

“SciPAC 7”

Part 1

Conversations packed the restaurant, assaulting Kira's ears as much as the aroma of food besieged her nose. She was unaccustomed to such a noisy environment. Though she had lived on the planet Vulcan for the past three years, she had never before set foot in this establishment, even though it catered to the tastes of her fellow humans.

She thanked the waiter who took her to the table where her classmates waited. Unlike her, they were all Vulcans. They were also all older than her, but because of the lengthy Vulcan lifespan they were at a similar life stage as she was at twenty-one.

They greeted her with only a slight inclination of their heads. Most humans found the complete lack of emotional display disconcerting, but Kira knew how to read Vulcan body language well. If they had been humans, they would have been all smiles.

Kira had been born on Vulcan, though she was not raised there. Her parents had a deep respect for Vulcan culture and had educated her in its mysteries. She knew that it had probably contributed to her acceptance at the prestigious Academy of Practical Sciences which she attended. The school's administrators knew the benefits of applying the philosophy of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations to their admissions. Vulcan students consistently had greater academic success when working in teams that included at least one off-worlder.

But the administrators also knew that a culturally disruptive student could cause more harm than good. So a human like Kira, who could easily work within Vulcan culture without being shackled by it, was invaluable.

In fact, her unique qualities were why her friends had chosen this restaurant for their celebratory dinner. Their team had just completed a challenging assignment designing a new kind of close-range stellar probe. The project was in danger of complete failure until Kira had solved a problem that the rest of the team had considered unsolvable. The trick, Kira knew, was not limiting one's thinking prematurely. She thought of ways to attack the problem that her classmates simply did not consider.

As Kira sat down, one of them picked up his glass and held it out. "It is a human tradition to make a 'toast' on an occasion such as this. I would like to thank Kira." The others held their glasses aloft.

"My friends," Kira said modestly, "I do not deserve such an honor. It was a small thing of luck to think of a way around the inversion problem."

"It is not for that one solution that we thank you, Kira," replied another of her classmates. "But rather for demonstrating your approach to problem-solving repeatedly throughout the project. Your human perspective was quite educational."

Kira inclined her head in thankful acknowledgment as her classmates drank from their glasses. Their attempts to dabble in some human culture were humorous to Kira, though she showed no trace of it on her face. Like her Vulcan counterparts, she exercised control of her emotional displays.

"And also for your tenacity," added Silek. "I had heard of this human trait, this refusal to admit defeat. It sounded illogical at the time. But through you I have learned its value. You redefine the nature of the problem until you find a way to succeed." Kira almost blushed. It was high praise indeed for the Vulcan to admit he now saw logic in an action where before he had seen none.

It didn't help that Silek was the most handsome man that Kira had ever known. Other than the greenish cast to his skin, the only outward feature that differentiated Silek from a human was the slight points at the tips of his ears. Kira thought they made him look even more dashing. It was not unusual for human females to find Vulcans attractive. In fact, before she had begun classes at the Academy, she had been required to take a special class for off-worlders. There, she was warned of the dangers of emotional entanglements with her classmates. There were very few cases of Vulcans marrying humans. But there were many, many stories of unrequited love.

Kira had already known all this before the class, of course. She knew more about Vulcan mating rituals than she probably should. And she knew that Vulcans didn't fall in love.

Vulcans ordered their lives around logic. Emotions were an

inconvenience. Some even pursued an ascetic discipline that expunged them of all emotions. But most simply suppressed their emotions, or at least the display of them.

Of all her classmates, Silek was the one Kira spent the most time with outside of classes and projects. She enjoyed spending time with him and considered him her best friend. He continued, "Kira and I once took a day trip to Serenity park. While climbing the Peaceful Mountain to visit the Springs, we saw an exquisite specimen of a Sunfire flower. It was alone on a rocky slope where nothing else grew. Kira told me it reminded her of a human phrase."

He looked to her expectantly. "Bloom where you're planted," she supplied.

The others nodded with understanding. Silek went on, "I find it illustrative. Rather than working with what could be under ideal circumstances, do what you can with what you have available. This, I believe, is the core of the practical sciences." The others agreed.

Tarok said, "There is a book by Surek on the contrasts between the theoretical and the practical that explores that theme in some depth."

