The Serendipity Paradox

by TomFooleryPrime

Summary

A schoolteacher, an ambassador, and a plot to overthrow the Federation. Love isn't always easy... or logical.

Notes

This is intended to be a full-length romance novel featuring the relationship between Spock's parents, Amanda Grayson and Ambassador Sarek. I've tried to keep it as canonical as possible. The first few chapters are slower "housekeeping" chapters, but when was the last time anyone read a romance and called it "good" when the characters were ripping off their clothes by the second paragraph? Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy it.

Where possible, I've tried to include Vuhlkansu translations from the Vulcan Language Dictionary. I am not a linguist, and some sentences are my best approximation of an incomplete, fictional language.
Sarek had been staring at the wall for some time. Fixing his eyes on the open expanse of the smooth concrete focused him, and he needed focus. He was going back to Earth. *He did not wish to return to Earth.*

The Vulcan High Council had informed him of their decision hours before, citing it as "prudent." Given the circumstances, it was prudent, yet he could not reconcile his unease.

It was illogical to consider this reassignment punishment, but equally illogical to imagine it was any kind of promotion. He had already served as ambassador to Earth. It was a problem for which there would be no resolution. The Vulcan High Council had requested that he would go, and he would obey.

"I come to serve," he thought, tamping the wryness in his mood.

His knees ached from kneeling on the floor, but the sensation was irrelevant. His mind was as clear as it could be, so he stood, drew his cloak around himself, and left the empty meditation room.

Since he could not clear his mind through meditation, he decided to analyze his situation with logic. He was the most reasonable choice for the assignment following the death of Ambassador Sulak. He was well-versed in Earth and Federation politics: he had spent more than half his life in service to Vulcan, negotiating treaties on Vulcan's behalf with other Federation planets before taking up permanent residence on Earth while serving as diplomatic attaché to the Vulcan consulate. Several years after his initial posting, he had been appointed ambassador following Selden's retirement and had held the post for more than a decade.

When he had returned home to marry T'Rea, he had simply assumed his diplomatic career was behind him, neatly tucked away as a past chapter of his life. Truthfully, politics had always been his father's pursuit, but Sarek had proved a highly competent diplomat, and his service honored his father and his family.

Though Sarek had been done with politics, but politics had not been done with him. Shortly after his marriage, a crisis had emerged between the Rigelians and Coridans over trade routes and the Federation Council had asked him to intervene. He had asked his new bride to accompany him, but she had refused. T'Rea had her faith and it was held firmly on Vulcan, and Sarek had his duties, which were not so firmly fixed on their home planet. So he went to Rigel to initiate an agreement between the two planets and it took the better part of a year, but mining freighters had been peacefully passing through that sector of space ever since.

T'Rea hadn't been the same when he returned, but he was unsure what measure of sameness he had been seeking. Like most Vulcan children, they had been bonded at a young age, but their bond had never been a strong one and their match had deeper roots in allying their families than in genuine affection. It had been easy to blame religion and diplomacy, but Sarek had long suspected there was another male with whom she shared a deeper connection. He'd never questioned her about it, and she had respected him enough to preserve an admirable degree of discreetness over her affair.

He had been back on Rigel when his father died. Skon had held considerable influence throughout Vulcan, and instead of his father's death providing an excuse to remove himself from
politics altogether, Sarek found that the void his father left only drew him further in. He had returned briefly for the funeral and to put his father's affairs in order, and he had not seen T'Rea during that visit.

It was not surprising when he finally returned home several weeks ago and his wife told him she was pregnant with another man's child. She had been careless. Legally he had two options. He could engage the man in ritual combat, but neither outcome would be optimal. Killing the father of her child was unlikely to make T'Rea love him, and being dead himself wouldn't strengthen her affections either.

Were his father still alive, he would have chosen the second option, which would be to raise the child as his own and put the whole business behind them. Most Vulcans not in the throes of ponn farr would have opted for this more reasonable course. Vulcan was full of open secrets that were never discussed in any forum, public or private. Yet with Skon deceased, Sarek no longer felt an urge to preserve the decorum that permeated every level of the Vulcan experience. So he chose a third option.

It was not logical to remain bound to a partner with whom one shared nothing. Furthermore, he suspected T'Rea and the child's father would prefer to be together. He didn't know anything about the man and understood that knowing wouldn't change the situation. So Sarek made the decision for all of them. He divorced her.

It had been finalized the previous morning. A number of colleagues and mentors had strongly urged him to reconsider. Divorce was rare among their people, and rarer still among older political families. She had seemed uncertain at first but had agreed. There were often annulments and broken engagements but people didn't end a marriage of more than five years when there were children to consider. In his view, it seemed contradictory to have such a provision in the law if social pressure would forbid the exercise of it. In hindsight, perhaps it had been rash to do something so radical, but it was too late for that. He wouldn't question his decision further.

That morning the undersecretary to the Vulcan High Council had summoned him to a meeting to discuss an urgent new appointment. Earth, they had said, and to Earth he would go. He was given a week to pack his household and endure the days of tedious entrance briefs to become informed of the current Terran situation. He looked around his father's former home, his home, imagining it sitting completely empty for the first time in nearly three centuries.

It was just as well: there was nothing tethering him to Vulcan anymore.

Amanda shook her foot, distracted by her thoughts. "He's going to be late," she thought, glancing down at her PADD and watching the seconds click upward toward 1300 hours.

With the precision of a shuttle launch, John cruised around the corner and sat in the pub chair across from her exactly on the hour, smiling and nodding as he continued a conversation on his PADD. She had to admit she found his punctuality a bit annoying, but it was nevertheless impressive. She had to give him some credit: being a politician kept him on a pretty tight schedule.

Unfortunately for John, she planned to break up with him.

She'd met John Molineaux at a formal embassy luncheon several weeks after she had moved to the area. She had immediately considered him the most handsome man in the room, and he seemed to like her too, and that made them a match from superficial heaven. He was a junior congressman in the United Earth government and though he had only been elected two terms ago, he was already vying for the position of speaker.
Amanda had never had much interest in politics, but she certainly had considered John a catch when she met him. He was the sort of man her mother approved of – dripping with responsibility, connections, and good looks. She realized she was the sort of woman voters approved of – a schoolteacher with a good education, a pristine past, and a subdued and appropriate level of aesthetic beauty.

These facts added another level of authenticity to their relationship, but did little to make Amanda feel like she cared for him. She had only met him two months ago and figured most people didn’t fall passionately in love at first glance. After all, soul mates were a thing for fairy tales. And after observing the collapse of her own parents’ marriage, she had learned love was a thing that was best grown over time for best results, but even still, she’d become convinced this was never going to work.

She stared at the table, allowing her thoughts to drift back to work. It was Saturday and she’d spent most of the morning in the basement of the United Embassies working on Project Rosetta. Rosetta was half the reason she had moved to San Francisco four months ago from her home in New Chicago after graduating from among the top in her class in theoretical xenolinguistics at the American Language Institute.

Universal translators had been around for more than a century, but "translator" wasn’t the most precise term. "Universal interpreters" was more correct. Rosetta was a nearly decade-long endeavor to enhance processing time and create a standard translation matrix capable of integration across every Federation computing platform. For the first time, programmers were attempting to incorporate kinesthetic analysis and anthropologists were streamlining various sociological and contextual referents.

She worked on the project only part time as a volunteer, perusing the linguistic databases for errors and assisting with grammar analysis and syntax generation of the Tellarite and Vulcanoid languages, but she was proud to be only 24 years old and able to put her name to such a monumental achievement in interstellar communication.

The main reason she had upended her life and moved across the country was the school. She had met the senior human resources clerk of the United Embassies at a career fair at the end of her final semester of graduate school, and two formal interviews later, she had packed her cat and her scant belongings and found herself in San Francisco teaching a small class of diplomats’ children that included four humans, two Tellarites, and a bright young Ithenite girl. Her students were such a joy to teach.

Her thoughts drifted from Monday morning’s lesson plan to John’s fingers. He was still talking on his PADD to a man with a deep voice about raising poll numbers throughout next week, but his hands were occupied in arranging the place settings into parallel and perpendicular lines with points of reference Amanda could not identify. Obsessive-compulsive disorder was another of his peculiar habits that she found mildly irritating.

When he had first come to her studio apartment, he had moved her couch to sit at a perfect right angle to the old-style fireplace and put the various knickknacks that resided on her bookshelf into a military-style formation. She was unsure if it was controlling or simply just one of his oddities. Vera, her upstairs neighbor and one of the few friends Amanda had made since the move, called him uptight.

"I'm so sorry, Amanda," he said, pointing to his PADD. "Work: you know how it is. Anyway, how has your day been?"

"Fine," Amanda replied, trying to find a good segue into the speech that went, "it's not you it's me."
"It's got to be better than 'fine'. We found time to be together," he grinned.

Her mind went blank as she struggled to think of something to say, but the waitress mercifully rescued her. She ordered a salad and endured a bit of teasing over her vegetarian diet, and he got the salmon and what looked like a casual wink from the waitress.

Yes, she was definitely flirting with him, and John was just being himself and flirting right back. Perhaps *flirting* wasn't the right word, but he was always on display, always making a presentation, and people lapped it right up. People were dumb.

The waitress eventually excused herself and they talked over the election, and she did her best to feign interest and felt like she gave a passable performance. The key was to listen and repeat short phrases as questions. It was just linguistics, and it made people feel important.

He liked feeling important. In fact, he loved it. Yet she never felt important around him. "John, I think-"

"Oh, I meant to ask the other day, how's your dad doing?"

"My dad?" she blinked, trying to readjust her train of thought.

She hadn't talked to her father in a couple of weeks, but they had never communicated regularly. They had the sort of relationship where they went months without speaking and then picked up right where they had left off with ease. He was a rare elements surveyor and was often away from home for months or years at a time. Her mother had grown tired of that very quickly and they had divorced when she was six.

"He's... *great*. I guess. But John-"

"You said he was an asteroid miner," he interrupted. "What's that like?"

*I did?*

Amanda couldn't recall having ever talked about her father with John, aside from mentioning that her parents were no longer together.

"Yeah, I could swear it was a few weeks ago."

"He's actually a surveyor, not a miner. I don't remember where he was the last time we spoke, but-"

She stopped. Why was he asking these things? All she wanted to do was break it off with him and instead he wanted talk about her dad?

"John, we need to-"

He held his finger to his lips, looking at his PADD, and then offered an apologetic smile.

"Sorry to run, love, but I just got a message about getting a live spot on the holos in 30 minutes. If I take the shuttle I can get there in time. Here's my card for the food. We're still on for this weekend, right?"

She managed to turn her grimace into a smile before he noticed. They were supposed to attend an interplanetary conference at the nearby Science Observatory. She frowned and didn't even get the chance to respond before he was gone. As if on cue, the server came back with their entrees.
"I'm sorry to bother you, but is that John Molineaux with you?" she asked Amanda.

"Yeah, uh, yes, he had to go," she explained. "In fact, I'm not really even hungry; would it be a bother to ask you to box it up?"

The waitress left and she sat there, feeling conflicted. The waitress came back with a to-go bag and John's card. She thanked her and stood to leave when the waitress called out, "You're lucky. He's quite a catch!"

"Yeah," Amanda thought glumly.

What was the saying? There were plenty of fish in the sea? Federation Standard was still littered with a vast number of expressions and idioms. The language itself was widely regarded as the easiest to learn, but from a cultural perspective, the overwhelming amount of vernacular and proverbs flowing through it occasionally stumped even native speakers, particularly since it had become a nexus of more than a dozen planets that made up the Federation.

It was a short walk back to her apartment. Her stomach churned at the thought of the salmon but at least her cat Euclid would like it. As she rustled through her shoulder bag to find her access card, a familiar face peeked over the upstairs balcony.

"Hey neighbor!"

"Hi Vera," Amanda replied with a smile.

"Hold the door; I'm coming over," Vera called.

Her upstairs neighbor was a little strange but a lot of fun. In the three months she had known her, Vera had a new hair color approximately once a week, and never once had it rotated through a natural shade. Currently it was a peculiar hue of deep lilac, though Vera insisted it was really more of a violet. Amanda couldn't see the point in splitting hairs, no pun intended, because she was certain it would probably be green before next Tuesday.

Vera wore heavy makeup in a way that was more ironic than tacky. Tiny holes dotted her face where she exchanged various pieces of facial jewelry daily: today she was sporting a series of zirconia studs along her eyebrows.

It had taken Amanda a month to get a grip on her neighbor. A long time ago San Francisco had been something of a hub for free-spirited people, rule breakers, and goofy, technologically inclined people, but in the last century it had been somewhat tamed thanks to the presence of Starfleet headquarters and the various offices of the Federation. Most of the city's former hipster crowd had either evolved with the times, moved away, or died, but there was a smattering of the most devoted who had remained, and Amanda counted Vera among them.

She wasn't even exactly sure what Vera did. Amanda imagined she had a job because she was rarely home at night, but for some reason she felt too afraid to pry deeply. Vera was that sort of person who had a personality so strong it practically had its own gravitational field; Amanda couldn't help but like her. She was honest to the point of occasionally being mean, but her advice was solid.

At first Amanda had suspected her of being a freeloader because she often entered Amanda's apartment like she lived there, eating the food and even trying on her clothes. She soon caught on to the idea that Vera was almost insulted that Amanda didn't do likewise, asking after a few weeks why she was always having to come over to Amanda's place, and wondering why Amanda never came over to hers.
They entered her apartment and Vera flopped down on the couch to pet her cat Euclid and Amanda went into the kitchen to make tea.

"So how is he?" Vera probed.

"John?" Amanda mused.

"Yeah, the clown that thinks he's going to take on the Federation."

Amanda pursed her lips and dropped the tea bag into the mug as she waited for the water to boil. Using a teakettle on a stove was so old-fashioned, but Amanda liked the process of tea almost as much as drinking it.

"I'm breaking up with him."

"Bravo. Don't get me wrong. He's attractive. He has good hair. But he's a useless-"

The kettle began to scream, drowning out Vera's string of obscenities. Amanda smiled and removed it from the induction burner.

"I had no idea you were so passionate about politics," Amanda said with raised eyebrows and a half smile. "I've always known you were never fond of John, but-

"I want the best for you. And our planet. This stuff matters, you know?"

"I do," Amanda said, feigning seriousness.

Vera smirked and stared at her expectantly, waiting for a real answer on the status of her relationship with John. Amanda sighed and shifted her weight onto her other foot.

"The truth is, he's annoying, tedious, boring, obsessive..."

"Xenophobic?" Vera suggested.

Amanda rolled her eyes. She supposed it was true. John often spoke approvingly about the Earth First Movement and the Autonomy Party, and while he never spoke badly about other species, she always got the sense that he disapproved of them. It was a major reason she wanted to break things off.

Sometimes she wondered what he saw in her, teaching alien children and being able to communicate in five Federation languages. He had never mentioned it, but then again, they so rarely talked about Amanda's life. Everything was always about John.

She stared at Vera. "I guess he's just the kind of man my mother has always dreamed of."

"I'll find you a guy. Someone proper you can take home to mom. Speaking of which, I have a date with a Denobulan in..." she checked the clock on the side wall, "... 30 minutes. Any chance you could teach me something fun to say?"

"I don't speak a word of Denobulan," Amanda protested.

"Then why did you spend so long in school getting all those fancy degrees? Why do you spend all your free time working on this fancy translator?"

"So that one day people like you can whisper sweet nothings into the ears, or whatever counts for ears, of species all over the galaxy without the need for human translation," Amanda replied in a sing song voice.
"Well, I really can't stay. I'm going to go wash my armpits for this date," Vera said, getting up.

Amanda stared at her, mouth open and shaking her head in disbelief.

"Just kidding. I'm going to shower. It is Sunday you know. My bath day. But seriously, congratulations on ditching that loser," she said.

"He's not ditched just yet. I still have plans to go to a conference with him this weekend," Amanda groaned.

"Back out of it," Vera said, waving goodbye and closing the door.

Amanda wanted to back out of it – rubbing elbows with dignitaries was so uncomfortable. It seemed like a new planet entered the Federation every year and it was such a hassle keeping up with various customs and courtesies. She had eventually just settled on committing to memory all of the gestures and phrases that were considered appallingly rude and did her best to avoid them. She had learned the hard way that Tellarites considered politeness, particularly among strangers, to be a peculiar breach of etiquette.

In the short time she had worked at the embassy, she had also learned a whole database of cultural idiosyncrasies. It was fascinating to read about and helped improve her language skills, but putting them to practice required compensating for a lifetime of mindless mannerisms. In graduate school she had attended a seminar on practical interspecies communication and cooperation, and had been given access to hundreds of pamphlets with basic manners of dozens of frequently encountered cultures.

Never show both palms outstretched to an Andorian. Always smile but never shake hands when greeting a Denobulan. Never smile or shake hands when greeting a Vulcan. Do ask about a Rigelian's family. Do not wave at a Coridian.

Dozens and dozens of pages of rules she had attempted to commit to memory, but no matter how hard she studied, no pamphlet explained what to do when encountering a mixed group. She imagined herself putting on a strange pantomime in which she pretended like she had about seven personalities at the same time.

She wanted to send John a message and back out of her commitment. What she really wanted to do was send a message explaining she no longer wanted a relationship, but that seemed so mean and petty to do through text. He stayed so busy, and she couldn't imagine finding another opportunity to see or call him before Friday.

She felt stuck.

On the other hand, she'd wanted to go to the Science Observatory ever since she had moved to San Francisco, but it was so often closed for dignitaries, and being a teacher at a diplomatic school didn't quite qualify as important enough to warrant general admission.

Euclid jumped up on the counter and began rubbing his face on her arm. She took another sip of her tea, silently cursing her situation. She just had to get through this weekend. As much as she dreaded committing any of a thousand faux pas, maybe she would actually meet some interesting people at this function.

Maybe she'd find someone else. She instantly felt guilty even considering dating someone else given she was still technically dating John, but smirked at what her mother would say.

From the moment she had told her mother about him, she had gushed and swooned at the idea of
her daughter being involved with such an important person. If she was going to get rid of him she'd need someone better lined up to take his place as far as her mother was concerned. Who else could she go for? What was better by Jana Grayson's standards?

She knew the Terran president was single... and about 70. She laughed out loud, scaring the cat from the counter.

Better yet, the Federation president was also single. Granted, he was Andorian, which caused her to take perverse delight in the thought of explaining to her conservative mother that her grandchildren would have antennae. She laughed until tears welled up in the corners of her eyes and she began to hiccup.

She flopped down on her couch and stared at the mantel of the fireplace at the flickering digital photoframes that John had organized into perfectly parallel rows and wondered if she was happy.

Perhaps she was, but she could be happier. She stood up and turned the photoframe of her and John at a beach in Big Sur on its face. It should be easier to find a guy, she thought, especially considering the pool of available men hadn't been confined to just Earth for more than a century. Yet somehow even with her options increased twenty-fold the future seemed bleak.

She was only 24 and found herself forgetting she was an adult most of the time. So often she felt like a little girl playing around in her mommy's clothes pretending at things like bills and jobs and love lives. Yet just last month her mother was already bringing up the topic of grandchildren and she began to feel overwhelmed.

She moved toward her desk and began adjusting the following week's lesson plans, ate her leftover dinner from her date at the restaurant, and tried to go to sleep. The bright lights of the San Francisco cityscape laughed at her attempt.

"San Francisco is full of people," she mused. "I have time."

Moments later, she was startled when her cat Euclid jumped on the bed and lay down on her chest. At least she would never be alone.
Sarek stepped off the starship onto the landing pad and shivered. He drew his collar higher around his chin and gazed out at the fog throughout the bay. Earth's solitary sun had just broken the horizon and cast light on the peaks of the antiquated Golden Gate Bridge.

He disliked Terran weather, San Francisco's in particular. He remembered a time serving as attaché under Ambassador Selden that they had visited a nature preserve that was less than an hour away by shuttle to the southeast. Humans called it Death Valley. He had assumed the moniker was an informal human attempt at witticism, but apparently the formal name was indeed "Death Valley." The excursion was the only time he could recall ever feeling completely comfortable out of doors on this humid, frigid planet. It did not help that he arrived during Earth's winter season.

It began to drizzle and he headed for the turbolift attached to the elevated platform on which they had landed. There was a small throng of people huddled under an overhang, sheltering like a herd of animals against the cold. As he approached, two people stepped from the crowd and moved toward him, one human, the other Vulcan. At approximately six paces from him both stopped and rendered the ta'al, the Vulcan salute.

"We come to serve," said the human. "I'm Giles Marcus, your Terran administrative attaché."

"Ambassador Sarek, I am Varen, secretary to the Vulcan consulate," the young Vulcan added. "Live long and prosper."

"Your service honors Vulcan. Peace and long life," he replied, nodding a response to each and returning the ta'al to both.

They descended in the turbolift to the street level where a driver waited with a shuttle. Varen opened the door and Giles entered, followed by Sarek, then Varen. Consulate protocol at its finest.

"Ambassador Sarek, I know you held this position for years and no doubt you've read the briefs en route. It is truly an honor to welcome you back to Earth."

"Yes," he mused. "There has been little news about my predecessor as of late. It is one of my foremost initial priorities to advocate for the investigation into his death. Have there been any recent developments, Mr. Marcus?"

"None," Giles replied with a frown. "As of right now the investigation is still open and considered a suspected homicide."

Ambassador Sulak had been found dead in his living quarters just three weeks earlier, and the coroner had been unable to determine a cause of death. The body bore no injuries and the toxicology report had been checked and rechecked and revealed nothing. The transport Sarek had arrived in was scheduled to return his body to Vulcan later that day.

There were rumors and conspiracy theories. Sarek knew the Vulcan High Council suspected the involvement of the separatist Earth Autonomy Movement, but no one had claimed credit for his death. He had been told little by the Vulcan High Council in his entrance briefing, but he presumed that was because they knew little.
He had known Sulak in passing, and knew him to be a competent moderate who got along well with humans and Vulcans alike. That he should die with no explanation as to how or why was deeply troubling in light of growing political unrest on Earth.

"Things have been tense here," Giles continued. "There's an interplanetary conference at the Science Observatory this weekend that you ought to attend. It's been planned for months and I've added it to your schedule."

Giles began clicking through a calendar on his PADD.

"As you know the Autonomy Party is gaining a lot of traction and elections for the Terran government are next month. Ambassador Sulak was scheduled to speak about Vulcan's position on expanding the Romulan corridor. We have the remarks he was scheduled to give, if you'd like-"

"Yes, I will speak for him," Sarek interrupted.

"Very well. Also, there's to be a memorial at-"

Giles' PADD chirped. He clicked a button to silence it and continued.

"The conference is this Saturday for Ambassador Sulak. I know it's not a particularly Vulcan custom, but-"

His PADD rang again and he moved to silence it again when Sarek stopped him.

"Your call seems urgent. Perhaps you should attend to it."

Giles fixed his earpiece and clicked the call on the PADD to 'on' and his face went that pale shade that Sarek knew often indicated fear or pain in humans.

"What, now?" he yelled, forgetting his present company and startling everyone in the vehicle, including himself.

He collected himself a bit as he listened to the caller for a full minute.

"But it's too early. Which hospital? I can be there later, but we just picked up the new ambassador," his voice trailed off uncomfortably as glanced in Sarek's direction.

"I will call you in a little while. Be brave, ok? I love you," he said, his voice quieting again, clearly embarrassed by the show of emotion in front of two Vulcans, one of whom was his supervisor and still a virtual stranger.

"Is everything alright?" asked Sarek, aware that humans often seemed to take delight on divulging matters that Vulcans tended to keep private.

"I'm having a baby, two actually, twins, it's uh…" he trailed off, staring out the window of the fast-moving shuttle and clearly attempted to gather his thoughts.

"Impressive, considering you seem to lack the requisite anatomy," Sarek replied.

"My wife," he muttered.

The shuttle approached the curb of the West side of the complex near the building where the Vulcan consulate was located.

"You should go to her," Sarek said, glancing at Giles.
"Congratulations on the addition to your family," he said slowly.

"Thank you, ambassador," he replied, a red flush spreading over his cheeks.

The shuttle came to a complete stop. Varen exited and held the door for Sarek, and the Giles emerged.

"I will be in first thing tomorrow morning. Thank you for your understanding. You're in good hands with Secretary Varen," he said, nodding in the direction of the young Vulcan next to him.

As if Varen's hands could be "good." He had forgotten just how many axioms humans loved using with the Federation Standard English.

"Live long and prosper," Sarek said, rendering the ta'al.

"Peace and long life," he said, before whipping around and simultaneously making a call on his PADD while trying to hail a taxi.

"Your belongings are being unloaded and taken through customs and should be en route to your residence by 1600 hours," Varen said evenly. "Would you prefer to be there when they arrive or should I have a clerk accept them for you?"

"I shall go myself, thank you," he answered, feeling suddenly very tired.

"I am sure you are familiar with the consulate and no doubt would find it redundant to accept another tour. Not much has changed in the four years since you have been gone," Varen explained. "I can however introduce you to the rest of the staff."

"Yes, let us go inside," he replied, dismissing the momentary disappointment that stemmed from the realization that though very much had happened in the last fifteen years, very little had really changed.

Amanda clicked off her PADD and smiled. Talking to her father had been a breath of fresh air. It was weird talking about men with him, but he seemed to instinctively know. After the precursory chit chat and a few uncomfortably started sentences from her, he simply told her that he supported her no matter what, and that was all that needed to be said on the matter.

At least he had good news to share. He said he was near a planet called Zetar and believed he had found a large deposit of helium-3. She wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but she could tell from the excitement in his voice that it was something big. Apparently there were a few more scans and probes to confirm the find, but it sounded promising.

Her father had always made a decent living through surveying, and she always had the sad sense that he did it hoping to become handsomely wealthy, not because he cared about the money, but because her mother did. They had been divorced since Amanda was very young, and he had missed out on virtually all of Amanda's life in an effort to appease a woman he was no longer married to.
The rest of her week passed by much too quickly for her taste. The thought of going to this conference with John put her in a foul mood. She tended to look forward to her weekends working on Rosetta or curled up at home with a book.

She often thought she needed to branch out and make more local friends, or make any real friends at all. She had Vera, who sometimes felt more like entertainment than a friend, and she was acquainted with a lot of the contributors on Rosetta. She loved her students, but being that the oldest was eight years old, they weren't the best source of mature companionship. She decided after this conference was over, not to mention her relationship with John, she would put herself out there more and make more connections with people.

On Friday, she found herself sitting in the back of a shuttle sedan with him. They had just left the main suburbs of San Francisco and she enjoyed gazing at the light fading over rolling countryside. The weather was gray and a misty drizzle hung in the air. She glanced in his direction: he was completely absorbed in his PADD, his fingers performing an intricate dance of swiping and clicking. Every moment she spent with him only made her more certain about her decision.

The Science Observatory was in the hills outside of Palo Alto about twenty-five minutes away by shuttle. They had barely spoken a word to one another, and that was fine. He had picked her up at her apartment just after work. She knew instantly by the way he examined her when he first stepped out of the shuttle that she was probably not dressed well enough for this evening's function, but he had wisely said nothing.

She had never worn flashy colors or much jewelry and couldn't stand the impracticality of shoes with towering heel heights. She often tied her hair back at school: tonight she wore it loosely at her shoulders. The schedule indicated "semi-formal attire," and she had borrowed a billowy, black dress with wide sleeves from Vera that was cut down to her knees with a pair of sensible flat shoes.

Vera had tried getting her to wear makeup but she had put her foot down on that quite firmly. She could count on one hand the number of times she had worn makeup in her life. Makeup felt unnecessary and impractical: the easiest way of avoiding lipstick on her teeth was just to not wear any.

There was to be an informal reception that evening in the planetarium before the conference officially started the next morning. If she could get through the night without seriously offending some diplomat or getting too irritated with John, she began to feel like she might actually salvage some of this weekend.

He was fully scheduled for various seminars on Saturday and had tried to superficially apologize for being unable to get her into any of them, but on the inside she had rejoiced. She had been excited to learn there was an open forum on cross-cultural linguistics early in the morning that she planned to attend, and afterward she would spend the rest of the day touring the observatory before being obliged to attend a formal banquet that evening.

The observatory was home to the largest aquarium in the Federation and exhibited species from every member home world. She had never been exactly passionate about marine species, but she had also never left Earth or seen many things from other planets. She often found it ironic that she was well versed in five other languages and familiar with four more but had never really held long conversations with native speakers of any of them.

Her thoughts drifted and she began to doze. What seemed only like moments later, the shuttle stopped abruptly.

"Here," John said cheerfully, turning to face her.
He raised his hand to her face in what she initially assumed would be a tender gesture, but instead turned out to be him smoothing her hair down.

"What was that?" she sneered.

"Your hair… it's just… frizzy."

She stared at him, open-mouthed, anger brewing inside of her.

"You're very beautiful, Amanda, I just wish you took better care of your appearance," he answered carefully.

"So you fix my hair like I'm three years old?" she sneered. "Are there any graham cracker crumbs on my face you want to wipe off? Did you bring a tissue for me to blow my nose into?"

He seemed taken aback. She had generally held her tongue whenever she felt he was being critical of her, but she felt he had crossed a line.

"You're overreacting," he dismissed.

"It's so humid that it's practically raining. There is no amount of hairspray that's going to make my hair lay flat without making it also look like a football helmet with a high shine varnish," she snapped.

She began to feel bold. She was about to tell him to just go into the conference without her and ask his driver to take her home when a valet opened the door.

"Congressman Molineaux," the valet droned.

John looked sidelong at her. He said nothing, but he didn't have to. The stern glint in his expression clearly ordered her to remain silent. Keeping up appearances, she thought. Typical.

They exited the shuttle and marched up the wide stone staircase in silence. The observatory was such an exquisite piece of engineering that she momentarily forgot her irritation. High, arched, concrete pillars buttressed a building of reinforced glass and metal alloys. The inside was illuminated by warm, soft light that reminded her of antique light bulbs she had seen in very old films.

Then she noticed the crowd and began to feel anxious. She had wanted to review photos of important people she knew would be in attendance, but hadn't found time between a last minute change in her lesson plans and a deadline on a Romulan transitive verb matrix for Rosetta. There were so many people.

The moment they stepped inside, John abandoned her for the company of two men in gray suits with excessively gelled hair who were no doubt contributing to his campaign for house speaker. As little as she wanted to spend time with him, it was preferable to being alone in a room full of strangers. She moved sideways along the glass wall and found the ladies' room just off to the side and went in.

The bathroom was large and minimalist in appearance with harsh overhead lighting. She heard several other women chattering in the stalls and frowned. She looked at herself in the long mirror by the doorway and took inventory. Sure, her hair was beginning to misbehave in the damp air and Vera's dress was a little big on her slender frame and there was a bit of cat hair on it, but she thought she looked all right. Didn't she?
She looked like her mother. Fair skin, dark brown hair, and even darker brown eyes. Her mother was an elegant and poised woman, so Amanda had always figured she must have gotten the awkward gene from her father. The person staring back at her in the mirror looked boyish and slightly scared. She hadn't felt self-conscious about her appearance since primary school… until now.

A woman emerged from one of the stalls and moved to the high tech ultraviolet light cleansing stations. She was tall, blonde, immaculately groomed, stinking of confidence, and everything Amanda figured John was looking for in a woman. Why did he decide to date her? She had never really thought about it.

She brushed her fingers through her hair in frustration and quickly left the restroom. She found herself back in the crowd of people and completely unsure of what to do next or with whom she should attempt to mingle. She spied John not far from her, speaking with Vice Admiral Maxwell Bentham. The admiral was a small man with a clean-shaven face that revealed a serious countenance.

He was well known even to civilians for his role in deescalating tensions with the Klingons. John told her that he lost his whole family during a Klingon raid on a Federation colony as a child. He had been the lone survivor out of an outpost colony of more than 500 citizens. She wouldn't have guessed he had such a tragic story just by looking at him.

Betham clapped John on the back and steered him toward an alcove with several paintings, presumably to speak more privately over the swarm of people. She stood there for a few minutes, nervously inching her way around the crowd toward a long row of tables when she heard someone calling her name from behind.

"Amanda! I didn't know you'd be here!"

She turned to see Giles Marcus: the first familiar face she'd seen since John ditched her at the door for people with money. She knew him moderately well; he was a former Starfleet xenolinguist who had left the service for a job in the Vulcan embassy and like her, also worked part time on Rosetta. He looked… awful. He had bags under his eyes and looked a bit thin, but he wore a broad smile on his face.

"How are you?" she replied as he moved closer toward her, cutting through a small group of people.

"Great, or, you know, as great as anyone can be at a get-together like this," he laughed.

"How's Celeste?" she asked, inquiring about his wife, whom she knew was expecting twins any day now.

"You didn't get my message? She had the babies last week. Two healthy girls," he answered, pulling his PADD from a small shoulder pouch to show her pictures.

Amanda cooed at the images of the tiny babies swaddled in yellow blankets.

"Yeah, Sarah and Amanda," he beamed.

"Amanda! I'm honored!" she joked, a sincere smile spreading on her face.

"Well, it's a family name on my wife's side, but if she grows up to be half as pretty as you, I'll consider myself lucky. And cursed maybe, you know, having to beat the boys off with a stick," he winked, elbowing her gently in the ribs.
Giles was an unapologetic charmer and sometimes she wondered how he managed to stay sane all day, working in an office with Vulcans who weren't exactly known for their dazzling personalities. He enjoyed flirting and teasing, but she knew he was loyal to his wife almost to a fault. Most importantly, his comment came at a moment when she really needed to hear something kind, and she smiled and genuinely thanked him. He brushed it off in his usual good-natured way.

"Weird you didn't get the message though. I sent it to everyone on the chain distribution list down at Rosetta," he added.

"If I got it, I missed it, and I'm sorry," she added quickly. "Anyway, how are things at the office? Has the new ambassador arrived?"

"Yeah, he had a conference call with the higher ups on Vulcan and he'll be late. He actually got here the same day the twins were born. That was… a fun way to make a great first impression," he mused.

"How did that go over?"

"It worked out, I guess. He's understood about my taking time off. I think. It's a little hard to tell."

"What's he like?" she asked, feeling sympathy for his situation.

"Well, he's… Vulcan. He was actually the ambassador about four years ago, before Sulak. Speak of the devil," he added, his eyes darting to the doorway.

Amanda looked over and saw a sinewy figure dressed in black standing in the doorway, seemingly taking stock of his surroundings. He stood nearly a head taller than anyone else in the room and she noted a slight expression on his face that resonated from critical to curious.

"I gotta go. It was good talking with you. I'm staying off of the project for a little while to help my wife out with our little poop factories of joy, but I'm sure I'll see you around," he said cheerfully.

Alone again. She heard a peal of raucous laughter from the left side of the room and saw John holding court with five men who no doubt made up for their thinning hair with an abundance of influence. She glanced down at the time on her PADD and groaned. It was only 18:45.

Sarek scanned the room and quickly located Giles chatting with someone who was either a small human woman or a large human child. He entered the hall, pushing into the large crowd of people with an increasing degree of unease. He breathed slowly and relaxed his mind. It would take a while to get reacquainted with human festivities.

He could never understand why humans and many other species enjoyed congregating in such a disorganized and chaotic manner. He was unsure if the tightly knit horde was the result of the peculiar human desire for intimacy with complete strangers or poor planning to secure a large enough space for so many. Perhaps it was both.

"Mr. Marcus," he said as Giles approached. "Is there somewhere more quiet that I may speak with you?"

"Of course," he replied. "I just came from the aquarium. It's open and there's almost no one there."

Giles pressed his way through the crowd and Sarek followed. It was slow going: in the short distance between the observatory entrance and the aquarium tunnel on the right side of the room, he was stopped by nine people, all with various comments, questions, and pleasantries.
He had been involved in politics for more than three decades, but had never adapted to the various customs and formalities of other species. It was a vile assault each time some well-meaning but ignorant species attempted to shake hands, hold hands, kiss cheeks, pat backs, or touch foreheads with him. Giles thankfully seemed adept at mitigating such interactions by standing in for him.

Behavior aside, he also found other species’ manner of dress highly illogical. The air temperature outside was sufficiently cold enough to induce a phase change in the natural liquid state of water. It was logical for Andorians, who preferred cold temperatures due to the climate of their home world, but for most of the other guests, their attire was entirely impractical. He was standing next to a trio of Ithinite women who wore layers of sheer fabric cropped at the elbows who were visibly shivering. Most of the human females wore skirts revealing their arms, legs, backs, and torsos in varying degrees of immodesty and shoes that did not cover much of their feet but elevated their height to unrealistic proportions.

It took them nearly half an hour to traverse the fifteen meters to the aquarium entrance through the thick crowd and the obligatory greetings. They turned into the hallway leading to the aquarium and the noise decreased by a factor of ten. Sarek walked purposefully with his hands behind his back, head and eyes straightforward, and Giles lengthened his stride to keep up with Sarek without breaking into a trot.

"Anything of note from the Vulcan High Council?" Giles asked.

"The investigation into the late ambassador's affairs on Vulcan has turned up nothing," Sarek replied evenly. "There has however been a new advisory issued on the Earth Autonomy Movement. I've sent it to you, along with a collection of memoranda on the proposed annual commerce treaty addendum between Vulcan and Earth. Have Metana contact someone in the Terran economic office on Monday."

Giles took out his PADD and began taking notes. They exited the connecting corridor between the observatory reception hall and the aquarium and Sarek slowed his pace. They entered a walkthrough aquarium tunnel with a wide array of Terran fish species.

The aquarium was remarkable. Unlike Vulcan, Earth had more water than land and boasted a diverse marine population as a result. He stopped a quarter of the way through to observe a fish that was a meter and a half in length with a lopsided head and a pointed dorsal fin. Giles looked up from his PADD and smiled slightly.

"A hammerhead shark," he said, gesturing with his stylus.

"Fascinating," he said, taking several slow steps toward the glass and peering more closely into the deep tank. "Are you well acquainted with marine biology and ecosystems?"

"I loved the ocean as a kid," he replied. "I'm no real expert though."

"How are your children faring, Mr. Marcus?" Sarek asked without taking his eyes off the shark.

"Good, thank you for asking. And I wanted to thank you again for the blankets you sent. My wife and I are very appreciative."

"You are most welcome," Sarek replied, finally turning to face him.

The man looked exhausted, but stood there with his PADD at the ready, waiting to resume taking notes.

He recalled in his first year as ambassador fourteen years prior that he had run through four administrators in less than two years after failing to grasp just how frail humans really were. They
needed sleep every day. In fact, he found out they spent about a third of their lives sleeping, which seemed an egregious waste of efficiency from a biological and practical standpoint.

It was also disappointing to learn that to maximize productivity in the remaining two thirds of their waking lives, human required extraordinary amounts of leisure time, which was even separate still from time they needed to spend bonding with their mates and children. Otherwise they would become depressed and their performance would suffer. Or as his third administrator had put it in her formal written resignation, "burnt out," which he still thought was a curious expression.

Giles Marcus seemed highly competent. He had never met a human so fluent in the Vulcan language or so adept at maneuvering around integrated social situations, and reasoned that based on his previous interactions with human subordinates, retaining Mr. Marcus would require concessions that he would never feel compelled to grant to his Vulcan staff members.

"Perhaps you should return home for the evening. Metana will be here in the morning and I don't imagine I'll have a need for you for the remainder of the night."

"Oh, I couldn't-"

"I can manage my own affairs for a few hours, at least," Sarek interjected.

"I prefer to pull my fair share of the work, sir," Giles insisted. "It's really no problem."

Sarek examined Giles, trying to discern his logic and motives behind refusing to abandon his duties. He knew humans were prideful: was that what this was? What answer would lead to the quickest resolution?

"I will not think less of you," he said, before adding, "but perhaps your mate, your wife, would think better of you if you were to return home."

Giles was quiet for a moment and then slowly nodded.

"Thank you, sir. You have the schedule in your inbox. They pushed your speech about Ambassador Sulak to 20:15 and moved it from ballroom three to the mezzanine level. If you need anything, I'll have my PADD on me."

"I appreciate your service, Mr. Marcus," Sarek said in reply, aware humans had a deep-rooted desire for constant affirmation.

Giles bowed his head slightly and turned and left.

Sarek noted the time on his PADD. 1905. He continued down the length of the aquarium tunnel that opened at the other end into a circular intersection with seven divergent hallways. It was almost uncomfortably cold and there was a loud hum from a cooling system that echoed from the hard surfaces, making the acoustic effect mildly uncomfortable to his sensitive ears, but he still preferred it to the clutter of humanity in the reception hall. In fact, he hadn't encountered anyone since Giles departed, and he enjoyed the solitude.

He wandered into the central tunnel and saw numerous exhibits of freshwater Terran fish. He turned a corner, which switched back into the adjacent tunnel where extraterrestrial species were housed. He browsed this area for nearly an hour. The tanks were large and set in isolated marble alcoves. He paused to admire a habitat featuring Andorian ice eels. Their tendrils were an incredible assortment of purples, blues, and blacks. He read the informational display and learned they were nearly extinct on Andor but had been introduced in Terran waters where they managed to thrive in the Arctic near Earth's northern pole and were becoming an invasive species.
In the next alcove he was surprised to find a woman sitting on a bench in front of a tank filled with spiny firefish, a small species native to his own planet. Her hand was gently pressed up against the glass and he could see from the half profile of her face that her mouth was slightly open and that she was lost in what seemed like child-like curiosity.

He recognized her as the woman he had seen speaking with Giles Marcus earlier in the evening. She seemed unaware of his presence and he reasoned that she must have been unable to hear his footsteps over the thrum of the cooling ducts. Not wishing to disturb her, he turned, but his movement seemed to be picked up in her peripheral vision.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, jumping and turning her body toward him.

Her eyes widened and her pupils dilated by a fraction of a millimeter. Their eyes locked. She braced herself to stand and he motioned her to remain seated.

"I did not intend to startle you," he said.

"No, no, of course not, no…" she said, her voice soft. "I was just admiring these fish."

"They are quite common on Vulcan."

His hands were folded behind his back in the typical neutral, diplomatic way. He took a step toward her to get a better view of the tank.

"They're beautiful," she replied, looking back over her shoulder at them. "In their own way."

He was uncertain what human females found aesthetically pleasing, but he considered her perspective on fish that were widely regarded as pests on his home world intriguing. He looked from the tank back to her. She stood, folding her hands before her and shifted her weight onto one foot. She was the first woman he had seen all evening not wobbling on poorly engineered footwear.

"It is good that you can enjoy them," he remarked.

"There are a lot fascinating species here from all over the Federation," she said, looking about the long hallway.

"I quite agree."

They were silent for a few moments, neither one looking at the other.

"I must go, Miss…?" he said, canting his head slightly to the side in deference to her.

"Grayson," she said, looking back at him but not quite meeting his eye.

"Miss Grayson," he finished.

She paused for a moment, lifted her chin slightly, formed her hand into the ta'al, and added in nearly unaccented Vulcan:

"Romhalan, dif-tor heh smusma." (1)

He arched his eyebrows in momentary surprise.

"Sochya eh dif," (2) he said in response, returning the ta'al.

She looked almost relieved as she slowly backed away and headed for the opposite end of the
tunnel and he hesitated to watch her go. It was the first social interaction he'd had all evening aside from Giles that wasn't altogether unpleasant. He appreciated Terrans who tried to understand Vulcan culture and respected the ones who actually made real strides in getting there. He turned on his heel and headed back in the direction of the aquarium tunnel to the mezzanine level, turning his mind to the remarks he was due to give about his late predecessor.

(1) Farewell, live long and prosper

(2) Peace and long life

Chapter End Notes

(1) Farewell, live long and prosper
(2) Peace and long life
Amanda woke the next morning alone in her hotel room. John had gotten them separate rooms, which was one of the only reasons she'd agreed to come. They had never been intimate and for a while it had bothered her, but more recently she was thankful.

She'd managed to avoid most of the reception altogether by touring the aquarium. She wondered what it meant that she found fish more interesting than most people. She'd been discovered down there by the new Vulcan ambassador and wondered how it must have looked, hiding away and staring at aquatic animals instead of socializing. Yet she realized he was there too, and she didn't have to know much about Vulcans to guess that his motives for walking around a deserted aquarium were probably much the same as hers.

She so often worried about doing or saying the wrong thing with the wrong species. She'd never actually met a Vulcan, and though she thought he was an intimidating representative of his race, talking with him hadn't been as terrifying as she might have imagined. She'd reviewed their interaction carefully as she walked away, hoping she hadn't been rude or botched the Vulcan greeting. She wasn't nearly as proficient at Vulcan as she was Romulan, but she figured it had gone well enough.

Then again, how could she tell? His face had remained motionless and for all she knew, she could've told him to jump off a bridge and gotten the same reaction. She had no idea how Giles got along all day with people who were impossible to read.

She glanced at the digital clock on the wall – 0715.

Her room came equipped with a sonic shower and she was surprised at how effective it was. She still enjoyed the water-based system in her apartment, but she imagined she could get used to this one day if her landlord ever decided to update her decrepit building.

Thirty minutes later she left the room. Her hair was pulled in a loose braid and she wore business casual slacks with a pale pink t-shirt. She analyzed herself in the mirror, feeling the creep of critical thoughts. She rolled her eyes at both her vanity and self-consciousness, then tucked her access key and PADD into a small shoulder bag and left for the observatory.

It was a short walk from the entrance of her hotel. The sun was out for the first time in weeks, making for a bitterly cold day. She wrapped her black pea coat around her more tightly and walked faster. She entered the observatory from the mezzanine level and saw there was a continental breakfast.

She heated herself a wheat bagel, spooned a handful of berries on her plate, and chose water over coffee. She was looking for an available table when she heard her name.

"Amanda Grayson?"

She turned and recognized Vice Admiral Bentham.

"Would you like to sit with me? There aren't really any tables open that I can see," he said, gazing at her and motioning to the small chair across from himself at a table for two.

"Um… alright," she said, forcing herself to smile.

She took a seat, set her plate down, and drank a sip of her water.
"I don't believe we've ever met in person," he said. "Molineaux has told me all about you though. I'm Maxwell Bentham."

"Yes," she said, folding her hands in her lap. "I don't think we have met, but of course I know who you are."

"John says you're quite the catch," he mused, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Does he really?"

She had no idea that John had ever actually discussed her with anyone else. He was so self-absorbed she couldn't believe he knew how to talk about anything but himself.

"Yes, he says you're a brilliant teacher and quite the linguist. Says you speak most of the Federation languages and Romulan. That's quite an accomplishment."

"Oh, well, thank you. And that's not quite true. I mean, I am able to communicate in Romulan quite well, at least what we've been able to understand about the Romulan language with such limited contact, and about eight of other languages to varying degrees of fluency. But I wouldn't say most of the Federation languages, no."

"No doubt you're being humble. Have you ever thought of joining Starfleet?"

"Ah, no," she said, managing a polite grin.

Actually she had briefly toyed with the idea in her last semester of graduate school when she still hadn't found a job and began to panic over what she would do for the rest of her life. She had actually taken the academy entrance exam on a whim one weekend and scored through the roof in language and communication skills, but most of her other line scores were decidedly average. Perhaps she could have done better if she had prepared. She was certainly intelligent and capable of understanding various fields outside of language, but areas like mechanics and mathematics had never come very naturally to her and it was obvious that well-rounded individuals had better opportunities for advancing in the long term.

"It's certainly not for everyone, but we could definitely use some Romulan speakers."

"Well, I would say I actually speak Romulan, per se. It's more correct to say I can talk in Romulan to a sufficient degree. 'Speaking' a language suggests you understand the nuances of the culture; the idioms, axioms, slang, social and political niceties, that kind of thing."

"I see," he said, setting his cup of coffee down.

"So, how are things in Starfleet?" she asked, preferring to turn the subject toward him.

"Space is space, people are people, and life goes on," he said, forming his hands into steeples. "Tell me, do you speak Vulcan? Correction, do you talk in Vulcan?"

_So much for changing the subject._

"Um, moderately well, I think. The alphabet is very nearly identical, as are vowel and most consonant sounds, but the Vulcan language is a lot more fluid than Romulan and the syntax has some notable changes. Romulan is quite utilitarian, you see. One word for one idea. Romulan has a wider vocabulary, but there's less room for confusion."

She stopped herself, realizing that sometimes she could prattle on about languages to the point of boring people. Yet Bentham seemed intrigued.
"What about Klingon?"

"I know very little Klingon. Maybe enough to ask for directions to a battle arena and order bloodwine in a way that wouldn't guarantee my swift execution, but I would hardly call myself capable. I've always wanted to learn though."

She had the peculiar feeling she was being interviewed. She took a bite of her bagel, finding it was already cold.

"Well, maybe one day we can talk you into putting on a red shirt."

"Hmmm?"

"Our translators and comm staff wear red," he explained.

"Oh, well, I think I'll stick to teaching."

"Well, I'm glad John brought you, it's been a pleasure speaking with you."

She looked over his shoulder and saw John approaching. He looked confused at the sight of her sitting with Bentham and he walked faster.

"Admiral Bentham, I see you've met my girlfriend, Amanda Grayson," he said, coming to a stop at their table.

"Yes, we were just having a chat about languages," he answered without looking in his direction.

"Amanda, my love," he said, acknowledging her.

"John," she intoned, taking another bite of her cold bagel.

"I've been calling you for the last hour; I was getting worried."

She wanted to say something sarcastically cruel but bit her tongue because Bentham was still sitting across from her.

"Well, here I am," she said, delivering a fake smile. "I turned the alerts off on my PADD at the reception last night. I must have forgotten to turn them back on."

"Well, John and I should be going. We have an 0800 panel on planetary self-sufficiency and I'm the moderator. It was a pleasure meeting you," Bentham said, standing and walking away without further comment, John following on his heels without even saying goodbye to her.

She set her PADD on the table and checked the alert setting. It was indeed still off. She noted three missed calls and two messages from John in her inbox. She was about to click her PADD to off when she thought about what Giles had said last night about sending out a birth announcement. She checked through her "received and read" folder and found nearly a dozen messages that she had never seen, including the one from Giles and several from her section manager at Rosetta from nearly three weeks ago inviting her out to lunch.

That was strange.

Perhaps there was a glitch in her PADD or its software. She began reading the rest of her messages. Thankfully none were critically important, but she still felt badly for never responding. She was grateful that she had failed to receive two from her mother. Somehow she didn't think the 'I didn't get your message' excuse would be believed, but it actually was the truth this time.
She finished her breakfast and departed for the linguistics forum. It mainly centered on semantic messages and body language, which she was quickly engrossed in. It was over after two disappointingly short hours, but she spent the remainder of the day visiting several exhibits including the spaceflight museum and the closed, functional biodome that had been operating for nearly 200 years without human intervention.

At around 1700, she decided to go back to her room and begin getting ready for the formal banquet later that evening. She’d had a dark gray gown replicated for the occasion. She had never dressed up in something so fancy in her life or spent so much money on one garment. It was floor length with capped sleeves and had beaded detailing along the bodice.

She took her time getting dressed and managed to curl her naturally wavy hair into more tame waves. Her mother gave her jewelry for every gift-giving occasion and for once she was glad. She installed a pair of gold drop earrings in each ear and put a delicate gold chain with a ruby pendant about her neck that had once belonged to her father’s mother. She had borrowed a pair of flat black evening shoes from Vera and the look was complete. She looked at herself in the mirror for a long time, feeling more confident than she had the night before. She had lost weight, maybe too much, she thought, but the dress fit like a glove around her slender frame. Eventually a smile poked its way onto her face. She shoved her identification and room access cards into discrete the waist pocket of her dress and left her room.

Her next move was a bit more complicated. Should she go get John or go down to the banquet by herself? Neither one sounded great, but she decided on the former option. She padded down the carpeted hotel hallway to room 819 and was about to ring the buzzer to his room when she heard voices coming from inside.

She wasn’t the sort of person who tended to eavesdrop, but curiosity got the better of her. She deftly pressed her ear against the door, and could hear John speaking excitedly with whom she presumed was Max Bentham in muffled tones.

"Our timeline got moved up. That's all there is to it. Figure it out," Bentham was saying.

"Elections are still three months away. I've been swamped-"

"We don’t have a choice."

"But we’re already out on a limb here. Moving there? That's practically Klingon space!"

Amanda crinkled her nose. Her heart began to beat and she thought she should back away from the door, but the conversation continued and she found she was unable to drag herself away.

"If they get to it before we do, it's over."

"Well, if I don't get elected to speaker, it's over too."

"Have you confirmed the location of the find, yet?"

"No, there's been nothing. I don't want her to suspect-"

"She won't suspect anything. Just get it. You're acting spineless. If you can't do this, I'll find another way."

There was a long moment of silence and Amanda peeled herself away from the door. She felt a bit faint. She had no idea what they were discussing, but Klingons? John was the joint chairperson for the Defense Committee.
What timeline? What "find" were they talking about? What did the Klingons have to do with it? Who was "she" and what might "she" suspect?

Amanda's mind started to run away with her, but she quickly began to feel very foolish. Two men were having a private discussion about things that could easily relate to their given professions. She hadn't heard the whole conversation, nor did she have any context, and jumping to conclusions was pointless. She took a breath and rang the buzzer.

John answered quickly, and very nearly did a double take.

"Amanda, you look… really nice," he said, his voice sincere and his face full of surprise.

"You don't have to sound so shocked," she snapped.

Seconds ticked by.

"Are you, going to invite me in? Or should I just wait out here for you to get dressed?"

"Oh, yes, come in. Admiral Bentham is here."

She entered the room just as Bentham appeared from around the corner and nodded to her.

"I was actually just leaving," he announced. "I'll see you downstairs, John."

He brushed past her in the narrow entryway and was gone.

John got ready quickly and they walked quietly downstairs and across the street to the observatory. The night air was bitingly frigid, and Amanda had skipped wearing a coat because it was such a short walk and she disliked dealing with coat checks. She was perfectly happy to preserve the silence, but John apparently was not.

"So, have you enjoyed the conference?"

"Well, I saw the aquarium last night and went to the language forum this morning. I wouldn't call it the highlight of my life, but it's been fine," she said briskly, picking up her pace.

"Good, good," he replied. "Say, how's the family doing?"

"Good, I guess," she answered.

"Mom's fine?"

"I don't know. She normally sends me messages once a week but for some reason they've been going to the 'received and read' folder in my PADD. I'll probably take it in for maintenance on Monday."

John was silent. She looked at him, noting his face suggested he was thinking hard. Finally he spoke again.

"Your dad, how's he doing?"

"He's great. He thinks he found some deposits of something. Somewhere. I forget. But doing well, it sounds like."

"He found deposits? Good for him… you don't remember where?"

"No," she said, frowning. "Does it really matter?"
"Of course it does!"

"Why?" Amanda asked, stopping in her tracks. "Ever since we started dating you've never expressed any interest in me, my family, my life, or generally anything but yourself or your campaign."

