranged for the use of a media room, which the crew of the passenger liner were only too happy to reserve for the High Commissioner and the two returned hostages. It was an elegant room with tasteful, subdued art on the wall behind them, just waiting for Important People to make calls from.

T'Shael's Eldest Mother was an elderly woman, her face as lined as any Vulcan Cleante had ever seen. Her hair was bleached white, and coiled up in an elaborate style, with something like a crown perched on top. It was very different from the skull-cap-and-scarf worn by most Vulcan matrons. Cleante tried to trace any similarity with T'Shael's familiar features, and failed.

Jasmine al-Faisal was never one to let anyone get the better of her—it was how she had risen so far, so young—and so she started off on the offensive: T'Shael's recovery and current health, the large Vulcan enclave on Earth which might offer her anything she needed, the advantages to a linguist of visiting a new planet which held not only an abundance of languages if its own but also more interstellar languages than even T'lingShar could boast.

T'Larn countered that Vulcan had far better healers, T'Shael's own clan to support her, and that career considerations could be attended to once T'Shael's physical and mental health was assured.

And so it went, back and forth. Cleante discreetly rubbed the palms of her hands on her skirt as she listened to her mother and T'Shael's Eldest Mother debate. She had often chafed at the requirements of Vulcan propriety, at holding silence in her elders' presence. Now, though, she was glad of the excuse not to get in the way. She was desperately hoping for T'Shael to come with her to Earth. She didn't want to disappoint her mother, to set back the fragile new growth in their relationship, but she couldn't imagine going anywhere without T'Shael. Perhaps someday, when they were used to peace again. But not today when she still woke in the night, certain that Kalor was coming for T'Shael. She edged closer to her friend, hoping the movement would escape T'Larn's notice.

T'Shael was ... concerned. She had never before defied her eldest mother, never questioned her—never thought such a thing might happen. T'Larn was Eldest Mother precisely because of her wisdom and experience, which a young woman like T'Shael could not hope to equal. It was axiomatic that the Eldest Mother would know best for her clan; that T'Shael might challenge that ... made her uneasy. For a Human to challenge T'Larn on her behalf was highly irregular; and the human could not possibly know the strictures she was shattering.

And yet, what else could she do? She could not leave Cleante, not while Cleante wished for her presence. The echo of Resh and Krn's anguish, their pain at isolation, resonated through her mind at the thought, taking up space where once her link to Stalek had been. Once, T'Shael had been content to live her life alone, imposing on no one, that others might be spared the grief she had felt at her father's suffering. A quiet life of service had been all she desired.

Now, that thought seemed ... empty. Barren. Had it always been so, and she unable to see it? Was it the death of Stalek, whose mind had whispered to her even in her solitude that so changed her? Was it the lingering after-effect of the meld with the Deltans? Or was it merely her friendship with—her love for—Cleante?

The Human was uneasy, afraid. T'Shael could tell this from her shifting muscles, but standing next to each other as they were, she could also 'hear' her t'hy'la's emotions, if only dimly. It occurred to her that shielding was a possibility; certainly, it was what she would once have done. But she had learned to let Cleante in, during those months as prisoners, and she would not shut her out once more. Cleante took a slow half-step towards T'Shael, and T'Shael echoed it. A twitch brought a fold of her robe forward to hide their hands. Hesitantly, she touched the back of her first two fingers to Cleante's hand.

Cleante started, but T'Shael could feel her relax. It was odd, to touch another; she had touched more people, for longer, in the last few months than she had since her seventh year. But Cleante was different. This was no violation that she allowed for the sake of another. It was ... welcome.

"T'Shael. Thee has thoughts on this matter?"

T'Shael did not allow herself to show her surprise. Perhaps it would have been best to postpone the comfort until a time when her elder was not present, even if only via subspace. "I bow to your wisdom, Mother," she said, inclining her head. She did not remove her hand. It was not visible; that was propriety enough.

"If that were true, thee would not allow this discussion," T'Larn pointed out.

"Given a choice, I would stay with Cleante, whether on Vulcan or Earth," T'Shael said. She paused; this was a private matter, but Ms. al-Faisal would not understand, and T'Larn was due the information about her once-solitary house-daughter. "She is my t'hy'la."