"Yes, I have that book," Silek answered. "Its writing, however, is not as convincing as this project experience has been."

Tarok agreed. Kira, however, was intrigued. "I would like to read that."

"You can borrow it from me," Silek offered.

After dinner, Kira accompanied Silek home to pick up the book. She thought it rather quaint that Silek had a hardcopy, but she found that she, too, preferred the weight of a book to the more common electronic readers.

Silek's apartment was a mirror of his personality. It was neat and uncluttered, but eclectic, with artwork interspersed with scientific instruments. She perused his collection of artwork, most of which was by human artists, while he fetched the book from his library. Her eyes fell on a framed picture of a young Vulcan woman. It was the only image of a person in his collection. "Who is this?" Kira asked when Silek returned.

"T'Pei," he replied, "the woman I will marry."

Not a trace of emotion touched Kira's face. But inside, she was swept in a maelstrom of jealousy, surprise, and anger. Jealousy at the thought of Silek marrying this woman. Surprise at the jealousy. Anger at herself. She was supposed to know better. Vulcans didn't fall in love. But she had.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, she thought. What was she going to do? She realized Silek was still standing there, holding the book and watching her with his unreadable Vulcan face. She took the book. "Thank you," was all she said.

She went home. This was a disaster. What if he found out? How could she work with him now? Her message light blinked. It was a letter from Earth. Curious, she played the message. It was an invitation from Starfleet, asking her to apply to a new program that they believed was particularly well-suited to her background. Her eyes skimmed the letter. This was the answer she was looking for. She would leave. It was perfect.

* * *

Three years later, Kira was serving aboard SciPAC 7, a small science research vessel. The SciPAC program involved minimally-staffed ships on long-term observations missions in remote locations. In fact, SciPAC 7 was only supposed to have six crewmembers: the captain, the first officer, two analysts, and two engineers. Kira was first officer.

SciPAC 7 was the only ship in its program with a crew that included three alien races. Kira and the captain were humans. The analysts were Andorians, a husband and wife team. Kira could not pronounce the name of the planet that the engineers came from. She also did not understand their biology and social structure enough to know what their exact relationship to each other was. But they were always together.

The ship was two years into its three-year mission when one of their analysts had received terrible news. Several members of his family had died in a tragic accident. He found himself unexpectedly the leader of his clan, and had obligations that he could not avoid. They had interrupted their mission to transport him to the nearest space station so that he could travel home.

The other analyst, his wife, had left with him. Their mission was in

danger of being aborted. Starfleet, however, had sent word that they had found a replacement and that they intended the mission to be completed.

The remaining crewmembers were nervous. Finding a team that could work in isolation for a long time had required extensive psych evaluations and compatibility tests. Would this new crewmember fit in?

Kira paced on the bridge. It wasn't really big enough to pace effectively on. The door slid open and she stopped in her tracks. Even having been away from Vulcan for three years, she still subconsciously avoided displaying her emotions to others.

Captain Jack Tracer entered. He was a tall man with sandy blonde hair and broad shoulders. For the past two years they had been good friends as well as coworkers. If he had not been her commanding officer, Kira thought perhaps she would have sought to become more than friends.

He handed her a datapad. "Starfleet finally sent the information on our new analyst." Kira took the pad and scanned its contents. "A Vulcan. Anyone you know?"

Kira almost dropped the pad in shock. She must not have hidden it completely, because the captain gave her a curious look. "Yes, I know him," she said. "His technical background is perfect for this mission."

"And personality-wise?" the captain asked.

"I worked with him well in the past. I think you will like him."

The captain smiled, relieved. "Good. Give him a tour of the ship when he arrives."

"Yes, Captain." Kira switched off the datapad, and Silek's image disappeared from its screen.

* * *

Two weeks later, SciPAC 7 had returned to its mission observing a star far beyond the bounds of the Federation's populated systems. Kira was pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to work with Silek again. In a way, it felt like they had never been apart. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed him.

She went to the data lab to find out what he thought of the recent changes in the star's radiation signature. He tried to explain some theory that was a little beyond her. Finally, she asked for the practical impact, and

he suggested some changes to the ship's shields to better protect them from the star's emissions. The shield suggestions intrigued her and she ran several models through the computer to better understand them. She was impressed.

