**Vulcan Love Stories**

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**Vulcan Love Stories**

by [CelestiaTrollworth](http://archiveofourown.org/users/CelestiaTrollworth)

**Summary**

These are character sketches from a longer piece I'm working on. All are how couples lost or found one another after the fall of Vulcan, or how they dealt with the loss. Most have ludicrously happy endings because the world is an unfriendly place right now and I'm in a mood to fix everything, dammit.

The longer piece is going to be canon-mashing, but if that's what it takes to get some happiness back into the alternate universe I'll gladly do it.

In Chapter 20, fetal transport is a well-established, seemingly routine technique by Voyager’s time, so I figure this crew would have managed.

**Notes**

Yes, I know Mestral didn't have an Earth name to begin with. He does now. Thanks to the Vulcan Language Institute, rihan.org, and most of all the Great Bird of the Galaxy for all the fun we have in his corner of the universe. May his people live long and prosper. Of course, I own none of the more or less canon characters and wouldn't have the original ones were it not for the generosity of the franchise, and of course, no one is making any money from this work.
Chapter 1

Nick Mestral and Zora Golich

I was in the Pittsburgh consulate when it happened. “It” is what we call va’Pak most of the time. There's no need to be more precise. K'turr or Kolinahr, every Vulcan knows what we mean. There were six and a half billion sort of permanent deaths there and a few hundred thousand temporary everywhere else, because we all died over and over when the shock wave tore across our bonds. One minute I was trying to make sense out of my grandson's report about a planetary evacuation, the next I was on the floor, and so was everyone else in the office, most of us screaming, some for the first time ever. Five minutes later every comm channel was backed up with calls from all over the Burgh. My name is on Solkar's emergency contact, and he'd gone out on them at work so his human partners wanted to know what to do. They found out what was happening the same time we did.

In the days that passed, none of the news was good. That pile of malice was headed for Earth. I figured we'd had it and what the hell, I didn't want to stick around if the whole family was gone. Bonds were so strained we couldn't tell who was left. Solkar dragged himself in to his office and we would come up with names and look at the list of rescued, no, not him, not her either, they're all gone, she'd never leave the monastery, he'd never leave his wife and she's been too sick to travel. It shouldn't have mattered because like I said, that thing was headed for Earth so we should have been toast. I went out for an hour or so, up to the graveyard to say sorry, Maggie, Bud and all, the frickin' Romulans are running loose and that's why we can't have nice things. My padd went off one more time with news that some crazy Starfleet captain had chopped up the drill rig at Frisco and taken out the Narada while he was running off. Make that two crazy Starfleet captains, one our great-grandson.

Solkar pulled his used to be ambassador now consul card and got through to the ship, which was crawling back and could have used a tow. Our grandson Sarek got on the horn calm as could be and ran down the list of who had got out. He thought they had hours, Spock's friend realized they had minutes, and the vrekasht kid went and got the same Council of Elders that had run him off. His mother didn't make it, and my heart broke when he said so—Amanda was Sarek's everything. What I went through when my Maggie died, I wouldn't wish on anybody, let alone my own kin.

My youngest daughter Rana turned up later aboard a beat-up shuttle that hitched a ride with a bigger ship. It was another two months before we found out John's daughter-in-law had left a medical conference early and gone to visit her parents on a farm colony because of all the commotion, then couldn't call in. We didn't know where his younger son was and didn't expect to know because of what he does, but we knew he was still in the family bond. The rest...well.

All through, I was listening for a particular woman I'd met a long while back. She was an Air Galactica pilot, part of the K'turr community at Carbon Creek, her people there for nearly two hundred years—they'd been thrown off Vulcan because her grandmother was Betazoid and they married without permission from the old High Command. My time was going to come around, she was widowed, and we'd been talking whenever she was in town. Zora's regular freight run was Earth to Vulcan, twice a week, but the flight corridor was closed and it was hard to get messages through because of all the subspace disruption and time distortion. We hadn't done a formal bond yet; it hadn't seemed important and we'd get to it when the time came. Now I had no way to know for sure she was just stuck and not gone like the rest.

Until then, it hadn't soaked through to me that Zora meant that much. I may have walked away from
the hardline philosophy, but I'm still Vulcan. I meditate, morning and night, and in the back of my mind is that needling voice that says love doesn't happen. Even when you let go of that, you've still got it in your head—no sense in liking Zora better than another one, no sense crying over spilled milk or a spilled planet. It's that combination of worry and guilt because you worry, love and guilt because you love. We'd been friends for years, she, her mate, my last wife and I, and there was no way around how much she mattered to me.

One afternoon I was at the consulate when one of the guards buzzed up and said I had a visitor. Nobody comes to see me there, so what the hey? The lift brought up Zora.

The explanation came out: the closed corridor kept her away, she was stranded out by where New Vulcan is now and decided to ferry survivors of disabled ships to the farm colony while she was waiting, she couldn't even get a quick message through. She said all of that after I kicked the office door shut to make sure nobody would see me hug her. I did, so hard I pulled a muscle in my back, and she offered to fix it for me, and we fixed a lot of things and my back and our bond were two of them.

It's about time, and we'll be married all the way instead of just the piece of paper, but we got that done that afternoon...eventually. Some things mattered more right then.
Chapter Summary

Back in 1973, we had a school assignment to write a Trek fanfic. Ru, Lia and Lhairre materialized and have never really gone away. He was Larry back then because rihan.org hadn't come up with a spelling in Romulan. After all this time, that big, stocky engineer is still grumping around adoring the self-described meanest woman in the universe, and I don't expect that to change.

Vulcan Navy Ek'halitra'lan T'Lia, aka Daise'Khre'Riov Areinnye R.S.E. Imperial Navy

Those planning to live double lives should have both be placid. Had I been a receptionist on both sides of the Neutral Zone, Lhairre's life would have been easier. Had he chosen someone less problematic to the universe, he could have spent the past seventy-eight years sitting in a power plant on some colony world, happily tending to the occasional glitch. Instead, he has needed to extricate me, or my t'hy'la Rai or both of us, from every impossibly terrible situation imaginable or not.

He came to live with our family when we were seven, of age for bonding, and it was obvious to everyone that while Rai and I are arguably halves of a heart, we were not bondable. From the first day, Lhairre was mine, and all of us in the usual pack of children knew it. Grandmother was looking at DNA profiles and family interest charts when I stopped by her studio one afternoon. I assumed she was doing matches and asked “May I bond with Lhairre?”

She blinked in her best attempt to veil surprise and checked the files. “That would be most acceptable.” We went ahead and bonded. By the time we went before T'Pau to do the ceremony, there wasn't anything left for her to do. She muttered about natural bonding and warrior adepts, and well she might, but nobody told me not to and Lhairre didn't mind. That characterizes the rest of our lives.

One afternoon when we were in our teens, we were in the desert looking for pepper pods, and he climbed a rock and lifted his head to look at the far horizon. That image of him, lean and hard-muscled in the afternoon sun of T'Khasi, has stayed with me all my life. There are days when I see him teaching the young crew in Engineering and wonder when he got the silver strands in his hair or the fine lines around his eyes, because Lhairre in my head is always seventeen. The second after that long look around, he jumped down from the rock where he stood, said “No one is near,” and I went to him. His bare hands on my bare skin are fire and hope and wanting all at once, and I swear I have never felt that for another being but him.

We didn't know what we were doing and no one on Vulcan was likely to tell us. Neither of us had the slightest intention of going to the Science Academy and my father was at the old embassy on Earth. There was also that issue of my being a warrior adept not dedicated to the Council's version of Surak; there was considerable pressure for me to attain Kolinahr or leave the planet. Mother gave her permission for me to go, not that it would have mattered had she not, and we left together.

On Earth, attitudes toward sexuality are much more open. It is easy to educate oneself. Getting over the “pretend you have no physical body” teaching is another matter, leaving us confused about
feelings that aren't supposed to exist. One evening we were all over each other on the floor of my dormitory room. Our clothes were falling off and the pictures and explanations suddenly made sense, and Lhairre said “Wait, stop.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do, but honor is honor. He looked down at me, nose to nose, and said “We should be married before we do all of this, but I want to, do you?” I certainly did. We went to City Hall and filed the paperwork the next morning, took our copies to my father, went to the room and discovered that everything works as advertised and is most agreeable.

There followed seventy-eight years, seven children (three for others, four ours, one of whom is currently and impatiently waiting to be born,) and a sixty-five-year undercover operation which required us to spend over thirty years living as Romulans. Not until we moved to that side of the zone did we realize how much Vulcan lost in the attempt to rid ourselves of constant warfare—and over there, civil war is continuous and never all that civil.

The one point two trillion Vulkansu who think of themselves as Romulan live in constant fear. The vast majority of them also manage to live, just as much, in joy. Unless you lived on T'Khasi, you would not know what it meant to hold Lhairre's hand on the street or let the children run into my arms in public. The roaring furnace of Vulcan emotions is no less intense over there, but accepting them makes small comforts possible. The food is better. The furniture is comfortable. There are gardens of flowers for no good reason, nor does anyone demand one. Most of all, husbands and wives may love one another, and for thirty years over there, I took every chance to make up lost time with Lhairre.

It was not a good thirty years otherwise. Living under that disaster of a government has done as much damage as it did on Vulcan, and yet—and yet—the Romulan Star Empire is a thousand worlds and two thousand times as many Vulcans as were lost on T'Khasi. The waste over there is appalling, the view of lives as trifling more than a soul can stand, but because they have one another, the common people who can avoid the military continue to reach and build. Some of the horrors we saw in that time cannot be revealed, some came close to driving me mad, and for some my only cure was the night and his arms. In all that time I heard not one word of self-pity or complaint from him.

On the night after we came back from the Empire, when my brother was taken care of, the ships were secure and loyal to us and the New Vulcan colony was safe, we went to our quarters. He was still wearing his safety glasses—I'll always remember that as well—and he tossed them on the table instead of putting them away because he was in such dire need of a drink. Thirty years of fear, gone; trouble of its own kind on us, no doubt, but we could be ourselves again, more so because the Council of Elders was no longer about to rule us either. He threw himself down in one of our big chairs with a glass of blue ale and watched me. Out of habit, I began to hang my robes up and brush my hair and do all of the things one does when there's been no bed for days, and when I laid down my tunic his arms were around me with his whole being asking Do you want?

Fire and hope and wanting, all at once, as if he'd set me ablaze with the suggestion. We couldn't go home to Vulcan, but we were home, as safe as we will ever be. I looked at the comm; there were a hundred more questions and people wanting interviews and commanders who had not yet dealt with their own old fear wanting new orders, all of which could wait and would have to because dammit Lhairre had his arms around my waist and I needed him worse than water. “Yes,” I said, “and that's the only time I'll say it tonight; whatever you want to do, the answer is yes. I don't want to think or analyze or make one more decision; I want you to throw me on that bed and do everything you want. If I need you to stop I'll say so, but I can't imagine why. ” For him, because he never got to choose. After all, I got to choose him.
Climbing The Mountain

Chapter Summary

In the 2009 movie, there's a Council of elders Vulcan with a face that looks like he's chewing up lemons. I don't imagine he could have kept that attitude for long had he survived...

S'Mak Jorek

Even my name is strange to me these days; I have a wife and a clan now. When I went up the mountain, I left behind all the kinship one depends on in exchange for that pin that advertised my mastery of Kolinahr. One name is enough for those who have endured the trials and discarded every emotion. Everything is logic...or so we tell ourselves.

On the Day, I was among the elders who fled with the ark, called out by that impertinent half-breed who was indispensable. Because of the battles and the damage to the starship we were on, it took the captain many days to escape what was left at Vulcan, chase the foe from Earth and go back.

We were sent to a town on Earth where there is a large k'turr community. Those who organized the resettlement thought other Vulcans might help us acclimate, but I had no intention of doing so. The committee showed us to hotel rooms, handed us welcome bundles with clothing and information, offered any help we might want and left us to find our way if that was what we wished. They had even considered the wishes of Kohlinahri by making part of a floor for us appropriately bare and plain.

For a week, I neither ate nor drank. By the seventh day, I wondered whether there had been any explanation, any more rescues—but there was no vid in the monastery rooms, and I no longer had strength to get up and go outside. I crawled to the window and opened the blinds to the strange blue sky. With effort, I lifted myself into the chair and looked out at the alien green mountains. There was a carafe of water on the small table and I drank absent-mindedly while I stared out at the weird spectacle.

A tap on the door needed an answer. One of the townspeople came by every day to see whether we were in any need. This felt different. “Jorek?” I knew Mina's voice. “Do you live? May I enter?”

She would understand. Perhaps she wanted a witness for her own death. “You may.”

She was carrying a small basket of fruit, bread and a bottle of juice. Such a story I had never imagined: she had been undone by a farmers' market. Impending extinction had fanned the flames of survival too well. The welcome bundle included directions to the local market. She couldn't read the voucher, but she followed the map only to find herself with no knowledge of the local language or produce. A kind Terran who spoke Golic offered help. What should have been unthinkable was the only logical course: she accepted, and the woman guided her through the market.

“I know what you have decided, but perhaps you would have a bite of this,” she said, and used her knife on a fist-sized greenish-yellow fruit with a crisp texture. What harm would one bite do?
and sweet at once, not a familiar flavor but definitely agreeable; she called it an apple and said the variety was Granny Smith. One small bite became another, then I had to try one of the red heart-shaped fruits she said were strawberries and some juice from a different type of apple.

As an adult I had never eaten anything not on the monastery table. We often went for weeks with nothing but dry ration bars and water, in order to remove taste from the temptations we faced. In spite of that, none of the new foods seemed to be distressing in the least. “The woman explained what would likely be safe for us,” Mina said. “She said it is wise not to eat a lot of any one thing at first, but to try a small portion of each.”

There was strength in the bites of fruit, or perhaps in the company. “What is the bread like?”

“Remarkably familiar. The baker is Vulcan.” She broke a piece from the loaf for me. In handing it over, her fingers brushed mine. Her touch was peace.

I recalled how she had always been agreeable company when we all walked in the evening, not that the company of one should have been more so than another. We had both taken an unusually long time to finish our studies; often we spoke of our doubts to each other before we found the cold quiet we had hoped to achieve. So it was as we tried to understand where we were, both in the general sense and as we looked out on those green mountains with the blue haze settling on them. We went outside, carrying the basket, both of us weak but taking strength from the small meal and the Terran sunshine. The community center was a few blocks away. Before we got there, a sign directed us to the meditation spring, up a winding hillside path from the community center garden. We looked at each other, nodded and began the easy ascent.

Only thirty-six meters up the path, around two small turns, we were out of sight on a stone walk lined with plants from the heights of the Golan Mountains. We recognized the svai that used to grow around the edges of the monastery grounds and the lagga that wound over the fence; kasa were nearing ripeness and grapes, nearly the same on both planets, already hung in green bunches. All along the path, Terran plants native to the area intermingled in harmony. The calm was like the grounds at Gol, but without the undercurrent of anxiety about liking anything or enjoying the scenery.

We faced a short, slightly steeper rise in the path; she grasped a handrail to take herself up the two meters of slope, and I closed in behind her should she fall. How often had we climbed so on the mountain path at Gol? The soft haze of her aura brushed mine, still peace, growing stronger. Two curved benches surrounded a round vat, half a meter deep and twice as wide, that caught the outflow of a spring and overflowed into a little pond full of tiny darting fish. The marker explained that the spring flowed at all times and fed the small stream below the pond as well as any wildlife or people who cared to drink or carry water away. “Unthinkable, on T’Khasi,” she said. “Wars would have been fought over this spring.”

“Wars were fought here, but the spring was not the object.” I had read the welcome bundle’s pamphlets during the week; there had been wars and rumors of wars, yet the people of Earth had managed to come back, every time, clean up the mess and live together. One of the fish hesitated before swimming away; I thought peace at him, and he eyed me as curiously as I looked at him. If I drank, would I be robbing him? He found the idea funny. There was always more than enough water; why would I not take some when it was there for all?

I leaned over the spout that carried the flow from the spring and sipped carefully, then Mina did the same. “I know what that would have meant on T’Khasi,” she said. “The idea is not disagreeable.”

It had not been disagreeable all those years ago, either. “Quite the opposite.”
Deliberately, she cupped her hands under the spout and held them toward me. I bent my head and drank from them, then gave her water from my hands as well. In that way has the promise between two adults always been understood. “I may have more of these berries.” She handed me one of the forks. I do not believe the contact with her hand was an accident. I do not believe she meant to keep me from it, either. “Jorek, I cannot claim any emotionless state, not after...that.”

“Nor I. Your company is pleasant. Has it not always been?” Was denial not the most illogical of emotions? What needed to be said, and soon, demanded it be said between the two of us alone. “Mina, I choose life. My time will soon come, and I am not of a will now to stop it.”

“It would be illogical in the present need.” Our species' need, or our own as my very blood shifted within me, reaching for her? I was unsure either of us knew what to do, and said so; we had gone up the mountain as barely more than children. Would instinct be our guide?

“There are better ways,” she said after a moment's quiet thought. “The k'turr have healers who speak openly of such things. Should we not avail ourselves of their knowledge?”

My throat tightened at the thought of speaking of such things to a stranger, even a healer. Still.... *You can do nothing until you cast out fear.* “It is logical.”

“We have climbed another mountain,” she said, as if just realizing. “And we have undone what no longer makes sense. I do not know what the future holds, but I wish it to contain you.”

Someone else came up to be alone at the water, and we made our way back down the path. We knelt in my room to meditate upon the events of the day, and when the incense burned down and the stars spotted the sky, we lay on the appropriately hard and narrow bed together.

In the morning, we met with Judy the healer, who is also, as it happens, a priestess. She gave us information we needed and, in the same appointment, assisted us with our bond, which she formalized two months later when the time came unexpectedly soon. Thanks to her tutoring, I did not injure Mina other than impregnating her, which both of us desired. Our son Soval will carry his ancestor's name when he arrives in due time. I am still learning to live in this new world with my wife. I find the attempt most agreeable.
Incensed

Chapter Summary

T'Rana seems to be the fanfic default for Sarek's mother's name, although not even the novels can agree. His dad is Skon...or Skonn...or maybe Skor. In any case, she gets a rather rude comeuppance in the longer work, and she doesn't really mind. I owed her a little happy to go with it.

S'Harien T'Rana

Three times I failed Kohlinahr before the first month's training, despite my determination to be the most dispassionate of women. Three different Masters of Gol told me my answer lay elsewhere. It took me nearly a hundred years to understand.

I was fourteen the first time they sent me back, eighteen the second and twenty the third. On that round, and on the advice of the current Master who was more than a little tired of dealing with such an unsuitable student, my mother picked me up from the monastery and told me a family friend was in urgent need of a wife. One would do as well as another, I said, but in the back of my mind the image of Skon would not leave. I had known him since we were very young and had always found him quiet and peaceable. At the appointed place and time, he met me, and so we became bondmates. Our bond was successful immediately and was most pleasant.

All of twenty-one we were when Lia was born. Three years later, we were shocked to discover our son was on the way. After all, we'd been too young by common wisdom to make Lia; Sarek was not only another baby for a very young couple who should have been marginally fertile at best, but also out of order. No one had told us that indulging in certain acts could cause a child at any time.

