

The background of the cover is a deep blue space scene. A large, curved horizon of Earth with white clouds is visible on the right side. In the center, the USS Lexington (NCC-1709-A) is shown from a low angle, appearing to fly towards the viewer. The ship's saucer section is prominent, with the name 'LEXINGTON' and 'NCC-1709-A' clearly visible. The ship's nacelles are also visible. In the upper left, a faint, ghostly face of a man with a beard and long hair is superimposed on the dark space.

**STAR TREK
THE LEXINGTON ADVENTURES**

Doomed is your Soul...

Damned is your Life!

**An Original *Lexington Adventures* Story
by Series Creator
Joey Bonice**

“Doomed is your soul // Damned is your life!”

An original story by
Joey Bonice

Based on
Star Trek® by Gene Roddenberry
The Lexington Adventures by Joseph Bonice

Story Inspired by:
Golan, M., & Globus, Y. (Producers), & Hooper, T. (Director). (1985). Lifeforce [Motion picture on Blu-Ray].
USA: Cannon Films.

Larsen, G. (Producer), & Stewart, L. (Director). (3 January 1980). Space Vampires [Television series episode].
In *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*. United States: NBC/Universal Television Distribution.

“Smalltown Boy (12” Extended)” by Bronski Beat (1984). Original song lyrics by Steve Bronski, Jimmy
Somerville, Larry Steinbachek. Album: The Age of Consent. Label: London Records. Producer: Mike Thorne.

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Prologue

“Always do everything you ask of those you command.”

- GEN George S. Patton, Jr., US Army

“Captain’ Log, Stardate 8449.82. We’ve delivered Ambassador Mountbatten-Windsor to the Eminiar system. To backtrack a bit, it seems the Vendikar and Eminiar VII are on the cusp of joining the Federation. We are to support the ambassador seeing these two one-time enemies join our side. As a side note, we’ve found a small one-person ship that suffered a warp drive failure in orbit around Vendikar.”

Captain Alexander McKnight was sitting in the main conference room of the Federation starship *Lexington*. With him was the ship’s executive officer, Commander Brieanna Smith, and the ship’s chief engineer, Commander Sophea Bennington-Fox.

“First question: where’s the pilot of that ship?”

Smith knew that was her cue. “Seems the ship was in a stable orbit after it arrived. However, the pucker factor must have been a little high. Mine was after Sophie and I saw the condition of the ship.”

Bennington-Fox took over. “From what we saw from the scans was that the ship needed to go to drydock for major overhaul. Even though the thing’s older than the hills, it’s only had just the very basic of maintenance done.”

“And the pilot? What do we know of him?”

“The ship’s database lists the sole owner and pilot as one ‘Archibald Harris’,” said Smith. “Saavik’s checking his record but what she found out already was that he’s got a class one pilot’s license and is a retiree of the British Government. No red flags as of yet.”

Alex nodded in appreciation. “Good work. Sophie, have we secured the ship?”

“It’s on the primary flight deck, though it’s a tight fit. Marines are sitting guard on it and my staff is going over every inch to make sure there’s no surprises. We did a preliminary check for explosives and came up negative thus far.”

“Excellent.” Alex yawned; both women held their chuckles but barely.

“Been a long day, Alex?” asked Smith with a grin.

“I think you had a longer day than I had. I find that being a diplomat is a learned skill and I learned it at a high cost.” Alex yawned again. “Think I’ll hit the hay and get some sleep before I go back down again. Sophie, keep your crews working on that ship. One good explosion could easily rip us in half.”

“Don’t I know it,” she said, tossing bangs out of her eyes. “My people will turn that ship inside and out just to be sure.”

“Just leave enough for a shipyard to fix, okay? Anne, let’s see if we can find that pilot. He’s got some explaining to do.”

Even though she knew the scene was a very clever holographic fantasy, Commander Angelica McKnight could have sworn she was sitting on an idyllic tropical beach somewhere in Earth’s South Pacific. The form-fitting chair made her feel as if she

was floating on air. She wiggled ever so slightly, before adjusting her sunglasses and taking another sip of her virgin cherry margarita. Loud, fast-paced music from Earth's earliest era of rock-n-roll bathed her ears; she could still easily hear the splashing of ocean surf and the murmur of people close to her. Despite the volume and non-alcoholic beverage, she felt as relaxed as a kitten in a sunbeam. It wasn't often an opportunity to unwind such as this came along, so it was wise to seize the chance and savor every moment, as she was currently doing.

Oh, how I wish I could stay here forever, she thought as she took another sip. *All I need now is a drop-dead gorgeous hunk to flirt with and I would be set! Too bad my flirting days are long over.*

The commander took another sip before placing her drink back on the table and pushing dark auburn bangs out of her eyes. A small yawn escaped her, along with a smile. Hearing some slight giggling made Angelica aware of the other two women to either side of her. McKnight smiled, knowing they were thinking the same thing. After the events of the last few months, they all needed a break, especially after their last mission. They had been hoping for shore leave at Pacifica, which was a great resort planet and one that most of the crew had been betting on. However, while it was only 35 light years away, Starfleet had decided to send *Lexington* on another mission instead. So, after the crew got over their disappointment, they descended on the virtual simulation hall and the pool, both of which were getting a real workout this evening. Simulations would be the closest they'd get to a real vacation for a while longer.

Then again, she silently reflected, a vacation for might not be in the cards for quite a while. She recently had heard rumors that certain members of her Academy class would soon be paneled to determine their suitability for promotion to the rank of captain. If the panel's recommendations were approved by both Starfleet Command and the Federation Council, Angelica Renee Louise Windsor-Mountbatten McKnight (*try saying THAT three times fast*, she silently laughed) could be offered a captaincy. There had recently been talk of upgrading certain executive officer slots from the rank of commander to captain and if that were to happen, it was entirely possible she would be one of these officers. More likely, she thought, since she had only the requisite command background, she would probably be offered a slot as an executive officer to a ship-of-the-line, such as the new *Excelsior*-class battleships just coming into the Fleet or even to one of the *Lexington*'s sister ships currently under construction at San Francisco or Newport News. Whenever she thought about it, Angelica would find herself with mixed feelings on the issue, as she knew she would hate leaving the *Lexington* but she also needed to advance her career.

"You know," said Dawn Mathias, her distinctive Australian accent coming from Angelica's right, "I could get used to this. Why, oh why, did I join Starfleet instead of staying in Bunbury?"

"I don't know how I managed to go without something like this for as long as I have," replied Kimberly Bautista, her gentle Filipino accent reflecting her mood. "It reminds me of my home province in the Philippines."

McKnight could not resist teasing Bautista. "I've been meaning to ask, Kimmie. Where's your boyfriend of the week?"

"Why do you want to know, Angie?" came her all-too-quick reply.

“Yes, do dish, Kimmie,” enjoined Mathias. “Where *is* this man of yours that you've been talking about all this week? I don't think you've talked about anything else!”

“I see what's going on,” said Bautista, putting her VR sunglasses on the table as she spoke. “You're both married so you're living out your dating fantasies through my love life!”

Mathias removed her VR sunglasses, placing them on top of her head. “Far from it, my friend. I'm a natural observer, especially of all things romantic. I'm enjoying watching you navigate the intricacies of modern love!”

“As for me,” added McKnight, “seeing you juggle several boyfriends at a time makes watching you... *interesting*.”