After their shifts ended, Silek came to visit her in her cabin. It was not the first time he had dropped by to talk, though Kira thought there was something different about his body language that she could not quite identify. They sat and talked for awhile until Silek mentioned how Starfleet had contacted him to ask if he would join this mission.

"I am surprised that you agreed to it," Kira said. "I would not have expected you to be willing to spend a year away from all other Vulcans."

He stared at her a moment before answering. "It was an opportunity to work with you again."

She raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't realized you had found the experience so pleasurable." She was playfully jesting that he was taking an action purely for pleasure. She expected him to retort with some logical reason for his decision. But instead he simply stared at her.

"Are you alright?" she asked. She struggled again to pinpoint what was different about him.

He got up from his chair and sat on the couch right next to her. She resisted the urge to back away from this intrusion into her personal space. Something was obviously bothering him, and she was his friend.

"There's something we need to discuss," he said quietly, "but words cannot convey.... Will you meld with me?"

He had performed the Vulcan mind-meld on her once before, and she was not afraid of it. But she did fear what he might read in her emotions. She swallowed nervously. She could feel the warmth radiating from his body. But she could tell this was important to him. She nodded.

He raised his hand and gently laid his fingers on her face. "My mind to your mind," he said. "My thoughts to your --"

Swiftly and gently, his mind settled around hers. She felt a ripple of surprise from him. Kira could not suppress a surge of pleasure at the intimacy of the contact. She hoped he did not notice.

Kira, said his thoughts, when you left Vulcan, I was disturbed. I did

not understand my own thoughts. I meditated at length but found no clarity. Finally, I sought help from the teacher Suvek. Kira recognized the name. Most Vulcans did not approve of his teachings. He claimed that Vulcans could only achieve their full potential by embracing their emotions. Silek showed her his memory, and she experienced it through his eyes.

"Teacher," Silek said, "I seek help understanding the emotions that tangle my thoughts."

Suvek smiled at him kindly. "Describe them to me."

"I cannot. They are unfamiliar to me."

"Are they pleasurable or painful?"

"Painful."

"When did they begin?"

"When my friend Kira left."

Suvek nodded sagely. "Tell me about her."

The memory faded. Again, Kira heard Silek's thoughts. *We talked at length, and I came to understand. Kira... I love you.*

The telepathic link shattered as Kira scrambled away from Silek's hand, falling off the couch as she did so. Silek visibly struggled to recover from the sudden loss of contact.

Kira found her feet. "You can't mean that." Her pulse was racing and she felt the need to run.

"You know I mean it. I melded with you so you would see." She saw doubt and pain on his face. "I reviewed my memories of you carefully, and I thought that you felt.... Did I misinterpret?"

"It doesn't matter how I felt!"

"I do not believe that."

"Silek, you're going to marry T'Pei in a little less than two years! I'm an officer in Starfleet now. After this mission is over, I will probably never see you again!"

"I know," he said quietly.

Kira began pacing quickly back and forth through the empty space in her cabin. "Completely illogical! We can't be talking about what I think we're talking about. Whatever Suvek told you --"

Kira was startled to find Silek suddenly in the path of her pacing. She barely stopped herself from walking into him. He leaned over and kissed her.

It was more than a kiss. She could feel his mind, his thoughts, and his love laid bare to her. He did not delve, but merely offered the tantalizing glimpse of what it would feel like to be intimate with a touch telepath.

With great difficulty, she pulled her lips away from his. For a moment, she stood there in his arms, breathing heavily and looking into his eyes. "This is madness."

"Love is too valuable to let it slip away without being savored."

"Suvek's words."

"Yes. But I hold them to be true."

Kira shook her head and extracted herself from his embrace. "I need time alone to think, meditate, whatever." She fled.

* * *

The ship's corridors were dim, indicating it was the ship's nighttime. For some reason, Kira found herself heading to the bridge. When the doors slid open, she found Captain Tracer there.

"Captain!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry, I didn't expect anyone to be here."

"It's alright," he said. "I'm off-duty, too. Just a little side project to satisfy my own curiosity." She glanced over the display panels in front of him.

"Breaking encryption algorithms? Interesting hobby."