T'Larn raised an eyebrow. "And thee did not inform me immediately? It will affect ... many things."

T'Shael bowed at the rebuke. "I humbly apologize, Eldest," she said, slipping into the most formal dialect of their clan. It was rude to speak so in front of the Humans, in a language they did not know, but the formality of the apology took precedence.

T'Larn stared at her. T'Shael was, briefly, glad of the light-years between them. Master Stimm was the only Elder she had regular contact with, and he was not so ... piercing. Her soul felt worn already; the Eldest Mother's gaze bored through her. "This changes things," she said in English. "I will take consideration of it and inform you of my decision. High Commissioner, we will speak later." She cut the connection.

"Well!" Ms. al-Faisal said. "What a rude person."

"Vulcans are more abrupt, Mother," Cleante said.

"I understand that dear, I've worked with many of them over the last few years," her mother said, turning to look at her. "But they still offered appropriate respect to the office of the High Commissioner!" She shook her head, dismissing the matter. Jasmine eyed the two young women, how close they stood to one another. "And what is this t'hy'la, anyway?"

Cleante pursed her lips. "It's, well, it's sort of like best friends. But more of a formal relationship. It's really hard to translate, there isn't a way of saying it in English or Arabic. Okhti, maybe, or habibi?"

"There's quite a difference between 'my sister' and 'my beloved'! Jasmine pointed out.

"Not in this case," T'Shael said. "Either would be an accurate translation of t'hy'la, in different circumstances."

"And it's enough to make a difference in what T'Shael is required to do?" Jasmine asked.

"Yes," T'Shael said briefly.

"Hm." Jasmine eyed them both speculatively but said no more, to Cleante's great relief.

"So, T'Shael, tell me about yourself," Jasmine said the next day after they had eaten breakfast. Cleante took her meals with her mother—T'Shael, like all Vulcans, did not speak while eating, so it was a good time for Cleante and Jasmine to spend together. But afterwards, they

would gather in the girls' sitting room. Up to this point, Jasmine had mostly spent the time working and talking with Cleante while T'Shael worked at the desk across from the sofa where Cleante generally curled up.

Cleante cringed. Humans asked such direct questions—and her mother had never been shy about questioning her daughter's friends and lovers—but Vulcans generally did not. Not personal ones, at any rate.

"I am a linguist," T'Shael said. "Becoming a Warrantor allowed me to learn many languages from across the Federation without leaving my home planet. There was always call for me to teach, Vulcan to the other Warrantors and other languages to those of my people preparing for travel offworld."

"That, I knew," Jasmine said. "Cleante has told me about you, at least a little, in her letters over the years and about your time together in captivity. For a casual acquaintance, it's enough. But you're apparently going to be a fixture in my daughter's life for some time to come, and I'd like to get to know you better."

T'Shael nodded. It was a reasonable request. Certainly, she had no doubt that T'Larn had ordered a full dossier on Cleante, once T'Shael had declared them t'hy'la. "My father was Salet, one of the greatest players of the ka'athyra in many years—he was also a celebrated composer, and revolutionized the construction methods for ka'athyra. I spent most of my childhood at his feet, although I have no great talent myself. My own playing is merely competent; his was inspired. He died of a wasting disease, a genetic disorder, when I was young. My mother was a scientist and a Starfleet officer, and was killed on the *Intrepid*. I have no blood siblings, so I was largely alone after their passing. I studied with Master Stimm in T'lingShar and taught. My life was very quiet."

"It sounds like it," Cleante's mother said. "Do you want to return to that quiet life?"

"It had much to recommend it," T'Shael said. "It was appropriate to my skills and aspirations. It would not be a hardship. And yet, I have changed. It would be illogical to assume that I might resume that life, even if I wished to." She considered her words carefully. "There are ... many factors in play. My decisions are not wholly my own."

"Yes, your Eldest Mother is ... quite overbearing." She shook her head. T'Shael found her reaction interesting; Cleante's descriptions of her mother, combined with T'Shael's own observations, revealed a similar quality in the High Commissioner. "Cleante would never stand for me ordering her around like that."