Bautista knew the teasing was all in good fun but that didn't help her get any less defensive in her reply. “And just how many boyfriends did *you two* have before you were married?”

Oh yes, she is very cheeky, McKnight thought. *Just like me was when I was younger.*

The *heir apparent* to the British crown put her VR sunglasses on top of her head, carefully avoiding the band of the studio-sized headphones she was wearing. When she lifted the glasses from her eyes, she no longer saw a beach but an Olympic-sized swimming pool in a combined pool - gymnasium area located on the trailing edge of the saucer section with wall to ceiling windows showing the ship at the LaGrange point between the two planets.

“My dear Kimberly...” she said before being interrupted by the intercom's whistle.

“Ambassador Mountbatten-Windsor to Commander McKnight.”

The British woman looked to her companions. Their carefully blank expressions could not quite hide their surprise at the unexpected interruption. Angelica removed both her glasses and headphones as she answered, “This is Commander McKnight. Go ahead, please.”

“Commander,” came the voice of the ambassador. *“I hate to interrupt you on your off-time but I am in need of your assistance this evening. Might you have some time to help me?”*

McKnight glanced down at her body as she listened. There was a light bronzing to her skin, a pleasing sign. She always had to work at getting a decent color to her skin and no matter how hard or long she tried, it would not stay for long. *I never get a good tan!* she thought. *Must be the Scottish part of me that won't allow for a decent tan!*

Angelica sighed. “Understood. I'll be there shortly. McKnight out.”

Angelica swung over to one side of the chair quickly, sneaking a peek at a nearby chronometer while grabbing her nearby leather pants. She was surprised to see over an hour had elapsed since the three women had come in. *Why do these things always seem to happen when I'm having the most fun?* She shook her head to put her mind back to where it belonged.

“Don't get too comfortable, you two,” she said as she put on her leather pants and slipped on some knee-high boots over the pants' legs. “I shan't be long.”

Mathias couldn't help but smile. “So why is it parents always have to pick the worst times to see their kids?”

Angelica stopped midway from picking up her red racer's jacket to look at her daughter-in-law. It was very much what she was thinking; all Mathias had done was

vocalize it. “One of these days, I shall endeavor to inquire from someone's parents to see if they have a copy of our schedule.” She put on her jacket and zipped it up just enough to block a slight chill, as well as cover the fact all she had on under it was a bikini top. “But yes, my mother always has had a bad sense of timing.”

“Well, whatever it is,” Mathias commented as she put her earphones back in her ears, “I hope it’s nothing.” She adjusted her long, dark hair as she settled back in her chair, though it had not escaped McKnight’s notice that Mathias had placed a towel nearby her blue nylon sundress. Bautista hadn’t so much as stirred from her chair.

As the commander walked briskly to a nearby turbolift, she took a moment to stop in front of a mirror to quickly check her appearance. Wearing this leather outfit made her look like she was in her mid to late twenties, though she noticed her bustline, hips, and thighs were beginning to show what she was: a forty-two-year-old married mother of two. Even at her age, she would wear leather attire as much as she could. As she walked to a nearby turbolift, she couldn’t help but take a stroll down memory lane, remembering the exact moment she was attracted to, then began wearing, leather attire.

One sunny day in September along Bond Street in London, she had been out shopping *incognito* with Carrie, her best friend, when her buddy had spied a leather outfit on display at Selfridge’s. At first, a teenage Angelica didn’t think anything of it but Carrie, who had known Angelica since they were toddlers, thought it would look good on her. So, Carrie had teased, then dared Angelica to go and at least try the outfit on, for a laugh if nothing else.

Angelica clearly remembered feeling a little nervous and excited as the sales woman escorted her to the changing room to try on the outfit. Once alone, she carefully looked over the clothing, feeling that somehow, it would feel right on her. Quickly disrobing to her underwear, she put on the black leather pants and matching button up shirt. When she saw herself in the changing room’s mirror, she was immediately taken with what she saw. Angelica instantly fell in love with how the soft leather looked on her body and how it felt on her skin. Here, she decided as she spun around, stood a confident and beautiful woman, secure in her own sexuality and unafraid to show it. Somehow, it was as if she and leather were a perfect match. In that moment, she knew leather attire would be for her from here on.

With a devilish smile, Angelica tore away from the mirror and stepped into the waiting room where Carrie was patiently waiting. She would never forget the look on Carrie’s face when she saw Angelica come out to show off her new look. After figuratively picking up her jaw from the ground, Carrie commented on how the material of the outfit seemed to only to accentuate Angelica’s best features, especially her build and sparkling brown eyes. No man could be able to take his eyes off her, Carrie said with more than a little envy apparent in her face as she looked at Angelica. Her friend’s comments only convinced Angelica that she had made the right decision. She bought the outfit on the spot, then convinced Carrie to buy the same outfit for herself. The two girls wore their new outfits out the door and for the rest of the day. In many ways, Angelica was indebted to her best friend who teased her into trying on her first leather outfit because ever since then, leather was Angelica’s preferred (one could say, almost standard) attire.

When Angelica arrived home at Clarence House that evening, her mother was appalled, to say the least, at what she saw what her daughter wearing and that led to one of their first arguments. As a result, Angelica was so mad at her mother that the next day, she left from Clarence House that morning without bothering to disguise herself, knowing the press would get wind of her being out and knock themselves out for their coverage of her. She walked along Bond and Piccadilly Streets with the assembling press in tow as she went to Selfridge's, then to Fortnum & Mason's. She fully intended to replace much of her wardrobe with leather clothing. She bought many different articles of clothing, from complete outfits with jackets, shirts, and pants to dresses for every day or evening-wear.

The shopping spree had taken most of the day and cost nearly a half year's pension, but Angelica did not care. In fact, she was so content with all her purchases that, at the end of the day, she walked out of Fortnum & Mason with a sky-blue leather dress with matching hat, gloves, and boots. Of course, she had timed it so the press would have photos of her in her new look just in time for their evening editions. Luckily, her mother was out of town that day so Angelica wouldn't have to hear about it when she got back to Clarence House.

Despite her cleverness, she *would* catch some flak from some of the more conservative members of the press the next morning. In these people's opinion, the *heir apparent* Princess of Wales had no right to wear any type of indecent clothing like she had the day before. One prominent newspaper had even devoted an entire article about how shameful it was that the Princess would be caught in that type of clothing and how such looks, and, by extension, behavior, could actually do some real damage to the Royal image.

Those voices were in the minority, Angelica was pleased to note. Most of her supporters actually liked seeing the princess look like this. She got messages from many of her fans, expressing their support for her and her new look. One fashion magazine even was even asking if she would be willing to do a photo shoot of her with her new look.

Angelica's answer came the next day when she expressly wore one of her new leather dresses to a luncheon in her benefit. It had been her intention to express her opinion without saying a word; after all, it was her body and her image so she could damn well do whatever she wanted with it. To her fans and supporters, it was a thank you for their support. For her detractors and critics, it said they could go to blistering Hades for all she cared.

The trip down memory lane stopped when the lift deposited Angelica near her quarters. She needed to change into something more appropriate for visiting a senior ambassador and what she was wearing wasn't entirely appropriate. Angelica quickly arrived at her quarters, shedding her jacket and tossing it onto the bed. Same with her bikini top and pants. As a senior officer, Angelica always had a fresh uniform within reach of her bed. She dressed in her Class A uniform and checked her curly red hair to make sure it was presentable. Angelica left her quarters and began the walk to the ambassador's stateroom suite. On the *Lexington*, the VIP quarters were on the same deck as the senior officer's staterooms so the trip did not take long. Angelica steeled herself when she rang the bell for entrance.