His face softened.

"Listen, Amanda, it's just these elections. You have to understand. It will get better, I promise."

She scowled and stalked past him without saying another word.

Sarek had spent the day engaged in numerous activities. His Vulcan economic policy advisor, Metana, had arrived before the sun came up. She was very young and less familiar with human customs than he would like, but she was a skilled economist, easy to get along with, and logical.

Mr. Marcus had arrived in the afternoon looking even more tired than when he had departed the night before.

He delivered remarks about the expansion of Romulan corridor to an audience of nearly 1,000. Giles had given him Sulak's talking points, and he ignored about half of them, favoring instead to raise his own points extemporaneously. He was a gifted orator: many Vulcans were. Many species relied heavily on emotional appeals that eventually devolved into name-calling and threats, but Sarek had a unique ability to sense the turn in his opponent's argument and shut it down cleanly and completely before raising his own well-spoken counterargument. His talent had served him well that day.

Vulcan wanted to extend the perimeter of their sector of space closer to the projected Romulan Neutral Zone. Their proposal would also greatly benefit Andoria and Orion who therefore supported Vulcan in their request. Coridan was not a member of the Federation, but longstanding hostilities with Orion caused them to lodge a formal complaint with the Federation Council and the Vulcan High Council. Most of the Terran government sided with Coridan, and the Federation Council was split evenly on the issue.

The situation was tense, and the political divisions on Earth were making matters worse. It didn't help that the Federation president was Andorian, but it didn't matter where he was from. Terrans and Coridians alike were painting this as a black and white issue, and the president's impartiality would have been questioned regardless of his heritage.

It was supposed to have been a discussion panel, but it had turned into an open debate when a Terran representative named John Molineaux had accused Vulcan of wishing to horde Starfleet resources on defending Vulcan from the Romulans when the primary mission of Starfleet was exploration. Sarek had quickly pointed out that Earth held exactly 81.4% of Starfleet's resources despite only contributing between 13 and 18% in materiel annually. He had encountered humans who could debate quite well in the past, but Mr. Molineaux wasn't among them. He shredded the young congressman point by point, and by the end he had a moderate degree of confidence that some favor had shifted among the Terrans to Vulcan's position, or at least Vulcan had not lost ground.

After the discussion he met with T'Lara, the Vulcan member of the Federation Council, to discuss the matter further. Afterward, Metana had returned to San Francisco and he returned to his lodging to meditate.

He had very little time for personal introspection since his arrival on Earth and it was wearing on
him. He sat quietly for an hour, completely purging his mind of the stresses and annoyances that came with constant contact with a multitude of abrasive species. An hour was not nearly enough time, but it had certainly been helpful.

He dressed in black, formal clothing and proceeded back toward the observatory. Giles waited for him by the entrance, shivering with his hands in the pockets of his tuxedo. The reception had begun two hours earlier, but the official function did not start for another ten minutes.

"I hope you have not been waiting for me," Sarek said as he approached.

"No, I've been inside all evening; I just stepped out for some fresh air," Giles replied. "I was going to call you but I didn't want to disturb you during your meditation hour."

"Thank you," he said, beginning to walk toward the entrance of the banquet hall.

They entered to find a room similar to the one from the night before: a large space made small by being packed full of people shouting to be heard over each other. There was food and drink, but Sarek, like all Vulcans, detested directly handling his food and did not consume alcoholic beverages.

The wine and liquor had clearly been flowing for quite some time. Many of the humans had flushed cheeks and unsteady gaits, which he understood to be signs of alcoholic intoxication. He would never understand the human propensity for choosing to consume substances in public that freed them of inhibitions and good judgment.

Sek, the Tellarite ambassador to Earth approached him and he found himself immediately engaged in a discussion about the Neutral Zone. Giles excused himself and Sarek spent the next forty-five minutes reiterating the same details of the proposal before finally removing himself from the conversation as well.

He knew both humans and Andorians in particular enjoyed these social gatherings until the latest of hours. He took a deep breath and started concentrating his mind, trying to achieve a higher degree of focus. He found it difficult in the present situation, but he was certainly capable.

Amanda stood near an enormous potted rubber tree in a corner of the room talking with Giles. She sipped from a glass of champagne; he declined to drink.

She told him about the forum that morning and about Bentham's strange line of questioning at breakfast. Giles had been in Starfleet for fifteen years and knew little about him, aside from his general reputation of being a cold, ambitious, and career-driven man.

She dropped the subject, afraid the wrong person would overhear and they discussed his new family. He lightly teased her for dating John and she was close to telling him their relationship was over but decided that was too personal. John definitely had the right to know their relationship was over before Giles did. Eventually the conversation turned into a debate about Tellarite poetic meter.

"I left my PADD upstairs. Let me see yours, and I'll show you that it's a nine syllable count," Giles insisted.

"I didn't bring mine either. No purse, no pockets," she shrugged. "But speaking of PADDs, I did get your message. It went straight to my 'read' folder, along with more than a dozen other messages. Weird, huh?"

"More like you probably have someone reading your mail," he smirked.
"That's impossible. It's never out of my sight."

"And where is it right now?"

"Well, I mean usually. But more than that, who would want to read mail from my mom and friends? Almost all of them were personal messages."

"I don't know," he said, canting his head to the side as though it would help him think better. "But I will tell you that someone doesn't actually need to be in physical possession of your PADD to read your mail. It's pretty easy to access remotely if your PADD settings set to the right specs and someone has the right router."

Amanda frowned.

"Even still, who would do that? And why?"

A Tellarite man interrupted her train of thought. He was stout, even for a Tellarite, and bellowing classic Tellarite obscenities. His bulk obscured the identity of the person he was speaking with, but Amanda instantly knew.

John was drunk. His speech slurred, his lip was curled back in an almost canine snarl.

"You can speak the Federation Standard language, you know," John spat. "That's what's wrong with you. All of you. You come here, thinking you know everything and what's best for everyone…"

John and the Tellarite were talking over each other and Amanda could make out generally what was being said about John. None of it was pleasant, but at least he had the decency to insult John as an individual: John had well passed the border of mild insults into blatantly open racism, and people nearby were growing quiet and watching the scene unfold.

Two more Tellarites had moved in to defend the initial aggressor, whom Amanda learned was Chancellor Gasek. She moved toward John delicately, silently willing him to shut his mouth and apologize. The room was growing quieter and she could feel the hairs on the back of her neck starting to stand up. A server with several wine glasses and a large pitcher on a tray was trying to get by her and out of the unfolding turmoil.

Giles put his hand on John's shoulder and tried steering him away but John threw him off. Then one of Chancellor Gasek's younger compatriots took a swing at John, missing by millimeters.

Chaos erupted.

Amanda stood in the middle of the scene, completely dumbfounded and uncertain of what to do. Giles got up and brushed himself off, coming so close to Amanda she tried to take a step back and stepped on the waiter's foot. Someone approached from her left side, saying loudly and firmly to, "Stop this."

She turned to see the Vulcan ambassador from the night before, just in time to watch the waiter collide with him and begin to fall backwards… right onto Amanda. His hands let go of the tray to attempt to brace his fall, and the tray and its contents were dumped right down her back and left side of her body. The wine wasn't the worst part; the pitcher had apparently been holding ice water.

She tried to maintain her composure but she loudly gasped with the awful shock of being drenched in nearly frozen water. John wheeled around angrily, coming even with the Vulcan ambassador. The waiter was just getting to his feet next to her and began yelling at John as the
instigator of the disaster.

That seemed to be John's breaking point. He tried to turn and took a swing at the waiter, but rather than hit his intended target, instead his fist landed squarely on Amanda's face.

Her head snapped back and tears instantly streamed from her eyes. Her hands instinctively went to her nose and they were quickly coated in blood. She wasn't sure if the room went silent or if she was too absorbed in her own pain and surprise to process sound. She was acutely aware of liquid dripping from her chin and she wasn't sure if it was blood or tears or both.

She tried opening her eyes but the tears blurred her vision. She felt utter panic. She wanted to get out of this mess, but there were several people pushing her from behind and she couldn't find an escape route. Slowly the sound level began to fade back in and she could hear more people actually screaming now. Giles grabbed her hard by the arm and pulled her toward the rubber plant they had been standing near earlier.

She managed to make out the figure of John trying to fight a Tellarite and a human. He was swinging wildly, and it seemed like his two opponents were unsure how to attempt to bring him down. Then a third figure appeared and grabbed him by the neck and she watched his body crumple to the floor lifelessly.

_He's dead. He's dead. They killed him. He's dead._

She began to hyperventilate. Black spots formed in her field of vision and she felt her body going weak. A pair of strong arms gently lowered her to the ground as she lost consciousness.
She didn't get home until nearly twelve hours later. As she approached the front door of her apartment she noticed a man from the hotel waiting for her with her luggage. *At least one thing had worked out in the end.*

His eyes avoided making contact with her face. She signed for her things without taking an inventory, thanked him for the delivery, and walked inside. She felt utterly defeated.

She was still wearing the blood-spattered, wine-soaked dress from the night before. She had torn it all the way up to her knee on the left side. She checked her appearance in the small, metal-framed mirror in her hallway and laughed – she looked like she had single-handedly taken on a bar full of Klingons… and lost.

The doctors at the walk-in clinic in Palo Alto had worked wonders putting her nose back together and getting rid of her headache, but there was little they could do for the bruises. She had deep purple circles under both eyes and across the bridge of her nose which were sore and gave her a raccoon-like appearance. She wondered how she would explain this to her students the tomorrow. She wondered how she would explain it to her boss.

She groaned, thinking again about how this would reflect on her, the diplomatic school, *Earth…*

Her PADD had arrived with the rest of her things from the hotel and she was afraid to check it. She hadn't spoken to anyone she knew since the incident the night before because she had left her PADD in the hotel room, but she had a very keen sense that they all knew what happened at the banquet. She had seen the security camera footage all over the news on the holo screens in the clinic waiting room. So she watched the event play over and over again, both in real time and in slow motion, and watched other patients in the waiting room give her sidelong glances but mercifully they said nothing.

She watched it in loop repeatedly. The Tellarites were yelling, the waiter was panicking, *she* was panicking, Giles was scrambling, the ambassador bumped into the waiter, the waiter dumped the drinks on her, the waiter yelled at John, John took an appallingly aimed swing at the waiter and accidentally hit *her,* and the ambassador appeared to choke John into submission in some peculiar way. She couldn't quite tell what happened from the angle, but it really looked like he pushed some sort of kill switch on the side of John's neck and turned him off like an appliance. As it turned out, John wasn't dead, which was good. Her already low opinion of him had been completely obliterated, but she wasn't *callous.*

She was fuzzy on the details immediately following what the news media had christened "the punch." She had fainted for a few brief moments and came to sitting on the floor with Giles tilting her head back to slow the flow of blood from her nose. Questions were flying in from all directions and she managed to ask Giles to get her a shuttle cab, which he swiftly did. On her way out of the back entrance to the banquet hall, reporters had already lined up like jackals, asking if she was pressing charges and how this would affect Congressman Molineaux's campaign. She was going to ask the driver to drop her by the hotel to collect her things, but camera crews were already starting to swarm the vehicle and she just begged him to drive to a walk-in emergency clinic instead. The driver had been kind enough to let her use the com link in the cab to call the hotel and ask them to deliver her things to the apartment the next day.

Her PADD began to ring and she checked the screen. Her mother was calling, and she had 107 missed calls and 192 messages. They were from a motley crew that included her mother, John, Giles, Vera, two of her students' parents, her Aunt Janet, and more than a dozen numbers
she didn't recognize but were listed as various news outlets and the Tellarite embassy. She gulped.

Her PADD continued to ring and she was about to answer it when a second call chirped. *The Vulcan embassy.* She stared at her PADD with expressionless eyes and then shut it off. She would deal with this after she took a shower and had a nap.

Sarek sat in his office at the consulate with his hands pressed against his forehead in a steeple position. He had experienced a series of cascading events following the unfortunate incident at the interplanetary conference banquet. It was morning now and he had not returned to his lodgings. He often found it helpful to reflect after any kind of gathering as a means of organizing events in his head in a more logical way. The gathering from the night before was proving moderately challenging to comprehend.

The observatory security team stepped in almost immediately after he had felt compelled to neutralize Congressman Molineaux. He and Giles both stayed to answer their questions and afterward he spoke with the police and a handful of reporters.

Giles had advised him against speaking with the media. Humans seemed to have a requirement for about waiting until well after an incident to put together an official version of events in what they termed "press releases." He imagined it was a way of mitigating embarrassing remarks or misinformation, but Sarek was Vulcan, and Vulcans were not often prone to speaking imprecisely or about facts and events they could not confirm. He told them what he knew and what he had observed: nothing more, nothing less.

The door to his office suite was open and he could see the news projections on the central holographic viewing screen in the lobby. The events of the night before had been the main topic of focus on every outlet since it had first been reported. One thing he had never been able to understand about humans was their ability to fixate on one event while ignoring all others. Humans were so easily distracted by the most irrelevant things.

Of all the things that occurred at the interplanetary conference, *this* was the one they chose most worthy of news. Of all the events occurring throughout the entire Federation, this was the one they cared about most. All other news had been relegated to quickly scrolling text at the top of the screen.

Three days ago, Starfleet raised the threat level based on intelligence that Romulans may have encroached on the designated Neutral Zone and may be continuing to do so. It had caused a mild panic and the news covered only Romulan-related topics, from explaining all the declassified material about their weapons capabilities to analyses of maps of the Neutral Zone border. One news station had aired a three hour long segment where seven hardly qualified individuals extrapolated a simple Starfleet press release into a full on invasion, mostly accusing Starfleet, the Federation, and the Terran government of doing nothing to protect the citizens of Earth. But that was all forgotten now, in light of a minor physical altercation at a diplomatic conference.

It had been unfortunate and he would have preferred not to be involved. He abhorred violence, but it was logical to employ a small amount of it against an individual to prevent that individual from committing further acts of aggression. The nerve pinch had subdued Molineaux, but not before he struck Miss Grayson, the woman from the aquarium.

Sarek was uncertain the degree to which he contributed to her injuries. He had moved too quickly and misjudged the beverage server's speed and direction of travel. Their collision caused the server to then collide with Miss Grayson, which caused her to be in the proper position to be struck. Taking responsibility was illogical, because it was Molineaux who had instigated the fight and Molineaux who had resorted to using his fists, but his knowledge of human behavior caused him
to believe Miss Grayson may not see it that way.

While they had waited for the investigators, Mr. Marcus explained that he knew Amanda Grayson on a personal level and that she was a teacher at the diplomatic school and was romantically involved with Congressman Molineaux. Marcus had recommended the consular office should call her and make a formal apology. While he admitted he was not responsible, he could not deny he had a role in the outcome, and he agreed. Marcus gave him the information and he had tried twice, unsuccessfully, to make contact.

He was beginning to tire. He hadn't slept in four days and his fatigue was no doubt contributing to his inability to relax his mind. He was the only one in the office. Humans observed holidays on the sixth and seventh days of their so-called seven daylong weeks. *Remarkably inefficient.*

His Vulcan staffmembers often worked Saturdays but commonly reserved Sundays to attend to personal matters.

He turned to the console on the left side of his desk and was about to attempt to reach Miss Grayson a third time at the number Mr. Marcus had provided when he heard someone enter the common suite of the adjacent room. Moments later he heard a gentle knock on the door.

"Ambassador?" asked Giles.

"Enter," he replied, turning his chair to face his secretary.

He motioned for him to sit in the high-backed chair across from his desk, and Giles did, slumping slightly with obvious exhaustion.

"Everything is about as good as it can be under the circumstances. The police will use me as the point of contact if they have any further questions. I arranged for your belongings to be moved from your hotel lodgings back to your private quarters here."

"Thank you for your diligence in this matter, Mr. Marcus," he said, nodding.

"The Vulcan consulate has no public relations secretary and I'm not really an expert in that particular area," Giles continued. "You may want to think about getting one, considering the volume of calls that are coming in. I started filtering my incoming calls and messages about four hours ago. I stopped counting when my inbox hit over two thousand."

"Have you received any word from Congressman Molineaux's office or Amanda Grayson?" he asked.

"No. I'm guessing Molineaux is probably going to take the weekend off to get with his people and come up with a way to spin this, as if anyone is going to believe that punching your girlfriend in the face in the middle of a racist tirade is excusable," he added, anger rising in his tone.

"Well, I would prefer to send a message to the congressman's office before tomorrow to explain our position on this incident. I believe it is unwise to pass any judgment on his actions but don't want to give the impression that I have anything to apologize for. Can you draft whatever you think is appropriate and send it out by the end of the day?

"Certainly," Giles replied, his face falling at the prospect of achieving a twenty-four hour workday over the weekend.

"After that, you may return home," Sarek said, noting his subordinate's dismay.

"What would you like me to say to Amanda- uh, Miss Grayson?"
"I have tried to reach her also but have been unable to do so. Do you have better contact information for her?"

"No, just the one mobile number and her home address."

Sarek weighed his options. In his experience, putting off apologies in emotionally charged species often lessened their impact proportionally to the amount of time between the offense and the apology. Giles seemed to sense what he was thinking.

"I can go with you to meet her in person after I send the message to Molineaux's office, if you prefer."

He considered was what both logical and appropriate. It seemed likely to believe she wanted privacy in the aftermath of a widely publicized incident; however meeting her in person to apologize could make a substantial statement.

"You seem to have a degree of familiarity with Miss Grayson. Do you have any insight into what she would prefer?"

"She's pretty level-headed. I apologized to her profusely at the banquet before I put her in a shuttle cab. She was probably still pretty rattled but she tried making it clear that it wasn't anyone's fault but Molineaux's. I still think you should apologize, just to convey the point clearly."

"Very well," he said. "Can you call for a shuttle and send me her address?"

"You don't want me to go with you?" he asked, trying in vain to keep the relief from his voice.

"As you said, you've already apologized. Now it is my turn to make amends."

Giles left his office and a short time later, Sarek collected his heavy overcoat from the closet and went downstairs to wait for the shuttle.

She stepped out of the shower, gently toweling around her face, which was still tender. She wiped the condensation from the mirror and looked again at her wrecked face and sighed. She was in the middle of putting toothpaste on her toothbrush when the buzzer to her door rang.

She cursed under her breath and looked for clothes to put on. The buzzer rang again. I'm coming, she thought, trying her best to suppress her annoyance. She was in the middle of putting her underwear on when the buzzer rang a third time. She stumbled, barely catching herself on the metal dresser.

"I'm coming," she snapped, this time aloud.

She grabbed her bathrobe and cinched it tightly around her waist. She peered through the peephole. Vera.

She unlatched the lock and let her in. Vera didn't make it inside before she began swearing about John.

"That bastard! Look at your face!"

"Yeah…" Amanda moaned, unsure of what to say.

"Tell me you're pressing charges. Tell me he's dropping out of the election. Tell me he's going to prison. Tell me-"
"I don't know yet. I don't know anything. I'm just trying to take a step back for a day or two."

"You can't let him get away with this," Vera protested.

"I'm not. I just want to make sense of everything that happened last night before I jump into something."

"But it's been on the news all night. I tried calling-"

"Yeah, I know," Amanda said, cutting her off more forcefully than she intended. "I'm just tired. I haven't slept, my face hurts, and I kind of just want to be alone."

"Yeah, yeah, I get that," Vera said, frowning.

"Don't take it the wrong way…" Amanda pleaded, beginning to feel guilty.

"No, it's fine," Vera added. "You need rest. I'll get out of your hair and continue to mislead reporters away from your door. Good thing we live in an out-of-the-way dump and the landlord's too lazy to repaint the apartment numbers."

Amanda felt an enormous burst of gratitude and hugged her friend.

"Do you have that black dress I loaned you?" Vera asked.

"Yeah, it's still packed with my stuff from the hotel. You need it now?"

"If it's not too much bother. I ditched the Denobulan guy. He was goofy. Anyway I got invited to an art gallery tonight and it's my lucky dress."

"How is it lucky?" Amanda asked, turning and stooping to open her luggage which had remained in the entryway.

"Every time I wear it I meet the most amazing men. I wanted it to be lucky for you too, so you could get rid of John 'Jackass' Molineaux and find some interesting guy with a lot of money and rich-people hobbies."

"If I did that, I'd have to move away from all of this," she said with a fake smile, waving her hand around the room.

"So I take it you didn't meet an interesting guy with a lot of money and rich-people hobbies?"

"No, no one like that. I didn't meet anyone. I spent the whole weekend avoiding people," she said, finally locating the Vera's dress in the bottom of her suitcase.

"Wait, that's not true," she corrected, holding up a finger to her mouth in a thoughtful fashion. "I met a Starfleet admiral who looked like he fantasized about skinning me alive while we chit-chatted and the Vulcan ambassador to Earth. Which one do you think is going to come beating down my door to sweep me off my feet?"

They stared at each other for a few seconds and burst into laughter simultaneously.

"You're funny," Vera dismissed, taking the dress from her.

"Yeah, a real barrel of laughs," she said, wincing at the pain caused by crinkling her nose during her fit of giggles.
Vera left and promised to come by tomorrow evening and Amanda returned to the bathroom to finish brushing her teeth. She got dressed in athletic pants and a t-shirt and laid down on the bed to take a nap. Almost immediately, her door buzzed again. She didn't move and silently prayed for whomever it was to go away, but it rang a second time. She sighed, got up, walked to the door and peered through the peephole. John.

She waited for a minute and took a deep breath. She began to feel angry. The door buzzed again and she ripped the door open.

"What?" she growled.

"Oh- oh my God," he said, staring open-mouthed at her face.

He was holding flowers and looked rather tired.

"Go away," she said, closing the door.

"Amanda, wait, you don't understand-"

"What's to not understand?" she asked, pulling the door back open. "You get drunk and scream racist garbage at an interplanetary conference at the top of your lungs in a crowded banquet hall full of a rather diverse group of people, then punch me in the face and act like I don't understand?!

"The way I acted was so-"

"Out of line that it practically puts you in another galaxy? Listen, John, you're the one who doesn't understand. I don't have time for you anymore. And that's fine, because it's not like you ever had a lot of time for me either."

She tried closing the door again but he blocked it with his foot.

"Get off my porch or I'll call the police," she said in a low growl.

"Considering I'm on my way to have lunch with the San Francisco police chief, I don't know what the police would do," he said, shrugging and giving her a sheepish smile.

"You are unbelievable! First you're begging me to forgive you and now you're threatening me?"

John took a breath and opened his mouth to say something else, which was muffled by her slamming the door in his face. He rang the buzzer again and again and she sank down on her couch and considered her next move. After about five minutes the buzzing stopped and she relaxed. She was so tired.

She began to doze when she was startled awake by his knocking on her sliding glass door on her back patio. He must have climbed the fire escape. Maybe he thought it was romantic. She happened to think it was desperate and extremely creepy. She gulped and tried to look serious as she walked to her back door.

"Amanda, we can get past this. Please, just give me another chance."

She took a deep breath.

"No," she said, trying to force her voice to stay calm.

"What happened- that's not who I am," he insisted, pressing his hands against the glass.
"Whoever you are, you're not someone I want to be involved with," she said, her tone growing more dangerous.

"Please, it's cold out here, just let me in."

"Go away, now. You're just embarrassing yourself. I'm still considering pressing charges from the banquet, and I know what that would do to your campaign, as if it weren't probably already in the toilet."

Those words seemed to have a magic effect on him and he left. She started closing the vertical patio blinds and realized that her hands were shaking. *John wasn't dangerous, was he?* Sure, he had done a number on her face, but that had been an accident. She felt a growing anxiety as she flopped back down on her couch.

She stared at the pictures on the fireplace mantel. The one of her and John at Big Sur was still face down, but the frames were all still lined in obsessive little rows. She stood, walked over to the fireplace, and quite irrationally began adjusting their positions until they were completely askew. She wanted John out of her life in every sense of the word, and disorganizing his organization made her feel a little better. She moved on to the knickknacks on the bookshelf, turning trinkets every which way.

Her doorbell buzzed again and her heart sank. She felt a strange rush of paranoia, thinking that he was watching her and wanted back into her apartment to fix her mess. And *that* made her angrier than she had been all day.

She stomped over to the door, flung it open and yelled, "I said 'go away!'"

The person standing there wasn't John, but the Vulcan ambassador.
Apologies

She stood in the doorway with her mouth open, muttering unintelligible syllables. Her heart was thumping so loudly she was certain he could hear it.

Aside from a slight upward tick of his eyebrows, his face remained remarkably stoic. She realized she was making sounds that didn't quite form words and stopped. She was afraid she was going to hyperventilate.

"Miss Grayson?"

Somehow his neutral tone kicked her mind into the appropriate gear.

"I am so sorry, ambassador. I wasn't expecting you. I thought you were- well, it doesn't matter. I just- I can't believe- that was so rude of me- I'm beyond sorry."

"How can one be 'beyond sorry?' One is either sorry or one is not," he replied.

"Right," she mumbled. Her face began to grow hot, which was causing it to throb from her bruises.

Her hands started brushing away the stray hairs from her face and her self-consciousness expanded to her appearance. Her mind started scrolling through a checklist of things.

She was wearing a bra, right? She was afraid to look down to confirm. Was her apartment dirty? Did he have a good view of her apartment from where he stood on her front porch? Why was he even here?

"… I thought it was important you knew," he finished.

He had been talking and she hadn't even heard him over the screaming of her own thoughts. Now she had been rude twice.

She stood there quietly, unaware that she was holding her breath. His face remained completely expressionless. Seconds ticked by and an already awkward situation turned from bad to worse. He was clearly waiting for her to say something. A wind gust rolled into her apartment and she shivered. Suddenly she noticed his cheeks and the tips of his nose and ears had a greenish hue to them, which gave him a very strange appearance.

She desperately wanted someone to say something. Should she invite him in? Would that be appropriate? Was her apartment clean enough? He looked very cold and at long last she realized she was being rude for yet a third time.

"Would you- would you like to come in?" she stammered.

His eyes darted from her to the apartment behind her and then back to her. He said nothing for what felt like an eternity and she was silently calling herself every swear word she knew.

"Very well," he said, his body leaning backward a fraction of an inch.

Her invitation seemed to make him uncomfortable, but taking it back would be even ruder still.

"It's just that it's so cold outside," she added, trying to explain her offer.
They remained at an impasse, motionless and both sizing up the situation and each other.

"May I enter?" he asked eventually.

She instantly recognized the problem and felt stupid: she was blocking the doorway. She took a shallow breath and stepped aside to let him in.

Her eyes darted around her apartment. *It looked ok, didn't it?* She had a particle filter that kept dust from forming and an automatic sweeper that got rid of most of the cat hair and dirt off the floors. Sure, there was *some* cat hair on the couch and her luggage was still sitting on the floor. *Was there a cat smell?* Her dining room pub table was covered with lesson plans and cross-referenced Rigelian and Romulan phonics and syntax schematics that she had spent more than a month unsuccessfully diagramming for her work on the universal translator. Hopefully it looked like an organized mess.

She never had guests in her apartment besides John and Vera. John was his own cleaning and organization service and she had long ago given up on trying to impress him. And Vera, well, she wasn't a guest; she was more like a stray animal that kept coming back for the food and pats on the head. She *had* promised herself that she would make some new friends after she booted John from her life, she thought with a degree of sad irony. Sure, she had pictured someone more affable and less... Severe? Important? Unswervingly Logical?... but who was she to be choosy?

They stared at each other and she knew the situation was circling the drain and picking up speed. All the pocket guides she had ever read about cross-cultural etiquette with other species had only related to formal settings. As far as she knew there were no primers titled things like *A Night on the Town with Tellarites* or *Tea Time with Vulcans: 10 Ways to Break the Ice*. Even if there were, surely there was nothing so specific as *The Human Idiot's Guide for What to Do When a Vulcan Dignitary Arrives on Your Doorstep.*

*Why had no one ever written anything like that?* She would have forked over her life savings on any such publication that could clue her into what she should do.

"Can I take your coat?" she asked, wringing her hands.

"Thank you," he said, shrugging it off one shoulder, twisting it around his tall frame to offer it to her.

It was more of a floor length cloak than something she would consider a coat, extremely heavy and surprisingly soft, with a very high collar and immaculately detailed stitching that she hadn't noticed before. She folded it over her arm to avoid it dragging the ground and hung it in her entryway closet. The task had only taken about ten seconds. *Now what?*

She looked back at him nervously and he turned to face her. She bit her lip, starting to feel annoyed at how awkward this was becoming. She thought about her mother, the socially conscious woman who had spent her entire life climbing to the middle of New Chicago's social circle. *What would her mother do?* That was easy: she'd ask if he would like to sit down and offer him a drink. She imagined that if her mother were here, she'd be scolding Amanda for not having done this sooner.

"Would you like to sit down?" she asked, trying to look calm.

"Very well," he said.

She thought she noticed a hint of indecision in his tone. *Now where to sit?* The couch was covered in white cat hair and he was wearing dark clothing. Her bistro table was would be more
suitable, except it was covered with old-fashioned books, charts, and paperwork. She chose it anyway.

She motioned him in the direction of her tiny breakfast nook, moving quickly to try and collect her things.

"I apologize for my mess," she blurted. "I wasn't expecting company."

Was that the right thing to say? Was she implying that he was being rude?

"I did try contacting you from the directory at the embassy complex," he intoned. "However it is illogical for you to apologize for finding yourself unprepared to welcome an unannounced visitor."

She would kick herself for not responding to her calls later. She worked quickly to compile her things into a neater stack and move them to the nearby kitchen counter. It felt like his eyes were drilling through her.

"I see that you study the Romulan language," he noted. "Impressive."

"Hmmmm?" she murmured, then looked down and noticed her flowchart on Romulan syntax. "Oh, well, yes. What we know about the Romulan language, anyway."

"I presume you've also studied Vulcan. Your command of its difficult pronunciation suggests you have been a student of it for a considerable amount of time."

"Um, I have studied it, yes," she stammered. "Though I wouldn't say I can communicate in it particularly well. It's far more difficult than Romulan, though the features they share in common are quite striking."

She stopped herself there. She often had a tendency to ramble on about the nuances of linguistics, and it seemed arrogant to give the man a lecture on his own language. She felt herself relaxing a bit now that conversation was flowing.

"Ambassador," she said quickly, "I hope you can forgive me, but I don't often entertain many Vulcan guests, well, none really, and I'm not really familiar with your customs on these things. To be completely honest, you're actually the first Vulcan I've ever spoken with directly."

There. Honesty never hurt.

"This is your home," he said, as if trying to forgive her misgivings. "You must be as you are."

She felt a smile forming on her face and tried to force it down. She began to think more about the situation from his point of view: it was likely just as unfamiliar to him as it was to her. She felt herself relaxing further, which lowered her anxiety to about a 38 on a scale of 0-10.

"Would you like anything to drink?" she asked, waving her hand in the direction of her kitchen. "I can brew some tea, I think I have some cranberry juice, and of course water."

"Water will be acceptable, thank you," he replied.

She moved to the kitchen, feeling shaky and hoping it wasn't noticeable.

She moved around the counter and into the kitchen and extracted two small cocktail glasses from the upper cabinet above the sink. She poured two glasses of cold water from her filtration unit and rejoined him.
"I hope you don't think I'm being rude for asking," she said, handing the glass to him, "but why have you come?"

"To apologize for the incident last night. You were seriously injured and my actions contributed to those injuries."

"That's not true," she argued. "Well, not exactly true. You were only trying to stop a bad situation from getting worse. I just, sort of got caught in the crossfire. I don't blame you any more than I blame the waiter, or myself. The only person to blame is Congressman Molineaux."

She felt a strange sense of embarrassment in bringing up John's name and wondered if the ambassador knew they had been in a relationship. She wanted to explain that they were no longer together, mostly as a way to convey to him that John's opinions were not hers as well. Yet it felt inappropriate bringing up such a private matter.

"Also, I wasn't seriously injured," she continued, deciding to try and steer the conversation away from her ex-boyfriend.

He glanced at her face and she noticed his eyes narrow a fraction of a centimeter.

"Oh, well, I mean, I realize it looks bad, but it really isn't," she added. "Besides, the more I think about it, maybe getting punched in the face was good for me, in a way."

"Explain," he said, raising an eyebrow.

She sighed and tried to think of how best to put it.

"Well, before last night, I would have thought being hit in the face hard enough to break my nose was the worst thing that could happen to me. Well, maybe not the worst, but you know… Anyway, it taught me that I'm not as fragile as I thought I was, and there's value in that."

"I see," he remarked.

Amanda took a drink of her water and he followed suit. He shuddered.

"Is something wrong?" she asked. "Is the water too cold for you?"

He paused for a moment, staring into the glass in his hand.

"It is acceptable," he replied.

"Really, it isn't a problem. I can get you something else."

He looked from the water to her, directly meeting her gaze for the first time since he had invited him inside. It was somehow both intimidating and reassuring at the same time.

"Look, you told me that it's my home and I should 'be as I am.' Well, being as I am means that I want you to be comfortable," she said earnestly.

"The water is colder than I am accustomed to," he admitted.

"I can make some tea," she offered.

"I do not wish to inconvenience you."

"It's not an inconvenience if I offer," she said, forgetting her company and smiling. "I was
thinking I'd like a cup myself since it's so cold outside."

"I have not sampled much Terran tea," he mused.

"Well," she said, standing up and walking into the kitchen, "I don't know a great deal about Vulcan customs or Vulcan in general, but I do know about tea. What sort of Vulcan tea do you prefer?"

She began filling her teakettle with water and turned on her induction burner. She opened her large tea organizer and began sifting through the vast array of tins and bags.

"At home I normally consume a simple t'hgara blend with breakfast," he explained.

"I don't have any of that, but I do have a white oolong that's quite similar. Would you be interested in giving it a try?"

"Whatever you recommend, thank you."

"Do you prefer it hot or warm?" she asked, putting the full kettle on the stove.

"Both words have highly subjective and variable definitions. Specify."

"Well, I suppose the upper limit of 'hot' is boiling and I'd say 'hot' stops somewhere around 60 degrees Celsius," she quipped, realizing how regrettably sarcastic her words must have sounded as they escaped from her mouth.

"'Hot' will be suitable, thank you."

She set to work, finding that focusing on her task was calming. She felt like she was completely out of her element and badly stumbling through making small talk with him, but tea she understood. Several minutes passed without either of them speaking and Amanda took a deep breath. Soon enough tea was ready and she emerged from the kitchen and observed him looking at the books on the shelves opposite his seat at the table.

"You must think I'm pretty old-fashioned, keeping hard copy books around," she said, setting the hot cup of tea in front of him.

"Not at all. I see you have several titles devoted to astronomy; is it a subject of interest to you?"

"Um, I guess so, but I think a lot of subject areas are interesting. All of my astronomy books came from my father, though."

"Is he an astronomer?"

"No, he's a surveyor. He's probably spent more of his life out in space than he has here on Earth. I've been interested in languages since I was a kid and he would send me books and maps and texts from whichever port he was at. I think it's fine to learn languages by reading about them, but I think mastering them comes from reading them as the natives do."

"Logical."

"The first one was that one," she said, pointing out a thick manuscript on a middle shelf. "It's actually a collection of Tellarite star charts. What little I know about interstellar cartography came from the Tellarites. What about you: do you like astronomy?"

"I enjoy astronomy generally, but it is a broad field. More specifically I studied astrophysics at the
Vulcan Science Academy," he said, pursing his lips together to a nearly miniscule degree.

"Applied or theoretical?" she asked, taking a sip of her tea.

"Both, to a degree."

She observed a slight downward tilt of his chin and took note of it. The more time Amanda spent in his company, the more she was able to discern certain diminutive mannerisms in his face and body language that seemed remarkably synonymous with those of humans, if she was interpreting them correctly. As a linguist, she couldn't help but acknowledge that some of the most important language wasn't spoken aloud, and she wasn't aware how much she relied on nonverbal cues until now.

"What was your area of focus?"

"I designed a comprehensive search for neutral baryonic matter in the subspace medium," he replied.

"That's really impressive," she said, taking a drink of her tea. "So how did you end up going from particle physics to politics?"

He was silent for a brief second. She analyzed his face but could draw no conclusions about what he was thinking.

"Familial responsibility," he answered, reaching for his teacup and hesitating before taking a sip. "This is very pleasing."

"I'm glad you like it."

Silence fell between them once again. Thinking over the reason for his visit started to weigh on her. She finished the last of her tea and set the cup down and stared at the table.

"I just want you to know," she mumbled, "the things John, Congressman Molineaux, said, they were terrible. I don't share his opinions."

"I made no assumptions on the matter," he replied. "It would have been illogical to do so."

"Thank you," she said, feeling a sense of relief. "I just want to say sorry for the things he said."

"Why should you? They were not your words, nor are they your opinions, as you've just indicated. I have never fully comprehended the human propensity to apologize for things outside of their control."

"But you came here to apologize to me for something that was an accident, and therefore out of your control," she challenged.

"I felt it was my duty to do so, not as an individual, but as an ambassador to your planet and your people. It is what I believed a human would expect."

"So you consider it logical to be illogical?" she asked with a mildly playful tone.

His eyebrows rose significantly and she knew she had struck a nerve.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I'm not trying to lecture you on logic. I imagine that's a bit like a kitten trying to spar with a lion."

"Again, you are apologizing for a thing outside your control. You highlight a paradox that I have
been forced to attempt to reconcile many times as ambassador to Earth. A kitten may be a kitten, but it still has claws, to use your analogy."

"Well, if you'll permit me one more apology, which is undeniably my fault and was well within my control, I would like to say that I am sorry for yelling at you when I answered the door."

"You apologized for that already," he dismissed, finishing his tea and placing the cup in the saucer on the table.

"I just felt like I needed to reiterate that," she replied.

"Do you normally answer your door in such a fashion?"

"Actually you would be the first person I've ever greeted with completely unsolicited wrath, so no, not normally," she said sheepishly, trying to avoid the mention of John.

She collected their cups and went into the kitchen, wondering what to do next. She set the cups in the sink and her eyes darted around her kitchen. She heard Euclid meow from the next room.

She came out to see him staring intently up at her guest, his tail swishing side to side. He rose up on his hind legs and stretched out his paws onto the ambassador's leg. Her cat was about to use his slacks as a scratching post.

"Euclid!" she hissed.

The cat jumped in surprise and darted into the living room, only to return moments later and bound up onto her pub table. To be fair, he most likely had run out of food sometime yesterday while she was at the conference and she had neglected to feed him when she got home. She should have gotten a dog.

"I'm sorry," she said, scooping him up and ferrying him to the kitchen.

"A third unwarranted apology," the ambassador said, crossing his arms and watching her open the food container and scoop out two heaps of dry cat food.

In a way she felt glad her face was so bruised, hoping it was hiding the color rising in her cheeks. A chirping sound emerged from her entryway closet.

"I am receiving a call, excuse me," he said, rising to collect his PADD from a large pocket hidden away in his cloak.

She looked down at her cat; he was crunching his food hungrily and she became acutely aware of how hungry she was.

"Miss Grayson?"

"Hmmm?" she murmured, wandering out of her hiding place in the kitchen and into her small front room.

"I must go. Thank you for your hospitality. I hope I have made amends for last night's episode," he said casually, pulling on his coat.

"I already told you, there were no amends to make," she said, approaching him and walking him the short distance to her front door. "It was really thoughtful of you to stop by in person, Ambassador…"
She stopped abruptly, feeling embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, it just occurred to me that I don't know your name."

"A fourth illogical apology."

She offered him an exasperated smirk. She couldn't help but think that she wanted to find his straightforward personality rude, but he wielded it well and he wasn't abrasive or condescending.

"Illogical," he continued, "because I have been impolite and neglected to tell you. I am Sarek."

"Well, Ambassador Sarek, thank you for your company, and I'm sorry to see you go," she said, immediately realizing her mistake. "So that brings our total for today's visit to five illogical apologies," she added with a sigh.

He turned back to her, opened his mouth, and then closed it again. His thoughts seemed to linger for a moment before he pulled the door handle and said, "Live long and prosper, Amanda Grayson."

"Peace and long life, Ambassador Sarek," she replied.

He stepped out and started down the steps to the street level and she watched him go. It had started sleeting during his stay. The cold winter air swirled into her apartment, so she shut the door behind him and sighed as she leaned into the doorframe. She supposed it could have been worse. Not for the first time, she found herself overwhelmed by the irony that she had both a gift and a passion for language learning and communication but so little experience or skill in actually putting that talent to practical use. She started to review the entirety of their interaction, wondering how accurately her memory would portray her awkward stammering and self-conscious silences. She softly banged her head into the door in abject frustration and yelped, having forgotten about her tender face.
The next several weeks were brutal for Amanda. Ambassador Sarek was just the first in a long procession of people poking into her life. She wanted to put the events of the conference behind her but no one else seemed so inclined.

Her mother was disappointed. She wasn't sure if it was in her, John, or the situation in general; she swore up and down she was angry with John for hurting her daughter, but Amanda sensed some other disappointment there. Before this whole thing, John had aspired to one day be Terran president and was actually on track to do so, probably in about thirty years. She could only imagine her socially conscious mother's delight in the thought of her own daughter being married to the leader of a planet, and then her disappointment as those dreams evaporated.

The Tellarite ambassador, a middle-aged man named Julan, was waiting for her outside of her classroom the following Monday morning before school started. He was the father of one of her students, a stubborn boy called Zhav. She hadn't been sure what to expect when she saw him stomping back and forth outside of her schoolroom, but he had come to apologize on behalf of Chancellor Gasek and all of Tellar Prime. After he was done apologizing, he stuck around.

He had been excited to discover she was well-versed in his language and insisted on meeting with her every week after that to discuss his son. He developed a curious habit of showing up in the small cafeteria in the basement of the North wing where she took the students for lunch, bumping into her in even the most remote corridors, and generally popping up more often than could possibly be randomly attributed to chance. He was nice enough, but he came on quite strongly and even if she ever thought she could be interested, she was pretty certain he had a wife back on his home planet. Avoiding her new Tellarite suitor was proving difficult, but keeping the media and the general public at bay had been impossible from the start.

Most of the media's portrayal of her was as a battered girlfriend, an innocent victim, or an idiot who didn't know how to move out of the way while the 'boys handled their problems.' She had thought sexism was of a bygone age and felt dismayed to discover such old-fashioned sentiments still existed in some strata of society. Earth of the 23rd century had come a long way, but apparently there was no such thing as a finish line where progress was concerned.

She had managed to avoid talking to anyone from the press, which had been a mixed blessing. Initially it made interest in her even more ardent as everyone fought to get an exclusive interview. They called and knocked on her door at all hours of the night. They waited outside of the embassy for her to get to work and waited all day for her to leave again. Eventually she learned it wouldn't have mattered anyway, because they were going to report on the story with or without some salacious quote.

She never realized how much she loved solitude until people recognized her everywhere she went. In public, complete strangers acted like they knew her and it opened her up to unsolicited advice, questions, and comments from all manner of people.

One man on the bus had accused her of staging the whole thing to make John look bad. The Monday after it happened, Congressman Molineaux's office released a lengthy statement explaining his support for interspecies cooperation, his disgust with domestic violence, and a bill he was putting forward in the next congressional session to fund a program to facilitate a student exchange among various federation universities to celebrate diversity. Included in the same statement was a single sentence indicating that she and the congressman had "parted their separate ways but still remain good friends in light of this unfortunate, unintentional incident." Amanda thought his campaign manager was playing rather fast and loose with the phrase "good friends"
but she was happy all the same to be free of him entirely, both on a personal level and a public one. Still, there existed a fraction of society who thought she was horrible for deserting him in his hour of need.

Then there were the armchair warriors. A tiny, wizened old woman in a hover chair at the corner deli had told her in no uncertain terms that if *she* had been the one punched in the face, she would have hit him right back with her purse. Nearly a dozen people had criticized her directly to her face for not pressing charges, insisting he would hurt other people if she let him get away with it. She just wanted this whole thing to be forgotten. John had gotten drunk, tried to hit a waiter, and hit her on accident. That was all there was to it.

Unfortunately that seemed to have the counter effect of drawing it out more, just so people could tell her that she was making the wrong decision. She had never understood the burning desire that people have to give their opinions where they were neither needed nor wanted, but she quickly learned any choice she made would be picked apart and examined and found to be lacking or short-sighted in some way.

Eventually media interest about her slowed to a trickle, especially given that she was but a costar in the circus surrounding the incident. John took center stage, though people had also formed a wide range of views about Ambassador Sarek, Chancellor Gasek and his aide who had thrown the first punch that had missed John, and even Giles Marcus to a small extent.

Almost all of the media hailed Sarek as a hero who put a swift end to a brawl started by a drunken Terran congressman, though naturally some ultra-conservative fringe outlets decided to spin it a different way entirely. Some accused Sarek of assault and excessive force, and to hear one organization tell it, the fight was a ruse by the Vulcan government to try to assassinate John that had failed. The Tellarites hadn't fared quite as well as Sarek, but were generally absolved of most of the blame.

Giles became an overnight chivalrous sensation, and still images taken from the video projections showing him holding Amanda has her face bled made the rounds on all the morning talk shows. Quickly that devolved into the assumption that she had Giles were having a torrid love affair, and she had called his wife to explain. Thankfully Celeste was too busy with newborn twins to watch much news and had laughed it off.

Amanda did her best to bury her head in the proverbial sand and wait for the storm to pass. She completely locked down the settings on her PADD, making her contact information private. She recalled Giles' comments about third-party access to her messages and though she wasn't particularly tech-savvy, eventually figured out how to reconfigure the settings to disallow remote access to her messages. Eventually she stopped receiving hundreds of calls and messages a day from the general public and did the best to go on with her life.

Unfortunately, the incident at the conference had impacts that reached far beyond her and John. The interplanetary conference in general had served as a curious catalyst for the Earth Autonomy Movement and generated increased interest in the Earth First Party. She never paid much attention to current politics, preferring instead to let history be the judge, but it was sneaking its way into her life. Vera was oddly politically active and often talked about various rallies and meetings she attended. According to Vera, the EAM and EFP were a huge problem.

The Earth Autonomy Movement supposedly traced its roots back to the Xindi crisis when it had been known as Terra Prime. It was rebranded several years later when the Romulan war broke out as a means of distancing itself from their predecessor's extremist tactics. It had gone on to consume several offshoot organizations, some extremist, some not. For more than eighty years, support for the organization had waxed and waned, usually coinciding with Federation or Terran elections or some interplanetary crisis. Over the past year, Vulcan's interest in expanding the Romulan corridor
had reignited interest in the EAM.

Vulcan wanted to push their boundaries outward for scientific exploration, which some believed came too close to the existing Romulan Neutral Zone. Vulcan's insistence spurred interest in the fledging Earth First Party, a small independent group that sold itself as a protector of human interests. Their holo ads often featured old style nuclear fusion weapons and an insistence that Earth should never relive those days. Most people generally regarded the EAM and the EFP to be one and the same, though those well versed on the subject would call the former a terrorist organization and the latter a political party a half step removed from endorsing terrorism. The EFP had a handful of candidates that were running in the mid-term elections, and the events of the conference only spurred support for their numbers. Things were becoming so ridiculous that she started avoiding holo screens and news articles altogether.

Her entire life had morphed into a sad cycle of evasion. She often left her apartment before the sun came up, so as to avoid large crowds on the shuttle bus who might recognize her and have something to say. She would arrive at the embassy school only to spend her days craftily dodging Ambassador Julan. Though she screened calls on her PADD, occasionally a reporter would find some way to get through.

She hadn't had a very active social life before, but now it was dead, buried, and food for worms. Vera seemed to come by more often, and Amanda finally realized that for all of her eccentricities, she really was a good friend. At the moment, she was her only friend. She had spent weeks begging Amanda to get together and do something like actual friends would do, but they kept such different schedules that it had proved nearly impossible. She had taken to sending her messages with advertisements for various shows, attractions, and museums in the bay area, but Amanda wasn't certain she was ready to venture out into public like a regular person just yet.

So she immersed herself into Project Rosetta, spending almost every evening and weekend in the basement of the embassy complex. If she didn't have a cat to feed or require a shower and clean clothes, she imagined she could easily take up residence in her basement cubicle. She wasn't sleeping or eating as well as she should, and it was showing in her increasingly thin frame. Eventually it caught up to her.

She awoke on a Friday morning to the sound of her PADD alerting her to a new message. She rolled over, noted the time, and shrieked. She was due at work in half an hour. She dressed and showered in record time and tore down to the bus stop, only to find her usual mode of transportation pulling away down the city's narrow streets.

She sometimes walked to work when the weather was nice, but even at a brisk pace it usually took her about twenty minutes. She checked the time: she had half of that. So she ran, sprinting all the way to the embassy complex, pushing through occasional groups of fellow pedestrians.

She arrived at the school building security checkpoint with one minute to spare, swiped her card, and dashed down the hallway, arriving about twenty seconds late. Her students sat at their two tables, staring at her. Sweat poured down her temples and she was breathing heavily. She set her bag down on the desk and marched immediately over to her educational holo screen.

"Good morning, class," she said as steadily as she could, though she could tell it came out as more of a gasp.

"Good morning, Miss Grayson," they responded in unison.

She got to the wall only to realize the power to the screen was on the fritz again. She turned to face her students, watching them watch her and she felt instantly drained. It was going to be that kind of day.
Her lessons on geology and literature had to be put off without the use of the holo projector, and she spent most of the afternoon stepping over maintenance crews as they toyed and tinkered with various components. She did her best to improvise, and thankfully most of her students possessed the maturity to get through the disruption in their usual routine. They were young, but they were the children of diplomats and it often surprised her how well mannered they were. She had always been a bookish sort of student herself, but her students were well ahead of where she had been at their age, both intellectually and socially.

Eventually 16:00 rolled around and she turned her young charges over to their parents and caretakers for the weekend. She stopped by the food stand in the rotunda for a salad and headed down to the basement, fully intending to finish the source code for formal Romulan dictation recognition she had been working on for weeks.

The embassy complex was an intricate network of above ground buildings that were all connected by a central, circularly shaped basement. The Rosetta Project occupied offices in a small wing on the West side, hidden away in a corner behind nondescript metal doors.

She swiped her access card on the terminal and entered, finding the usually busy office space was nearly empty. It was nearly 17:00 on a Friday, and she imagined most people had better things to do than slave away in a basement all weekend. She certainly wished she did. She plopped down unceremoniously at the computer console she had commandeered from the people who worked with syntactical structures and stared at the screen, realizing her heart wasn't really in this today.

Her PADD chirped, alerting her to a new message. Vera sent her a brochure for Palo Alto's hanging gardens, and she smiled. She knew she couldn't stay cooped up in hiding in her apartment or the stuffy basement of the embassy forever. The hanging gardens were widely regarded as one of the bay area's premiere attractions and she had wanted to go since she moved out to San Francisco months ago. Something clicked inside of her and she promised herself that tomorrow, she would get out of her rut and go. She checked the weather, learning it was supposed to storm overnight and rain tomorrow, but Sunday was supposed to be sunny and unseasonably warm. It seemed like a sign. So what if people recognized her? Was she really so timid she couldn't handle it anymore?

She messaged Vera back saying she would love to go on Sunday, only to be met with the immediate response that Vera already regrettably had plans all weekend. She felt a bit dismayed, her boldness to take charge over her life fading a bit. She could still go by herself, but suddenly it didn't seem as fun anymore. She frowned. Maybe next weekend.

No, she thought sternly to herself. She needed to get out and about now, or it might never happen and she would end up like Mrs. Lasachek, who lived down the street growing up and hadn't stepped foot outside her house in more than twenty years after her husband died. Her mother had called it agoraphobia, and often sent her down to deliver roasts and pies. She never understood what could cause a person to just abandon the world in that way, but the events of the last month made her realize that sometimes circumstances can drive people to a number of irrational behaviors.

She smiled to herself at her newfound resolve and prayed it lasted. She was about to click her PADD off when she noticed an unread message. She had forgotten about the morning message that woke her up and smiled when she realized it was from her father. She swiped her finger across the screen to open it and read:

Amanda,

I love you very much. We haven't talked much lately, but I just wanted to remind you that I think
about you often. Things are getting tense out here and I've run into some problems I wasn't
anticipating. I may not be able to talk much for a while, but I wanted to give you the authorization
code to my deposit box. It's at the old bank. You know the place. If something happens, everything
in there is yours.
Box 77619
Code: 12-F-77L181

I love you, sweetheart. You'll always be my little girl.

-Dad

She was confused. The tone of his message made it sound like a last will. She knew his line of
work wasn't exactly safe; he occasionally ran into smugglers or competing surveying teams, but he
had never sent a message that sounded nearly as ominous as this. She dialed a com link to him on
her PADD and got no answer. Her heart started beating quickly as anxiety rose in her chest. She
tried thinking about the situation logically: he was often out of range or busy, so it wasn't unusual
that he wouldn't answer. The message seemed cryptic but he had never been a man for using ten
words when one would do.

She pulled the lid from her salad and began to eat, mulling over what to do. It wasn't time to panic.
She would try him again in a couple of hours.

She finished her meal and dove headlong into her algorithm. She lost herself in her work and time
seemed to accelerate. When her PADD chirped and she looked down to see a message from Vera
asking, "Where are you?" she noted the time and panicked. It was 0030 hours and the shuttle
buses stopped running half an hour ago. As she was messaging Vera back, the lights shut out and
auxiliary lighting came on.

She had never stayed so late at the embassy complex before and was uncertain if it was common
for the lights to be turned off after certain hours. The hallways were illuminated by emergency
lighting only and it cast strange shadows up on the walls. She walked to her usual turbolift, only to
discover it seemed to be out of service for the night. She swallowed her frustration and tried the
stairs, only to get to ground level and discover the exit was also locked, and her annoyance began
to turn to fear. Then the lights shut off completely and she stood in total darkness, trying to keep a
scream from coming out. This couldn't be routine. They wouldn't lock down the exit to the stairs.
It had to be against some kind of safety code, in case of a fire or emergency.

She used the light from the screen of her PADD and slowly doubled back around the side corridor
of the basement and found another turbo lift that she had never used before, which to her relief
was operational. She took it from the basement to the ground floor and the doors opened about 30
centimeters before power failed and they froze. She could hear thunderstorms raging outside, and
managed to pry the doors open wide enough to squeeze through, counting her blessings that she
hadn't gotten trapped inside.

She exited into an unfamiliar lobby and tried to collect her bearings. The sign on the wall next to
the elevator illuminated in the darkness as she approached it, indicating she was in the West lobby,
where important dignitaries often entered for privacy.