T'Shael had not been referring to T'Larn, but to Cleante. "I would have been more willing to question my mother's orders than my Eldest Mother's," T'Shael said. Humans had no equivalent. Her mother had borne her and deserved her respect; the Eldest Mother's decisions determined her marriage and professional opportunities, and had more influence over her life than any other single person. T'Larn protected and guided the clan, her role a necessary one. The needs of the many outweighed the needs of the one. It was T'Larn's duty to see to it that the many were served, but also that each one within that many might have a good place.

"Question, but not challenge?" Cleante's mother said, with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," T'Shael said. Cleante made a face at her which T'Shael could not interpret.

"I suppose that's the difference between Vulcan and Human children," Ms. al-Faisal said. "Cleante has always challenged me—and ignored me, when she wished."

"Well, adolescent rebellion is a time-honored Human tradition," Cleante said. "And I rebelled often, but never *too* far."

"True." Ms. al-Faisal smiled at her daughter. T'Shael lowered her eyes. It honored her that they would discuss family business before her, but she would give them what privacy she could.

"At the time, it was terribly frustrating," Ms. al-Faisal said. "I never stopped to think how much worse it might have been. You never did anything dangerous, to yourself or others, or anything that might damage your prospects. Or even seriously embarrass me—but at the time, even such minor annoyances would drive me to distraction."

"I know," Cleante said, studying her mother. It seemed such a long time ago. It would hurt her mother to say it, but if there was one thing she had learned from T'Shael it was that honesty was preferable to silence. "I did it because I wanted a reaction from you—any reaction. Your attention, even if only for a little while."

Jasmine stilled, watching Cleante. "I'm sorry. I gave you everything I thought you needed. I thought your murabiyya's attention would be enough."

Cleante reached over to grasp her hand. There was nothing she could say to that.

Her mother had never been one to dwell on what could not be changed; the moment of silent contact didn't last long. Jasmine turned to T'Shael again.

"Will you be visiting your Master Stimm during our stopover on Vulcan?" she asked. "I imagine he would find it agreeable to see you, particularly if you're able to come to Earth with us."

"Master Stimm died while we were captives," T'Shael said quietly.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't know." Jasmine's voice went soft. "That must be hard."

"It is," T'Shael said briefly.

Jasmine hesitated, and Cleante hoped her mother would drop the subject. "But surely you will have someone else to visit—we'll be on Vulcan

for three days before moving on. I know Vulcans are very big on marriage," she said. "Do you have a husband or fiancé waiting for you?"

Cleante winced. T'Shael raised an eyebrow at her, puzzled. This was basic biographical data, which Ms. al-Faisal had a right to know as Cleante's mother. "I was betrothed to a gravity-control engineer named Stalek; we had little contact, for he lived and worked in the asteroid belt, building new habitats. He, too, died while we were captive."

Cleante's mother raised a hand to her mouth, a gesture that T'Shael had seen Cleante make when she was upset and wished to hide it from the Vulcan. "Oh! No wonder. The shock—even for a Vulcan ..." she trailed off.

Cleante sighed as her mother stopped talking. She supposed it was best if Jasmine believed it was shock and grief at finding her loved ones dead that had sent T'Shael to despair. There was so much she *wanted* to talk with her friend about, but not with her mother present. And her mother had been ... hovering, since their recovery. Cleante didn't blame her, but it was frustrating.

"Well!" Jasmine said at last. "Perhaps you can show us around Vulcan. I know you had several years to visit places with Cleante, but I've actually never seen much of Vulcan. My career has taken me to summits on several worlds, but Vulcan has, oddly enough, never been one of them. I've been on ships that stopped over there, several times, but I've only ever seen a few of the tourist attractions. I would suppose that you could give us a much richer view of your home, even with only three days, than the tourist brochures."

It took two nerve-racking days for T'Larn to call them back, as the ship drew ever closer to Vulcan and their possible separation. Cleante was used to nerve-racking; the gnawing in her belly that had nothing to do with hunger was an old friend. She just hadn't expected to experience it once they were free. She had nightmares the first night; T'Shael heard, and came in to comfort her. They didn't talk; T'Shael sat in the chair by the bed. Cleante watched her through lowered eyelashes, drowsing. Just knowing her friend was still there, breathing the same air in the same cabin, was a comfort.

The next day when her mother came to get her for breakfast, she asked how Cleante was sleeping. T'Shael rattled her out.