"Come in!"

The second officer entered the suite and found a distinguished-looking middle-aged human woman sitting at the desk, looking at the computer screen in front of her. Though her hair was steel gray and there were wrinkles where none had been before, her brown eyes shown a keen intelligence and a penchant for details. There was a sense of authority and power around her; even Angelica could feel it.

“Ambassador?” Angelica asked as the door closed behind her.

“Ah, Angelica!” the ambassador said, motioning to a chair beside hers. “Come!” Angelica walked over to the proffered chair. “What did you want?”

Margaret Windsor-Mountbatten shook her head. “I was hoping to talk to you for a few minutes. We’ve not seen each other since I came aboard.”

“And why do you think that is, Mum?” retorted Angelica as she sat down. “We’ve barely spoken to each other in twenty years so why break that streak? What on Earth could we possibly have to discuss?”

Angelica would have sworn she saw a look of hurt and pain cross her mother's face but it disappeared as quickly as it appeared. “Because there's something I need to talk to you about and it won't wait any longer. I didn't think this kind of news would be appropriate for broadcast over subspace radio. I needed to tell you face-to-face. I knew you wouldn't come all the way to Earth so I could tell you, nor would you willingly accept a call from me. After all, I could hardly ask your husband to tell you this kind of news. This was something I had to tell you myself and the only way I could do that was to come aboard your ship and get you in private so I could tell you.”

Angelica's patience was running thin by now and it showed in her tone. “I'm here now, Mum. What was so important that you came all the way out here to tell me?”

Margaret took a deep sigh before answering. “Angelica... I'm dying.”

Twenty years in Starfleet had taught Angelica at least one thing: how not to express your surprise at the unexpected. But it took all her experience not to show it. However, her training never covered on how to keep your mind from reeling from sudden shocks like this.

“*What?*” was all she could manage to get out.

“I'm dying, Cinnamon,” she repeated, using Angelica's childhood nickname, which was in reference to her red hair. Margaret had never before used it and for Angelica to hear her use of it now only confirmed that Margaret was indeed serious. “It's some rare off world disease I can't even pronounce. I've been told that the symptoms won't begin to affect me for a while yet, but that hasn't stopped me from telling the Diplomatic Corps that this mission will be my last as a Federation ambassador.”

Angelica stood up and began to pace the length of the stateroom. She still could not wrap her mind around what she had been told.

“How long have you known?” Angelica finally inquired.

“About two months.”

“I know you said you couldn't pronounce the name but what do you know about what illness you have?”

“It's rare. Very rare. They only found it only after extensive testing. And because it's so rare, they're not sure if there is a cure.”

Angelica finally stopped pacing and looked to her mother. “How can those doctors be so sure?” An idea hit her. “Our ship's doctor is one of the best in Starfleet. She can examine you...”

Margaret stopped that thought before it could gain any traction. “My dear, I'm the Queen of the United Kingdom. Don't you think I *already* went to the best specialists and the best doctors in the Federation examine me? To the last, they said the same thing.”

“Mum, Dawn's... er, I mean, Doctor Mathias has a lot of experience with off-world illnesses and she has access to a lot better database than most Earthbound doctors can access.”

Sadness entered Margaret's eyes. “I've already seen all the specialists at Starfleet Medical after all the others. They also gave me the same diagnosis.”

Angelica walked in front of her mother, knelt down, and took her hand. “How can you be so damn *certain*, Mum? This isn't like you to *not* fight. After all, you've fought with me for all these years...”

Hardness crept into Margaret's voice as she interrupted Angelica. “Stop right there, Cinnamon! Do you think I *wanted* to be estranged from my eldest daughter? Do you think I *wanted* us to stop talking to each other? You must really think that I think so little of you!”

Her mother's outburst stopped Angelica's retort before she could complete the thought. Not once in her life had Angelica heard her mother talk in this manner. To hear it now was... startling. And she was now on a roll with years of regret pouring out.

“And let me tell you something I've never had the chance to tell you, Cinnamon,” Margaret continued, “All those arguments we had when you were growing up; they hurt me more than you will know. I never wanted to hurt you, then or now. It hurt me every time we fought and it hurt me even more that I haven't been able to talk to you in almost twenty years.

“And it really hurt me that I wasn't at your wedding. Seeing it on video doesn't make up for being there. But I know why you didn't want me there. At the time, I was opposed to you marrying that man and I would have done anything to make sure you didn't marry him. But after watching you being with him all these years, I knew I was wrong. But again, I didn't know how to tell you and I have a hard time admitting when I'm wrong. But I am.”

Margaret stopped and took a breath to gather her thoughts. “Cinnamon, I don't have very long so I just want to put this feud of ours to an end. That's why I'm here. To put things right while I still can.”

All these years, she didn't know that their spats had hurt Margaret as much as they had hurt Angelica. “I never knew you felt like that,” Angelica finally admitted.

“I think it's time for you and I to be honest with each other,” said Margaret. “I knew you were hurting but I didn't know how to help you. And being unable to help only made me angry and, unfortunately, I took it out on you when I should have taken it out on myself.”

Angelica looked to her mother. “When I was a teenager, all I wanted was for you to hurt as bad I was hurting. And as an adult, it seemed to me that by staying away, at least we wouldn't fight.” She paused, realizing that now was a time to put all her cards on the table and let what come. “And even you will have to admit that treating me the way you did, as... *cold* as you did was a pretty bad thing.”

Margaret looked down, then to her daughter. "I'll admit I handled your situation very poorly. But look at it from my perspective for a moment."

The familiar anger that Angelica would feel at this point didn't materialize. Instead, a pang of pity made itself felt in its place. She never once thought to take the time to look at things from her mother's perspective and that knowledge brought with it an embarrassment Angelica had never felt before.

"I've tried but I can't, not with the way you treated me. Why did you treat me the way you did for so long, Mum?"

"I admit, Cinnamon," Margaret said, her voice devoid of anger or malice, "that I was too harsh on you. But I, Princess of Wales, *heir presumptive* to my brother's... your *uncle's* throne, and as one of the five ambassadors from Earth to the Federation, needed to prepare you for the day you would take your place as Queen."

Angelica thought for a moment. "And that leads to one big question. Why?"

There was puzzlement in Margaret's face. "Why what?"

So why did you have me? I mean, I wasn't planned. I was an accident!"

Margaret reached out and took Angelica's hand. "Call me old fashioned but I decided against an abortion. You were innocent, Angelica. Yes, I did not plan on getting pregnant until later in life but my one night's carelessness with a complete stranger because I was mad at your father. And none of that is your fault; it is mine and mine alone. When I found out I was carrying you, I knew I was responsible for you. And I made the decision to love and raise you. Though your late father wasn't happy with me being pregnant at such a young age and after such an... *indiscretion*, he agreed with my reasoning. Even James wanted me to have you."

"Even though you all knew what my birth would mean and you were barely 18 years old?"

"Even then. Before you were born, your uncle worked with the Prime Minister to ensure you would be a person who would follow me."

Angelica looked in shock. "Uncle did *that* for me?"

Margaret sighed. "Yes. He never had kids, even though he wanted them. You were the closest he would get to having a child of his own. He loved you like his own daughter, especially after my husband died before you were born. And James made sure that you were not only wanted but that you would be in line to follow him and me."