Tracer leaned back in his chair. "Someone has to do it. Otherwise there'd be no reason to find better algorithms." He smiled at her. She started pacing. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

He sighed. "Don't make me pull regs on you, lieutenant." She knew what he meant. The special situation of a SciPAC crew led to the creation of special regulations, which included the captain being kept apprised of

all interpersonal relationships.

"I will, I'm just... not ready yet."

Tracer nodded. "Don't wait too long," he chastised, and went back to pecking at the keys on his station.

Kira moved towards the door, but stopped abruptly as the ship's computer chimed an alert and the lights on her station flashed. She quickly assessed the information flowing in.

"What is it?" Tracer asked.

Kira's eyes widened as the meaning of the readings hit her. "Red alert!" she shouted and started keying her station furiously. The ship-wide klaxon sounded, and Tracer leapt to the command chair. "Star emissions unstable. Flare forming. All hands, brace for impact!" She strapped herself into her chair and heard the captain do the same.

Kira's hands were a blur. The flare would pulverize them unless she could reconfigure the shields. It was a logical extension of Silek's suggestion. If only she had enough time.

Tracer was steering the ship away from the star at maximum speed. It would only buy her seconds. It should work. It had to work.

The flare hit them, and Kira's vision went to black.

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The blackness reluctantly gave way to an eerie green glow. Dimly, Kira recognized the emergency lighting.

She blinked and cleared her vision. The bridge, at least, was intact. All the boards were dark, indicating no power was available to the bridge. She guessed that only emergency life support was operating.

She unbuckled herself and went to the captain. She checked his pulse and breathing and was relieved to find he was alive. He groaned as he woke up.

"Status?" he asked as he unbuckled himself from his chair.

"No power on the bridge. Emergency life support appears to be operating." She checked the doors. "All exits are locked down. No way to know if there's a hull breach on the other side."

Kira had never felt so helpless. They couldn't go anywhere, and they couldn't do anything where they were. If they tried to force their way off

the bridge, they might cause a depressurization that would tear the ship apart. And even if they could reach the ship's power center, it's unlikely they would have the skills to help repair it.

Tracer pulled the emergency supplies out of their storage compartment. "The bridge is growing colder," the captain pointed out. "Come here, we can share this thermal blanket."

Kira sat beside him on the floor and they wrapped the blanket around themselves.

"How did that flare not dust us?" he asked.

"I reconfigured the shields, based on some ideas that Silek gave me. It let us ride the energy wave instead of being crushed by it."

"Cosmic surfing."

"Exactly."

"Well done."

"It doesn't appear to have been enough."

"We're alive, so there's still hope."

"If we don't even have navigation shields, we're drifting through space completely unprotected. One small piece of space rock and we're dead."

Tracer raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like your usual optimism."

"Sorry."

He shifted to a more comfortable position. "Space has a lot of emptiness in it. I'm not too worried about running into something."

Kira's expression went blank. "If Silek were here, he'd calculate the odds for me."

Tracer examined her face. "Since we don't have anything else to do, maybe we should have that talk."

Kira sighed. "Yes, sir."

"As friends, Kira. Don't call me sir."

"Yes, sir." She winced. "Sorry, force of habit." She fidgeted. "Do you know why I joined Starfleet?"

"Of course. To boldly go where --" He grunted as her elbow connected with his ribs, cutting him off. He smiled. "I'm just kidding."

Why?"

"To run away. Because I foolishly fell in love with someone who didn't love me, and I needed a way out."

Tracer nodded sympathetically. "Sounds familiar."

"You, too?"

"Uninterrupted missions to deep space. Perfect program for those looking for a place to hide."

"How did you manage to pass your psych profile?"

"Same way you did. I lied."

Kira smiled despite herself.

"You have a beautiful smile, you know. Don't see it much, though."

"Again, force of habit."

"It's not healthy to suppress smiles."

"So I hear."

For a moment, they simply sat together in silence. Then Kira made herself continue, "It was Silek."

"What was?" he asked.

"He was the one I joined Starfleet because of."

Understanding dawned on Tracer's face. "Oh, no."

"It gets worse. He just told me that he loves me."

Tracer looked confused. "Isn't that good?"

"No, it's not." She shook her head. "You don't understand. Have you ever heard of *pon farr*?"

"No."

"Vulcans do not often talk of it, even amongst themselves." She paused, reluctant to discuss this. "Vulcan males have a biological drive every seven years to mate or die. That's why they have arranged marriages. The time of madness is called *pon farr*. They are consumed by it, and cannot control their own actions."