The pregnancy was most welcome, but embarrassing, advertising as it did an untimely surrender to passion. I determined to return to the hard discipline of my youth and stop living with Skon. He was called to the Earth embassy, so I had the excuse not to go with him. It nearly cost my life.

The old enmities that roiled then, High Command versus Council of Elders, Syrannite versus Traditionalist, broke open when one of the disgruntled followers of V'las decided to poison me. I am told no Vulcan has ever survived such levels of that toxin. My liver and kidneys began to fail during a conference. and I remember nearly nothing for the next six months except for my bondmate pulling me back to the world every time I determined to leave it.

After a time, I knew the baby lived but was no longer in my womb. Skon told me they had to deliver him months early to give him even a slim chance, and that Skon's father had come back from his posting on Earth to care for him. That Solkar had matters well in hand would have been still more reason to let go, but Skon was illogically insistent. The baby was not enough for him; our little daughter was not enough; that great nirak had to have me, too. They tell me he spent six weeks at my bedside before anyone could give him a hint of good news, and that he left only for minutes at a time for the most necessary functions, sleeping in a chair with his hand on mine.

I recovered, in time. Four years later, in keeping with the accepted schedule rather than our own, we
had a second son. We occasionally shared quarters when travel or necessity dictated, we were together at the appointed times, and when it was time for me to leave Skon did not always follow me around asking whether I might stay a little longer just this once. I heard from him daily whenever we were apart. He was an attentive and gentle father. Even when he disputed Silek's choices with regard to his career, they agreed to feign being at odds in order to preserve the proper impression, but I do not believe the two of them went more than a day without speaking.

Our careers developed in a satisfactory manner. Our children had triumphs and tragedies. My older son insisted on marrying a human. Grandchildren arrived in due course while we were still so young that more children could have been ours had we wished, but I thought they might be seen as an extravagance. When my mother retired, I assumed her seat on the Council of Elders and was properly cold and logical.

We were accustomed to Seleya's anger, but in 2258 an exceptionally violent swarm of earthquakes centered around its pillar of fire. The Navy tried to tell us a form in space above the mountain resembled a cloaking device and plasma drill. On the advice of the High Master of Gol, I condemned them as alarmists. My older son opined that it might be good to put the planetary evacuation plan into effect. I chided him for his fear. The Council of Elders meditated around Surak's ark, and osu Surak told them someone really should go up and look. Silek's son and his mate had packed to leave the planet in their shuttle, so they picked me up. They promised to return me if the earthquakes were simply Seleya in a bad mood.

They were not, as we all know. I did not witness the end and do not regret it. My grandson's wife T'Kriss managed to get us away, with great damage to the shuttle. After a week in the dark and cold, we made contact with the also damaged Enterprise limping back to Earth after its defeat of the Narada. We found my older son and outcast grandson had survived, although my daughter-in-law had not. The Council was aboard; the outcast grandson Spock had insisted on retrieving them personally along with Surak's ark. He provided all that was necessary and had the elders in his quarters where there was a fire pit and incense. Of such is a turn in life made.

The incense was his, of course, traditional and masculine. He had a good supply, and his rooms were large because he had been the captain until some irregularity occurred. Forty-seven of us were in nearly constant meditation, as one might expect. Over the course of four days, I went from fashionably dulled acceptance of my new life to vague disquiet that would not go away to active irritation at that incense. It was not logical for me to like or dislike it, and yet...it wasn't my incense. By the time we reached Earth, I was annoyed to an astonishing degree simply because I was alive and privileged to kneel and meditate amid my long-known circle of associates in a cloud of smokewood resin.

We beamed down in the middle of planetary night directly into the ambassadorial quarters to avoid the press. My older son and grandson preceded the rest of us. My younger son and Skor were waiting for me when I arrived. Silek was predictably emotional and soon went off to meditate. I was left alone in the hall with my bondmate.

As I greeted him properly with no more than the standard family ritual contact, he looked at me with the first tears I had ever seen in his eyes. “You will want to rest.” He led me to his room, where he had turned down the bed and laid out clothing exactly like what I had lost. He had looked up my recent purchases and duplicated them. The greater surprise was the familiar scent in his room: my incense. He had kept a little for my visits and replicated it. I hadn't thought he noticed, and said so. He took me in his arms and whispered “I couldn't forget.”

It is fine incense and the clothing fits very well, but I didn't use either that night. Weeks later, when a mole at the embassy poisoned us with Trellium-D, it is possible that I should have used the incense
more for meditation, but under the influence of that toxin other matters were more pleasant and more important, and have remained so.

Our older son insisted on preparing us a place on New Vulcan. Skon feared I might go off to occupy it alone. I told him, in so many words, that he was welcome to occupy me on either planet. Where one of us lives, the other does, and we share a room and a bed. I am now a hundred and twenty-two years old, firmly at midlife and soon to be the mother of Arre, our fourth child and second daughter. The neurological damage from the poisoning would prevent further attempts at Kohlinahr even if I still desired such a thing. I sleep in my bondmate's arms every night. I have no regrets.
S'chn T'gai Sarek

Chapter Summary

Amanda made all those sweaters, right?

S'chn T'gai Sarek

He will go back to space soon. That much is certain. Nothing else is, not his survival, not mine, not the fate of the race. We have spoken; we have determined not to argue any more over a place that no longer exists and rules that no longer apply.

It is colder on the *Enterprise* than Vulkansu consider comfortable. His visits to his mother inevitably saw her send him off with a handknit black sweater, inelegant but warm. I found excuses not to be at home when he was here, of course. While he was away, he carried with him the knowledge that his mother had thought of him every time her needles made another stitch.

Many years ago, when she...when Amanda and I visited her family during one of her father's illnesses, her grandmother realized the family squabbling was uncomfortable for me and encouraged me to leave the house with her, go out to the barnyard and meet her small flock of sheep. She explained that when the Terran weather turned warm and they began to shed, she sheared them and spun their wool by hand as a means of relaxation, then made various useful items from the yarn. The sheep made it known to me that they not only did not mind, but also were grateful to be relieved of the heavy winter coat all in one day rather than over a hot and itchy few weeks.

While we were there for what seemed like two weeks but was, in actuality, two days, she demonstrated knitting to me and encouraged me. After that crisis had passed, we visited again during Terran Christmas, bearing the requisite gifts. Mine from Grandmother Grayson and her bondmate proved to be a gray sweater (I recognized the wool as her friendly ram's spring coat, undyed in blue-gray) with a complex pattern that entraps heat. That part of the Plains was once hot, but since the wars has become quite cold in winter, and I put the gift to use posthaste.

On my last trip to Earth before the Loss, it happened to be beside the front door as I rushed out. The weather controls were known not to be functioning well in San Francisco, so I snatched up the sweater in my haste and left it at the Embassy. Vulcans do not keep many sentimental objects; I tell myself it is a practical matter, this heavy warm garment, but the truth is that Grandmother Dove thought of me all that while, even though she barely knew me at the time, and chose a color and pattern that were useful as well as pleasing to the eye.

Over the years, I have had a great deal of waiting time. I have waited for closed sessions of various legislatures to end so that negotiations could commence. I have waited at doctors' offices while Amanda endured one treatment or another. I have waited to pick our son up from school. It is logical to carry some work along to occupy otherwise wasted moments in places where a harp is distinctly not welcome. When Spock was very small, those tiny sweaters were easily carried in a robe pocket. That is no longer the case, but I no longer have as many duties as when Vulcan was the crown of the Federation. I also have much more free time in the evenings and well into the night, when her loss is bigger than the planet's and I cannot play my ka'athyra long enough to keep dark thoughts at bay.
Those are the hours when I cannot find her katra in mine, when the bond that still whispers seems to have gone dark. Those are the hours when the decades we were together seem as a moment, when I hope for someone to come by the house if only to hear another voice beside my own. Those are the hours when it is well that this black microfiber yarn is so absorbent.

I wish this yarn were armor against the whole fury of heartless space. The best I can do is that ply of Kevlar twisted into the fiber. Prime says he died at one point and his father somehow survived. I would not, even with the demonstrated desperation he described. If there were magic, if there were talismans, if there were a way to guarantee his safety with these stitches—

But such things are illogical. Even the prayers worked into the very fabric would occasion Spock's disdain. Oekon, that he be safe, even believing nothing—that he be safe, that he return to me. When he goes this time, he will have this, all the armor I can give him, all the illogical hope a father can pour out of a broken heart and turn into a garment. This time, I will convince him that she had it ready for him in San Francisco before the Loss. This time, once more, he can remember his mother and imagine her thinking of him with every stitch.

As soon as he leaves with it, I will pull the needles out of my pocket and cast on the next cuff. That yarn will also be quite absorbent, from the same necessity. The explanation can wait until he returns. Oekon, please, that he will.
Chapter Summary

S'chn T'gai Skon

Skon was exposed to a lot of Trellium-D during the aftermath of the Vengeance. Fortunately, so was T'Rana.

S'chn T'gai Skon

On this pleasant San Francisco afternoon, I await the return of most of the family from their run. Of all the forms of exercise I might choose, running will never be among them. I will jump into the Bay at the slightest provocation and swim until my skin crinkles, as I just have, but jogging around the track is never going to be my favored pastime. That has not stopped my son-in-law, daughter and wife from enjoying it. On this particular day, I do not mind watching as they lope back along the coast from the point to the embassy.

On Earth, it is not necessary to cover all exposed skin to prevent sun and sand burns. This has led my children to adopt Terran exercise clothing. In a stunning development this morning, my wife observed that it seems more comfortable and practical for the task, and she borrowed some of my daughter's workout wear.

I am aware that my daughter Lia is an attractive woman, but for all her k'turrness she is rather conservative in her wardrobe choices. There is nothing indecent about her workout shirt and shorts. She is quite tall, as am I, so the running shorts are not excessively brief on her mother, either.

T'Rana would not have asked me to evaluate the appearance of the clothing a few years ago. It is a measure of our newfound mutual trust that causes her to ask my honest opinion, and I value that confidence greatly. In that light, I have observed her as she left the embassy grounds and as she returns. Nothing seems amiss except, perhaps, that she might need a more supportive upper undergarment since she is nursing our youngest, who spent my swim time in a baby raft and is currently teething on my ear.

Rana has been in the Terran sun and her skin is a gentle shade of gold. Her arms, in particular, are finely toned and the muscle definition far exceeds what might be expected in a woman at midlife. So also are her legs. They are excellent legs, quite long, finely sculpted from her diligent exercise, and I can think of much better uses and locations for them than that fluid, graceful propulsion down the running track. This is unfortunate, as I am in public and still in my swim gear. Concentration born of a lifetime of mental discipline can redirect my body's attention to little Arre's extremely sharp new incisors, which are indeed incising at present.

Or I can consider Rana's formidable mental abilities and skill at nearly everything she does. She has been, by turns, an efficient and somewhat ruthless diplomat, an efficient and somewhat ruthless president of the Council, and a skilled and determined silversmith whose inlay work compares favorably with the best of the ancient craft. Her encyclopedic understanding of the fine points of our culture was instrumental in the reconstruction of ritual space on New Vulcan. She led the rescue when it became possible.

And she has excellent legs. I am fully aware of their strength in certain situations. And that upper undergarment is definitely not supportive enough for her present needs. I must make a note of it and...
find something suitable and not think about it just at the moment.

That aspect of our marriage was, of course, always up to her. Dear me. I meant that she initiated all contact and defined its terms. That is how we had two children in three years, which was nearly unheard of, by the time we were twenty-four, which was really unheard of, and had one of the medical staff not given us some information in a small pamphlet, we might have engendered a small army out of ignorance. The only way she could maintain her otherwise exemplary control was to refrain from living with me most of the time. When she would come to the embassy for a Federation session, it was logical for her to use my quarters, and, if I were fortunate, me.

Such matters were never fodder for discussion on Vulcan. We may be a logical people, but some bodily functions are considered so animalistic that there is no conversation about them save for a very brief explanation when the time is imminent. This has led to numerous problems over the years, never so much as when my wife and I were exposed to massive amounts of Trellium-D after va'Pak. The loss of the planet caused an instinctual physiological reaction, and my nearly losing her caused a stronger one which resulted, in due time, in Arre, who is now seriously chewing on my other ear. In any case, prompt medical treatment saved our lives and allowed us to conceive our daughter without incident, but could not prevent the damage already done to our emotional control, which will never return in its fullness. All at once, the rather stately and nearly dignified manner in which...that...had previously happened seemed wholly inadequate for the expression of our newly strengthened bond.

My recently returned daughter, upon hearing me ask a timid question of a healer we both know, suggested I avail myself of some k'turr or Romulan instructional materials. I was daunted by their quality until I happened upon *Vulcan Love Slave*. Albeit fiction, it purports to be as accurate as possible. I found it stimulating. That is, interesting. There was even an accompanying vid which, I understand, is quite popular on both sides of the Neutral Zone for those who enjoy such viewing. Both the book and the vid gave me an overview of certain activities I had not considered, as well as some I did not know existed, and suggested ways to make the experience more pleasant for both parties.

When Rana asked what I had been reading, I made the text and vid available to her. She insisted we watch the vid together. One of these days we will see more than the first five minutes of it. She approaches; Arre lets go of my ear for a moment; my daughter scoops her own little one from the jogging stroller and trots over. “Sa'mi, you are covered in seaweed. We were going to beam up, see to the ship and change before dinner. Shall we take Arre up while you take care of that? She and Ta'an will play while we finish our work. We'll need at the very least an hour and a half and I'm sure you and ko'mekh have much to discuss.”

There are advantages and disadvantages to having damaged personal shields and a very adept daughter. In this case, I doubt she needed the mental disciplines, because I was far too long involved in watching Rana lope across the grass toward me, flushed and triumphant from the brief exercise. I wonder whether she considers seaweed an aphrodisiac. “That would be convenient, ko'fu'kam. We will see you at dinner. Be good for your sister and kind to your niece, Arre.”

Her husband holds out his arms and Arre jumps into them, already flailing at Ta'an in some baby sign language that pleases them both. The rest of the party troops on into the embassy, talking about what they saw in their five-kilometer jog around the grounds and down the shore. I walk back into the shade of the grape arbor with Rana. This spot is notably invisible to security cameras. “Was your exercise satisfactory?”

“*Inadequate, I think,*” she says. "* Barely a start.*" Doubtless she is only brushing sand off my chest. I do the same for a tiny bead of sweat on hers. “*Was yours the same?*”
“Indeed so, though Arre enjoyed being towed along. I note that your clothing seems appropriate except that you may like more support in this area.” It is only logical to demonstrate.

“Just so,” she says, then grimaces mildly. “Actually, yes. I was in some discomfort. I had not considered the expansion of those facilities at present. It has only been a bit over ninety years since that has been a concern.”

“I rather appreciate it. An hour and a half at least, she says. The staff will be some time preparing dinner. I thought we might go to our quarters to rest and watch a vid.”

“I understand the ocean scene on Romulus is quite instructive, and after all, you do have the scent of seaweed and salt on your skin.”

“We may fast forward to that in order to ensure we view it.” Inside the building, absolutely, right now. After all, she does have those legs.
Chapter Summary

Even things that don't breathe can be the breath of life to some.

S’chn T’gai Jhan Solkar

Music is not regarded as a profession in most of Vulcan society; escaping the secondary educational system requires being able to play an instrument, or in desperate cases to sing, but what is so common (and so mechanical, and such a chore to many) is held in no esteem. Take the S'Harien musical instrument company. The rest of the Federation knew them, but on Vulcan no one mentioned them. They were armormers over a thousand years ago. When the Piercebloods beat their legendary swords into ka'athyras, the musical dynasty they formed meant anyone who was at all serious about playing had one of their rather expensive instruments. It is customary for a newly married couple to welcome their in-laws with a gift. T'Rana must have held me in a better light than I thought back then, because what she brought me was a ka'athyra, not only one of the top of the line models her grandmother's shop produced, but one built to specifications I might have made had I realized them myself. I had no idea she had noticed my music, let alone thought of such tiny preferences as only a fan would see. It would not have occurred to me to ask for a slightly wider spacing on the bass strings to accommodate my large hands, or to curve the back of the body so it would lie at a more natural angle for me. The inlays were extraordinary tiny works of art, a fusion of my son's calligraphy and her silversmithing. Of course, I merely nodded and told her it was most satisfactory. I found her a most satisfactory mate for my son, but in that time no one would have said that, either.

When Rana was so very ill and her unborn son had to be delivered months early, I hurried home because tiny Sarek was a pre-birth empath and would never survive without an adult able to shield him. He spent the next six months tucked against my side. While my wife was often away managing her growing shipping business, he and I spent many nights in the family hall in the north springhouse, where the acoustics were best. By the time he was a toddler, he was plucking at the strings. Because of the assassination attempt, I missed his childhood, but in time he became a far better musician than I.

Even during long periods in stasis after that and another assassination attempt, my katra found itself with that harp, specifically, in my all but imaginary hands. I kept it at D’H'Riset because it was the best I had for ceremonial use and because the damp air on Earth often disagreed with it. So it was that it came to be lost on va’Pak. Kaiidth, I had others, even one built to nearly the same specifications but with wood and finish better suited to Pittsburgh's climate. In light of all else that was lost, it would have been the height of selfishness to think a moment more of it, but I did think of it often.

When the partial solution to our troubles presented itself, the staff at the Fortress made excellent use of their short notice to pack everything one can imagine. On my next scheduled off day, I returned to our new D’H'Riset to find my formerly tiny, now formidable grandson sorting through a packing case of instruments with properly subdued but, to me, palpable glee. “Fa'sa,” Sarek said, “this one is not mine.”

I make no apology for the smile that lit my face as he put the harp in my hands the way his mother had a hundred years before. We both had much to do; even so, the grandson who had survived my playing so long ago hoisted his own newly recovered favorite harp, we sat down, and I suppose my daughter would once have said we wasted a half-hour, not that it felt so. When he had to go take care
of one of his many tasks, and I should have been off to mine, I stayed a little longer, listening to the echo off the new roof and walls. Not the same, but not bad; the tiny differences are bearable with this old friend in my hands.

As I thought of old friends lost and found, a new one called my name softly from the doorway. Hana will soon be my wife in Vulcan terms as she is on Federation paper. She had finished her work shift and carried her—our, now—little daughter to the music that she loves nearly as much as I do. Hana is more traditional than I. When she saw the harp, her eyes alight were the only betrayal that she shared my overflowing heart. “Jhan'kam, they found it?”

“It is so.” Cordais wormed her way from her mother's arms and burrowed between me and the harp. She ran her fingers over the neck. She is too small just yet, barely walking; soon, she will reach around to pluck a string, then she will try for a chord. No doubt her tiny hands will swat away my big ones because she wants to do it herself; did Sarek's not, almost a hundred years ago? Hana's older children are grandparents themselves. They come to visit their timeshifted mother and sister, deferential, distant. In time, they will realize the relatively young stranger is indeed their mother, the cheerful baby the small sister they anticipated, the stepfather not—in some media announcer's ominous tone—Solkar of Vulcan, but John who would very much like to get to know them. So much must be rebuilt, even so many lives newly recovered that will never be the same no matter what we do with this new planet. Am I so selfish as to be glad for a returned harp that requires only a little tuning and the touch of a child's hands?