"Cleante woke from nightmares twice last night," T'Shael said. "Both times, it took her at least one point six standard hours to fall asleep again."

Cleante made a face and T'Shael. "Honestly, it isn't so bad," she said. "And part of it was just ... comfort. I woke up, and I was safe, and here, and T'Shael was with me. I wasn't afraid to go to sleep again, but being awake was so nice." She couldn't quite find the words to explain.

"Yes, but you need your sleep, darling," Jasmine said. "I could tell just looking at you that you couldn't sleep—your eyes are so red. Perhaps we can get a sleep aid from the ship's stores, to help tomorrow night."

"Maybe," Cleante said.

"And T'Shael needs her sleep, too," Jasmine said, shrewdly.

"Oh!" Cleante turned to T'Shael. "I didn't even think of that. I'm so sorry!"

"Vulcans require less sleep than humans," T'Shael said. "My meditations were very restful."

"Yes, normally," Cleante said. "But you were so badly injured—much worse than I was. You won't recover properly if you don't take care of yourself."

T'Shael inclined her head. "I found the regularity of your breathing to be an aid to meditation in the absence of a proper candle."

Cleante beamed. That might be the nicest compliment anyone had ever given her. It struck a chord deep within her that nothing else had.

Her mother brought the exchange up over breakfast. "You and T'Shael are obviously very close," she said.

"Yes, I've told you this, Mother," Cleante said. "That's why I've invited T'Shael to Earth with us—and why I'll be staying on Vulcan if she has to." She bit her lip. She didn't *want* to leave her mother, but T'Shael needed her more—and she needed T'Shael more.

"I've looked it up, but I can't really find any definition of the word t'hy'la," Jasmine said. "It's in a lot of their ancient poetry, though."

"Oh, yes, I've been reading some of it!" *That* was something she could talk about at great length—there were so many beautiful things in the old pre-Reformation poems, and she was thinking of learning one of the ancient Vulcan languages or dialects. Poetry suffered so in translation. T'Shael would find it interesting, she thought.

"I was wondering—does it mean 'lover', by any chance? Given Vulcan privacy taboos, that would explain the lack of translation." Jasmine took a bite and chewed. "Though I'm surprised—it doesn't seem like something they would be into."

"T'Shael and I aren't lovers!" Cleante said. "I'm not a lesbian, as you well know!"

"Darling, nobody who's had so much evident enjoyment with so many boys and men as you have could possibly be a lesbian," her mother said dryly, thinking back to some of Cleante's more flamboyant escapades. She hadn't discovered the joys of romantic and sexual attraction as young as Jasmine herself had, but she had made up for being a late bloomer with a vengeance and a string of short-lived but passionate affairs. That period had left Jasmine partly amused, partly worried for her daughter's safety both physical and emotional, and *very* annoyed at her daughter's inability to focus on anything else. "But there *is* such a thing as bisexual, you know, and it is a *spectrum*, not a hard-and-fast line. Do you remember Padmapani and Durijesh? They worked in my office when you were about seventeen, and you had such a crush on Durijesh for about two weeks." At her daughters nod, Jasmine went on. "Padmapani is mostly straight—Durijesh is the only man he's ever been interested in, really, or at least interested enough in to *do* something about it. You could be the same way. I would never have thought T'Shael

might be to your taste—she's so quiet, and you've always gone for the loud ones—but perhaps your taste in women is different than your taste in men."

"You have put *far* too much thought into this," Cleante said, amused. "But no, I'm not attracted to T'Shael in the slightest. Or any other woman I've ever met."

"Then why are you so insistent on staying with her?" Jasmine said. "Is it a trauma response? Because you need to come home to recover, and surely she can get better treatment on her homeworld than anywhere else. And you haven't a selfish bone in your body; you wouldn't ask her to come to Earth if it wasn't what she needed."

"T'Shael is my home," Cleante said. More than the pyramids or the Nile, more than the elegant designer rooms her mother favored.

"And you say you're not sleeping together." Jasmine shook her head and took another bite.

With the aid of medication, Cleante slept through the night. T'Shael, however, did not; she woke three times, believing that Cleante needed her. At the third instance T'Shael conceded defeat and sat in Cleante's chair to meditate to the sound of her breaths. As anticipated, her meditations were quite fruitful. While meditation could not replace sleep, it could substantially decrease the immediate need for it. Being unwilling to worry Cleante (whose view of T'Shael's physical recovery was significantly more pessimistic than T'Shael's own), she left when Cleante showed signs of waking. By the time Cleante was dressed for the day and out of her cabin, T'Shael was meditating in the sitting room.