"I don't understand how this is pertinent."

"Silek is engaged to marry a woman named T'Pei in a little less than two years. At the time of his first *pon farr*."

"But if he loves you --"

"It doesn't matter. He will marry her because he has to in order to

live."

"But I know Vulcans have married humans before."

"Not for their first wives. Vulcans are physically very strong compared to humans. After they experience *pon farr* a few times, they're able to learn to control it somewhat. To rein back their strength enough. But to mate with a human during uncontrolled madness? That would be certain death."

Tracer considered this. "What does he expect from you?"

Kira shrugged. "I think he wants to experience love, even if he can only have it for a couple of years."

"Do you still love him?"

Kira closed her eyes. "Yes," she admitted. Tears filled her eyes. "But it doesn't matter. I can't --" Choking with emotion, she could not continue to speak. Tracer wrapped an arm around her and she wept on his shoulder. Then she wiped the tears away and said angrily, "Why am I even worried about this? We're going to die here soon!"

"We're not going to die here."

"You can feel how fast the temperature is dropping just as well as I can. We're going to freeze to death in a few hours."

Tracer was silent. She knew she was right.

"Captain --"

"No titles, Kira. Not now. Call me Jack."

"Jack." It felt odd to call him that. Even back at the Academy she hadn't addressed him by that name. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Starfleet assigned us to this crew with the expectation that, well, you know, you and I would...."

"I know."

"I should have offered."

"No. That was never one of your duties."

"It wouldn't have been out of duty." He looked at her inquisitively. She hugged herself self-consciously. "I've always been very attracted to you. You are my best friend. And I respect you."

"And I, you."

She looked away nervously. "I'd had such bad luck with love before. I didn't want to ruin the relationship we had, because it was so... comfortable."

"I know what you mean. I took it for granted that we'd be working together for a long time. Mission after mission."

"Me, too."

"Plenty of time to get to... other things."

"Yes. But I have wanted to, Jack. The whole time. And now we're running out of time, and I regret so much not doing more with the time we had."

A tear rolled down her cheek, and Tracer wiped it away. "We're not out of time yet," he said softly. Kira blinked, wondering if he meant what she thought he meant. She moved closer and kissed him. They kissed again and again, and his strong hands pressed her body against his. He then proceeded to drive all the worries from her thoughts.

Some time later, Kira lay with her head on his chest listening to his heartbeat. "You should not have let a talent like that go to waste for so long," she said. He laughed and ran his fingers through her hair. "Jack," she said seriously, "thank you." He kissed her forehead.

The air was growing very, very cold. They were still warm enough beneath the thermal blanket, but Kira knew it would soon become painful to breathe. She wondered what her final thoughts would be. She thought it would be ironic if that had been her last. Not long now.

Suddenly, there was a sound. A sound she had taken for granted for years, but had been missing for the last few hours: the thrum of the ships engines.

All across the bridge, panels burst into life, displaying readings of the ship's status. Lights, gravity, and warmth returned.

Kira and Tracer leapt into action, checking the boards. The comm bleeped, and engineering checked in. Ion drive engines were back online, but the warp drive was still out. Kira was so proud of the ship's engineers. But the hull was damaged. They wouldn't be going anywhere for awhile.

Kira keyed Silek's cabin, but there was no response. She tried her own cabin. Still no answer. Panic rose within her. "Captain, I can't reach

Silek."

Tracer met her eyes. "Go find him." Kira raced from the bridge.

She ran to her cabin, and found him lying unmoving in her bed, having obviously tried to stay warm as best he could as the ship's air temperature plummeted. Vulcan was a hot world, and Vulcans had a higher body temperature than humans.

Kira brushed her fingers down his pale cheek. He breathed in sharply and his eyes snapped open. He smiled weakly at her.

Kira sighed with relief. "I was afraid you were dead!" She had never seen him smile before.

"I was in a trance used to survive cold nights in the desert." He pulled himself slowly to a sitting position. "What happened?"

"Come with me to sickbay and I'll explain."

* * *

The engineers worked on repairing the hull and the warp engines. There was not much hope of rescue. Subspace communication was completely out because of interference from the unstable star, so they could not let Starfleet know their location.