The embassies of all Federation planets to Earth were housed into a tight complex shaped like a
honeycomb, each facing inward into an enormous courtyard. Each building had the impression of
being a free standing structure but were all interconnected by skywalks on the second floors.
There were various administrative buildings throughout, as well as several eateries, the school
Amanda worked at, a massive auditorium and a few other buildings on the West lawn she had
never identified.
She stepped off the lift, her eyes trying to adjust to the darkness. She could barely make out the long, curved glass wall stretching out in both directions around the rear of the courtyard. Suddenly a bolt of lightning illuminated the lobby for a second and she realized she was locked in. To the left was the corridor that led to the front North entrance, but the heavy, metal doors were shut tightly. She tried swiping her access card, but as she expected, received a red "access denied" message on the adjoining console. There was considerable security at the embassies, and since she was only a teacher at the school, she didn't exactly have free reign of the place. She pressed the call-button on the screen and got no answer.

She clicked through her PADD, trying to locate the contact information of the night watchman at the public service entrance. After several minutes she located it, dialed, and got no answer. She fought back the exasperation and sinking feeling that she might be spending the night.

She walked to the long glass walls and peered out through the storm. She could see lights in the other embassy buildings, but they were flickering on and off with no discernable pattern. She noticed a light on in what she assumed was the public entrance to the embassies but it was too far away across the open courtyard to be sure. She tried the number for the front desk again, and this time there was only static.

She weighed her options. She looked back at the turbolift she had just emerged from, noting the adjacent computer terminal was still nonoperational. The thought of returning to the pitch-black basement wasn't particularly appealing either. She could wait here for the storm to pass, but there was no telling when that would be and she was feeling rather on edge, standing in a cold marble hallway completely alone and in the dark.

She moved toward the glass door along the wall and pushed and was moderately surprised to find it open. She judged the distance from her position to the illuminated building on the opposite side of the courtyard. It was maybe 150 meters, and there was no way she'd make it there without looking like she had stepped out of a shower. She waited about five minutes, praying the storm would stop or the power would return. The lights remained off but the rain had subsided to a drizzle and she tucked her PADD and access card into her shoulder bag, clutched it closely to her chest, and darted across the open courtyard.

She was about halfway to her destination when the torrential downpour resumed. She ran faster, though it didn't matter because after about ten steps she was thoroughly drenched. She made it to the lit building and tried to pull open the glass door but it was firmly locked. She peered through it, noting the computer console at the desk was illuminated but there was no one manning it. She pounded her fists on the glass, hopeful the night watchman or some after hours clerk would hear, but no one came. Then the lights went out inside there as well.

She turned back to the courtyard and jumped when she realized there was a man standing just two meters behind her.

"Ambassador Sarek?" she yelled over the rumble of the storm.

What was he doing out here? It occurred to Amanda that he probably wondered the same about her.

"Can you not gain entry?" he asked, coming closer to her.

"No, it's locked. Do you know what's going on?"

"No," he replied. "We should seek shelter."

"Obviously!" she snapped, embarrassed by her rudeness. "But where do you suggest we do that?"
At that moment, the storm decided rain wasn't enough and decided to deliver hail as well. Pellets of pea-sized ice pelted them, stinging her skin. He yelled something that she couldn't hear but she noticed a light flicker over his shoulder and instantly recognized it as the embassy school.

"Come on," she yelled, running past him and motioning for him to follow.

As she ran she pulled her access card from her bag and when they arrived at the building she swiped it through the terminal. She felt the door mercifully click and ripped it open. They stood inside the rear entry to the school, both dripping puddles of water onto the floor and shivering from the cool air conditioning.

She looked at him, fighting the urge to laugh. He had been so intimidating all those weeks ago in her apartment, but now he looked like he had neglected to remove his clothes before a bath. He had ice pellets clinging to his usually immaculately groomed hair and water dripping from his chin and nose. She knew she couldn't look much better, and tried to brush away the wet tendrils of hair plastered to her forehead.

"What were you doing out there?" she asked, ditching formality in light of the unusual situation.

"I was out of my office when the power failures began," he responded, attempting to wring water from his long shirt. "I found myself locked out. Then I noticed you running across the courtyard. What were you doing out there, Miss Grayson?"

"I was in the basement and it went dark."

As if on cue, power to the school building failed again and they stood in the blackness.

"Yeah, like that," she said in annoyance, pulling her PADD from her bag and wiping the water off. "I made it up to the ground level and found myself locked in to the private embassy hall. I saw the light on at the public entrance and thought someone could tell me what was going on."

"These outages are unusual," he noted, turning to look back across the courtyard.

"How so?"

"These systems are integrated. The power should not be on in some areas and off in others at random. An auxiliary power system should at least provide restricted entry and exit from buildings," he replied.

"So what does that mean?" she asked, still drying her PADD.

"I don't know," he murmured.

She clicked her PADD on and tried calling the front desk again, only to be met with static, again. She asked him if he could think of anyone else to call, but he could not. The PADD provided just enough light for her to escort him down the wide hallway to her classroom. Their wet shoes squeaked on the stone flooring and they trailed water all the way there.

The classroom doors weren't secured using the embassy computer system and relied instead on old fashioned locks and door handles. She considered her surroundings and immediately went to a side closet on the wall and produced a battery-powered model of the Terran solar system. She set it on one of the desks and turned it on. It illuminated and began rotating, demonstrating the orbits and transits of the planets. It wasn't bright enough to light the room, but it was better than nothing. Ambassador Sarek stood in the doorway watching her.

"You might as well sit and take in Jupiter's majesty," she declared, pulling out one of the small
chairs for herself. Noting that his size would easily dwarf one of the chairs her students sat in, she added, "you're welcome to sit at my desk. It's a little more comfortable."

He pulled the chair from her desk over to the table and sat next to her.

"This is your classroom, I presume."

"Yes."

"Mr. Marcus told me you were an educator."

"Yes," she answered, remembering how awkward the last private conversation she had with him had been.

"I was unaware your profession kept you so late," he said, peering closely at the model solar system.

"It doesn't," she laughed nervously. "I also work part time on the Rosetta Project. That's where I met Giles, er, Mr. Marcus. Anyway, I stayed to finish a few algorithms and lost track of time. Besides, you seem to be burning the midnight oil too."

He canted his head and considered her words.

"I take that to be a euphemism for working beyond a traditionally set work period."

"Something like that," Amanda admitted, smiling at the persistent formality of his speech.

"I often stay until I am satisfied my duties have been adequately attended to," he stated.

"Do you not often get the chance to get out and sight-see?" she asked, immediately wondering if she was venturing into territory that might be considered too personal.

"Not since I've been back, no. I find the winter season here disagreeable."

"You seem to imply now is the perfect time to be out of doors and exploring Earth's attractions, however the current weather conditions would suggest otherwise."

"The weather isn't always this bad. That's just the way spring can be sometimes. The forecast for this weekend is actually supposed to be sunny. I was planning a trip to the hanging gardens on Sunday. You should go."

He turned his head to look at her, his eyes squinting a fraction of a millimeter. A peal of lightning streaked across the sky and illuminated his features temporarily from the high windows in the classroom.

"Do you mean with you?" he asked.

Thunder rumbled ominously and suddenly the ambiguity of her words slammed into her like a freight train. Her cheeks started to flush and she was at a loss for how to answer.
Dawn

Sarek arrived at his living accommodations just before daybreak on Saturday. Were he not still damp from the night before, he might have remained at the consulate. There were a number of communiqués he still needed to dispatch to Vulcan and still others he needed to read.

This day was different however. Today was Kal Rekk, a day reserved by Vulcans as a time of solitude and reflection. None of his Vulcan staff members would be at the consulate, nor would anyone on Vulcan be there to receive any messages or transmissions he sent. Most followers of Surak's teachings would have risen before dawn to eat a light meal with their families and before retiring to individual rooms before the sun rose over Vulcan. They would spend the day meditating, seeking penance for transgressions committed during the course of the Vulcan year.

He'd been on Earth for forty-seven days and during that time he had neglected to meditate regularly. Meditation was so essential to preserving the vigilant control over his thoughts and emotions, but his mind had been active for so long that he sensed it was beginning to fray at the edges. Just as he could not go indefinitely without food or sleep, neither could he go without meditation.

He entered his bedroom and peeled off his wet overcoat, folding it neatly and placing it in a basket to be laundered. He did likewise with his shirt. He observed his reflection in the mirror next to his wardrobe, noting that his frame had thinned modestly. As he finished undressing, he commenced processing the events of the previous night into a logical summary in his head. He sensed he was overlooking some significant detail.

He had been recording his official log of the day's activities for his monthly transmission to the Vulcan High Council when the power faded briefly. He had exited his office to locate a possible explanation for the problem and from his vantage point noticed the door to the lobby of the Vulcan consulate was open. His staff was usually gone before 2200 and secured the door, knowing he would often depart between midnight and 0100.

He had attempted to call the night watchman in the building from the console on Metana's desk and heard static. He had proceeded to attempt to reach both the courtesy patrol and the control desk for the consulate complex and also was met with failed communication links. Based on his understanding of the building's power systems, circuitry, and communication network, it seemed unlikely to be an operational glitch. In the absence of other logical explanations, sabotage seemed most probable.

He had emerged into the hallway to identify the extent of the problem, and no sooner had he done so than the heavy doors slid shut behind him, most likely due to a failure in the sensor. He had been inept to leave his office without his PADD or access card, and was reduced to searching the building for other occupants. He found none, and it had taken him 20 minutes to locate the only functional exit, which led into the contained central square of the consulate offices. He noted that the entire complex seemed to be suffering from the same rotating power failures when he had spied the lone figure running across the square through the storm.

It had been Amanda Grayson. Miss Grayson…

His thoughts snapped back to the present and he finished dressing into loose, dry robes and contemplated his next actions. He would observe Kal Rekk. He opened the wardrobe and retrieved additional candles and a mat and began assembling the correct dais on the wall opposite the window.
After forty years in the Vulcan Diplomatic Service, he had spent many holidays and observances alone, yet aside from his brother Silek, he was truly alone for the first time in his life: no wife, no children, no parents, and a brother with whom he had not spoken in 9 years. During his studies at the Vulcan Science Academy, he had given serious consideration to attaining kolinahr and purging himself of all vestigial emotion. He had even begun working with a master when he had received his first appointment as attaché under Ambassador Selden. He had reasoned that if he were to live among humans and attempt to understand them, being completely devoid of emotion would be a hindrance to that particular aspiration.

The smell of the dusky pillar candles slowly wafted through the air and he inhaled deeply. He glanced down, noticing that he stood on the approximate site where they had discovered Ambassador Sulak's body.

The woman responsible for administration of diplomatic lodging had asked if he would prefer different quarters based on that fact. He knew the human fear of death had significant roots in the irrational belief in ghosts and evil spirits. It was regrettable that Sulak's katra had extinguished here, but the idea that some ephemeral part of his being would remain to torment visitors to the site of his death was illogical even by human standards.

These quarters had housed the Vulcan ambassador since the Vulcan Consulate moved from the Sausalito compound twenty-four years ago to join the rest of the Federation embassies in the heart of San Francisco. He did not think it necessary to abandon the residence to satisfy human superstition.

He spread the prayer mat across the floor and flicked the knob on the handle of the luminere and began to light the candles, seventeen in all. As his fingers worked, he started calming his mind and breathing deeply. It often took him at least an hour to achieve a perfect meditative state. He hit the switch on the wall to close the opaque shutters over the window and knelt on the mat; he closed his eyes and formed his hands into a steeple.

Through his eyelids he could discern the flicker of the flames dancing and as his mind eased into tranquility, they coalesced into a nameless, shapeless form. His breathing slowed, his heart slowed, and lightness came over his body. It would take half the day to achieve the perfect balance between consciousness and clarity that would enable him to begin atonement in the tradition of Kal Rekk.

After an hour, a familiar sensation of simultaneous numbness and awareness crept into his consciousness, but there was something else also. There was an earthy taste in the back of his mouth, and upon noticing it he rapidly ascended from his meditative state. He opened his eyes and stared at the candles. His stomach growled impatiently, and he was acutely aware of the taste in his mouth. It was like t'ghara tea, familiar, though somewhat different.

"Had his mind really become so undisciplined that minor hunger pangs could interrupt his meditative efforts? He swallowed, took three deep breaths, closed his eyes and began again, finding it difficult to escape the unfamiliar but pleasant taste in his mouth.

"So why'd you come beating down my door at this awful hour?" Vera asked, scratching her head and yawning.

"It's ten in the morning," Amanda sneered, holding up her PADD and noting the time on the face.

She was sitting in Vera's apartment helping her fold piles of laundry dumped unceremoniously on the coffee table. Vera peered out her blinds and hissed at the rays streaming into the room. Her hair was the most natural color Amanda had ever seen it: a deep blue so dark that it was essentially
"Are you still wanting to go out and do something today? I mean, my plans for tonight fell through," Vera said, shrugging and moving away from the window.

"Glad to know I'm your backup plan," Amanda teased. "But actually, I'm going to the hanging gardens tomorrow."

"Ok, that sounds fine. I'm not getting up before noon though."

"Um, I'm actually already going with someone else. That's what I came to talk to you about."

"Do you have a date?" Vera grinned wolfishly.

"I don't think so, but I'm not really sure."

"You're not sure if you have a date?" Vera asked, moving over to the clothes and sifting through them.

"I think I might have asked the Vulcans ambassador to Earth out on a date, yes."

Vera froze, locking eyes with Amanda and raising her eyebrows as another deep smile spread across her face.

"I think I might have? You say it like it was an accident," she laughed. "How'd that happen?"

"I don't know," Amanda wailed, throwing down Vera's shirt into the pile, which she could almost swear doubled in size every time she folded a garment. "We got locked out of the building last night and ended up in my classroom. We were talking about the hanging gardens, and how I was planning on going this weekend and I told him he should visit them too, but words just sort of fell out of my mouth into a stupid jumble. I didn't mean with me, but that's how he took it."

"But you don't want to go with him?" Vera murmured, holding up a sheer bra to her chest and looking in the mirror.

"Well, I guess he's not a bad person or anything, I just don't want to make things weird at work. I'm not sure if there's even a policy on dating at the embassies. I'm not rushing to date anyone right now either, and let's be honest, he's not exactly my type."

"What is your type?"

"Well, I don't know. But he's not it. He's impossible to read and he intimidates the hell out of me."

"Are you sure it is a date then?" Vera asked as she picked up a pair of matching underwear to the bra she was clutching in her other hand. "Maybe he just thought you were being friendly."

"Maybe. But what if he thinks it's a date? Does that mean he wants to date me? Do Vulcans even date? That doesn't seem like something Vulcans would do. I mean, obviously they- well, you know. Never mind. I just wish there were some way out of this."

"If you don't want to go, then don't go. Tell him you're sick. Tell him your grandma died. I've killed mine off half a dozen times to get out of dates."

"I can't lie to him. I already feel like he scrapes the bottom of my psyche every time he looks at me. It's like he knows what I'm thinking."

"Well then go with the truth. Tell him you changed your mind."
"I can't do that. That would be rude. And Vulcans are so formal."

"Is he cute? Do you like him?" Vera blurted, staring fiercely at her.

"I just told you that he's intimidating," Amanda reminded her.

"That's what happens when you're attracted to someone you barely know. They intimidate you. You second-guess yourself. You don't know what to do with your hands. Your voice jumps an octave. Dumb things come out of your mouth, like, 'Hi, my name is Um...' or in your case, 'Mr. Ambassador, date me please!'

"That is not how it happened. I mean, he's intelligent, and..." Amanda paused, considering Sarek romantically for the first time and feeling color rise in her cheeks.


"Sarek."

"Amanda and Sarek, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-"

"What are you, five years old? Shut up!" Amanda snapped, throwing a pair of folded socks at her and missing by nearly a meter.

"So what, Amanda? I'm the last person to judge anyone for their dating choices."

"By the way, I've met lots of people that I had zero attraction to who also made me nervous," Amanda argued. "You would know that if you had ever been to one of my mother's garden parties. They're nothing but a bunch of stuffy old people who are made of nothing but excess money and judgment."

"Deny it all you want," Vera said, clicking her tongue and reaching into the piles of clothes to locate her PADD.

Amanda reached for another shirt and watched Vera's fingers nimbly trace back and forth across the touch screen of her PADD from the corner of her eye.

"I actually thought you were going to help me fold some of this for a second," Amanda scoffed.

Vera held up a finger and said, "This is important."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking him up."

"You can't do that!" Amanda yelped, jumping up from the couch and racing to grab the PADD from Vera's hand.

Vera held it out of her reach and scowled playfully. "Why not?"

"Because- because, you know?" Amanda stammered.

"What, you think he's going to know? Like he's watching us?"

"No..." Amanda said. "It's just- it's weird."

She couldn't understand why she felt so uncomfortable even looking at his biography on the
online embassy database. Vera clicked through a few links and then there he was, a stern picture surrounded by Vulcan script.

"That's him?" Vera asked, her eyes scanning the image.

"Yeah."

"He's not ugly," she shrugged. "Can you read any of this?"

"Click there: it will translate," Amanda said, motioning to a small icon on the right hand side of the screen.

Vera complied and a short entry about the Vulcan ambassador appeared. Amanda read over Vera’s shoulder as she scrolled.

"He negotiated the Interstellar Comprehensive Trade Act in 2192?" Vera asked incredulously. "So you're into older men."

"Vulcans do have longer lifespans than humans," Amanda replied, realizing it wasn't something she had ever thought about before.

"And by older, I mean even if he was only 12 when he did that, he'd be the same age as my grandpa," Vera cackled.

Amanda sighed and braced herself for a round of ridicule. Her cheeks were hot and she had a strange twisting feeling in her stomach. Vera looked at her suspiciously.

"You do like him," Vera declared.

"I don't," Amanda insisted.

"Sure you do. You know why? Because you're digitally stalking him," Vera answered, holding up her PADD and grinning widely enough to show her back molars. "Only obsessed people do that."

"You're the one who started this," Amanda protested.

"Sure, but who's reading along over my shoulder?" Amanda rolled her eyes and was about to say something petty, but decided against it and flopped back down on the couch, shaking her head.

"Have you ever been on a date someone from Vulcan?" she asked after a moment, hopeful her friend had some insight.

"Ha! No, they're a pretty uptight crowd. And so moral," she said, placing disdainful emphasis on the last word as she clicked her PADD off. "Where do you even go to meet one? I've never seen one in a bar or at a club. Besides, what would a Vulcan pickup line even sound like?"

"Exactly. He's so... proper, and I don't know much about Vulcan culture. The whole time he was over at my place, I was terrified I would say or do something wrong. It was like being in an interrogation room where no one asks questions; you're just left to squirm until you confess to doing something you've never done."

"Yeah, I can see that," Vera said, moving to the kitchen. "Intercultural relations and all. You fart in front of him and then you have the awkward responsibility of spending the next however many years avoiding him at the embassy. I would be a real interplanetary incident."

Amanda began laughing and couldn't stop. She soon had tears rolling down her cheeks and even
Vera started giggling.

"See, this is the problem," Amanda said, hiccupping for air and trying to compose herself. "They don't have emotions. Or if they do they don't show them. They don't smile, frown, or even smirk. It's like they have no muscles in their faces. And I laugh all the time. I imagine that to them it's about as taboo as walking around naked."

"Look, Amanda," Vera said, pausing to consider her choice of words. "You're not dumb. You're beautiful and way more articulate than me. Than I? Me?" she paused, reflecting over her grammar. "Whatever, anyway, be yourself, you know? It's not your responsibility to change who you are just because you think that's what he expects. If this is a date, he accepted because he likes you for you. He's obviously aware that you're human. Even if it isn't a date, he agreed to spend time with you and thinks you're at least capable of getting through the day without doing something outrageous like randomly screaming obscenities or publicly urinating in potted plants."

"Is that what your dates can expect?" Amanda snorted, bursting into another fit of giggles. "Honestly, where do you come up with this stuff?"

"I don't know," Vera mused. "See, I'm always saying weird stuff. It could always be worse, because he could be going out with me. Bottom line is, do you think he's worried about how you might see him right now? I doubt it. Fact is, he's probably old enough to be your great-grandpa and also probably thinks prime numbers are sexy. We're all a little weird. It just depends on your frame of reference. The Denobulan I dated- well, the one before the last one, he had this obsession with licking-"

"Stop," Amanda cried holding up her hand and imagining it would be easier to avoid having a mental image altogether than it would be to get rid of it.

"You get what I'm saying though, right?"

She did. Actually, Vera made a lot of sense. Anxiety went both ways. But did Vulcans even feel anxiety? "I do, and you're right. I think I'm going to read up on Vulcan culture though."

"You're the only person I've ever met who studied for a date," Vera teased, emerging from the kitchen.

"It's not studying, and it's not a date."

"Ok then, you're researching for your rendezvous."

"Are you going to just let me fold all of your laundry or are you going to help?" Amanda asked, changing the subject.

"Hey, you're the one who came over here. I didn't even ask you to fold my clothes; you just started doing it," Vera said, sinking down next to Amanda and turning on her small holo projector.

...no word from the coroner about cause of death.

Amanda looked up from Vera's laundry to the hologram projector. There was a breaking news story in progress. She listened intently to the news anchor announce the death of Starfleet Chief of Staff Admiral Jason Winters. He died in his home the previous evening and had been discovered by his wife and children earlier that morning. Vera looked over at Amanda watching the news intently and started listening to it as well.

"Did you know that guy?" she asked, gesturing to the screen.
"No, but I know his replacement," Amanda answered slowly, watching Admiral Maxwell Bentham come to a podium at a press conference and begin making a statement.

She felt a strange tugging in her stomach, understanding that something was wrong but unsure of how or why. Max Bentham would be heading Starfleet temporarily until a suitable replacement was found. He was certainly qualified, but still… there was something unsettling about him. She recalled his pushy interrogation over breakfast at the conference and the conversation she'd heard through the door of John's hotel room.

She sighed and put it from her mind. It was easy to get carried away with thinking about conspiracy theories. For some reason, news of Admiral Winters' death made her think of her father and the cryptic message she had received the day before. She picked up her PADD from the arm of the sofa and tried reaching him again. There was nothing on the line but static.
Amanda sat on a wooden bench surrounded by dozens of climbing rose bushes just outside of the East gate of the hanging gardens, fiddling with her PADD. She had tried numerous times over the past twenty-four hours to reach her father but hadn't gotten through. She sighed and clicked back to her browser and resumed reading a passage about the Vulcan principle of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, too anxious to truly absorb what she was reading.

She was more than an hour early. She had been unable to sleep well the previous night and around 0600 she got up and showered, pulled her hair into a loose bun, and donned a blue gingham shirt, a khaki trousers, and a pair of hiking boots. Vera would have hogtied her and made her wear something more attractive had she been there, but Amanda preferred a more subdued look. Glancing down at herself, she couldn't imagine less suggestive clothing, short of maybe covering herself in a garbage bag poncho. *This was definitely not a date.*

She was uncertain from which direction he would come, so she caught herself frequently looking up from her reading and scanning the area. She was in the middle of skimming a section about parallels between Greek Stoics and Vulcan philosophy when a shadow covered her screen.

"You are early, Miss Grayson," said a familiar voice.

She noted the time on her PADD and clicked it off and without turning to see him replied, "So are you, Ambassador. By about forty-four seconds, anyway."

"It was logical to arrive early and perform a survey of the area to be certain I could locate you."

"Very logical, yes," she murmured, as she turned her body on the bench to face him and draped her arm over the back.

She squinted in the morning sun and held her free hand up to her face to block the glare. He stood about a meter behind her and looked the same as ever in dark clothes, dark hair, and a perfectly placid expression. To her chagrin, her heart drummed a little faster and she found herself cursing Vera for putting the thought into her head that there existed some romantic attraction between them. She completely disagreed with her friend's assessment, but even thinking about it was uncomfortable.

He moved around the side of the bench to sit and she turned the opposite way to face forward again. They both sat, facing forward with their hands on their knees and Amanda judged the distance between their bodies on the bench. It seemed a modest and appropriate distance. *This was obviously not a date.*

"What would you like to see today?" she asked, craning her neck to look at him.

"I have never visited these gardens," he replied. "I will accept your recommendations."

"Well, I've never been here either, so I'm afraid I'm going to make a rather terrible tour guide," she admitted, turning her head to look back at the cascading walls of green that lay before them. "But I'm open to exploring them together."

"Very well," he said, rising from the bench.
She stood also and they proceeded down the brick pathway to an arched entryway covered in English ivy that immediately fed into narrow, steep stairs. They climbed together, forced by the width of the stairs into very close proximity to one another. The air was heavy with sweet, earthy smells of springtime.

They were halfway up the stairs when a pair of sparrows engaged in a fierce battle raced just over her head, startling her. She jumped back slightly in surprise and began to lose her balance on the sharp stairway. Her hands clawed at the wall but found nothing to steady herself, but Sarek twisted himself around and caught her firmly by the elbow, forcing her upright.

He quickly released her arm with an almost jerky movement. His grip had been strong and her arm throbbed as a result. Her face grew hot in embarrassment. Not even five minutes into this little outing and already it was going wrong.

"Thank you," she said, her voice barely rising above a whisper.

He nodded slightly and they continued their climb the stairs. At the top they reached a terrace with a wide expanse of green lawns and fruiting trees. A wide path lined with rough stones stretched through the center.

"Is there a reason this place is called the hanging gardens?" he inquired.

"I know it was named for the Hanging Gardens of Babylon," she said. "It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but a lot of historians dispute whether it even existed. The gardens of the ancient world were supposed to be a feat of engineering and an enormous point of pride for the Babylonians. From what I understand, these gardens were built as a symbol to that part of the humanity that prefers to recognize the value in building things instead of destroying them."

She allowed her voice to trail off, unsure if she was brandishing her usual authoritative teacher's voice that she often employed on her students. After all, no one likes a know-it-all.

"When were these gardens established?" he asked.

"The original, or the gardens we're currently standing in?"

"It would seem that if you could identify when the original gardens were constructed, the historicity wouldn't be in dispute," he answered plainly.

"True." She bit her tongue, trying to avoid such an open display of emotion. They walked on.

"I know these gardens are nearly two hundred years old. This place was once a Sanctuary District…" she paused in the middle of her sentence, not eager to explain some of the more unsavory aspects of Earth history.

"I am familiar with the term," he said, almost as if excusing her from explaining further.

"Well, anyway, after a series of riots, the government turned this tract of land over to a billionaire named Harlan Adler. From what I've read, he had no family to leave his fortune to, so he spent the last years of his life investing in public works projects. He wanted the poverty and hunger from the sanctuary districts forgotten, so he insisted on planting a large variety of edible plants in the gardens so that anyone who was in need of food could take it, completely free of charge."

"Admirable," he replied. "Your planet is home to a wider variety of consumable plant species than any other I've visited."

"Have you been to many planets?" she asked, immediately wondering if that was an ignorant
question to be asking of an experienced diplomat.

"Yes," he responded. "I have spent most of my diplomatic career on Earth, but I have visited every planet in the Federation, and several non-member homeworlds as well."

"And do you find that... enjoyable? Traveling so much?"

"It has been invaluable to my abilities as an ambassador, though also generally a requirement of it. To where have you traveled?"

"San Francisco," she said. "I've never left Earth. I've never even left the North American continent."

"Surprising, for someone with such a degree of linguistic ability."

She didn't return his gaze but continued to move forward through the thickening expanse of peach trees.

"Your silence suggests I've caused some offense," he added after a minute.

"No," she said, fighting off a pained smile. "I mean, thank you for your compliment. And you're right; I always imagined I would travel more. I just sort of fell into teaching at the diplomatic school as a way to work on Project Rosetta. I've often been forced to appreciate the irony that I've spent so much of my life learning to communicate with alien cultures but haven't really had much occasion to do so."

"And yet here we are."

"Well, unfortunately my Vuhlkansu is terrible. I'm afraid to insult you by even attempting it," she admitted.

"It is a lesson I have encountered many times in my time in the Diplomatic Service. Offense is an inevitable byproduct of seeking to understand other cultures. It goes in both directions."

"Can I admit something to you?" she asked, stopping in the middle of the footpath.

"If you wish," he said with what she swore was a slight discernable hint of puzzlement.

"I stayed awake last night trying to learn about Vulcan culture. Every time..." she hesitated midthought and forced herself to look him in the eye. "Every time I'm around you, I feel... I don't know. Daunted?"

"That was never my intention," he said, his eyebrows scrunching a fraction of a millimeter.

"No, of course not. It's not you at all. It's me," she explained. "I just never seem to know quite what to say. Obviously Vulcans are a very private people, and humans are not. I've spent my whole life on Earth learning how to fit in to society, but only as it relates to humans; which topics of conversation are considered polite, which are taboo, how to make small talk, that kind of thing."

"I am not particularly skilled in 'talking small', to borrow your expression," he began. "Yet I recall you told me once that the best way to learn a language is to experience it as the native-speakers do. I think you'll find culture is much the same way. In other words, lal'sharr dang-qual veshtau, ri kah'rul."(1)

Amanda blinked and considered his words. She had studied some Vuhlkansu in graduate school
alongside Romulan, which she knew far better, but she had very little practice with actually speaking it outside of a handful of useful phrases. She bit her lip and slowly replied, "Sep-wafik, du ved yet."(2)

They began walking again, this time conversing in Vuhlkansu. It was slow going and Amanda found herself limited by her vocabulary and the language's ambiguous nature, but he corrected her patiently when she made mistakes. They talked on general subjects, from the weather to their surroundings, with Sarek mostly guiding the conversation and Amanda struggling to hold her ground. Aside from telling him she liked to eat concrete for breakfast, she made few major errors.

The sun was rising higher in the sky and as they continued their walk, they started to encounter other people out walking, jogging, or spending a Sunday afternoon with their families. She noticed a few people give sidelong glances or raise their eyebrows. After they had circled the whole level of that section of the gardens, they went down a wider set of stairs on the West side.

As they descended, Amanda said, "You're not as bad at small talk as you say."

"And you are not as bad with Vuhlkansu as you believe."

"My instincts are telling me to dismiss your compliment for humility," she said, looking over at him.

"Self-deprecation seems to be a common trait among your species, irrespective of merit," he replied. "You possess an acceptable command of the pronunciation, and what you lack in vocabulary and grammar could be remedied through practice and patience."

They emerged onto wide-open lawn with a large pond in the center with dozens of migratory birds. There were more people walking about on this lower level, and a small crowd was formed on the far side around what looked like an outdoor amphitheater.

They walked along the concrete walking path toward the pond through a maze of waist-high boxwood shrubs and topiaries. They were quiet for a time and Amanda thoughtfully probed the silence: it felt sort of natural. She realized she was beginning to enjoy their walk and the anxiety she had started the morning with had completely fallen away. They were only five meters from the pond when she heard a distinctive hiss from behind the bushes. She halted and they watched the long black neck of a Canada goose appear from around the corner of the boxwood.

She took a few steps back but Sarek held his ground.

"What is that creature?" he asked, craning his neck to look at it.

"A nesting Canada goose," she stammered. "Let's go around, before the male-"

It was too late. From behind them burst a cacophony of honking and rustling. She turned and saw another large goose approaching, his feet slapping on the pavement and his wings flapping threateningly. She gulped, recalling summers at her father's family's lake house near Thunder Bay and could feel the blood draining from her face.

She knew her fear was entirely irrational. She wasn't bothered by most of the traditional phobias like heights, spiders, dentists, snakes, rats, blood, or virtually anything else. She had been maybe three years old and had gone with her mother to feed the ducks from the dock. Her mother returned to land to take pictures of her when several geese walked up the narrow dock, cornering her. They had so aggressively ripped the bread crusts from her hands that one had drawn blood and she panicked and fell backwards into the water. Most people would look back on such a story and laugh, but it had instilled in her a profound terror of geese.
"Miss Grayson? Are you ill?"

"No," she lied in a gasping breath.

The male goose stood about two meters away, bobbing his head and hissing. Amanda felt nauseated and dizzy. She instinctively stepped away from the angry father goose, only to be met with an even angrier display as she encroached closer to his mate and her nest. She battled the urge to jump over the boxwood bushes and sprint away but found herself clutching her mouth with her hands.

"I think it would be wise to find an alternate route."

"Uh-mmmmm," Amanda said, trying to shove coherent words out of her mouth.

Sarek moved closer to the male goose, taking a path closer to the bushes to give the avian aggressor a wide berth and turned to wait for Amanda. She stood glued to the ground. The goose rushed forward as Sarek moved alongside it, and Amanda bolted behind Sarek, running into his back. His face was expressionless, but still somehow brandished a look of utter confusion and maybe something that bordered on contempt.

"I'm sorry," she said, walking briskly in the opposite direction of the geese. "I'm so sorry."

"More apologies," he mused. "Were you afraid of those birds?"

She stopped and looked back at the pair of geese, judging the distance and beginning to feel less anxious. She looked back at Sarek, unable to meet his eyes. They stood about a meter apart, and his considerable height allowed her to look him in the throat as she said, "If you were anyone else, I would beg you not to laugh at me."

"Laugh?"

"Yes, I'm afraid of geese. A lot of people would think that's funny."

"It is… illogical. You have no reasonable expectation of significant harm from such an animal."

"I know," she blurted. "Is there nothing you're afraid of?"

"Vulcans are taught from an early age to master emotions, including fear."

"Fear is so primal though," she countered. "And it seems to have a significant evolutionary benefit."

"Unless of course one is afraid of moderately-sized water fowl species. I fail to deduce the evolutionary advantage of that."

"It just gave him an evolutionary advantage," she said, bobbing her head in the direction of the geese.

Sarek locked his hands behind his back and turned down the footpath that they had come from. Amanda felt foolish as she trailed behind him. As they neared the wider main path that was lined with yellow rosebushes, she started to think about what he had just said.

"May I ask you something?"

His eyes darted toward her and she took it as a sign of assent.

"You said 'Vulcans are taught from an early age to master emotions,' but I thought Vulcans didn't
"That is incorrect," he said quickly as he slowed his stride to walk abreast with her. "It is a common misconception among other species that Vulcans lack emotion, but Vulcan philosophy is nearly entirely concerned with the ultimate mastery of the self, and emotional control is the foundation upon which the teachings of Surak rest."

"I see," she said, biting her lip and thinking.

"Have you ever read Surak's teachings?"

"As an undergraduate I read excerpts in a comparative religion class."

"It was not intended to be studied in a fragmentary fashion," he explained.

"I sort of got that impression," she admitted.

They were nearly upon the amphitheater and had entered the outskirts of the crowd. Amanda looked at the stage and instantly recognized the story to be Shakespearean. She stopped, placing her hands in her pockets to observe the actors.

"Then hie you hence to Friar Laurence' cell! There stays a husband to make you a wife. Now comes the wanton blood up in your cheeks..."

_Romeo and Juliet._

"This reminds me of a theatric performance I attended twelve years ago," Sarek whispered. "Though I do not believe it is the same."

"I would have never guessed Vulcans enjoyed the theater," Amanda whispered, turning to him and pulling her hands from her pockets to cross them about her chest.

"Vulcans do not engage in stage performance, but we are not opposed to the art forms of other species," he explained.

"Do you remember the title of the play you went to?" she asked.

"I believe it was _The Merchant of Venice._"

"Ah, a pound of flesh but not a drop of blood," she said trying to avoid a smile. "You have a good ear and an excellent memory. This is a different play by the same playwright."

"The language seems inefficient and cumbersome," he noted.

"Many great lovers of literature would call that blasphemy," she smiled. "William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest English authors in history even still. But I agree with you, performed in the original language, it is a bit tedious."

"What is the title of this performance?" Sarek asked, observing the actors as they departed the stage and rearranged the set.

"_Romeo and Juliet_," she said, beginning to feel awkward for no identifiable reason. "It's almost over; they're about to elope and kill themselves."

He turned to face her, raising his eyebrows and crossing his arms across his chest.

"Yes, it's illogical," she nodded, seemingly speaking aloud what he was already thinking. "_Romeo
"and Juliet is probably one of his most famous tragedies, though depending on your sense of humor it might be considered a comedy."

"Explain," insisted Sarek.

"Well, I've never actually seen the play performed and I read it years ago in secondary school, but I think I can remember most of the main details. Romeo and Juliet are young lovers from rival houses. After he sneaks into a party at her family's house, they fall instantly in love and decide to run away and marry one another. Some people get killed which only makes the war between their families worse, and Romeo is banished from the city. Juliet's parents arranged for her to marry another man, not knowing she was already married to Romeo, so she comes up with this plan to fake her death by drinking a small amount some kind of poison that will only make her look dead, but no one bothers to tell Romeo. He finds her, thinks she really is dead, and then drinks the rest of the poison in a dose that ends up being fatal. She wakes up, sees her dead lover, and drives a knife through her heart."

She became very aware of how hard Sarek was staring at her, but he said nothing. A quiet existed between them for a few moments, before Amanda finally added, "What? I didn't write this play."

"I am unable to discern how anyone would consider such a story a comedy, if my understanding of the definition is correct."

"Well, it's not a comedy exactly," she continued. "But the plot is so ridiculous that it's almost a parody. For centuries people have pointed to this play and these characters as the epitome of young and undying love."

"How can it be considered 'undying love' if they are both dead by the story's end?"

"It's like you've asked and answered your own question," she replied, meeting his gaze.

They stayed to watch the last act of the play, but Amanda found herself watching Sarek from the corner of her eye. He seemed wholly engaged in the actors on the stage, and she struggled to understand what part of him could be so interested in something that seemed so illogical. At the play's conclusion, they both applauded and resumed their walk through the gardens and very quickly found themselves back at the East gate they had first entered through.

She couldn't believe how quickly time had passed. It was nearly 1400, meaning they had been wandering together for nearly six hours.

"I suppose this is where I bid you goodbye," he said, taking a step toward her with his hands adopted in their usual position neatly behind his back.

"I enjoyed our morning," she said, feeling strangely shy.

"Kup itar-bosh na' du k'waw'zhe," he said.(3)

She carefully translated his words in her head, struggling with the last word but assuming he was thanking her for her invitation. She bit her lip as she thought of the correct and appropriate response and then replied, "Kup-aitlu k'kan'zhe na'sasarlah." (4)

His eyebrows rose higher than she'd ever seen them go and if she didn't know better, she could swear he was about to laugh. True to his Vulcan demeanor, he maintained his composure but said, "You should continue to work on your Vuhlkansu."

"What did I say?" she gulped.
"I believe you meant to say 'I want to thank you for coming,'" he answered.

"Yes, but what did I say?"

"You said something suggestive of impregnating me," he replied.

"Oh my God!" she yelped, clasping her hands over her face to try to stifle embarrassed laughter. "I'm so sorry."

"Your seventh illogical apology," he said, turning his body square to hers and taking a few steps toward her. "Vulcan is a difficult language to master and you have done better than any other human I've encountered."

She slid her hands down her face to expose her eyes, though they remained clamped over her mouth. She lowered them, feeling like her face was on fire.

"Well, thank you," she said. "And this is number eight, but I'm still sorry."

"I am to meet the consular driver in four minutes by the driveway. Do you have a means of transportation home?" he asked.

"Um, I was going to stay and walk around a little by myself and take a cab home," she said, feeling her knees wobble slightly from embarrassment.

"Very well. Live long and prosper, Amanda Grayson," he said, giving her the Vulcan salute.

"Wait," she added, "what was my sixth illogical apology?"

"You apologized for your fear of geese. While your fear is illogical, so was your apology."

"Oh right," she groaned, before locking eyes with him and adding, "Peace and long life, Ambassador Sarek."

He nodded and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

(1) Culture is learned through experience. (approximation)
(2) I agree: you're quite right. (approximation)
(3) I am thankful for your invitation. (approximation)
(4) I want to pregnant you for coming. (approximation)
Sarek returned to his living accommodations less than an hour later. His mind felt chaotic and he felt the urge to continue his unproductive meditative efforts from the previous day. He hung his cloak in the entryway closet, removed his shoes, and proceeded to his bedroom when he heard his PADD chirp on the long desk nestled in the corner. It had remained in his quarters during his excursion to the gardens and he now felt compelled to tend to it rather than meditate.

He saw two missed calls from Voris, his security advisor, another two from Kuvak, his adjutant, as well as a missed call and message from Giles. As none of them were expected at work on that day, he deduced it was a matter of urgency and dialed a communication link to Voris first at the consulate. After 10 seconds, a voice answered, "Ambassador Sarek, there has been an incident. I cannot discuss it with you over an unsecure network."

"I understand," Sarek replied. "I approximate it will take me 10 minutes to arrive at the consulate," he said, terminating the connection with the usual Vulcan efficiency that lacked what most humans would consider politeness.

He donned his shoes and his cloak and departed for the consulate, arriving at the back entrance of the Vulcan embassy building to meet Voris, the consular adjutant, Kuvak, and two human men wearing black suits, one quite young and the other perched on the apex of middle age.

"Ambassador Sarek," Voris said, motioning to the two men, "Detectives Voorhees and Whitlock."

Sarek nodded in deference to them and the younger one that Voris had identified as Voorhees started to extend his hand for a handshake but caught himself at the last second and retracted it. The older man, Whitlock, shook his head at his partner and stepped forward.

"Ambassador, we're with the Federation Investigation Service. Sorry to drag you out here over the weekend, but this is a matter of some urgency. Can we speak privately somewhere?" Whitlock asked in a thick Northern accent.

"Of course," he said, ushering them inside. They took the lift to the third floor of the building where his senior staff offices were, along with a secure conference room.

The three Vulcans and two humans entered the room and Voris shut the door from a panel on the wall. They seated themselves in the large, high-backed chairs that faced into a large, oblong conference table. Sarek folded his hands on the cold, smooth surface and examined his company.

"Uh, Mr. Ambassador," Whitlock began, "We're with cybercrime investigations."

"I see," Sarek replied.

"I think it goes without saying that the conversation we're about to have is confidential and doesn't leave this room," Voorhees added with a distinctive drawl.

Sarek and Kuvak exchanged subtle looks. Sarek considered both men and the information about themselves they had just revealed. Human lines of questioning were often chaotic and unstructured as a means of getting people to confess, and human suspects were often illogical enough to confess to things they had never even done, when the wrong questions were asked the right way. Though he knew better than to make faulty inferences, he had far less faith in humans to avoid the same errors.
"I cannot necessarily agree to your terms," Sarek replied.

"Huh?" Voorhees murmured in surprise, clearly taken aback by his frankness.

"As I do not know what you are about to disclose to me, I cannot say whether or not it is of significant import to Vulcan or its people. If it is, as ambassador, it would be my duty to take that information out of this room and relay it to my superiors on Vulcan," he explained.

"But you don't..." Voorhees trailed off in confusion over the rebuke to his position of authority.

"This is the Vulcan Consulate," Kuvak finished. "Surely the ambassador is willing to answer your questions, but Federation law affords many exceptions to those in diplomatic service, as I'm sure you know."

"This is a serious matter," Voorhees argued. "Who do you think -"

"Out," Whitlock barked, cutting his junior partner off and pointing at the door.

Voorhees opened his mouth to protest but common sense quickly prevailed, his face flushed slightly, and Voris opened the door for him to exit without another word. After it was closed, Whitlock turned to the three Vulcans and apologized for his younger colleague's inexperience with interplanetary investigations.

"Look, I'll be straight with all of you," Whitlock said, gesturing wildly with his hands. "On Friday night, we believe the embassy complex control system was remotely accessed and certain files were removed. I want to make it clear that you aren't a suspect, nor is anyone in your office."

"I wish to confirm that I am able to communicate certain parts of this interview with the appropriate outside parties, if necessary," Sarek insisted.

"I would prefer that you didn't, but I also have no doubt that you, that is, all three of you, understand how to handle sensitive information and would do your utmost to protect that information if it put the security of the Federation at stake."

"Am I correct in assuming that my refusal to agree to complete confidentiality will result in your withholding information from me?" Sarek asked.

"Yes," Whitlock replied without taking his eyes off the ambassador.

"Very well," Sarek said. "If that is how it must be."

"Can you tell me what time you left the building?" Whitlock asked, finally looking away from Sarek to jot down notes on a large PADD with a digital stylus.

Sarek recounted the events of Friday night patiently, understanding that Whitlock already had the information but was simply corroborating it.

"Did you see anyone else that night after the outages occurred?" Whitlock asked.

"Only one other person. Amanda Grayson."

"Ok, and did you talk to her?"

"Yes, I encountered her running across the open expanse between the consular buildings and approached her to ascertain whether she possessed information regarding the power failures or had made contact with anyone from the administration. She did not and had not."
"She was running?" Whitlock asked. "Like away from someone?"

"It was raining," Sarek explained. "The storm was severe. Due to the outages, we were unable to find a point of reentry but she managed to access the back entrance of the school building."

"But you were still safe inside the Vulcan embassy and surely knew you would have gotten locked out if your access card was still inside the office; why risk going out into the storm?"

Sarek reflected for the briefest of moments: the detective was correct in implying his decision was illogical. He’d mulled it over himself during a respite in his meditation the day before.

"As I said, she was the first individual I had encountered since the outages began. It was logical to make contact with her."

"Ok," Whitlock said, pausing to collect his thoughts. "Do you know what Ambassador Sulak was working on before he died?"

"He was an ambassador and was working on many things. I assume from your open-ended question that you have a response in mind. If you could specify what answer you seek, I could tell you more readily," Sarek replied.

"I'm assuming he kept files in your databases…" Whitlock probed.

"Of course he did," replied Sarek.

"Has anyone accessed them recently?"

Sarek and Voris exchanged looks.

"No, as of Friday night, Ambassador Sulak's files had not been accessed for fifty-one days. The last people to access them were from the Federation Investigation Service," Voris answered, his eyes falling on the badge Whitlock wore around his neck on a lanyard.

"Can you think of anyone who might have been interested in retrieving his personal logs?"

"Your question is vague," Sarek responded.

"What about your own files?" Whitlock continued, looking up from his PADD to meet Sarek's eyes.

"What are you attempting to imply, Detective Whitlock?" Kuvak asked.

"I'm saying that we think that whoever breached the embassy's computer systems had specific targets in mind. We believe your database was a target of interest," he finished, banging his hands on the table for emphasis.

"What information gives you cause to think so?" Sarek asked.

"That's what I'm here to find out," Whitlock sighed.

"This is a consulate, or as you prefer, an embassy. A great amount of information is exchanged within this building, transmitted over our frequencies, and stored in our databases each day. Without further information as to whom you suspect or what you suspect your suspects were looking for, I am unable to help you. If you can provide further information, I or my staff will assist you in whatever way we are able," Sarek said, rising to his feet to signal the conversation was at an end.
"Did you know the Starfleet Chief of Staff was found dead in his home yesterday morning?"

"What does this have to do with the Vulcan consulate?" Kuvak interjected.

"I can't speak about that ongoing investigation, but don't you find it a little odd that someone hacks into the embassies on the same night Admiral Winters is killed?"

"I was apprised of his death yesterday evening. I had not been informed it was murder," Sarek said.

"Who said it was murder?" Whitlock probed.

"You implied it when you mentioned he 'was killed,' unless you were referring to the killer as being some non-sentient object or event," Sarek countered.

Whitlock scowled before saying, "Well, he is dead, and I will say the circumstances are not so different from Ambassador Sulak’s death."

"I thought you investigated computer crimes," Voris said.

"I do, but this investigation is now falling under a joint task force, and my scope of investigation is as wide as it needs to be," Whitlock explained.

"Then perhaps your colleagues would have been a better place for you to begin your investigation," said Sarek. "Do you have any further questions?"

"Uh, your staffers tell me you're going back to Vulcan soon?" Whitlock added quickly.

"Yes, I am due to return eight days from now. The late Admiral Winters was to accompany me along with a handful of delegates from Earth to discuss a number of important matters directly with the Vulcan High Council."

"Do you still plan to go?"

"Yes. I planned to speak with Admiral Winters' replacement tomorrow morning, a man by the name of Maxwell Bentham. I believe it is in his interest to go and I imagine he will," Sarek explained.

"How long will you be gone?"

"The trip is planned for nine days. We will return on the tenth."

"Ok," Whitlock said, scribbling notes on his data PADD. "If I need to reach you with any other questions, will that be possible?"

"If you contact my office, my secretary, Mr. Giles Marcus will assist you."

"One more question, if that's ok," Whitlock urged.

"Of course," Sarek said.

"Well, don't you find it all strange?" he prodded. "The previous ambassador dies under mysterious circumstances, then a few months later the embassy is hacked on the same night the head of Starfleet dies in a similar manner to the Vulcan ambassador, and right before he was due to go to Vulcan? Excuse me if I'm wrong, but it seems like Vulcan is the least common denominator here."

"I imagine you wouldn't have to look very hard to find many commonalities between the three
occurrences," Kuvak answered.

Whitlock scribbled a few notes on his PADD before clicking it off and saying, "No, no, certainly. Thank you, gentleman for your time. Sorry it had to be a Sunday. I'll contact your office if I have anything further. Safe travels."

Sarek gave Voris a look, and Voris took the cue and escorted Whitlock from the conference room. Kuvak glanced at Sarek.

"What are your impressions, Kuvak?" Sarek asked.

"I am not certain I have enough information to form any at this time," the adjutant answered. "It is entirely possible the Admiral's death and the attack on the embassy computers is coincidental."

"I agree: humans are often very quick to jump to the most convenient conclusions. However, I will inform the High Council. There is little we can do here until tomorrow, as most Earth-dwellers avoid working on Sundays."

"I intend to stay and review what we know of the case," Kuvak told him.

Sarek nodded but said nothing. They stood and exited the conference room. Sarek went to his office after he met with Voris and instructed him to cooperate with the computer systems engineers to determine the extent of the database infiltration. He shut and locked the door, and opened a secure channel to the Vulcan High Council and informed them of the recent events. At the transmission's conclusion, he resumed the tasks he had been working on Friday evening. After several hours, his door buzzed.

"Enter," he said, clicking the button to unlock the system from his desk.

Giles stepped in. He looked exhausted. "Do you need anything, Ambassador Sarek?"

"No," Sarek replied, unsure of what prompted his question.

"Well, it's getting late and if you have nothing for me, I'm going to head home," he said.

"Very well," he replied, turning back to his computer console.

"Ambassador," Giles began slowly, "I just wanted to say, I'm glad you're alright."

"Why would I not be?"

"I guess after Ambassador Sulak's death and then Admiral Winters last night, I-" he stopped himself and shook his head a little. "Well, this morning was the first time I was ever unable to reach you for more than about twenty minutes. I was about to send the police over to your quarters."

He turned back towards Giles. It hadn't actually occurred to Sarek that others would be concerned for his safety.

"Thank you, Mr. Marcus," Sarek said. "I believe it was premature to worry, but your concern is appreciated. This morning Miss Grayson was kind enough to give me a tour of the hanging gardens and I neglected to take my PADD."

"Oh," said Giles quickly, before adding in confusion, "What?"

"I intend to keep it on my person at all times in the future," Sarek replied.
"Oh, your PADD, right," Giles faltered. "Amanda Grayson?"

"Yes," Sarek replied. "I am aware the two of you know each other. It was you who recommended I apologize to her after the conference last month."

"Yes," Giles said. "I didn't mean to seem like I was trying to pry into your private life."

"There is nothing in which to pry," Sarek answered. "She simply gave me a tour."

"Of course," Giles said. "Anyway, I'm going to get home, if there's nothing else."

"No, nothing," nodded Sarek.

Two days later, Amanda sat in the basement of the embassy, working on a new project for Rosetta. She had completed all of the assigned Romulan syntax generation matrices and was now working to integrate them across the better-known Federation languages.

The day before, a pushy detective named Voorhees had met her in her classroom at the end of the school day and asked her general questions about where she was and what she had been doing in the embassy complex on Friday night. Much of the interview centered on Ambassador Sarek, which left her with several very strange impressions. She was about to tell the detective she had been with him all morning on Sunday, but he didn't ask and she didn't feel inclined to bring it up. It had made her want to contact Sarek, but after the awkward way their meeting had ended she was unsure if it was appropriate.

Adding to her problems was her worry that she still had been unable to reach her father. To be fair, five days without speaking was far from a record. Several years ago when he was surveying the moons of the Laurentian system she didn't speak to him for nearly six months, but then again, several years ago he hadn't sent her a eerie message before falling off the radar either. Last night she almost broke down and called her mother to ask if she knew anything, but came to her senses and promised herself to give it a full week. She loved her mother, but wasn't eager for an interrogation about her romantic life.

Today at least gave her an excuse to take her mind off of her problems. It was Election Day on Earth, and all the months John had spent campaigning amounted to this. After their breakup, she had paid a little more attention to politics and felt disgusted with herself for ever seriously considering John Molineaux and even more confused that he had ever been attracted to her. He was still a member of the Conservative Party, but members of the Earth First Party had endorsed him despite his promises to continue to seek interspecies diversity on Earth. Paying attention to politics only made her realize why she mostly ignored it before but it troubled her that Earth seemed to be heading for a return to an isolationist mindset. They had come a long way since the Romulan War.

For a long time it seemed like John didn't have a chance of gaining the speaker position he was campaigning for; the events at the conference had hurt him badly. He had dropped thirty-three points in the polls that weekend and since then had fought tooth and nail just to pull even with his opponent, a moderate called Phillip Parsons. Amanda had voted for the latter without hesitation. She glanced from her computer console at the central holographic projector in the middle of the room at election update coverage now and again. Not even preliminary results had come in, so she knew it was foolish to pay such close attention so early in the night. The truth was, it was a pleasant distraction. Her mind wasn't really in her work between her father, the investigator, and Ambassador Sarek.
She looked from the holo projection back to her console. She input a few lines of code and tested them against her dictionary. They failed. She tweaked the code and tried again, and failed again. She was about the scrap the whole thing and start over when she heard a familiar voice behind her say, "Hey stranger."

"Giles, I haven't seen you down here in ages," she said, turning around with a smile on her face. "At least not since the twins were born."

"Yeah, my wife went to visit her sister in Tulsa for the week and it went from being utter chaos at my house to total silence. I couldn't take it anymore."

"You look like you have about five years' worth of sleep to catch up on," she admitted.

"Well, kids, you know. I keep hearing they're supposed to sleep through the night by six months and I think, hasn't it been that long? But as it turns out, no, those little tots aren't even two months old."

Amanda laughed.

"No, I'm only joking really," he continued. "Some days I wish they would grow up a little so my wife and I could get some sleep, but other days it's like I can't believe how fast they've grown already. I spend so much time here at work and I feel kind of bad that I'm not there to help Celeste more."

"Is you boss really that much of a slave driver?" she teased.

"He's Vulcan. I don't think he takes days off. And speaking of my boss... I heard you went out on a date with him," Giles poked.

"What? Who told you that?" Amanda said in a shrill voice.

Giles crossed his arms and looked at her playfully but said nothing.

"It's not true," she snapped, trying to keep her voice down. "And where did you hear that?"

"From him," Giles said, crossing his arms and smiling.

"He told you that?" she said, her voice more of a hiss than speech by that point.