Now Angelica was beginning to see the light any why both her mother and uncle did what they had done. It was all because they loved her so much that they could not bear having her cast her out of the family through no fault of her own except for being born.

"I think I'm beginning to see your side of this issue," admitted Angelica. "But there's still one thing that bothers me though. Why didn't you tell me once that you loved me? You were extremely tough on me and I resented you for it! It was as if you didn't trust me!"

"I trust you with my life, Cinnamon. But I didn't know that you would rebel against what you were to be. You wore your leather clothes as a sign of rebelling against both me and what you were. You fought with me because you needed a target and I was the closest one available. You felt alone; isolated. You thought no one could relate to you so you closed yourself off; that is, until you met Alexander."

Angelica was astounded; her mother had accurately described her teenage feelings right down to the letter. Margaret took Angelica's silence as being correct and proceeded.

"That's why I was the way I was with you. I loved you too much and it pained me to do what I did more than you will know. When we started to fight, that's when I knew that my treatment of you had opened a rift between us. There's not a day that has gone by that I regretted what came between us. It was like you didn't love me anymore and that hurt worse than any argument we ever had. Imagine if your own daughters were to do that to you?" Carrie and Jennifer were Angelica's twin daughters, so Angelica could imagine full well if the roles were reversed.

"I can see where you're coming from, Mum."

"So that is why I have come here, using up a lot of goodwill and favors in doing so. Now the time has come for me to step up and admit I was wrong. I want to forget all those hurtful and bad things we have said and done in the past. I don't know how much longer I have but in what time I do have, I want to put the past in the past and let it be forgotten."

Angelica could feel the tears forming in the corners of her eyes and she didn't know whether to let them go or try to stop them. There was a flood of relief that came from a conversation she would not have imagined possible up to an hour ago. She found that she could no longer be angry with this woman and that she had spent the last two decades acting like a foolish girl over a point of pride, not once considering the other side of the story. "When I look at it from this angle, my attitude was childish to the point of being inexcusable. That's not an excuse for what I did but it's the only thing I can offer you."

"Cinnamon, you're my daughter and I love you so very much. For all that I failed to do and more, I am so very sorry. Please forgive me."

The daughter found she could not hold back her tears anymore. "Yes, I forgive you. And I'm sorry too, Mum. Forgive..." Angelica's voice broke, openly crying for one of the few times in her adult life. Margaret took her sobbing daughter in her arms and held her as both she and Angelica cried away their sins from the last two decades.

Sometime later, Angelica found herself back in her quarters, changing into her bedclothes. To say this night wasn't what she had expected when it had started was an understatement. She would have never thought her mother to be sick, much less wanting to make amends with her for their past. However, to hear her mother actually apologize to her for everything would have been inconceivable before tonight. Never, even in her dreams, would Angelica have expected such a thing.

In the past twenty years, it had crossed Angelica's mind to try to make amends with her mother but she could never bring herself to actually do it. It was her own stubborn pride, she concluded. Before tonight, she would never admit to herself that maybe her mother had a legitimate reason for doing what she did and tonight, her mother had all but proven that suspicion right.

Her mother had also been right in another respect. Angelica had been a hellraiser in her teens and being a royal had made it much worse. And she had rebelled against her mother because, to her, her mother had been so distant and so tough on her. Angelica had never wanted to be Queen and now she was staring it in the face. Her mother may have

had a bad approach but her goal was correct: to prepare Angelica for a role she didn't want. That had to have been bad enough.

The other reason Angelica hadn't talked to her mother for so long was because of Alexander McKnight; more specifically, Angelica's marrying him. They had married the moment she had graduated from the Academy and that act had infuriated Margaret. Margaret wanted her to get married like she had; in a big public ceremony at Westminster Abbey to a appropriate suitor. Instead, Angelica had married in a Starfleet chapel to a common Starfleet officer far away from her native soil.

After talking to her mother, Angelica had gone to the captain's quarters, knowing Alex had to be told. And as she told him the story, he seemed to be just as surprised as she had been. When they were done talking, Angelica reluctantly left his quarters for her own. Normally, they shared his quarters but when there were visitors to the ship, she would stay in her own quarters so they would not draw any wrong impressions.

She went through her nighttime routine of cleaning her face and brushing her teeth before putting on a red satin camisole and short shorts. Angelica did not usually wear sleepwear but again, when there were visitors aboard ship, allowances had to be made. It felt odd that she, a married woman, would be going to bed by herself but she knew this wouldn't last forever. In no time at all, she was in a light sleep.

As she slept, she would swear there was a tingling in the back of her mind. At first, it felt like someone was trying to talk to her but she could not hear what they were saying. She tried to push it out of her mind but as she fell asleep, it turned into a dream.

She was somewhere but she could not tell where she was. Angelica could tell that someone was with her but somehow, she knew it wasn't her husband. He was tall, standing well over six feet and dressed impeccably in a conservative style of suit. Not one of his dark steely gray hairs were out of place and his shave would have been the envy of most men. His gray eyes were taking in the half-dressed woman standing in front of him.

Hello, Your Royal Highness, said a deep, resonating voice. Angelica was mildly shocked that this seemed to be someone who knew who she was. It had been a while since she had been in the United Kingdom and longer than that since she had performed any of her royal duties so she's been out of the public eye for some time.

Yes, Angelica Renee Louise Windsor-Mountbatten McKnight, she heard him say. Yet, his lips did not move. It was then she realized his voice was coming from inside her mind. **I know who you are. And yes, only you can hear me. Just listen to the sound of my voice, Angelica.** That tone and timbre could have belonged to a profound Shakespearean actor; Angelica had heard voices like that in her previous career as a recording engineer and she would even admit she loved hearing that kind of voice. But what was a voice like that doing in her mind right now?

Do not concern yourself with who I am. Just listen to my voice.

How do you know what I'm thinking? she thought, then mentally kicked herself for asking *that* dumb a question. Whomever was talking in her mind obviously would know what she was thinking; they had plucked her name from her mind so she had to assume that anything she knew, they knew too.

Get out of my head! she mentally shouted. The man simply smiled and, in that instant, she instinctively knew what he was about to do.

Oh, bollocks! You're going to hypnotize me, she thought, voicing the obvious. Normally, Angelica would have laughed at the prospect of someone trying to hypnotize her but she wasn't laughing now.

The stranger was persistent if nothing else. His voice was as smooth as the late-night DJ that she sometimes would listen to when she could not sleep. **Angelica, just keep listening to my voice. My voice relaxes you. You wish to do nothing else at this moment but listen to the sound of my voice.**

As she listened, she could feel her body relax, as if she were receiving a full body massage. She knew she had to try to fight for control of her mind. **No! I won't submit!** Despite her defiance, Angelica could feel her thoughts growing fuzzy, out of focus. She knew it was only a matter of time before she would cave in but she would not willingly go into that quiet night without a fight.

The man simply kept that maddening smile on his lips. **You have no choice anymore. Keep listening to the sound of my voice. My voice is the only one you will hear. In your mind, you will fall asleep but you will continue to listen to my voice.**

I swear, I'll never... listen to that ...DJ ever again. My.... prom... ise... to... This would be the last thought she would have before falling asleep.

Angelica McKnight was now completely under this man's control.

Very good, Angelica. You are asleep but, in your mind, you are listening to my voice. Your mind is now blank. You have no thoughts of your own. You are now mine to command. You will obey me and me alone. You are my slave and I am your Master.