Kira stopped by sickbay to check on Silek and found it empty. She found him in the data lab, hard at work analyzing the scanner readings.

"Who told you that you could leave sickbay?" she chided.

"I left when I no longer needed to be there," he said matter-of-factly. Then his manner changed as he moved very close to her and said in a low voice, "Though I appreciate your concern."

She backed away from him and caught her breath. She thought he looked... hurt. She turned away. "We need to talk." He said nothing, so she continued, "Sometimes friends find that their futures take them along separate paths. Yours lies on Vulcan, with T'Pei. Mine lies in Starfleet. You understand that, don't you?"

"Do you love me?"

"That doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

Kira pressed her palms against her eyes. It would be so much easier if she could lie. But she couldn't, especially not to him. "Yes," she

whispered. She shook her head. "But it doesn't matter. Love does not change who we are, Silek. Or what we are."

Silek grasped her arm and turned her to face him. There was an intensity in his eyes that frightened her. "And what are we?" he asked.

"A human and a Vulcan!"

"What difference does that make?"

"A Vulcan must marry a Vulcan."

"I disagree. I do not want to marry T'Pei. I want to marry you, if you are willing."

Kira laughed mirthlessly. "You've gone mad. You know you can't do that. You'd die."

"I don't think so. It would be dangerous, for both of us, but if the alternative is to lose you, I would choose the risk."

"You're being illogical... irrational, even! Silek, I've moved on. It might be hard for you to understand this now, but you will put this behind you, too." She tried to leave, but he caught her arm firmly.

"Give me a chance, Kira."

"A chance to do what?"

"A chance to change your mind."

She shook her head sadly. "There's nothing you could say that could change my mind."

"True. Words are inadequate." He pulled her close and kissed her.

Sunlight burst forth over the horizon, painting the sky with crimson.... Water poured over the rocks, spinning in playful eddies.... Wind sighed in the trees, sprinkling leaves through the air.... Warmth on her skin... Coolness on her tongue.... hunger... need... touch.

Kira struggled to form her own thoughts. Silek was inside her. Silek was her.

Fingers dipped in the water. Sunlight on her face. Wind caressing her hair.

The sensory overload brought her pleasure almost to the point of pain. Her body shuddered.

I love you. She could not tell if the thought came from him or from herself. *I need you.*

Love was drowning her, and she wanted it to never end. She wanted more. She slid deeper into his mind. She no longer cared where her own thoughts ended and his began.

Suddenly, she was alone in her mind again. She screamed in pain. She wanted it back. Silek was pushing her away, breaking the link. "Too far," he gasped. "Too dangerous."

She clawed at him, desperate to meld again, but he held her wrists. She felt primal need, thoughtless desire. Slowly her mind calmed and her thoughts took their own form again. Her breathing slowed. She relaxed and he released her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to... are you alright?"

She drew a ragged breath. Tears filled her eyes. It had been so wonderful. She turned and ran all the way back to her cabin.

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Kira didn't think the tears would ever stop. She didn't know what to do. Every future she could imagine was filled with pain.

The door chimed again. She knew Silek was outside. She wasn't sure how she knew, but she knew.

"Go away," she finally answered.

"Kira, please let me in. Please." She could feel his anguish.

"No."

He beat against the door in frustration. She ignored him and cried until she fell asleep from exhaustion.

* * *

The door chimed. Kira stirred. She knew it wasn't Silek, so there was only one other person it could be.

"Come in, Jack."

The door slid open and Tracer entered. He looked at her sympathetically. "Do you want some breakfast?"

She shook her head. He sat on the bed next to her, comforting her wordlessly.

After awhile, he said, "I had a long talk with Silek."

"And?"

"And I didn't know Vulcans cried."

Kira looked at him sharply. She couldn't imagine Silek losing control in front of the captain.

"Do you love him, Kira?"

"I already told you that I did."

He shifted uncomfortably and asked softly, "And do you love me?"

Kira hesitated. She searched within herself. "Yes."

"But not the same way."

"No."

He nodded as if he expected her response.

"What should I do, Tracer?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. What do you want me to do?"

Tracer smiled slightly and touched her cheek. "Whatever makes you happy, Kira."

"Oh, why do you have to be so damn sweet?"

"Can't be perfect all the time," he joked.