"How did you sleep?" T'Shael asked, rising out of her trance.

"Well enough," Cleante said. "I had a dream—I must have been remembering the night before—I felt like you were sitting beside me. What a funny thing to dream! Before we were captured, my dreams were always a series of absurdities, one after another. Then—well, you know about my nightmares. This was different than either."

"A welcome change?"

"Oh, very!" Cleante smiled at her.

It was not the carefree smile Cleante had sometimes flashed in her direction on Vulcan, nor the tight, brittle one T'Shael had grown accustomed to in recent months. This was something smaller, and yet T'Shael felt it was somehow deeper, more intimate, something which others might never see. The thought pleased her. "I am glad." She would spend a portion of every night in such meditation, if it benefitted Cleante.

The day passed quietly, although Cleante's anxiety increased measurably during the day. By late afternoon, she had stopped even pretending to read or listen to music, and her mother's concerned glances were getting more and more noticeable. When the screen chimed to let them know they had a call, she startled.

Her mother calmly tucked away her PADDs and took the nicest chair in the conversation grouping facing the screen. T'Shael stood to her side, leaving Cleante the choice between standing with her or sitting on the chair next to her mother. She stood with T'Shael.

The screen blinked on. T'Larn sat in the same chair in the same room as she had two days earlier. When she saw all three of them gathered there she began without ceremony. "Ms. al-Faisal, during your layover on Vulcan, I wish to speak with you in person. Please let me know what time would be convenient."

Jasmine nodded. "That would be good. I'll have to double-check our schedule and let you know."

T'Larn turned her attention to T'Shael. "There is a mindhealer of thy husband's clan named Valesh. She is to attend a conference on Earth in two months time. She will travel to Earth with you and attend you there. Once the conference is finished, she will make a recommendation and things will be decided further."

T'Shael bowed. She would have to meditate soon; Master Stimm would have had words about the turmoil in her soul. She had not realized how deep her anxiety ran until it was eased by the Eldest Mother's words. "Your consideration is appreciated."

"Healer Valesh's inconvenience is the greatest. You may demonstrate your appreciation by attending to her instructions. Your health is a priority, and you will treat it as such. I trust your t'hy'la will aid in this process."

"She will," T'Shael said. Indeed, *that* was more assured than T'Shael's own ability to heal. If she could not understand why she had tried to die, she could not ensure it would not happen again. But Cleante—flighty, changeable Cleante—was a foundation that would never be shaken and never give her up.

"Cleante," T'Larn said. "During your brief stay on Vulcan I wish to see thee as well."

Cleante bowed. "Of course, Elder."

Three days on Vulcan didn't last long. T'Shael had spent the last days before their arrival tutoring Cleante and her mother on what to expect and how to behave in their meetings with T'Larn, and they went reasonably well. Vulcan Security had detailed them a guard to accompany them as they toured, which Cleante called "locking the pen after the sheep get out," although privately she found it reassuring. T'Shael found the idiom interesting—she had learned it in a different form, which led to some conversation about crosscultural metaphors.

T'Shael and Cleante, together, had decided to take Jasmine on a tour of personally significant places, rather than a more general tourism. So Jasmine saw T'lingShar in some detail, along with the ruins near it. She was particularly fond of the crafter's shop.

At the end of the third day, they re-boarded their liner, to find Valesh already aboard and settled in to her cabin. She had left a message requesting T'Shael to meet her in the morning after breakfast, and to meditate and sleep well that night.

"So what will the two of you be doing?" Cleante asked in the evening, having wandered out of her room in pyjamas. "I know a little bit about Human forms of therapy—lots of talking and some medication—but I don't know what Vulcans do."

"I know very little of the mindhealer's arts," T'Shael admitted. "My knowledge of psychology is mostly limited to that which can inform my xenolinguistic studies, and I have never been in a mindhealer's care. But I believe that there are often mindmelds involved, particularly in the initial diagnosis state, and that conversation and medication can both be components as well. I know there are rituals associated with the practice, though not what they entail. It will be, as you would say, a learning experience." She paused, gauging her own privacy with Cleante's concern. "Would you care for me to share what I learn?"