Perhaps, but that evening we sat in the new north springhouse for a long while, playing until Cordais and her mother were both falling asleep. “You should be in bed, small one,” I said to Cordais, but she shook her stubborn little head and reached for the strings again.

“One more. More song. Earth.”

Most of my Terran music is unsuitable for the very young at bedtime. Zef Cochrane and I certainly spent enough time playing his post-apocalyptic black metal. Sarek, however, is fond of Mozart and Brahms and Lennon and McCartney, and the latter seemed to have the perfect song for the occasion. Sarek played that particular piece often during Amanda's death. A long and winding road, indeed, and we were far from the end of it, but we are walking, at the very least, and we have music.
Nyota Uhura

Chapter Summary

Skon is just the man to ask.

We all make assumptions. I once assumed the Vulcan way of suppressing emotions meant actually extinguishing them. Not to kiss and tell, but that is not the case.

One-night stands are not my preference. However, anyone I dated at the Academy knew career came first, so nothing lasted more than a semester or two until I met a certain half-Vulcan. I thought it would be fun while it lasted and he would move on when I did. Not until the total chaos of our recent lives did I realize: sex with a Vulcan is never casual, on their side it's never temporary, and it isn't going away on my side either.

Just after the Rescue, we were ferrying the Romulo-Vulcan madam of a house of prostitution and her employees to their new colony planet. She was easy to talk to and our evening discussions were illuminating. She spoke of her difficulty in keeping shields up when someone attracted her in more than a professional way, and that led to learning about the nature of attraction in our two species. I explained the missteps that had come between Spock and me; she gave me insight; I began to understand, and understanding led to needing to apologize to him as soon as I could, but there had to be another conversation first.

It wasn't as hard to arrange as to plan. Being the fleet flagship, we make a lot of trips to Starfleet headquarters. Spock's grandfather is the premier cryptographer for Vulcanoid languages. Skon and I have worked together a number of times, long before I knew who his relatives are or who he might be in the larger scheme of my life, so not even Spock thought it unusual for me to request an appointment with him. Skon was, as usual, at the Vulcan embassy in San Francisco, decoding transmissions from several new planets considering whether to accept Federation or Klingon alliance.

Of all the men in that large, confusing family, Spock is most like his grandfather. Granted the physical resemblance, many people would think I was crazy for suggesting more to it. After all, Spock very nearly choked Jim to death and has, on several other occasions, beaten the crap out of people or exterminated them in a number of ways. I don't think Skon would swat a mosquito who was actively biting him. Even though he is middle-aged, he looks young, meek and fragile, seeming to be a pair of enormous soft brown eyes with unnaturally long lashes. That's what he looked like when I met him on the terrace by his grape arbor. “Yel'kam--” Star, Nyota, Saeihr, Yel, it doesn't matter to linguists-- “it is most agreeable to see you. I have questions for you as well as Nick's cookies.”

He and I share a fondness for his father-in-law's oatmeal raisin. I will never get used to catnip tea, so he invariably has coffee on hand for me. “I can help with your questions, osu, but you may not want to help with mine.”

Oh, that blink with the hint of a grin. “I get 'osu'?” Skon's father Solkar is big and imposing if you don't know him, and his son Sarek will make you show respect until you know him really, really well. When he is between those two big personalities, nobody notices Skon enough to address him, let alone be polite.
“I'm trying to ingratiate myself so I can ask a personal question.”

He managed to look so darned hopeful even though his face barely moved. “Do ask. I am seldom offended.” Which is true.

“IT's about Vulcan men. Are all of you...clingy?”

“Oh, is that all. Yes.” Chin on fists, he batted those eyelashes and looked up at me like a puppy hoping he was doing an obedience exercise correctly. “I take it you are disturbed by that?”

“Disturbed might be a little strong. Curious as to how to manage the cultural difference. Among humans, it might be a sign of a relationship not quite right were a man that obsessed.”

“Ah! We are supposed to pretend we are not obsessed by our mates, but most of us are. Those who have wives they cherish often follow them around in spite of the men's own careers. Deny as we will, we are creatures of instinct, and until very recently getting too far from our wives at the wrong time could be fatal. So could making them angry. Being clingy, as you put it, is a survival strategy.”

He barely raised his voice, with a hint of mischief only a linguist would catch. “Even Rana has difficulty being displeased with me if I am sufficiently near and endearing.”

I nearly laughed. “She's here, isn't she?”

“Just inside the lobby. She might or might not hear, but due to our damaged shielding and the subsequent increased bond strength we share, she has the gist of the sentiment. Doubtless she will feign disagreement.” He scooped up one of the big cookies with a napkin and began to munch.

“What you really mean to ask, I cannot answer. Can you live with a man to whom you will be the breath of life? I am assured that properly done, a Vulcan husband's duty approaches hero worship. If you do what I believe you are considering, and his reply is what I fully expect it will be, you will seldom have to fill your own plate, retrieve your remote control, remember any upcoming events or, for that matter, arrange your own hair if you do not wish to do so. One of the Andorians commented that it seems less like their idea of a mate and more like having an extremely devoted personal assistant who rushes to provide sexual satisfaction on demand. There is a price. Spock will ask you to remember what you hold.”

I knew the rough outline of what S'chn T'gai are in Vulcan society, even if Spock tries to pretend it isn't so. “The issue of being a member of your family...”

“Not that. Of course you stand with the women in the clan. Your steel is every bit as true as theirs, and that is no small thing. I mean you hold his very being. He will do his job well while you are apart, much better when you are together. You are not a distraction. You are his world, which is particularly poignant in his case, since we seem to be missing our original for the moment.”

His father-in-law's cookies are beyond delicious. I had no idea how he could eat them without getting crumbs all over himself. “The matter of being out in space...and perhaps of children...”

That brought such a bubble of hope that I could sense it even when his face barely moved. “The rules which prohibited families aboard ship no longer apply. Even if they were reinstated by accident, you also hold a perfectly good Vulcan Navy commission. Should you desire a more ground-based childhood for your progeny, you do know that in traditional Vulcan society, grandparents ordinarily care for children for extended periods while one or both parents are absent?”

“Well...yes, but...” Once upon a time I wouldn't have let Sarek take care of my houseplants. A little more knowledge, a lot of healing and extensive exposure to him and Amanda had convinced me it wouldn't be a terrible idea if they had time. Skon lifted a finger.
“Bear in mind that due to our having procreated at an early age and our fathers' extensive time travel, any child of yours would also have access to two sets of remarkably youthful great-great grandparents and a set of, shall we say, rather eager great-grandparents, who have learned a little about Terran culture from our station here and much about modern child care since we have a newborn of our own...who is, at the moment, in the care of her grandparents because they were taking their Cordais down to the harbor to watch the sailboats and our little Arre really enjoys them.”

“Any children of ours might be thought of as too Terran.”

“More than three-quarters, I believe? Judging by Amanda, that does not seem to be a bad thing.” He leaned over. “I am familiar with dealing with Terran hybrids, you see.”

Rana had been unsettled by her heritage at first, then downright gleeful to have an excuse for any emotion she wanted to experiment with. “Those recent DNA discoveries were indeed revealing.”

“There is also the matter of you literally making beautiful music together. Sarek, for all his unwitting failings as a parent with his insane first son and his extremely stubborn second, is an excellent instructor of everyone else's children and could easily deal with music lessons, mathematics, or most of the hard sciences. Or piloting...er, it might be unwise to suggest that.”

“Just so.” It's a good, quietly uttered Vulcan agreement, carrying as it does the emphatic nature of a rousing “Hell yes!” in Standard. “That was the hardest part to ask about, but there's also...”

I must have been thinking it loudly. He added “The issue of Jim.”

“Yes. I don't intend to mate with him. That's not my way.”

“Will it bother you if Spock does someday? Or if he doesn't, but Jim is always there?”

“The first would be okay if I wasn't required to participate. His being there wouldn't bother me at all.” Jim has to be with us, or Spock won't be. I know my dark and stormy Vulcan, and he needs that warped but sunny afternoon in his life.

“It didn't bother my mother to have my father be attracted to men from time to time. You know Solkar can be a terrible flirt but never acts on his impulses. What happened with Zef Cochrane was not consensual on sa'mekh's side. The most obvious source of attraction has been, and always will be, untouched because Nick, ah, really doesn't swing that way.”

“It seems to work for them.”

“It does.” He reached up and picked a small bunch of grapes from the arbor, handing me half. I took them, knowing full well what he meant by that: a man serves his wife and other female relatives, including in-laws. He lifted his voice that fraction again, teasing the still invisible Rana. “If anything should prevent what you are thinking of, we could always bond you with one of the other grandsons. After initial failures for sufficient and obvious reasons—I do not think anyone is obligated to remain with a wife who actively attempts to kill him, but he tried with Rea--Sarek managed quite well, don't you think? You have met most of the rest, a devoted and steadfast group. T'Shaara once said 'there's madness, and there's S'chnT'gai madness.' Accurate, but you understand that.”

“I do. He should frighten me. He does not. It's just...crossing the Rubicon.”

“For you. He is...” Figurative speech is very difficult for most Vulcans, but Skon is in the business of decoding, after all. “Already neck-deep at mid-channel, willing to be a stepping stone and patiently waiting to see if you ever plan to invite him to the far bank with you.”
I flashed back to the haggard mess of him that greeted me on that forsaken planet. So much had happened since Vulcan fell, and yet... and yet. What had he left undone that I had asked, or done that I asked him not to? How much had he given up merely because I might want something else at some vague, unspecified future date? Across the table, Skon's soft eyes were waiting to hear. One nod was all he needed. He toasted me with his tea mug and looked, if you knew how to see it, smug.

Rana stuck her head around the arbor. “So ask him already! You have my blessing if that matters to you. Prime never tried to ask his Uhura. I believe his advice to our Spock was ‘don't be an idiot.’ My advice to you is ‘don't be an idiot the way I was, bonded to a perfectly good man and all but ignoring him for a hundred years.’ Considering what else we have all seen, being hesitant about contracting a bond that is already three-quarters of the way to unbreakable is scarcely worth concern.”

“Fa'ko'mekh, you're right,” I said. She raised an eyebrow and elbowed her husband in a way so conspiratorial there was no doubt about the setup. “I'll show you two what I was working on, the actual excuse for this visit, and then I need to go have a talk with your grandson.”
S'chnT'gai Surak

Chapter Summary

Oh, come on, even the undead have to have a voice...

S'chn T'gai Surak

One of the advantages of being disembodied is the ease of control it affords. Without a body demanding sleep, food or mating, a mind can contemplate in the void state where all is possible. We are the essence of ourselves in a way not possible when a body is interfering, pleasant as that often is.

For the better part of two millennia, we watched our descendants try to walk away from their warring selves without walking away from the essence of who they are. They did not always do so well. It became necessary for some who listened to us to hide the katric ark, for which I was grateful lest we have to leave our capsules (although what they call “true death” is not what they think; it merely makes us harder to access, not permanently gone.) A hundred years ago, when it was possible for the Kir'Shara to return to the light of day, a well-meaning priest who had taken too much from a mistaken philosophy removed my wife's capsule from the case.

She was down the hall rather than at my side, but near enough was good enough. The priest intended to remove what he thought was a distraction. He had no reason to know he might as well have removed my heart. Kaiidth, I had no feet to walk down the hall to her, nor she to me; we thought back and forth in the quiet hours.

It was never my intention to tell anyone not to be one heart with a bondmate. Affection may be dangerous, but so are many things we must do, and navigating the path of affection without being blind to fault or enraged beyond mercy is a necessary part of the way of peace. What caused the perpetual wars was not love; it was lust, greed and often buyer's regret entangled with the normal irritation at living close to one another. Political marriages of people who barely knew each other turned into clan feuds that blew up half the planet. No, seriously, look at the map. Half, by actual area. We were, as my descendant has said, not very nice people.

But love...how else to understand that the spear in the other's heart is the spear in your own, unless your heart can reach hers and hold it in the same esteem? At one time, the Council of Elders propagated the dogma that bonds do not actually happen, that the union of heart and soul was an old rumor. The object was to keep people completely separate except for pon farr, which they perverted into a septennial explosion of frustration and need. What happens to all men should not be shameful, and certainly not life-threatening. We were equipped with brains during life; it seems a shame not to put them to any good use. As for the other parts, in the proper use, they unite more than bodies. In those drowsy moments after, with our minds as entangled as our limbs, possibility seemed limitless and peace close at hand. Staying with one rather than many requires a great deal of negotiation and compromise, restraint and dedication, all commendable traits.

The danger is that it is much easier to walk away from an insult to oneself than to a bondmate, and even more so a child. When we cherish another, and injury is done to that one, it is barely possible for a Vulcan not to consider revenge of spectacular proportions. Only deep meditation upon the
inevitable revenge for the revenge dissuades us, and even then there are times when all we are capable of is making sure there can be no revenge taken for the revenge.

So it was when a descendant came to talk with me about the insults to her brother and husband. They were of the gravest kind. Both were alive only by means I cannot fully describe; I believe some Terrans call them “miracles.” She wished revenge, but she knew it could not be rash and she recognized that were she to take what was, in theory, her due vengeance, innocent people would die and perpetuate the cycle. “If only it were me, I could forgive,” she said. “Osu, I apologize for my emotions—”

“Do not, ko'fu'kam. You have them, kaiidth, we all do. Only they must not rule now.”

“Yes, osu. I cannot allow them to do these things to others.”

“Indeed not. The spear in your heart should be the last, should it not?”

“If I can manage. But how?”

“Let us ask her. You know she has dealt with this kind of thing.” And so the three of us communed, and we managed an answer which, while imperfect, was the best anyone with skin on could manage. There was some necessary killing, but there was no mass violence. Her answer came only at great cost to her, mentally and physically. Her entire youth was taken up in flight and struggle much like our own. In spite of that, when the future speaks of the great peacemakers of Vulcan history, they will speak not only of her brother, but of her.

When she came back from the horror she had endured, she visited straightaway, still in a Sundered uniform and fresh from battle of a type unseen in my time. “I did my best, osu,” she said through her tears. “It did not suffice.”

“It did not suffice yet. I would have thought the same thing in those circumstances. Goodness knows I thought so in our time, when all seemed lost after the first nuclear weapons exploded.”

“I cannot see beyond this.”

“But I can.” How could I explain that a hope, which seemed ridiculous, was what had kept me from escaping the vrekatra and going to look for the ones I had lost? I could not lie to my little one in such distress, and yet, how could I tell her what I perceived as the whole truth when she could not comprehend it? The jaggedness of that great loss resounded in the room, all of us missing someone, for only the few in the katric ark had been brought forward and she who was my wife was not among them. “Ko'fu'kam, if you are to finish this job, you must know there is a way. I cannot explain, but you will find it.”

And she did, as everyone knows; not only her, but her kinsmen who came upon the answer unexpectedly, and her whole family who organized the escape from the broken past, and her husband who never left her side the whole time. When it was settled and the people were safe, she came to the Kir'Shara again and this time she switched off the power. “I have something for you, osu,” she said, and opened the outer shell so she could put the vrekatra she held in its proper place. She latched the lid and turned on the lights again so my words would continue to march around the chamber, but I was less intent on them, I confess, than on the one beside me.

“I am confused, adun,” said she who is my wife. “I understand there was a problem?”

“There was, my wife,” I said, “but it is settled now.”
Amanda Grayson

Chapter Summary

Bruised ribs beat a bruised heart.

Amanda Grayson

I do not remember being dead. I was falling, yes, and rock crumbled around me. Sarek raced out—how did he get there?—I fell on his back, and we tumbled together through a portal that brought us here. Back here, as he says, and he believed the intervening time to be over a year. To me, it was five minutes, and there is the root of everything since.

I have been married to him for thirty-eight years, and in all that time I have known him to have nightmares that make him shiver and whimper in his sleep until I touch him. One of his aides swears Sarek has gone a week without sleeping on missions because he did not wish to wake anyone with his unquiet rest. Even at home, on some nights he would meditate for hours in his corner rather than try to lie down. I am not sure this new place is home—it has the same layout, but it's not the Fortress we knew on Vulcan—but I would gladly give that up if the nightmares had not come with it. The worst of it is that now, unlike before, he cries in his sleep.

I don't mean that he cries out; I mean the whimpers lead to tears and he will roll over, sound asleep, wrap his arms around me, bury his face in my shoulder and weep until my nightgown is soggy and my ribs hurt. Sometimes I have to wake him because I can't breathe. When that happens, I dry his face first. In theory, Vulcans cannot be embarrassed. In reality, nearly everything embarrasses them. Once the python grip around my chest eases, I can rub his back and pretend I don't know what's wrong. The calming points on his upper back and shoulders almost always work. If they don't, I don't mind therapeutic lovemaking. More than anything, that seems to settle him, so he will spend the rest of the night with his head on my chest, listening to my heart and not holding as painfully tight.

At first I thought his hands and feet were hurting him again, but our boys explained that when he was badly injured otherwise—and I was not there, which bothers me—our dear daughter-in-law summoned a whole team of surgeons, who determined to fix everything they could while he was out once. They straightened his newly broken fingers and the old breaks as well, set all the crushed bones in his feet to rights, cleared the scars from the nerves in his wrists and made much improved repairs to his back where it was broken so long ago as well as the fresh injury he had sustained. They even fixed the leaking heart valve that would have killed him sometime soon. His physical pain had been with me so long that its absence felt odd and light. This greater agony replaced it.

One afternoon I was putting the roses in place in the new garden when my father-in-law drifted through. I have always liked Skon. In some dark memory, he was killed long ago, before we met; the Guardians of Forever assure me that was an error in time, and I am glad because it would have been a crime not to know him. He is fully capable of teasing and mischief and doesn't mind that I know it, so he crept up behind me. “I know you're there, sa'mi.”

“I can no more surprise you than I can Lia. However, you won't whip around and swat me.”
“I'd better not when I'm holding a shovel.”

He toasted me with the tea mug that is more or less glued to his hand. “Just so. Are you well this morning, ko'fu'kam?”

When he calls me his daughter, he isn't kidding. He once said that if Sarek and I split up, he was coming with me. “Well enough. A little achy in the ribs.”

“He's still hanging onto you, isn't he?”

“Oh—well—yeah. How did you know?”

“I seem to have injured Rana thusly on more than one occasion, unintentionally I might add.” Of course it was. Skon wouldn't hurt anything, not even his wife, who most people think would deserve it sometimes. Rana can be a pain in the butt. Well, could be, until I came back and found her much mellowed. “You see, I believed I had lost her on va'Pak. The overwhelming losses around her had thinned our bond until I was unsure whether I really felt her, or was wishing it so. When she presented herself to me in San Francisco, alive and well, it was all I could do not to embrace her publicly, and as for trying to sleep in the same bed with her, I understand she found it painful at times.”

“Oh. Oh!—it's because he thought I was--”

“Ko'fu'kam, for over a year we all thought so. Those of us who were here cannot fully describe what it felt like when you all returned. We remember those lost months as a time of broken hearts. Some of us simply dropped dead in the streets, giving no outward sign of being inwardly consumed by grief. I feared it would happen to my little one as well.” I can't think of anyone else who would call my husband “my little one,” but I would bet to Skon he's always going to be that adorable tiny baby. “I am very grateful for your return, Amanda.”