She hugged herself and rocked slightly. "Logically, it would be best for me to tell him to go home. Marrying me would cause Silek so many difficulties, not the least of which is endangering his life."

"And yours."

"Right." She squeezed her eyes shut. "But when I try to imagine going back to life without him...." Tears came again, unbidden. Tracer waited patiently until they subsided.

"Kira, if you let this opportunity slip away, you will regret it every day for the rest of your life."

"I know."

"Even Silek isn't looking to logic for an answer. He told me he loves you. And I believe him. When I asked about the problems you foresee, do you know what he told me? 'If I cannot solve the problem, I will change the problem. I don't believe in giving up.' He said he learned that from you."

Kira smiled. For a moment, they sat together in silence.

He got up and looked her in the eyes. "Go find him."

Kira watched him leave sadly. She was really quite fond of Captain

Tracer.

* * *

Kira approached the door of Silek's cabin, still unsure of what she wanted. The door slid aside before she pressed the comm button, opened by Silek who was standing just inside.

There were so many emotions in his eyes. He gestured for her to come in.

The door slid shut behind her. She could barely restrain herself from throwing her arms around him. She wanted to be back in a meld with him more than anything. And she could feel that he wanted it, too. But he held back, afraid of hurting her again.

"Silek, what do you want from me?"

"I just want to be with you. I love you. And you love me."

She started pacing. "And how, loving you, can I let you ruin your life over me?"

"You are being a bit melodramatic."

"I know Vulcans. Humans are interesting as a novelty, but they're not welcomed into Vulcan society. Your family would disapprove. Your coworkers would disapprove."

"I don't care."

"You could die in *pon farr*, or kill me by accident."

"We'll find a way to manage that."

"And even if we find a way to survive all that, we'd only have a few decades together! You'll be in the prime of your life when I am old and gray."

Silek looked at her very tenderly. "All the more reason not to waste a moment now."

She threw up her hands. "Why won't you look at this logically?"

"Logic is a guide, not a chain."

"Suvek's words again."

"Yes. One should not let emotion alone dictate one's actions, but one should not deny one's emotions, either."

"You've become quite the radical thinker." She shook her head. "Somehow, I'm going to be blamed for this."

Silek smiled. It took a moment for Kira to realize she wasn't breathing. *What a beautiful smile*, she thought.

She felt a glow inside her thoughts and became alarmed. "Why can I feel...? You're still inside my head!"

Silek looked very guilty. "My love, I didn't mean for it to happen."

"For what to happen?"

He looked into her eyes. "We're... married."

"What?"

"There are ceremonies on Vulcan, of course, but the thing that truly defines a marriage is the telepathic bond between the husband and wife."

"You *bonded* me? Without my permission?"

"Let me explain --"

"Wait a minute, that's impossible! Your bond with T'Pei --"

"I had no bond with T'Pei." She looked at him uncomprehendingly. "My parents arranged the marriage with her parents, but elected not to perform the initial bonding ceremony." Kira hadn't known that was possible. "And the bond with you was unintentional. I linked with you because I wanted you to understand how much I loved you. But you drew me in deeper, until I was afraid we would not be able to recover our individual selves. I broke the link abruptly, and only later realized that we were thus bonded."

"I drew you in? But you're a telepath --"

"And so are you."

Kira blinked. "Are you joking?"

"No. Kira, I've mind-melded with other humans. When I melded with you, I was surprised at how easy it was to touch your mind. And the time I first told you that I loved you, you broke the link. A non-telepath shouldn't have been able to do that."

"You must be mistaken."

"The way you changed the link last time made it certain. There are established cases of humans having latent telepathic abilities."

Kira's hand covered her mouth as her jaw dropped. "Oh, what have we done?!" Kira cried.

Kira felt Silek's pain as if it emanated from her own heart. And she

heard it in his voice. "You are... unhappy that we are bonded?"

"No.... Silek, no." She moved close to him and almost reached out towards him before she stopped herself. "It's just that, I think you're making a mistake. Made a mistake, now. This is going to make your life so difficult. I'm... I'm not worth it."

His eyes searched her eyes. "How can you think that?"

"I'm not, Silek. You should find someone else to love. Someone more... appropriate."

"As if I can choose who I love."