"Well, not exactly. He said you gave him a tour of the hanging gardens in Palo Alto," Giles confessed. There was a twinkle in his eyes that made Amanda cringe.

"Well, that's all it was. We just went for a walk together," she insisted.

"Oh, yeah, sure; just a walk. No one's getting defensive over your 'not a date' or anything," Giles smirked.

"It was a nice day; he's a nice person… What else did he tell you?"

"That was pretty much it. He's my boss. My Vulcan boss, not my best friend. We don't sit up all night gossiping and braiding each other's hair."

"Well, did he seem… what did he… he didn't say anything else?" Amanda asked, unsure of exactly what she was looking for.

"I don't know if you've realized this, but he's Vulcan. He doesn't often seem like anything. He could probably watch his family get autopsied with a straight face. But you seem awfully
concerned with what he thinks about you, for it not having been a date."

"I just, I hope- I didn't want to make a bad impression," she stammered.

"What did you do?" Giles said, seriousness blending into his expression.

"Well, do you want to know how it went?" Amanda groaned. "Let's see, I almost fell down the stairs, he found out I'm scared of geese, and-"

"You're scared of geese? Like 'honk honk'? Like those geese?"

"Shut up," Amanda snapped. "But it gets worse. As we were leaving, I accidentally told him, in Vulcan, that I wanted to impregnate him instead of simply saying 'thank you.'"

Giles' face was motionless for about five seconds before he burst into raucous laughter. Several people in nearby cubicles glanced over in annoyance but Giles continued to almost writhe in mirth. After a while, his laughter was reduced to fits of sporadic giggling and he said, "Thanks, it's been a rough day. I really needed that."

"I'm glad one of the most embarrassing moments of my life could be there to pick you up when you were low," Amanda sneered, turning back to her console.

"Oh, don't take it the wrong way," he said. "We're both linguists. Hell, my first assignment out of the Academy, I stopped into a restaurant on Tellar Prime and asked the waiter for directions to the bathroom, but mixed up the words 'bathroom' and 'pockets.' He seemed so confused, and I tried to politely explain that I needed to relieve myself, the whole time completely unaware I was implying that I wanted to do it in his pockets. I got kicked out and told not to come back."

It was Amanda's turn to laugh.

"Well, do you often go to restaurants on Tellar Prime? I doubt it. I come to the embassies every day," she said through giggles.

"Look, I doubt he cares or even gave it a second thought. Vulcans don't feel embarrassed and he's been an ambassador for a long time; I'm sure he's probably heard worse," Giles said.

"True," Amanda replied, propping her head up on her right hand. "I think I'm actually going to call it a night. I haven't been very productive and I don't think my cat even recognizes me anymore."

"Ok," Giles said. "And I mean it, every linguist worth his or her salt makes at least a few completely humiliating mistakes."

"Yeah, thanks," she said as she put her PADD and a few reference tables in her shoulder bag and headed for the door. "See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'll probably be here all week," Giles said, taking over her workspace. "And I'm never going to let you live the geese thing down."

"Great, thanks," she said with a groan. "See you tomorrow."

She travelled her usual maze of turbolifts and access points out of the embassy complex until she found herself on the street level. It was an unseasonably warm night and she walked toward the bus stop but changed her mind halfway there when her stomach growled. She thought of the deli four blocks away and recalled that Tuesdays they offered a delicious root vegetable minestrone. She smiled to herself, turned on her heel capriciously, and headed in that direction.
She walked into the deli, which was unusually quiet for a Tuesday night and wandered up to the counter. She enjoyed the old-style feel of the place, complete with linoleum floors and vinyl booths and a little bell above the door that chimed as people came and went. The deli's owner, a middle-aged Brooklynite import called Vinny, completed the effect by possessing a loud personality and an impeccable memory for all of his regular customers. Amanda came in about once a week, which was not nearly as often as a lot of people at the embassy, but he was quick on the bounce and had treated her like family within a month of the first time she stepped foot in his deli.

"Amanda! Mandy, as I wish you'd let me call you. You have a face like a Mandy. I tell you that every time, but it never stops being true," Vinny called as he stepped around to the front from the kitchen.

"How are you, Vincent?" she teased.

He insisted on calling her Mandy despite her protests, so she often resorted to calling him by his given name, which usually set him straight.

"Let me guess, it's Tuesday, you're a vegetarian… you're here for my minestrone."

"It's like you read minds," she laughed. "Yes please, and for here."

"Of course, of course. And what can I get for you, sir?" he asked to someone standing behind her.

"I shall have the same."

Amanda's heart skipped a beat. She knew that voice.
"Good evening, Miss Grayson," he said as he moved forward to stand next to her.

"How are you, ambassador?" she asked, her voice suddenly hoarse.

"I am in good health," he responded.

"That's good," she croaked.

She stared straight ahead and pretended to read the billboard menu behind the counter with intense devotion. Her mind flashed through the events of their last meeting and she hoped the shaky, nervous feeling would go away.

"Miss Grayson?"

"Hmmm?" she asked, finally breaking her straightforward gaze to look at him.

He was watching her, but said nothing.

"I'm sorry," she admitted, "I'm… my mind was somewhere else. Did you say something?"

"I asked if you were also well," he replied.

"Oh, yes, I'm fine."

"That is an ambiguous expression."

"What is?"

"Fine."

"I suppose so," she murmured, looking forward again and feeling her cheeks grow hot.

"If you want to go sit down, I'll bring this out to ya," Vinny called from the kitchen.

"Ok," she replied.

It suddenly occurred to she was facing a peculiar social situation. Was he eating here also? Would it be presumptuous to assume she could sit with him, or rude to insist on sitting by herself?

"Were you dining in also?" she asked Sarek, attempting to shift the decision-making to him.

"I had not intended to. Perhaps he has incorrectly made the assumption we came in together," he said.

More silence. She shuffled toward the nearest booth and sat down with her back toward him. She flipped the top of her shoulder bag open to retrieve her PADD, more as a means of distraction than out of actual necessity.

"May I join you?" Sarek asked from just over her shoulder.

"Sure," she blurted, cringing from awkwardness but relieved that he had resolved it as she motioned for him to sit across from her.
She folded her hands in her lap and looked across the table, her eyes adjusted at a downward angle.

"Do you come here very often?" she asked.

"Intermittently."

"Oh."

Seconds passed like hours and she bit her lip. Her PADD chirped and she quickly pulled it from her bag, hoping it was from her father. It was a message from Vera, asking if she had any sour cream. She frowned, wondering what Vera would do with sour cream, considering she'd never seen her cook so much as a piece of toast. She was about to reply back to her friend when she realized it would horribly rude to engage herself in her PADD in the company of her dinner guest so she promptly clicked the device off.

"Sorry," she said, almost as an afterthought, motioning to her bag.

"I do not understand," he said.

"For messing around with that," she explained. "It's rude not to give you my attention."

"I see."

"I'm just expecting an important message from my father," she added, feeling a strange compulsion to explain further. "He's been out of contact and the circumstances are kind of unusual. It's very... well, anyway, never mind."

She suddenly felt very foolish telling him about her father, figuring that he had no reason to care about her personal problems and she didn't know him well enough to confide in him anyway.

"You said you father was a surveyor," he mused. "That is a profession which would no doubt keep someone from communicating with his or her own home world regularly."

"True," she conceded, "and I had thought of that. The last time I really talked to him, he had found a lot of helium on Zetar. He surveys planets for rare elements and minerals."

"Helium isn't exactly rare," Sarek countered.

"No, it's not," she admitted with a blush, feeling rather ignorant on the subject and sorry to have brought it up. "It's some isotope of helium."

"Perhaps you meant helium-3," he suggested.

"Yes, I think so," she said, relieved at the mild degree of his correction. "I don't really recall the difference: chemistry was never a strong suit."

"Helium-3 is a common isotope of helium and widely prevalent throughout the universe and even in space, but not often found in significant concentrations to be useful without substantial expense," he noted. "Class J planets possess it in moderate quantities, but retrieving much of it without destabilizing the planet eludes current mining and engineering techniques. I believe your moon once had a modest supply but it was quickly exhausted through your planet's use of cryogenics and nuclear fusion proclivities."

"Wait, if it's a simple helium isotope, couldn't it just be manufactured through fusion in a reactor?" she asked, some of her brief science education coming back to her.
Through the decay of tritium, yes, and older techniques could produce tritium readily through deuterium or lithium but it is a low-yield, inefficient, and expensive process and requires deuterium and lithium, which have significant technological uses as well. Mining large deposits of helium-3 directly allows for better concentrations at a fraction of the time and expense.

"What is it currently used for that we'd need so much of it?"

"Primarily terraforming, experimental propulsion prototypes, and large class weapons systems."

She was about to ask what he meant by "large class weapons" when she spied Vinny approaching with two large, shallow bowls in hand. She focused her attention back to Sarek, realizing their relationship existed in an odd intermediate where she always felt extremely awkward upon first encountering him but together they always found a way to fall into seamless conversation.

"Here ya guys go," Vinny said, setting down their bowls of vegetable minestrone with a gentle clank on the stainless steel counter. "Sorry it took so long. I got a little distracted watching the election coverage."

"How's it looking?" she asked.

"About like everyone expected, except for that guy Molineaux. He's actually leading but there's only 12 percent of the votes in and some of the polls up north haven't closed yet, so we'll see I guess. Didn't you used to know that guy?"

"Yeah," she groaned, giving him a death glare.

He caught the hint well enough, clapped his hands together, and proclaimed, "I'll leave you two to it. Actually, I bet you guys will be thirsty; you want a pitcher of ice water?"

"Um, actually, room temperature water should be ok," she suggested, looking over at Sarek.

He gave a single nod and added, "That will be suitable, thank you."

"Hey, whatever ya like," Vinny said, shuffling back to the kitchen.

"I had thought you preferred to drink chilled water," he said.

"Well, I might not have retained as much from science class as you, but I do seem to recall you dislike ice water," she said cordially.

She picked up her spoon and took a bite of her minestrone, enjoying the warm sensation of broth tickling her throat. She noticed he was watching her and she sat up and asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Another point of clarification: how is it possible that you 'used to know' someone? Either you know an individual or you do not."

"That's... literally true, I suppose," she said, stifling a smile. "I guess people use that expression when they were acquainted with someone and no longer remain in touch with them... for whatever reason."

"I see," he said, picking up his spoon and closely examining it before dipping it into the thick soup.

She was unaware she was staring at him; her head tilted a faint degree to the side. Vinny returned with two clear glasses and a wide-rimmed stainless steel pitcher. She poured herself a glass and
sipped from the lukewarm water and Sarek did likewise.

"So, what is Vulcan food like?" she asked after she sipped a few more spoonsful.

"Much like this, though with milder flavors. Most Vulcan cuisine is dominated by items you would refer to as soups or stews, but it also includes raw fruits, vegetables, and grains. By habit, Vulcans do not consume animal flesh."

"I didn't know that, but it makes a lot of sense," Amanda replied.

"Specify," Sarek pressed.

"Um, well I'm not exactly a scholar of Vulcan philosophy, but it seems to be based largely on pacifist tenets, which could extend to all forms of life, not only sentient ones, if I understand the broader aspects of Kol-Ut-Shan correctly," she explained.

"That is the broad interpretation, yes," he said. "But it is sufficient to understand the principle. The man who served us referred to you as a vegetarian. Why do you abstain from consuming animals when so many of your race do not?"

"For reasons a lot less noble than yours," she admitted, taking a sip of her drink.

"You should not hold your motivations up to another's standard," he argued.

"I don't mean to compare them, I guess. I just sort of fell into vegetarianism when I was younger after watching my cat play with a baby bird that fell out of its nest," she said, her voice trailing off.

"Explain."

"Ok, so, growing up we had this longhaired cat that liked being outside. One afternoon I came home from school and he was on the back porch playing with a fledgling bird," she began.

She was unsure of how much detail to go into with this story and wondering why she was even telling it. She didn't want to explain that she had cried or that she had begged her mother to do something.

"It's a stupid story," she mumbled.

"I am intrigued. Please continue."

Her eyes flickered at him and she sighed. "Well, he was playing with this bird."

"From what I understand of domesticated cats, predation is in their nature. I believe you own such an animal even now, do you not?"

"I do have a cat, and I know it's just the way they are. I mean, I know that now. But back then, I watched my cat torture this little bird and I felt..." she bit her lip and looked at him and tried to think of the least emotional word to convey her point, "disappointed that my sweet pet cat would do that to something like that. I guess I always sort of knew cats did that kind of thing, but being confronted with it made it hard to ignore. Over time when I really thought about it, I came to the same conclusion you already pointed out: predation is in their nature. Predation is nature. But I had a conscious choice to do something else."

"That shows a curious amount of introspection I've not often associated with human youth," he said looking at her directly, which when added to the compliment made the sensation of self-consciousness bubble up inside her.
"I don't think it makes me unique," she argued. "I think it just makes parents who prefer to keep their children sheltered in innocence common."

"Clarify," he insisted.

She closed her eyes for a moment and thought of how to best compose what she was trying to say without sounding sanctimonious.

"Well, life is hard, and I think many parents, that is to say human parents, find comfort in being able to make the world a little less cruel for their children, at least for a while."

"It is difficult to see the value in shielding a child from a truth that he or she is cognitively able to comprehend," Sarek interjected.

"I agree with you," she admitted. "But I would say my perspective is tainted by adulthood. I look at my students and I realize that children are a lot more resilient than we give them credit for. When I think back to my cat and the bird or other harsh realities I would eventually encounter as I got older, I think I would have preferred to accept a hard truth from the start than a reassuring lie that would fade over time."

He said nothing but made eye contact with her, which caused the flood of nervousness to return. His eyes seemed to be searching her out and she felt vulnerable in a peculiar way. He turned back to his minestrone and she did also. They ate in silence for the rest of the meal and as her anxiety abated she conceded there was a subtle naturalness to the quiet.

She continued to unwittingly observe him and the startling realization that she enjoyed his company began to emerge. The more she considered why that was, the more sense it made. He was direct but never impolite, intelligent but willing to learn, and possessed a wholly unique perspective that she enjoyed exploring as well. What if Vera had been right?

Her thoughts began to scatter and become less coherent as she contemplated that possibility. He was nice; that was all. He was interesting, so what? Maybe she did like him, but perhaps not in a romantic way. Even still, she'd had fleeting, harmless little crushes before. Surely it didn't mean anything.

She set her spoon down in the empty, white porcelain bowl, finished the last of the water in her glass, neatly tucked her hands under the table into her lap and did her best to reign in her thoughts. All of the other patrons were gone and it was just the two of them sitting in silence. She noticed he was already finished with his meal and was watching her with a look she struggled to interpret.

"Are you going back to the embassy?"

"No," he replied.

"Well, are you ready to go?" she asked, rising from the booth.

He stood also and they walked over to the counter together. They could hear the rumble of an industrial food particle cleaner and indiscernible noise from a portable holo projector in the kitchen.

"Vinny?" she said, leaning over the counter and craning her head into the kitchen to see him leaning back onto a food preparation table with his arms crossed, entranced by the news.

"Oh, sorry sweetheart," he said jumped up and moving toward her. "This is the wildest election I think I've ever seen. Explains why no one's here. They're all down protesting at the campus."
"Describe what you mean by wild?" she laughed.

"It looks like that Molineaux guy is gonna win, along with a handful of those people from that Earth First Party. Everyone said they didn't have a chance. I didn't vote for those clowns. Excuse me," he said, waving his hands apologetically at Sarek. "It's rude to talk politics with customers."

She frowned at his news before sheepishly asking, "How much do I owe you for the meal?"

"Were you guys together or separate?" he asked, pulling out a service PADD and adding up their order.

"Separate," she said hastily.

"I do not mind purchasing your meal," Sarek said.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," she begged, almost putting her hand on his arm to stop him before realizing how strangely personal that was.

"I am uncertain of your customs in this matter," he said.

"Well, it depends," she said, trying to figure out if anyone fully understood the rapidly evolving rules behind splitting or sharing a check. "We both came here separately and the fact that we ate together was just a random bit of serendipity."

"I am unfamiliar with that word," he said, straightening.

"It doesn't translate well," she mumbled.

"I tell you what, it's on the house," Vinny said, growing cheerfully impatient with the pair of them.

"On the house?" Sarek asked, turning back the deli owner in puzzlement over his expression.

"He means he doesn't want to charge us for our food, which is nice, but unnecessary," she explained, turning back to Vinny.

"Look, I've never seen this place so dead and I'm glad at least two people came in for my grandma's famous vegetable minestrone. Let me do something nice for a few loyal customers."

"Thank you for your generosity," Sarek said graciously.

"Ya welcome," Vinny said with a huge smile, slapping the counter with his palm.

"Yes, thank you," Amanda added, a little more quietly.

"Say, I don't know if you're takin' one of the shuttles home or what direction you're headed, but ya might want to avoid Archer Park. There's some pretty angry people down there right now," Vinny said as they turned to leave.

"Thanks," she replied.

Whenever she walked home she often cut through either the park or the nearby college campus. Her usual shuttle bus also went right by there and she started to consider alternate routes home. She assumed Vinny was referring to protesters, but how bad was it down there really?

"Do you have a safe means of transportation home?" he asked as they exited the deli.

"It's a nice night and I was thinking of walking but I normally go through Archer Park. I guess I
could go all the way down to 19th street and double back around," she said, thinking to herself as she spoke.

"I can send a car to take you home," he offered.

"Oh, that's very nice, but you don't have to do that," she said, feeling flustered.

"I do not understand the human need to repel offers of assistance," he said, placing his hands behind his back in a stance she was beginning to associate as being distinctively his own.

She opened her mouth to speak and felt a grin developing as well and despite her efforts to control it, laughed.

"I don't understand it either," she finally admitted, shrugging innocently. "I guess it's considered polite, maybe?"

"It seems more typical of the nearly universal human requirement of independence," he said with a miniscule flicker of his eyebrows.

"It seems to me that Vulcans pride themselves on self-sufficiency," she challenged.

"Your point is irrelevant, as I was speaking specifically of your race," he said.

"But you speak of such a character trait in humans as if it's a flaw," she explained.

"That is an incorrect assumption on your part," he said, tilting his head slightly toward her. "Which has led you to an illogical conclusion."

"That independence is a flaw of humanity or that it even exists in Vulcans?"

"The former."

"But how can you-" she stopped and looked from the pavement to his face, finding his expression wholly calm. "Has anyone ever won an argument against you?" she asked, crossing her arms and tilting her head as well.

"Certainly."

"Recently?" she asked, unable to keep the grin from sneaking onto her face.

"Define your parameters."

She uncrossed her arms and looked beyond him to the traffic light, which had begun flashing yellow. She smiled and looked back down at the ground, trying to think of what to say. She sighed, and looked him in the eye and said, "It doesn't matter, because I don't think I've got a chance of ever winning one against you."

"How will you know unless you make an attempt?" he said.

It seemed like he was goading her, but reasoned that such behavior was probably illogical and therefore probably just in her imagination. Their eyes were still locked and she instinctively wanted to look away but found herself unable. Vera was probably right.

"How do you plan to get home?" he inquired.

"I really can walk," she replied, shuffling her feet, "but thank you for your offer to call a car for me."
"Will you permit me to escort you to your residence then?"

"Oh, you don't have to-" their eyes briefly met again and she smiled, this time rather demurely. "That would be nice of you."

They set off on foot down the wide sidewalk, side by side. Amanda perused her thoughts and feelings, wondering why he would offer to walk her home. Perhaps he was just concerned for her safety. She glanced around, noting both the foot and vehicle traffic was lighter than usual. They walked together quietly for four blocks before turning left onto a small, two lane street that would take them back to her apartment without cutting through the park.

"Your society does not seem to handle regime changes well," he noted eventually.

"You're talking about today's elections?" she asked, surprised by the break in the quiet.

"I am."

Her eyes darted over toward him and she wryly said, "Maybe we just happen to like riots and revolution. Like forest fires, you know?"

"Are you implying sporadic destruction is beneficial for long-term growth?"

"No, but it's how we seem to like to handle things," she said with disappointment. "Tell me, what are Vulcan elections like?"

"Specify," he said, looking over to her.

"Well, I sort of imagine candidates don't call each other names or accuse one another of unsubstantiated sleights, hypocrisies, or crimes or build entire campaigns on exploiting minor fears into major panics?"

"No."

"So what do they do instead?" she asked.

"They merely publicly defend their positions on issues they consider to be of wider significance and-"

He stopped midsentence and Amanda followed his line of sight. The indiscernible noise of the city had morphed into shouting. Up ahead, she saw a few people running both in the direction they were headed and away from it. She looked back at Sarek, uncertain about what to do.

"Perhaps we should consider another route," he urged.

She looked around to get her bearings and said, "If we can go up one more block, we can go down 3rd Avenue and hopefully move around this."

They continued in the same direction and quickly began to encounter more people. She was more curious than afraid, and tried to make sense of the din of shouting voices she could hear. They were coming upon the street she had suggested when she heard the sound of shattering glass and turned in shock to see a man defiantly standing in the middle of the street with both fists raised. He had a black balaclava around his face and she realized he had just thrown some heavy object through a storefront display. She was frozen in confusion, mesmerized by the sight of something so brash and it seemed like all the shouting faded from her consciousness. She was unsure how long she stood there looking at the offender but eventually she became aware of a hard tugging on
"Amanda," Sarek yelled forcefully over the increasing noise. "Let's go."

Panic struck her with the force of lightning and she realized they were standing in the middle of chaos. More people were running around them in no particular direction. Sarek reversed course and they hurried in the direction from which they had originally come. He hadn't let go of her arm and though she was glad, she wondered if he could feel her shaking amid their jerky strides.

"That one's Vulcan," she heard a man shout from behind them.

She tried to turn and identify the speaker, but Sarek wheeled them both into a poorly lit, narrow alleyway. The alley fed out into a parallel street about 20 meters away but she could see even more throngs of angry people swelling at the opposite end. She looked at Sarek, who seemed as calm as he ever was and she felt completely mystified. She could hear more voices approaching from the street they just left and she shut her eyes, wondering what was about to happen. This had all happened so fast.

"Miss Grayson, stay in the shadows. Walk that way and don't look back," he ordered, nodding at the alley.

"You want me to leave you?" she cried, dumbfounded.

"I do not have time to explain-

"Hey, over here!" croaked a raspy voice.

Down the opposite side of the dark alley, she noticed a glint of something and identified it as a piece of jewelry catching the streetlight from the main thoroughfare. She could just make out a tiny woman standing in a darkened doorway, motioning them forward. The sounds of the riot grew closer and a few people sprinted in front of them in the alley, oblivious to their presence. Echoes of shattering glass and fighting rang through the narrow passage. She wheeled around to look at Sarek.

"Come," Sarek said, leading her forward by the elbow and into the darkness.
He was not in the habit of entering the homes of strangers, particularly those he encountered in dark side streets, but the circumstances were unusual. The threat of physical violence to both Miss Grayson and himself warranted taking such a risk.

He tried to be gentle as he steered her toward the threshold, recalling how frail humans were and how easily they were injured. His companion seemed to be so overwhelmed by some primal emotion that she had been rendered functionally incapacitated, and her condition added another complication.

He could see the woman beckoning them more clearly now: she was elderly and smaller even than Miss Grayson. He turned to face the street as they moved to ensure no one was following them so as to unnecessarily endanger their rescuer, and with another few steps the pair was on her stoop. She opened the door widely enough for them to enter and then quickly shut it and snapped a few locks into position.

He released Miss Grayson's arm and looked at her. Her eyes were wide and questioning and she was trembling and breathing hard. She mumbled, "Why did you ask me to leave you?"

"It was logical," he whispered. "They were seeking me, and I do not blend into a crowd on Earth so well as you."

"We should get away from the doors and the windows," the small woman advised in a peculiar accent.

The three of them stood in close proximity in a tiny entryway that led into a kitchen reminiscent of a galley on a tiny space shuttle.

"Come," the woman murmured, leading them into a larger living space.

"Thank you for allowing us into your home," Sarek said, wishing to convey his sincere gratitude. "I am Sarek."

"I am Fredricka," she replied, before turning to his Miss Grayson and asking. "Are you alright, dear?"

"Yes. Oh, and I'm Amanda. Thank you so much for letting us in," she stammered.

Sarek sensed she was more frightened than she let on but she was no longer shaking.

"Well, you can make yourselves at home. I have some-"

Her words were cut short by the sound of someone rattling and banging on her rear door. The three stood soundlessly; the door rattled a second time, and then it was quiet again.

"I have some tea," she said more quietly. "Will you take tea?"

"Of course," Amanda replied in the same hushed tone.

"No, thank you," Sarek answered, removing his PADD from the inside pocket of his cloak.

"Suit yourself," Fredricka said. "If you change your mind, just let me know."
The two women moved into the kitchen and Sarek examined her blinds and heavy curtains from where he stood. They looked tightly closed and by all appearances, the apartment likely seemed empty from the outside. He muted the audio and dimmed the screen on his PADD before sending messages to both Mr. Marcus and Voris about the current situation and asking for a status report in return.

The people in the streets had been shouting slogans for the Earth First Party and if the man at the deli had been correct, this was related to the local elections. He had spent a total of 32.4 years on Earth and in all that time had never witnessed or even heard reports of riots. Most humans he knew would probably proclaim that their race was beyond such things now, but no race truly was beyond collective illogic, not even Vulcans.

His people had watched Earth for decades before their first contact, watched them nearly destroy themselves in global nuclear war, and watched as they struggled to take their first baby steps into space. Since Vulcans making first contact with this planet 163 years earlier, they had witnessed humanity make vast strides in eliminating poverty, developing technology, and finding a place in the galaxy, but violence over the results of a free and popular election served as proof that an aggressive and capricious nature still lurked beneath the surface. The sentient species of Earth were paradox made flesh.

His PADD vibrated in his hands and he received a message from Mr. Marcus, followed a few seconds later by a message from Voris.

His secretary's message informed him that he was willing to arrange for a site-to-site transport from his location back to the consulate. He glanced at Miss Grayson in the kitchen with the old woman, smiling and holding a mug of tea close to her face with both hands. He could not leave without her, but transporting back to the consulate would require explaining how they came to be sheltered in a tiny apartment in the heart of San Francisco together. Judging by Mr. Marcus' surprise in learning of their shared visit to the gardens, he imagined his secretary perceived some deeper personal attachment existed where there was none. He trusted his secretary, but found dealing with human gossip tiresome and would prefer to avoid it.

Yet he would not ultimately compromise their safety for appearances, so he continued to Voris' message. It explained there were reports of sporadic violence throughout the city and a handful of other metropolitan areas on Earth following the results of the elections, but the local authorities expected to have it under control within the hour and Starfleet security was standing by to assist if necessary. The current directive was to shelter in place until advised otherwise.

He clicked his PADD off, returned it to the hidden pocket within his cloak, and inspected his surroundings. The accommodations were simple, but the décor was certainly not. The small space was decorated with heavy wooden furniture bearing ornate carvings, a large rug with impeccable embroidery, and unusual lamps with off-white shades surrounding central roundish bulbs bearing delicate internal filaments. He had seen such antique illumination devices at the historical exhibit at the California governor's mansion years ago. The photographs were the most interesting, black and white images printed upon paper and housed in bulky metal and wooden frames.

In terms of relative technological timescales, it was one of the few fields where humans had advanced more rapidly than Vulcans. Vulcans didn't have photography or the ability to conveniently record accurate images until they possessed computers sophisticated enough to process optical images into digital information, yet more than 100 years before humans had comparable computers, they had developed a chemical process for transferring images directly to paper.

He remained stationary in the center of the room and mused about scientific history while he examined the content of the photographs from his position. They all contained human subjects,
mostly female, mostly smiling, some in color and some monochromatic gray. He estimated some of the images must be at least 200 years of age.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to neglect one of my guests."

His elderly host approached and gently patted his arm. Human touch was often unnerving, but hers was clearly intended to be welcoming and kind. He also didn't wish to offend her after she had taken a risk by allowing them into her home, so he repelled his natural instinct to pull away and endured it.

"That was when I was just a girl in Bavaria," she said, moving to pick up the picture he had just been looking at of a younger version of herself and another female with similar features that was probably a close relative. "That was my sister, Marguerite."

"You are both so beautiful here," Amanda remarked from behind her, moving forward to admire the image from over her shoulder.

"We were, weren't we?" Fredricka laughed.

"When did you move to San Francisco?"

"Oh, years and years ago. I was a little older than you, I think, 25 or 26. I quit the university and packed up my life and boarded a shuttle and never looked back."

"You sound like you moved on a whim," Amanda chuckled. "Why did you choose San Francisco?"

"I didn't; San Francisco chose me," she explained, setting the picture down and moving over to a narrow hallway table with more photographs. "Why does anyone quit their lives and move thousands of miles away from everything they've ever known?"

"I have a guess but it will probably sound cliché," Amanda said with a demure smile.

"You're onto something," she said, wagging her finger at Amanda. "His name was Joe, he was in Starfleet. We were married three weeks after this one was taken…"

Sarek observed the pair as their host recounted her life story to Amanda. It was a peculiar fact about humans that they so easily divulged the most intimate details of their lives to complete strangers. He could not help but notice how easily Amanda developed a rapport with her own kind and how readily she smiled for others. He watched their conversation rather than listened to it, observing their body language and facial expressions. His eyes rested on her hands and followed her index finger as she traced it across one of the glass frames holding a photograph.

He perceived an unease in himself that he could not explain and attempted to withdraw into his mind and suppress it when he became acutely aware Miss Grayson was looking back at him. Their eyes met and the smile on her face evaporated. She bit her lip and quickly looked away, and even in the dimly lit apartment he could see a pink flush on her cheeks.

Though being in the company of humans was often mentally exhausting, it offered a distinct advantage of often being able to rapidly identify their thoughts from the outward expressions of their faces. It did little to predict how they would eventually act, but it hadn't taken much practice to learn to read and react to human facial cues. In his career as an ambassador, he had quickly discovered how to adapt his conversation and arguments to the outward displays of annoyance, anger, confusion, delight, and anguish of his human counterparts. Yet interpreting Miss Grayson's so-called "body language" was strangely difficult.
She frequently smiled though it was clear she did her best to mute it in his presence, which he inferred was either due her hiding something or an attempt to be polite. Additionally, she often looked lost within herself, which meant she was either engaging in the curious human habit of daydreaming, simple-minded, or something else entirely. She was extremely intelligent, which caused him to rule out the second possibility, and while she did possess a moderate degree of naiveté, he attributed that to her youth.

He wasn't certain of how old she really was, though Fredricka had inadvertently helped him to approximate it to about 24 Terran years of age. She had claimed she moved to San Francisco when she was 25 and a 'little older' than Amanda, and as she had not been corrected on her assumption and he knew Amanda recently obtained a graduate degree which would have taken a certain number of years to complete, she was either 23 or 24, with the latter having a slightly higher probability. She was young, but she wasn't a child.

"I haven't heard any noise from outside in some time," Amanda said from across the room, breaking his sequence of thoughts.

"I am waiting for a confirmation from my security attaché. Thirty-three minutes ago, he informed me the local authorities were working to subdue the violence," he answered, before looking at Fredricka and adding, "I wish to thank you again for permitting us to shelter in your home. I hope we will not impose upon you for much longer."

"It's no trouble," the elderly woman insisted. "It's been an exciting night and I don't have guests as much as I would like. Of course, I hope those hooligans didn't kill anyone, but helping a stranded young couple in need has been a sweet bit of serendipity."

"Oh, we're not- it isn't- you see- he and I… Sarek, we're just… friends?" Amanda said, her voice adopting a peculiar pitch that Sarek interpreted as discomfort.

Fredricka looked at her curiously, then looked at Sarek, and then back to Amanda. "Ok."

Sarek could not understand Amanda's obvious distress at the woman's mistake. Humans made faulty assumptions with an alarmingly regular frequency. No doubt she had perceived two people alone together in a back alley in close physical proximity to one another as the only prerequisites to romantic attachment. He would have corrected her himself had Amanda not beaten him to it.

"I enjoyed hearing your stories, and of course, your wonderful tea," Amanda said, her voice still shaking.

"You are most welcome. You can come back any time you want. But now, I hope you can forgive me, but I am old, and I have my bridge club in the morning, assuming they haven't burned the senior center down. You should stay as long as you need to. If you need to sleep here, I can get you some blankets from the hall."

"We will likely be gone within the hour," Sarek said as mildly as he could manage. "But thank you for your hospitality."

"Ok then. If you go out the back, please just lock the bolt before you step out. Goodnight," she said with a smile, looking back and forth between himself and Amanda several times before turning to retire to her bedroom.

A brief moment of silence passed between them when Amanda quickly said, "I don't know why she thought that. I…"

"She merely made an illogical conclusion based on fragmentary evidence," he finished firmly.
"Well, anyway," Amanda said, moving around him to sit on an upholstered piece of furniture bearing a floral pattern.

He moved to adjacent single chair and sat also, formed his hands into a steeple, and turned his head to face her. A long period of silence passed between them before she looked at him in return, her eyes cast slightly down, and said, "I'm really sorry all of this happened."

"Explain," he insisted, detecting she was likely on the brink of one of her many illogical apologies.

"You offered to get me a shuttle car home, but I was stubborn and wanted to walk instead," she whispered. "If you hadn't had to walk me home, you wouldn't be here right now."

"I was not required to walk you home; it was a decision I made," he explained. "The riots would have detained you regardless of your mode of transport."

"But you said you hadn't intended to eat at the deli and if you hadn't been polite and sat with me, you would have been somewhere else at the time and wouldn't have gotten caught up in all of this."

"It would seem that you have advanced from apologizing for things out of your control to apologizing specifically for my choices," he said, trying to get her to meet his gaze, which she reluctantly did.

"I didn't mean to make it come out that way I guess," she said, her voice trailing off into a whisper. "I just feel sorry that we ended up in a position where you felt like you had to put yourself in danger to ensure my safety."

"It was logical," he clarified. "As I was not going to be safe either way, I preferred instead to give you a better chance alone instead of requiring you to share my fate out of some absurd definition of loyalty."

"I think you should review your own definition of loyalty," she said with a curious smirk he had never seen on her face before. "Even if you say you were only being logical, I really appreciate what you were willing to do for me, and I'm still sorry that I had a hand in putting you in that situation."

"Miss Grayson, I have encountered many of your race who had difficulty recognizing that they should apologize when necessary, but you may be the first person for which the inverse is true, that you prefer instead to apologize when no apology is due."

"No one is perfect, I suppose," she muttered, staring at the photographs mounted on the wall directly in front of her. "Humans certainly do have a lot of flaws. Honestly, I wonder what you must think of us. You're so perfectly logical all the time and you have to constantly struggle to interact with people who will elect unfit individuals to positions of power one minute, then throw tantrums and tear apart cities the next because they didn't get their way. I almost want to apologize to you for having to witness the worst of humanity, but I know perfectly well that what you saw tonight doesn't even scratch the surface of what the 'worst' is."

"Does it not occur to you that we also witnessed many of the better aspects of humanity this evening?"

Her eyes darted in his direction with curiosity.

"Earlier this evening the deli owner did not charge us for our meals, displaying generosity even when we were among only a handful of patrons. Then Fredricka risked her own safety for two
individuals she did not know. She certainly was not required to do so."

"You almost sound like an optimist," she said, smiling broadly but quickly twisting her expression back into a more neutral one.

"May I ask a personal query?"

"Sure," she said. "Anything."

"Why do you so often attempt to restrain your external emotional responses from me?"

"You mean like smiling?"

"Yes."

"I was under the impression that it made Vulcans uncomfortable," she said. "I guess I figured it was more… respectful, though I'm starting to suppose I'm not very good at it."

"I have spent much of my life in the close company of humans and other species which do not care about emotional restraint. I have coped with a wide spectrum of emotional displays. I should make a very poor diplomat indeed if I could not tolerate a few of your smiles."

She scoffed and smiled, made an attempt to regain her composure, and then allowed the smile to materialize. His PADD vibrated against his chest and he stood to remove it from his cloak. Voris had sent him a message indicating the local authorities had made the necessary arrests and central city traffic was open again. They requested his presence back at the consulate, and he tapped out a quick message informing his staff that he would be there in approximately 45 minutes.

"The riots have ceased; we should go," he explained as his finished his message and sent it.

They wordlessly exited Fredricka's apartment, securely locked it as promised, and Sarek took note of the number above the door to send her a note of thanks the next day. They exited the alleyway into the street and proceeded to walk briskly the nine additional blocks to Amanda's apartment. They encountered twelve uniformed police officers directing traffic on their short route, and Sarek noted the damage to property appeared unexpectedly minimal in this area.

They walked without talking and Sarek spent the time composing the formal report he would write about this incident and the transmissions he would send to the Vulcan High Council. He had left the consulate uncharacteristically early on this evening to rest and meditate, but knew both pursuits would be out of the question for the rest of the evening. It would be past 2300 hours by the time he returned to his office and he knew the likelihood was high that he would work through the night into the next morning.

Soon they arrived at Amanda's door and he prepared to bid her a hasty goodbye.

"Ambassador Sarek?" she said so quickly that the words nearly slurred together.

"Yes?"

"I want to thank you again for everything."

"Thank you for your company," he replied.

They stood close and she opened her mouth to say something but shut it and offered instead a closed smile.
"Good night, Miss Grayson," he said, turning to leave her small stoop and return to the consulate.

"Ambassador?" she said with a bit more urgency. "I know this is really forward of me…"

He turned back to her to provide her with his full attention.

"Actually, never mind. I know you're really busy and-"

"Speak your mind, Miss Grayson," he said.

"Would you… be interested in going to dinner with me sometime next week?"

"I shall be returning to Vulcan on Monday," he explained.

"Oh…" she said with an odd look of confusion and what he perceived to be disappointment.

"It will be a short visit; I shall resume my post on Earth the following week," he added.

"I see, well, I understand, and have a good night," she blurted, turning to unlock her door.

"Are you retracting your offer altogether, or are you willing to alter the date for the following week?" he asked, seeking clarification.

"Hmmm?" she said, turning back around.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled in a way he had not yet seen. She looked down at the ground in a way that suggested it held some answer she was seeking, and then looked back at him curiously. He couldn't interpret her expression at all.

"May I contact you when I return to Earth?"

"Yes, of course. If you want," she said quickly, dropping the long lanyard that held a small assortment of access cards.

They stooped to retrieve the item from the ground at nearly the same time, but he was swifter than her and stood up, holding out her collection of key cards. She took a step forward to reach for it and their fingers brushed briefly. The intimacy of her touch caught him by surprise, but he was even more startled by the briefest sensation of a strange, almost warm wave flood over his consciousness, though he managed to maintain his outward calm. She was looking at him inquisitively and inspecting her own hand in confusion, clearly innocent of the Vulcan practice of finger touching, or ozh'esta.

"I'm sorry; must have been static or something," she said, almost as if trying to convince herself.

"Yes," he said aloud, though internally he wasn't sure if he agreed with her assessment.

His heart was palpitating at a slightly accelerated rate for reasons he could not identify. He had touched the hands of many humans before, yet it had never been quite like this. He sensed he was rapidly losing control of his composure and deliberately slowed his breathing and consciously shifted his mental state to attempt to focus on a singular point in his mind. It was an easy and familiar thing to do, but not something he had been compelled to do in years.

"Ambassador Sarek?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

"Yes?"

"Are you alright?"
"I am," he replied. "I shall contact you when I return to Earth."

"Ok," she muttered. "Good night, then."

"Good night, Miss Grayson," he responded before turning to retreat from her stoop.

He knew she watched him walk back up the street and could not easily infer what she might be thinking. For the first time since he was very young, he couldn't make inferences about his own thoughts. He moved hurriedly and performed breathing techniques to piece his mind back together, regretting that his duties would keep him from being unable to perform a deeper meditation that night.
Amanda entered her apartment feeling slightly faint. Her hand shook as she pushed the door closed behind her and leaned backward onto it. She dropped her shoulder bag from her shoulder around to her elbow and her knees gradually bent until she was sitting on the floor with her back resting on her front door. What had just happened?

A loud knocking startled her and she jumped forward and scrambled to her feet as the knocking persisted. "I know you're in there: I just watched you walk in," called Vera, her voice sly and cheerful.

Amanda scrambled to her feet, opened the door, and stared at her friend. Her hair was a new shade of vibrant red and she wore hoops through her eyebrows and nostrils.

"Ok, first of all, I've been calling you all evening and you don't answer, then I found out your pig of an ex got successfully elected after pummeling you, but you don't answer, then riots break out down the street and, what's that? You still don't answer. Then what do you know? I look out my front window and see you on the porch with last weekend's 'not a date' and you look surprised to see me."

Amanda said nothing but held the door open wide enough for her to enter, which she did.

"You know, I'm surprised you're even home," Amanda said a few moments later. "It'll be midnight soon; isn't that the time you sneak into people's windows and suck away their essences?"

"Today is Tuesday, I do that on Thursdays," she grinned. What a typical Vera tactic: fighting sarcasm with sarcasm.

"But seriously, it's Election Day: I figured you'd be at some kind of rally or maybe even participating in the riots, given how easy it is to get you going on politics."

"You wound me," Vera replied with faux shock. "What kind of person do you think I am? What is it that you think I do?"

"I don't know, actually," Amanda laughed. "What do you do?"

Vera thought quietly to herself for half a second before grinning,shrugging, and muttering, "Meh... So are you going to tell me or am I going to have to beat it out of you?"

"Sheesh, ok mom," Amanda snapped. "No, first, I need tea."

She hoisted her shoulder bag up and extracted her PADD and skimmed through the message traffic: ten calls and two messages from Vera, one message from her mother, and frustratingly, nothing from her father. She sighed and deftly moved to the kitchen and tea production got underway. Vera pulled one of the pub stools from the table around to her kitchen counter and Amanda recounted the details of the last several hours. Vera remained uncharacteristically quiet, but her face did all the talking.

"So you asked him out on a third date? You know, the third date is when even conventional, boring people tend to lose the clothes and-"

"Stop," Amanda said, holding up a hand to silence her friend and she poured tea into cups with the other. "The first two hardly qualify as dates and it's like I told you, I asked him and he seemed ok with it and then all of a sudden he got weird."
"What exactly did you say?"

"I asked him if he wanted to go to dinner next week. He said he couldn't because he'd be gone, but he would call the week after. I was probably acting nervous and stupid, actually I know I was, because I dropped my key cards, he picked them up, handed them to me, and then he... got weird. Well, as much as you'd expect a Vulcans to get weird."

"Maybe you're just imagining it."

"No, he was definitely very different. I mean, he's really hard to read, but not impossible. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I hope you don't think he's out of your league," Vera said. "You're a catch. I'd date you."

"I don't think we're even playing the same sport most of the time, to use your metaphor," she said dryly. "I mean, he's an ambassador. I teach children to do long division."

"You do all the stuff with the talking machine," Vera argued.

Amanda laughed at her goofy, oversimplified terminology before countering, "Yeah, more than twelve hundred linguists, computer scientists, and anthropologists have also. For all intents and purposes, my contributions amount to being manacled to my fellow oarsmen below decks, reminding the computer what the difference between a pronoun and a possessive verb is."

"You're being dramatic," Vera scowled.

Amanda sipped her tea and pouted but realized she was right. She was being dramatic, but the underlying doubt still remained.

Her doubts and anxieties grew as the days passed. She felt suspended in time by the constant noise of emotion washing back and forth between her thoughts. She continued to hear nothing from her father, which added to her worry, she heard a lot about John, which only added to her frustration, and heard nothing from Sarek, which only made her think about him more.

By Friday it had been a full week since he sent the strange message about his deposit box at the bank and his awkward reassurances that he loved her. She read the message several times each day, analyzing every word but unable to find some deeper meaning. He had said things were "getting tense" and that he "ran into some problems" but what did that mean? It could mean anything. She researched star charts on her PADD of his location. He said he was near Zetar? Or was it Zekar? She had never heard of such a planet or a star system and couldn't find anything remotely close to that name on any current star chart.

She thought of returning home to New Chicago and checking his deposit box, thinking there would be some significant clue there, but then quickly remembered she wasn't a character in some bawdy mystery novel. Her father was just a normal person, and normal people didn't leave a trail of mysterious clues to turn their children into amateur sleuths. In truth, she didn't want to find out what was in the deposit box because his instructions were to open it "if something happens." She couldn't be sure that anything had happened yet, and opening the box would be like admitting that he was... captured? Adrift in space? Stranded on an uncharted planetoid? Dead? She didn't know and wasn't ready to think about it.

Molineaux's ascendency to congressional speaker caused her more problems. Before the election she had made it almost two weeks without a call from a reporter or an inquiry from a total stranger off the street about "the punch." The volume of interest was only a fraction of what it had been before, but it was annoying because she thought she was past all of that.
She had watched his acceptance speech the morning following the riots and she rolled her eyes at his vague assurances. He swore to do what was "best for Earth" without stipulating what that might be and promised to be impartial in congressional sessions. He had won by a frighteningly slim margin and she discovered that the bulk of the protests and riots had centered on accusations that some of the polls had been rigged or tampered with. The planetary government was considering an investigation, but for now at least, the job was Molineaux's.

One peculiar thing she noticed was that he seemed changed somehow. In all the time she'd known him, he had exuded a profound, inherent confidence and a casual swagger that had been endearing while they dated but now seemed obnoxious in hindsight. Now it was mostly gone and he was more subdued. He looked thinner, more tired, and generally beaten in a way that didn't suit him. She supposed it was probably the stress of dealing with the fallout of the conference, and irrespective of her opinions on the matter, it couldn't have been easy for him.

The problem she had the most difficulty ignoring was Ambassador Sarek. She'd spent countless hours psychoanalyzing every interaction they'd had from the moment she met him at the aquarium to the point when he practically ran away from her when she'd asked him to dinner. The more she thought about it, the worse she felt. Every goofy comment, every awkward silence only felt amplified in her memory. She would work herself into a cycle of convincing herself that he probably despised her, then the rational part of her brain would tell her to stop being silly, and then she would recall something she'd said to him and the cycle would repeat.

When she started to suspect she had a little bit of an innocent crush on him at the deli, she had been fine with that. Everyone encountered passing infatuations now and again and since she'd felt confident at the time that any kind of relationship between them would be laughable, she'd just dismissed it. Now she found herself really considering him as a person, as a man, and as a potential partner and she never got very far into those kinds of thoughts before she'd start furiously blushing and return to cataloguing all of her embarrassing moments with him.

He popped into her mind for all manner of reasons, so it didn't help that the following Monday, the day that she knew he was leaving to return to Vulcan, she found herself in her classroom giving an introductory lesson on probabilistic logic. It had been in her lesson plan for over a month but felt like an ironic and irritating reminder of her predicament.

As she explained the differences to her students in additivity and multiplication through Venn diagrams, she examined her efforts and wondered if that was truly how he viewed existence: as little more than a series of statements joined by logical conjunctions like "and", "or", "either", "but", "if", and "then." It seemed a bleak and almost joyless way to approach life, and she hoped she was being unfair and oversimplifying it. Surely even Vulcans had to admit there was more to life than ideas such as "if this, then that, but also that."

That afternoon when the school day was over, she trudged out of the building and into the open courtyard at the center of the embassy complex. The sun was shining and it was a magnificent spring day. The thought of wasting the rest of it hiding down in the basement trying to force a capricious computer to assemble a coherent English sentence from only a few syllables of another Romulan sentence was depressing.

She walked along a footpath and debated her plans for the evening. Working on the translator was about the best distraction she had from her thoughts, but she was feeling burnt out by Project Rosetta. In the last two months, she'd logged the second highest number of volunteer hours of anyone at the embassy complex location. Top honors went to a retired Starfleet cryptologist named George Logan who always complained that his grandchildren didn't live closer and he had nothing else to do with his time.
"Hey, Amanda!"

She looked up from the ground to see Giles moving briskly toward her carrying a small, black parcel.

"I thought you were leaving for Vulcan today."

"Me? No," he said as he caught up with her. "I mean, the ambassador and some of his senior staff left. Wait, why do you know that?"

"Never mind," she mumbled.

"Ok," he replied. "Speaking of the ambassador, yes, he did leave pretty early this morning. He left this on my desk with instructions to give it to you at my earliest convenience."

He extended the package to her and she took it. It was wrapped in neatly embroidered, heavy black cloth quite similar to the cloak he often wore. It was a bit pliable, like a paperbound book.

"Are you going to open it?" Giles asked, crossing his arms and looking back and forth from the package to her.

"Yes, I will," she said, accepting his invitation to a staring contest.

"So… when?"

"When I feel like it," she responded.

Her hands were shaking slightly and she was afraid he would notice. Was the item she held intended as a gift? If so, why had he asked Giles to give it to her instead of giving it to her himself? Of course, he was probably very busy, and she didn't even know what it was yet. She dropped it into her shoulder bag casually, aware that the contents and his motivation in giving it to her would give her something new to pick apart and obsess over.

"So, I imagine you have a lot of free time?" Amanda said, trying to change the subject.

He scowled at her but said, "Yeah, Celeste and the kids came back from Oklahoma last night. I'm actually on my way home now. I forgot what my house looked like in daylight."

"Yeah, I was thinking of taking a little break from Rosetta too. Probably not too long; I just need a change of pace."

"If you're looking to branch out into a fun and exciting new field of study, you're welcome to come babysit," he chuckled.

She contemplated it for a moment and said, "Yeah, sure, ok."

"Really? I was actually kidding, but if you want, sure. Our anniversary is Thursday and it would be nice to-"

"You don't have to explain," she said with a genuine smile. "I love kids. Send me a message with your address and the time and I'll be there. Anyway, I have to run. It was great seeing you!"

She wheeled around and started to walk away hurriedly for two reasons. She was eager to find out what Sarek had given Giles to give to her, but she also noticed Ambassador Julan approaching from about twenty meters away on their left. She didn't think he had seen her and she had successfully avoided him all day. She was still unsure if he was lonely, pushy, infatuated, or some
combination of all three, but she hated the discomfort of trying to perpetually hint that she wasn't interested in anything more than an acquaintanceship. Was that how Sarek viewed her, the way she viewed Ambassador Julan?

She walked faster, entering the main lobby from the courtyard. She saw the 419 Shuttle moving toward the appointed stop, raced to catch it, and arrived just before the door glided closed. She swiped her pass card on the terminal, greeted the driver warmly, and flopped into the seat just behind him.

She cautiously opened her shoulder bag and removed the parcel Giles had given her. She traced her fingers along the embroidery, admiring it briefly before sliding her index finger into a fold to reveal what was inside. It was an old book with black, embossed Vulcan script on the front that she instantly recognized as *The Teachings of Surak.*

She carefully opened the cover to find a handwritten note in Vulcan script, written in neat, vertical handwriting. She translated it to say, "*For the mastery of language, just as the natives master it.*"

Sarek had been sitting for hours on the cold stone floor of the meditation room in his family's home on the outskirts of Shi'Kahr. The small property had been willed to Sarek after the death of his father. His younger brother Silek would have been entitled to half the estate, had he and Skon not formally parted ways over Silek's decision to pursue space exploration rather than a diplomatic career. Sarek had not seen his sibling in more than nine years, but did not bear him any ill will.

He was slowly emerging from a deep meditative state and felt a light relief in his consciousness. This evening's meditations had been his most successful since his return to Vulcan three days earlier. The atmosphere of Vulcan was refreshing, though it had taken a full day to reacclimatize to the heavier gravity and thinner air. Being back among Vulcans also provided a pleasing respite from the constant onslaught of emotive and cultural disorder that came from daily interactions with humans and other emotionally charged species.

His trip had been extremely productive. He'd already met with the Earth ambassador to Vulcan, the Science Council, and a delegation from an Earth colony at the outskirts of Vulcan-patrolled space. He had also already met twice with the senior members of the Vulcan High Council in his brief stay: first alone to discuss internal matters on Vulcan and once the day before with representatives of Starfleet, Andoria, and Coridan to continue discussions about the expansion of the Romulan corridor.

The interim Chief of Staff of Starfleet, Admiral Maxwell Bentham, had attended the session and not spoken a single word: he had merely passed along information about Starfleet's capabilities and listened as Vulcan and Andorian experts proposed strategic plans for exploring the sector of space that edged close to the Romulan Neutral Zone.

His private meeting with the Vulcan High Council had focused on only three issues: the lack of progress of the investigation into Ambassador Sulak's death, the possible breech of their databases at the consulate the week before, and the tense conditions following the Terran elections. The hacking inquiry had thus far turned up nothing: if someone had been attempting to access Vulcan's files on Earth, they did not appear to have been successful and there was no indication as to what they had been seeking. As for the riots, he had dutifully filed a report about his observations but had minimized most mention of Amanda Grayson.

She was the one thing keeping his mind from its more customary state of complete neutrality. He had given much reflection about what had transpired between them on her doorstep, and could arrive neither at a conclusion nor a means of resolution.
He enjoyed her friendship, nothing more. She was the only human female he had ever kept company with in an informal setting. He knew little of human courting rituals, but deduced from the behavior of both the woman Fredricka and his secretary Mr. Marcus that perhaps humans might perceive their connection to be more intimate than it was. He found himself unable to draw any logical conclusions on how she considered their relationship.

She had appeared extremely uneasy at Fredricka's suggestion that they were mates, and he initially assumed she detested the idea. Yet he also knew humans, along with most other species, had a curious habit of projecting the opposite impression of their true intentions based on social courtesy or embarrassment of being discovered. Of all human failings, he considered the tendency toward duplicity as a means of politeness to be the worst.

Though he understood little of human romantic entanglements, he did know about Vulcan bonding, and his knowledge on this subject was what troubled him most. It had seemed to him that in the fraction of a second their fingers had connected, he felt aware of her presence, much the same way he had once felt attuned to T'Rea's. Yet the contact with Miss Grayson had been so brief and had caught him so unawares that he hadn't had time to explore its boundaries in the moment. It was likely they shared a weak empathic bond over their few shared experiences, but that certainly didn't imply anything more significant.

What was significant was the fact that he lacked a mate. For Vulcans who had not been bonded as children or no longer had a mate, seeking a new mate was a tenuous process. Following his divorce from T'Rea, he had given serious consideration to undergoing kolinahr, but had forgone the ritual to perform better as an ambassador.

His choice meant that he would need to find a mate in less than two years, but Earth lacked a ready supply of unattached Vulcan females. He returned to Vulcan a minimum of four times annually, which would give him several opportunities to seek out and begin courting a new mate. His current visit to his home world was only due to last another six days, but he vowed to begin his search during his next quarterly briefing when he would once again return to Shi'Kahr.

There was still the lingering question of Miss Grayson, and he reasoned the only logical thing to do would be to distance himself from her. He would regret the absence of her company, but it seemed evident that some unintentional bond, however weak, had formed between them. Immediate personal extrication would prevent any such bond from forming more deeply and would spare her the unfair burden of such a union. It was logical… yes, logical.