“I'm glad to be here. Oh, dear, it's like when we met, isn't it?” He nodded, and I could feel the faint twist of his heart as he thought of it. The Trellium-D poisoning of everyone at the embassy meant I could read him better than ever, and it had never been difficult.

“He'd had pneumonia already that year, his recovery was very slow, and we brought him to Earth in desperation, because there had been so many dust storms that year and we hoped the dense air might help. Rana wouldn't call it desperation, of course. She said it was logical, because my father was there and could offer insight in dealing with the other healers. He had just come back from his second decades-long stay in stasis after the Tellarite assassination attempt nearly succeeded, so he was well versed in new medical possibilities. He suggested, as a last alternative, that we might consider putting Sarek in stasis if his condition continued to deteriorate. Sarek refused, politely but firmly, and then, just as he seemed to be improving ever so slightly, he developed an even worse case of pneumonia. Infection around his wound—the one he took saving my life—had reignited like a slow fire consuming him. He had given up and was simply waiting, Silek brought you to us to brighten what would have been an even more terrible time, and then the oddest thing happened...”

“He got better,” I said. “It wasn't instant, but he did get better.”

“All the healers who told us to take him home and cherish him while we could...we did, but my father never stopped looking for an answer, even though he was still very weak himself. He found it, not as easy as it would be now; it took weeks to get Sarek to the point where we knew his death was not imminent, months until he was passably well, and the reason he put up with the long convalescence was one fascinating human guest who came by on Sundays.” Skon smiles now, not broadly but a quick lopsided grin when he thinks not too many are looking. “Considering you are
literally his life, you may be putting up with bruised ribs for some time.”

“Is there anything I can do for him?”

“Of course. What she does for me. Be there when we wake, and pretend we weren't afraid. After all, that would be an emotion.”

“Gotcha.” I shook my head. Vulcans.
S'chnT'gai Spock

Chapter Summary

Seventh time is a charm :) 
Apparently, though I haven't been able to read the comics, Spock's out-of-season, stress-induced pon farr after va'Pak was a doozy. aybe it's better for things to happen at the proper time.

This is my seventh wedding day. I set the changes to my personnel file last week, to be made effective at the appropriate time. My mind is not what it should be, and later it will not serve me well.

“No,” says my father, who of course has heard, “it is as it should be, it will do as it should; this is the heart and soul of Vulcan, though it is no more.” What was unspeakable the first time it happened to me has become, in the strange new universe after va'Pak, a matter of respectful but open discussion.

My uncle presses a packet of pills into my hand. “Only enough to make it safe,” Lhairre says. “Nothing to alter the course of what should be.”

He is right, of course. Dr. McCoy nods, my shaking hands lay the pills under my tongue, and my mind clears just enough. “Why was this ever illegal? It is so much better this way,” my father says. He is determined to be here with me. I cannot imagine the mortification involved. And yet, this has indeed been the Vulcan way. Fathers who can manage to be there accompany their sons when the sons are in a humiliating condition. I did not shield that thought sufficiently. He heard it. “It is called being a parent, Spock. It happens. I will embarrass you when I am old. That is called being a son. Now is not then, and this is now managed. You will survive and you will not hurt your wife.”

To the Federation, she is already my wife. That happened years ago. It is not as if we had not enjoyed that aspect of our lives even before she agreed to the paper commitment. This, however, is not paper. This is Vulcan's heart. From the time of the beginning, it has been so. My senses have gone to brilliant tunnel vision. Jim is here, of course, his own buried wish much louder than he means it to be, his memories of his other self sharp. “Relax. You won't have to fight me this time. Unless she really, really still doesn't like me,” he chuckles, and he's right, it is funny. Even my father indulges in that fraction of a smile. “There is plenty of time. You didn't let it turn into an emergency.” He is gracious enough not to add this time, since just after va'Pak I...Leonard would say I made a horse's ass of myself.

“No.” I can talk. The medicine has worked. “It is, however...urgent.” He knows. His only wish is that the urgency would be directed toward him, and I cannot give him that. He understands that, too. T'hy'la do understand so. The matter of embarrassment does not touch him as it does my father and uncle. He knows, he understands, he is here. That is a gift I could never have asked.

Massive great-uncle Davy and equally large Captain Rai lean casually against the door. There was nothing casual about guarding a man in pon farr, even as it began, for millennia. We had no idea what might happen in the absence of Vulcan; we had medication, meditation, and still twenty-three men died for lack of Mount Seleya before Chekhov thought of a way to fool our bodies. Now the problem has been solved, insofar as it can be. I am not actually in the men's chamber outside Koon-ut-kal-if-fee. Outside is not truly Koon itself. It is all a simulation, a brilliant one, but a recording, a memory. Still, T'Pau will be there, doubtless;
Sesek, her bondmate, used to give lamentably inaccurate marital advice to the man while she spoke similarly to the woman. I believe they may have surmised the sketchy information is unnecessary in the present instance.

And it is unnecessary. I have made love to Nyota eight hundred and fifty-six times, at first with a complete lack of skill for which she forgave me. She says practice makes perfect. I plan to practice as often as possible. The technical details of what we will be doing for the next three to seven days are no longer in question. She has given me to understand she has made certain preparations that will be most pleasant. I have assured her of the same, even though my receipt of a brightly wrapped and labeled package from Central Prostitution Supply of Kir Haran in the Romulan Republic caused more than small mirth among my shipmates. I am exceedingly fortunate that the Romulans did not put the contents on the customs label. Vulcan shops have never labeled such things, even if they carry the requested items. Nothing less seemed enough for my seventh marriage.

This, too, has become a matter of amusement. Technically, T'Pring and I were married, in a sense—less than a marriage, but more than a betrothal, the traditional child bonding ceremony could count as my first. We have chosen not to think of it as such. No, for Nyota and me the first was a brief flurry of paperwork in San Francisco when my mind was still in a hormonal haze. Nyota charitably granted me permission to declare myself non compos mentis and invalidate the certificate if I so desired, which I did not. I would have thought she would be the one to object. When she did not run away, despite my abominable behavior in that frenzy, I told her she was more than worthy of a proper ceremony conducted in accordance with her family's wishes as well as mine.

This became a problem, although, she insisted, an entertaining one. Her family is less religious than highly traditional. Fortunately, they replicated the meat and did not execute the friendly cow and calf I offered as Nyota's bride price, to the raucous amusement of her parents. They reminded me that their daughter bought me from T'Pring for a cup of water, so an infant heifer and her mother (who will be spoiled pets) seemed equitable. That second wedding was highly satisfying, since couples in their tradition are culturally expected to seclude themselves for two days in a very comfortable and commodious cabin for two days.

A year later, Starfleet's San Francisco headquarters contacted us to ask whether we had meant to file our original paperwork, since it had been mislaid and had lapsed. Since we were near Earth at that time, we took the opportunity to meet my great-grandfather Nick Mestral at his mayoral office in Carbon Creek and have him perform yet another civil ceremony, to the delight of most of the town. They did not warn us of the traditional Carbon Creek wedding feast, which involves pierogies, dumplings and an alarming amount of drinking of human and Vulcan intoxicants. We were sober when we signed the certificate and so was fa'samekh, and it was transmitted immediately, so I am confident that paperwork was valid. Sobriety was a fleeting commodity for nearly everyone else there. Before he began to indulge, Solkar asked if he might bless us according to his own religious tradition, and we must have agreed, because there are pictures of us in the Black Chapel of St. Nicholas. Not to be outdone, my aunt also performed a Jarok ceremony for us and my sister-in-law thought of an old Syrannite blessing to confer, although its reputed fertility-enhancing qualities were a bit disturbing at the time. By that sixth ceremony, I might have agreed to anything. In fact, I agreed to several things later that night that Nyota had added to our negotiations only as possibilities. Trying not to think of those at the moment is difficult. I will recall, instead, that Jacob Stolzfuss' wheatfield is sharp with stubble at that time of year and the stream is very cold.

“Good thing we have those pills,” Lhairre says. “She has to read everyone's your whole names and lines of succession. I've known weddings where that didn't work well.” He and Jim trade looks and guffaw. I know the ceremony he describes. Tradition used to require the priestess in charge to witness the first copulation. At that one, the entire wedding party did. Fortunately for the couple, most of the guests were Romulans, who thought it a matter for cheering, betting and critique rather
than censure. I am unsure which I would consider worse.

My brothers are outside, so close to their own cycles that they dare not come in because mine would trigger theirs. Jim thinks this is funny, too, and Bones was teasing them earlier. So has life changed: now we can talk about it. Now Sybok can be here and be sane. Nothing is as it was on T'Khasi. This is not home, then is not now, we are not who we were. I will never lose the illogical but undeniable ache in my heart for what was, and still, I welcome what is, kaidith, better than anyone could have imagined eight years ago.

“She's ready,” Ruven calls. “And damn, she's even more beautiful.”

My seconds are at my back, in case Nyota decides to pick one of them instead. Tradition is that both fathers escort the groom, both mothers the bride. I no longer regret having to put this off, because Mother will be here. Nyota's father mutters “Hot as the Serengeti in summer out there,” and slides his arm through mine. My father does the same, the guards open the door, my brothers fall in, and beyond the door is the heat and orange dust that was home.

Nyota is waiting, our mothers at her side, Gaila and Christine behind her. I can feel Jim's smile without seeing it. Bones would never admit to the thought that has just drifted by. They are here. My family is here. Most of all, glorious in that dress she planned so long ago, she is here, holding out a hand to me. If I touch her, it will be all I can do not to—but I will manage, these few minutes, to postpone our eight hundred and fifty-seventh encounter. This time will...feel...real. I will walk into my seventh wedding, for once sure of myself.
Mother meant well, setting me up with...I'm not going to say her name, because it doesn't matter any more. Hoshek and Bilek's mother, will that do? Her parents thought it was a good match, meaning she would have lots of money. I didn't mind that. It was having to have sex with her that I minded. A lot. Vulcan men have to have sex with somebody, and I never wanted to.

I never even wanted to have sex with Amanda, and she wanted to have sex with me back then because she hadn't met my brother yet. He doesn't mind at all. In fact, she was the one who explained to me what she thought might be the matter, and I had never thought of it like that, but it did make sense that when the fever came along and my very logical ex-wife was near, I kept picturing one of the men I worked with. I mentioned that to my ex once and she very logically hit me.

When I mentioned it to Amanda she explained that some men like other men to do that with and some people don't like to do it with anybody, but she did like to, and she liked men for that, so we used to sit at the tea shop together and I think “ogle” is a polite word for what we were doing to men walking by. It wasn't fair to her to make her do without something she liked that much, so I got her to come over and meet my brother, because he was so sick at the time that he needed to take his mind off nearly being dead. She kept visiting and he didn't die, and everything happened the way it did, and that was good, but she couldn't find anybody for me because I was already married even if my ex-wife didn't think I should be.

My ex called me stupid, clumsy and accident-prone. It's not transnuclear engineering or dimensional astrophysics, but I do have a doctorate in Terran archeology and you generally can't do that if you're actually stupid. Amanda says I'm just an airhead. The image of my skull being full of clouds and birds isn't that unappealing, or even far from the truth. Clumsy, well...I did have a lot of accidents back then. The cooling unit falling off the roof in Sausalito was really strange as accidents go, but the old piano seemed even more odd. Amanda said it was a cliché. I thought it was a Baldwin, but there wasn't enough left to be sure. The last time, my wife came by to drop off the children. She had the flyer on manual, her attention drifted from the controls and she went right across the sidewalk. I might have been killed had I not tripped on the curb so it went right over me. My sister happened to be in town when that happened and she went to talk to my ex about it. That was the last accident and my wife never came to Earth again even after the Loss. With the need to stir the gene pool, she went off to have children with a man she had worked with for a long time who looks an awful lot like Bilek.

That was awkward, because after the Loss, a lot of men were going into you-know-what early, and I started wondering what to do.

That was when our sister came back and brought Rai with her. The old legend is that if you lose a sibling, they come back to you as your t'hy'la, and maybe so. All of the pictures of that group of children have her, Rai and her future bondmate standing together working on some problem, playing with the same toy, or standing on Rai's shoulders to get a better look at something, because Rai really does make a good stepladder. When we were young, we ran all over the desert together. I got to be the annoying little brother tagging along behind. That meant I got to look at Rai's behind a lot. I didn't mind. He didn't mind. When he grew up to be a professional athlete, I really didn't mind. He was very esthetically pleasing in his uniform.
When he couldn't play football any more because of the new rules, he went back to the Navy and learned how to be a starship captain. When Lia and Lhaire needed him, of course he went with her to be a Romulan. We only got to see each other a few times over thirty years, but when we got together it was always like the old days and we would eat unpleasant pizza from Stella's and talk all night. Once I was on Delta Vega researching a failed colony and he had to come back and hide while some wounds healed, and nobody there cared that we were k'turr, so we spent two weeks in the Ice House not getting anything done because we were too busy curled up on the couch together with wine and chocolate, talking about everything he had seen and done on that side of the Zone. I liked talking to him. I didn't ever like talking to my ex-wife that much, but then, she only came around when it had to happen and neither of us was in a mood to discuss it only get it over with.

With Rai it never seemed that so much time had passed since we'd been together. I always knew more or less where he was and how he was, except when he had to shield because of being in a bad place, which he was, a lot. He said when we got together it was the same as taking off tight boots or getting out of his dress uniform (and putting other clothing on.) He wasn't married. I wondered how he was managing, but you didn't ask those things back then, especially not where the Council of Elders might hear you and Mother was on the Council and they were obnoxious even to her.

When he came back after the Loss, we caught up the way we always did. There was Trellium-D all over the Embassy and I got a really bad dose. There was no Amanda at the Embassy. That was worse than the toxin. When I got to New Vulcan and the new Fort, we were among the few scattered around the big room at dinner, and there was a lot of whispering about the man in another clan who had died from you-know-what. Since we were sitting off to ourselves Rai said “I'm going to have to take care of that myself soon.”

I said “Me too. There are a lot of widows. Not enough, but a lot.”

“Eww. It's bad enough to have to have sex, but with a woman?”

“Well, yes. Eww.” That is a very apt Standard expression. “I always liked to look at men, but do things like that actually...I mean, can two men really?”

“Over in the Empire they do,” Rai said, and he showed me a vid he had to explain. “I had no idea how that would work, but there was this prison we took over...” It was a funny story, even though we're supposed not to admit anything is funny, and it also made sense of lot of things I'd wondered about but hadn't wanted to look up because somebody would see what I'd been looking at and if my ex-wife had been around she would have hit me or I might have had an accident again. “Over that way, all the doctors had pills you could take so you-know-what either doesn't happen or isn't anything to worry about. You can get those over here now.”

“Seriously, you can?”

“At least two of the doctors we know prescribe them right out in the open. Your mind stays clear, you don't get the awful fever, and if you want, you can not take the one kind so you can still...you know. I suppose I should, because of needing children, but still...eww.”

“Exactly. I have the boys, but considering, there should be more. The fertility technicians have been working overtime on ways to combine DNA for people who can't do that otherwise.”

“Can you imagine if we did?” He made these gestures, somebody the size of a door with no rear end but big shoulders, and he couldn't help giggling and I sort of did.

My sister had her back to us about five meters away. She snapped, half under her breath, “Silek!” I looked up at her, and she turned, grinned and she and Lhaire both did the thumbs-up Terran thing.
Mother was nearby. She didn't do the thumbs-up. She just looked as stony as ever and nodded.

Our fathers have always been close, and the two of them came by as if they were wandering past to go play punchball. That was when Skon and I were still supposed to pretend we were mad at each other except we never really were because he knew I wasn't made to be an astrophysicist and my handwriting is lousy, so he didn't stop, only said “Can I start writing yet?” meaning our marriage scroll.

“I would,” Rai beamed up at him, and handed me his glass in front of everybody, and I handed him mine, and that was that.

His ship is a flying hospital and is the best place for me to live, because it's always traveling from one of the new colonies to another and there is something new and fascinating to look into wherever we go. The doctors aboard are mostly good and people are grateful to be able to get specialty care, like those pills if they're Vulcans. I helped decorate the hallways so it doesn't look like a nasty hospital. It's annoying enough to be so sick that you have to transport up to a starship; it doesn't have to look harsh and clinical. We have a good culinary department too, with a replicator that can handle most things and a stack farm room for Vulcan fruit and vegetables. We had a few elders come aboard who looked as if they were ready to die, but they didn't once they saw some paintings and had some food from home. One man decided to live after he had some terrible Stella's pizza. I think he was a Kolinahru, so it probably reminded him of being miserable at the monastery.

My grown sons were remarkably not surprised by our marriage and said they had assumed I was gay. I wish they'd have told me a few decades ago. Rai's slightly more grown daughter thought it was a good idea once she got to this side of the Neutral Zone and could introduce herself. Ael is a really brave woman and her mother was so brave that she got killed by the Klingons, which was not what any of us had in mind but it used to happen a lot.

We went to the fertility clinic and had them combine our DNA to get our son Kirk who we named for my nephew's friend because it also sounds like an old distinguished Golan ancestor from Rai's family and Mother can't complain about it even if she would which she probably wouldn't now because she has changed a lot. We now also have toddler twins, girl and boy, because Rai promised a dying friend that he would have her babies, so Mijne has a family too. We have another embryo from the two of us, but she has a high psi score and has to wait for a live host instead of a portable incubator.

Sometimes the little ones—well, not T'Kunli, she has to wait, as I said, but T'Yai and Tilek and Kirk—climb on the bed with us at night and we all watch vids and talk about the things I have dug up. We don't usually talk about the fights Rai has been in, but he does tell football stories. When they are not sleeping with us, Rai and I still have wine and chocolate and talk too far into the night, but we don't have sex because we don't like it and we don't have to and we are not just content, we are happy.
S'Kel Lhairre

Chapter Summary

Even despotic admirals sometimes purr.

S'Kel Lhairre

Military procedure manuals are remarkably uniform. Even given cultural differences and small unused anachronisms, such as the Vulcan Navy provision for executing and consuming an incompetent civilian chief, procedures exist for everything from latrine maintenance to what to do in case of a spatiotemporal anomaly emitting ships containing living beings. The one provision I cannot recall reading is what to do when one's admiral has fallen asleep on one's shoulder.

Vulcans do not, as a rule, sleep soundly. That is even more true since the Loss. No wonder the Navy Anthem is a hymn to well-guarded rest; Seleya always contemplated mass murder and T'Khasi's other inhabitants were on the prowl, so we learned to half-sleep with one eye open. Now we doze where we can, on whatever ship or strange planet. Our home is on its usual patrol of the New Vulcan system, so we are, at present, aboard the Seleya, catching a ride to a colony in need of security advice from the admiral. On this mercy ship, captained by my admiral's t'hy'la Rai, I have done my due diligence about the engine room, advising the young chief on a few matters that concerned her. That settled, I was planning to spend the afternoon considering promotions and training curricula.