"Only if you wish to," Cleante said, bringing her knees up and hugging them. "But I want to know how you're doing—you scared me, T'Shael, I won't lie about it or hide it. I want to help you however I can, and I want to know what you're doing and what you're going through. But only if it won't hurt you. If it's private—or if it would hurt you to share it—I can trust that Valesh is helping you."

"I understand," T'Shael said. "I apologize for scaring you. It was not my intention." She paused. She would not normally speak of this, but Cleante would find it helpful. "I cannot clearly recreate my intentions during that period, nor the reasoning behind it. It does not seem to me to be entirely rational, yet at the time I truly believed it to be so. That is the ... disconcerting thing about it."

"Yes, I can imagine it would be," Cleante said softly. "Do you think Valesh will help you figure out what you were thinking? Or, maybe not—if you weren't rational, maybe it would be better to figure out how to ensure that you never go into that state in the first place."

"I cannot conceive of a benefit to reconstructing an illogical train of thought," T'Shael said, "but there may be one—I am not a mindhealer."

"Neither am I!" Cleante said with a laugh.

"And yet your unorthodox methods were instrumental in starting the healing process," T'Shael pointed out. "In any case, as my t'hy'la, I would imagine that you will be participating in at least some of the sessions."

Cleante smiled. "I'd like that."

The next morning, Cleante delayed leaving for breakfast until Valesh came. Given the available spaces, T'Shael and Valesh would be using T'Shael and Cleante's sitting room while aboard ship. Valesh was in a single cabin, not a suite, and Cleante could easily be comfortable in her mother's suite. Jasmine had come to see what was keeping her daughter, and so T'Shael met Valesh with Cleante and her mother at her side.

"Healer Valesh," T'Shael said, bowing low. "This one is honored by your presence, particularly at such short notice."

"There was need," Valesh said. "And while Stalek's death has severed the formal alliance between our two clans, we are still honored to call you daughter. If your well-being may benefit from our actions, the difficulty is irrelevant. You matter to us."

T'Shael felt her breath coming faster, and could not determine the reason why. Her physical state was—or should be—largely unchanged. Yet her heart beat faster in her side. "I am honored by your concern."

"It is not an honor to you," Valesh said. "It is your right."

T'Shael nodded. She could not think of anything to say. This had never been a difficulty for her before.

Cleante's mother stepped forward. "Healer Valesh, I am Councilor al-Faisal. And I certainly thank you for coming—it can't have been easy to rearrange your schedule to accommodate us on such short notice. If you need anything, please let me know and I will arrange for it."

"I will do so," Valesh said. "Although at this point my needs are simple, I am not sure what resources I will need to arrange for once we arrive on Earth. If I run into difficulty, I will inform you. Have you arranged for a therapist for Cleante once you return to Earth? I am insufficiently familiar with Terran psychology to serve both."

"No," Jasmine said, slightly taken aback. "She seems to be doing fine, at least for the moment, so I'm leaving it up to her."

"And we'll have plenty of time once we're back on Earth to arrange something, if I need it," Cleante said.

Valesh cocked her head. "Earth, like most of the core Federation worlds, has a very low rate of abuse and crime. There are not many therapists with experience in the kind of long-term trauma that Cleante has suffered. I would suggest checking with Starfleet—their ships go into deeply problematic situations on a regular basis, so their therapists have training and experience with long-term trauma. I am working with their medical department to establish protocols for xenopsychological trauma therapy, so I am familiar with many of their best people on Earth. If you require recommendations, I could help. My efforts will be most helpful for T'Shael if they can be coordinated with Cleante's therapist."

"Thank you," Cleante said, "That would be lovely."

Jasmine glanced at the chronometer on the wall. "I would be interested in speaking more on this subject with you, Healer Valesh, but our meal is growing cold and I am sure you wish to get started."

"Yes." Valesh bowed in dismissal to Jasmine and Cleante.

Cleante bit her lip, glancing at T'Shael. She wanted to stay and learn more about this stranger who would be taking care of her friend! But T'Shael and the healer needed privacy, so Cleante followed her mother out across the hall and into her suite.