He rose from the stone floor and extinguished the candles, satisfied that he had reached a resolution over his personal affairs and could focus more easily on diplomatic endeavors. He had a meeting with the Vulcan Security Council to more fully discuss the development and actions of the Earth Autonomy Movement early in the morning and required rest.

The next morning he awoke, having been unable to achieve a desirable quality of sleep. He dressed slowly and methodically, ate a light bowl of plomik soup, and proceeded to the city's government district by car.

As he arrived at the building that accommodated the Vulcan Security Council, he received a message on his secure PADD connection that his private meeting had been cancelled and he was summoned instead to an emergency meeting in a different wing of the same building. He altered course and discovered a conference room with a handful of other Vulcan governmental personnel.

He seated himself at the far end of the table without speaking a word to any of the others, and soon the room was at capacity. More people arrived and with all available seating taken, they were forced to stand in the wings of the room. He counted 37 individuals in all: he recognized Savar from the Vulcan Ministry of Science and Sevek, the Chief Minister of the Vulcan Communication
Agency, as well as two members of the Vulcan Advisory Council and representatives of the Vulcan Ministry of Information. It was illogical to extrapolate the possible details of this meeting based solely on the individuals assembled, but he understood that of the people he could identify, all of them were certain to possess the highest level of security clearance, just as he did.

A short time later the door to the conference room was sealed and Chief Minister Sevek stood to speak.

"Six hours ago, a Vulcan probe 3.6 light years from Celes intercepted an encrypted Klingon message. The contents of this message follow an unknown encryption pattern and were received on a low-band Starfleet channel. The intended recipient is unclear based upon the trajectory of the signal. This information was relayed to Starfleet immediately and they have launched a joint effort to decrypt this message."

Sarek contemplated the information. The Federation had not heard anything from the Klingon Empire in more than two years after having come to the brink of war one four separate occasions in the last decade.

As Sevek completed his briefing, the door opened and Sorel, the Vulcan Minister of State entered the room along with a man who was most likely his aide. All seated parties rose to their feet in unison out of respect and remained standing until Minister Sorel reached the head of the long table to speak.

"Four hours ago, the Vulcan research vessel T'Mal received a distress signal from Captain Melvin Grayson of the Comstock, a civilian Terran survey ship in the Bolian sector."

A number of individuals in the room turned their heads to look at both Sarek and Savar as the two people for which the burden of this crisis would primarily fall upon.

"The T'Mal located the source of the signal near an uninhabited planet designated Ivor Prime. Upon arriving at the location, only traces of debris were visible. Two other ships in the sector have been rerouted to assist in search and rescue operations, and Starfleet will be notified. The T'Mal's initial scans of the area detected high levels of antiprotons, consistent with large scale, type 3 Romulan disruptors."

Sarek began processing Minister Sorel's words and the numerous implications of a Romulan attack in Federation space. First among his thoughts was whether or not Grayson was a common Terran surname…
Condolences

Sarek was aboard a starship halfway into his 14-hour journey back to Earth. He'd cut his trip short by four days following the Comstock incident. The Federation-wide reaction had been one of panic and the possibility that Romulans had destroyed the vessel wasn't even public information. Yet.

It was generally understood within military circles that the Romulans possessed the holographic technology to camouflage themselves as friendly ships, as they had done seventy years earlier when they had tried to provoke war between Andoria and Tellar Prime prior to the Federation's formation. Intelligence agencies had also known for a long time that the Romulans were highly invested in stealth cloaking technologies, but most engineers disputed their ability to hide something as large as a ship, especially travelling at warp.

Of course, the most accurate information about Romulan technology was more than 65 years old and dated back to the Romulan Wars. No one had ever made visual contact with the Romulans and what little they knew of the Romulan language was half extrapolation based on limited data from old and intercepted transmissions. The Romulan Wars had been the catalyst for a standardized Federation universal translator, a project ten years in the making called Rosetta.

But whether Romulan ships were disguised or completely invisible, either possibility was ominous. Even more curious was that reports from previous Romulan encounters explicitly outlined their triphasic emitter technology, which could simulate various weapons signatures. If there were some plot by the Romulans to start another war, it was illogical that they would go through the trouble of hiding themselves to get so far into Federation space and then leave traces of their own disruptors when they could have just as easily made it look like the work of Klingons.

Despite little information being available to the public, it hadn't stopped people from speculating about the involvement of the Romulans, or the Klingons, or some internal plot. It hadn't stopped the Earth First Party from accusing Vulcan and Andoria of negligence. Reports had surfaced that the Comstock had been in distress for three days in the Bolian sector, and as Vulcan and Andorian ships routinely moved throughout that region of space, it was believed that their call for help had been heard and ignored.

Sarek sat in the ship's forward lounge, holding his PADD and deep in deliberation. The news of the Comstock's almost certain destruction had been released 48 hours before, and he knew that Miss Grayson would have no doubt been informed by now. When he had confirmed that Melvin Grayson was indeed her father, he intuited a peculiar wave of sympathy for her situation. He felt a quiet sadness that he found very difficult to control, which was perplexing because not only had he never met the man, but also he didn't even experience the same emotion when his father had died the previous year.

Presently he found himself struggling to draft a message of condolence to her. He had started and deleted three separate attempts, dismissing each being too concise or too logical for human comfort. He was uncertain what to say that would adequately convey his sentiment. Vulcans did not publicly speak about the emotional turmoil caused by the deaths of loved ones. They grieved, naturally, but it was a thing understood to be deeply personal and done in private.

As he contemplated the content of his message, Admiral Bentham entered the lounge and sat in a nearby chair next to a low, circular table. Sarek had had little interaction with him throughout their visit to Vulcan. He sensed the man was seeking a conference, so he clicked his device off and turned to him.
"I hope I'm not interrupting," Bentham said with a half smile. "I know you must be very busy."

"As are you, no doubt," Sarek replied.

"Yes, curious times we live in," Bentham agreed. "Though I expect every generation thinks that about itself."

Sarek said nothing but watched the admiral shift in his chair and lean forward. Bentham was a man with a thin frame, short stature, and a flawlessly neat appearance. His size and clean-cut features would lead many to guess he was far younger than he was, were it not for the hard wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. His eyes were a dull blue and were neither kind nor calculating. They were almost Vulcan in nature, possessing a neutral quality that many called unnerving.

When Bentham had consented to take the place of the late Admiral Winters on the voyage to Vulcan, Mr. Marcus had prepared a dossier on Starfleet's temporary Chief of Staff for Sarek.

Bentham had been born and raised on the unsanctioned Federation Providence colony of Jouret IV, near the intersection of present-day Federation, Klingon, and Romulan space. 49 years ago, tensions between the Romulans and Klingons nearly erupted in war and the Klingons killed the 500 colonists, believing them to be Romulan spies. Bentham had been the only survivor and despite his young age, managed to live alone on the colony for nearly a year before his rescue.

He had applied to Starfleet at age 16 and excelled beyond expectations, spending most of his career in intelligence before assuming command and several staff positions. His secretary's report described him as a shrewd negotiator and brilliant tactician.

"I want you to realize, Ambassador Sarek, that I personally don't think Vulcan could have done anything to prevent the destruction of the Comstock."

"I agree with your assessment," Sarek replied. "Has Starfleet made any progress on the decryption of the message from the Klingons?"

Bentham's mouth twitched slightly at his mention of the Klingons. It was apparent he was used to conducting conversations to suit him and disliked submitting control over the discussion.

"No, not yet," he replied. "It's curious about the Romulan weapon signatures though. If it really were Romulans, they may have crossed the Neutral Zone right near that corridor you're wanting to expand."

"The expansion of the corridor is in the interest of science and the Federation, not me personally. Furthermore, there is inconclusive evidence to show it was Romulans, though if it were, there is no way of knowing where they crossed the Neutral Zone or how long they were in Federation space, either before or after the alleged attack on the Comstock."

"Yes, all very logical points. " Bentham rebutted, before being interrupted by Sarek.

"Moreover, it is curious that the message from the Klingons was received just hours before the first distress call from the Comstock. It's been years since the last contact with the Klingons and decades since the last contact with the Romulans. I believe humans appreciate deriving meaning from coincidences, so tell me, Admiral, what do you make of it?"

Bentham's eyes narrowed as he answered, "I don't put much stock into coincidences either, unless I have a reason to. Can you give me a reason?"
"I was thinking you could give me one," Sarek replied.

"My professional opinion is that the Klingon message is a fluke," remarked Bentham. "There's all kinds of leakage radiation floating through space and subspace; there's bound to be a message or two that gets sent in the wrong direction and floats around until someone picks it up."

"Decrypted so well that even the best at Starfleet haven't deciphered it yet?"

"From what I understand, the brilliant cryptologists at the Vulcan Science Academy are struggling with it too," Bentham mentioned.

"Our inability to decrypt the message is irrelevant in terms of why the Klingons would devise such an encryption strategy in the first place. You believe the message is a fluke, yet it is logical to assume the contents of the message are of significant value to the Klingon Empire if they have encrypted it so well that we have been unable to decode it for days."

"Just because it's significant to the Klingon Empire doesn't mean it's significant to the Federation," Bentham argued.

"On that point, you are correct," Sarek agreed.

"For someone whose home world is taking a lot of blame for the loss of the Comstock, you're really fascinated by this Klingon message."

"And for someone who has spent decades in Starfleet intelligence, you seem unfazed by an unusual message intercepted by the Klingons."

"What are you implying, Ambassador?"

"Merely that we are engaged in two separate conversations, and I would prefer to focus on one."

"I heard tell you were one of the best orators in the Federation," Bentham said.

"A third-party opinion which is irrelevant here," Sarek countered.

At that moment, Bentham received a call and urgently excused himself. Sarek noted that Bentham was very skilled at obtaining information: the best intelligence officers were. He couldn't be sure precisely what information he wanted, but he had effortlessly employed casual conversation, intimidation, mild insults, and flattery to get it.

He returned to his PADD to resume efforts to draft a message to Amanda and noted that he'd received a message from Secretary Varen at the consulate. The message was brief and explained that the Terran government was proposing an emergency session to secede from the Federation. He spent the rest of his journey back to Earth entangled in correspondence between Earth, the Federation Council, and multiple levels of the Vulcan government.

He returned to Earth at 0200 hours Sunday morning and was greeted by Varen at the landing dock. It was raining and he noticed how quickly he had adjusted to being back on Vulcan by his discomfort at Earth's wetter, thicker atmosphere.

He was tempted to return to the consulate and return the 35 messages he had received from Vulcan citizens residing on Earth about the developing crisis, and begin drafting replies to requests for his attendance at an increasing number of meetings and briefings in the coming days. His schedule was already overbooked for the 13 out of next 18 days and he knew his list of tasks would continue to grow almost exponentially. Rather than proceed directly to work on a day that most humans were idle and at a time when few humans were awake, he chose instead to return to...
his living quarters.

They spoke little in the consular shuttle car and Sarek returned to his PADD and the message he intended to send to Amanda Grayson. The text area was completely blank. As they arrived in front of his building, he clicked the screen off, thanked Varen for his diligence in handling the current crisis in his absence, and walked the stairs to his accommodations.

He undressed and prepared for sleep. He was tired: physically, mentally, and even emotionally. He laid awake in his large bed, breathing slowly to facilitate an easier transition into sleep, but sleep did not come.

Amanda's face was swollen from twenty-four hours of episodic crying. She lie sprawled across her bed, curled into her own grief. Vera had stayed with her through most of the night, holding her and wiping the tears and mucus from her face periodically.

The school's administrator had come during the middle of her class on Friday and said there were people from Starfleet who wanted to speak with her privately. She knew before she even walked out of the classroom that her father was dead.

Of course, they hadn't said "dead" exactly. They had said, "missing, presumed dead." The Comstock had a crew of 14 including her father, and from the looks of it, they were all dead, as if they had just disappeared in orbit of a planet called Ivor Prime.

A bombardment of well-wishers and sympathizers descended on her all Friday evening and into Saturday. Her mother called three times and sounded as though she'd also been crying. Her mother never spoke much about her father after the divorce, but they'd parted on amicable terms and were always civil when speaking of each other. Hearing her mother cry about her father's death made her cry even harder, as she wondered if her mother felt some lingering guilt or regret about the manner in which they'd parted ways.

Giles and Celeste stopped by in the evening to give her a vegetable casserole and offer their condolences. She'd babysat their twins just the day before: it was amazing how quickly things could change.

She found herself staring at the wall, pretending she could see patterns in the texture. The ring of her PADD on the nightstand startled her, and she clicked the speaker button without even picking it up to see who it was.

"Hello, Amanda?"

It was John. She sat up, too drained and too sad to pick a fight.

"Yeah," she answered hoarsely. "Yeah, it's me."

"I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am," he said with a kind sincerity she could scarcely believe.

"Yeah, thanks," she mumbled, her voice harsh and tense.

Silence hung heavy in the air for a number of seconds before John spoke again, saying, "You're a really wonderful person, Amanda, and you deserved a lot better than me."

Was this some kind of apology or an attempt to reconcile? He sounded like he genuinely cared, and so she couldn't figure out what his angle was, and that bothered her.
"So I'm really sorry for everything, the way I treated you in our relationship, the…"

He trailed off and she stared at her ceiling feeling completely confused.

"Look, I never met your father, but I'm sure he was a good person. He raised a great daughter. I'm so very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, John," she said cordially.

Whether he meant it or not, whether there was some political advantage in his apology, she didn't have the desire or the energy to be petty.

"Listen, Amanda, please take care of yourself. Just, just take care of yourself."

"Um, yeah, thanks, I will," she said, growing weary of his strained platitudes.

"Yeah, well, I mean it. Take care of yourself. Goodbye."

She heard the faint noise of the connection click and her PADD fall silent. She continued to stare at the ceiling, and tears began dripping down her cheeks again. Euclid chose that moment to leap onto the bed with her, which made her cry even harder for no obvious reason. She hugged him and buried her wet face into his patchwork fur, and cried until she fell asleep.

Some hours later she woke up alone. It was dark outside and the glow of the city streamed into her bedroom. She rubbed her eyes and swung her legs over the side of the bed; every part of her body felt like it weighed more than it should and her head throbbed and her throat was dry.

She shuffled her way toward the kitchen for a glass of ice water when she tripped over her shoulder bag that she had dumped unceremoniously in the middle of the narrow hallway to her bedroom. She'd been nearly hysterical when she came home yesterday afternoon and tidying up her apartment hadn't been high atop the priority list. Blinding pain tore through her big toe as the bag's contents scattered across the floor.

She plopped down on the hard floor, clutching her toe and wanted to cry and feel sorry for herself, but she found that she had no tears left to give.

"Great, now I'm too dehydrated to cry," she wailed out loud, and then wanted to cry because she couldn't cry.

When she was done with her pity party, she looked around at the various items strewn across her floor until she came to rest on the *Teachings of Surak* that Sarek had given her lying near her injured foot. She reached forward and gently picked it up by the spine, allowing the pages to fall loosely open.

She stood and carried it into her breakfast nook, and sat at the table, gently turning the pages. The book was old and well used, but it was also well made. She turned back to the first page and began skimming, translating as best as she could by sight. It was harder than she thought it would be, and found herself retrieving her hardbound English/Vulcan dictionary from her shelf along with her PADD and stylus for taking notes.

After she had completed three pages, she read through her translation and considered its meaning. It was an introduction, an explanation for why Surak had chosen to embrace logic as he watched emotion destroy his people. "We have differences. May we, together, become greater than the sum of us both." She thought about Earth, the riots, and then him. Putting her mind to work at teasing apart his language had the brilliant effect of taking her mind off of her father, but inversely made her think of Sarek.
She knew it was wrong to say she *missed* him. She supposed missing people was reserved for occasions when two or more people had a long-standing association. In a strange way she felt guilty for thinking about him now, as if she were somehow being disrespectful to her father’s memory. Yet as she worked she thought of him periodically, wondering if she would ever hear from him again and what he was doing at that moment at home on Vulcan.

The clock on her kitchen cooking unit read 0158 hours. She wasn't particularly tired, but she *was* restless. She put on a pot of green tea and then returned to translating Surak’s teachings. She translated for hours, until the gray dawn crept through her bay window and illuminated the materials she’d collected on her pub table.

She sat up and stretched, feeling the vertebrae in her back release a delicious popping sound. Across from her was the bookshelf where she kept the volumes her father had sent her from his travels. She felt a fresh wave of grief and reached for her teacup to see if she could literally swallow her sadness back down but the cup was disappointingly empty.

She trudged into the kitchen, seeing that it was now 0714 hours. She wanted to be tired, but she felt sad, confused, and jittery following the events of the last weeks and a whole pot of heavily caffeinated tea. She refilled her kettle and put it to boil to make another pot and flopped down on her couch, staring at the picture frames on her mantel that were still wildly askew following the morning after the conference when she felt so irrationally angry with John that she'd thrown a bit of a fit and pushed them out of the neat little rows he had placed them in.

She laughed as she thought of what she must have looked like, and then felt sad again when she remembered that she had been in the middle of throwing her silly tantrum when Sarek had stopped by for tea. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and assuming it was Vera checking in with her, she looked at the door, noticed the latch was open, and yelled, "It's open."

After a few seconds she repeated herself but the door remained closed. She hopped off the couch and pulled open, and to her shock discovered Ambassador Sarek. *He wasn't supposed to be here.*

She looked down at herself, realizing she was still in the same clothes from Friday evening that Vera had helped her change into and that she hadn't showered or performed any virtually any personal hygiene since then. Her hair was in a messy ponytail and her wide-rimmed shirt probably exposed more of her chest than he considered decent, so she stood up straight as casually as she could and stared at him awkwardly.

"You said the door was open; clearly it was closed," he said, motioning to the doorframe. "Though now I see you may have been imprecisely referring to your locking mechanism."

"Oh, yes," she said, offering a half-hearted smile. "Please don't think I was being rude: I didn't realize it was you. I thought you were supposed to be on Vulcan."

The teakettle screamed behind her and she added, "Would you like to come in? Have a cup of tea?"

He barely nodded, entered, and shut the door behind him as she dashed off to the kitchen, shrugging her shirt up onto her shoulders to hide her bra straps. She pulled the kettle from the conduction unit and her mind furiously raced through all of the reasons he might have come.

"Did you say you wanted some tea?" she asked, her voice strained.

"That would be acceptable, thank you," he said.

She went to her breakfast nook to grab her empty cup from the table and noticed him still standing
by the door, his hands behind his back, looking at her with an expression she would almost define as wonderment.

"It's not the same tea you had the last time, it's Earl Grey, but if you like I can make you-"

"Whatever you prepare will be appreciated, Miss Grayson," he said.

"Ok, you can come sit if you like," she said, motioning to the pub chair Vera had pulled up to the kitchen counter.

Her cat had heard her activities in the kitchen and came to investigate, which wasn't surprising given it was past his usual feeding time. She nearly tripped over him turning the corner, but he was persistent and started rubbing his face on her leg.

Sarek pulled the pub chair from beneath the counter and sat, and she felt self-conscious as he watched her. She wanted to ask him so many things, but focused on tea instead. She stood on the tips of her toes to pull another cup from the high cabinet, wobbled a bit, and the cup slipped from her hand and smashed on the floor.

In her attempt to get out of the way, she leapt backwards onto Euclid, who howled, and then she jumped forward in panic, thinking she'd seriously hurt her cat. She stepped squarely onto a large fragment of the broken porcelain and felt instant pain, and finally completely lost her balance and fell forward onto her hands. Her left hand landed on another large shard of the broken cup and when she tried to raise herself to a sitting position, it slipped from underneath her in the warm blood already pooling on the floor.

"Miss Grayson, are you injured?"

She looked down at the disaster her tiny kitchen floor had turned into, and noticed the cup was part of a pair that her father had given her for her birthday, and she did the last thing she ever wanted to do in front of Sarek: she burst into tears. She sat up, leaning her back on the kitchen cabinet and saw that he had come into the kitchen. She saw an actual emotional expression on his face for the first time, and it was one of complete, utter discomfort.

He didn't linger long in the kitchen entryway; upon seeing her wounds he immediately began searching through the drawers and found a pair of clean blue dishtowels. Her kitchen was barely more than a meter wide but he stooped in the narrow space and quickly took her wrist. He removed the piece of porcelain embedded in her palm and placed one of the towels in her fist and held it closed.

"I need to tend to your foot," he said. "Do you have a medical kit?"

"In the hall closet; there's a dermal regenerator in there."

Her tears had all but subsided and she started to feel like a complete idiot. She twisted her leg to look at her foot and was horrified to see a chunk of porcelain about five centimeters long buried deep in the arch.

"Is Euclid ok?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I presume you refer to your cat. Judging by the speed he departed your kitchen, he did not suffer any permanent injury."

He returned with the small black medical kit and knelt down by her side again. She tried to sit up better to reach her foot, but the angle was awkward.
"Will you permit me to treat your foot?" he asked, opening her medical kit.

She sighed and nodded and he spread the other dishtowel across his knee and lifted her foot up onto it. Amanda felt a jerk of pain as he extracted the sharp debris and began suturing it closed with the small, hand held laser device.

"Your hand," he said, shifting his weight and leaning closer to her.

She pulled the blood-soaked dishtowel from her fist to expose the deep cut and he gently took her by the wrist. They had never been so close, and she felt her eyes drawn toward the angular lines of his face. As she watched him, she soon became aware that he had stopped moving. Her eyes trailed upward toward his and she discovered he was looking at her.

His face was smooth and unchanging as ever, but at this distance, she could discern an expression that she couldn't quite put words to. It felt like an eternity that they sat that way, neither of them breathing or moving but simply watching each other.

Amanda breathed and inched her chin forward and soon her lips met his.
He felt the warm press of her mouth on his and for approximately three seconds, did nothing to pull away. Then his mind connected with the present reality and he jerked backward more forcefully than he'd intended. Her face wore a mask of disbelief. Her eyes were wide and darting over the various features of his face and he could see her pupils were rapidly dilating.

"That was..." she gasped. "I'm really... I- I-"

She began to cry again, though clearly she was making an attempt to conceal it. She struggled to get to her feet.

"I would not advise attempting to walk on your floor, given its present condition," he said, looking at the sharp pieces of porcelain scattered everywhere. She closed her eyes and nodded.

He examined the scene and started picking up the larger bits of debris. As so often had happened in her presence lately, his thoughts began racing. He reviewed the last moments in his mind, unsure of why he had kissed her. He wasn't even certain that he had kissed her — she seemed convinced she was the culprit. In retrospect it had likely been mutual, but he felt a biting shame that he would exploit her in such an indecent way, especially while she was in such an emotionally compromised state. He had neither explanation nor excuse for his conduct.

He opened his mouth to apologize for his part in the kiss when she asked in a muffled voice, "There's a hand vacuum in the pantry behind you; will you hand it to me?"

He complied with her request and she swept up the smaller porcelain fragments without saying a word. Her face was flushed and wet and bits of her hair were caught in the moisture. She sniffed and wiped her face with her newly laser-stitched hand, which smeared residual blood across her left cheek.

He recalled the first time he witnessed such an open effusion of human grief. 12 years ago he attended a funeral for the leader of a joint asteroid mining expedition who had died saving his human and Vulcan crew when an ice shelf had collapsed. The man's widow had sobbed through the entire service and he remembered wondering why her family had allowed her to suffer so publicly when they could have taken her somewhere more private.

Humans had few reservations about public grief and though he had come to understand this well, it was nevertheless very difficult to ignore certain Vulcan taboos. Humans preferred comfort, Vulcans preferred privacy. He felt ill equipped to console her and it was evident she didn't want whatever consolation he could provide.

She completed sweeping the remains of the teacup into the automated disposal unit and retrieved the two blood soaked towels from the floor and started on the process of packing up her medical kit. He knelt to help her and watched her figure stiffen as he approached. He saw fresh tears well in the corners of her eyes; she ducked her head down in an obvious and poor attempt to disguise them.

His presence was obviously adding to her misery. He carefully backed away from her and stood.

"I should go," he said.

"Ok," she said in quick succession.

Right as he began to say, "I apologize for-," she said, "I'm so extremely sorry that I-"
"No, it is I who should apologize for intruding upon you at this time," he said. "I hope that you can forgive me for taking advantage of you."

He turned on his heel and as he reached the door of her apartment, she said, "Live long and prosper, Ambassador Sarek."

He could not discern what she intended to imply from the neutrality of her tone, whether it was finality, anger, or nothing at all. He turned to see her standing in the threshold of her breakfast nook, both hands clutching the handle of her small vacuum device. The whites of her eyes were stained red but despite this he still considered her a handsome woman. It occurred to him in that moment that he had never consciously thought of her as being beautiful before. She just was, in an effortless and unaffected sort of way.

"Peace and long life, Amanda Grayson," he responded before turning and retreating through the door.

The car from the consulate was still waiting on the street level to take him to his office. He seated himself in the back and breathed deeply. He struggled to both process and suppress the emotions coursing through him at that moment. His hands still had her blood on them and his lips still carried the salt from her tears.

Why had he even come to her home? To offer condolences for her father's likely death, which he had failed to do. Why had he not thought she might not want visitors? He had promised to contact her upon the conclusion of his trip to Vulcan, yet she wasn't expecting him for another four days. Why had he not thought of that? The questions flowed more freely than the answers.

Why did she occupy his mind in the quieter moments while he was meditating or preparing for sleep? Why was there a bond forming between them? Was a meaningful bond possible between their species?

First there had been the brief finger touching before his departure to Vulcan. Then just minutes ago, he had been acutely aware that the instant she'd injured herself, he'd registered a very subtle, barely noticeable, subdued sort of pain. When he'd left his perch on the chair and entered the kitchen to assess the extent of the damage, she had begun crying and he'd found it... distressing.

Was she crying from her injuries? From the loss of her father? From the destruction of the cup? From his presence? There was no logical way to determine.

The vehicle pulled up to the Vulcan consulate and he did his best to shed his mind of those confusing thoughts. For as much as he desired some resolution in his current situation with Miss Grayson, it was clear that none would be forthcoming in the next several minutes if it had not come over the course of the last several days.

With a degree of effort, he transitioned her out of his thoughts entirely by concentrating on the task ahead of him. It was only a temporary fix, but it would have to do.

The Vulcan High Council requested to speak with him and they were due to be in their chambers in 24 minutes. The embassy complex was quiet, which was not unusual for a Sunday. He stopped in the lavatory to wash his hands of Amanda's red, human blood and forced himself to ignore thinking of her further. When he arrived at the staff offices on the third floor, he found Mr. Marcus and Voris, along with a handful of other junior personnel.
The two members of his senior staff followed him into his office and shut the door.

"Mr. Marcus says Starfleet has had no success in decrypting the Klingon message," Voris began, glancing sidelong at Giles.

"I admit it's very strange," Giles explained. "I worked in xenolinguistics and decryption for 15 years. It never took us this long to decode anything. Either the Klingons have discovered their brilliance for decryption or Starfleet isn't what it used to be."

"I trust you will continue to act as liaison in this matter and keep me informed of any developments?" Sarek asked his human secretary.

"Yes, of course," he replied.

"Thank you Mr. Marcus," finished Sarek. "I don't believe I shall need anything else for today, if you'd like to return home."

As he left, Sarek turned to Voris who spoke once the door was securely closed. "The Vulcan High Council has decrypted the message," Voris explained, eyeing the top-secret console on his superior's desk. "I was informed of it an hour ago. They would not release the information to me without a secure channel."

"I see," Sarek answered as he turned on the computer. "What are your thoughts?"

"Mr. Marcus knows more about decryption strategies than I do and neither of us have seen the message. However, in my research, Starfleet has proven just as capable as any Vulcan agency at subspace decryption in recent decades."

"It is logical to infer that if the High Council has chosen to pass along the information as soon as it became available to them," Sarek mused. "As I'm sure Starfleet will."

"Ambassador, I do not wish to 'jump to conclusions' as our human counterparts say, but I think we should accept there is at least a possibility that Starfleet isn't working on it as diligently as they could, or that they aren't sharing the available information they have," Voris said.

"What gives you cause to think so?" Sarek asked, recalling his conversation hours ago with Admiral Bentham.

"The amount of mistrust between our peoples has lessened as the Federation has grown stronger, but I have observed that the leaders at Starfleet still have the illogical desire for competition with Vulcan organizations."

"If there is indeed a competition, is it not reasonable to believe Vulcans simply performed better on this occasion?"

"Certainly, and your argument is the most logical of all evident conclusions. Yet I would not dismiss the possibility that Starfleet is concealing something."

"We cannot speculate what motivations they would have for deliberately violating the Federation charter and withholding valuable intelligence information if they were in possession of it," Sarek countered.

"One does not have to have a precise picture of the purpose to theorize as to the action. Mr. Marcus thinks something is amiss," Voris argued.

"Mr. Marcus is human," Sarek said, checking the time.
He motioned for his security advisor to sit and turned the console screen at an angle and dialed the secure communication link.

The secretary to Councilwoman T'Lona answered his call and immediately turned the call over to her supervisor.

"Your line is secured?" the elderly Vulcan woman asked without any formal introduction.

"It is," he replied.

"The High Council has been in discussions throughout the night. Issue an advisory to all Vulcans residing on Earth that they should be prepared to leave the planet if the Terran government decides to leave the Federation in the near future. You and your staff will also be recalled."

"I understand," Sarek said.

"As you are attending tomorrow's emergency session, the Ministry of Defense believed you were entitled to pertinent information regarding recent events. Has Starfleet communicated anything of note?"

"No," he answered, looking over to Voris who confirmed.

"Understood. The Klingon message was decrypted six hours ago. It is unclear for whom the message was intended specifically, but it is an order to remove a test facility from a planetoid orbiting Iota Eridani. We have made casual inquiries with the Suliban and the Nausicaans, and neither of them are aware of any such facility."

"And you are unable to confirm the accuracy of their claims with Starfleet because you have not yet informed Starfleet," Sarek added.

"Correct. Let me remind you that the Federation charter stipulates that we have forty-eight Federation standard hours to inform Starfleet intelligence of our findings. We are well within that regulation. Moreover, we have other reasons to believe the testimony of the Suliban and the Nausicaans, which I cannot disclose to you at this time."

"Tell me then, do you have any idea if this test facility exists and to whom it belongs if it does?"

"Two probes were launched to that system that moment the message was decoded to obtain that information. I am authorized to tell you that the Vulcan Security Ministry believes that if it does exist, it belongs to the Earth Autonomy Movement, based on previous intelligence."

"Intelligence that has been shared with Starfleet?" he asked.

"Information that came from Starfleet," she explained.

"Forgive my curiosity, Councilwoman, but if Vulcan has reason to mistrust Starfleet, why would the Council consider this intelligence credible?"

"It is based on older information before certain personnel changes were made within the organization," she clarified. "I can elucidate no further on the matter at this time."

"Is there anything else, Councilwoman T'Lona?"

"One other matter that is perhaps even more significant. The preliminary investigation of the Comstock destruction shows forensic inconsistencies based on the layout of the ship and the debris pattern found in orbit of Ivor. The ship's last known location was relayed to a supply ship bound
for the new Memory Alpha library. That ship logged the Comstock's heading in the opposite direction of Ivor."

"You are implying the Comstock was damaged or destroyed somewhere else and some of the wreckage was relocated to Ivor?"

"That is a possible explanation," agreed T'Lona.

"Does the Vulcan Security Ministry still believe the Romulans are involved?"

"There is insufficient evidence to determine that at this time," she assented.

"If the Comstock was bearing away from Ivor, have the Tellarites or Saurians confirmed any information regarding the Comstock's last location?"

"I understand mineral surveying is a competitive and secretive business. Captains of these ships rarely voluntarily transmit information about their location unless it is directly requested."

"You must have some purpose in giving me such detailed intelligence on this investigation," Sarek answered, unable to determine his role in the conversation.

"The Council is aware you are not an intelligence officer, nor are you an investigator, but we request your assistance by shedding light on this formal investigation through informal means," T'Lona explained.

"Explain," he insisted.

"Three of your formal reports and two of your logs make mention of a schoolteacher named Amanda Grayson."

"Yes," replied Sarek, aware both Voris and Councilwoman T'Lona were observing him carefully. "We know each other by association."

"She was coincidentally the only child of the Comstock's captain and according to logs registered for previous years, she was the only person he has contacted on Earth in the past four years. He communicated with her regularly. The Council requests you speak with her, informally, and ask if she had contact with her father in the days before the Comstock's disappearance."

"What information are you specifically seeking?"

"The vessel's last known location, future plans, and his activities leading up to his disappearance."

"I shall speak with her," Sarek answered. "She will likely want to know if there has any evidence showing negligence on behalf of either Vulcan or Andoria in properly responding to the Comstock's distress calls."

"No, there has not been, and you are free to tell her that when you speak with her," replied Councilwoman T'Lona. "It will be formally issued in a report to Starfleet within the hour."

"Is there anything else?"

"The Council is requesting whatever information you can provide before the start of Earth's emergency secession meeting tomorrow."

"I understand."

"Live long and prosper, Ambassador Sarek, Secretary Voris," she said.
"Peace and long life," he and Voris said in unison as he terminated the communication link on the secure console.

They sat quietly for a few brief seconds, each considering the information they'd just been given. Voris excused himself to review older Starfleet memos, and Sarek reclined in his chair in a lazy fashion similar to posture he often witnessed in humans.

He did not wish to approach Miss Grayson while she was in her present emotional state. Though he disliked the disingenuous habit of requiring some pretense to speak with a person, it occurred to him that the purpose of his earlier morning visit had been to offer condolences for her father and he had not done so. No, he had made her cry instead.

He began to feel a paradoxical irritation with himself over his recent illogical behavior. The harder he tried to subdue his emotions, the more he failed to do so, and the more he failed, the more frustrated he became. He could not recollect being this emotionally unbalanced since his early childhood, which fueled feelings of embarrassment, which was merely another emotion he could barely control.

He reached for his PADD and forced himself to write out a short message to Amanda, apologizing for his conduct and requesting to meet with her later that day.

Amanda was curled on her couch in the fetal position, stroking her cat and feeling understandably sorry for herself. There was so safe place for her mind to turn that didn't remind her of her father or Sarek. She gave up on translating more of the Teachings of Surak because ironically, reading about a philosophy forged in the concept being emotionless made her emotional. She tried to find something to watch on the holographic projector, but the news was full of the Comstock disaster and the entertainment channels seemed to exclusively feature films about romance or tragedy.

She had even briefly dozed off, only to be awoken by a dream in which her father was trying to talk to her but she couldn't hear him over the sound of his ship exploding. Her mother had called twice and eventually she turned her PADD off because she wasn't in the mood to talk.

20 minutes after that she changed her mind and decided she did want to talk, but rather than flip her PADD back on and return her mother's call, she'd gone upstairs to see Vera, but she wasn't home, which was unusual for a late Sunday morning. So she sat wallowing on her couch in sadness, loneliness, and embarrassment.

She'd been granted an open-ended leave of absence from the school on Friday, but she was seriously considering quitting and moving to... wherever. Having to teach at the diplomatic school meant being at the embassies, and Ambassador Sarek worked at the embassies, and she couldn't avoid him forever.

She couldn't believe she'd been so forward as to make a move on him when he was trying to help her. She absentmindedly traced the light, pinkish scar on her left hand that was leftover from his work with the dermal regenerator.

The logical part of her brain tried to make it better by convincing her that she'd been a mess of hormones and tears and she'd made the silly blunder of mistaking his kindness for romantic attraction. But he probably wouldn't understand that. She wasn't even sure Vulcans showed affection by kissing, though she reasoned if he'd served on Earth for as long as he had then he must be aware of it's function in human relationships. So there was no mistake: she kissed him and he ran away.
She wanted to talk to someone. Then she remembered talking to her father following her breakup with John and how reassuring he’d been and she felt the sting of fresh tears pricking her eyes. As if on cue, moments later there was a knock at her door and she set Euclid on her coffee table and trudged to the door.

Her brain took a second to recognize the person standing there and when she did she did a double take. It was Vera and she looked so… normal. She had dyed her longish, bright red hair a deep chocolate color, almost the same shade as Amanda's. She had removed her facial piercings and skipped the ostentatious makeup and was wearing a pair of red slacks with a professional, billowy pink top. Amanda had never noticed under the shock value, but seeing her friend this way, she realized they could probably pass for sisters.

"You look so… nice," Amanda beamed, before hastily adding, "I mean different. You were always beautiful, but… wow. What prompted the change?"

"Well, I figured it was time to get a real job," she said, stepping inside Amanda's apartment.

"Did you have a job before?" Amanda asked, poking at the edge of anonymity Vera had always seemed to bask in.

"Yeah, I used to bartend down at Mudsucker's. Last night this guy came in and made a casual reference to Bertrand's theorem, and before you know it, we went down the rabbit hole of prime numbers and binomial coefficients and he offered me a job."

"Huh?" uttered Amanda, completely confused.

"Well, my dad's been saying I need to put my degree to use, and I always thought I would… someday."

"Your degree?"

"Yeah, I have a doctorate in mathematics from CalTech."

"Wait, what?" Amanda said in disbelief.

"What?" Vera replied innocently.

"What?" Amanda insisted. Vera shrugged and smiled halfheartedly. "Why did you never mention any of that, Dr. Vera? I also just realized I don't know your last name."

"It never came up. Besides, you don't need calculus to mix drinks for a bunch of Starfleet cadets and middle-aged men who wish they were 15 years younger."

Amanda started laughing. Laughter felt good.

"You look really amazing," she managed to say.

"You… don't," Vera frowned. "I came by to check on you and see if you wanted to go to lunch or something. You know, put on real clothes and get out of the apartment."

"That would be really nice," Amanda said.

"Is that blood on your face?"

Amanda took a few steps over to the hallway mirror and saw the disaster that was her appearance. Her dirty, tousled hair was half falling out of the ponytail and she had dried blood smeared across
her cheek.

She recounted that morning's events to Vera and started crying again when she got to the part about kissing Ambassador Sarek as he tended to her wounds on her kitchen floor. Vera remained uncharacteristically silent as she unloaded all of her frustrations and when she was done wailing, she stood there hiccupping and feeling like an idiot. Vera simply hugged her.

"It's probably not as bad as you think, and no, I don't think you need to move to a frontier colony and change your name," Vera said, patting her head.

"I just- what was I *thinking*?"

"You *weren't* thinking, but given the circumstances, that's not so crazy," Vera soothed. "I used to think human men sending mixed signals was bad, but I can't imagine trying to go off of no signals from a Vulcan guy. Though you did say he gave you that book…"

Amanda looked to her miserably for some answer or advice.

"Look, you're hurting and lonely and he was here and he swooped in like a very dark and no doubt *fatalistic* Prince Charming and patched you up. I might have kissed him too if I had been in your shoes. Maybe you just got your signals crossed, but I doubt he *hates* you."

"Both times he's come over here I've felt like a complete fool," she sighed in frustration.

"Why *did* he come by this morning?"

Amanda considered her friend's question and realized she wasn't sure and said, "I don't know; we didn't get that far. I was too busy destroying my kitchen and punching holes in my body to ask."

"Well, maybe you should think about it," Vera mused.

"All I can think is that I was really falling for him," Amanda hiccupped. "But then my dad died-"

"You don't know that," Vera interrupted. "For all you know-"

"I think I do," Amanda interjected. "I think I *do* know he's dead. I just *feel* it. We weren't as close as some fathers and daughters, but he was still my dad."

Vera hugged her again and said, "Go shower. Put on something nice. I'll wait for you. I'm going to make you smile if it kills me."

Amanda complied and retreated to her bedroom where she undressed. She took her time in the shower, going so far as to shave her legs and exfoliate her face. She was afraid to stop caring for too long, and hoped that she could find a way to fake feeling better until she actually did.

When she exited the small shower stall she realized she lacked a clean towel so she tiptoed naked across her bedroom and pulled down one of the small, prettily embroidered bath towels her mother bought for her when she moved in. They were impractically fancy and small and this was the first time she'd ever used one of them. She wiped the excess moisture from her skin and then wrapped it around herself, disappointed that it barely covered the things it was supposed to.

Since she was already in her closet, she started looking through her clothes and decided she wanted to wear her blue sundress but remembered it was still hanging in the laundry compartment just off her kitchen because she'd been too lazy to put it away for several weeks. As she opened her bedroom door she could hear noise from her holo projector and assumed Vera was watching a program. She padded down the short hallway in bare feet and saw Vera standing at her front door
talking to someone. Vera's eyes widened and she frantically motioned for her to go away, and Amanda quickly saw why.

"Ah!" Amanda yelped, walking backward down the hall until she walked into her bedroom door.

Standing just inside the threshold of her front door had been Ambassador Sarek. He had followed Vera's hand signals until he saw her, standing in a towel so small that it left little to the imagination. His eyebrows flicked upward and he quickly averted his eyes and stepped back onto the stoop.

"I should go," he said, though she wasn't sure he was speaking to her or Vera.

"No!" she pleaded. "No, please don't go. Please stay."

She wasn't sure why he had come or what she wanted to say to him. Just a few hours ago she thought she'd irrevocably destroyed any chance of seeing him again.

"Let me get dressed, ok?" she called, wondering if he was still there.

"Very well," she heard him say.

She tore into her bedroom and dressed in record time, pulling on the only other dress she owned, a loose off-white and pastel pink dress. She wrung as much water out of her hair as she could and hurried back down the hallway. He was talking with Vera but he was still standing on her front porch.

"I'll leave you two to it," Vera announced, walking cautiously through the door while Sarek moved to let her depart. "It was nice to meet you."

"Yes," he said, nodding subtly in Vera's direction.

Amanda stood there nervously wringing her hands and cognizant of the fact that her skin was still a bit sticky from her recent shower.

"Would you like to come in?" she asked for the second time that day.

He assented without speaking and walked through the door and gently closed it behind him.

"Look," she said, unclasping her hands and holding them in front of her awkwardly. "I'm sorry, both for this morning and for just now."

"Depending on your method of accounting, your tally of illogical apologies is either now at 12 or 15."

"Last I stopped counting, we were at eight," she laughed. "What were nine through 15?"

"You apologized for the outbreak of a riot, you apologized twice for your erroneous belief that my presence at that riot was your fault, you apologized for what you mistakenly believed to be static electricity when we touched, you apologized twice for the events of this morning, and you apologized for being caught unawares... when I arrived just now."

She blushed and prayed the impossibly small towel had kept everything covered. She couldn't help but notice a mild unease about the way he trailed off. It didn't suit him.

"I don't know if it's possible for me to embarrass myself even more in one day," she admitted.

"Embarrassment is illogical. However, given it is a subjective emotion, the amount to which one
may be embarrassed is a question of individual degree, therefore I cannot say whether it is possible or not," he explained.

She looked at him with an incredulous look, which turned into bemusement, which in turn became a smile.

"Please don't think I'm rude for asking, but why are you here?" she asked. "I mean, I thought you were still supposed to be on Vulcan…"

"Recent events have caused me to alter my itinerary," he remarked, catching her eyes for the first time since his arrival.

"You didn't fully answer my question though," she replied, more boldly than she intended. "I mean, why are you here? It's just that you seemed- well, I just didn't think, and then the way I behaved this morning and-

"I believe you invited me to dinner upon my return," he said, interrupting her rambling. "It is my hope that you have not rescinded the invitation."
"You want to go to dinner?" she mumbled. "I mean… it's barely just past noon."

"I can return this evening if you would prefer," he replied.

"Um, would you like to maybe go to lunch instead?" she asked.

"That will be acceptable," he agreed. "I apologize for arriving unexpectedly."

"No, I'm really glad you came back," she muttered. "I wish I had been wearing more clothes, but… anyway."

"I sent you a message, and you did not respond," he explained.

"I only turned my PADD off a few hours ago," she explained. "Is there something important you wanted to talk about?"

"I do need to speak with you as a matter of professional urgency," he admitted, pausing. "And I would like to speak with you informally, as your friend."

Professional urgency? Friends? Amanda nodded carefully before looking down at herself and asking, "Well, can you give me a few minutes to finish properly dressing?"

"Of course."

"Um, make yourself comfortable," she said, motioning to her couch and wondering what he considered comfortable.

Amanda trod back to her bedroom and he took a seat on her small sofa. When she arrived in her bathroom, she set to work combing and drying her hair in record time, all the while feeling anxiety rise within her.

She had made a weak joke about embarrassing herself and now found herself running through increasingly ridiculous scenarios in which she probably could embarrass herself worse: she could vomit on him, or accidentally stab him. A few minutes ago she hadn't dared hope she'd ever see him on such a personal level again, but now that he was here she didn't know what to say. Adding to her worry was what he was here to say. As she rushed through brushing her teeth and spit into the sink, she looked back at herself in the mirror and considered her appearance.

She looked somehow older than she had just a few days earlier. And sadder. She sighed, hung her toothbrush in the holder, and put on a pair of gray flat shoes.

She came out of her bedroom awkwardly, balling her hands into nervous fists and turned the corner into her common room. He had turned off the holo projector and stood near her pub table. Euclid was settled at the corner and rubbing his face on Sarek's hand.

"Try though I tried dissuade him, your pet is quite insistent on perching himself upon your furniture," he noted.

"Well, he's a cat: they're not famous for obedience," she replied with a pursed smile.

As she walked toward him, Euclid sprang from the table and she realized her work from the previous night was still laid out in the open. She slid her hands over the back of her pub stool and
started collecting her materials.

"I didn't get the chance to thank you for lending me the book," she said.

"It was not intended as a loan. It was intended as a gift."

"Oh… thank you," she stammered. "I'm only about a third of the way through it, but it's been… a journey."

His eyebrows raised a fraction and he insisted she explain.

"Well, Vulcan isn't my native language, and I'm also not well-versed in Surak's teachings, so there were a few passages in particular that I struggled with, just because Vulcan has the frustrating habit of being so ambiguous," she admitted.

"The *Teachings of Surak* have confounded many scholars and prompted a number of interpretations since they were first recorded."

"That doesn't seem very logical," she said, stopping before she went too far down the rabbit hole of criticism for fear of offending his beliefs.

"It was not designed to be," he said.

She arched an eyebrow at him and continued to collect her books and charts into a pile.

"Speak your mind," he urged.

"I don't want to offend you or say anything wrong."

"It is your opinion of a philosophy that I did not compose. It is illogical to assume anything you say could cause me personal offense," he challenged.

"Well, I haven't even finished half of it, so it seems unfair to render a judgment without an understanding of the entire work."

"Wise," he nodded. "Though I am curious about your preliminary opinion."

She bit her lip and glanced down at the book in her hands.

"Well, ok. Each line taken separately seems like a really vague parable. Very obvious… Yet when they are taken together, it's easier to see a deeper meaning. The more broadly I consider the text, the more profound it becomes. But the one thing that confuses me most that I alluded to earlier is the idea that the foundational text of a culture so engrossed in logic and facts and reason would be so… unclear. But that's true of your language as well, so I'm not sure which to blame."

As she finished talking she straightened up a bit, feeling as if she'd said too much and should prepare to defend her point.

"Fascinating analysis," he mused.

Euclid jumped back on the table and sauntered over to Sarek and resumed bunting his hand with his face.

"Euclid seems to like you; he normally hates people he doesn't know," she said, petting her cat's back and watching it instinctively arch with the pressure of her hand.

"Was not 'Euclid' one of your early mathematicians?"
"Yeah," she replied. "That's where I got the name. The markings on his side are triangular."

"I see," he said.

"Ambassador Sarek..." she started, catching her words in her throat and fighting to compose them into a coherent sentence. "I know you didn't come here to talk about the Teachings of Surak, or my cat."

Maybe she had been too brisk. He was Vulcan though; she figured he could take it. Even so, the words felt strangely confrontational and she wished she had said them differently.

"That is true," he admitted. "I do-"

"Do you want to go for a walk?" she interrupted, blushing.

"Do you have a destination in mind?"

"No," she confessed. "But the weather is nice and I thought we were going to lunch. Though to tell you the truth, I'm not really very hungry. Still, I'd just rather be... somewhere else."

"Very well," he answered, though she sensed mild confusion about her request.

"I just haven't left my house in two days and I'm not as capable of controlling my emotions as you. Being here, it just... makes me... well, never mind."

He agreed to request. She grabbed her shoulder bag from the chair and escorted him out of her apartment. She swiped her card through the access port to lock it and met him on the sidewalk.

"Are you certain you wish to walk?" he asked. "I can have the car take you wherever you wish to go."

"You're making me second guess myself, considering the last time you suggested we take a car and I was too stubborn to listen, we ended up in the middle of a riot," she smiled.

"It is illogical to assume there is a connection between your refusal to ride in a vehicle and the emergence of misfortune," he argued.

"Yes, it is," she stated matter-of-factly. "But I'm not really sure where I want to go, so is it ok if we just walk?"

"If you prefer," he said with an air that suggested that it wasn't what he would prefer but he was willing to humor her.

They walked north down the street along the wide sidewalk for nearly a block before he spoke. "When I initially arrived at your home this morning, my intent was to express my condolences for your father and his crew," he explained.

"Yeah," she said, biting her lip. "Thank you. That actually means a lot."

She wasn't eager to talk about her father for fear that she would cry. Being with him had been helping her to forget the whole thing, even if just for a little while. He formed his hands into a steeple before him, giving him the appearance of contemplating his next words. They walked for nearly another block that way when Amanda asked, "So what is this matter of 'professional urgency' you need to speak to me about? I'm curious to know what the Vulcan ambassador to Earth needs to professionally discuss with me."
"It regards your father," he said, letting his hands fall back to his sides. "I understand speaking on that subject is probably distressing to you."

"It is," she confessed, surprised he would have that kind of consideration. "But if there's anything you need to know, I'll do my best to tell you. Without crying."

"Are you certain you would not prefer to have this conversation in private?"

"I don't think it matters, though I guess it depends on the questions you have," she shrugged. "Can I ask why you want to know about my father?"

"The Vulcan High Council, as well as Starfleet and the Andorian authorities, are investigating unusual circumstances surrounding the Comstock incident."

"I knew there was an investigation, but you're actually the first person to talk to me about it. To be honest, I haven't been watching the news. After everything that happened after the conference I can't say I have much faith in the media, not that I even did before," she said, trying to keep the bitterness from her tone.

"Are you not aware that the Terran government is holding an emergency congressional session tomorrow to discuss secession from the Federation?"

"What?" she gasped in surprise. "Why?"

"The Terran government claims it is in response to the loss of the Comstock."

"That doesn't make any sense," she gasped. "I mean, things like this happen, don't they? They don't even know if it was an accident or not."

He didn't respond.

"Don't they?" she repeated. She glared at him but still he had no words to offer.

"You know, don't you? You know, but you either won't or can't tell me," she finally said. "If you didn't know you would tell me so. If you won't tell me because you think it will hurt me, I don't care. I want to know. But if you can't tell me for important reasons, I'll try to understand. Which is it?"

"The latter, Miss Grayson," he said. "I do not wish to conceal anything from you unnecessarily, but as you're coming to understand the full scope of the matter, surely you can see how there likely exists a certain amount of protected information."

"Sure, I guess," she murmured, noting a sudden ringing in her ears.

They walked several more blocks without speaking. She appreciated that Sarek seemed to be giving her space to think without badgering her, but she wasn't sure where her train of thought was on schedule to go.

"I understand that you can't tell me much of what you know about the Comstock," she said, biting her lip and refusing to look in his direction. "But can you give me your opinion on a few things?"

"I shall try," he agreed.

"Do you think my father is dead?"

It was a frank question and she imagined it was one he hadn't been expecting, because he took his
time before saying, "You told me once that you would prefer to hear a hard truth to a reassuring lie."

She gave him a pained smile but felt her heart beginning to pound harder, as though his answer somehow had a legitimate role in deciding her father's fate.

"I cannot be certain, but given the evidence as I know it to be, no, I do not believe your father survived whatever befell the Comstock." He looked at her as he finished his sentence and she felt her heart sinking.

She'd promised to try not to cry. She breathed deeply and bit her cheek hard enough to taste blood. Through her fresh wave of grief she felt a bizarre gratitude for his honesty. He had been the only person who hadn't tried to give her false hope or tell her that things would be ok.

Well, actually that wasn't true. John hadn't either. They walked along for another few minutes and Amanda could hear sounds of the ocean. Her mind felt tangled and raced through a perplexing web, but she still felt a pride in herself that she'd thus far managed to avoid breaking down into tears again.

At long last she asked, "What will Earth do without the Federation?"

"I cannot tell you," he replied. "I can tell you that we should either alter our course or prepare to swim."

She took note of their surroundings in surprise. They had come through the tightly packed buildings and into a parking lot that overlooked the ocean. The sun glittered off the Golden Gate Bridge to their right and a cool breeze lapped at her face.

"Do you want to go for a swim?" she joked.

"Vulcans are not adept swimmers."

"I think I was teasing," she said, watching a pair of gulls fight over a food wrapper. "The water is probably freezing anyway. I've taken up a lot of your time. Do you want to go back? You can ask me whatever you want about my father: it's fine."

"I would be willing to remaining here for a while, if you choose. My presence is not required at the consulate until 1700 hours."

"Would you like to go down to the water?"

He motioned for her to lead the way, and they crossed the parking lot and descended a set of metal stairs to the sandy beach below. There were a handful of people milling around and a man playing fetch with a dog.

They walked about 50 meters away from the beachgoers to a secluded outcropping of rocks and Amanda looked over the bay. In all the months she'd lived in San Francisco she'd never visited any of its beaches. She now caught herself wondering why, then remembered she spent most of her time hiding away in the embassy basement tinkering away on language matrices. She climbed up onto a shorter boulder that had a smooth surface and tucked her legs under her skirt and kneeled into a sitting position.

Sarek approached her. She could feel him watching her watch the ocean, but they'd been quiet for so long she wasn't sure how to break the silence. Then he did.

"I don't believe I conveyed my sincerest apologies to you earlier for my actions this morning."
"Hmmm?" she wondered.

"I behaved indecently and I believe it caused your emotional distress."

"You told me that my apology was illogical," she said. "And now here you are doing the same thing."

"It is illogical to apologize for circumstances outside of your control," he began to explain. "But the circumstances were in my power to control."

"How so? What exactly are you apologizing for?" she asked, now completely confused. "I broke a tea cup, you came to help me, and then I-" she choked and blushed. "I kissed you. It was so presumptuous of me and I don't know what I was thinking. I'm surprised you came back at all."

Amanda finally looked at him and started to tear up from her confessions. She felt a familiar sense of dread. He said nothing but it instantly dawned on her what he was implying.

"Are you suggesting that you think you kissed me?"

He looked straight into her eyes and she resisted the urge to look away. Still he said nothing.

"Is that what you're saying?" she prodded. "Correction - not saying? Why would you think that? Did you kiss me? Why would you?"