We were on the large, overstuffed, reclining wardroom sofa looking at the promotion list. Lia made a suggestion. In the lengthy process of making the notations, I became aware of a growing drowsy weight. Brief mental investigation revealed that she is, indeed, sound asleep, her head against my neck. While strictly speaking, a well-functioning marriage bond nearly eliminates the need for physical contact, she and I have never found the latter in the least unpleasant. She has spent most of her life in perpetual motion, often alone and in an alarming variety of terrible situations, any unwounded momentary stillness is to be prized, and I do cherish it, so that list will have to take care of itself.

Eighty years married, she and I; we have been able to spend perhaps a third of that together. Duty called, not once but dozens of times. She and I both commanded starships. For ten years, we did so in two separate star empires, in theory as mortal enemies. Fortune favored the foolish, as the Terrans say, and we escaped with our lives. We had thirty-four aliases between us. She has officially arranged my execution nine times; I have done away with her personae twice and have seen her ships to a fiery end five. Her skill and innovation in transporter technology complimented my stealth devices to keep us alive, if not always content.

This moment makes all of those worthwhile. She is as limp and trusting as our children. I have held her in many circumstances, needing and giving comfort, needing and giving relief from injury, trying to make a bed out of something that wasn't. This is not an actual bed, but, like most furniture of Romulan origin, it serves uncommonly well as such. There are always pillows, there are always blankets, there are inevitable footrests and mug holders even in offices. Vulcans accustomed to working in tiny white cubicles with plastic chairs are disturbed. The accommodations tempt them to
forget what they meant to do in favor of sinking into the softness, yet the Empire managed to conduct its Byzantine affairs at least as efficiently as Vulcan ever managed its straight and rigid course. Could it be that the world does not end when one of us finds a good spot for an afternoon nap?

If I let her sleep in that position, her back would be bothered, her shoulder stiff, but I have no will to move her because she would wake up. Our Rai comes in for a tea refill and grasps the problem. He tugs on the reclining back of the sofa and drops the biggest pillow into my lap. I slide back just far enough to let her sag onto it. He scoops up her feet to straighten her body on the sofa, and she, knowing it is him and she is safe, neither wakes nor resists. His thoughts confirm my own, of course: she has been so tired. When one works that hard for that long, even the Madmiral deserves a rest. I believe she also deserves the blanket he drops over her, and my hand on her back. The contact draws her deeper into sleep, and the soft vibration against my knee is proof of her contentment.

Rai stays, the three of us soaking in that lifetime of familiar warmth, our minds at peace, hers on idle with dreamlike scenarios and solutions drifting by. One of the possible solutions needs a bit of warp core input; in silence I suggest, Rai confirms and adds, her half-dreaming self assembles. Three engineers can repair a great deal of damage if they all practice slightly different specialties. The damage we cannot repair keeps all three of us awake, but since we are, against every probability, still three alive, it is tolerable. This very comfortable piece of furniture is much more than tolerable, my catnapping wife even more so. “Wake us for dinner.”

“Roast mogai, kupus and chola soup and kasa dumplings.” Rai may not smile, but I feel it. He tucks a throw around me as well and quotes the last line of the hymn: “Sleep, for I stand guard.”

“When you put it like that,” I say, and give in to the drowsiness as my lap full of admiral purrs.
I knew next to nothing about Vulcans when I staggered into Starfleet HQ to enlist. Cultural Diversity was the first class on my first day, which was a good thing because there were people around me who weren't people, exactly. I'd seen some of the species on the news or whatever, but sitting between a red brain guy who has to have a heated mobile tank so he doesn't freeze and a genderless being who has three foot-long fingers on each of their four gray-green hands was eye-opening. The bored Rigellian prof wasn't very good and about all I learned about Vulcans, besides the greenish blood and pointy ears, was “don't touch them.” Nobody explained why not, and anyhow, the Orion girl sitting in front of me had my mind elsewhere.

After I got touched by a Vulcan, really hard around the face and throat and even harder on the shoulder where he damn near pinched my arm off, and after we all spent a really long time jammed in with a lot of the traumatized survivors, some of it started to make sense. Falling asleep in Old Spock's armchair in front of his fireplace on Delta Vega counts as my first Vulcan hug when he was walking by and just for a moment pulled me against his side. He explained later that he hoped I didn't mind; he used to stealth-hug his Jim like that, and it's the heart lower and further right thing, the instinct to hold a child or a lover against that fast whispering beat.

Nick Mestral said it isn't so much physical contact as contact without warning that's a problem, the way it's always been for me. He isn't warm and fuzzy, but he gets affection across by grousing and poking and every now and then slinging an arm around my neck like a choke hold that has no force behind it but all the fondness he can't say. When Spock needed a hand on his shoulder and wouldn't ask, Nick gave me some pointers on that, too—he's his excuse, be his poor human in need of affection or comfort—but he also reminded me that in his personal experience no amount of looking tragic will get a straight guy to go for a bisexual one. When I found out Spock and I were related, I was almost glad. Not quite, but almost.

When we were face to face across the heavy glass around the warp core, the other barriers dropped and I knew what he really thought of me. It had never occurred to me that loving someone did not have to include having sex with them. Sex had been everything to me, proof of love, how to get food, how to feel like a big shot. He doesn't think that way, at all, even with Nyota. She has parts he finds attractive and enjoys, but if there comes a time when those don't work, he will think no less of her and love her just as much, and he does love her. He loves me as well, and as deeply, and I didn't know what to make of that but I sure liked it at what I thought was the end of me.

After I died and was trying to get over it, Spock stashed me on the top floor of the Vulcan Embassy, away from the press. He was still unwell himself from the beating Khan had laid on him, but he wouldn't leave me unless his father was in the room with me. I meant that much. He didn't care how tired he was or how he hurt; not even Nyota could get him to go lie down until backup was there. When the cavalry did come over the hill, it was better than I could imagine. I was having a nightmare, and this big scary-looking dude brought me out of it and set my mind to rights. It took about five minutes to realize being afraid of Solkar would be like being terrified of beer or cheeseburgers. He understood because he'd been dead and back to life twice and he gave up being
hardcore Surakan a long time ago. I should have been awestruck, but he told crazy true stories about what amount to his three lifetimes and I laughed for the first time in my second. Since then, whenever we're in range we find a bar, share bourbon and soda and tell stories, and when it's time to leave and we're where no one can see, he hugs me and tells me he's proud of me.

In the chaos of the Great Rescue Captain Ruven, who grew up as Solkar's son, and I pulled off an epic rescue if I do say so myself. After, when nobody was looking, he grabbed me off the floor in those python arms of his, and it's a shame he's straight because he likes me, unafraid and unashamed. Ru and I get it, we're both captains, we know the crap parts of the job, and he's not the quiet civilian you'd think; he's been places and done things, and it's good for both of us not to have to explain. He's a weird mixture of k'turr calm acceptance and commando understanding, and he suits me.

Five was...heh. It didn't start well, let's leave it at that, shall we? I went down to Atlanta with Bones, he left me alone while he went to see family, and I did something stupid. Really stupid. The way I got into Starfleet stupid, only I was older and should have been wiser and wasn't. Spock would have had to come over from Nairobi and get his favorite drunk idiot—it was that dumb—except his aunt pulled her Starfleet rank on him. She bailed me out and hauled my sorry self back to her ship to clean up, never saying a word to me. I came out feeling like a more nearly sober idiot, and Lia still didn't talk to me. She looked me up and down, gave a little half-shake of her head, raised one eyebrow at her husband, and left. I didn't know that was her shorthand for “you handle this,” but hoo boy, I got yelled at by a Vulcan dad.

Make that a Vulcan dad who is also half Romulan, which is ten times worse. Romulans don't usually shout; instead of that guttural Vulcan bark questioning your logic, it's fast, sharp speech two inches from your nose with unmerciful eye contact as they let you know exactly why they're disappointed and what they expect you to do about it and how you're going to behave the next time you're in that situation. For all the lip I've given every superior officer up to and including Chris Pike, I couldn't say more than “Ha, osu, ie, rekkhai,” and couldn't keep track of which was which. It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes but it felt like a couple of hours.

He was right, and nobody else would have had the nerve to let fly at me. I sat around the rest of the night thinking how lucky I was nobody got killed, including me. In the morning, Lhairre showed up like nothing had happened, said “We have a job,” and hauled me along on what turned out to be an extraction of a Confederation operative from a really bad situation. They parked me at the helm of a little cloaked ship while Lia paced the bridge and leaned over my shoulder to look at the screens.

We got him, Lhairre took him downstairs to debrief and not that he'd admit it calm down a little, and we sneaked back fast. I can't explain how scary it was or how wrung out I felt thinking about how it had taken every ounce of skill I own to do what had to be done. Nobody else was around, and she leaned over again and hugged me against her side. “There, sa'fu. That's what I know you can do.” Since then, she treats me like her own kids, fussing over my uniform, hugging me when she can get away with it and having Uncle Lhairre chew me out when I need it. It's not only yelling. He isn't a hugger, but if he hears about my doing good I get the little half-smile and maybe a “That worked, didn't it?” To me that's the grand prize.

It's no secret Spock and I had a rough time sorting things out at the start. He was depressed and guilty about the Loss, I was a mess because—well, a lot of reasons that weren't getting better—and we didn't realize how the beating we were taking was welding us together. The Romulans say you can't call yourselves t'hy'la until you've bled on each other, carried each other out of trouble, been bawled out by a boss together and had to explain why you were in the wrong bed. We managed within six months. The bed was the first and easiest explanation. I was drunk, story of my life back then, got confused in the dark on our first night on the new ship, fell into what I thought was my bed, found out in the morning it was his—you'd think the heat would have clued me in, but I was that lit
—and he and Nyota had shrugged and gone to sleep in mine. The other stuff just happened, crazy mission after crazy mission. That's how I hugged a Vulcan.

Plenty of times Spock and I have literally slept together, as in, side by side in a variety of jails, or caves, or once under a shuttle on a blazing desert planet that was supposed to be uninhabited (spoiler, it wasn't and the natives were not happy) when we'd been up for like three days and crawled into the shade as soon as we were more or less safe. It doesn't make military sense for both captain and exec to go planetside, but in theory we're not military. When we were called in as election observers we both went because nobody else wanted to and it sounded harmless. It wasn't. Starfleet underestimated how ticked the parties were at each other.

That was why we holed up in some absent carnivore's wet smelly cave with so many bruises we looked like we'd been run over. Mine were bad, his were worse, and he had gotten soaked and cold. Help was on the way, because the two of us made a communicator work where it shouldn't have, with an assist from his wife on the bond channel that always works but isn't specific enough for a beam-up. They would pick us up in three point five two hours, as soon as they were in a good spot, and until then, we were safe. We had a couple of emergency blankets and one ration bar, which we split even though we were both so beat up that chewing hurt. There was enough power left in our phasers to warm the floor and a couple of good backrest rocks, plus our dress uniform coats to sit on and the thin reflective blankets to warm him up, and that's when he started shivering.

While we were taking care of rescued people after the Battle of Vulcan, Sarek sent a guy to the head of the triage line. He looked okay except for shivering a little, but Bones barely kept him alive because he had very bad internal injuries. I asked Sarek how he knew, and he said a shivering Vulcan is always an emergency because they can normally control even if they're very cold. Even before our fun adventure on Bandara, that important safety tip had saved Spock's life at least twice, plus once it embarrassed hell out of him when he was only upset because he thought I was dead. That night the basic med scanner we carry told me he was seriously hypothermic and had likely just warmed up enough to shiver at all.

I heated the last packet of water and made him drink it. It was scary when he didn't argue. It was even scarier when I said “You're cold, come here,” and he did. I leaned him into my chest, with his head over my heart, and rubbed his upper arms and back to get the blood going. His hair was as soft as I suspected it would be against my cheek. The contact made him easy to hear without speaking, and he isn't polite and careful in thought around me as he is in public speech: I'm not dying, nirak.

Fooled me, you lime popsicle. “Let yourself shiver. It's the quickest way to warm up.”

“Vulcan bodies are not constructed to retain heat; quite the opposite. Most of our training is geared toward staying cool.” Your heart sounds like my mother's.

“You kept your cool in this situation, maybe too well.” His teeth were rattling. Shiver. It is logical. Make your muscles warm you so your mind doesn't have to do all the work. I was hanging on as much for my fear as his comfort, but the offer had to be made. “If this bothers you...”

“In the current circumstance, it does not.” It is quite pleasant. And warm. Especially warm.

But you're still straight, dammit.

Yes. That thought was not interesting.

To you, maybe!

Touche. Or, considering the meaning of that word, not touche. Especially not there.
“Quit making me laugh. It makes my ribs hurt.”

“I did no such thing, Captain. Any humor is your own fault.” Ha. Are you certain your injuries are as minor as you try to suggest?

_They don't feel broken, but who knows?_ “Getting chased by the bear-thing and rolling downhill was the _best_ part of this. The little brats using us for a trampoline, on the other hand...”

“I was least fond of the large Cardassian envoy with the section of iron pipe. His proposal to remove my head with it was most unfortunate.”

“Especially after you decked him. The kids were equal-opportunity destroyers. I suggest we draft the lot of them as weaponry.”

“Deploying them would certainly be seen as a war crime.”

“What was the best part?”

He sighed, heavy and content. _This. Not that I will ever admit it to anyone else._

By the time we beamed up, he had warmed till his teeth weren't rattling. Nyota looked him over, shook her head and dragged both of us to sickbay, where Bones had a totally predictable tantrum about the whole thing and called us names only a ship's doctor can without getting hauled to a captain's mast. Nothing was broken—we could have told him that—but we were really colorful for a few days.

Since then, I have hugged Spock several times, usually while one of us is non compos mentis for one reason or another (blue ale, getting hit over the head with a wrench, sex pollen and an accident with an unusually strong batch of chocolate come to mind.) I have also stumbled to him in my battered daze from attempted murder, terror or grief, knowing those very strong arms will always be open to me even if he has to haul me into a private place to maintain whatever dignity is left.

Not long before Prime died, I asked him whether he was at peace with the possibility of an afterlife. “Of course. Jim has been there a good while. I am unsure where he may be, but his katra still finds mine. Th'yla always find each other, and time is immaterial.” Then he smiled. “However, he no longer puts himself in such predicaments as were once his habit. I look forward to the equivalent to chess in front of his fireplace, without the...ah...adventures that were less than pleasant.”

It was a weird question, but I had to know. “Did you two ever talk about how you felt?”

“He, frequently, upon the addition of intoxicants. I, not until after V'ger's inadvertent revelation of the foolishness of hardline pseudo-Surakan thought. After that, I reminded him on occasion. Too few occasions. Do not wait when he needs to hear it, but do try to avoid charging across a conference, stumbling into him and grabbing his crotch to stay upright. The other ambassadors were nonplussed.”

“You know,” I said, trying not to turn red all the way to the ends of my hair, “even I might be able to avoid _that._” He approved, but he never would explain...
Chapter Summary

Life does not proceed in a logical fashion.

S'Harien T'Pol

I am no longer young, and the years have been unkind. There may remain fifty years to me, or five. Either way, if the universe is as I suspect, I shall be most content. At one time I would have preferred haste. That is no longer the case; what an odd resolution for a life that began in such a conventional manner. At the very least, I would have expected to find my end on the red sands of the Forge, perhaps in the cave where my mother's bones rested; it would have been as good a place as any, and the radiation would have been of no consequence in the end of my days. That cannot be now.

Old Cousin Selek told me to be content with this timeline, for in another, my life was not as it is. There, Trip did not fake his death and Elizabeth was never placed in stasis while her small heart still held some fraction of life. It is well here; her early childhood was fraught with medical treatments for a year and more, yet she remembers little of it and did recover. Betty, she calls herself now, grown, married, a grandmother four times over, my graceful unconceived daughter who is both of us.

He came back to me six months after I left the ship. He was not the Trip we had known after what had happened, some of which he was never at liberty to disclose. That part of his mind was closed to me, politely, with a firm lock installed by a well-meaning healer. His body was the bigger problem, too many parts beyond proper repair to give him the life he should have had, but not too many for him to come home with me to heal. I told those Vulcans around me I felt an obligation to my shipmate. Truth, now that I am old: I loved him, and do, and will.

We had a hundred years. After he was well enough to live again, Kuh came along—Charles the Fourth, but his sister called him Kuh, Four. They became adults and worried as Trip grew older, but we sent them off with assurance that we would be well tended in their absence. They found mates, business and lives on T'Khasi. We were parents, grandparents, great-grandparents; they gave our descendants the names of our old shipmates, Mac and Hoshi, Jonathan and Phlox. They visited often, gliding between Earth and Vulcan as if it were natural in their scrambled ancestry. They had just gone home the day before va'Pak. On that day we became no longer parents, nor grandparents, nor great-grandparents, but two aging bondmates in our little Embassy quarters surrounded by more grief than a body could bear.

Two weeks later, into that silence of heart stumbled a bewildered aging man I strained to recognize. Koss enlightened me. Some time widowed from his ninety-six-year marriage to a most kind and agreeable older woman, two weeks before he had been the father of six, grandfather of fifteen and great-grandfather of ten. Now he had no one left and knew no one among the survivors except me. I was concerned as to Trip's reaction. I need not have been. When Koss began to explain what he had lost, and broke down in an agony of shame halfway through, Trip was the one who comforted him, and so went the next year and a half. I do not know how or why we chose to live, or whether we did. Past the ability to contribute physically to repopulation, we became a tripod, too old for passions that might have haunted us otherwise, but leaned together for support in a windstorm undreamed of.
We regained a sort of rhythm to our unbalanced days. Koss was always up early, preparing first meal as a permanent guest, while I meditated, then helped Trip with his morning routine and walk to the kitchen where we ate. We could have gone to the common room where the staff would serve us, but it was no longer a family place; it was a space haunted by a few survivors from various clans.

Koss Architectural had once been the premier firm in our province. Koss had the records, but not the creative minds who had enabled his own. We were an inferior substitute, the material at hand. He found a few embassy aides amenable to learning the new discipline, and together with a surviving civil engineer and dear ancient Malcolm Reed, we began to lay out the work of recreating Vulcan on the new colony at Vaebn 3. I was not in favor of a direct recreation. Trip reminded me my clan home at Desert's Edge would be rebuilt there, but that, too seemed a mockery to me.

We began to take some interest in the news again, if only to pass the hollow time. There were alarming reports from the Romulan Star Empire as well as the damaged, but not defeated, Klingons. Koss thought nothing of it, Trip was mildly curious, but I had my suspicions about the actual nature of those events. The Vengeance Incident shook us from our quiet. Jonathan Archer had been in the room and was gravely injured when the bomb went off, then we were at the Embassy when the ship made its fatal plunge across the harbor. Help was needed, help we gave; afterward, Sarek insisted we go to Dubai with the other elders, where we would be warm and well cared for without straining the resources of a city that could barely care for itself or a colony not ready for us.

When the attack fell on New Vulcan, and the Navy's long clandestine operation had to be cut short in order to achieve spectacular victory, I confess to a moment of savage pride in my kin who managed such a thing. Over the next year and three months, we considered our options as the new planet built itself again and invited us all to come home. We visited, we approved of the new empty shell that was Desert's Edge, we were guests at Sarek's table in the reborn and equally forlorn D'H'Riset, then we went home because San Francisco had healed and could take us in again.