Yes, she found herself saying in her mind. **I... obey. I am your slave and you are my Master.**

Excellent. Now listen carefully. You will ensure my safety and survival. You will tell me anything I wish without hesitation or question. Do you understand what I am telling you?

Yes. I understand.

When you wake up from this dream, you will behave normally as if nothing has happened. However, you will feel a need to come me. You will come to me but in doing so, you must not attract attention to yourself. Do you understand my directions?

Yes. I will remember your instructions.

Softly, the man caressed her face with his fingers. For her part, Angelica blushed and her body involuntarily trembled under his touch. Had her husband been performing this act on her, she would have thrown him on the bed and had her way with him. However, here and now, she was stock still, awaiting his command.

You are very lovely, Angelica. His fingers kept playing with her face, moving along to her ears and hair. Had she been able to process what she was seeing, she would have seen fangs appear as he smiled at her, thinking of what was about to happen. **In a moment, you and I will share a very intimate act much more fulfilling and less messy than you enjoy with your husband. Oh yes, you will enjoy this very much.**

Even though she wasn't able to answer, her body's quaking was more than an answer. It was permission. He gently, almost lovingly, placed his fingers on her temples. The involuntary cry Angelica gave was more powerful than any joy or climax she had

experienced in her life. She could not feel the life force being drained from her but his reaction said it all. For moments, they were feeling as one, acting as one. He could feel his power increasing as he took what she was unwittingly offering.

Finally getting his fill, he gently lifted his fingers and stared at the auburn-haired beauty in front of him. The frissoning of her body continued, as if she had experienced the most powerful climax of her life. She was breathing heavily and her face was the color of her hair. Yet, she remained as she was, eyes unopened. They remained dangerously close to each other.

Very good. I will see you in a short time, Angelica. Now, awake!

Then, as if a veil had lifted, Angelica woke up, finding herself looking up at the ceiling. She blinked furiously a few times before turning to look at a chronometer. It said 0600. *What in the hell was that?* she thought to herself. *I've never had anything like that before! NEVER!*

Angelica shook her head slightly and got up to use the bathroom. She looked at her reflection in the mirror, admiring what she saw.

She didn't notice there were two slight bruises on each of her temples.

Chapter One

"You elected?"

"No, but I got nominated real good."

–Yul Brenner & Steve McQueen, The Magnificent Seven (1960)

"I heard you were looking for men," said Brieanna Smith to the man dressed in black sitting in front of her. *Or women*, she thought. *Too bad it would be almost another century or more before women would be accepted as equals.*

"That's right," he answered with a Russian accent. "Men who are good with *that*." He pointed to the Colt Single Action Army in its holster on her right thigh.

"I'm good with it, mister" Smith replied. "You may be surprised to know just how good. Test me."

"I intend to." He stood up and walked around the table. Smith noticed his eyes never left her gun and he never turned his back on her. *It's so refreshing to deal with a professional*, she thought. *Klingons? Romulans? They're rank amateurs when it comes to an old-fashioned gunfighter.* She knew this man had been one of the best gunfighters in the Old West, based on all those old Western films she had watched. *And here I am testing myself against him right now. Why did I decide to do something this stupid... once again?*

"Place your hands like this," he ordered, bringing up his hands and keeping them about three feet apart. Smith mirrored his stance. "Now clap. As fast as you can!" She did as bid, only to find his own Colt Single Action Army revolver in between her hands. *Damn, that's fast!* she thought.

"Your turn." If nothing else, he was as sparse with his words as he was with his lead. Then again, as a professional gunfighter, you didn't carry much ammunition. Either you dropped your target quick or you were dead. Oddly, that somehow appealed to Brieanna's inner cowgirl.

He assumed the position he had shown Smith earlier and looked at her with deadly earnest intent. "Call it."

Smith steadied herself, knowing that one way or another, her reputation was on the line. All the hours she had put in practicing for this moment were now to either pay off or it would make her look a fool.

From the periphery, she could see a very slight tenseness in Kris' shoulders; you almost couldn't see it. But she knew what it meant and that was all she needed. The look of surprise on his face when he found her sidearm in his hands was worth everything she'd gone through to get to this point. Secretly, she was glad she had listened to the ship's doctor about losing some weight on the weapon; that had enabled her to outdraw this gunfighter.

"Very good," Kris said in slight admiration. "Question is, can you do that when it mattered?"

Smith holstered her weapon as she answered. "I can."

"Such speed... for a woman." There was no malice or derision; simply a statement of fact. Women gunfighters were rare in the Old West so to meet one was an occasion indeed. Especially one that could outdraw him.

"Don't let that stop you, Kris," answered Smith, keeping her eyes on him. "I can handle myself just as well in a gunfight as I can in a duel."

"So, tell me, why you want do this for some farmers?" he nodded to the three farmers seated behind him. *Mexicans*, she thought. *In this period of history, they're as poor as the dirt they farmed. Too bad it'll be at least another century before Mexico would become a first world nation, if I remember my history right.*

"Because," she said with a smile, "I enjoy a challenge. I think that Pancho Villa copycat I heard about will be the challenge I'm looking for."

"Captain McKnight to Commander Smith."

The gunfighter's gun was out in a blink. It took everything for Brianna not to answer in kind, lest he shoot her, even by accident. She shook her head, not believing her sudden run of bad luck.

"What was that?"

"Computer," she said a little urgently, lest the program become corrupt, "delete last three seconds and save program. Then end program."

The world faded from an Old West dirt house to black. Smith removed the VR glasses to reveal the alcove in her quarters on the *Lexington*. VR suites were starting to come into the fleet and she wanted one, though she could do without the gear she had to wear. She placed the glasses on a nearby shelf as she puffed, mentally transitioning from an Old West gunfighter to a Starfleet commander, though she was dressed like a cowgirl by wearing a black leather shirt, black riding pants, dark yellow suede vest, a bright yellow bandana, black leather gloves, and a dark 10-gallon hat covering her dark, graying, hair. "Smith here. What'cha need, Alex?"

"Just wanted to let you know there may be a slight change in plans."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows went up as an evil thought hit her. "I've not heard any alert."

"Oh that? The final talks and signing ceremony's still on schedule. But I wanted to let you know that Angie's got a personal issue that may cause her to take a leave of absence."

"Oh?" she asked. Automatically, her thoughts went to what could have happened to her friend. "Anything bad?"

"Not at the moment, no but I'd prefer to talk to you about that in person. Meet me in my office before I beam down with her for the morning session. Say about 0830."

"Understood. The morning session's still on for 0900 hours, right?"

"Unless there's a change that I don't know anything about. Care to trade me places?"

Smith barked a laugh. "Are you kidding? You can have that honor all to yourself, skipper."

Alex chuckled. "One of these days," Brianna swore she could hear the smile in his tone, "you'll be in my shoes, Anne. Have a good evening, kiddo."

"Kiddo? Only my dad ever called me that and that was only until I was a teenager!"

Now Alex chuckled openly. *"Sorry. Almost everyone's a kid to me and I do tend to get carried away."*

"I will forgive you this once... old man!"

His chuckle turned to full laughter. *"Okay! You got me there! See you in the morning, Anne! McKnight out!"*

Smith was reaching for the glasses but she felt she wasn't in the mood to get back into the simulation. She removed the glasses, then took off her sidearm, making sure it was unloaded and safed before placing it in the safe. Then she disrobed and took a shower before putting on a sleepshirt and shorts and went to bed, knowing she would have to get up early and make sure everything was in order before Alex reported for duty.