Their breakfast had not been improved by the time spent in the warmer, but Cleante was too focused on T'Shael to notice.

After Healer Valesh left for the day, T'Shael sat limply in a chair. She had melded twice as a student, to teach her the telepathic disciplines that only practice could instill. Those melds were thorough, but neither long-lasting nor especially taxing.

Valesh's meld was another thing entirely. It was an evaluation of T'Shael's mental state. The healer went nowhere she was not welcome; but T'Shael knew what was expected of her, and that Valesh would note any areas closed to her and would address them with other means.

Nor had T'Shael's been the only mind they explored. Valesh had offered up her own perspective of T'Shael, highlighting areas where their assessments differed and offering a clinical perspective. It was ... odd to see herself thus.

The door hissed open and Cleante came in. "T'Shael! Are you all right?"

T'Shael frowned. "I ... it is hard to tell. The meld was ... not what I was expecting."

"But was it helpful?" Cleante asked. She came to kneel down in front of the chair T'Shael was sitting in. T'Shael realized that she should have chosen to sit on the couch—then they could have sat next to one another. It would have been more comfortable for Cleante.

"I believe so," T'Shael said. "She now knows exactly what my state of mind is and what areas we should focus on. And I ... I have been shown what I look like to her."

"And?"

"She believes that I have taken modesty to an unhealthy degree, because I hold myself in too little value, and that this trait is of long standing."

Cleante opened her mouth, then paused, biting her lip. "I ... I did sometimes wonder, T'Shael," she said. "I mean, on Vulcan, because I've always known you were a wonderful person. You're smart, and compassionate, and such a good teacher. And I know Vulcans tend to be smart, but compassion isn't universal and neither is being a good teacher, particularly not to aliens, but you never seemed to notice. There's modesty, and then there's undervaluing yourself. But I didn't know if that was the same, with Vulcans. But you were always so together, even for a Vulcan, that I told myself I must be wrong."

"I would not have listened had you told me," T'Shael said. "Indeed, I do not quite know that I agree with Valesh's assessment even now. But she has given me work to do."

"Oh? What?"

"I am to write lines," T'Shael said. "On paper, with ink, as a meditative exercise. The pairing of physical movement with meaning is helpful in internalizing the lesson."

Cleante smiled. "It's supposed to do that for Humans, too! I sometimes had to write lines as a punishment as a teenager. Mostly along the lines of 'I will concentrate on my studies and work to my full potential.' What are you supposed to write?"

"I am a unique and valuable person and my existence is a gift to those around me."

Cleante was silent, but her eyes glistened. "It's true, you know. You are. You are a great gift to me. I can't imagine surviving it without you, and I can't imagine going forward without you."

T'Shael felt something loosen inside her. "Thank you, Cleante."

"You shouldn't have taken so much on yourself to protect me," Cleante said. "I'm stronger than you think. I could have taken it."

"But you shouldn't have had to," T'Shael pointed out.

"Neither should you!" Cleante said.

"I know," T'Shael said. "But protecting you gave me a purpose, a goal, beyond mere existence."

Cleante shook her head. "But that was for *your* benefit, not mine, T'Shael. It would have been easier for me to handle the ... the abuse, than it was to know you almost died because of me!"

"You cannot even name what happened," T'Shael pointed out. "Sex by coercion or threat of force is rape, Cleante, so defined on both our worlds. And if you cannot say it, how can you endure it?"

"Not everything is about language," Cleante said, rubbing her forehead. She sounded tired. "Sometimes you don't have to be able to talk about something to endure it. To heal, maybe, but not to endure. And I could—can—endure anything as long as I have you, T'Shael. And you almost *left* me. Because you thought, what, that it would protect me? That I wouldn't *care* that the best friend I've ever had died and left me to face *him* alone? You can't ever do that again, T'Shael!"

"I doubt very much the circumstance will ever recur," T'Shael said. "Given the odds against it happening in the first place. And if Valesh's treatment is effective, I will ... learn to consider my own needs as a factor in my decisions."

"Good!" Cleante said. "I like her already. What else has she talked to you about? Do you have anything else you're supposed to be doing?"