As soon as the words escaped her mouth she wished she could draw them back in. His failure to say anything was getting her worked up and she knew she sounded hostile.

"My species engages in the practice for the same reason as yours," he said quietly, sitting next to her on the lower end of the rock and placing his hands on his knees.

"Oh," she said, her dumbstruck face burning scarlet as she looked away to the ocean horizon.

Another interlude of quiet passed between them and she absorbed the sounds of the falling tide, sea birds, and cool wind. Eventually she dared herself to glance at him from the corner of her eye and saw he was watching her intently.

"I did not intend to upset you," he eventually said.

"You haven't upset me."

"I was referring to this morning," he clarified.

"You didn't upset me then, either. In fact, you haven't ever upset me," Amanda explained. "Though you've often been guilty of confusing the hell out of me."

"Explain."

"Which part?"

"Both parts."

"Well, you didn't upset me this morning: I was already upset. My dad is probably dead and I've been coping with that for the last two days. Even though I'm going through a really hard time, I was happy when you came by this morning because I was afraid I'd offended you the last time I saw you, since you left in such a hurry. But then I broke a teacup that my father gave me as a gift and ended up falling and hurting myself and being that vulnerable in front of you was..."
awkward. You were so kind in trying to help me. So between being sad, hurt, embarrassed, and grateful, I just felt overwhelmed. It was nothing you did that made me cry, and I'm sorry if my emotional outburst bothered you."

She sighed and bit her lip and watched him for a reaction. After a few moments he answered, "I have grown accustomed to coping with the emotions of other species. As a diplomat I have certainly provoked emotional responses on numerous occasions. I am very familiar with things like anger, fear, frustration, impatience, and greed."

"But you don't have a lot of experience when it comes to dealing with crying human women?"

"None," he agreed.

Amanda slid her hands backward over the rock face and gazed up at the few clouds in the sky.

"I really hate that I have to rely on you to tell me what you're thinking," she suddenly admitted. "With humans it's so easy, because what they're thinking usually has much to do with what they're feeling, and what they're feeling is usually written in their body language. But you... you're this... perpetual enigma."

She gave him a pained smirk and squinted as the sun moved out from behind a cloud and caught her eye.

"At this moment I am thinking... that I care for you, Amanda Grayson."

His words were so simple and were stated so plainly, yet they still had the effect of almost knocking the wind out of her. His face wore its usual neutral expression, but she could see there was more to his eyes and the slight creases around them than she was accustomed to. She sat forward without taking her eyes off of him and realized she was holding her breath.

On a strange impulse she reached out her hand toward him, palm facing upward. He considered her gesture and removed his left hand from his knee and extended it to meet hers. She had been expecting him to take her hand but instead he gently brushed her index finger with his own and slowly brought his middle finger up beside it. As his fingers traced down the length of her forefinger and met her knuckle, she felt a subtle upsurge of... something.

The sensation was familiar but she had difficulty placing it. It was somehow simultaneously the feeling of delicate euphoria and overwhelming calmness. Her hand was shaking and she started to feel dizzy when finally realized she wasn't breathing and gasped for air. He retracted his hand and though his face remained unchanging, she could detect a nervous curiosity there.

"I ought to have asked for your consent," he said quietly.

"Consent for what?" she asked, folding her hands together in her lap.

"To touch you in such an intimate way."

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked in a panic, wondering what fresh mortification was in store.

"No," he stated. "Among my people, ozh'esta is normally practiced only between bondmates."

"Ozh'esta?" she asked, rolling the word over her tongue. "Finger...?"

"I do not believe there is an adequate translation. The closest approximation would be perhaps something like a finger embrace."
She cocked her head to the side. Surprised by her lack of shyness, she unfolded her hands and
with a tiny gesture from her right hand asked, "May I?"

His eyebrows raised in surprise and he paused a moment before extending his right hand and
taking hers in what initially seemed like would be a handshake but quickly devolved back into
what he had referred to as ozh'esta. His touch was more certain this time, and with an
uncharacteristic boldness she met the sureness of his fingers with her own.

She watched their fingers tenderly touch with rabid fascination and amid the wondrous
contentment she perceived a growing urge to draw nearer to him and passionately kiss him. It was
obvious to her that such a public display of affection would probably shock and embarrass him, or
whatever passed for embarrassment among Vulcans. They slowly retracted their hands from each
other and all the awkward bashfulness that had been oddly absent hit her like a shockwave.

She could feel a quiet apprehension to him, which was explained when he said, "Miss Grayson, I
would be remiss if I did not tell you that should Earth decide to leave the Federation in the near
future, I shall not be remaining on the planet."

She couldn't think of words capable of delivering a more figurative punch to her gut. He was
going back to Vulcan? Her numbness must have been apparent in her expression. Why would he
touch her in what he had referred to as an "intimate way" if he was leaving?

She wanted to yell at him for toying with her feelings. But then she realized feelings were a
human domain, and maybe he didn't realize the effect he was creating. Then she felt the wild urge
to tell him how she felt about him, especially seeing as how it seemed like she had little to lose if
he was likely returning home. But what would that do? It wouldn't make him stay.

He took her hand again but held it contemplatively this time, causing her to feel almost angry.

"We should probably go back," she muttered, pulling her hand away and standing.

He stood also and she hopped from the rock and began walking briskly back to the stairs through
the sand. He followed her, remaining a half pace behind. As they walked through the parking lot
and back to the street he caught up with her and they walked abreast for a number of minutes.
When she felt moderately confident that she could prevent herself from stuttering or crying, she
said, "You said you had some questions about my father."

"Yes," he admitted.

"Well, what do you want to know?" she asked, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"I recall you told me that your father believed he had found helium-3 deposits. Do you know of
anything else?"

"No, but he didn't talk about his work very often and I'll be honest, sometimes when he did, I
wouldn't pay much attention if I didn't know what he was talking about."

It made her sad thinking that she'd tuned him out as soon as she heard words like "spectroscopy"
and "mineral contracts" and would gladly listen to hours of it with rapt attention if she could just
talk to him one last time.

"When did you last speak with him?"

"It was the night the power went out at the embassy complex, but I didn't actually speak with him.
He sent me a message that morning that was really weird."
"'Weird' in what way?" he asked.

She didn't answer him immediately as her thoughts cascaded through the logical aspects of what may have happened to her father. She'd spent the last two days so consumed with grief that she hadn't really thought about how strange it all was.

"Well, the message my dad sent was really personal, which was a bit out of character. He made it sound like he knew something was going to happen to him, and he left me information for his private safety deposit box back home."

"Have you checked the contents of this box?"

"No," she admitted, thinking it was probably time that she did. "But there's more. The last time I talked to him was a few days before the conference by audio link. That was when he told me about the helium. But I remember thinking that the name of the place was unusual. I can't remember if he said Zetar or Zekar or Zehar, but I'm certain it was something like that. Anyway, I looked up all possible spellings that I could think of on current Federation star charts and found nothing even close to any of those names."

"You are certain?" he asked.

"Well, obviously not certain because I can't even remember the exact name, but wasn't the Comstock debris found in the Bolian sector? I thought the Bolian sector was charted."

"Drafting star charts is complex and never precise," he tried to explain, though clearly he was also thinking about something else while he spoke. "Distances on star charts appear to be minimal, but they're scaled by factors of ten based on warp travel speeds. The actual distance between different celestial bodies is difficult to adequately comprehend. As scanning technology improves, charts are becoming more accurate but the further out they are from central Federation space, the less reliable the data is."

"So what does that mean? Finding new stars and planets is like searching for a needle in a haystack?"

"Your analogy is crude and imprecise. It suggests you are certain there even is a needle and likely assumes the haystack is of a predictable size. It would be more correct to say that a charted sector of space is like a field of haystacks and based on mathematical probability you are confident of that a minimum number of needles likely exists within them."

"So there could be planets in the Bolian system that we don't even know about?"

"It is almost a mathematical certainty that there are," he confirmed. "This planet that you initially referred to as Zetar, did he say it was a planet?"

"I guess so," she said. "What else would it be?"

"It could be the name of a system, or a moon, planetoid, asteroid, star, nebula, comet, or some other phenomena."

"I'm getting the feeling I'm not providing much help," she said, feeling exasperated and noticing they were fast approaching her apartment. Should she tell him how she felt before it was too late?

"Do you know where they found the debris of the Comstock?" he asked, his voice careful.

"The people from Starfleet that I talked to on Friday said it was 'Ivor' and said it was in the Bolian sector, but I'd never heard of that either," she confessed. "I guess it seems weird that they don't
have more records. I thought there were rules about flight plans and logs."

"There are for Starfleet and for private vessels travelling through certain regions of space," he explained. "But no such regulations exist for private vessels in frontier space. The Comstock had very few transmissions before its disappearance, but that is not considered uncommon for a survey ship."

"I don't feel like I'm being very helpful," she said woefully, beginning to feel panic at the thought of saying goodbye to him.

"You have been more helpful than you likely realize," he replied. "Is there nothing else you can recall from your last messages or conversations with him?"

"No, but I also wasn't thinking in terms of him disappearing at the time. If you want, I can show you all of my archived messages from the last few months."

"I do not wish to intrude into your private correspondence."

"It's not really all that private…" Amanda stopped, suddenly recalling the strange glitch with the messages on her PADD from several months ago.

"Miss Grayson?"

They had arrived at the stoop of her split level apartment building and she was about to explain that she had reason to believe someone had been reading her personal messages when she noticed the front door of her apartment was cracked open by about ten centimeters. His eyes travelled along the path of her gaze and he immediately noticed the problem.

"I locked my door before we left, didn't I?" she asked as she felt the blood draining from her face.

"You did."

She started to walk up the stairs but he gave her a halting motion with his hand and walked ahead of her and nudged the door open with his foot. The apartment seemed untouched, but she still felt panic all the same. She started to walk in but he stopped her.

"You should contact the authorities," he said.

While she agreed with him, she explained that would be difficult to do, since she had left her PADD sitting on the kitchen counter and from her vantage point she could see it was no longer there.
Decisions

Sarek stood in the lobby of the Vulcan consulate, arms folded behind his back, watching Terran news on the room's central holographic projector. His mind was busy assembling information into logical streams but he had long ago determined he lacked sufficient information to draw many relevant conclusions. He had another 20 minutes before he was due to contact the Vulcan High Council again, but a breaking news story had piqued his interest.

A human woman named Maria Polyakova had been found dead in a lake in a place called Gary, Indiana. While it was logical to note that humans died every day, Ms. Polyakova had the unique distinction to be the wife and supposed widow of Igor Polyakova, the Comstock's first officer. If the civilian news reports were to be believed, there was no obvious, benign reason that her body would have turned up in a lake.

The story of Ms. Polyakova's mysterious death had overshadowed the news of the disappearance of a young man named Michael Castaneda three days prior. He was the adult son of Anthony Castaneda, the Comstock's navigator. It was unclear exactly how long he had been missing, since friends last saw him on Thursday evening leaving a tavern in Hoboken, New Jersey and his disappearance wasn't reported to the police until he failed to show up for work the following day.

The media was dubbing it "the Comstock Curse." Sarek found this interpretation of this series of coincidences tiresome, yet even he was ready to admit the rate of misfortune among the immediate surviving family members of the Comstock was statistically significant.

He had called the local police on Amanda's behalf and waited with her outside her apartment until they arrived. He had answered their general questions and Amanda confirmed her PADD had indeed been taken and not simply misplaced. Since she had turned it off, there was no way to triangulate a signal from the device and a child would be capable of retrieving the data stored on it without turning it on. The only other thing missing from her apartment was her cat, which he surmised slipped through cracked door.

Their walk had taken them a total of 122 minutes, which was a narrow window for such a deliberate burglary. He considered the possibility that someone was watching her activities but he did not wish to alarm her needlessly – she had looked frightened enough when he left. He would have asked her to return with him to the consulate but the police had not finished their investigation. She'd also made it plainly clear that she didn't return his affections and he had not wanted to draw out her discomfort.

Now the news regarding Ms. Polyakova and Mr. Castaneda was causing him to reconsider his decision to leave her alone. He was concerned for her safety, whether or not she had a romantic interest in him. The police were with her but he had no way of determining how long they would stay. Since her PADD was the singular item missing from her apartment, he also had no way of contacting her.

He left the lobby for his office, sat down at his secure console, and dialed in a communication link with the Vulcan High Council. He again spoke with Councilwoman T'Lona, as well as Torin, Vulcan's lead investigator into the Comstock incident.

He related the information Amanda had told him, beginning with the possible discovery of helium-3 near a celestial object that may colloquially be referred to as an approximation of the name "Zetar." He hesitated in explaining the details of the safety deposit box, believing she may have intended to tell him that in confidence, but decided to include it in the end. He also included that she had never heard her father speak of Ivor but explained that they did not often speak about
his profession.

When he concluded briefing the information he had obtained from Amanda, he explained the developing investigations into Ms. Polyakova's death and Mr. Castaneda's disappearance, as well as the theft of Amanda's PADD. He watched T'Lona and Torin exchange glances.

"The testimony is uncorroborated, fragmentary, and circumstantial," Torin said.

"I quite agree," Sarek responded. "Nevertheless, it was what I was tasked with collecting."

Torin and T'Lona conferred among themselves and terminated their transmission, agreeing to call him back within the hour.

Sarek disliked the idea that Vulcan was meddling in the affairs of Earth as they had done a century earlier. Vulcan's patronizing attitude toward humanity and Earth's childlike willfulness to reject help from Vulcans had been the source of considerable friction between the two planets for decades. He had spent much of his early diplomatic career on Earth striving to overcome that inconsequential quarreling, mistrust, and condescension and now the relationship between Vulcan and Earth was on the brink of reverting back to its former state.

He held the opinion that Vulcan's treatment of Earth in Earth's formative space exploration era was relatively unfair. Yet 80 years later, Earth had absorbed a lot of power. It largely controlled Starfleet and Starfleet controlled the Federation's main space program and intelligence agencies, and thus Vulcan and the rest of the Federation were poised to pay a high price for Earth's actions if Earth decided to secede from the Federation in the coming week.

It was curious that the majority of Terrans opposed secession, but political analysts were suggesting it was a real possibility. Organizations like the Earth Autonomy Movement and Earth First Party had been regarded as fringe movements for a long time and though they would never have majority support, even minority support for their platforms created strife.

He made another attempt to logically assemble the evidence in his head, beginning with Ambassador Sulak's death, the digital attack on the embassy complex, the death of Admiral Winters, the elections and subsequent riots, the Klingon message, the loss of the Comstock and the occurrences involving the Comstock crew's surviving relations. Still, he could find no apparent connection between any of the events.

The incidents befalling the families of the Comstock personnel were the most troublesome. There was a chance they were coincidental, but the frequency at which they were occurring suggested some connection. He could not determine who would wish them harm and without that, he could not ascertain a motive. If the Comstock's family members were being targeted, the only logical reason was for information, but what information?

Unfortunately the matter was left in the hands of the Terran authorities and he had neither the authority nor clearance to obtain information about their ongoing investigations. While he had no authority to intervene into Earth's affairs, he had considerable connections on Vulcan, which led him to a resolution he decided to discuss with Councilwoman T'Lona.

Approximately ten minutes later, she resumed their call without Investigator Torin. They discussed the emergency secession meeting planned for tomorrow and Starfleet's continued inability to decrypt the Klingon message. Lastly, they coordinated the plan to evacuate Vulcan citizens and personnel from Earth in the coming weeks.

There were approximately 3,000 Vulcans residing on Earth – most served in education and research fields. Even prior to the consulate's advisory that Vulcan citizens should consider
returning to their home planet, his office had received 321 requests for relocation. He had issued the official advisory seven hours ago, and in that time the office received 981 further requests. Various shuttles routinely moved between the two planets, but they would be insufficient to meet the increased demand.

"The Transportation Ministry is sending two supplementary Sh'Ran class ships tomorrow to accommodate the additional requests," Councilwoman T'Lona explained. "They are scheduled to return the following day for late departures. Additional customs personnel will be ready in Shi'Kahr to minimize delay. Send changes and additions to the passenger manifest directly to the Transportation Ministry."

"I shall comply," he said. "I have one additional topic for your consideration. I wish to evacuate Amanda Grayson to Vulcan as well."

"For what purpose?" asked T'Lona.

"I believe she may be in danger and she has undertaken personal risk in divulging information to the High Council."

"The evacuation was only intended for Vulcan citizens and their resident families," argued T'Lona.

"I am aware. I am asking the High Council to make an exception."

"Under what conditions? Is she applying for asylum?"

"She is not directly making the application – I am seeking it on her behalf. As you know, she is Terran and Earth is still a member of the Federation. She could freely seek entry under a number of statutes, but would take several days through normal channels."

"You can invite her as a diplomatic guest," said T'Lona.

"But is it not customary for the High Council to grant approval for diplomatic guests who intend to remain on Vulcan for an indeterminate stay?"

"It is," agreed T'Lona. "Where will she stay?"

"I shall grant her access to my house in Shi'Kahr and personally provide for her needs."

"That is your choice," consented T'Lona. "Include her in the manifest, and I will approve your request. Ambassador Sarek, the High Council thanks you for your continued service."

"I come to serve," he replied.

"Live long and prosper," she said.

"Peace and long life."

The transmission was terminated. Sarek collected his cloak and relayed the instructions from the High Council to the handful of staff members present. He dispatched a car to meet him at the street level in front of the Vulcan Consulate, and departed to Miss Grayson's house for the third time in one day.

Amanda returned to her apartment feeling broken hearted on numerous fronts. She'd spent the last hour looking for Euclid to no avail. His loss seemed like just one more piece of her life slipping
away.

She was beginning to think more had happened to her in the last two weeks than had happened to her in her entire life. She'd survived a riot, lost her father, taken a bumbling shot at an unconventional romance, been robbed, and had her cat run away. Now Earth was facing serious political instability, her father was still probably dead, her romantic interest was almost certainly packing up and moving 16 light years away, and now her cat was alone on the streets and her PADD was gone.

Admittedly the PADD itself was probably the least of her worries, but she never realized how difficult life was without being digitally connected to everyone else. It felt like an extension of her and the one time she had chosen to go somewhere without it, it had been stolen. She didn't worry too much about it though because her mind was otherwise occupied, rotating furiously between terrified, confused, and depressed.

The police didn't stay long after Sarek had departed for the Vulcan embassy. They hadn't seemed very interested in investigating her case and kept heavily insinuating that she must have left her door unlocked because there was no sign of forced entry. They begrudgingly agreed to check with her landlord about who might have access to another access card, but she got the distinct feeling they probably just told her that to get her to shut her up.

They didn't even bother checking with any of the neighbors to ask if they had seen anything. Their parting words were something to the effect of "don't call us, we'll call you" and "these things happen, that's why you should lock your doors." But as far as she knew, "these things" really didn't happen much anymore. When she asked how they proposed to call her since she no longer had a PADD, the lead investigator shrugged and said he figured she'd eventually replace it.

Being alone in her apartment made her jittery to the point that even small noises were making her jump. She lost track of how many times she'd checked the locks on the doors and windows. Someone had entered her apartment with ease, and she wondered if they were coming back. She went up to Vera's, both to recruit her help in looking for Euclid and to ask if she saw anything, but unfortunately her friend wasn't there.

She put on a pot of tea and moved over to the pub table where she'd translated the first part of the Teachings of Surak the night before. She looked down at the book and felt such overwhelming feelings.

She had wanted to say goodbye in a more meaningful way, and now she was unsure if or when she would ever see him again. She should have told him how she felt. He had told her. Though on closer examination, maybe that wasn't exactly true. All he had said was, "I care for you." What did that mean? She cared for all kinds of things in all kinds of ways.

"Ugh, don't cry again," she told herself out loud, her voice straining from emotion.

She picked up the pile of books and translation materials and stowed them away on her shelf. Her hand lingered on the collection of Tellarite star charts her father had given her when she was a child. She touched the binding and her sadness shifted from Sarek back to her father. She pulled the charts from the shelf and hugged them.

She breathed as deeply as she could to stave off tears and went back to her couch and opened the old pages. She had opened to an inlay of the Saurian sector that was embossed with some kind of shiny red and silver foil. She smiled weakly, wondering if her father had ever visited this part of space and wondered what it must be like, living the nomadic life that he did.

She turned the page to find another chart of a different region of the Saurian sector. The words
were in the Tellarite language and that's what made them so appealing. It had been the first one she'd ever tried to master, which had prompted him to give her this book. The names of the places never meant much to her, but she had read them all the same. Her eyes scanned the page. She yelped.

There, clearly as she'd ever seen it, was the name "Zetar." Her heart was pounding in her chest and she read the word several times, trying to be certain she had the letters correctly. *Zetar, yes, it was Zetar.* She checked the name again and again and found it cross-referenced on at least two other nearby charts.

She had to call someone. It immediately occurred to her that she didn't know whom to call even if she could. With no PADD she was virtually helpless, but no single Terran authority or anyone from Starfleet had bothered to ask her any questions or really tell her much of anything. *Sarek* had asked. He had left her apartment to go to the embassy, and she wondered if she should try to find him. Was that appropriate?

She tried to slow her mind down and think rationally about what it meant. She looked up from the pages and closed her eyes. Maybe it meant nothing. She retraced the conversation she'd had earlier with Sarek in her mind.

She stared at her mantel and tried to put it together when she was hit by a second realization. Her heart nearly stopped. The picture frames that had spent nearly two months wildly askew on her mantel were now perfectly aligned, including the one of her and John in Big Sur that she'd put facedown. She dared herself to look over at her bookshelf at the array of knick-knacks, and they too had resumed their perfect formations.

There was a knock at the door and she screamed. "Miss Grayson?" a muffled voice shouted.

She continued to look back and forth between her mantel and her bookshelf. John had been in her apartment. *Obsessive-compulsive John.*

"Miss Grayson?" the Sarek's voice shouted more loudly through insistent knocking. "Miss Grayson!"

She stood and pulled the door open, visibly shaking with the book of star charts in her hand.

"*He was here. It's in the Saurian sector. In my apartment. The Tellarites. I know because the picture frames and he was reading my messages. But Zetar, it's there.*"

She was mildly aware she was yelling and probably not making much sense. He walked into her apartment and shut the door. His composed demeanor was starting to calm her down on the outside, but her thoughts were still jumbled.

"*Who was here?*" he asked patiently.

"John. John Molineaux."

"*When?*

"While we were at the beach."

"*How can you be certain?*

She explained her ex-boyfriend's penchant for obsessive order and parallel rows, recounting how
she had set them awry in irrational anger and remembered looking at them earlier in the day when they were still in a state of disorder. He raised his eyebrows in what she took to be skepticism.

"Look, I know you're going to tell me that I'm off my rocker, but I'm not making this up," she snapped.

"I am uncertain what it means to be 'off your rocker,' but I do not think you are making this up," he replied. "Though I wonder why you think Congressman Molineaux would break into your apartment, steal your device, and then straighten the picture frames. If such a thing were habitual for him, his actions would only implicate him in the crime. I have met Congressman Molineaux and though I dislike many things about him, it does not seem that he would be so foolish."

"But you don't know what it's like to be neurotic, do you? You're Vulcan. You're logical. Lots of humans have weird quirks: they can't help it. They probably don't even realize they're doing it."

"I must admit I have observed a curious collection of compulsive eccentricities among humans over the years," he admitted. "But your evidence is still highly circumstantial. Did you mention your concerns to the police?"

"No, because I only just noticed it. And I don't think the police will care. They completely dismissed everything I told them but then again, he's friends with the San Francisco police chief. And I think he was reading my messages. And we dated for more than four months – he could have made a copy of the access card to my apartment. Ugh! I sound so paranoid…"

She took a few steps back and slumped into her armchair and swept her hands across her face as she tried to piece it all together.

"Why do you believe he was reading your messages?" Sarek asked.

She told him about her suspicion that someone was snooping through her messages when she realized she hadn't gotten Giles' birth announcement. Then her blood ran cold as the events of the conference trickled back into her consciousness.

"Miss Grayson? Are you ill? Your complexion appears abnormal."

"He was talking to Admiral Bentham," she squeaked, her voice shaking. She tried to remember the vague details of the conversation she'd heard through the hotel room door. "I didn't think anything of it at the time. But I had the weirdest conversation with Bentham over breakfast that morning and then right before the banquet they were in his room talking. They said something about the timeline being moved up? And Klingons."

"Klingons?"

"I don't remember…" she breathed in frustration. "No, this is crazy. I'm being paranoid and turning this into something it probably isn't."

"I do not think you are being paranoid," he said. "But it would be helpful if you could recall the details more accurately."

"What? No! You're supposed to be logical and tell me I'm being crazy!"

"But I do not think that," he argued. "You are overly excited, but certainly not insane. Try to calm down."

She took a few deep breaths and closed her eyes. When she opened them she found herself looking at the star charts in her lap. She stood suddenly and shoved the book of star charts in his
hands, surprising him.

"There's more. Look, Zetar, it's right there, in the Saurian sector. These charts are really old and these are the Tellarite names, but that's it."

"I do not read the Tellarite language," he explained, looking at her with a mild interest.

She haphazardly tried to explain the Tellarite alphabet and why the text he was looking at clearly spelled out "Zetar" in Federation Standard English, but he simply said, "Linguistics is your area of expertise. I trust your opinion."

"Then why has Starfleet never heard of it? Wouldn't it be on their star charts?"

"Before the Federation, there was no standard way of naming or classifying objects in space. Stellar cartographers are still assembling the collective knowledge of various Federation planets. Many objects have been renamed, reclassified, erroneously duplicated, or removed from charts. These inconsistencies are among the primary reasons that Starfleet has pushed for extended deep space missions."

"So what does all of this mean?" she asked.

"I do not know."

"So what do I do? What are you going to do?" Amanda groaned.

"I would advise against remaining here," he said.

"But I don't really have anywhere else to go," she quickly countered. "I mean, I guess I could stay with my mom but-"

"Allow me to finish," he said. "It is apparent that you do not feel secure here, and it is logical to conclude your fears have a reasonable basis. For that reason I would encourage you to temporarily leave Earth. I have made arrangements for you to travel to Vulcan tomorrow afternoon if you wish."

Amanda blinked in disbelief before asking, "Are you leaving tomorrow then too?"

"No, my duties will keep me here unless the Vulcan High Council recalls me."

"But I don't know anyone on Vulcan. I seriously meant it when I told you that you're the first Vulcan I've ever really met. Honestly, I don't even know that many people on Earth."

"I understand your concerns, but might I suggest we discuss them elsewhere?"

"But you want me to go to Vulcan... How long would I have to stay? Where would I stay? I can't just run away from my home forever."

"I am not asking you to," he declared. "What I am asking you to do is pack some necessary belongings and return to my accommodations with me. I hope you do not think I am being forward – my intentions are only for your safety. You may stay with me tonight and tomorrow I shall dispatch a shuttle to take you to the transport bound for Vulcan."

"But I'd need to tell my job. My mom. My landlord. I can't just run off without telling anyone."

"I think you fail to understand the necessity of both the urgency and secrecy involved."

She gulped and scanned his face, wondering what to say.
"You seem concerned and you have ample cause to be," he added.

"What am I supposed to say when the most rational person I've ever met is asking me to do something that sounds crazy? You're saying I should just pack some things and what...? Hide somewhere? Until... this all blows over? We don't even know what 'this' is!"

"I assure you, I have given it careful consideration and."

"You don't get it!" she snapped, before softening her tone. "That's what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid you're right."

"It is your choice, Miss Grayson."

He was really serious. Of course he was always serious, but there was an added level of earnestness in his expression. It terrified her.

"Yeah, ok," she mumbled.

"I recommend you pack only what you need for several days. Should you require anything further, you can obtain it on Vulcan."

She pulled her black duffel bag from the top of her closet and immediately felt overwhelmed. She didn't know of any recommended packing list for fleeing one's home on short notice, nor did she have any idea what she should wear on Vulcan. Every Vulcan she'd ever seen was dressed more modestly than a monk, and she didn't exactly have a lot of tunics that stretched from her chin to the floor.

In the end she reasoned that if Vulcan was renowned for its hot and dry climate, she could probably skip winter clothing and a bathing suit. In the end she collected mostly professional business attire, a pair of dress and casual shoes, a pair of jeans, a few t-shirts, and the necessary assortment of sleepwear and undergarments. She tossed her hairbrush and other toiletries in the side pouch and looked around in confusion. Like most people, she always forgot something when she traveled, and that was even when she had more time to consider what she needed.

He was standing at the end of her hallway when she exited the bedroom.

"May I bring this?" he asked, holding up her collection of Tellarite star charts.

"Yeah, I guess," she replied, looking around her apartment for what else she might need and grabbed her shoulder bag from the floor by the door.

"Are you ready to depart?"

"No," she answered honestly. "But let's go anyway."

The shuttle from the embassy complex waited just outside the building and he ushered her into the back and climbed in next to her. She looked across him to her home and questioned when and if she'd see it again. She noticed the lights were still off in Vera's apartment, and wondered what would happen if Euclid came back and she wasn't there. She worried what her mother would think when someone reported her missing and felt horrible guilt.

She noticed Sarek watching her stare out of his window at what she was leaving behind and she considered whether or not she was making the right choice in going with him. She didn't really know much about Ambassador Sarek, and wondered if she was being naïve to trust him. Almost as if he sensed her thoughts, he held out his hand to her and she took it. He clasped his other hand
over hers and held it delicately. She allowed herself to look directly at him and then swallowed and thought to herself, "Well, I have to trust someone."

The tall man doubled back onto 23rd Avenue and checked the address again on his handheld device against the faded numbers on the building. There was no way to be certain. He walked the length of the street again for four blocks, up and down, and clicked his device over to the aerial map.

The afternoon was fading fast. Normally he didn't like working in broad daylight, but they said it couldn't be helped. His boss had said time of was the essence and he was being paid double. He had been told in no uncertain terms that messing this up would be a mistake he wouldn't come back from. They sent someone else earlier and all they'd gotten was the woman's PADD.

He checked the address a sixth time and cursed the artsy people who fought so hard to preserve these "historic" neighborhoods with their crumbling architecture and ridiculous numbering conventions. The more he paced back and forth, the more likely he was to be noticed.

The odd numbers were on the other side, and the red brick building one block up was the only choice left after everything else had been eliminated. He began to cross the street but was stopped in his tracks by a long, black shuttle that looked like what the government types would cruise around in. After the shuttle passed, he crossed the street and got into his nondescript blue personal shuttle and slowly turned it South on 23rd Avenue, parking just beyond the red brick building. Then he waited.

The description he had been given was vague. He was looking for a petite, pale Caucasian woman on the short side of average with medium length (whatever that meant) dark brown hair and brown eyes. He'd easily seen a dozen women fitting that description in the last hour. He had asked for a picture and they promised to send him one, but he hadn't gotten anything yet.

The only thing he worried about was botching it. He had a reputation for being discreet so he didn't want to just snatch her off the sidewalk or from her bed in the middle of the night where she might scream. It would be easier if they didn't need her alive, but he didn't get to choose the conditions of the grab.

Given she'd been robbed earlier in the day, she'd also probably be skittish and wary of strangers knocking on her door, which just made his job harder. He flipped through the box of identification cards in his back seat and pulled out one from the embassy. Apparently the woman worked there and he figured she might get into the car with a man that worked there also without too much fuss.

He watched a black and white cat chase something through the overgrown bushes and took a sip of his coffee. It had gone cold. His handheld device pinged and he pulled up her picture. He reclined his seat slightly and studied the image and glanced in his mirror and did a double take. There she was. Probably. She wasn't bad looking: her tight red pants showed off a pair of really nice legs.

She was about five meters from his vehicle and closing fast. He sat up slowly and could just make out her speech over the light traffic and other city noise.

"Euclid, you naughty boy! What are you doing outside? Let's get you home!"

He couldn't believe his luck. He watched her crouch down right next to his shuttle and try to catch the cat in the thick bushes. He looked up and down the street: there was no other pedestrian traffic and the angle was perfect. He ditched the ID and pulled his miniature hand phaser from his console instead. This was going to be easy.
He exited his vehicle calmly and moved around the front. She was still on her hands and knees trying to coax the cat out of the shrubs.

"Amanda Grayson?" he asked.

"Huh?" she murmured, pulling her head out from the bushes with a smile.

He hit her fast in the ribs at point blank range with the phaser and she fell into his hands like a rag doll.
Sarek opened the door to his quarters and stepped aside to let Amanda pass. She crossed the threshold and turned to wait for him. He noticed her eyes move about the large, open living room in curiosity. He hadn't been confident she would agree to come and now that she was here he found himself uncertain of how to accommodate a human female.

He had never entertained any guests in his home on Earth during his entire tenure on the planet. He knew most ambassadors from other Federation member planets brought their families, hosted gatherings, and kept a moderately sized staff to cook and clean, but he had little need for such things. A woman came by to clean once a week but often left after about twenty minutes, both because he was meticulously tidy and also because he was rarely at home.

For that reason he kept no food here. There was a replicator in the kitchen that he occasionally used but he ate most meals at the consulate. Humans had the curious but efficient desire to discuss important business over meals, and that custom kept him fed without the need to return home to dine. At least the quarters were equipped with four large bedrooms, a formal dining room, a sitting room, and the necessary day-to-day items such as dishes, cookware and towels.

He noted the perspiration beginning to accumulate on her forehead and adjusted the environmental controls from 42ºC to 25ºC to better suit her physiology.

"You have a lovely home," she murmured, looking back at him with wide eyes.

"Thank you," he replied. "There is a large bedroom at the end of the hall with a private lavatory. I am sure it will be suitable to your needs."

"Ah," she replied with a bob of her head, wandering to the hallway on the right.

He watched her walk out of view and extracted his PADD from inside his cloak and checked the time. 1859. They had said little in the shuttle on the way there. He had held her hand to calm her, though admittedly he found the close contact with her personally agreeable as well. He was baffled that she would again take his hand after she seemed so angry at the beach. Now he had to actively work to keep her from diverting his thoughts.

He typed out a message to the undersecretary of the Vulcan High Council seeking an emergency meeting with Councilwoman T'Lona at the earliest opportunity. He did the math in his head and realized the soonest he could reasonably expect to hear back would be in approximately seven hours. He sat on the black chaise lounge chair in the front room and waited for her to return. Now that she was in a safer location and no longer hysterical, he wanted to further inquire about Congressman Molineaux and Admiral Bentham.

There were other things he wanted to ask about as well, but now was not the time. He wasn't certain there would ever be a correct time.

He waited for ten minutes, his sensitive ears scanning the space for sounds of movement in the room down the hall but he could detect none. Cautiously he rose to his feet and moved down the hallway and paused for a time outside of her door, uncertain what sort of protocol was appropriate. A Vulcan would consider it rude to intrude upon a guest in any way with the door closed, excepting cases of emergency.

It was approaching the approximate hour when many Vulcans meditated, but she wasn't Vulcan and he had no way of knowing what was customary for her in the middle of the evening. He
debated retreating from her door and meditating himself: he'd gone far too long without regular meditation and he strongly suspected it had a role in his inability to curb his emotions around her. Yet it was illogical to suppose an hour of meditation now would have a significant effect on his problem, so he held his breath and was about to knock when she opened the door.

"I was just washing up. I hope you weren't waiting on me," she stammered.

"No, I did not wish to interrupt you."

"It's your home. And I'm really thankful that you're letting me stay here…"

"Is something the matter?"

Her eyes looked at the floor and shifted right and left before she said, "A lot of things, but there's nothing wrong with you."

"I appreciate the difficulty of your present situation," he said.

"I hope you don't think I'm being ungrateful, because really, you've done so much for me already, but... what am I supposed to do when I get to Vulcan?"

"I have arranged for you to stay at my private residence in Shi'Kahr. There is no one there at present, but I shall ensure you have whatever you require."

He registered acute surprise on her face. "That's really- I don't… want to impose on you. And I don't really have any way to repay you."

"I am not seeking recompense. Your information has assisted me personally, and Vulcan also. It is I who is repaying you."

"I don't see how anything I told you could be helpful," she sighed.

"I do not have all the facts of the investigation myself," he admitted. "Though if it would not upset you, I would ask if we could review the information you provided earlier, now that you have regained control of your mental faculties."

She smiled and nodded. He could detect the sound of the acids in her stomach lurching.

"You are hungry," he stated.

"I'll be fine," she said, putting her hands against the doorjamb and taking a step forward.

"I regret that I have no food readily available, but I have a replicator that could probably replicate a variety of Terran dishes."

"A replicator? Like they have in on starships?" she laughed.

"Yes."

"Interesting. I've never eaten replicated food, at least not that I know of. I've heard it tastes the same."

"I have found that to be generally true, though the unit in my home renders many Vulcan dishes more salty than I am accustomed."

"I'm up for whatever you recommend," she replied.
They moved to the kitchen and the lights illuminated automatically and reflected off the hard granite countertops. She moved curiously toward the replicator unit on the wall and stood before it pensively before looking to him for assistance.

"What do you prefer to eat?" he asked.

"What can it make?"

"Whichever recipes have been properly programmed into it."

She opened her mouth to speak but sighed instead, then smirked and turned to the console and lightly tapped the touchscreen. It illuminated the blue interface with a handful of buttons linking to various styles of Terran cuisine and other non-local dishes. He watched her deliberate and tap the nail of her forefinger on the replicator's hard metal casing.

She finally made a choice and cautiously selected a button and the replicator produced a bowl of pink, savory smelling soup. Her eyes lit up in what he perceived to be either delight or puzzlement, and when she looked back at him she was genuinely smiling.

"Bowl and everything, huh?" she asked, cautiously touching the plain white bowl with her index finger.

"I would imagine it prevents your broth from spilling all over the floor."

"It almost sounds like you're teasing me," she said, pursing her lips and looking at him.

He hadn't been, but there was a playfulness in her tone that was more suited to her typical personality. It pleased him to hear, as it implied she was beginning to relax.

"What are you eating?" he asked, taking a step toward her and taking the bowl with one hand and examining it.

"It's called borscht. It's a Russian soup made with beets and served with sour cream. If I remember correctly, you said many Vulcan dishes were varieties of soups and stews."

"So I did, and so they are. Why is this one pink?"

"Because beets are pink?" she replied with a gentle laugh.

He handed the bowl to her and selected the same dish, then moved to a drawer in the center island and extracted two spoons and handed her one. He was about to move to the formal dining room but she started to pull out one of the short, backless stools from underneath the kitchen island.

"You wish to take your evening meal in here?" he asked, surprised by her choice.

"Oh, um, why not?"

"It is customary to take breakfast and solitary lunches in the kitchen, but evening meals are always consumed in the proper dining room," he explained.

"Oh," she said, her cheeks flushing red. "I don't really know much about Vulcan customs. I mean, I know some as they relate to formal situations, but I can't say I'm familiar with the ins and outs of daily life for Vulcans. I guess starting tomorrow I'm going to receive a vigorous education."

He noticed her frown and look down at the bowl in her hand apprehensively. "Is something amiss?"
"I sort of get the sense you went out of your way to arrange all of this for me, and I just don't want to… I don't know… do or say something wrong."

"Vulcans not only understand diversity but also embrace that it is the natural order of the universe. You are not the first human to visit my home world. Additionally, you have spent your entire life learning what other humans expect of you and so it is illogical to presume that you must also be fully acquainted with the nuances of Vulcan culture. I have spent a significant portion of my life on Earth and there are many things that still perplex me about your race."

"I'm not sure if that was supposed to be a lecture or a pep talk, but it did make me feel a little better." She shot him a wan smile.

"If I may offer one piece of advice, Vulcans will more readily accept you if you are not so forthcoming with emotional displays," he suggested.

"Like smiling?" she asked, her smile fading into worry.

"If you can avoid it," he explained. "Though I do not personally mind; I am accustomed to the behaviors of your species."

He retrieved two cloth napkins from a shelf and showed her the way to the dining room and they sat quietly. The soup she had recommended had a curious taste: not delicious, but certainly adequately filling. They sat without speaking for the first half of the meal and he noticed her eyes suggested she was reflecting upon something. Eventually she asked, "What information did you want to review?"

"You mentioned several things from the interplanetary conference that did not make sense. As I recall, you mentioned you had a peculiar conversation with Admiral Bentham. Can you remember what you discussed?"

"I don't know if it was the conversation or just him, but he's very… unnerving. Some people might call it 'charming' maybe, but he was really more scary than anything. He knew who I was because Congressman Molineaux told him, but he knew a lot of things about me, almost like he had read my resume and did his own background investigation. He wanted to know how well I spoke Romulan and Klingon."

"Anything else?" Sarek asked.

She frowned and looked down and he was beginning to recognize she often did that when she was thinking carefully about something.

"I don't remember."

"Very well," he said. "You also mentioned you overheard a conversation between Congressman Molineaux and Admiral Bentham. What was the context?"

"It was right before the banquet. I got ready early and went to his room, but I heard them talking through the door. I don't normally eavesdrop, but there was something about their tone and what they were saying that seemed… not right. I know I heard them talking about Klingons and they said something about a timeline. There was more, I'm sure, I just can't remember. Bentham sounded like he was bossing John around though."

Sarek considered her words and contemplated strategies for helping her recall more information.

"And another thing," she continued. "John asked about my father that night, and he asked about him before too. I thought it was strange because I'd never really talked about my family with him,
but all of a sudden he seemed interested."

"What exactly did he ask?"

Amanda put her hands to her temples and sighed. She was quiet for a short time and replied, "I don't remember. I wish I had your memory."

"Would you permit me to try something?" he asked.

She took her hands from the sides of her face and looked at him hopefully. "What?"

"Would you allow me to mind meld with you?"

"Mind meld?" she mumbled.

"Vulcans possess psionic telepathic abilities," he explained. "If you would consent to a meld, we may be able to prevent hours of frustration."

"Telepathic abilities?"

"Yes, it means-"

"I- I know what it means," she stammered. "You want to read my mind. The place where I keep my thoughts. All of my thoughts, many of which are private. Why not just ask to see me naked?"

"I do not intend to cause offense," he responded, trying to ignore the fact that he very nearly had seen her without clothing earlier at her apartment. "It is not quite as open-ended as you suggest. After an initial probe to locate the specific memories, that is all I would access. I am not familiar with the structure of your mind, but I would never deliberately partake in memories or thoughts that would be generally regarded as private, nor disclose them to anyone else. I assure you, I am highly trained and there is a strict code of ethics involved."

"I'm not Vulcan though. How can you be sure it would work on me?"

"I am told it works well on humans."

"You're told? How many humans have you mind-melded with?"

"None," he admitted, eliciting a glare from her that was equal parts stern and scared.

"It isn't just that," she said slowly, "it's… my mind. It's like the only place I have that's just mine."

"I certainly understand your sentiment and your concerns."

"No, you really don't," she said. "I have… many thoughts about you. I mean I appreciate that you wouldn't tell anyone else, but in that case, you are the 'anyone else.'"

Sarek was unsure of how to respond, but her confession surprised him. When he had admitted to her that he cared for her and joined with her in ozh'esta, her reaction had been… temperamental. He had assumed she was curious about the Vulcan custom but didn't hold any romantic regard for him.

Was she now implying that she did? No, that was illogical. Simply having thoughts about him was not indicative of affection. How curious that he would immediately jump to such a logical fallacy…

He prepared to apologize for overstepping his bounds when she looked at him and asked, "Will it
hurt?"

He described the process to her as they cleared away their dishes from the table and placed them in the kitchen's reclaimator. He explained that it was merely a painless transfer of thoughts, though occasionally strong emotions could also be transferred. Her trepidation waned slightly yet he could easily discern she wasn't completely convinced that this was a good plan.

They moved back to the sitting room and sat next to each other on the black chaise lounge.

"So I just, focus on the memory and you can… dig it right out?" she asked with a waving gesture of her hands.

He wanted to explain that her description wasn't entirely correct but sensed it was not the appropriate time for such a correction and simply said, "I believe you would say, 'more or less.'"

"Ok," she said, resting her palms on the edge of the sofa.

"You are certain you want to do this?" he confirmed.

"Certain? No. But I will."

"And you are concentrating on the-"

"Yes, just do it," she barked.

He lifted his right hand to her face, hesitated, and then placed the tips of his fingers onto the appropriate points. He watched her eyes reflexively widen and her pupils dilate and felt the warm gasp of her breath on his wrist.

She clearly had no concept of blocking his mental advances as a Vulcan instinctively would. Initially he was alarmed at the ease with which he could permeate her consciousness. It was like falling from a great height and expecting to land on concrete but landing in water instead. He almost broke the meld, but forced himself to concentrate through a growing feeling of intense panic, profound sadness, and… he didn't want to perceive it.

After some faltering, he recognized what he was looking for and retrieved it as quickly as he could. In total it had lasted only fifteen seconds and then he quickly removed his hand from her face, shocked to discover he was breathing hard and his left hand was interlocked with hers. Her face was deeply flushed and her expression almost unrecognizable… but it also wasn't.

He understood what it was, and he knew that she knew. She drew her face close to his and kissed him, releasing his hand to cup both of hers lightly around the sides of his neck. Earlier that morning he had assumed she was emotionally fragile and he was taking advantage of her. Yet through her sadness, uncertainty, and fear he was wholly aware of her intense and steadily growing feelings for him.

He hesitated still, wondering about the lines of his integrity and her emotionality and inexperience when she offered an even greater surprise.

"Please, it's ok…"

She hadn't said it: she had thought it. It hadn't been strong: in fact, he was only vaguely aware of it at the fringes of his perception, but it was there. He felt her growing awkwardness and she started to pull away. Rather than let her retreat, he began to kiss her in return.

He ran his hands up her arms and cradled her neck gently, intertwining his fingers through her soft
hair, and then slid his tongue across the part in her lips. Her confidence was renewed and she brushed his tongue with her own.

Then two things happened. She had started to lean onto the high back of the chaise, gently pulling him on top of her and he became mindful of how tightly he was now clutching her neck. She made a garbled squeaking noise and he loosened his grip, afraid of how fragile she really was and afraid of himself for momentarily forgetting that fact. Their kiss ended and they pulled their faces away simultaneously, their hands still holding one another tenderly about their necks.

He looked straight into her eyes, noting how alive she looked. She was breathing so hard she was almost panting and he could feel her emotions. She was a jumble of conflicting emotion.

He continued to study her, wondering if these intense, chaotic feelings were typical of the human experience. If they were, he had the sense that he had grossly misjudged humanity: the fact that they could endure life at all without going insane or turning to logic as Vulcans had was an impressive achievement.

He leaned forward and kissed her lightly, then rested his forehead upon hers. He could feel their heated breath mingling together and fought the urge to revisit their previous intimate activities.

His PADD beeped from its position on the nearby coffee table and he snapped back to the present reality. He reluctantly let go of her and tried to reassemble his thoughts. He focused on his breathing and with monumental effort reached across her to take possession of his PADD.

The display screen showed a message from the Vulcan High Command directly. Not the undersecretary or the clerk, but a message directly from Councilwoman T'Lona, simply stating, "I require an immediate secure conference. Acknowledge."

It was logical to assume the matter was extremely exigent, given it was the middle of the night in Shi'Kahr. His mind wove through the information he had obtained through the mind meld with Amanda and integrated it into his own awareness. He continued to breathe steadily to improve his focus, swiped across the message, and typed out a quick reply.

"Is everything ok?" Amanda asked.

The frenzied look was gone and had been replaced by inquisitive worry. Without touching her he couldn't feel her emotions quite as well as he had earlier.

"I am required at the consulate," he stated, rising to his feet.

"Now? It's 2030 hours," she argued, still sitting.

"I believe I understand the situation with the Comstock more fully following our mind meld," he said. "My theory is somewhat speculative, but it may be possible to derive the truth when the information you have provided is taken together with the information that the Vulcan High Council possesses."

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"I do not know, but you should be safe here. May I take your Tellarite star charts with me?"

"Uh, yeah," she muttered, going to the bedroom to collect them.

He moved to the reception closet and removed his cloak and she soon returned. After putting his arms through the sleeves he turned back to her. Her hands were shaking as she handed him the collection of charts and she clasped her hands together and continued to watch him expectantly.
He approached her and thoughtfully touched his thumb to her chin and leaned down to kiss her. It was more relaxed than it had been earlier and when he pulled away this time he could discern a peculiar brightness to her expression.

"I shall likely only be gone for several hours," he said.

She nodded wordlessly and walked him to the door as he requested a car from his PADD. He stepped out onto the stone walkway and was about to depart when he looked over his shoulder to her standing in the doorway. She smiled nervously, nodded to him, and closed it. He heard the click of the electronic lock, nodded to himself, and walked away.

Vera awoke in muted agony. She couldn't quite tell where the pain was coming from, why she was in pain, or what hurt worse: the burn on her side, the ache of her shoulders, or her head.

When she tried to speak, she noticed the presence of a heavy sensor attached to her neck and that prevented her from making any vocalizations at all. The only noise she could make was a soft whistle if she breathed out forcefully.

She had silent tears flowing down her cheeks as she tried to recall exactly how she ended up in the dimly lit room with her arms wrenched soundly behind her back. She was walking down the sidewalk... she was in the bushes looking for Amanda's cat... there was a man... he asked if she was Amanda Grayson... she saw his black shoes... then she was here.

She tried to catch her breath but the silence of her crying was frightening. She wanted to wail and demand to know what she was doing here but all she was left with was the sound of her own hyperventilation. She heard muffled voices from behind the cracked door and tried to pull herself together but she continued to cry.

"Give her the cordafin; that will wake her up."

"I'd be surprised if she wakes up at all after you hit her at that range. The instructions clearly said 'alive.' That implies at least able to talk, not just clinically alive."

"Look, it was a sketchy job to begin with and I didn't have a lot to go on. It was the middle of the afternoon and in public."

"Just give her the damn stimulant."

The door opened and more light flooded into the room and Vera squinted and looked away. Three men entered the room and she started screaming, but no sound came out.

"See, I told you she'd come around," said a tall man with his hands in his pockets.

"We have to tell the admiral," said a middle-aged balding man. "The Tafv can't transport her for another twenty-nine minutes, but he'll want to know."

"No," said a third man, whose features Vera couldn't make out with her poorly adjusted eyes.

"He said every minute counted," argued the middle-aged man. "I say we start now."

"So when do I get paid?" insisted the tall man.

"You don't," said the third man.

"What? Do you know what I went through-"
"You don't," interrupted the third man, "because that's not Amanda Grayson."

"Of course it is! Look, this is the picture you sent me."

The man pulled out a handheld device and walked over the Vera, grabbed her roughly by the hair, and held the device up next to her face.

"No, it's not her," said the middle-aged man in surprise.

"What are you talking about? 'Course it is."

He released her hair and looked at the screen of the device more closely. Vera looked away and slumped back against the wall, her scalp throbbing.

"We gotta tell the admiral," said the middle-aged man, pulling out a small PADD.

"No," said the third man.

"What's with you? You're losing it."

"I said 'no,'" replied the third man.

"Well look at this," said the middle-aged man, showing the PADD screen to the third man. "He already knows. I don't know how he knows, but he's saying she's at the Vulcan ambassador's house."

"Ok, if that's not Amanda Grayson, who is it?" asked the tall man, pointing back to Vera.

"No one," replied the third man. "No one that matters anyway."

"If we get rid of her, he'll never know we even grabbed the wrong girl," said the tall man. "I can go get the real Amanda Grayson now. I've got access cards for down at the embassy. I could easily talk my way into the housing complex. I think transporting would be too risky but—"

"No," snapped the third man.

"Look, he messed this one up," said the middle-aged man, pointing back to Vera. "But he's never been wrong before. And who else is going to do it? You? You'd be recognized before you even got out of the car."

"Yeah, let me fix this," urged the tall man. "I'll take a small crew and we'll say we're maintenance. It'll be legit."

The third man sighed and nodded as the tall man left the room and called out behind him, "The transport shuttle is leaving in less than two hours. They're having a hard enough time keeping that thing cloaked as it is. So I suggest you hurry."

"We still have to get rid of her," said the middle-aged man, crossing his arms and nodding toward Vera. "I'll do it. You can go back to the coms room."

She put her cheek against the cool, smooth wall and tried to pretend like this wasn't happening. She couldn't think of a meaning for "get rid of her" that ended well when she was tied up and gagged.

"No," replied the third man. "I'll do it."
"You couldn't do it earlier this afternoon. But sure, maybe you grew a pair. Go ahead: get your hands dirty. Call if you need anything," said the middle-aged man as he left.

Vera was alone in the room with the third man and cried harder as she watched him shut the door and swallow them both into darkness. She heard his footsteps on the hard floor and struggled in vain to free herself and screamed. And screamed. And screamed. And still no sound came out. The third man walked over to the opposite wall and turned on a small, singular, overhead light that bathed the room in a yellowish light.

He turned around to look at her and Vera recoiled in shock. It was John Molineaux.
Revelation

John sat in his penthouse on Douglass Street, staring out over the horizon, over the brightly lit city, and into the black night. He smoked a cigar even though they were no longer fashionable and sipped whiskey from his glass. He walked to the clear wall and looked down to the street 100 floors below and wondered what it would be like to jump.

He also wondered how long it would last – San Francisco, Earth, and the Federation and all of its planets. The quadrant. The galaxy. The universe. *Time.* Nothing went on forever, not even time, if certain fields of theoretical physics were to be believed. But as he looked down at the slow Sunday night traffic beneath him, he felt afraid what he saw would end much sooner than it ought to and felt ashamed of his role in it.

He looked up at the sky. A cloaked Romulan vessel was hiding somewhere in Earth's orbit, though maybe it had already departed for the Neutral Zone by now. He checked his watch: no, not yet, not for another hour or so. He wondered if they had gotten to Amanda and if she was on board with the Castaneda kid. They'd probably already tortured Castaneda to death by now. He'd never thought any of the family members knew anything, but Bentham was desperate.

John never wanted to hurt Amanda; she was a good person. That's why he'd volunteered to be the one to bring her in and he'd been so relieved when she wasn't home. He took her PADD instead but it hadn't had much information on it. Bentham had been hopeful about the deposit box, but apparently all it contained was some old jewelry and sentimental items.

He had wanted to warn her for weeks about Bentham but hadn't found a decent way of doing it, not until that afternoon. He had rearranged her picture frames and hoped against hope that she would notice and leave town. Instead she did was normal people would do and called the police, and given that probably half of the San Francisco police department was in Bentham's back pocket in some way or another, that had gone about as well as anyone could really expect.

Bentham now believed she was working covertly for the Vulcans because she had been hanging around the Vulcan ambassador who had knocked him out at the conference. John hated the smug bastard, but Vulcans were supposed to be smart, and he hoped this guy was smart enough to figure out how to help her, because *he* certainly couldn't anymore.