She didn't know she would have the longest couple of days of her life coming very soon.

Alex McKnight and Brieanna Smith made their way to his office, which was located in the forward port area just off the bridge. Essentially, it was the executive office version of the senior officers' quarters, with a sofa in place of a bed and an antique oak desk in the rear section for private meetings. Alex motioned for Smith to take a seat on the sofa while he went to the replicator for drinks.

"Your usual, Anne?"

"I think I need it, Alex."

The captain ordered a large vanilla bean iced coffee and one medium Cortado. Smith marveled at both the smell of the coffee and the comfort of the sofa. The thing looked like it was as hard as rocks but it was surprisingly soft.

"Is this a new sofa?"

"When we were picking up the ambassador at starbase, I got to swap out that crap thing Kennedy had in here for this one. That sofa you're on was in the quartermaster's office and after I sat in it, I knew I had to have it. So, I made a deal and it cost me a case of an really old vintage wine." He retrieved the coffee cups and walked to the sofa. "I've actually fallen asleep on that thing."

"I don't doubt it," she said, taking her coffee from him. Alex then walked around and sat on the other side of the sofa, taking a sip of his drink. Brieanna winced a bit as the hot liquid hit her mouth but it tasted very good. She put it on the table in front of them.

"So, what was it you wanted to talk about, Alex?"

"It's about the ambassador," the captain said as he followed suit and put his coffee on the table. "You know she's Angie's mom, right?"

"Yeah, I remember. And if I'm remembering right, she and her mom don't get along very well."

"Until last night, you were right. She had met Angie last night for the first time in years," he said, picking up his cup. "They made amends with each other."

"Wow!" said Smith. "I know Angie isn't one to forgive easily or quickly but how did *that* happen?"

"Apparently, the ambassador's sick."

"How bad is it?" she asked as Alex took a drink.

“From what Angie told me, it's terminal.”

Smith took a drink, thinking. “Wow,” she finally said. “I can see where that kind of thing would make you patch things up pretty quick.”

“Angie didn't say it but I think she may want to accompany her back to Earth after this mission.”

“I'd be kind of surprised if she didn't,” Smith said. “I know if it were my parents, I'd be out of here like a bat out of hell. Pretty sneaky of the ambassador to get Starfleet to let her use the *Lexington* for her mission.”

“I was thinking the same thing. But you know how ambassadors have their pull.”

Both stopped as they enjoyed their coffee. “I've to hand it to Spock,” said Alex, breaking the silence, “that solution in keeping coffee in the transporter buffer was a great idea. I remember the days when there was only one type of coffee and you had to go to the mess hall to get it.”

“We're getting spoiled, Alex,” Smith responded as soon as she finished her sip. “All this new technology is nice and all but it's also badly spoiling us. Could you imagine Valentina or Jason going all the way to the officers' mess for a cup of coffee that had been brewing all day?” She chuckled. “These kids don't know how good they got it anymore.”

“I agree, Anne. But, as we get older, I sort of come to like these perks. I've always liked iced coffee but in the old days, it was a real pain in the ass to make. Now, I go up to a replicator and have the perfect cup in seconds. I kind of enjoy that.”

“And you've just shown your age, buddy!” She finished off her coffee. “Damn that was good!”

“Another cup?”

“I shouldn't but why not? How often does a commander have a captain serve her?”

“You're asking for it, Anne!” he teased as he got up for another round. “I suppose you want a coffee cake too?”

She giggled. “If you're offering.”

Alex chuckled and shook his head. “You're incorrigible, Anne!”

“But you love me all the same, my old friend!”

He punched in the order and came back with the same two coffees as before and two coffee buns that Smith had not seen before.

“What's this?”

“I had them when my family was stationed in South Korea,” he explained. “Oh my God, are they delicious! They've got a few names but I've known them as ‘coffee buns’. My sister called them ‘rotiboy’. They're great with coffee and they're addictive as hell.”

Smith picked one up and took a tentative bite. As Alex promised, they were really good. As in “melt in your mouth” good.

“I see why you like them,” Smith said, enjoying the taste. “They're great!”

“Take a sip of coffee after and the flavor is to die for.”

She took a bite, then a sip of her Cortado and, just as her friend said, it was a really sweet and full of flavor.

“And you got this in Korea?”

"One of the side benefits of being a military brat was being able to live in another country and really get to know the customs, culture, and foods. I also like Shepard's pie too."

"Well, you've now given Dawn a reason to put me on a diet," said Smith. "I'll be putting on weight eating this stuff!"

"I told you it was addictive. I find it hard to stop after one but I can after two," he said with a wink.

"Back to the subject," she said as she took another bite of her bun, "The ambassador didn't look sick this morning at the brief."

"No, she didn't. But then, the ambassador didn't mention what was wrong with her and if she did, Angie didn't mention it to me. Personally, I think Angie was still in shock about their reconciliation."

"Hmmm," verbalized Smith. "But Angie hasn't said anything officially?"

"Nope. But then, they had their first conversation in twenty years last night and they let it all out."

"I take it this is all off the record then?"

"It's an unofficial 'heads up' so if she does ask for leave, we won't be without a communications officer. You know of anyone?"

"Come again for Brianna?" she asked.

"In case we've to replace Angie, you know of anyone that can fill in?"

Smith looked to her coffee cup before answering. "I'm thinking of a Delta shift Caitian ensign who seems to be standing out from the pack. Name's Gillian Cunningham."

"I think I know the name," he said, drinking. "What got my attention was how a Caitian managed to have a human name."

"To be honest, I've never asked. But Angie has given her some really high marks and compliments on her last two quarterly evaluations. Seems to be at home on the communications board. I think if you asked, she'd probably agree with Cunningham to replace her."

"Fine," Alex said, putting down his cup. "If Angie brings it up, I'll ask. But I wanted you aware since you're the executive officer and personnel issues are your bailiwick."

"But this isn't official."

"And not commonly known," Alex confirmed. "Speaking of not commonly known... Angie's up for a promotion."

Smith looked at him in surprise. "I didn't know that."

"The panel meets next month. I've got a feeling they'll recommend her for promotion to Captain."

"It couldn't happen to a better person," Smith said, taking a drink.

"Jealous much?"

"Not really. I'm not ready for a promotion but thanks for offering."

"You're waiting on me to retire, aren't you?" he teased as he drank. "To take the center seat of the *Lexington*?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm learning from one of the best and am not comfortable in taking a command of my own just yet."

"I understand. I've seen officers get promoted before they were ready and the results weren't pretty. You'll let me know when you think you are?"

Smith nodded, putting her cup down. "Though you think I am already ready for promotion."

Alex just smiled. "Just so we understand each other. Are we ready in case things go south between Vendikar and Eminiar VII?"

Smith nodded. "Kimmie's been running drills with the phaser crews to shoot down small, fast-moving targets and Dawn's been refreshing her staff on radiation poisoning and treatment options. Sophie's checking the hardened circuits and the protected computer core to make sure if we do get hit with a nuclear weapon, we won't be dead in the water."

"I don't intend to let a missile get that close to us."

"You know me. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best."

Alex chuckled. "That's my line!"

"Then I learned it well," Smith chuckled. "Sophie and I will be checking on the shield generators later this afternoon to make sure the matrix can handle a near miss."