"She would like to meet with you, tomorrow, as well," T'Shael said. "There will be no mind-meld, but now that she knows how our relationship functions she will know better how to accommodate my treatment to include you. T'hy'las are so rare, she has never treated any—"

nor has the issue been greatly studied."

"I'll be happy to help," Cleante said.

"And she wishes to arrange a marriage for me as soon as may be practical," T'Shael said. "The telepathic bond of a married couple often has measurable positive effects on the Vulcan psyche. It is her opinion that if Stalek had not died, I would not have been ... distressed enough to attempt retreat in such a drastic measure."

"*Now* who can't say it?" Cleante said. "You tried to kill yourself, T'Shael. You tried to commit suicide."

"Yes," T'Shael said.

Cleante studied her friend's face. T'Shael looked worn, and very small. She had the urge to take it back, to say she didn't mean it, but ... it was the truth. T'Shael had willed her death, and it had almost worked. And there was no going forward without facing it. "But getting married would help you?"

"Yes." T'Shael frowned. "I am ... not accustomed to being alone inside my mind. Stalek and I were never close, but he was *there*. It is ... like trying to play a piece of music to the wrong time signature. It may work but there will be a noticeable difference."

Cleante sat back on her heels, thinking. She had an idea—not a good idea, maybe, but ... "T'Shael, *we* could get married!"

T'Shael raised an eyebrow. "Cleante, we are both heterosexual."

"Yes, but I've had sex with women before," Cleante said. "Twice! I wanted to see if I liked it, and once as part of a threesome. I can *do* it, it's no problem, and that way we wouldn't have to worry about who they'd find for you."

"The Eldest Mother will find someone appropriate," T'Shael said. "In any case, a marriage between us would only last until my next pon farr. In the blood fever, one's natural inclinations cannot be subverted. If the burning one desires one's own gender, that one will reject any of the opposite gender that approach, even their own bonded mate. And if the burning one desires the other gender, that one will reject any of the same gender."

"Oh," Cleante said, disappointed.

"But I do not understand why you would wish this," T'Shael said.

"What if they don't understand about us?" Cleante asked. "What if it's someone who lives on Vulcan? Or like Stalek, out in the asteroid belt?"

"What of it?" T'Shael said, curious. Though the chances of being matched with a man from the asteroid belt were rather low, given how few people lived there.

"You'd have to go away!" Cleante said. "Unless he was willing to come *here*."

T'Shael thought for a moment. "In human marriages, do the spouses live together all the time?"

"Usually," Cleante said. "Oh, they may live separately for a while if they have to, but in that case they generally divorce. What's the point of being married to someone you never see?"

"Ah," T'Shael said. "This would be a consequence of the human understanding of marriage as a relationship between two people based on emotional compatibility and attraction."

"Well, yes," Cleante said. "How do Vulcans understand marriage?"

"An alliance between Houses, protection for pon farr, and, in the case of children, a stable and attentive environment," T'Shael said. "Only in the case of children is cohabitation required, and even then, only for a few decades. But I will never have children because I might pass on the disease that killed my father. Many couples choose to cohabit, but not all. And there are degrees of cohabitation. My own mother resided with my father and I when she was on Vulcan, but given her career with Starfleet, that was not often, as I grew older."

Cleante's frown was gone, and T'Shael was glad. But they had so often misunderstood one another, and T'Shael could not bear it. Cleante would welcome touch, even knowing the access that it would give to her mind. And T'Shael's mind felt fragile after her session with Valesh, but not so fragile that she could not bear the touch of Cleante's mind. She reached out and touched her friend's hand. Cleante's mind was as vibrant as she was, with so many different thoughts and emotions pulsing through it. Without a meld, T'Shael could not read her thoughts but she could feel the shape of her, solid and present.

"Cleante," she said, "I do not know how Humans will regard us, but we are t'hy'la. No Vulcan would separate us—not a husband, and certainly not my Eldest Mother. She wants what is best for me, and what is best for me is you."

End Notes

Title comes from the poem [Dreamwood](#) by Adrienne Rich.

If this were a map

it would be the map of the last age of her life,

not a map of choices but a map of variations

on the one great choice. It would be the map by which
she could see the end of touristic choices,
of distances blued and purpled by romance,
by which she would recognize that poetry
isn't revolution but a way of knowing
why it must come.

I'm also on [dreamwidth](#) and [tumblr](#).

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