It said a lot about Bentham as a person that first he had wanted to recruit her for her skills, then he wanted to interrogate her for information, and now he simply wanted to kill her for helping the Vulcans. *After* interrogating her, of course. Bentham was an old hand at chewing people up and spitting them out, but where most people would quickly lose power after burning so many bridges, the inverse appeared to be true for the sociopathic head of Starfleet.

He swallowed the remaining alcohol in his glass, extinguished his cigar, and went back to his desk. He was amazed he was even here right now. He had known Bentham for several years and he despised the feeling that the small man could read minds. Bentham had so many people tucked away in so many places that he had expected to die before he even made it out of the parking lot with Amanda's crackpot upstairs neighbor in the trunk.

He had hung the data file around her neck on a lanyard when he pulled up to the hospital and dumped her out onto the sidewalk, crying and still gagged but very much alive. He had tried to apologize to her as best he could, but every time he had gotten close to her she had understandably tried to bite him, kick him, spit on him, or head butt him. Was her name Vida? Vera? It didn't matter.
The data file he gave her was his insurance, in case he was either killed on his way home or got cold feet at the last minute. He sat down at his computer console and reread his confession. There was so much more he wanted to say, but it had most of the basic information. It had at least enough to get the ball rolling, anyway.

His finger hovered over the "send" button on the touch screen and stopped. He filled his glass with the last of the whiskey in the bottle and poured half of the burning liquid down his throat. He looked at the handful of old-fashioned pills on the desk and the hand phaser and continued to debate which option would be better. He plucked one of the pills into his glass and took a sip. *Not so bad.*

He did another and another and felt an exhilarating fear. Soon all the pills and whiskey were gone. His eyelids began to feel heavy. He pressed send.

Sarek walked hurriedly into the Vulcan consulate. He had received several calls and messages from each member of his senior staff en route and diverted them all to an automated message informing them of his impending arrival.

The Vulcan consulate was normally a quiet and somber place and *technically* still was at the moment, but there was subdued tension riveting through the lobby. There were 24 Vulcan citizens crowded into the reception area, including several children. All of them were watching the central holographic screen, along with most members of his staff.

He didn't have to watch the news program to understand why. The bold caption above the news anchor's head simply said, "ROMULANS."

Several of the Vulcans approached him for information and he admitted he had none to give but was on urgent business. He excused himself and entered his office, trying to logically determine how this would complicate both the emergency secession meeting and the scheduled Vulcan evacuation the following day. He immediately turned on his secure console and before he could even dial in the communication link to the High Council clerk, he received a call.

Councilwoman T'Lona greeted him along with Councilman Tes of the Vulcan Ministry of Information, as well as Vulcan's leader, Chief Minister Sevek. They exchanged the usual pleasantries at a brisk pace and Minister Sevek asked if he was on the agenda to speak during the emergency session the following day.

"No," replied Sarek. "As you know this is an internal Terran matter-"

"With great potential consequences for all of the Federation," interrupted Minister Sevek.

"Indeed," Sarek replied. "The floor will be open for alien members of the Federation Council to speak following Earth's deliberations. I believe Councilman Suvok will likely give remarks."

"He was scheduled to," Minister Sevek explained. "But we have been unable to contact him. We have asked the Federation Investigation Service to locate him, but have not heard back."

"What do you require of me?" asked Sarek.

"If we are unable to locate him, we require you to speak in his place. You are not a member of the Federation Council, but at present you are the most senior member of the Diplomatic Service on Earth, and as a founding member of the Federation, Vulcan has a right to be heard. As you likely know by now, someone at Starfleet released the information about the possible role of the Romulans in the attack on the *Comstock*, which will certainly have repercussions for the
emergency session tomorrow."

"I believe that individual was the Starfleet Chief of Staff, Admiral Maxwell Bentham," Sarek replied.

Councilwoman T'Lona and Minister Sevek exchanged looks, while Councilman Tes appeared to be reading something in his lap.

"I am certain I am not working with all available facts, but I have obtained additional information through Amanda Grayson," he explained.

He began to outline the conversation she'd overheard through the door when Councilman Tes interrupted him.

"If this message is legitimate, Ambassador Sarek is correct," Councilman Tes interjected, motioning to his PADD.

"To what message are you referring?" inquired Minister Sevek without looking behind him to acknowledge the speaker.

"A classified emergency dispatch just sent from a personal residence directly to the Vulcan High Council, along with the Federation Council and a number of other Federation governments. It is a private confession and contains details of a wide-ranging Federation plot."

"Allow us to confer privately and then renew our discussion, Ambassador," Councilwoman T'Lona stated, before Minister Sevek raised his hand calmly.

"I do not see why he should not be granted access to this communiqué, given his position and the present circumstances," argued Minister Sevek. "See that it is forwarded immediately."

After 30 seconds, a message appeared in the inbox of his secure message service, and over a communication link with the heads of his own government, he learned how the governments of Earth and the Federation were likely on the brink of falling apart.

To whom it concerns,

I do not personally know how deep the roots of the Earth Autonomy Movement go, and if you are involved, then nothing in this message will come as a surprise. To everyone else, this is how the EAM has plotted for more than a decade to bring down the Federation. This is also my confession for my part in it.

Admiral Maxwell Bentham is the leader of the Earth Autonomy Movement. I met him two years ago at a private club in Colorado when we discussed my interest in the Earth First Party. He was supportive of the isolationist movement and introduced me to many campaign donors. I would not have been successfully elected without his help.

I thought he was simply mentoring me due to our shared political ideals, but I eventually became aware he had a hand in putting countless people into positions of power. I do not know the full extent of his influence, but I've attached a list of those whom I personally know to be working for Admiral Bentham.

Eventually I discovered Admiral Bentham's true motivations behind helping me further my political career. His involvement with the EAM began while he was serving as commander of a Starfleet intelligence detachment tasked with patrolling and intercepting transmissions along the Romulan Neutral Zone. Sometime during his command he intercepted plans for a large-scale weapon that could produce massive amounts of thalaron radiation and effectively destroy a planet.
from very remote distances.

He never turned this intelligence over to Starfleet. Instead, he set about building the weapon for himself. I do not know all of the technical details, but it took him more than ten years to assemble the necessary materials and bribe and mislead the engineers who built it, as well as to rise through the ranks of Starfleet and promote the careers of people loyal to his cause and threaten or remove anyone who stood in his way.

Eventually he confided in me that his intent is to destroy both the Klingon and Romulan home worlds. When I first became suspicious of his true intentions, I am ashamed to admit I still supported him, as the Klingons and Romulans are war-faring societies and I feared for Earth's safety. Then six months ago, I discovered by accident that he does not intend to stop with the Romulans and Klingons, but seeks to take revenge on the Nausicaans, Rigellians, Coridians, and Vulcans for their failure to evacuate the Jouret colony during the Klingon and Romulan war. Whatever my opinions of alien species and the Federation, I cannot in good conscience allow the annihilation of billions.

I knew I could not immediately go to the authorities without proof and I have spent the last six months compiling all of the convincing evidence I could obtain. I hope it is enough. The more I have learned, the more I am certain that Admiral Bentham intends to completely destroy the Federation and countless alien lives.

The weapon was structurally completed six months ago and is being hidden on a planetoid orbiting Iota Eridani. The weapon is designed to have some limited mobility and the Romulan schematics detailed the necessity of an artificial quantum singularity and a massive quantity of superfluid helium-3.

Admiral Bentham solved the first problem by crossing into the Romulan Neutral Zone five months ago and boarding a disabled Romulan ship called the Tafv and capturing the vessel and its crew. The ship possesses not only the quantum singularity propulsion system but also extremely advanced cloaking technology, which in addition to hiding the ship has also been modified to conceal the weapon.

Due to the lack of the Federation's knowledge of the Romulan language, I was tasked with recruiting linguists familiar with Romulan to the EAM to help interrogate the captured Romulan crew and decipher the schematics of the ship's systems. Bentham now has a small human crew on the Tafv and is using it to advance his operation.

Admiral Bentham had less obvious means of solving the second problem, which was to obtain trillions of cubic meters of enriched helium-3. Even if he possessed the funds to purchase it, the estimated amount of helium-3 in all the Federation reserves would have still been insufficient to properly use the weapon for an extended period of time. Then, by coincidence and dumb luck, two months ago I discovered that Amanda Grayson, one of the linguists I had attempted to recruit to Admiral Bentham's cause, had a relative who had just hit upon a discovery of helium-3 in the Saurian sector. He was the captain of the Comstock.

Despite a month-long scan of the sector, no helium-3 was detected. Two weeks ago, Bentham's people found the Comstock exploring a nebula at the edge of Saurian space and Bentham's crew aboard the Tafv demanded the location of the helium-3. Melvin Grayson, the ship's captain, refused to comply with their demands and attempted to escape by fleeing into the nebula where the Comstock was destroyed.

The loss of the Comstock forced the admiral's hand. He has not stopped working on the weapon, but now his contingency plan is to incriminate the Romulans in the attack on the Comstock. The Tafv crew retrieved debris from the nebula and put it in orbit around a planet in the Bolian sector.
to throw investigators off the trail while he continued to search for the helium-3. The relocation of the debris to a planet nearer the Federation and Romulan border had the added benefit of making it easier to blame the Romulans for the attack.

Bentham's interim plan is to spark another war with the Federation and use his political power to urge the Earth to secede from the Federation while he continues to develop the weapon. As you know, the emergency session is to take place tomorrow. My role was to sway votes in favor of this ruling.

This confession only scratches the surface of the amount of influence Admiral Bentham holds and the lengths he's willing to go to for power and revenge. Many of the personnel he recruited to the EAM were not willing participants but were coerced through all manner of means. Once they had fulfilled their role, they were usually murdered. I will never absolve myself of the guilt I feel for watching him nearly drown the infant daughter of the project's chief engineer, Marlo Hansen, when Bentham suspected him of sabotage. Hansen was later vented into space upon the project's completion, though the official report of his death is listed as a transporter accident.

Among the technology recovered from the commandeered Romulan ship were several torture and interrogation devices. I know they were used to obtain information from the former head of the Federation Investigation Service before his alleged fatal skiing accident three months ago, and from the late Vulcan ambassador Sulak when Bentham suspected Sulak had vital information about the proposed Romulan corridor expansion. Regrettably the ambassador was tortured to death before he yielded information, so Bentham arranged to steal the information from his personal files at the Vulcan embassy following his death but was unable to do so. I do not know for certain, but I believe these devices were also used on former Starfleet Chief of Staff Jason Winters two weeks ago and Federation Councilman Suvok last night.

In the last week he has hunted down the close family members of the Comstock crew in the hopes they have information on the whereabouts of the helium-3. Maria Polyakova was murdered using these Romulan technologies, as were Michael Kitts and as of this morning, Anthony Castaneda. Bentham is still searching for Angela Maruzen and the aforementioned linguist, Amanda Grayson. I believe anyone associated with the Comstock is in immediate, serious danger, as well as anyone possessing a large quantity of helium-3 or detailed knowledge of Starfleet defenses along the Romulan Neutral Zone, superfluids, or large-scale weapons.

I had intended to keep this message short, but it has been a long two years and much has happened. I have attached numerous documents and files supporting my claims: I trust you will find everything is in order. I am guilty of many crimes, both directly and indirectly. I hope you will not judge me too harshly, because I tried to make everything right in the end. I only hope it has been enough.

Congressman John Louis Molineaux

As Sarek finished reading the message and overlaid the information he had acquired from Amanda, he began to recognize the full gravity of the situation and work out all immediate actions he would be required to take.

If this information were true, it would certainly shut down the emergency secession meeting tomorrow and Earth would profusely apologize for even considering leaving the Federation. On the other hand, Molineaux's account suggested that Bentham was running out of options and growing desperate, and if his contingency plan were to initiate a war with the Romulans, he certainly possessed the means to do so. If he really had captured a Romulan vessel, war might already be inevitable.

More members of the Vulcan High Council and other Vulcan agencies were linked into the
transmission, and Sarek summoned the Vulcan members of his senior staff into his office. They debated and discussed Vulcan's strategy to the emerging crisis for the better part of an hour.

People came and went freely from the conversation as they were apprised of more information, left to confirm it, and then returned to update the others. Vulcan vessels were warned and recalled to Vulcan space, probes were launched, and other Federation members were contacted. Chaos and panic were illogical, but his office was coming very close.

Sarek confirmed the arrival of the transport vessels to return Vulcan citizens to their home world and tasked the members of his senior staff with contacting the remaining Vulcans on Earth and notifying them of the developing information. The Federation had faced crises before and survived, but he was not certain what condition it would be in following this one. Just because every other major crisis had been relegated to a footnote in the history books didn’t ensure this one wouldn't be on the final pages of the those same books as the story of how the Federation ended.

As he labored, his thoughts lingered on sections of Molineaux’s confession, particularly his assertion that "anyone associated with the Comstock is in immediate, serious danger." He worked at teasing out the logical implications of it all. If Bentham had the ability to reach anyone, from housewives to the head of Starfleet, it would be logical to assume he could still easily gain access to Amanda even still. Then it occurred to him that Ambassador Sulak had been murdered in his quarters, the same quarters that Sarek now occupied.

Of course, Molineaux had cast a wide net and news of this confession had by now reached the government of every Federation member planet and had surely trickled into Starfleet. That created a paradox. Naturally Molineaux would fear for his own life and would seek to gain as wide an audience as possible to reveal this information to on the chance that some would ignore the evidence he provided. However, a larger audience meant less chance of managing the crisis quietly behind the scenes before widespread panic set in.

It would only be a matter of time before at least portions of it were leaked to the public, and the reactions of the masses were known to be wildly unpredictable. A logical person in Bentham's position would surrender himself to the authorities, yet if Molineaux’s testimony could even be partially believed, Bentham was an increasingly erratic individual. He would not surrender so easily when he had little if anything to lose.

He finished drafting his proposed remarks to the Vulcan High Council for tomorrow’s emergency session, should it still be scheduled to happen, and excused himself. He had done everything he could for the moment and his staff was working on the finer details of the rest.

He decided to retrieve Amanda from his quarters himself. He had considered sending a junior staffmember to collect her, but reasoned she would likely be understandably skittish about answering the door for an individual she didn't know. If she had all the information he currently did, she would be even less inclined to open the door for strangers.

He meditated on the brief ride back to his accommodations. He did not allow himself to think of his growing romantic entanglement with Miss Grayson, but it occurred to him that he would be pleased to see her again, though they had only been parted for a short time. How illogical. He was not sure what the future had in store for them, but reasoned it would have to wait until this current crisis passed.

The vehicle had barely come to a stop when he pushed the door open. He moved up the stairs toward his front door, noting the exterior light was off. It had not been when he had departed. He felt a strange rush of fear that repulsed him as he inserted his key card into the door.

The moment he stepped across the threshold he understood the presence of his anxiety. It was
because it was *her* anxiety. In one sweeping motion, he saw her sitting on this black chaise lounge and turning to see him, her face the color of eggshells. Three men stood over her and she stretched out her hand and started to yell, "*NO!*" when the tallest of the three men punched her hard in the throat and the sound was immediately extinguished.

When he looked back on that moment, he could not be precisely sure what happened next, other than the fact that the five seconds immediately following the tall man's choice to strike Amanda included a number of firsts for Sarek. It was the first time in his adult life that he had ever lost complete control of himself. It was the first time he had ever killed another sentient being. It was also the first time he had ever been stunned into unconsciousness with a hand phaser.

When he awoke some hours later behind a force field in a dark room, Amanda was gone but he would soon discover he was not alone.
Caught

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Bentham seethed but maintained an outward calm true to his nature despite the fact that he was alone and no one would see his outburst. He sat in his lake cabin and continued to scan Molineaux's confession, realizing his cards were down and all that was left now was to see what hand everyone else had to play.

Molineaux had betrayed him. The sniveling, self-important, conniving, manipulative, racist idiot had sold him out. Of course everyone had flaws. It was an ironic fact that many of the flaws he relied on in people as a means of exploitation worked both ways: to be willing to betray the Federation, first one had to be capable of betrayal, and once a person was capable of betrayal, well… they tended to repeat the behavior. It was too late to dwell on that now.

He had long suspected he had made an error in trusting Molineaux and had even planned to get rid of him after the Romulan *isahha'edh* device was online but until then, Molineaux was critical to contingency plan beta. Now that Molineaux was out of the picture, the only choice left was contingency plan gamma. Bentham would have been a terrible military strategist indeed if he had put all his eggs in one basket.

Molineaux had been under the mistaken impression that he ran some kind of global conspiracy and Bentham had never bothered to correct him. The man had actually thought that he ran the Earth Autonomy Movement, which as far as he knew was little more than a bunch of terrorist kooks and xenophobes. Not even *he* knew who or what the EAM was or the extent of its power, but Molineaux had asked him once and he had simply just not denied it.

Molineaux thought Bentham practically owned the SFPD, when he really only had one loyal mid-ranking lieutenant. The rest of the illusion just relied on the centuries' long tradition of brotherhood within law enforcement agencies to do favors from time to time.

Of course Bentham knew many people and cultivated a diverse number of personal relationships, but that didn't mean they knew anything. Most of them simply provided secondary or tertiary benefits. Making friends in high places was essential to his work, because friends don't suspect friends. So just because he played golf once a month with the head of the Federal Investigation Service didn't mean he had recruited him into his plan, and especially didn't mean he had the whole FIS under his thumb.

In total, he only had about fifteen people he trusted to any real degree and maybe thirty more that he intimidated into doing smaller, compartmentalized tasks. Sure, he had killed a lot of people either directly or indirectly in the last dozen years to make this all possible, but he had always been careful they would never tie back to him. Unfortunately his mission and timeline had forced him to grow sloppy in recent months by killing a number of high-profile individuals. While the deaths of people like Sulak and Winters had raised a lot of suspicions and had been terribly handled, it just couldn't have been helped.

And so, the appearance of power was power itself. The real key to it all wasn't building a massive, private army of thugs and murdering anyone who got in the way: it was the judicious exercise of patience and planning and relying on people to invent their own versions of the truth.

He perused the confession again with some relief. The truth was, Molineaux didn't even know the half of it.
That was the other half of the power equation: delegating and compartmentalization. Molineaux didn't know about contingency plan gamma, and that was to be the only saving grace of this whole thing. He was grateful at least one of the Romulans on board was still alive. Of course, switching to gamma also meant that he was back to needing the helium-3, and fast.

He had maybe a day, two at most. MacFarland left to pick up the Grayson woman from the Vulcan ambassador's house forty-five minutes ago. Putting that tracker in her bag at their shared breakfast those months ago had seemed superfluous at the time and really had more to do with his keeping tabs on Molineaux, but it had ended up being extremely useful. Now he had to hope that she knew something. He had a strong feeling that she did. It was a lot to gamble on a hunch, but he was almost always right.

His first task was to contact his six-person crew on the Tafv, the captured Romulan vessel that he had taken great pains to conceal in Earth's orbit for the past two days. He needed to get transported aboard to begin contingency plan gamma, and the clock was ticking. He could only transport during a very short window every 90 minutes, as the vessel had to uncloak to activate the transporters and the Tafv had to be in synchronous orbit with Earth's moon to briefly obscure it from Starfleet sensors for the three seconds it would take to transport.

He was about to notify the Tafv when he received a message from Kerns, the man he had appointed to captain the ship. MacFarland had been killed but they had not only managed to get Amanda Grayson on board, but the new Vulcan ambassador as well.

He smiled to himself. Things were looking up.

He started to type out his instructions when he received another message from a friend at the FIS, reading only, "Agents en route. Get out NOW."

He immediately stood and briskly walked to the door and switched to talk to text on his PADD and dictated to Kerns, "FIS en route. If unable to transport on next pass, leave orbit and initiate gamma. Get helium at any cost."

He opened the door to three FIS agents materializing from a site-to-site transport on the portico of his wooded summer retreat. Their phasers were drawn. His thumb clicked "send" on the message and he dropped the PADD, shattering the screen glass.

He stomped hard on the broken remains of the PADD. Of course they would eventually intercept and decrypt the message without the hard copy of the device, but by the time they got around to it, the Tafv would be long gone.

He raised his hands in surrender and fell to his knees. No point in fighting. He was a practical man. He could wait out the next few days in custody. After all, what good was revenge if he didn't get to see it unfold?

Sarek's first surprise upon waking was to discover that he was alive. His consciousness flooded back quickly but he did not have any concept of how much time had passed. One moment he had used tal-shaya to snap the tall man's neck just below the skull and the next moment he was here, lying on his left side and staring at an onyx wall with a repetitive geometric pattern.

His head and back ached and he had a peculiar, lingering feeling of dread that took enormous effort to repress. During his youth he had studied at the Vulcan Institute of Defensive Arts and had been rendered unconscious many times during his intensive ten-month training period as he learned to master techniques central to Kareel-ifla and Suus Mahna. Being stunned into unconsciousness with a phaser was a completely different experience: his mind had essentially
been shut off, which had removed all frames of reference for his present surroundings.

He impulsively wanted to locate Amanda but reflexively surrendered to logic instead. He did not know how long he had been here, where he was, or who had brought him here.Obviously it had been people in Bentham's employ, but he could not know how many there were and what capabilities they had.

He also could not know what would happen to Amanda, but if Bentham's men planned on killing her, she could already be dead and there was nothing he could do about that. If she were still alive however, it was improbable her ultimate fate would be decided in the next several minutes, and he needed those minutes to collect his thoughts and bearings.

He remained motionless on the cold floor with his eyes partially closed and ears open. The room was dimly lit and unfurnished, cold even by human standards but extremely dry. There was the faintest thrum of energy, reminiscent of either a faraway plasma generator or a nearby force field. Given the small dimensions of the room he currently occupied, the latter seemed a more logical candidate. It was reasonable to assume he was in a cell of some kind.

If that were true, it was logical to assume the men who had captured him wanted him alive. The most obvious reason for keeping him alive would be to extract information, and if Molineaux's account held any truth, Bentham's people had ways of doing that. Information was most certainly the only thing that would prevent them from immediately killing Amanda as well.

Bentham had allegedly killed three close family members of the Comstock crew, presumably after they'd failed to give him information on the location of the helium-3. Given he and Amanda had both been abducted, that information almost certainly still escaped him. If her suspicions about Zetar were correct however, that information might not elude him for much longer. Amanda Grayson was a remarkable woman with many excellent qualities, but he doubted her ability to withstand torture for any length of time.

He slowly sat up sideways and looked behind him. The three-sided room was slightly less than three meters by three meters in dimension. The open wall revealed a narrow and dark corridor outside, slightly offset from its true dimensions due to a refraction of the light. He had been right about the force field.

He felt a sudden pain spread throughout his chest cavity and slowly fade, leaving only a fleeting feeling of fright. Perhaps it was the lingering effects of being stunned by the phaser. A minute later, the pain renewed with an increased intensity and it momentarily took his breath away and allowed the terror reached a staggering pitch. He slowed his breathing and fought to get it under control, and it quietly slipped away.

The fear was perplexing: fear was irrational and would not alter his circumstances. The suppression of fear was one of the earliest lessons Vulcan children received. He breathed methodically and pushed it into a remote corner in his mind and rose to his feet.

He approached the force field and reached the back of his hand out to where he approximated its location to be. It was warm and he could feel the gentle pulse of the energy from ten centimeters away. Direct contact with it would be extremely painful and sustained contact would probably kill him.

The open wall of his cell led into a very narrow hallway just one meter wide. The angle was shallow but he could see into four other similar cells on the other side. He could see a pair of feet from a person sitting and leaning up against the wall but could not see beyond the occupant's knees. The other cells appeared empty but he could not be sure from his vantage point.
The engineering construction and design of the prison were wholly unfamiliar to him and did not resemble anything he had ever seen within the Federation. He started to examine the walls of the cell and believed them to be either a polished duranium or tritanium alloy with meticulous laser etching.

The only other items of note in the cell were two air ducts with unusual hexagonally patterned grates. He assumed the force fields extended across the grates, though it wouldn't have mattered as the ceiling of the cell was three meters above his own head and even with a running start, he wouldn't be able to jump and reach that high to find out. He ran his fingers along the seams of the walls and found none.

He was just concluding that this cell was probably inescapable when the pain hit him again in the chest and a new thought occurred to him. The pain wasn't coming from within him as a residual effect of a hand phaser: it was Amanda's. They were hurting her. He could not allow himself to succumb to emotion now despite the anger welling inside of him.

He formed his hands into a steeple and breathed deeply. There was nothing he could do to stop her pain or comfort her. He recalled how her mind had touched the edge of his when they kissed and he now tried to do the same by reaching out to her mind through plat-vok. He fought with all the concentration he possessed but… nothing. They were not formally bonded and since she was human, he wasn't sure how complete of a bond was even possible between them.

He continued to focus on his breathing and knelt down onto his knees to focus all of his energy in stabilizing his emotions. He was very nearly down to two breaths per minute when the pain hit him again and the anger resurged briefly. He continued on in this way for fifteen minutes when his ears detected a noticeable shift in the hum of the force field.

He opened his eyes to see a human male of average-height and very plain appearance standing with his arms crossed. He was dressed oddly, with a white dress shirt tucked in to black work pants and bloused into heavy boots. Around his waist was a pistol belt with a Starfleet issued hand phaser, a communicator, and what appeared to be a remote activation device of some kind.

Sarek neither spoke nor moved. They watched each other watch each other, and Sarek was cognizant of the fact that he no longer felt Amanda's suffering, though he could sense somewhere at the threshold of his consciousness that she was still alive.

"Ambassador Sarek, right?" asked the man, taking a step toward him in the extremely narrow hallway until his face was only centimeters away from the force field.

Sarek remained motionless.

"You killed one of the better men I ever had work for me. It might come as a surprise to you, being Vulcan and all, but it's harder than you'd think to find guys that have no conscience and will obey any order you give them."

Sarek continued to kneel on the floor and made direct eye contact with his presumed jailer.

"You know, I always imagined underneath that boring exterior you people were probably psychos. I heard you broke his neck with one hand. I mean, wow," the man laughed.

Sarek blinked and continued to breathe calmly.

"Not in the mood to talk. That's ok. I didn't think you would be. But I don't doubt that you're listening, and I bet that logical brain of yours is probably clocking a lot of overtime right now. So I'm going to stop beating around the bush and just come out and say it. My boss thinks
that you know where we can find some helium-3. Ringing any bells?"

Sarek judged by the man's casual tone of voice that he was accustomed to coaxing information out of humans and wondered if he had been the one interrogating Amanda. The fact this man was asking him for the helium's location meant that Amanda had not yielded the information.

"You know, I don't like to hurt people," he said frowning. "I really don't. It's just a job, and I'm good at it. The Romulans on the other hand... whoa, I gotta tell you, you wouldn't believe the stuff they have. See, I thought I wrote the book on suffering, but those people... they're artists. I found things on this ship that I wouldn't use on my worst enemy."

Sarek wondered when the man was going to arrive at his point or if he had already made it when he asked for the location of the helium.

"But you see, there's a pool going around. My guys say there's no point in torturing Vulcans. I mean, we tried it. The last ambassador I killed from your planet... that guy had a will made of neutronium. Not gonna lie, it was kinda inspiring. Anyway, I digress. So we've got this bet, and I'm looking at you and I'm thinking, why did we even bring you along? You just can't get anything out of a Vulcan, like I've been saying."

Sarek could hear a struggling from somewhere very far away down at the end of the narrow hallway which caused the man to turn and look. His smile was suggestive of something worrisome, and he quickly turned back to Sarek.

"But then I look at your little sweetheart and I think, wow, she's a peach. Tougher than you'd think too: I like that in a woman."

_Fear again._ Not Amanda's this time, but his own. Sarek willed his rational mind to ignore the emotions as he stared at the man, stood, and cautiously approached the force field.

A human man even larger than Sarek walked into view, dragging Amanda with him. The man was of such a substantial bulk that his broad shoulders very nearly blocked the walkway. Her arms were behind her back and she was slightly bent forward at the waist in a completely submissive position. She appeared to be struggling against her captor, but her posture and significantly smaller size rendered her completely helpless.

Her face was oriented toward the floor and she would have had to crane her neck at an extremely awkward angle to be able to look up at him. He could see small streams of blood trickling from her nostrils around the corners of her mouth and down her chin. Anger began to dwarf his fear.

"When I first saw her I thought it would be easy to get her to talk," the man continued. "I mean, look at her. She looks like such a sweet person that I thought maybe I could even just ask nicely. Turns out I was wrong."

The man holding Amanda's arms behind her back looked completely indifferent to his present occupation. _Bored_, even. Sarek noted Amanda's legs were shaking and could not decide if it was from fear or muscular strain.

"So I give her a little incentive to talk, and still, she says nothing. Andros here was getting impatient and just wanted to give up and really have a go at her, but then I thought, it seems like you two are pretty close. Then it really hit me. I bet I know how I can make a Vulcan talk."

Sarek watched Amanda stiffen and try to look around. The man holding her, who Sarek concluded was Andros, pulled down hard on her arms, forcing her back into an upright position. She was breathing heavily and her eyes grew wide when she saw him, but there was something
fixed in them that he could not identify. She looked frightened yet determined. Her eyebrows furrowed and she squinted at him. *Still the anger rose.*

"So Ambassador, first let's start with the helium-3. Where is it?" he asked.

Amanda stared hard at him and shook her head almost imperceptibly. Sarek knew they had already lost. Amanda had not told them and neither should he. For this defiance, they would both be tortured and then they would die. If they gave in they might be spared the torture, but they would still die.

It only mattered whether Bentham could still stumble upon the helium in some way before Federation authorities caught up to him. The Tellarite star charts were still at the embassy and therefore would have not been seized when he and Amanda were kidnapped. Given that most of the Federation was now aware of Bentham's activities, either Bentham believed he could still prevail against dwindling odds or their captors had not been apprised of Molineaux's confession. *Or didn't care.*

If the helium were on Zetar and the weapon was stored on Iota Eridani near the Klingon border, it would take *days* for them to just travel between the two planets, and that was *without* mining and extracting it the helium. Of course Bentham could have some other contingency plan Sarek could not anticipate, which was a serious possibility if his impressions of the admiral were correct.

So the logic in him demanded silence regardless of the complex probabilities due to a much simpler mathematics: what were his and Amanda's lives compared to billions? Was that not a fundamental tenet of Vulcan philosophy? The needs of the many must outweigh the needs of the few, and their case could be no exception. So though Sarek knew what must come next, he was unprepared for what actually transpired.

"So that's it then, Ambassador? *Nothing to say?* Ok, Andros, got my clippers?"

The man holding Amanda shifted his grip to restrain her with one arm and pulled a pair of what looked like gardening shears from a utility belt around his waist.

"I figured I could start small so I don't leave her *too* disfigured if you change your mind and start talking. What do you think? Pinkie fingers first?" he asked, looking from Amanda to Sarek.

The man holding Amanda ripped one of her arms from behind her back and spread out her hand. The fury in Sarek threatened to boil over, and the look on Amanda's face was unrecognizable. Her eyes were wide and wild, a perfect concoction of terror, determination, and rage. She didn't cry or scream or beg. Instead, she fruitlessly fought again the giant holding her down as the smaller man moved the shears toward her hand. Then the last shreds of Sarek's logic fell away.

He threw himself against the force field with the full weight of his wrath. More pain than he had ever experienced flowed into him and it seemed as though his heart would burst and his nervous system would rupture. It was illogical and excruciating, but it was effective.

It bought her four seconds, four precious seconds for the man with the shears to jump in surprise and the man holding her to forget himself and loosen his grip. She twisted and bit into his forearm like a vicious animal, and he lost his grip entirely as he shifted his bulk to strike her with the other arm. He missed because she was already in motion, diving at the waist of the smaller man and reaching for the activation remote swinging from his belt.

*She had deactivated the force field.*

Sarek still reeled from the agony and his heart was pounding erratically as he stumbled forward for
the larger man. The big man had turned his body to step backward into a wider and sturdier stance, and Sarek was lucky enough to catch him with his foot in midair. He shoved his right elbow up into the man's chin and knocked him completely off balance. He was big, but he still had delicate human bones. Sarek felt the man's jaw crunch as he reached around with his left arm to grab the man by his hair and shove him headlong into the reinforced wall.

He reeled around to see Amanda in a violent struggle with the other man. They were on their knees grappling awkwardly in the small space. She was smaller but had the necessary leverage to force a deadlock because the man's right leg was twisted awkwardly beneath him. He had drawn the phaser from his pistol belt and was attempting to aim it at her, but both of her hands clutched his wrist tightly to prevent him from doing so.

In two swift steps Sarek descended on him, striking him in the throat and causing the phaser to skitter down the long hallway. Amanda fell back onto Sarek's legs, but he stepped around her and put his fist into the man's face with alarming force and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. Then he kept going and only stopped when he felt he was on the verge of losing consciousness.

"Sarek?" Amanda croaked, her voice raspy and surprisingly calm.

He released the man's collar and his lifeless body slumped to the ground. He quickly came back to his senses and felt horrified as he looked down at his fist and saw it awash in both of their blood.

"Sarek?" she asked again with more confidence.

Sarek's head was swimming and his heart flopped around fitfully in his chest. He took a deep breath and clutched his side and hobbled over to her. She was trying to stand by pushing her hands off the floor from an awkward crouching position. She reached out her hand for his arm for support but they were both unsteady on their feet. He took another step to find himself half hugging her, half holding her upright.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said shakily. "What just happened? Where are we? How-"

"I do not know enough of our present circumstances to adequately deduce answers to your questions," he interrupted. "But it is logical to conclude we are not yet out of danger."

The communicator on the smaller man's belt chirped. Sarek made sure Amanda could stand on her own and turned to pick it up but stopped short. About five meters away, a very gaunt and shaggy Vulcan man was picking up the phaser that he had knocked from the smaller man's grip. As he pointed it at Sarek's chest, he spoke, and Sarek was surprised to find he was unable to understand him.

"We mean you no harm," he started to explain in Vuhlkansu, raising his hands in innocence. "We were prisoners here; I presume you also were."

A look of confusion crossed the man's face and he spoke the same unintelligible words again. The harsh, choppy sound of his language sounded almost familiar, and then Amanda said what he was beginning to suspect.

"He's speaking Romulan."

The man barked the same phrase for a third time, gesturing with the phaser.

"He wants to know who we are and where we are," Amanda said quietly. "What do I tell him?"
The Romulan was clearly uncomfortable with them speaking in a language he didn't understand. He began yelling menacingly and squared his shoulders to take aim with the phaser.

Chapter End Notes

No surprise to old-school Trek fans, but for those coming to this story from the 2009 Reboot, the end of this chapter might be a bit odd because it seems as if Sarek and the Romulan are confused by their common ancestry. In the Original Series and Enterprise, the relationship between the Federation and Romulans was pretty canonically vague.

In the TOS episode Balance of Terror, Commander Spock explains that following the Earth-Romulan War that ended in 2160, the Romulan Neutral Zone was established. That conflict was fought with more primitive technologies and supposedly no ship-to-ship visual communication occurred, and therefore the two races never actually saw each other until 2266. The timeline of this story occurs in 2226, therefore it will be another 40 years before Kirk and the gang make this a widely known fact.

It is my theory however that at least some individuals on both Romulus and Vulcan had to be aware of their common link, as evidenced by the relationship between V'Las, the Head of the Vulcan High Command in the mid-22nd century, and Talok, an undercover Romulan spy in Enterprise.

Anyway, I just wanted to give a huge shout out to Nyotarules on ff.net for pointing this out in some earlier reviews on this story. When I drafted the outline, this Romulan/Vulcan relationship wasn't really at the forefront of the plot, but those reviews really helped me alter the course of my story to bring it to this point and will continue to remain important throughout the rest of the story. So thank you so much to Nyotarules. :)

Escape

For Amanda, time had essentially stopped. Reality felt heavy and slow; there was a distinct ringing in her ears that dampened the sound around her. The Romulan man was yelling at both of them and Sarek almost shouting. Amanda stared at him dumbly.

"Amanda!" Sarek growled.

"Get in there," barked the Romulan, gesturing to the cell with the phaser.

She found her voice. "He wants us to get in the cell."

"That," Sarek said firmly, "is not an option. If we back into that cell we may never come out-"

"Silence," yelled the Romulan.

Amanda was a linguist, not a translator, and switching back and forth between languages was difficult enough, especially when she had virtually no practice in actually speaking Romulan.

"Tell him we are not with the others," Sarek added, shaking his head and pointing to the bodies on the floor.

"Um… we… we are… not with them," Amanda stammered slowly in Romulan, hoping she was using her direct objects correctly and motioning to the men on the floor like Sarek was doing.

"Lies," hissed the Romulan.

"He doesn't believe us," Amanda muttered.

"Tell him our names and ask him for his," Sarek insisted. "Do not tell him I am an ambassador."

"I am Amanda," she said, holding her right hand up to her chest and using her left hand to gesture to Sarek, "and he is Sarek. How are you called?"

"Get in the cell!" the Romulan screamed.

"I don't think he's interested in making new friends," Amanda whined.

"If he wanted us dead he would have killed us already," Sarek replied. "Ask him if there are other Romulans on board or if he can pilot this vessel by himself."

"Vessel?" Amanda asked in surprise.

"Yes, I believe we are on board a Romulan ship that Bentham commandeered."

The Romulan took a hostile step forward with the phaser still raised to Sarek's chest, clearly uncomfortable with the pair of them conferring between themselves.

"Um… are there… more? More like you? More Romulans? Are you-"

"No," snapped the Romulan. "You killed them…"

He continued to talk very quickly through gritted teeth and used several words Amanda didn't know, but she guessed he was explaining how their captors had tortured and starved his crewmates to death. It was believable enough: his hair was longish and matted and he had a beard.
of moderate length and smelled terrible.

"Look at them," Amanda said more boldly, taking a step forward to point at the body of the smaller man. "He… that man… hurt me. He hurt you also. Yes? Look at him now. Would we… do this to… allies?"

The Romulan studied her and she took another step forward as a sign of good faith. She noticed Sarek stiffen as she squeezed next to him in the narrow walkway of the prison.

"Tell me, how are you called?" she pleaded with him again. "We do not want to be your enemy."

"I am called Riov Llhran," he declared, phaser still defensively raised.

"Jolan'tru, Llhran," she said, trying to smile.

Sarek glanced at her and she explained, "His name is Llhran. I think he is, or was, the captain of this ship."

"Why does he not speak Romulan?" asked Llhran pointing with his free hand at Sarek. "And you are human. Why do you speak my language and he does not?"

It was the same question that plagued Amanda since they'd greeted each other several minutes ago.

"He wants to know why you look like him and don't speak his language. To be honest, I'm kind of curious too."

Sarek slowly dropped his hands, eyeing Llhran carefully for further signs of aggression and Amanda did the same.

"I do not know," Sarek confessed. "Tell him I am Vulcan. It is possible we share a common ancestor."

"We do not know. Sarek is… Vulcan," she explained, substituting the English word for Vulcan as she wasn't aware of one in Romulan. "He is not Romulan. He… he thinks that you share a family?"

Llhran looked at her in confusion and she tried to find a better word for ancestor. "I think you… share a… culture? From a long time before now."

The communicator on the dead man's belt chirped again but Llhran ignored it and moved closer to Sarek, carefully examining his features. Sarek did likewise. Amanda watched the two of them and suddenly noticed how pale Sarek was and observed that he seemed to be having difficulty breathing. Llhran lowered the phaser to a forty-five degree angle and the communicator chimed again.

"Tell him we can discuss our lineage later, but for now we need to devise a strategy to seize control of the ship. Explain that we need to work together," Sarek said.

"Now we need to… take… take back the ship," Amanda explained. "We need to think of a way we can do this. We will help you. You will help us?"

The Romulan lowered the phaser further but continued to hold it at the ready.

"Explain that he needs our help and-"
Amanda cut Sarek off and added, "This is your ship. You know this ship. We know the humans. We will... be better together. We will win together."

Llhran lowered his weapon and nodded, but said, "We are not friends. We are only temporary allies."

Sarek looked at Amanda quizzically, leaving her to explain, "Let's just say I don't think he's going to invite us to a family dinner any time soon but he has agreed to work as 'temporary allies.'"

The communicator chirped a fourth time and Sarek bent down to retrieve it. Llhran stiffened and Amanda held up her hands pleadingly and said, "We do not want the other humans to be... nervous."


Sarek flipped it open and instantly a string of profanities burst through the speaker in anger for making the caller wait.

"So did you get anything yet?" the voice finally demanded.

"No," Sarek said briskly.

"Well hurry up. We're only six hours out. If we could get it in the next hour we might still make it. So quit screwing around, got it?"

Sarek paused briefly before cautiously saying, "Ok."

"Seriously, I don't care what you have to do to her."

"Yes. I'm trying," Sarek replied in what she assumed was the closest approximation to casual human speech he could manage and clicked the communicator closed.

He turned back to Llhran and said, "If you are this ship's captain, what do you propose is the best way to regain control of it?"

Amanda translated as best as she could and Llhran bumped past them, sidestepped the body of the larger man, and walked toward the end of the hallway. He motioned for them to follow and Amanda shrugged and looked back at Sarek. He looked terrible.

"Are you ok?" she whispered.

"I shall be, when this is over. For now, we must focus on our task."

Llhran disappeared into a side room some distance up ahead and they followed. She detected a slowness and deliberate nature to Sarek's movement that was deeply worrying. Had they tortured him too?

As she formed the thought, they passed the cell where Andros and the other man had tied her to the strange reclining chair and used the small box-like instrument on her. It had looked so unassuming; until of course they turned it on and she would have sworn her ribcage was turning inside out. It had been pain like nothing she'd ever endured, and seeing where it all had happened just minutes ago filled her with intense anxiety.

Then, just like it had earlier, she felt a serene sort of peace that almost bordered on euphoria. Several times she had been so close to telling them about Zetar: she would have said or done anything to make the pain stop if not for that comforting sensation of calm that had somehow
managed to outcompete her agony.

She looked over at Sarek and saw he was watching her tentatively. She wanted to cry. She wanted to talk to him, hug him, hold him, kiss him… *But he was right. They weren't out of the woods yet.*

She and Sarek entered a small room at the end of the hallway next to the entrance to the brig. Llhran stood before several black-screened computer terminals displaying what looked like blueprints to the ship and other data files. While she found reading Romulan far easier than speaking it, most of what she was looking at was technical jargon. Llhran pulled up another image of what looked like a top view of a ship, scanned through it, and froze the image.

"*Here,*" he barked, looking at Sarek but speaking to Amanda.

"*What is that?*" she asked.

He sighed and began to explain but she couldn't make sense of most of it.

"*You talk… fast. Please. Slow,*" she said in frustration.

"*This is where we have weapons,*" he replied in annoyance, speaking slowly with a tone she took for scathing sarcasm.

"I think what he's pointing to is an armory," she told Sarek.

"What is the best way to get there?" he asked.

She translated his question and a ten minute struggle ensued that stretched the limits of her language abilities and made copious use of hand signals, vigorous pointing at diagrams of the ship, and what she guessed were probably Romulan expletives. She also learned that Llhran believed there were only five other humans aboard and guessed they would be operating the ship from the central engineering room with such a small crew.

To her frustration, Sarek continued to badger her to ask Llhran about all kinds of technical things. She had no idea what a "lateral plasma conduit" or an "artificial quantum singularity" were in Federation Standard English, let alone *Romulan.*

"Simply ask if-"

"*Look,*" she snapped at Sarek. "I'm trying my best."

"You are frustrated, but you are performing commendably. I am trying to explain that Llhran's plan has a high probability of failure. We can not reasonably expect to seize control of this vessel by force in our present collective physical condition."

Amanda looked at both Sarek and Llhran. The former looked as though he were on the verge of a heart failure and the latter appeared on the verge of fatal starvation. It was also taking her considerable effort just to stand, so she had to agree.

"So what do you want to do?" she asked him.

"Ask him if there is a way to vent the ship from a secure location."

"*Vent it?*"

"Depressurize certain parts so that we can harm them without harming ourselves. It is the most
practical-" he shuddered and gripped his ribcage and she put her hand on his arm in worry.

"Just ask him," Sarek insisted.

She turned to Llhran and asked, "Is there a method... we want to open this ship... to the space outside. But not hurt us. Only them."

Llhran gave her a surprised look but paused to think.

"That is a good plan," he said. "We can do it from the battle bridge. I am not certain, but I do not think anyone would be there."

"Battle bridge?" she asked, wondering if she was translating his words correctly.

"The area where leaders conduct battle. Fight wars?" Llhran explained in exasperation.

Another strained conversation unfolded, and after ten more tense minutes they had formed a rough plan. Llhran insisted the best way was to exit the brig and immediately enter a series of engineering conduits and crawl to a remote area near the center of the ship. When they had all agreed, Llhran cautiously unlocked the entrance to the brig and they filed out into a dark hallway.

Two meters ahead to the left, Llhran ducked down and began pulling at a piece of paneling with his skeletal fingers. Amanda bent down and with her nails was able to open it just wide enough for him to get his fingers in and provide enough leverage to pull it from the wall with a loud "thunk" to expose a crawlspace just less than a meter wide.

"We must hurry," Llhran mused. "You go."

Amanda balked. Not only did she not want a Romulan she barely trusted behind her with a phaser, she was still wearing the same white and pink dress cut above her knees that she had worn to the beach with Sarek and was wasn't eager to give him a show.

"You go," she insisted. "You know where to go. Keep weapon. I go behind you. I am small. I am not able to harm you easy."

She cringed at the rudimentary nature of her language, but it seemed to get the point across. They were severely exposed standing in the open passageway and they risked discovery with each passing second. Llhran scowled and glared at Sarek before relenting.

Amanda motioned for Sarek to go but he refused and simply whispered, "You should have gone first. But it is too late for that now. I think it would be better if I went last, should anyone access the conduit from this end."

"But..." she stammered.

"I appreciate your desire for modesty and I promise not to look," he added, glancing down at her skirt. "You can recover from mortification. You cannot recover from being dead, which is what will inevitably happen if we are discovered here."

She sighed and stooped down and went in on her hands and knees. Warm air brushed her face and she gasped. It was like crawling into an oven and the stench wafting off of Llhran's dirty body made it almost unbearable. Sarek came in behind her and pulled the door to the conduit back into place. Llhran had moved ahead ten meters to a juncture and was curled into an awkward posture in the small space.

She began to crawl, the metal grating digging into her knees. When she reached him, he looked at
her contemptuously and gestured with his free hand to the right branch of the duct and said, "We go this way."

They continued to inch along about a meter behind their Romulan escort. She was panting heavily after crawling nearly thirty meters and there were still ten more to go until they would hit what appeared to be a dead end.

It was blazing hot in the conduit and she felt weak, sweaty, and shaky. She could hear Sarek behind her softly grunting from either pain or exertion. It frightened her to see him in such a weakened state.

Llhran stopped when he reached a panel on the other end and signaled for them to stop and be quiet. She sat down and leaned against the rounded wall, feeling so exhausted that she wondered how much longer she could remain conscious. She hadn't slept in nearly two days and the only thing she'd had to eat in almost three was a bowl of borscht hours before. *And it was so hot.* Her eyelids were starting to droop when she felt Sarek's hand gently touch her face.

"*Miss Grayson, do not say anything. Just listen.*"

She breathed deeply and looked listlessly in his direction, wondering if she was hallucinating or dreaming. His skin was ashen and his eyes were glassy.

"*Our position is precarious. Llhran no longer has any use for us. He will almost certainly try to kill us once we have secured the ship.*"

"*Huh?*

"*Think, Miss Grayson. What is the end state of this situation? He told you that we were only temporary allies. Once we have achieved our common goal, we will not be able to peacefully part ways.*"

"*What do you mean?*" It was slowly dawning on her that she was talking to Sarek but they weren't actually speaking.

"*The point, Miss Grayson is that we should consider the inevitability that we shall have to kill him, otherwise he will kill us.*"

"*But there's already been so much killing,*" she thought sadly. "*He hasn't done anything to hurt us.*"

"*No, he has not. Not yet. And while I admire your ethics and in nearly all circumstances would agree, do you imagine he will just let us go and return home to Romulus like this never happened? Even if he wanted to, I do not see how he could.***"

She heard a loud clanging sound from Llhran's direction and slightly rolled her head on the wall to see him cautiously exiting the conduit.

"*We have to find another way,*" she begged. "*You're a diplomat. Figure it out.*"

Sake released his hand from her face and she willed herself back onto all fours and managed to slink the final two meters out of the engineering duct and found herself in a dark room with large view screens and a handful of computer terminals.

It was much cooler in this room than it had been in the conduit but it was still far from comfortable. She noticed Llhran was swaying slightly and gripped a console to steady himself. She saw the phaser still clutched in his hand and thought about Sarek's words with a shocking
indifference. She felt half dead already. Sarek soon emerged from behind her and was subtly shivering and slightly hunched forward.

Llhran was speaking and she tried to focus but her mind felt foggy. He touched his thumb to some sort of biometric scanner and the terminal sprang to life and illuminated his face in an eerie way. She watched his fingers move around the screen and then all the main screens came online and depicted what looked to be various schematics around the ship.

"Ask him if this area is secured," Sarek said. There was a distinctive labored quality to her breathing that worried her.

"Is this place safe?" Amanda asked Llhran.

"Yes," he replied, moving to an adjacent computer terminal to begin working. "This part of the ship does not appear on diagrams as a separate bridge. It appears as an empty storage area. They would not look here."

"But will they not see you… working… on the computer? And know we are here?" she asked.

"This part of the ship runs on its own computers. It is not part of the rest of the ship. But it can command parts of the ship. Tell your friend that his plan will not work so easy."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I read nine humans on this ship. You are one. There are three here," he said, pointing to an area on the left side of the ship. "That is an eating space. But there are five more in the main engineering space."

"So what?" she asked. "That is where you said they would go. Yes?"

"They are in the central room. Where the… where the main power source is."

She could tell he wanted to explain the problem in more technical detail and wanted to find words she could understand before he said, "We can not vent that part of the ship. Too dangerous. It is not possible."

"Can we… make them go somewhere else?" she asked.

Llhran looked back at the computer terminal thoughtfully and began shifting through more screens. It horrified her that she was discussing the finer details of killing other people with a Romulan starship captain. She thought again about Sarek's earlier remark about killing Llhran and how much the idea had sickened her. But was that really so different than what they were about to do?

She wanted to say that Llhran was different because he didn't ask to be put in this situation, but then again, neither had she. The men Sarek had killed earlier, that was in self-defense and they had tortured her. But these other people, they hadn't hurt her, had they? True, they stood by knowing full well what was happening in the ship's brig and the one man had said he didn't care what they did to her. But did that mean they deserved to die?

She began to feel overwhelmed at the idea that her conscience would never be the same after this, if she even got out of this alive at all. These kinds of ethics were easy to debate in philosophy class but another thing entirely to wield. She wondered if decompression was painful, and whether the amount of pain made a difference, and what other variables constituted a "just" or "good" death. This wasn't fair. She felt tears pricking the corners of her eyes and she gasped.
"What is he saying, Miss Grayson?" Sarek mumbled.

Llhran was pointing at a third screen and rolling his eyes at her inattention. He was using more technical words, but it sounded as though he were suggesting contaminating the engine room and forcing them into another part of the ship. She gazed down at the phaser in his hand, and then looked back to Sarek. *He looked halfway in the grave.*

Llhran clucked his tongue at her and she turned to face him. Their eyes locked and his eyebrows rose in obvious impatience.

"Miss Grayson?" Sarek asked again.

She looked from Llhran back to Sarek and smiled sadly. There had to be a way out of this. Suddenly the tiniest flicker of an idea crossed her mind. *Why not? They had nothing to lose.*

"Riov Llhran, what will you do when this is done?" she asked.

He shook his head and sneered at her question. "Explain your meaning."

"When we kill them... you will kill us. Yes?"

He stared at her and said nothing for a long time before eventually admitting, "It would be my duty."

"Then what? Will you go home to Romulus?"

His expression softened and he remained silent.

"But... you are not able, are you?" she continued with earnest sadness. "Not... like you are. Not now. Not after these humans took your ship. Killed your people. What will you say to your... leaders?"

"Romulus is my home," he insisted.

"Yes," she agreed with a nod and a wan smile. "And Earth is my home. If you go home... Romulus, you will be punished and they will make a war, yes? With Earth and the other planets in... in...um..."

She couldn't think of a word for a "federation" in Romulan and wondered if they even had one. The Romulan Star Empire wasn't famous for alliances.

"It would be their imperial duty," Llhran said, cutting her off.

"Miss Grayson?" Sarek asked, moving up behind her to her left.

"Is there a way for you to go home without... shame?" she asked, wondering if that was the best way she could put it.

"What is the purpose of these questions?" Llhran snapped.

"You want to live," she explained. "You could... destroy the ship. Yes? From here? Kill the other people. And us. And yourself. And you would have no shame. Why not... do that?"

Llhran remained motionless, his face angry and pensive. Amanda continued.

"But what if... you said your ship was destroyed and Romulus found you in a... in a..." she faltered on the word for escape pod, but he seemed to be understanding her suggestion.
"You would ask me to abandon my own ship?"

"Yes," she said with a wild hope, before adding, "We will too. Abandon it. Apart. Me and Sarek would go home to Earth. You would go home to Romulus."

"And let those people have my ship? Or your Lloann'na?" So that was the word for Federation.

"No," she said. "No one gets it. We will destroy it."

"Miss Grayson," insisted Sarek. "What is the plan?"

He was standing next to her now and she turned her head and looked at him lovingly, grinned, and declared, "To live. If Llhran agrees."

"I do not understand your-"

"Yes," Llhran answered, interrupting Sarek. He frowned, paced a few steps, and set the phaser down on a nearby computer console.

"What are you discussing with him?" Sarek asked.

"You said killing each other would be 'inevitable.' It turns out you might have been wrong," she explained.

"I do not take your meaning."

Llhran interrupted him again. He was talking fast and was back to using jargon. In addition to the ship's schematics, he was frantically flipping through star charts on a separate console.

"We're getting out of here," she told Sarek. "All three of us. Well, not together but-"

"We will not have much time to reach the escape pods," Llhran barked, giving her an annoyed look.

"Riov Llhran, please stop being loud," she said in exasperation. "And talk slow. I have... My head. It hurts."

He sneered at her briefly and then burst into a fit of laughter that she found contagious. Her ribs hurt so badly that laughing felt like agony and she doubled over as she tried to contain herself. Sarek stared at both of them as if they had gone insane.

"Would you care to enlighten me about the source of your amusement?"

"It's not really that funny," she dismissed, grimacing.

They spent the another twenty minutes ironing out their course of action. Between Llhran's knowledge of the ship, Sarek's knowledge of physics, her creative translation skills, and Sarek and Llhran's careful analysis of their current position, they devised a plan to breach the containment of the Tafv's singularity warp drive and flee in escape pods launched in opposite directions.