Osu Solkar lives in Pittsburgh for the most part, traveling to New Vulcan or San Francisco on his scheduled days away from his work. While of course our medical conditions were well monitored, he never failed to stop by and offer his healer's skill to all of us in person. He informed us of what I already knew: between time and sorrow, Trip's life was drawing to a slow close.

There was enough to distract us for a time. The treasonous inquisition bent on concealing the truth of the Vengeance furnished entertainment for every petty bureaucrat imaginable until it recessed for the Federation Day break. I knew some covert operation was going on; with only ten thousand of us left, several hundred being involved meant week-long work absences were obvious. Solkar and Mestral gave every appearance of having rushed back to Earth in great haste for the annual ceremonies, then they returned immediately to New Vulcan, which was very unusual.

Shortly after, the hearing resumed; I had thought to go, but could not muster the energy to walk over. There was a sea-change in the afternoon, sudden as a shower blowing in from the Pacific. Astonishment in the air intrigued me, as did the uncontrolled joy that suffused the embassy, and yet, surely it belonged to others, not to us. Koss and Trip continued to play chess while I tended my marigolds on the roof until Solkar paged me to the corridor beside his small local office. “T'sai,” he said, bowing his head without meeting my eyes, “there have been extraordinary developments.”

That was seldom promising. “Indeed.”

“I thought it best to inquire of Trip's health today before enlightening him.”

“He is as well as he has been.”

“In that case.” He opened the door to his office, which was full of our family. Solkar went to get the
men and show Koss to his own recovered clan, and we were parents, grandparents and great-grandparents again.

Trip lived to see two more grandchildren and three more great-grandchildren brought to us. To the surprise of his doctors, he drew such strength from the Great Rescue that it was another three years before the family and old friends, including Koss, gathered for his farewell. His mind was mostly clear as his body coasted to a stop in my arms and his katra stepped across the bond to me. He went to the Hall of Ancient Thought on New Vulcan, where he began a program of cheerful human annoyance to those around him, all of whom have since learned to appreciate him. All those years before, a memorial had been set up for Elizabeth, only to have her not need it at the time. It was appropriate to put his ashes there, as hers and mine will one day be. To friendship, to the unity of the Terran and Vulcan people, to the knowledge that we must cast out fear—not a bad tribute to his life, and I should have been able to accept that.

I could not. The grief was as hard and sharp as it had been a hundred years before. I meditated for days and still felt ungrateful for the gifts of time with him, of revived family and impossible hope. Koss' children had coax ed him to New Vulcan to live in their clan's rebuilt home next to Desert's Edge. To my surprise, he returned to San Francisco after a month and said he would stay as long as I wanted company.

Company was the extent of it, and exactly what was needful. Our families had work to do, our old shipmates had their own lives and places to be, and we looked after each other, allowing them to go about their business without undue concern for us. A year went by, Solkar visited often, and one day after he had been in Koss' quarters he approached me by the marigolds again. “T'cai, there is a subject for discussion.”

That was how he had given me the news of Trip's last illness. I considered the news that might be. “Enlighten me, s'haile.”

Instead of grave, he was gently embarrassed, only his mastery of emotions allowing him to continue. “You and Koss are one hundred and ninety years old. While that is not young, it is not the very end of life. You are remarkably healthy. He has asked me, in my role as a healer, to inform you that such is also the case with him; he is fit and in very good health barring the usual small complaints of age.”

That was pleasing, and what I had thought, but there appeared to be more. “Just so.”

“He also wishes me to convey that such health indicates the usual cycle will soon intervene in his life, albeit in muted form. It is his wish that I inquire of you whether you would choose to have him suppress it, which is of course possible and safe with the appropriate medication. Should you find you desire otherwise, he would be more than willing to do what that would require. I will say this: you and Koss are both of good character. Events that prevented your past bond from coming to fruition now permit you to be good companions. It is logical that if you choose a deeper form of companionship, that old bond could be revived with little effort on my part and might be beneficial to both of you.”

While I wished to consult Trip, the matter at hand is sometimes precipitous. I considered it for a moment, and the truth was, as he always says, staring me in the face. “Is the decision urgent?”

“No. I estimate ten to fourteen days from now.”

“If you would, o'shel-hassu, have Koss prepare for a trip to New Vulcan.”

He inclined his shaggy head and tried not to smile until his back was mostly turned. Solkar and his great heart could not help being happy for us. T'Pau enabled us to ask Trip's opinion. I cannot
express it in his terms, which were emphatic and positive enough to cause the other ancients to register distinct amusement. Our children had nearly the same reaction, especially my hybrids who follow my Jarok path. They could not wait to prepare what is referred to as the holodeck. So it was that one week later, for the second time I went into what appears to be our clan's place of mating and challenge to meet Koss. He was much less disturbed than on the previous occasion. Then, I was not truly his, and he knew his first act on our parting would be to sign divorce papers. This time, I was not fighting to get back to a man I loved; I was indulging an old friend and he was indulging me.

He did indulge me once the guests left. In Trip's long illness I had forgotten how I enjoy that form of contact. The destructive wildfire of youth turns, in age, to the steady warmth of coals on a chilly desert night. So it has been since; though he chooses not to be with me in the room I shared with Trip out of respect for their friendship, I visit his bed often and am most enthusiastically welcomed there. This is not the world I chose, or ever thought I would. It is, however, pleasant enough to find myself across the table from Koss, discussing the matters of however many days remain to us.
Chapter Summary

Kolinahr may not be all the newly returned think it is. At least, Rok hopes it isn't.

Chapter Notes

In honor of the US Coast Guard :)

“All clear, rekkhai!”

Our gently despotic captain casts a sharp eye at the rigging. “Loose the main rotor.”

“The main is loosed, rekkhai.”

The title is wrong, the moment very right as New Vulcan's wind picks up. This vessel is an unexpected part of the Great Rescue. My wife commander assures me her latest command is in good repair, ready to sail this very large lake leading into a system of fully functional oceans. She wears a replica uniform, the deep dusty red of Kir's lost sands; it is properly fitted and most pleasing on her, perhaps more so than her usual black. Our logical Vulcan excuse is that we are recreating a historic event by launching the ancient lifesaving ship as was done centuries ago on her native waters before they dried up. Our Romulan reason is that we are starsailors with a little time on our hands and want to play with her.

Her circular main spins itself to the gentle breeze and catches enough to get a move on. At first, no one on shore notices. I see it in Maekh's eyes before I feel it in the soles of my feet. I do not know whether other sailors feel the mood and shift of ships in motion, their constant reckoning with conditions and course. Tuning starships' warp engines causes each to sing a slightly different note. This one has no engine, yet she tells me she is in balance, tastes the wind that is her strength and stands ready for a journey on these new waters. If that is not Vulcan, I decline to apologize.

After all, am I? This has been a point of contention between me and my wife. We are back on this side of the Zone, most likely for life. In theory, we should be Vulcan crews now, speaking Golic aboard the Carbon Creek, keeping the ship dim and quiet and generally appearing to regret our lives lest they inconvenience someone. The past should be the past, and that is what troubles Maekh, or Commander Seren, or whichever of her many selves she is at the moment. This mad captain of mine is alight with the ship's new motion, her lips faintly parted as she half breathes comments to herself. “In balance. Yes. It is well with the ballast. Very nimble, she is.”

Maekh looked like this when what was then Havran led the echelon of seven dreadnoughts out of the Empire to conquer New Vulcan. The praetor's media delighted in us; they feasted on that moment when the admiral nodded to Maekh, who gave the final order that sent all seven at once into a tunnel of starlight. We had chosen our crews carefully and masked even better. Ships that looked fully crewed were run by a handful of people, the vast quarters waiting for those we would pick up on our way. In an empire where deception is a way of life, we had been part of the most insane
deception in the history of Ch'Havran without ever deceiving each other.

My commander suffered much. Too much, on some nights when sleep evaded her and peace leapt out a window to get away. Of course she could use more meditative techniques, but is there no other way to achieve them than Kolinahr? Today she has spoken to the monks about it.

We came here by very different paths. I am a prison baby. Both parents went by the time I was two, my father to a late-night interrogation and Mother to a political purge. A Unification family took me in and made the best Vulcan they could out of me without giving themselves away. Vulcan was a myth of milk and honey, total logic a fairy story. Maekh, on the other hand, has both parents against all odds, her grandparents survive—don't ask me how, miracles happen—and grew up in hard Vulcan discipline until her parents gave her the choice of crossing the Zone. She and I seem to have passed in opposite directions, ships in the night indeed. What she thought she wanted is in reach, and she can take it if she wishes. She said nothing on her return, instead taking command of this ship. Accordingly, all I could ask was “Orders, rekkhai?”

“Take us out and we'll see what she has.” It's what she said the first time we fired the warp drive on the Havran. Even stripped to essentials, it takes a larger crew to operate a hyperwarp-equipped dreadnought than a Kiri scullboat. There are only four of us aboard, two at the oars and me at the helm, and she is not smiling but I know she is happy.

That would have to change, along with her name. Hothead is not suitable for a Kohlinahru. They would assign a more neutral word for convenience, only because referring to one another by number is awkward. I do not think she understands as well as she might, yet it would be unforgivable to ask how the meeting went. A Romulan would volunteer the report over beer and mogai sandwiches. If the two ways were either-or, mine would be clear. They are not, as so I follow the Middle Road, because unfettered expression, damn the consequences, works no better than the denial of all that is in our hearts.

Is it in hers, still? Only two years ago, when we believed the mission would conclude in five years and began to think we might survive, we were talking about what to do on my next cycle. I was of a mind not to prevent conception if it could happen, and she agreed, I thought wholeheartedly, because she has longed for children since it might have been barely possible. From the first time we shared a bed, she has shown me nothing but tenderness and her whole heart, but, of course, if she wishes to attain Kolinahr...

The wind picks up. One of the crew is in awe. “Rekkhai, isn't it amazing! The wind, alone, propels us!” Just so; we have traveled great sections of the galaxy with technologies so new we were unsure whether we would survive them, but now ancient unseen forces push us in delightful new directions. We have often looked down at this lake from orbit. It is barely a hundred kilometers across and four hundred long. We could sail its perimeter in a few days. When we know how the ship handles, we could take her out on the oceans for months, less to explore than to sense what her crews did long ago. Surakans would need a ruling from the Council before they participated. Our agemates from Romulus would take it as an excuse to get very drunk and have inordinate amounts of sex. I wish to see what it was like to walk the deck, feel the wind in my hair and turn the sails to our use.

Helm makes a few small moves at Maekh's direction. I watch her as the motion proves the ship quick, responsive, but still stable in the water, a testament to the builder's skill. No wonder she was famous as a rescue craft. Her name amounts to “Safely Home,” and hundreds of sailors were so because of her. I am honored to stand where her crews did on those wild and windy nights that drove ships into the Salt Marsh or Bitter Shoals or False Harbor. Their shadows are long on this deck. Halek, her last commander, was the first man to captain a ship on Vulcan. He stood here while a haboob capsized four cargo vessels, and he and this ship brought off all who were still alive when he
got to them. As the ocean shrank, so did his job, until he was trapped behind a desk in Kir and *Safely Home* sat becalmed at the museum’s drydock.

The ship does not care that where we go is in doubt, not because she does not feel. Anyone who does not believe in fal tor pan, the Refusion, has never dealt with restored ships. My commander's cousin's Enterprise changes but never changes. So, translated to this strange ocean, does *Safely Home* rebuild her legend under my feet. The wind is steady, she has the current; my captain has me lock down on course. She turns to me. “The meeting,” she says, and shakes her head. “Those monks. What they made it sound like in school is not...Mother and Father should have explained.”

Hope is a jolt in the chest. “Rha’?”

“Pure logic, the beauty of it, was one thing, but that is not at all what they propose. To sever all ties...well, I never! What kind of logic is that? I've studied it enough and I don't see how that has to do with—and not even my name. Too emotional! But did you know the worst part?” I shrug to have her go on. “Severing ties meant my whole family, even you. Imagine! Where is Surak? 'In all things, balance, in marriage, fidelity'--what kind of wife would dump her mate to sit on a mountain watching her toenails grow for a few years, all to see if I get an ain't-I-smart pin?”

I have never heard that description of Kolinahr. Worse yet, I cannot find fault with it. Never mind relief; I am unable to contain mirth. “You didn't know?”

“Oh hell no! I thought it was about mastery of emotion and honing one's mind the way Mother has, not...that! I excused myself posthaste. Grandmother T'Rana kindly gave me a ride to the docks in that antique vehicle she and her father are restoring. She was unsurprised by my dismay and referred to her own experience, and repeated failure. 'You don't need that. Your duties have been onerous, and you require time in which to process and assimilate the past. Have you noticed this vehicle's comfortable back seat? You and Rok should drive it out to the South Dunes soon. Perhaps you would benefit from some desert meditation.' I also conveyed my dismay to Great-grandfather Mestral, along with my concern that I might have been rude to the monks upon leaving. He said 'Eh, you're okay. You didn't mention the horse they rode in on.' I looked up the reference and would not wish to do that with a horse, and certainly not with any of the monks and priestesses at Gol, but as for you...”

“Rha’?”

“Grandmother has a point about that back seat and what might happen were you in it. I do not anticipate leaving you, the Navy, our families, or our future offspring in pursuit of the monks' dubious brand of cthia. I have seldom been simultaneously so disappointed and so relieved.” Relief must be going around. Besides, she is especially attractive in that uniform. Smacking my backside lightly is very Romulan of her. “Desert meditation, eh? Seagoing meditation might also be effective, yes?”

“I should think so. Perhaps we will spend the night out here, rekkhain?” The ship is all but laughing as the wind takes her down the lake. It is worth remembering that Halek's bondmate served aboard with him, and I doubt her idea is original, but its contemplation is certainly most pleasant.
S'chn T'gai T'Maekh, formerly Commander Seren

Chapter Summary

Sometimes coleslaw does more good than Kolinahr :)

Of the interesting times, places and circumstances in which to contemplate love and trust, I do not recommend evening watch in the alley behind the Romulan Senate with a knife in one's gut. Thirty years ago today, a well-orchestrated mob dumped me behind a sack of vegetable refuse from the state kitchens. I depended on part of that mob to beam me up through cloaking before I bled to death.

I shifted a bit on my bed of wilted plomeek tops to confirm Mother hadn't hit vital organs. That was most gratifying, because she was regretful. I conveyed concern that her air pack at the bottom of the river might be inadequate for the wait to beam up. Father was concerned as he had the mob grab her mutilated body—a mutilated body, more precisely—from the river. The mismatch was no matter amid enough noise and celebration, which the burly Tal Shiar major whose glare could melt glass was orchestrating while listening for both of us.

Vulcan children are taught a great deal about internal anatomy in order to maintain its functions. The knife was merely in muscle and required only a suitable meditation to close off the blood vessels most affected. Nonetheless, an honor blade buried to the hilt and slicing with each breath warranted attention. The pungent plomeek tops were soft enough to give a little relief, enough for me to distract myself, and the scent—few things comfort a Vulcan so; rich and heavy, it speaks of peace and plenty.

It was not alone. My grandmother Jisit's house was a scant two street-wedges away. The blackheart vines in her inner courtyard were bearing fruit; it might have been my imagination I could smell their thick fragrance, calling me back to childhood spring nights lying beneath their arbor, looking through their leaves to the stars.

Pleasant memories are good painkillers. I indulged logically. When my parents knew I was old enough to choose whether to live as a respectable Vulcan or an anything but respectable Romulan, they explained bluntly, as was proper. Had others tried to impart such improbable ideas, I would have laughed out loud. They had always treated me with such respect that my answer was “Is that so? Of course I'll go with you.”

Thirty years of a multiple life—double would have been a relief—enforced my trust in those two. Often I was their messenger, carrying word not even their bond could pass for them. Vulcan-side, they were careful to look indifferent, yet any news was food for the starving. You say he looks well? Does he remember his vitamins? When you saw her, was her back still giving her trouble? Is she sleeping enough? When they could be together, no one else was in the room with them even in a crowd. It is well that flirting and seduction are a natural part of Romulan military life. Each new identity required such, to their great pleasure. They always managed an excuse to gather us all in a safe place, even if it was our old Klingon prize ship hidden cloaked in the Zone. “Elev,” Father would sigh, “jai'elev,” and take her in his arms until he could bear to let go of her and greet his children. From the first stirrings of puberty, I knew that was what I wanted for myself one day.

The reason for our riverside battle was that Mother needed to rid herself of a successful but now dangerous identity. The only sufficiently dramatic and conclusive end was an honor fight, and she
trusted only me to be her opponent. If I did my job correctly, she planned to assume a persona of
even greater danger and reward, a last gamble that would either get all of us killed or do what it did.
On the very day set for our fight there were terrible rumblings from the Klingons, even more than
when I was a small child. This move from my last alias would allow me to resume my more or less
own Romulan identity and step into my first command, a small vessel with a loyal crew, just at the
outbreak of war. All Mother and I had to do was stage a hate-screaming death match.

Kaidith, I was supposed to say, as if that made it easy to swipe at her with a blade suitable for
shaving or roar the kind of insults I reserve for Klingons and those who double-park. As we carried
out our staged fight on a chill spring evening with unanticipated black ice on the pavement, slips
were inevitable. We were in front of the Green Star and didn't even attract much attention until her
straying left uppercut broke my nose. Blood drawn would have meant vengeance in a real fight, so
the crowd rushed in, with our planted troops conveniently in the way up front. From there it was a
death dance, kicks and spins and slashes, elbows and fists and knees, handfuls of hair and teeth in
faces and the finishing move of two limp bodies into the river that was supposed to end it cleanly so
we could get out of there, only it didn't.

“Good riddance, you rotten bitch!” Father's bellow signaled the loyals in the mob to move in. Their
grabbing and jostling had to look authentic and did not feel good either. “Get the commander's body.
I want to see her burn! If there's not enough in that brush pile, tear down a building. Dump that
cooking oil on it!” Someone threw a flare; I felt the dull thump as the fire erupted behind us.

“What to do with this?” That voice, the one I wanted, yes. Those arms, yes. I could not let go entirely
as he lifted me by my scruff, but there was time for a breath, a chance to press my head into his
shoulder and catch the first hint of relief.

“Dump that trash wherever until it quits trying to breathe,” Father roared, and so the alley, and Rok
made to throw me down where the plomeek tops would break my fall.

* A minute or two, elev, he said through the bond that had anchored us a scant two years.

* It'll take you five, I thought back as he squeezed behind a half-closed door. He would have to get out
of sight and activate tracing to help my brother ensure the proper cloaking and masking fields on the
beam. Two minutes, my foot—which also hurt, being badly sprained, but was stuck in a bag with
cool kupus leaves and overripe blackheart fruit. Ah, well, he would do his best. Rok never did less.

Rok, my heart. My family had no luck finding my match all the way to my appointment to the
Command Academy. Physical urgency for a woman is almost nonexistent Romulan-side, yet there is
a certain suspicion of anyone who has passed thirty without a mate or several. I handled that, yet
longed for more than pleasurable wrestling. The minds around me were typically Romulan,
unshielded chaos. One afternoon during a remarkably boring series of drills, we took a break while
the commandant beat and screamed at our drill instructor. I felt a warm, disciplined and distinctly
male mind: *Vulcan?*

* Yes, and?* Not bonded; it would have been obvious to us. It would not have done to look around to
see the mind's owner. That could wait for the routine opportunities of time off. I made sure to take
advantage of those until a square-shouldered, heavyset young navigator candidate passed by close.