"You can take the girl out of engineering but you can't take engineering out of the girl."

"Hey, you're the one who put me in this slot! And I'm only the exec because of what happened to Bill Gee." She was referring to William "Bill" Gee, the *Lexington's* original executive officer with Smith as chief engineer. During the ship's trials, there had been an accident and Gee had lost the use of his legs. He had been forced to medically retire, though Alex had seen to it that his best friend got a promotion to Captain before his retirement. Alex had then approached Smith, armed with Gee's recommendation she take over for him. They had played poker to see if she would accept or if she were to retire.

She lost the final hand.

"And you've never given me cause to regret it, Anne. You've already bailed me out more times than I can count and that's saying something."

She blushed at the compliment. She had to hand it to Alex; he could be charming when he wanted to be. "Thanks. Though I think you missed your calling, Alex."

"How so?"

"I'm thinking you should have been a trial lawyer instead of a starship captain. You can be charming as hell when you want to be."

Alex laughed in his coffee. "I'm a horrible liar."

"Bullshit. You've bluffed, conned, and lied your way out of more things than I can count."

"If you say so." Both laughed.

Alex was glad that the ambassador had forced a break in the negotiations; he was hungry but he wasn't about to eat on the planet. He sneaked off and beamed back up to the ship, making a bee line to the officer's mess. The place was rather busy when he got there a few minutes later but, being the captain, it was easy to get access to a replicator. He ordered a bacon cheeseburger, onion rings, and a soda pop. When he first reported aboard, he asked the programmers to program the replicators to produce soda pop on

command and had provided them with the formulas but the first attempts were horrible; the computer had problems with the carbonation sequencing. It was Fox, in one of her first duties as chief engineer, who had finally managed to get it right. Alex drank soda in short spurts but it had become a hit with the younger members of the crew. Alex had to laugh at that, especially when he saw the younger officers and crewmembers on the Rec Deck drinking it.

Getting his tray, he looked over the area and saw Bennington-Fox sitting by herself near one of the windows along the aft wall. Figuring nothing about it, he walked over and introduced himself. "Mind some company, Sophie?"

The engineer was so lost in thought and had been staring out the window so the sound of his voice caused her to yelp and jump a few inches in her chair. She spun around and saw her captain standing there, trying to keep from smiling.

"Goddessdamn it, Captain! Don't scare me like that!" she said, holding her hand over her heart. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"Sorry about that, Sophie," he said. "Mind if I sit here?"

"You're the captain, captain."

He chuckled as he put his tray down and sat in the chair across from the Hawaiian woman. He spied the remnants of a bowl of *saimin* noodles and a half-full cup of chai tea. Though Bennington-Fox was born and raised in Hawaii, she certainly did not look like an islander. In fact, when Alex first looked at her photo in her personnel file, he thought she hailed from the American Midwest. She had that 'farmer's daughter' look: medium brown hair, blue eyes, average build and height. Therefore, it came as a surprise when he read that she was actually from Honolulu.

"Thanks, Sophie. How's it going today?"

"Been on my hands and knees all morning going over all the hardened circuits," she said, picking up her tea. "The circuits are okay. I've still got the computer core and shield generators to do this afternoon."

"Busy day then."

"Yeah, well, after what I heard about those guys on Vendikar from Kimberly, I figured it best to play it safe."

"Wait," Alex said, toying with an onion ring. "I knew Kimmie had been stationed on the *Enterprise* but she was aboard her at that time?"

"She says she was and I don't doubt it. Said they almost got themselves nuked from what she was saying."

Alex knew what Sophea was talking about; almost every starship captain had heard it at one time or another. Alex got the story directly from Jim Kirk himself. That mission hadn't been a cakewalk, that was for sure. And it hadn't helped that a know-nothing, pompous ass of an ambassador, Fox, made matters worse, only to redeem himself at the end by signing the paperwork to allow them to join the Federation as a provisional member. Ambassador Mountbatten-Windsor had been working on this admission nearly as long as Fox, hence why she was here; to see them become full Federation members.

"She wasn't far from wrong," Alex admitted, putting the poor onion ring out of its misery. "Good idea to check everything though."

“You’d better believe it,” she said as the captain started to work on his burger. “I’ve heard the stories.”

Alex nodded, letting the burger have a break as he washed it down with the soda. He wiped his mouth with the napkin before continuing. “So have I.”

Fox looked at a wall-mounted chronometer. “I hate to do this, Captain, but I’ve to meet Commander Smith in ten minutes. Will you excuse me?”

“Sure.”

Bennington-Fox picked up her trash and walked over to the recycling unit, dumping the tray and all into the receptacle before walking out. Alex picked up where he left off, now trying to put the burger out of its misery. It wasn’t long before Angelica showed up, getting herself a coffee from the replicator.

Something wasn’t quite right about her, he opined. First off, she didn’t have breakfast with him, which was odd. Second, she rarely brought work with her off duty and she seemed to be wearing an expression of deep thought. There was some instinct that was telling him that something wasn’t right but then, if he had a parent he didn’t get along with for almost two decades and then they suddenly told you they were dying, he’d probably be acting odd too.

Angelica almost didn’t notice her husband and when she did, her smile wasn’t as bright as usual when she would see him. Again, Alex chalked it up to what she said had transpired last night.

“Hey, beautiful,” he whispered so only she could hear as soon as she got in range. “Two pence for your thoughts.”

She sat down across from him, knowing people would be looking and judging them. “Oh. Hi.”

The very fact she was aboard was in thanks to a special program Alex had helped to create in his last days as the deputy commander of Starfleet. Fleet planners were starting to look at extending starship tours from five to seven years due to the rapid expansion of the Federation in recent years. If crews were to be out for seven years, they would most certainly form attachments and it would be only natural that some of them would marry other crewmembers.

However, it had been an unwritten rule that a husband and wife should not be in the same chain of command or on the same command staff. Alex had thought that a bunch of baloney. He thought that the best officer to stand up to their superior would be one that knew them best; knew when to push and when to give. Spouses should know each other best, he thought, so it would make sense. Then again, he knew of the tendencies to allow the spouse to get away with more than they would with others and that would undermine discipline and morale.

He had proposed to allow married couple to serve, within reason, on the same staff, provided there was someone impartial between them. That person would act to serve as not only a buffer but as a reminder to the couple that they were professionals, not lovers, while on duty. Amazingly, the headshrinkers bought off on that line of reasoning and they had worked with his staff to formalize the policy. The policy makers, however, decided to make a trial case and since Alex was going to back to starship command, he would be the guinea pig. In this case, Angelica would be the second officer and Smith would act as the

buffer between her and the captain. So far, Angelica had not given reason for him to regret accepting the conditions for her being there.

"That's all you've got to say? 'Oh. Hi.' Are you okay?"

She took a drink of her coffee. "I'm fine, Captain. Why do you ask?"

Now he knew something was up; she rarely called him 'Captain' when circumstances didn't demand it. "You're not acting yourself."

"I've got a lot on my mind."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Rather well" she replied with a High Wycombe accent, "considering what happened last night."

Alex put down his burger, wiped his mouth, and went to work on the remaining onion rings. "Yeah. That kind of news would put a damper on things. But you've got to look at the bright side. You got to patch things up with your mother."

"Yeah, I guess you're right there. It was nice to get everything out in the open and patch up our differences."

"So, I guess you'll be taking leave then."

"Why would I do that?"