At Sarek's suggestion, Llhran planned to maroon himself on a habitable planetoid just inside Romulan space for a time as a means of explaining his diminished physical condition, and Sarek determined the best coordinates for Amanda and himself to reach a nearby Vulcan research station.

As Llhran keyed up all the necessary controls he explained the features inside the escape pods.
Sarek calculated they would only have forty-seven seconds to reach the pods from the internal battle bridge before the warp drive would begin a chain reaction and implode in on itself and crush the ship.

Sarek and Amanda would take the last pod from the aft starboard side, which would require them to cover a distance of approximately eighty meters. Under normal circumstances, either of them could probably do that easily, but Sarek's face was a curious shade of gray and he seemed to be having difficulty breathing as it was.

"I shall endure, Miss Grayson," he said unprompted when he noticed her looking at him.

Llhran announced that he was finished coding the pod's escape trajectories and that everything was ready. As soon as he pushed a button on the touch screen, all but two of the ship's pods would be jettisoned and the containment field of the warp drive would breach. Amanda breathed deeply and tried to mentally prepare herself to sprint. She didn't feel as bad as Sarek looked, but she certainly didn't feel ready for a footrace against what Sarek had described as "the rapid expansion and contraction of an artificial black hole."

She looked at Llhran and wondered why she was choosing to trust him. What if he jettisoned their pod too? What if…

It didn't matter. She didn't see that they had a choice but to trust him.

"You said we were not friends," she said, breaking the silence awkwardly and slightly startling him. "But I hope that does not mean we have to be enemies."

He nodded thoughtfully and said, "No, it does not. Travel safely, A'man-da."

She and Sarek moved toward the main entry door and waited for Llhran's signal to go. She felt a wild impulse to tell Sarek she loved him, to kiss him, and say all the things she'd been feeling for the past few weeks. She noticed him watching her with a sort of quiet patience and maybe something she would loosely describe as subtle wonder. She started to reach for his hand when Llhran cried, "GO!"

Time froze. The heavy black door glided open and they sprang forward into the dark hallway. Red lights were flashing along the floor and ceiling and she was dimly aware of a deafening siren over the blood rushing through her ears.


Then there they were. She and Sarek almost fell into the four-person escape pod in their rush and her hip screamed from where she'd slammed it into some kind of lever. She twisted and tried to seal the hatch that would automatically eject them from the ship's belly. It was stuck.

"Help me!" she screamed, looking back in Sarek's direction desperately as the ship's intercom system informed them of their impending fate in eleven, ten, nine, eight…

An odd, primal noise echoed from somewhere deep within her and escaped her lips, and she threw the force of her entire body onto the hatch release. She did it again and was successful.

The instant acceleration from the pod's ejection flung her across the whole of the small interior and she slammed into the opposite wall. Stars flashed in her vision and pain shot through her head, arm, and ribs. She reflexively curled into the fetal position and tried to catch her breath. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she turned onto her back and cradled her elbow, and through the portal at the top of the pod she could see nothing but the vast expanse of the universe.
She was numb from pain, relief, awe, and joy. She started to laugh hysterically and waited for Sarek to make some remark about her irrational display of emotion. She turned her head and saw he was face down and unconscious. Then the panic returned.

"Sarek?" she yelled.

No response. She tried to sit herself up and screamed. For the first time she noticed bones protruding from her right forearm and her left hand was slathered in blood. She was on the verge of fainting from the sight of it but managed to tenderly support herself on her left arm and shuffle over to him.

She tried to roll him onto his back and discovered he was impossibly heavy. It took most of the strength she had with one arm. As her adrenaline waned she began to notice just how heavy her head felt and how much all-encompassing pain she was in.

"Sarek?" she pleaded, shaking his shoulder.

She tried to check for a pulse but couldn't find one. Maybe it was just his physiology? His skin was freezing cold. Surely that couldn't be normal? She could detect a shallow rise and fall of his chest and felt exhilarating hope. He was breathing, at least.

She managed to stand and almost fell over. She steadied herself against one of the walls and looked around for anything that looked like a medical kit and discovered one overhead. She couldn't pull it down with one arm so she hit the release button with her left fist and allowed it to fall to the floor.

It was full of all kinds of scanners and devices that she couldn't even name, let alone use. Even if she could, what chance did an untrained human have of treating a Vulcan with Romulan medical supplies when she couldn't even identify what was wrong with him?

She started to cry in angry frustration. She noticed what looked like a fire blanket folded neatly under the seat directly behind him and she pulled it out and covered him as best she could and found even that simple task to be exhausting. She was so tired and light-headed and every part of her body hurt.

She curled up next to him under the blanket on her left side and rested her head on his upper chest. Tears dripped from the tip of her nose and her consciousness began to fade in and out.

"You don't get to die," she whispered. "I love you. Please, don't leave me."

She soon slipped into unconsciousness and they drifted away together into the black vastness of space.
"Irreparable heart damage," the healer said. "An almost certain consequence of sustained contact with a significant energy source."

He was neither a trained biologist nor a physician, but as a Vulcan, his scientific knowledge was certainly extensive enough to follow the underlying principle. The three-chambered Vulcan heart was a complex organ, and the amount of energy he had absorbed through the force field had damaged his sinoatrial nodes and led to increasingly discordant heart rhythms until he was on the verge of an infarction.

Probability almost demanded both he and Amanda should be dead. It would have taken them more than six days to reach their intended destination of the Vulcan research station in orbit of Barradas III. They were on the cusp of death when a Vulcan science vessel called the Varith had rescued them less than five hours after their escape from the Tafv.

The ship lacked the resources to treat their severe injuries, but fortunately their mission had been to scout for mammalian life forms in a nearby star system and thus the Varith had several stasis chambers on board. Apparently he and Amanda made the journey back to Vulcan in stasis, packed neatly among a large variety of rodent-like species.

Back on Vulcan, his condition was easily treated through a series of electrostatic impulses to resynchronize his cardiac rhythms, though the hours he had gone without treatment had taken a permanent toll. The healer explained it would significantly shorten his lifespan and leave him more vulnerable to a number of cardiopulmonary infections. He would also never possess the same level of physical fitness, and would likely encounter lifelong episodes of "wheezing, light-headedness, fatigue, and shortness of breath."

He did not linger long over his prognosis and instead asked about Amanda. The healer would not tell him much due to privacy protocols, but informed him that though she was expected to survive, she had not yet regained consciousness. He asked to see her, but was informed Councilwoman T'Lona and a staff were en route to discuss the events that had unfolded both aboard the Tafv and throughout the Federation following the exposure of Bentham's plot.

He could not understand how Amanda had been so seriously injured. His memory of the final moments of the Tafv was not well constructed. It existed in fragments: they were running through the corridor and red emergency beacons were flashing. He recalled the impression of falling and Amanda screaming at him, and then the sensation of the floor falling out from beneath him. Something else…

She had told him she loved him. No, he could not be certain she had said such a thing. Even if she had, humans had a curious habit of saying things they did not mean under duress.

He rose from the bed to pull on the heavy hospital robe and was surprised to find such a simple task exhausting. He walked slowly to the small table and chair by the window and retracted the shade to see dusk setting over Shi'Kahr.

After several minutes, Councilwoman T'Lona entered alone. She explained that an investigator, adjutant, and stenographer waited in the hallway to take an official statement and that Federation authorities had been seeking to question him since he arrived, but she had been authorized to debrief him first.

She explained that following Molineaux's confession, Admiral Bentham had been traced to a
small cabin on the North American continent and apprehended. He had refused to speak, but Terran and Federation authorities had retrieved vast amounts of information from private computers and encrypted transmission logs.

The weapon had not been found in orbit of Iota Eridani as Molineaux had suggested but the Andorian defense fleet had discovered it by chance, partially cloaked and moving at low warp through the Taugan sector, only twelve light years from where he and Amanda had been found. The crew had refused to surrender, and when Andorian authorities tried to board and seize it by force, the crew destroyed the vessel, killing themselves and four Andorian officers.

"What was Bentham's ultimate goal? He could not reasonably have expected to obtain the helium and deliver it to the weapon before the weapon was discovered," Sarek asked.

"We do not know," she admitted. "But that information may be forthcoming as the joint investigation proceeds. Which brings me to my other purpose for this visit. The High Council hoped you could explain why the authorities found a human corpse in your Terran quarters and how you came to be found in a Romulan escape pod in the Taugan sector with Amanda Grayson."

He started at the beginning, explaining that Amanda was staying at his private residence and following the public confession of Congressman Molineaux, he had gone to fetch her and bring her to the Vulcan consulate for her safety, but arrived to find her being held hostage. A violent struggle ensued, he was rendered unconscious, and when he awoke he was on board the _Tafv_.

"So Molineaux's claims were true," T'Lona murmured. "Bentham captured a Romulan vessel. Where is the _Tafv_ now?"

"Destroyed," he replied.

"Were there any other survivors? Numerous scans of the sector were conducted and no debris or other escape pods were found."

"The ship itself was engulfed by an expanded artificial singularity created by overloading the ship's warp drive. There would be no debris. As for survivors, I cannot be certain, but I believe the original captain of the _Tafv_, a man called Llhran, also escaped."

"Did you see him?"

Sarek looked at her curiously. "Yes, he helped us escape."

"Explain," she demanded.

"Am I correct in inferring that you are aware that Romulans and Vulcans share a common ancestry?"

T'Lona paused. "As I am sure you easily deduce, that information is not something the High Council would prefer to make public knowledge. Vulcan's relationship with Earth has taken decades to repair after more than a century of mistrust. As ambassador to Earth, I am sure you can appreciate that. Being so closely tied to the Romulans would make many within the Federation needlessly suspicious of us once again."

"It is a secret that cannot be preserved forever," he argued.

"No, but that information would be dangerous to reveal at this particular juncture," she rebutted. "Despite Congressman Molineaux's wide reaching confession, the Romulan involvement has been contained. Media reports throughout the Federation have retracted their initial claims of a Romulan
attack, and the loss of the *Comstock* was officially attributed to an accident earlier this morning.”

"So you are going to ask me not to include that in my official report," Sarek said, cutting to the point.

"The High Council would be grateful," T'Lona agreed.

"Your assessment of the situation is logical and I shall comply, though I cannot speak for what Amanda Grayson will say."

"It is the High Council's hope that you could persuade her to see the potential consequences of revealing such information at this point in time and explain that the Vulcan High Council would immensely grateful to her as well."

"Surely other people will speak with her before I can," said Sarek. "Why do you believe I can convince her?"

"Perhaps I mistakenly assumed you were friends," T'Lona answered. "But you are correct: the Terran consulate has made repeated requests to transfer her back to Earth for treatment in a facility more specialized in treating human patients."

"If the loss of the *Comstock* is being called an accident, then has Congressman Molineaux's confession been made public?" Sarek asked.

"It is difficult to comprehend, but every Federation member who received the confession has seen the logic in remaining silent on the matter. Earth's attempt to secede from the Federation caused a panic. The Terrans have since cancelled their emergency session and are trying to make amends."

"How do the Terrans plan to account for Admiral Bentham and the Earth Autonomy Movement? They will have to be formally charged for their crimes and in doing so, their actions will be made public."

"Admiral Bentham is a member of Starfleet, and the Federation has agreed to defer the treason investigation to them," T'Lona said.

"And given Starfleet also serves in a military capacity, they are not obligated to make public the details of the investigation under classification procedures," Sarek finished. "But if Congressman Molineaux was correct, Admiral Bentham has recruited many people to his cause. I do not see how it is possible to identify them all and keep his true purpose and actions a secret."

"Based on the cursory investigation, Admiral Bentham didn't have a large organization as Congressman Molineaux believed. Two members of the Federation Investigation Service were apprehended shortly after he was, and a handful of individuals with known connections to Admiral Bentham have gone suspiciously missing. For now it seems the full extent of Admiral Bentham's plans may yet be contained."

"I fail to see how," Sarek mused. "Much of the secondary information is public and many people, I would suppose on the order of thousands, have read Congressman Molineaux's confession. It seems only logical that people will eventually discover the truth."

"The Terrans have a term that I am surprised you are not familiar with," said T'Lona. "They call them 'conspiracy theories.' Many of them are baseless and derived backwards until enough evidence has been compiled that could theoretically support the claim. The entire argument is constructed upon various informal fallacies and would fail to stand up to the scrutiny of even a Vulcan toddler, but many other races are more gullible. A conspiracy theory only requires the belief of a few individuals, which leads the majority to scoff at the illogical claims. Over time, a
large number of such theories cause the more logical majority to become jaded."

"Are you suggesting that humans spend so much time inventing imaginary plots that now that one actually does exist, no one will believe it?"

"It has been successful before," T'Lona replied

"But even without public knowledge of Admiral Bentham's plan, there will still be substantial consequences."

"Yes, and that cannot be helped," T'Lona agreed. "The Andorians are furious and have demanded to move Starfleet headquarters to their planet and the Tellarites are insisting that would give the Andorians too much power and would like the Federation Council to move to Tellar Prime. There will be much politicking in coming months but for now, the wide-ranging consensus is that the Federation is critical to the stability of the region, should the Romulans seek revenge for the loss of the *Tafv*."

"I cannot know for certain, but I do not believe it will come to that," Sarek said.

"Explain."

"Admiral Bentham's crew tortured and starved the Romulans aboard the *Tafv*. There was only one survivor, Llhran, the captain I spoke of earlier. He was vital in retaking the ship and agreed to destroy the *Tafv* and maroon himself on a planetoid in Romulan space as a means of regaining some of his honor and averting war with the Federation."

T'Lona's eyes narrowed. "How did you manage to negotiate such a deal?"

"The credit does not belong to me," he explained. "It belongs to Amanda Grayson. The *Tafv* either did not possess a translator or Admiral Bentham's crew disabled it. Miss Grayson is a skilled linguist with a respectable command of the Romulan language and facilitated our communication and proposed the arrangement with Llhran."

"Why do you believe he will remain silent?"

"I do not know that he will, and I am not certain he survived the destruction of the *Tafv*," Sarek explained logically. "He was in a considerably weakened state and may have been unable to make it to his own escape pod in time. If he did survive and does return home to Romulus, he has nothing to lose and everything to gain by keeping the truth to himself. He was naturally concerned by the loss of Romulan technology to the Federation, and the destruction of the *Tafv* was the only way he would agree to Miss Grayson's plan. Particularly in light of the Andorians' destruction of Admiral Bentham's weapon, it seems both parties have walked away with casualties but no public reason to continue hostilities."

"Then it seems Vulcan and the Federation are more indebted to Miss Grayson than previously believed."

"I assure you, Councilwoman T'Lona, Amanda Grayson is more likely to avoid notoriety than seek it, especially given her recent personal tragedies."

"I shall relate your account to the High Council, but there are personnel outside waiting to take your official statement. Is there anything further you would like to say, Ambassador Sarek?"

"Yes, it regards my post as Vulcan ambassador to Earth."

"The High Council is prepared to assign another ambassador and give you time to recover. The
Vulcan Science Academy plans to offer you a position as-

He interrupted his superior to say, "I wish to retain my position as ambassador."

"No one has ever refused an offer from the Vulcan Science Academy."

"They have not formally made an offer," he rebutted. "Therefore their record would remain untarnished. I would prefer it if the High Council would grant a continuance of my position prior to their official extension of such an offer."

"I alone cannot speak for the High Council, but if that is what you wish, I see no reason why we should not allow your request. It is curious, as it I am sure you are aware your reappointment as ambassador three months ago was something of a demotion, following your… regrettable personal situation."

He was surprised by her frankness but not the content of her confession. She had only said what he had long suspected. His former mate's family had significant influence. T'Rea's grandfather was cousin to Vulcan Minister of State Sorel and her father also was undersecretary to the head of the V'Shar, Vulcan's Security Directorate.

"Very well, live long and prosper Ambassador Sarek," she said, rising to her feet.

"Peace and long life, Councilwoman T'Lona."

Amanda awoke drenched in her own sweat with the vague sensation that an elephant was sitting on her chest. It was so hot.

"I'm in hell," she laughed weakly.

She was groggy and her voice sounded peculiarly garbled.

"Not precisely, Miss Grayson. You are on Vulcan."

"Sarek?" she croaked. She felt a hand slide across her left hand and opened her eyes. She turned her head on the pillow to see him sitting there in a low chait by her bedside.

"You're not dead," she said, feeling overwhelming tears of relief building inside of her.

"No," he answered. "But we both came very close."

"How long have I been out? How did we get here? Did he… Who… How…" She tried to sit up and found it was more difficult than she'd expected.

"You have been kept sedated for six days to allow your body to heal," he explained. "They removed you from the medication this afternoon to allow you to wake naturally."

Her mind was growing sharper and she suddenly felt very thirsty. As if he read her mind, he turned in his chair and clicked a button on a machine behind her and produced a glass of water. He handed it to her gently and steadied her hand as she raised it to her lips.

"Thank you," she said, mildly embarrassed by her dependence.

Her right arm was held firmly in a heavy metal device and she lifted it curiously. The events from the escape pod flooded back and she recalled being tossed against the wall when it ejected from the ship and the memories of her bones sticking out made her nauseated.
"How bad was the damage?" she asked, looking back at him.

"To you, the Tafv, or the Federation?"

She thought carefully to herself before saying, "All of it."

Before he could answer, an orderly came into the room.

"You are awake," she said.

Amanda resisted the urge to reply with sarcasm as the woman began taking readings with a medical tricorder.

"Perhaps the ambassador should wait in the corridor," she added.

"He can stay. I mean, if you want," she said, making eye contact with Sarek.

"Very well," the nurse said. "The Terrans transferred your medical records. Your current vital signs appear normal… for a human. However, I need to collect further data that was not available in your files. How many days ago did you begin your last menstrual cycle? I understand it occurs more frequently in your species."

Her face burned scarlet and without looking back over to Sarek she said, "Ok, maybe you should wait outside."

He complied with her request and the nurse continued to ask questions. A few short minutes later, a female physician entered the room and conducted a more thorough exam.

Amanda was shocked when she learned of the extent of her injuries. She guessed most of them happened when she had been thrown against the wall of the escape pod and the sheer amount of adrenaline had kept her from feeling more significant pain. In addition to her arm, she had also broken her hip, four ribs, two bones in her face, and fractured her skull. She had torn a number of ligaments in her right shoulder and lacerated her liver and right kidney.

Between internal bleeding and losing almost a third of her blood from the open fracture in her arm, she was informed that the fact that she was currently alive was "remarkable."

The physician introduced herself as T'Vara, and Amanda got the distinct impression she was fascinated by her human anatomy. The healer removed the cumbersome brace from her arm and she noted the light pink scar running down her outer forearm where she'd sustained the compound fracture. After twenty minutes, she announced she was satisfied with her condition said it was likely she could be released within forty-eight hours.

Sarek returned when she left. "Someone from the Terran consulate plans to visit you in the morning, but I should like to speak with you first, if you will permit me."

"Of course."

He related to her the entire series of events he had discussed with Councilwoman T'Lona two days earlier.

"So, Earth is staying the Federation then? And Admiral Bentham is going to prison? And we aren't going to war with the Romulans?"

"Yes to each of your questions, for the time being," he replied. "But there are two more matters which are of a more personal nature I would like to discuss with you. The first being that the
Vulcan High Council has asked me to ask you to say nothing about the shared heritage between Vulcans and Romulans: actually it would be preferred if you did not mention the Romulans at all."

"Huh? What? Why? Do you have any idea how much we could learn from this? How much I learned from this? I only spent an hour on a Romulan ship speaking Romulan with an actual Romulan, but it explains so much about their language. And the obvious link between the Vuhlkansu and Romulan. I just don't see."

"Miss Grayson, I admire your desire to make advancements in the field of linguistics and no one is telling you that you cannot. Yet think of the Federation's current situation. Consider of Earth's situation. I believe there are many who would exploit a link between the Vulcans and Romulans to renew tensions among Federation members, and the Federation requires unity, particularly now. Furthermore, admitting a Romulan vessel was moving through Federation space would likely incite a panic."

"You're asking me to lie?" she blurted. "I mean, lying by omission is still lying."

"You are correct," he admitted.

"I thought Vulcans couldn't lie."

"There is a difference between being unable to do something and preferring not to as a matter of principle, yet I believe this situation warrants it."

She was dumbfounded, but as she began to consider his points she could see the sense to what he was saying.

"What was the other thing you wanted to talk about?" she asked, trying to change the subject while she deliberated his request.

"It concerns your father."

Her heart skipped a beat. It felt like years since she had lost him.

"I don't guess you're going to tell me he was found alive," she said, trying to hold onto a shred of hope.

"No, I am not. The remains of the Comstock were found within a nebula in the Saurian sector."

She felt oddly calm. She felt like she had known he was dead in her heart when she'd first heard the news, and hearing Sarek confirm it gave her a sense of closure. Holding onto hope had been exhausting.

"I am sorry for your loss, Miss Grayson. I should not be telling you this, as it was contained in a classified communiqué, but I feel you deserve to know. Therefore, I would be immeasurably grateful if you didn't relate this information to anyone else. The official report claims it was an accident."

"The official report?" she asked suspiciously. "John killed him, didn't he?"

"Your former mate actually did a great service to the Federation, in a rather artless sort of way. I do not wish to go into the details, but he implicated Admiral Bentham in a fairly serious plot against the Federation, which has since proven to be true. He took his own life after he made the confession. I am sorry if his loss upsets you."

Amanda blinked. "It makes sense I guess, about John and Bentham. I mean, John was a lot of
things, but I never got the sense he was a really bad person. I'm not glad he's dead, but I'm not sorry for it either."

"He made many questionable decisions and followed philosophies I did not agree with, but he tried to do the honorable thing in the end. I respect him for that," Sarek assented.

"Then was it Bentham who killed my dad?" she asked.

"It was the human crew aboard the Tafv, on Bentham's orders," Sarek replied more precisely.

Amanda was quiet for a time as she considered it all. "You know, when we were on the Tafv and I was discussing with Llhran how best to kill the others on board, I felt horrible, talking so casually about killing other people like it was just some kind of unpleasant chore that needed to be done. I argued with myself over it, and even now that I know those people were responsible for my dad's death, I still just feel a sense of shame. We killed people, Sarek."

Tears blurred her vision and soon fell down her cheeks.

"It was necessary to prevent further deaths. I shall never condone killing, but I accept it is an inevitable cost that must occasionally be borne when it prevents additional deaths."

"I wish I could be so logical and utilitarian as that," she sniffed. "But I still have to find a way to live with it."

"You have a gentle soul, Miss Grayson. It is one of many things I admire about you."

She forced herself to meet his gaze, and she inched her left hand forward to take his. His forefingers met hers in the motion he had referred to has "ozh'esta." A feeling of familiar peace and happiness stunned her.

"It was you," she said suddenly.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She broke the contact with him and the sensation faded. She joined her two forefingers to his again and it returned. She looked at him with surprise.

"On the Tafv. I don't know how, but doing this with you…" she breathed deeply, taking in the euphoria of the closeness she felt with him. "It's like something from the ship. It is so overwhelmingly…"

"Miss Grayson?"

"When I was on the Tafv and they were… torturing me, I was so close to telling them that I suspected the helium they wanted was on Zetar. I would have said anything. But each time I approached the urge to give in, I felt like I do now. I don't know how to describe it. Content, maybe?"

Sarek gazed at her curiously, but their fingers continued to trace in circles. Eventually he said, "When I was in the cell, I could feel your pain. I tried reaching my mind out to you, as I did when our minds melded, but you did not respond. I presumed our bond was not strong enough. It seems it may have at least been sufficient to transfer emotion."

Her hand stopped moving and began to tremble.

"That makes sense. I think. When you were behind the force field and they were about to… well,
when they were threatening to cut my fingers off, I was actually more frightened by you than them. It was scary to see you so angry. And then I was angry. I’ve never felt anything remotely like that in my life. I was so angry I was frightening myself. When you hit the force field, it hurt, but I just completely lost control and bit that guy. I bit a guy."

She laughed at how ludicrous that sounded and then added, "Is that what Vulcan emotions are like?"

"You see why we take great pains to suppress them through a'rie'mnu," he explained.

"So what does that mean, if we can do this? Share feelings, I mean?" she asked, looking back down at their hands and enjoying the sensation of contentment.

"Are you familiar with the term 't'hy'la'?" he asked.

The door to the room swung open and the orderly started with rather un-Vulcan surprise.

"Excuse me," she said, looking away. "Hours for visitors have ended. You may return tomorrow at 0900."

Sarek dropped his hand and stood.

"I have business to attend to in the morning, but I shall return in the afternoon," he explained.

She watched him go and felt a sort of sadness at being parted from him, one which turned into annoyance when the orderly began insisting that she eat and provided her with a bowl of broth that tasted like highly concentrated, slightly sour, berry-flavored sweat. Apparently bad hospital food was a literally universal cliché.

She was ravenously hungry though, and when she had managed to choke down enough to satisfy the orderly, she was promptly given a hypospray of something that almost instantly put her to sleep.

She was roused twelve hours later by the arrival of a young man from the Terran embassy who introduced himself as Jackson Caldwell, health and private affairs liaison to the Terran ambassador to Vulcan.

He explained some of the same things Sarek had told her the night before and said that Federation investigators wanted to speak with her when she returned to Earth, mostly as a courtesy, along with Starfleet intelligence. Apparently Sarek had already filed an official report of their abduction and escape, and he commended her actions and wished her a speedy recovery.

She was left to wonder how much of what actually transpired made it into such a report, if there was to be no mention of Llhran, the Tafv, or the Romulans in general. What was she supposed to say when people from Starfleet asked?

To add to her anxiety about concealing the truth from the authorities, Mr. Caldwell allowed her to use his personal PADD to call her mother. She initially tried to refuse his offer since she was unsure how to go about explaining it all to her, but he insisted. She got a feeling of dread that her mother had been harassing the embassy staff for the past week.

After a very pained call that included a lot of crying and demands for information that Amanda didn't have, she promised to try to call again soon and explained that Mr. Caldwell had promised she would be home in less than four days. Her mother promised to be at the landing pad when she arrived. She had mixed feelings about that: her mother could be pushy, unreasonable, and even a bit snobby at times, but she was still her mom and she hadn't seen her in months.
When her call was done, Mr. Caldwell begged her forgiveness and stated he was overdue for a meeting. Given the amount of political upheaval in recent weeks, she found it a reasonable excuse.

Just seconds after he left, she regretted not asking him about the logistics of her impending release from the hospital and trip home. **Where would she stay? How would she get there? Whom should she call and how should she call them?**

Furthermore, she hadn't had the foresight to pack a bag for her kidnapping and subsequent hospitalization, and the only clothes she had on were a baggy gray tunic, hospital pants that were nearly twenty centimeters too long and rolled several times to prevent them from dragging on the ground, and a pair of gray underwear that nearly came up to her armpits.

As if the orderly were attuned to her anxiety, she arrived just ten minutes after Mr. Caldwell left and took her vitals again and compared them against her medical chart. She then informed Amanda that T'Vara had monitored her progress throughout the night and felt there was nothing more the hospital could do for her and believed the rest of her recovery would best be spent at home to preserve hospital efficiency.

She deflected all of Amanda's questions and ordered her into the private, adjacent cubicle sonic shower. Given she had gone a week without a shower, the energy pulses felt practically intoxicating.

She had been supplied with a basic, standard hospital hygiene kit and took particular delight in brushing her teeth. The toothpaste tasted like sour baking soda but since her teeth felt on the verge of growing fur, she wasn't going to complain. It took a while to pick the mats and knots from her hair with the tiny metal comb, but eventually she was able to brush it into a glossy shine. She tried to examine the overall effect in the 15 centimeter mirror inside the shower but decided no matter what, she had to look a far cry better than she had just half an hour ago.

Just as she was considering putting her soiled hospital clothes back on for lack of other options, T'Vara came in with a large bag and handed it to her through the door.

"These belonged to my daughter, but she has long since outgrown them. I approximate they should fit you closely enough."

"You're… giving me these clothes?" Amanda asked

"Would you prefer to travel home in the hospital garments?" the healer responded. "The surgeons cut your other clothes off and they were damaged beyond repair."

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful. I'm sorry; it's just… nice of you. Thank you."

"There is no need for thanks. My youngest daughter no longer has need of them, and you do."

Amanda smiled to herself and then instinctively tried to hide it despite the fact that T'Vara couldn't see her through the door. Apparently kindness masquerading as logical behavior wasn't just unique to Sarek.

"Thanks all the same," she said.

She opened the bag to find a set of brand new socks and undergarments: black, nothing fancy, and a little small but far better than nothing. There were several dress-like garments of varying dark shades of gray, purple, and navy, all made of many light layers and fabric and long sleeves.

She pulled a maroon tunic-like dress over her head with a bit of trouble. Her shoulder and ribs
were still sore and her hip still ached. She looked down at herself in the frock and though it was slightly too big on her, she thought it was quite pretty. She had never worn anything like it and was surprised to find it wasn't nearly as hot to wear as she'd suspected.

At the bottom of the bag contained a pair of light shoes that were really more like slippers. She put them on, found they fit like a glove, and flexed her feet in them. She was in enamored with them and figured Earth could learn a few lessons in footwear from Vulcans.

She emerged to find T'Vara standing in the middle of the room examining the screen of her medical PADD.

"You look suitable," the healer remarked

"Thank you again," Amanda stammered. "I owe it to you. Both for the clothes and patching me up."

"This is another dose of triox compound," she said, acting as if she hadn't heard Amanda's expression of gratitude and pulling a hypospray from her coat and injecting it into Amanda's neck. It stung, but T'Vara explained it would help her temporarily acclimate to the harsher conditions on Vulcan.

"I wouldn't recommend rigorous physical exertion, but it should ease the discomfort many of your species experience on this planet for approximately two days."

She continued to discuss her condition, encouraged her to return if she experienced anything from a list of symptoms, and turned a large PADD toward her for a digital signature on her release forms.

They were written in Vulcan and she began translating them for her when she cut T'Vara off with her own translation. She took an absurd delight in watching the healer's eyebrows flicker in surprise as she apologized for her assumption that Amanda was unacquainted with the language and complimented her on her mastery of it.

They spent thirty minutes pouring over redundant pages of information. Apparently cumbersome bureaucracy was standard in hospitals around the galaxy as well.

"Are there any further questions?" T'Vara asked.

"Yeah, actually, where am I supposed to go?" Amanda replied.

"Someone from the Diplomatic Service is waiting outside," she explained. "Follow me."

She followed her into a wide hallway and down a maze of corridors. Her hip hurt slightly: T'Vara had explained it would continue to be tender for several more weeks.

Despite the triox compound, the added gravity of Vulcan felt strange and easily tiring. They eventually came to something that looked like a reception area and the healer handed the PADD to a woman at the desk and pointed out an individual standing with his back toward them, gazing out at a brilliantly lit horizon.

She had expected a human from the Terran embassy, but instead she found Sarek.
He heard footfall padding toward him but continued to watch the cityscape of Shi'Kahr from the lobby. He was on the ground floor but the building was set atop a high ridge that offered an excellent view.

The footsteps grew louder and stopped directly to his left side. He turned his head to see Amanda standing next to him, modestly clothed in the style of a Vulcan lady. It suited her in an understated way.

"You look lovely," he said, giving her a long, objective glance.

"Yeah, my doctor, T'Vara, she was nice enough to let me have these clothes," she mumbled, looking down at a satchel she was carrying.

"I spoke with a man from the Terran consulate 40 minutes ago regarding arrangements for your accommodations and he said he had not yet made any," he explained. "When I called the hospital to inquire about visitation later today, they informed me you were being released within the hour. If you do not think it is too forward, I would like to offer to host you for the remainder of your visit on Vulcan."

"I would make a lot of comments about how generous that is of you, and how you shouldn't go to all the trouble, but I'm beginning to think that would be a waste of time," she replied, clearly trying to force down a grin.

"Logical."

"Besides, even if I didn't want to, where else am I going to go?"

He could see the smile inside of her threatening to burst onto her face. He wouldn't have minded, yet they were in public and he appreciated her attempts to restrain herself.

"Shall we go then?" he asked.

"Lead the way," she replied.

They emerged from the hospital under a carriage porch. Her skin flushed and he asked, "Are you feeling well enough?"

"Yeah, they gave me something to help me adjust to the climate, but it's still hot," she croaked.

The car pulled up to the curb and the valet turned the vehicle over to him. He moved to the opposite door and opened it for her. She seemed intrigued as she got into the passenger seat and tucked her bag neatly by her legs. He moved around the front of the hovercar and got into the driver's seat.

"Oh, you're driving," she exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes," he answered, releasing the magnetic dampener.

The vehicle lifted slightly and inched forward. She seemed on the verge of saying something else
when he accelerated the vehicle forward and emerged into the blazing midday sun that bathed Shi'Khar. She made a move to shield her eyes from the brilliant light and he quickly adjusted the holographic tint on the windows.

She stared from the passenger side window with sparkling eyes and an open-mouthed smile. Her child-like wonder reminded Sarek of the first time they met at the aquarium in Palo Alto. She remained quiet for a long time and Sarek found himself continually glancing at her from the corners of his eyes.

As they left the heart of the medical complex and traveled down a more remote avenue to his house overlooking the ridge on the outskirts of Shi'Kahr, she looked across him to see the city's expanse. When she noticed him looking at her, she blushed and smiled warmly. Her eyes lingered in a way that elicited a disconcerting physical response in him. She seemed to intuitively detect it, because she asked if anything was the matter.

"No," he replied. "How do you find Shi'Khar, Miss Grayson?"

"It's big – bigger than any city I've ever been to. But I guess I haven't been to many places either," she mused, balling her small hands into fists and placing them in her lap. "Is this where you're from?"

"My family's home is here, yes."

"Will I meet them?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"There are no immediate relations for you to meet. My parents are deceased and I have not spoken with my brother for more than nine Earth years."

"Oh," she replied, making a face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"Your thirteenth unique illogical apology," he replied.

"You're still counting?" she chortled.

He analyzed her face and thought her expression appeared playful. Human teasing was a specific area he had always had difficulty with and he was beginning to realize the more he thought he knew Amanda Grayson, the less he really understood her.

He turned his eyes back to the task of driving and turned the vehicle along an isolated road to began the steep climb to his family home. At the top of the ridge he pulled along the gradual circular driveway.

"This… this is your house?" she stammered.

"It is my family's home, and as I am the senior member of my family, I suppose it is not incorrect to refer to it as 'mine,'" he replied.

"It's very nice."

He pulled around the driveway, drove past the front entrance, and went down into the subterranean garage. After exiting the vehicle they alighted the stairs to the main level of his house and emerged into a wide hallway that fed into the large atrium at the center of the house. Her bag was clutched to her chest and her face was again full of awe.

"I shall show you to your room," he said, walking ahead of her down another large hallway to the left. "I did not have time to adequately prepare for your arrival, but the house is well-maintained in
my absence. I trust you will find it satisfactory."

He opened the door to the smaller guest room across from his own and noticed her eyes grow slightly wider.

"This is more than satisfactory," she mumbled. "This is nicer than anywhere I've ever stayed."

"Perhaps you would like to settle your things and then take a midday meal?"

"Uh, sure," she said and she lowered the bag from her chest and slinked into the spacious room.

"If you will meet me in the kitchen when you are ready, it is further down this hallway and to the right," he explained, motioning with both hands.

"Right," she said, turning to him. "Ambassador Sarek? I just wanted to say thank you. You know, for letting me stay here with you."

He nodded and left her to unpack. He entered the high-ceilinged kitchen and set to preparing a lunch for them both. Like most Vulcans, he had a respectable talent for cooking, as it was merely the practical exercise of chemistry and thermodynamics. He removed a large bowl of leftover mazed he had prepared the night before, along with a loaf of dense bread and a jar of tolik preserves from the stasis pantry.

He set the necessary dishes and utensils upon the small stone table in the kitchen and deliberated before pouring her a glass of cold water. He had nearly made her a cup of th'gara tea after recalling his initial visit to her residence and her affinity for hot tea, yet he decided a hot beverage would not add to her comfort on a planet that already had a climate with an average temperature 25 degrees warmer than she was accustomed to.

He sat and waited for her to arrive and considered what he should do. He had considered it all through the night: he hadn't slept since his release from the hospital and his meditation sessions had done little to help ease his mind. He shared a bond with Miss Grayson: that much was evident. She had said she loved him. And through all his meditation, reflection, and emotional purging, he was becoming aware that he likely returned her affections.

He relaxed his thoughts and breathed long, slow breaths and tried to restore appropriate rhythm to the beating of his heart. The healer said the palpitations would be recurrent for the remainder of his life. He would have to accept that.

When she hadn't joined him after 15 minutes, he returned to her room and found the door cracked. He knocked and received no answer. Even though this was his house, it would be grossly improper to enter a female's private quarters without permission. He knocked more loudly and still heard nothing.

He considered her physical state. She had suffered grave injuries and was recovering on a planet with an atmosphere she was ill adjusted to. Logic dictated a breach of social etiquette and he gently pushed the door open to find her curled up at the foot of the large central bed in a position reminiscent of a child in its mother's womb.

His sensitive ears could just barely detect the inhalation and exhalation of her breaths. It seemed reasonable that she should be fatigued, yet he could not escape a nagging sense of worry. He debated the necessity waking her: he was not a healer and he knew little of human physiology.

He stood in the doorway for several more minutes, watching her sleep until she rolled slightly onto her back and he judged she was likely not in medical distress. He returned to the kitchen, ate the light meal, and packed the rest of it away and retired to the meditation chamber.
He lit the candles and knelt on the floor mechanically as he had done thousands of times before and worked to restore his emotional center. The breaths came in and out methodically but did little to clear his mind. He redoubled his efforts, but each time he came close to quietude, Amanda forced her way into the forefront of his thoughts.

He thought of her smile, her frequent expressions of joyful wonder, the first time he had noticed the sweet smell of her hair during their outing to the hanging gardens, her quick mind, her gentleness, her innocence… Yet mixed in with the pleasanter thoughts were those of the tears she had shed on her kitchen floor, the look on her face just before her abduction from his residence on Earth, and the determined rage she had projected during their struggle on the Romulan ship.

There were other thoughts that he found even more difficult to repress. He recalled the length of her legs when she had emerged fresh from bathing to unexpectedly find him at her door. He remembered with some embarrassment the gentle slope of the top of her small breasts, which he had inadvertently seen through the wide neck of her oversized shirt when he knelt over her in her kitchen while trying to treat her injuries. Immediately before they'd kissed.

He stood in frustration and paced the room. After a minute he resumed meditating but continued to find it difficult to attain any meaningful level of clarity. He continued in that way for hours, well into the night, checking on Amanda periodically and each time discovering that she had moved slightly or was snoring softly.

When the candles burned down and finally extinguished, he gave up his efforts. He wandered into the atrium in the center of the house and gazed up at the night sky. He made out Earth's nearby star rising diagonally from the northeast across the horizon. He had never felt at home on Earth, though he had spent much of his adult life there. Now he considered it in a new light and found he actually looked forward to returning there. He was considering checking on Amanda for the ninth time when he heard the faint sound of her yelling.

"No… please…don't…"

He breathed and approached her apprehensively. He brushed her arm but she didn't wake. He shook her shoulder gently and she yelped and bolted upright. Her hair was tousled and her eyes were glazed over but rapidly snapped into focus. She was trembling. She was breathing heavily and looked around the dark room and fixed her eyes on the window.

"I'm going to guess I slept through lunch," she gasped. "I'm so sorry."

"That is number 14," he mused.

"Huh?"

"A fourteenth illogical apology. You are still recovering from substantial injuries and arrived in my home during the hottest time of the day during the hottest part of the year in one of the hottest regions on the planet. It is understandable that you should be easily tired."

"Can I start collecting some kind of bonus points when I've made like 50 or a hundred of these so-called 'illogical apologies'?"
He couldn't derive her meaning and waited for her to explain, but instead she just smiled faintly and stood.

"Are you hungry, Miss Grayson?"

She bit her lip and looked at the wall, which caused him to add, "It would be no inconvenience to arrange a meal for you."

They moved to the kitchen and he set out the remainder of the food he had prepared to serve her for lunch. He placed dishes for her on the stone table in the kitchen and sat across from her while she ate.

"I thought you said Vulcans don't take their evening meals in the kitchen," she said, clearing attempting to break the silence.

"They do not, however, it is now closer to the morning's meal, so I do not believe you are in breach of protocols."

She scoffed but her expression brightened when she spooned a bite of mia-zed into her mouth. He found it strange that her blatant emotional displays often had the effect of pleasing him.

"You made this?" she asked, pointing down to the thick, savory stew with her spoon.

"You seem surprised," he replied.

"Well, no, I guess not surprised. It's delicious," she answered. "I'm impressed that you're such a good cook."

"Thank you," he said. "Though cooking is simply the careful execution of a detailed list of instructions based on a number of scientific principles."

She stared at him and ate another bite before commenting, "Oh, Ambassador Sarek… you're a master at humility and understatement."

"May I ask a personal query, Miss Grayson?"

She ate another bite and nodded her head.

"You seemed to be yelling in your sleep and appeared frightened when you initially woke. What was the source of such anxiety?"

"I was... having a bad dream," she muttered, pursing her lips and taking another bite of her food.

A full minute passed without either of them speaking before she said, "I wish I were more like you. You know, able to shut off parts of my brain and feelings. I'm going to guess you don't suffer from nightmares."

"On the contrary," he disagreed. "Dreams are a part of the subconscious, a region of the mind Vulcans also possess. It is simply a matter of separating dreams from reality."

She was obviously surprised by his confession and took another bite before adding, "I guess waking up from bad dreams it must sound kind of pathetic to you."

He was uncertain of how to respond, but eventually explained, "You are a great many things, Miss Grayson. I would not count 'pathetic' among them."

Her eyes widened and her left eyebrow rose.
"When I first made your acquaintance, I believed you to be in possession of a number of remarkable qualities. The events of the past week have shown me that I have grossly underestimated you."

"What do you mean?" she asked, setting her spoon down in the empty bowl.

"I initially knew you as a schoolteacher who was frightened of geese and once lamented that being punched in the face was the worst thing that could happen to her," he began. "Yet you found yourself able to withstand torture, you negotiated with an understandably angry Romulan to avert an interplanetary war, and coped with injuries that very nearly proved fatal. In addition to that, you saved my life, and I am deeply indebted to you."

She blushed. "You saved my life too. If you're keeping tabs, we're probably even. Actually, you're probably a little bit ahead. In fact, I feel really bad that I dragged you into all of this."

"You could not have foreseen the events which were to occur," he argued.

She stood awkwardly and placed her dishes in the sink and activated the particulate recycler to clean them before replacing them in the cupboard.

"Anyway, no matter how well you think of me – it hasn't stopped me from having nightmares about what happened to us," she added after a time, locking her elbows as she leaned on the counter and gazed at the opposite wall.

"Have you ever attempted meditation?" he asked.

"The closest I've ever come to meditating was probably the disastrous yoga class my Aunt Janet dragged me to when I first started grad school," she laughed, catching his glance.

"Would you allow me to instruct you in some basic techniques?"

"As long as it doesn't include standing on one leg with my arms over my head and panting loudly," she joked, catching his eye. "Nevermind. I guess you don't have an Aunt Janet who makes you do yoga."

Rather than take her into the formal meditation room, he escorted her to the front sitting room and sat on the wide divan facing the front entryway. She sat a comfortable distance from him and looked at him with rapt attention.

He asked her to take five deep breaths and hold them for as long as she could, but simply inhaling caused her to wince.

"Sorry, my ribs still hurt from where I broke them. Yeah, I know, that's number 15," she moaned, rolling her eyes.

He dismissed her sarcasm and said, "Will you permit me to do something?"

"I guess?"

"Will you turn away from me?"

She complied with his request and he asked, "May I touch your back?"

"Uh, sure?"
He ran the knuckle of his middle finger down the course of her spine and considered the placement of his hands. She only had twelve ribs instead of the thirteen that Vulcans possessed, but he judged by the similar arrangement of the vertebrae and musculature that it would be easy enough with very minor adjustments. He used his forefinger and middle finger to press hard into her pressure point, compressing a specific muscle in her back into the fifth intercostal space of her ribcage. She howled.

"What the hell?" she hissed, glaring back at him.

"Has it helped the pain in your ribs?"

She blinked at him and rubbed her hand along her spine. Her expression softened. "Yeah, actually," she sniffed. "What did you do?"

"It is just one of many techniques that comprise the field of neuropressure," he explained.

He performed several more adjustments that he believed could be helpful in relieving the pain in her shoulder and neck, though he stopped short of providing assistance with her hip for personal reasons.

He continued to walk her through simpler meditative techniques and presumed they were working until he realized she was simply on the verge of falling asleep again. Soon her head was nestled on his arm and he was uncertain of how to extricate himself from underneath her small frame without disturbing her.

He settled for listening to the sounds of her slow and rhythmic breathing. He laid his head against the wall behind him and observed her. He was struck by the realization that he didn't want to be parted from her, not only in this moment, but ever.

He slept soundly for the first time since his release from the hospital, sitting upright with Amanda resting peacefully by side.

The sun breached the top of the distant L-langon Mountains and spread light over Amanda's face. She sat up and stretched. Her body felt stiff and she was wearing the same clothes from the night before. She was in the guest bedroom.

The memories of the previous night faded back into her consciousness and the last thing she remembered was practicing meditation techniques in Sarek's living room. How had she gotten here? She cringed at the obvious probability that he had carried her back to her room like an overtired toddler.

She went to the large adjacent bathroom with the small hygiene bag from the hospital and brushed her teeth and combed her hair. She wished she had something to tie it back with, but resigned herself to letting her hair fall loosely down her back.

She left the room quietly and closed the door gently behind her and trod barefoot down the hallway. The delicious aroma of something starchy and sugary hung in the air and she followed it all the way down to the kitchen where she found Sarek with his back turned toward her, working at something at the opposite counter.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning, Miss Grayson."

She approached him carefully and found him cleaning something that appeared to be a pinkish
yellow fruit under an ultraviolet cleansing beam. "Can I help you?"

"If you wish," he responded.

She sanitized her hands and in the sink next to him and he set her to work slicing the fruit that he had called "gespar."

"It is not a good time of year for gespar," he remarked. "They are sweeter when harvested in the early annual equinox."

She held the flesh of the fruit up to her nose and thought it smelled like a mix between a light citrus fruit and honeydew melon.

"I'm sure it will be fine," she said, carefully edging the knife around what appeared to be a hard central seed. "It smells nice enough."

"Were you spared from further unfortunate dreams?" he inquired.

"Oh, yeah, thanks," she started to say, until somewhere in the corner of her mind images of the dreams she'd had resurfaced and she started to blush.

The snippets she could remember hadn't been bad at all. They had featured his hands on her body, just as they had been the night before when he was performing neuropressure on her. She exhaled quietly and went back to slicing fruit.

He opened the cooking unit door to his left and removed a small pan with a loaf of bread dark brown bread that smelled delightful.

"Thank you for making breakfast," she murmured.

"You are welcome," he replied, setting the hot pan under a cooling hood. "Thought it is widely customary for guests to prepare the morning meal in Vulcan homes."

"Oh, well, I guess lucky for you I didn't know that, because I doubt I stood much of a chance of producing something that probably tastes half so wonderful as that probably will," she responded, biting her lip and craning her neck to examine the loaf of bread.

"I did not intend to imply you have failed in some duty," he said, turning to face her in a perfunctory way. "I do not wish for you to be my guest."

She looked up from the fruit she was slicing to stare at him. Had she done something so wrong he wanted to kick her out?

"I have spoken imprecisely. Allow me to clarify," he continued. "I do not wish to treat you as a guest."

"Then… what?" she asked, stepping back from the counter to face him, the knife still in her right hand.

"It is my hope that you would consent to be my bondmate," he said, a slight, uncharacteristic note of apprehension in his voice.

She blinked in disbelief. "What?"

"I believe in your culture it would be more appropriate to say that I am proposing that we marry."

She stared at him open mouthed for what felt like hours until she noticed the knife was trembling
in her hand. She put it on the cutting board and dried her hands on a nearby towel.

"Your silence suggests you are deliberating, either your decision or your chosen method of refusal."

"No," she breathed. "I mean, not 'no' but…"

"I do not understand," he said. "What is your answer?"

"I don't know how to answer your question," she stammered.

"The question is binary with only two ultimate responses."

She huffed. Leave it to him to make a marriage proposal sound like a technical manual. "I just- I feel like- I would disappoint you," she said, feeling ridiculous as tears started to well in her eyes.

"Why should you draw such a conclusion?"

"I don't know how to be the wife of a Vulcan ambassador. I'm sure I would end up saying and doing the wrong things. I didn't even know I was supposed to wake up this morning and cook you breakfast."

"How can one know how to do anything until they do?"

Her first tears began to fall and Sarek approached her tentatively.

"I did not intend to upset you. I shall withdraw my-"

"No," she snapped.

"Very well," he said, seeming to hold his breath. "I accept your-"

"No," she snapped. "I'm not saying 'no,' I'm just wondering if you've really thought this through. Now that I said that, I feel stupid. Of course you've thought this through. You're Vulcan. You think everything through."

He folded his hands in front of him and peered curiously at her. She fought to find something coherent to say. Eventually he remarked, "You seem conflicted."

"Not about you," she exclaimed, surprising herself.

"Then what is the source of your conflict?"

She clasped her hands together and held them to her forehead. "I'm falling in love with you and I barely know you and that scares me."

"Is there additional information about me that you require before you make your decision?"

"Well, yeah! Isn't there anything you want to know about me?" she insisted.

"I know enough about you to know that whatever I do not know is irrelevant to my desire to be your mate," he replied.

"But wouldn't it be more logical to spend some time together and find out if we both want the same things in life?"

"Choosing a mate is not done logically."
"That makes no sense," she argued. "How can logic dictate every facet of your life except your love life?"

"Your question is one with a complex answer," he answered.

"No, your question is one with a complex answer," she retorted. "You're asking me to marry you, but we haven't spent much time alone together."

"Is this a ritual among humans prior to marriage?"

"Um, yes, I suppose it is," she said, blushing furiously. "I mean, I want to know more about your culture, your life, your expectations, your likes, your dislikes, your goals… you know? I don’t even know what your favorite color is."

"Why should one have a preferred color? They all have relevance in visual processing. Furthermore, why should a preference for a color be a criterion for selecting a mate?"

She barked a high-pitched laugh and clasped her hand over her mouth in a horrible attempt to hide it.

"I do not have a wide degree of familiarity with human courtship rituals," he added, subtle frustration creeping into his voice.

"I can't say I'm well acquainted with rules of becoming a Vulcan’s bondmate either," she replied, now fighting back giggles through her tears.

"I shall attempt honor your customs if that is what you ask of me."

"There aren't really any hard, fixed customs," she replied, moving closer to him. "You just learn about each other and figure out what you want for your relationship."

"I want to be your mate," he explained.

"Well, of course. But where will we live? How many children do you want? Do you want children? Do I want children?" she asked, before adding, "Can we even have children?"

"Though not common, there have been successful matings between our species."

"Oh," she said, blushing. She stared at the floor and tried to collect her thoughts.

"How do you wish to proceed, Miss Grayson?"

"You could probably start by calling me 'Amanda.'"

"How do you wish to proceed… Amanda?"

She reached for his hand and he extended his two forefingers to her and she felt the comforting calm of his consciousness mingling with her own. She smiled.

"My heart is telling me that I probably love you and none of the rest of it matters," she said. "But the rational side of my brain wants to know if you need an answer right now. Can we wait a few months and get to know each other better?"

"Under what conditions?"

"Conditions?" she retorted.
"Yes, how long of a period do you require? What defines 'knowing each other'?

She balked and smiled at his clarified question and murmured, "First you go from asking me to marry you on a whim and say there's no logic attached. Now you're treating this like a science experiment."

"I only seek to understand the parameters--"

"Yes… Sarek," she said, testing their boundaries with the informal use of his given name, "I'll marry you. I'll be your bondmate. In... six months. If you can still stand to be around me."

"Your parameters seem arbitrary."

"That's because they are," she said in exasperation. "I don't know how long it takes to get to know someone before being comfortable enough to marry them."

"Very well. By what timescale are you measuring? The Federation Standard units of months or the slightly shorter--"

"You're killing me," she interrupted in laughing exasperation.

"I presume you are demonstrating the frequent human propensity toward hyperbole," he said, folding his arms behind his back.

"Will you kiss me?" she exclaimed.

"Right now?"

"Yes, it's customary to end a successful marriage proposal with some sort of display of affection," she said, trying to reign in her laughter.

"I see," he said, moving uncertainly toward her.

She looked down at his hands and took them gently, leaned herself forward, and stood on the tips of her toes to meet their lips together.

What began as a rather chaste kiss quickly became more passionate. They released each other's hands and Sarek grabbed her waist and she cupped her hands around his neck. Their hands trailed upwards, his along her ribcage and hers up toward his jaw until his hands lightly brushed her breasts and her hands met his cheeks. They both instantly recoiled. They broke apart and Amanda was shocked by not only how unexpectedly bold he had been, but by the look of obvious shock apparent on his face.

"Did you just feel me up?" she laughed, her voice sharp and unnatural.

His face twisted in confusion and he said, "Is that a euphemism?"

"Uh, no, I guess when I think about the words, it's pretty literal," she said, her face growing red. "Touching my… it's just… intimate. It was… anyway, I don't mind – I was just surprised."

"I shall admit your attempt to meld with me was also unnerving," he admitted.

She furrowed her eyebrows and asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

"I do not believe you did it intentionally, but touching another's face with your hands is… as you say… intimate," he explained.
"Oh," she stammered, her face now burning furiously hot. "But you did it with me…"

"That was different," he argued. "It was consensual and not done as a means of bonding. As you just stated, I am not opposed to the idea, I was merely taken aback."

She let out a low sigh and stared at him. "See what I mean? Our relationship is probably doomed to awkward disaster."

"It will no doubt require adjustment and education," he argued. "But I think it is premature to declare it a disaster."

She smiled and closed her eyes and leaned forward again to kiss him, gentler this time. When she pulled away, she could see an intriguing alertness to his gaze.

"What a wonderful bit of serendipity," she breathed.

"That is the third time in as many months I have heard that term, yet I do not know its meaning," he stated.

"I don't think it would translate well into Vuhlkansu," she smiled. "It means something along the lines of making happy discoveries by accident."

"Your definition seems paradoxical," he replied.

"How so?"

"Happiness is subjective, therefore the discovery of happiness is guaranteed for nearly any outcome for some individual, so long as it is relational to-"

She put her finger to his lips and he canted his head and raised his eyebrows in surprise at being silenced.

She kissed him again and said, "I love you, Sarek."

He leaned forward and rested his forehead on hers. He loved her too.

Chapter End Notes

The end. Sort of.

There's a sequel to this work titled, "How to Date a Vulcan and Protocols for Human Courtship."

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