Vulcan, Reman, some Watraii, but mostly First Exodus Romulan, indeed mostly Kiri. *Prison baby,*
he thought with a flash of his clans; he was a D'Kyr on the Vulcan side as well.

* S'Kel, for one of my clans.* Further explanations had to wait for Orgy Night. In the distant past,
Vulcan used a ten-day work period with a free day at the end. The early Empire declared no need for
time off, then quickly realized practicality demands otherwise. Even during military training, perhaps
especially then, there must be time for personal errands, rest both mental and physical, or at least
relief. That last was a staple of the Command Academy and I had always participated fully. The male
was present when I arrived at the community room. Flirting attracted no attention, with even the
fake-student spies already drunk and going off with each other.

For the first time since I gleefully discarded my virginity, I did not wish to simply have at an
attractive man more or less in public as is usual on that side. Instead, I gripped Rok's hand and hauled
him to my closet of a room. In a few frantic minutes there was even less between our minds than our
stripped bodies, which needed each other like roots and water. We both knew what would happen.
We let it, both of us struck within mentally as much as physically, recklessly skin to skin and all our
nerves in screaming harmony. I tried due diligence, warning I could be dangerous--

It's always dangerous here.

You don't know who I really am.

You are my wife, are you not?

I was unable to argue that clear fact, then or on any of the other nights we managed together in spite
of being on different tracks. Rok had no interest in captaincy and was only in the crisis program, as
was routine, to qualify him in case his ship's command staff was out of action. I am no engineer like
the rest of my family; from the get-go I have been a pilot and a warrior, not much else. In due course,
he went off to steer a small vessel in old Admiral Misery's ineptly managed Third Fleet, patrolling the
Klingon border at a very bad time to be there with a bad commander. I continued my studies as if
there were no disruption in my life. I did not continue my previous routine of getting hammered
every off day and joining in the tenday fun.

There was much merriment about that, as there is about every change in a Romulan's sex life. With
so much nervous secrecy about other aspects—I trusted people over there as friends for thirty years
and never knew their real house-clans, nor whether they had living relatives—that was the only safe
target for mockery. The consensus was that I needed to get myself to the border and take over the
ship he was on, so I would either mellow or take it out on the Klingons if the match didn't work.

They had no idea I had as much choice in that matter as I did about sneezing. The bond that flamed
to life that first night was growing, distance being irrelevant. Both the Academy and fleet had Tal
Shiar monitors with some mental skills—badly trained Romulans prone to broadcasting their
presence not problematic, V'las' disloyal Vulcans much more subtle and dangerous—so maintaining
aural discipline was mandatory, if not easy.

On Vulcan, our school heads were Kohlinahri. They made frequent, if vague, presentations about the
benefits of the purely logical life. When I came home wanting it, my little sister shook her head and
said "Elek!"—as if!—just as Father would. Saeihr nearly annoyed me into the monastery even though
she was right. Spite made me learn techniques that saved or improved my life any number of times,
including the present emergency. Calm. The damage is minor. Pain is unnecessary; it warns, but
you know nothing serious is wrong. Control the blood. All will be well. That was easier than some of
the uses to which I have had to put such tactics: If it does not work, it will be over very quickly. He
fired the first shot and you will be held blameless. Some sacrifices are inevitable. Tears are not
useful.

As for the latter, I was sorely tempted to indulge, and sore enough to as well. When I felt the first
shivering brush of the transporter, I braced myself. Beaming up injured is not an experience for
which one would volunteer. To my surprise, the trip proved smooth. Before I had a chance to fall to
the platform in our cramped, heavily cloaked old family ship, those arms I wanted were around me.
"One point three seven minutes," Rok said with more than a trace of smugness. My reply may not
have been printable. What good Romulan captain's would be?

“Damages, Doctor?” My little brother's voice was up an octave, but I had to commend his transporter handling as minimally painful.

“Nothing I can't fix easily,” my sister said after a quick scan.

I growled (because that is how one keeps from crying) “A lot of confidence for just out of medical school.”

“She seems fairly skilled,” Father said, laying a handful of relief and fondness on my aching head without moving a facial muscle. “It may be a good thing.”

“Speaking of skilled, you nearly wrung my damn neck,” Mother growled, for exactly the same reason, as she let go of her broken shoulder long enough to brush my hair off my forehead and remind me how much goes unsaid, but not unfelt. “You're too good at fighting and you smell like plomeeks. Better than the blood. Let's get this mess cleaned up and have a drink. I'm buying.”

In three decades since, I have often disagreed with Mother, squabbled with my sisters, doubted my brother's sanity, thought Father hopelessly out of touch and wondered whether I had been insane to mate with Rok, only to reconsider. Oddly enough, all I need to do is replicate a bowl of plomeek soup and a dish of slightly overripe blackheart fruit, and I remember how much I can trust them.
S'chn T'gai Courig, no longer Sub-Commander and glad of it

Chapter Summary

The admiral's kids are growing up.

Wet sand beneath my soles on this alien world is new. I am assured it is safe; it is difficult to believe when the sky is strangely blue and the water that laps at the sand is tinged with a potpourri of green algae. Even the wind smells faintly of salt, water and blood-colored plants bulging with life. One may look out of the Bay from here, or even stand on top of the tall Embassy, and see nothing past the bridges and islands to hint another shore exists. A replica ship glides by on a harbor tour, her sail system nothing I have ever seen before in person. Pictures and vid do not explain the creak of her rigging or the whisper of her canvas taking in the air.

New Vulcan offers me citizenship, as does Remus. I know and claim those worlds as I knew Vulcan from my mother's memories. Earth is the surprise. That alien sailing ship calls to me. The waters it sails are deeper than anything on Ch'Havran, far more than T'Khasi ever had. Newly returned whales breach and sing in the bay, setting their courses for the deepest point of the oceans. Part of me wants to go with them, into the deep blue where there is wonder even after millenia. I have seen uncommonly much for my age, and still have seen almost nothing.

Koss Architectural hired me for their new terraforming division as soon as there were plans for New Vulcan. My work may have been satisfactory; Koss himself has made it clear that when Vulcan returns, it will be my responsibility, and until then, I am to learn all I can from repairs on Earth and our new colony. The latter pairing of planets is most convenient. Less than a Terran hour ago I tendered my long-discussed and arranged Navy resignation to Mother, in her office here at the Embassy as is proper when one of the admiral's guard resigns. Father “happened” to be in the outer office as well; he knew what I had come for and approved silently as he usually does. He knew the rest too, not that he would have said so out loud. I got his quiet little half-smile and knew the depth of it.

T'Jhu called me in, Mother rose from her desk, and I recited the standard request for release from service at the end of enlistment. She replied “I free you from your oath at the end of today's duty shift,” which suffices on either side of the Zone. It would have been correct had I simply saluted and left, but she was in a mood to be Mother as well as my commander, with a sparkle in her golden eyes as she sat and propped her chin on her clasped hands. “You're about to tell me there's a young woman.”

I examined my shields, wondering where they had slipped. “How did you...?”

“When a young man simply chases tail, he doesn't care where he lands. You'd have stayed in the Service even though it isn't suited to you at all--” I was ready to protest. “No, no; you're brave, no one can question that, no one can doubt your green stars or the commendations your father and I had no hand in. You're a builder, not a destroyer, and staying in the shooting business would have destroyed you. Your careful and deliberate planning of a future long since told me she is based on both planets, and is therefore most likely Vulcan or Romulan. You're a civil engineer with a terraforming specialty; she is either the same or a historic architect. Koss' granddaughter Elaine, by any chance? The cute one with the blonde curls?”
I cannot be angry with her. There was no mental invasion. She is that good, and she is my mother. When there is no child match, couples are matter of fact about their engagements. I did not anticipate trouble. However, neither did I anticipate that both parents would be so pleased. They know Elaine and have worked with her, and I began to suspect I had been, as Terrans say, set up. There was the matter of nepotism. “Koss hired me before.”

“Of course he did. He hired you before we got anyone, including Elaine, back. In his grief he often spoke so highly of her research that I looked into it and was also impressed. We used a great deal of it for the Past Rescue. As for her character, I have found not a single obstacle, nor has your father, who offered an educated guess this would happen before I dared hope for it. We wondered how long it would be before you found each other when you were so obviously matched. Do you have a suitable understanding?”

“We do.” Technically we should have traded glasses of water. We used white wine from the nearby hills over a picnic basket. “Koss has given his approval. I would ask your blessing.”

“But you'd do it no matter what?” Her tone might be as flat as she wished; she understood and was teasing. After all, at a younger age than ours she and Father determined to be together no matter what planet they had to live on, or possibly take over. “I'm messing with you. Of course. Of course! What more could I want for you? Be content and give us grandchildren. Preferably soon, you know, her mother has already gone on, Koss isn't getting any younger and neither are my grandparents.”

“It may be soon,” I hedged. Speaking of...that...is easier because of the Romulan side, but even over there it's a strain when you're my age and talking to your mother. Elaine and I had discussed that and the relative urgency of childbearing, were it possible in our youth, to honor our older forebears. I have had only one rather mild cycle, easily suppressed, but that was seven years ago. This one may be the real thing, and the last blood work I had was fair warning it was time to clear up any obstacles that might get in our way. “Not...um...imminent, but not in the far distance, either.”

She tried to be Vulcan and not smile as broadly as I felt she wished. “Go see fa'sa John while he's in town this week. He will enjoy the news, he won't embarrass you with what you need to discuss. His scans are much more accurate than most so he can give you a really good estimate, within a day or two, and all the advice you want about how much edge to take off and what to do about any fertility you wish, or not. After that, talk to my father and let him get to work on your scroll. With the load of them he's been doing lately, he'll appreciate the heads-up. Should I talk to T'Rana?”

Notifying that grandmother was not a task I wanted to tackle. Father's mother would be no problem at all. “Could you? Would you please?”

“She doesn't bite. Not any more, at any rate. If you want to be obnoxiously Vulcan, Elaine and I should go together and inform her, then Mother gets to tell T'Pau. Frail as she is, she may want to claim clan elder's right and officiate. She can't say a word about Elaine's heritage. She's impeccably Vulcan and her family supported the Syrannite cause all along.”

“But the name.” I had to smirk. Elaine's mother was rescued from a violent event by a kind Human medic; she named her last daughter in thanks. Considering some of her family's female names, it was an inspired idea to avoid orthographic disaster.

“Even better, she will have to recite Elaine's foremothers. Their formal names make me think someone was severely intoxicated and fell asleep on a keyboard, but she can't argue their historical purity.” She fiddled with her padd, waited for a reply and looked satisfied. “You have no remaining duties. The equipment you are obligated to return is properly accounted for. However, your shift does not end for another hour and two minutes. This is an order: meet Elaine at Donatello's in one hour. Today's special is the portobello lasagna you both like and dessert of the day is chocolate lava
cake, which she informs me is her favorite. Speaking of orders, she requests I order both so they will not run out of either before you arrive. Convey my appreciation for her acceptance of my son's proposal. Also, be well...and happy. Yes. Happy. That is my final order to you.”

“Ae’i, rekkhai!” That was worth my fanciest salute, which Mother returned with equal gusto. Afterward, since there was an hour to wait and Donatello's was five minutes from the embassy's front door, I walked to the water's edge. Strange seas, indeed; Elaine knows much more about their history than I, because her first major research project was the whale rescue. She is small and graceful and less reserved than I. What we do fits together; our minds fit together; our bodies do so exceptionally well, and I wish no other. Uncle Silek introduced us while she was working on a Malaysian dig with him, so she is used to S'chn T'gai oddity, even mine.

“Especially yours.” Of course she has heard as she approaches on the sand. She reaches for my hand and tugs at me lightly, bringing me to her side. “I missed mid-meal to finish the plankton repopulation report, so about that mushroom lasagna...”

Set up, as fa'sa Mestral says, like a bowling pin. Nor am I sorry. This armful of Elaine is most intriguing. “You talked to Mother first, didn't you?”

“Of course. She spoke to your father last night. That's how it was always done.”

“Were you not concerned?” Courage, it seems, is not solely a military virtue.

“Not enough to avoid what is proper. Your mother assures me she doesn't bite. Much. Any more. Unless it's chocolate. I find that one of the most interesting parts of this very interesting planet.”

“It is so. Elaine...” This request may be too strange even for her. “You remember T'hasi. I barely do. When it comes time, may I have your memories?”

“Of course. You'll have to show me Ch'Havran. I have always thought it must be beautiful.” She looks up at the passing ship gliding up the bay. “Smooth sailing to them.”

“And to us,” I say. Kaiiddh, but that it will be so.
Zora Golich: Last Marriage

Chapter Summary

They’ve been married before and they hope this is their last marriage. Takes place after the Loss and the Battle of New Vulcan, but before the events of Gathering of the Remnant. Zora is a freight pilot.

(I have finally figured out how to post from an iPad!)

It is different being married to Kril’es Nick Mestral. I have been asked several times by people curious—he was once married to a human; how did that affect him?—and that’s the only answer I have for them. My first husband Shuri and I were married for fifty years, wonderfully grumpy old soul that he is, and while it may not have been the perfect match I have not regretted that my parents did not try to child-bond me. He was more than a century older, had been sent away from Vulcan for some forgotten infraction and had never bonded with anyone, but deeply desired children, as did I. We had three abd he cherished them. He was reasonably certain he would predecease me, so he went looking for my next husband, as is the custom with the elder spouse in a good old-marriage.

It would have been unseemly for him to admit he liked Nick. Between his and T’Mir’s medical equipment repair needs toward the end of their lives, they kept Mestral busy, but when he was at our house fixing Shuri’s heart booster there was always time for a board game or two and conversation. Mir used to come with him when she could, and gave me to understand she was doing as Shuri was, scouting my future territory. She assured me of his worth as a stepfather. Shuri died, then Mir a year after, and Nick and I resolved to do as they wished when the time came.

I doubt either of us would have wished to celebrate an enforced, truly hasty union. Nick was child-bonded to a woman who barely tolerated him and left him divorced at twenty-one. He then met and married his human wife, lived with her sixty years in the past, returned to wed T’Mir—he wasn’t around for much of their early life, owing to his having to go into stasis to save his people from horrors, but he was able to be with her for the last twenty-eight years when she truly needed him. If that marriage was not a love match, it was, like mine, tolerant, affectionate and full of mutual admiration. We thought we had six years, give or take, to lay our ghosts to rest and find our way.

Then came va’Pak, of course. Nothing I can say will explain it to you if you are not Vulcan. Even k’turr like me, my family exiled to Earth two hundred years before, still feel the call of those sands and the shimmering heat of its days. I was on the New Hope Colony end of my regular farm freight triangle, Earth to T’Kuht to there, and the entire sector was locked down with scant communication. My first thought was the children. Shuri farms at New Hope, George and Nia are here in Carbon Creek, so I knew they should be alive. Nick was another matter. He could as easily have been with his family in Syran helping with between-seasons farm work as in Carbon Creek, and our bond wasn’t solid enough for me to be sure whether he was alive or I was overly imaginative. As it turned out, I was not. When I returned to Earth and found him, the events of that afternoon at the Pittsburgh consulate still cause me to express perhaps more satisfaction than is strictly proper.

Now, freshly returned from the wedding trip we didn’t expect for at least three more years, I have taken my place in his family’s house, and he in mine. We are in Carbon Creek today and he and his great-grandson are cooking for an old Terran festival called Easter, which celebrates rebirth and
renewal. It seems a moment of hope in this dark time. My daughter and her family, George and his mate, chosen-family from two starships and most of our friends gather in. Our travels mean we have a variety of sleep schedules, all out of sync with the drizzly spring afternoon, so we women are playing poker to stay awake until we can nap briefly without sleeping through dinner or being up all night.

From time to time I lean back enough to see around the corner. I gather something has gone amiss with the recipe he and Spock were attempting. Nick has dipped his ever-present chopsticks into a tasting bowl of...I am unsure what, and Spock has done the same with a fork. That dignified young man with his flawless control nearly grimaces for a microsecond. “No.”

“Exactly.” Nick stares down at the big slow cooker. He is properly masked but I know his dismay. “It needs more everything. Garlic. Sweet peppers. More onions. When it’s too bland for us...”

“It is remarkably reminiscent of Kohlinahr rations,” Spock agrees, and his mate, who was about to deal the next of many hands, manages not to snort.

“He really can cook, fa’ko’mekh,” Nyota tells me. “Nick taught him really well.”

My stepdaughter T’Rana is also challenged to keep a straight face. ‘The problem may lie with the Ben curd. It was replicated, not grown here. Even I think it flavorless.’

“But you actually like K-bars,” her daughter the admiral reminds her.

“Nostalgia, ko’fu’kam. After my long illness, they were the first solid food I was permitted and they did not upset any part of my system, possibly because they are chemically unable to offend anything. Zora, did you have anything else aboard? I know you expected a short run.”

I confess to surprise on two fronts: first, no one has asked about that week I spent alone, and second, Rama once had a rather off-putting reputation that did not include consideration of her people. “I did not. I did without for a few days, then had to eat them. It was marginally better than starvation.”

“You could have chewed on the ship’s insulation and had the same texture with more flavor. When I went up to see what was happening, and we barely got away, I had four of them in my pocket as usual, and the three of us lived on them until we found the bigger ship. It is much easier to ration food that does not appeal to the senses.” Rana pauses, one of her diplomatic devices. “Father told me about their first two weeks on Earth, out here in the woods near the lake. Did he—?”

“He did.” The crash, the dead pilot, everyone more or less injured, Mestral the least so; he spent days watching over the others in the October woods, not knowing how aggressive the wildlife might be or whether any of them could live. Even if they were merely observers, their lack of emergency supplies was appalling and someone in the expeditionary force should have had to answer for it. There were only three days’ normal rations, no warm clothing and too few usable blankets for their needs.

Even when she regained consciousness, T’Mir was about to die rather than deviate from orders. Nick was ready to eat a deer if he had to. There is so much life in him that it is hard to recall how much death he has seen, and she was so dead it took that raging force to haul her back to life. By the law then, he should have allowed her and their surviving shipmate to starve themselves even if he chose to nibble on what plants he could find. Such was beyond him. Mir, her bondmate dead and her own injuries painful, never forgot how he slipped away in the night and brought back bread left out for wildlife and bottles of soda—never doubt a mechanic’s ability to jimmy a vending machine without getting caught. It gave them just enough strength for the trip into town later on.
It has not escaped me that safety and food have played a huge part in his life ever since. He has not overindulged, he is careful with all resources as is proper, but he cannot let anyone or anything go hungry or suffer otherwise without offering help. That was, in fact, how he found a mate in T’Mir. In what she would never admit was her sadness, she mated with a human. Once she returned to Vulcan, she became aware that human and Vulcan DNA are very often compatible. The danger she would have faced in explaining led her to put the matter frankly before a still-grieving Nick, who gladly claimed his old friend’s baby as his own and took her as his mate. That is why the official version of the adventure on Earth does not resemble the truth as much as it does hagiography; she was blind to his faults from the moment he refused to let her die.