"Sivek convinced you that you loved me. You could --"

"Let me show you." He reached out towards her ear. "Not like last time. Just let me show you some memories." He rested a finger behind her ear and they melded.

Kira followed him into his apartment. He went to the bookshelf, and reached for the volume she had asked to borrow. He stole a glance back at her. She was looking at his art collection, with a small smile on her face. She seemed to fit so well, another image of beauty amid the masterpieces.

He looked forward to discussing the book with her later. She always had perspectives and insights that made him think of new things.

Her brow furrowed. He brought the book towards her. She was looking at the picture on the shelf.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"T'Pei. The woman I will marry," he replied. He examined her face carefully. It was a mask, devoid of all emotion. She hid her emotions better than Vulcans sometimes. He wondered what she was thinking. After a moment, she seemed to become aware of her surroundings, and took the book from his hands.

"Thank you," she said, and departed. He was disappointed that she left so quickly. There were still many things he wanted to talk to her about. But he had no logical reason to ask her to stay tonight. He would have opportunities to talk to her later.

The next day, he came home from grocery shopping and found a message from her.

"Silek," said her recorded image, "I've decided to go to Starfleet

Academy. It will be an opportunity to see Earth, and, if I am accepted to the SciPAC program, to participate in some groundbreaking research. I start classes there in two weeks."

He replayed the message, thinking he must have misunderstood the first time. Kira had spoken before of wishing to see Earth, but he hadn't expected her to leave Vulcan before she had finished classes at the Academy.

He was experiencing emotions he could not name. Confusion muddled his thoughts. He needed a peaceful place to contemplate.

The walk to the meditation gardens did not order his thoughts as it usually did. He found an alcove and settled in.

He found no peace. He didn't want her to leave, but he was not sure why. He stayed there all night, unsleeping. In the morning, he started walking home. He would ask her to stay, even without a logical reason to do so.

He passed a flower shop and stopped abruptly. Among the arrangements in the window was a single Sunfire bloom. He thought of the day he and Kira had seen such a flower among the rocks.

He bought the flower, intending to give it to her. It was an uncharacteristically impulsive action. He knew such a gift would be considered a token of affection among humans. He wondered if it was.

He reached home and found another message from Kira waiting for him.

"I've decided to tour Earth before my classes at Starfleet begin. I'm leaving in the morning. I'm sorry that I haven't been able to reach you and will not have an opportunity to say good-bye in person." She paused. "Silek... I have greatly valued our experiences together. I wish you well." Her recorded image smiled slightly. "There is no need to message me back, for I know what you would say: Live long, and prosper." Her image disappeared.

The flower dropped from his hand. He keyed up starflight information and found her ship had already left. What was this feeling? He couldn't breathe. He... hurt. She was gone. Wetness filled his eyes. So this is what it felt like to cry.

The contact with Silek's memories faded. Kira opened her eyes. "I didn't know," she whispered.

"I didn't just decide to be in love with someone and pick you, Kira. Suvek didn't create these emotions in me. You are a very special woman. Every experience is more pleasurable when I share it with you. And I respect you." His voice cracked with emotion. "And I love you."

Kira reached out to him, resting her hand on his cheek. The touch communicated more than words ever could.

Silek sank to one knee in front of her. "Kira, will you marry me?"

She paused only a moment, thinking of Tracer but knowing that he would understand. "Yes." She smiled. "Although, for future reference, the human tradition is to ask *before* you get married."

Silek smiled back at her, swept her up in his arms and spun her in a circle. He kissed her.

"You know our troubles have just begun, don't you?" she said.

"You should be able to say that at any point in a life worth living," he replied. "Successfully overcoming challenges is what makes life fun."

"Fun? I never thought I'd hear a Vulcan talking about fun. Is that Suvek's teaching?"

"No. I came to that one on my own."

She smiled lovingly as she ran her finger over the tip of his ear. "So, what do we do now?"

A mischievous look spread over his face that was accentuated by the impish shape of his ears. "There is a human tradition, I believe, for those newly wed."

"You seem to have done a lot of research on human traditions."

"Yes, traditions...." He kissed the base of her neck, then brushed his lips upward until he reached her ear. Her pulse raced. "And a few other things," he whispered.

That night, Kira discovered that Silek had unexpected talents of his own. And she had no intention of letting them go to waste.