He does have faults, which he thinks should bother me more than they do. Right now, he is exercising one of them by swearing at the pot of bean curd stew in English, or more 1957 Pennsylvania coal miner. He meditates diligently, as do most Jarok followers—more than hardcore Surakans, not less, as one might think; denying emotions is easier than dealing with them—but swears by swearing at things as stress relief. Spock’s voice almost betrays his amusement. “Much improved. Do you believe we should add another damn measure of frickin’ paprika?”

“And rosemary. There. Whaddya think?”

“Acceptable. Your opinion, Captain?”

Spock’s friend must have tried it. “I think you got it. Actually, it’s pretty good now. I guess we’re waiting for endmeal?”

“Yeah,” Nick says. “It’s done enough to eat, but the flavors oughta blend a while since it has flavors now. You even look hungry. The jam is in that jar in front of you. Have a biscuit.” He finishes what he’s doing just as an increasingly sleepy Nyota wins the hand. It’s enough; we all broke even, and we have traded all the urgent news we had among us. The rest can wait until the rest of our visit, especially since most of us need a bathroom before we visit our scattered beds.

Our bedroom is upstairs front. When I step out of the bathroom, he waits for me in the hall, the two of us alone upstairs, and he bows his head to mine. His hands on my waist nudge lightly at my sweater, asking without words, my yes a return of the gesture. His need is often beyond mating, craving contact most Vulcans would not think of and I have only begun to appreciate. He reaches for me with his mind first, wanting to touch, and I reach back. “Oh, you,” he says, and the hands slide upwards. The hormones, that’s the excuse, they haven’t settled and won’t for a month or two, and if most men would be ashamed and meditate them away, mine is not most men. He lays his head on my shoulder. “You were about to take a nap.”

I know his scars now; his skin looks smooth but holds hard memories my fingers trace. We will make better ones. “I was. Do you plan to join me?” The bedroom door closes behind us, and I don’t know how this happens, but I am no longer wearing a sweater and he is unaccountably shirtless. It is remarkable how his pants stay on ordinarily, but fall off in my presence.

“You were thinking about my faults—‘he trips, that’s the explanation, landing on his back across the bed. He was holding my belt, so I have no choice but to fall on him. “Add clumsiness. Also—” he redirects one of my hands to verify his statement, “I am quite oversexed.”

Some time past he taught me the way humans kiss; I find it interesting. The stew is still on his breath. “It seems just right to me.” Rebirth, renewal, hope; we need those, and we need each other, kaidth.
K’Wyn Sochya and Rian

Chapter Summary

If you’ve read Gathering of the Remnant, you may remember these two. As for Silek, I always loved that character when he showed up in the novel verse and wished he could have made it into a series or movie.

Well. That was certainly an experience. Our infant daughter regards me with the most horrified expression I have ever seen on a newborn’s face as Rian towels the slime from her. “I did not anticipate such an arrival, ko’fu’kam,” is the best I can say to her, “but it was fortunate.”

Rian and I have known each other most of our seventy years and have served together...dear me, that long? She enlisted, I went to nursing training, and one day as I walked home the army wagon pulled up and the impressor told me to get on. That was boot camp in those days; there’d be a war on—when wasn’t there?—they’d run low on people, and you got on the wagon or got shot. As soon as we got to replacement camp, I ran to her and she put my name on her roster before worse happened. The next day, after a truly frantic twelve hours of training that amounted to “point that end toward the enemy, pull this and hope it doesn’t blow up in your face,” her captain assigned me as company medic and we were off. I wasn’t always military; most of the time I nursed at Hath Memorial in Shanai City, only emerging when the heavy started up. Rian worked her way up from being in charge of nine to her own company in due time, and I went with her.

She was a good commander with a knack for keeping us out of the worst trouble. What wounds we acquired were not dangerous. We were so fortunate we even survived the Autumn War when the Kiri army overran my whole town. Two years later, the Battle of Seleya nearly killed us both, and should have. The artillery that hit us broke her back and pelvis in many places. Both of my legs were laden with shrapnel and I was gut-shot. She sent the rest to safety and the two of us made ourselves as comfortable as we could in a notch between two buildings down a side street. After she tried to get into a healing trance, I kept notes until the bleeding took me out. Imagine my surprise when a most agreeable medic revived me and offered me a stupid, incredible, ridiculous offer to live in his time. I took it, on behalf of her as well.

Now neither of us is elderly, neither of us that youthful, both of us at prime childbearing age, which is why we were invited from what should have been our deathbeds eighteen hundred years ago to this much improved time. In our own, we were compelled to conceal our affection; here, our gynecologist did not so much as blink when we inquired about having children together. “Not difficult at all,” she said cheerfully, “both of you take this medication and come back next week,” which we did, and within the month I received our first of four embryos.

It was best for me to do the carrying, since Rian is missing a few internal parts because of her wounds. She is also in the midst of moving from her quite physical career as a field commander of ground forces to a less demanding post as a security analyst, while I have already upgraded my nursing education and will resume working soon. In civilian life, I took my turn in our district midwife corps. In spite of that, and of ourselves, Rian and I found ourselves marveling as the process unfolded under our curious fingertips: look, elev, that is a foot, definitely a foot, poking back at my hand from the vicinity of my liver. Do you feel that? She is pushing herself around, turning; perhaps we have made a gymnast.
Much of the element of surprise is gone these days. Health? The laboratory checked my whole egg and Rian’s stripped nucleus before the two met. Hair, eyes, skin? The few shed cells from the tiny ball told those tales. She will be of middling height, like both of us. Her hair, presently absent, will be straight and black. Her eyes are moderately dark and her skin will be halfway between my dark and Rian’s pasty ShiKahri complexion. (Be not concerned; we have made those jokes between us for forty years now, since we were too-young soldiers about to run into our first battle.) One day she will have that thin aristocratic nose of Rian’s and my broad cheekbones. Still, as the reality of her developed, we were covertly amazed. Day by day, she found new ways to startle us as she swam, then could only squirm, around her water-home.

She was most welcome in our apartment in the area set aside for past rescues who were without clans. We debated that, too, for a time, because Vulcans have long taken pride in the length of their names and lists of ancestors. Everyone is clan, name, cha’ this cha’ that cha’ someone else until the string becomes too unwieldy. We had clan names in the past even though we were rejected, but given that neither of us had relatives other than the baby, we chose a new, plausible clan name in my very old dialect, K’Wyn, Daughters of the Gates. It seemed a proper description for two who had been drawn through time.

Though we were no longer without prospects, we had to trust to the new safety net rather than our carefully constructed old ones. The military and nursing pensions we had built up had been left in the past with our beneficiaries, our current wages sufficient but not extravagant. We had been guaranteed help because of our willingness to contribute our genes when the Vulcan people seemed on the brink of extinction. Ten thousand of us came forward with, as it turned out, the entire lost population on our heels. We were briefly concerned; however, these stiff-faced friends reiterated their word of honor that they would not let us starve or otherwise go without. Even so, I often wondered whether we had done well at all.

We could have put her in one of the carrier bags and shared the load, but with this, our first, we thought the old-fashioned way might be better. Moreover, I was exceedingly curious about the experience I have so often seen others undergo. Even the most logical Surakan women around often choose to carry, not always because that specific baby is psionically gifted and would develop best so. Some make fumbling excuses. Most, and I take it this is a recent development since the Great Loss, simply say “I wanted to.” The only downside to the day Rian followed the doctor’s instructions to install her in my all too willing uterus was that what went in would eventually have to come out.

Humans are rightly concerned about pain; for us, it’s much less of a problem. Between the way we’re built and the training we have, we generally labor without agony, and if it does begin to hurt beyond our liking we have multiple solutions. The bigger concern is for the baby, who can get into trouble in multiple ways. In my case, my own wounds, which certainly would have killed me in our time, led to some scarring not entirely amenable to repair. Our doctor, Dzj’hu’di—Judy, as everyone calls her, even the Kohlinahri—suggested we might want to consider a hospital delivery. “The traditional surgical birth will be immediately available should you desire,” she said. “Also, I can offer you an alternative. My relatives and I have been working with transporter technology to enable literal incision-free surgery. It was first used on a Vulcan who had a le-matya fang embedded in his back. It was cleanly removed and he survived without further incident. As far as obstetrics, we have used the technique on fourteen injured pregnant endangered animals who generally are very poor surgical risks. We have had perfect success, which is impressive since many affected species give birth to high-order multiples and all of the fetuses must be individually tracked. We also saved an injured fvav and her foal after the rescue from the explosion near the zoo at Kir. Equines of all planets are notoriously intolerant of surgery, yet it was nearly instant and uncomplicated.”

“Hm, if she begins to whinny I may be concerned. If there is any question, of course, her life must
take precedence. I will not have Rian, ahem, saddled with that choice.” That was as casual as I could be about it, because I had indeed seen mothers bleed out after sections as well as conventional birth.

“You have a roughly seventy-one percent chance of needing no intervention,” our doctor said. “Those are reassuring odds, and even if quick action is necessary, you know there is a much better alternative than I could have offered you even a few months ago.”

“Allow me to sign the consent form. It is best to do such things well in advance.” Daunted more than I wished by such contemplations, I met Rian after work and went to parenting group that evening.

Such groups are a very old Vulcan tradition that caught on across most of the warring nations in one form or another. Most offer much more than simple explanations of what will happen at birth (I have seen far too many in dire need of those, since there has been too much embarrassment and too little education about sexual matters.) The group is assembled from those due within the same tenday. It serves as an entry point to the programmed nature of our society. On Vulcan, the children would have attended school and gone through the kahs-wan together, some would have been child-bonded, and those bound for higher education would have built-in acquaintances beyond the family. In our time, most would have gone to the same military unit when yet another war broke out. There is no real reason we cannot learn and teach what is needed without physical assembly in one spot, yet with all the disruption at the moment, the group seemed a strand of civility to clutch.

We met in the large, comfortable group room at the new hospital. The medical director had kindled the fire pit and added a bit of the community incense, so the Surakans and Jarok followers took a moment to relax and center themselves and the rest of us pretended we knew how. (Rian has managed somewhat, I am learning; it is not natural yet.) At the very first meeting, our initial concern about not being a male and a female pair proved unfounded. No one remarked on us. We were not even the only such couple. A tall, heavyset Golic starship captain and his weedy ShiKahri mate were lugging a very large baby boy in a gestational pack. They seemed devoted to each other and pleased with their first son together.

By that last meeting night, Captain Moran Rai, S’chnT’gai Silek and we had grown accustomed to one another. I remarked that their very healthy baby’s container was clearly too small. “And it’s the biggest size. He’s going to have to unzip soon,” Silek said, “and we’d rather he not do it in the middle of the night. He’s near seven kilos. I’m glad yours isn’t.”

“No, that might be awkward,” I agreed, as if it wouldn’t be in any case. She was projected to emerge at just over five, average, and that would be enough. “These new aids are exceptional. All of the medical devices are. I could have saved a great many with them in the past.”

“For the wars,” Rian sighed. She was in that kind of a mood.

Silek, currently carrying the baby bag, leaned across, chin in hand. “It doesn’t usually work out like that. Look at Rai. He hasn’t been killed even once and he used to have to pretend to be a Romulan.”

I realized who he actually was then—S’chnT’gai, yes, but male line, second son of the House—and marveled at the odd twists this new life brought. We were hobnobbing with our old commander’s tall, skinny, rather rumpled descendant. He was more like the men of our time than those around us; being among those so devoid of expression had become tiresome. While he was not quick to grasp the complexities of some social interaction, I cannot fault the size and depth of his heart. As the meeting neared its end, he jiggled the creaking, squirming bag and handed it to his mate, who tried the usual calming measures. “It’s not much use, Silek,” Captain Rai said. “We’d best have him born tonight if they have time to look him over afterward.”

The lecturer overheard. “Would you have any objection to a public unveiling? It might be instructive
to others who are also using carriers, and we could demonstrate the postnatal evaluation.”

“Sure!” Silek came too close to smiling. “I mean, of course, since it serves a good purpose, right, Rai?”

“I have no objection. Shall we?” The doctor showed us the process of opening the bag, allowing the baby to surface as the fluid drained, inverting him and massaging his back to clear his lungs, then verifying that he could breathe freely before disconnecting the placental pump and cord. Since all the mess stayed in the bag for later cleaning, it was the neatest, least traumatic birth I had ever seen, and I began to think our future additions would be better served that way. The couple paged their elders, who arrived in due time for the usual greeting ceremony. They graciously extended it to the rest of us, and the meeting broke up with a distinctly cheerful undertone.

We walked home much less burdened than we had been. I told Rian about the transporter birth option. “To think what is now possible!”

“To think she is now possible. Even so, I would not willingly trade your life for hers, wife.”

“K’diwa, I have already told our doctor how to proceed in that eventuality.”

She stopped at the corner, giving me that old exasperated glare I knew too well from being her first subordinate for decades. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Nothing much tonight, unfortunately.” I sighed, because we had reached a very awkward stage in regard to that. The customary wait afterward would not be entertaining either. I reminded myself that the reward would be more than adequate.

The next evening, as I prepared to leave the emergency services office after my shift, my monitor beeped a small alert followed by instructions to begin labor preparations several days sooner than anticipated. Certain readings suggested the placenta had either passed its best function or was experiencing minor problems. That had not been beyond the realm of probability, but it made me uneasy. Rian was on a field exercise until the next day. Traditionally, men did not attend birth for a variety of reasons. However, she and I had concluded we should both be present—my own attendance not being optional. I contemplated contacting her unit, then saw projections assuring me she would return approximately five hours before the birth given normal progress.

The maternity squad was nothing if not overwhelmed that night. The readings did not suggest a need to call on them, yet...something seemed not quite right. Intuition, we used to call it, shorthand for the intersection of extensive experience and good monitoring. If Rian would have been great comfort, I resolved to block the thread of connection between us. She would return in time, kaidith, it would do.

By dawn I was less certain of my judgment. The labor aid program is all helpful diagrams, even highlighted suggestions for which muscles need to move and how best to turn or walk in order to facilitate that. My internal scarring was preventing the free motion of several, slowing progress and several times taking her heart rate into the low end of the acceptable range. The hospital reviewed the data and did not summon me. Still, I was aware of a sort of pulling sensation that did not seem entirely right. To distract myself from needless speculation, I viewed the group pages and saw the marker that Silek was awake. I messaged him and he and Rai arrived posthaste, baby in basket rather than bag. “We were up, too. He’s far too interested in everything around him to sleep.”

He pulled out a board game we all liked and we conquered Gol a couple of times and lost it once. By the time General Ginar had taken over the entire desert and massacred us, Rian strolled in from work. She took a look at me and knew what the men had politely ignored. “You’re not very comfortable,
“Are you?”

“No, she is not,” Rai agreed, not giving me a chance to deny it. “Why don’t you take her over there?”

They went off with their son, and Rian insisted on driving me to the hospital, which might have been more hazardous than childbirth. It was only a few blocks, not that I cared by that time. The odd tugging had become a stabbing pain off and on, and her heart rate alarm was going off with distressing regularity. Before the doctor said anything, I knew. “It must be,” I told Rian.

“We do have this,” the doctor offered, bringing out the new device. She set it up for me, showing me the controls and what they were reporting. “You might want to lie on the bed to help that keep its tracking organized. I have another patient down the hall who has just delivered; let me go be certain they are well. T’Hana will help you if you need more instruction. Otherwise, allow it to track continuously, and should you think it necessary, push the large green button.”

In human terms, it might have been ten minutes before a contraction I had not planned hit with a vicious impact. The alarm began to chime, then clatter. I looked at the view screen and saw a loop of cord diagrammed, pinched between the baby and the internal wall. Rian fetched the doctor; as they entered the doorway, I hit the button.

There was a whir, a brief flash of internal heat that genuinely startled me, and an instant deflation. In less than a second, she materialized in the isolette at the bedside. She took two huge breaths and stared around in utter panic. “I’m over here,” I said, and that was where Rian picked her up and toweled her off, because the amount of blood loss is substantial enough to make me dizzy.

“Very good.” The doctor shows me a cord half torn off the placenta. “You caught that complication before it could do damage. I congratulate you on being the first to try fetal transport.”

“It seems to have worked.” Rian deposits her on my chest. Her turn at nursing comes later; we both have milk. Nothing of mine is bleeding any more and the cord is finishing its work. When it has gone still, the doctor hands me the scissors. Rian climbs into the bed with the two of us, shucking her uniform jacket and undershirt to let her curl up with us both. “We can’t keep calling her...’her’, you know. Nothing we considered seems to fit her in the least. I do not understand how that happens when we knew nearly everything about her.”

“It happens,” the doctor says with a tiny smile and a large wave of confidence and joy. “Full of surprises, this little one. Also strong, well formed, resilient and quite opinionated.”

“She didn’t get that from strangers,” Rian grumbles. “Compared to some births I’ve seen, that was remarkable, and she could have been in the most danger. Perhaps danger is her middle name. It might go well with our last.”

“In your dreams, ShiKahri paleface.” The doctor must be wondering why she is not named for an ancestor or a noted clan figure. “We don’t wish to use family names, given their attitudes.”

Inspiration strikes. “Doctor, may we borrow your name?” After all, she is the reason we are all here, alive, well and pain-free.

“Only if you don’t spell it the way my mother did!” Jhu’di will do, not the convoluted spelling. The High Command second is T’Jhu, ironically Angel. Jhu’di would be more like Angelica. Should she choose to live on Earth, it would be an easy transition. We both nod. “So be it then!” Judy the doctor lays a hand on the baby because she is also a priestess. “Be well, live long and prosper, K’Win Jhu’di cha Rian-Sochya. You are welcome here.”
She leaves us alone, and the inescapable facts scrape by us: even months ago there would have been a much worse choice, but then, a year ago there would have been no Jhu’di because the two of us would have died on that broiling desert night over a millennium ago during the Battle of the Salt Marsh. We have come to the future, and now we send an arrow further than we will travel ourselves. I turn to put my head on Rian’s chest, the baby nestling and nursing, the shattered past begging attention behind us. “There would have been a family welcome,” I say.

“There would, but as they say now, kaiidth. We will make the best of it.”

There is no pain, there is very little blood, and the weariness passes by nightfall. Twelve hours after her dangerous dive to the world, we are released to go home. “But,” says the doctor, “you might want to do the family greeting first. They’re assembled in the waiting room.

Mystified, we walk there, Rian carrying Jhu’di in case my residual shivers might drop her. It would not do to show surprise; the biggest waiting room is full of those waiting for her. I count four ambassadors, an admiral, six starship captains, Rai, Silek and their son, plus others I do not recognize. After an awkward second, none other than Ambassador Solkar picks up our daughter and begins to pass her around in the standard order. It’s a long trip because there are several religions among them and a few have authority to pronounce special blessings. Others, like Ambassador Sarek, simply whisper some promise into her ear. I can guess: she is family to them now and must be apprised of that. Silek shrugs at me. “She needed family. We have plenty.”

“I can see that!” Rian grins as the admiral’s big gruff husband is perilously close to making a fool of himself over the armful even by our admittedly relaxed standards. “As Doctor Judy says, this one is full of surprises.”

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