Alex stopped in mid-chew. "Uh... don't you want to see what you can do for your mom? I figured you'd want to go to London for a bit."

"She didn't ask me to go with her, Alex."

He barely believed what he was hearing. He lowered his voice, knowing she could hear him perfectly well. "You said she's *dying*, Angie! That's cause enough to take leave and get to be with her!"

Angelica sighed, as if she knew this would be his reaction. "But as you know, we hardly spoken to each other in two decades. Even though we patched things up last night, I'm not so sure I should push the issue, lest we be back at each other's throats." She took another sip. "And having been out of the royal loop for a long time, I may be more in the way than out of it."

In all the years they had been married, Alex could not recall any time Angelica talking as coldly as she was now. Alex could not place his finger on it but there was something definitely off with her.

"Listen," he said, choosing his words carefully. "I know all about you and you mother and how you two haven't gotten along. Hell, I'm a big chunk of that reason. But if she's ill, then don't you think you should be with her, regardless if she's asked for you."

"I don't want something to set us off and go back to the way things were," she countered. "It was nice to get things off our chest. And it's nice to be able to get along with Mum."

"I appreciate your thoughts, Angie. But consider this. Don't look at it like 'how can I screw it up.' Whether you like it or not, you're the next in line to the throne of the United Kingdom and when she... passes, you won't have time to say 'goodbye.' Take it from someone who knows from personal experience. You've got to take the chance *now*." *And you should take it*, he almost said.

“I appreciate what you are saying, my husband, but I don't want to act rashly.” She looked at the time. “My break is over and I'm due back on the bridge. If you will excuse me, Captain.” She got up and walked out without both another word or looking back.

Now Alex knew something was wrong but before he could analyze it, the intercom went off. “Bridge to Captain McKnight.”

“McKnight here. Go.”

“Sir, the ambassador's asked for your presence back on Eminiar. Their representatives are nitpicking some of the verbiage of the final paperwork.”

Chapter Two

"The truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but in the end, there it is."

- Winston Churchill

It was the end of Alpha shift and Angelica was all but ready for her duty shift to end. For some reason, she didn't feel completely like herself and for the life of her, she didn't know why. She even thought back to the earlier conversation with Alex and even then, she noticed there was something wrong with her. Yes, she had been shaken to the core by her mother's news and by their sudden reconciliation. So why would these two events, despite hitting closer to home than most events, affect her like this? It was almost as if she wasn't completely herself.

"I hope you're ready for tonight, Angie," said a familiar voice. She looked up at her friend, Kimberly Bautista, who was looking back at her expectantly.

"Ready?"

"You forgot *already*? For shame! We've got the recording studio booked for tonight!"

Indeed, the princess had forgotten, though she would be very embarrassed to admit it. She and the Filipina shared a common passion: music. More specifically, it was singing. And their love of music and singing had quickly cemented their friendship.

"I hate to admit it," Angelica said slowly, taking out her earphone, "but I... forgot."

"I *knew* it! You had that blank look when I said something about it!"

Angelica could not have said why but she was feeling a strong inclination for her to meet someone in private which was almost negating her desire to sing tonight, which was saying something. With Bautista badgering her, it would be hard for her to justify in not showing up to the studio. Then it hit her as to what to say to allow her to be late.

"Kimmie, I've got a dinner date for this evening." She quickly amended when she saw her friend's face fall, "but it won't be an all-night affair. I'll only be a little late to the studio."

"A date *without* any strings attached?" Bautista teased as they got into the waiting turbolift. "Is there such a thing?"

"I hate to admit it but the older you get and the longer you know someone, the strings just aren't as important as they once were."

"Are you kidding?"

Angelica punched in their destination before answering. "Kimmie, I've been married for a long time now. The after-dinner activities aren't as... *expected* as they are when you are dating. Trust me, my libido is doing just fine, but it's not a number one priority anymore."

Bautista looked at her friend as if she had lost her mind. In her current state, Angelica would have hesitantly admitted that her mind wasn't working right.

"Whatever," the Filipina conceded. "How late do you think you will be?"

“Not long,” the commander said as the turbolift stopped at their destination and opened its doors to let its passengers out. “I’ll be there with some time to spare, I promise.”

“Understood. I’ll keep a microphone and a set of earphones warm for you then.”

Bautista turned and headed down the corridor to her quarters. Being a senior officer, Angelica turned the opposite way to the suite of senior officer's quarters. All the time, the urge to meet someone was getting stronger. By the time she had reached her quarters, she felt as though she needed to go right now. She went to the closet and pulled out a prearranged set of clothes. She quickly disrobed to her undergarments and put on a black leather turtleneck with matching pants. Barely taking the time to fluff her hair, she put on a pair of boots and wiped off her outfit before heading out the door.

She made a beeline for the turbolift, hoping that no one would notice what she was doing. Luckily, for her, she didn't meet anyone on the way and there was no one in the cab when it arrived. From experience, she knew not to let her guard down and become complacent. It was then that mistakes happened and she knew that she could not afford to make one now.

The ride was both smooth and quick. Angelica quickly walked to the doors of the Botanical Gardens down on Deck 21. No one, save one human male, was there. The man was sitting on a bench, looking out of the floor-to-ceiling viewport window at the stars at warp speed. As she approached, she knew this was the man from her dream last night but looking at him in the flesh, he blended in so well that, had they been in her hometown, she wouldn't have noticed him, even if he had passed her shoulder-to-shoulder.

Yes, Angelica, said the same voice from earlier. ***It is I. Come closer, dear.***

This time, there was no hesitation or questions. She obediently walked over to the bench and sat down beside him. Angelica's face and eyes had no countenance of their own; she was expressionless.

How can I serve you, Master? she asked.

I noticed that your husband was asking about you. From his questioning, he must feel that you are not acting as yourself.

That is true, Master, she said. ***However, the news concerning my mother is a good cover for my serving you. But who are you, Master?***

He smiled, revealing fangs. ***I’ve always been partial to the name ‘Dracula.’***

In his quarters, Alex was deep into reading about the exploits of the American battleship *Washington* (BB-56) during World War II when he heard the door open and close and the sound of rubbing leather. He didn’t bother to look, as he knew the only other person who could open that door.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?”

He still didn’t look at the direction of the voice as he turned the page. “At this point, should I?”

Angelica came over to him and sat on his lap. She was wearing over-the-knee boots over a pair of tight-fitting black leather pants with matching racer’s style red jacket, which was zipped up as far as it could go. Her tightly curled auburn hair cascaded down below her shoulders. Her hands were covered in some very exquisite looking red leather gloves.

She was rather drunk, as evidenced by her British accent strongly coming out. However, for the life of him, he could not remember why he didn't go with her or why she would be drunk. The only time he recalled seeing her inebriated was at their wedding reception.

She reluctantly broke off the kiss. "How are you doing, Dear?"

That in and of itself should have been a warning to Alex. She never called anyone "Dear" and hated being called by that term of affection. Unfortunately, he failed to take any notice.

"Not too bad. You?"

"Well, my ears are ringing from all that loud noise they're calling "music" these days but now that I have my husband all to myself, I'm suddenly all right."

"Is that so?" he said with a smile. "Magically healed, eh?"

"Don't you believe your wife? For shame!" She bent over towards him, demanding his attention. He finally put his book aside and turning to look at her. Her deep brown eyes were fixed on him, waiting to see his reaction. He felt his breathing quicken when his eyes fell on her. She had a funny smile on her face, meaning she was excited and barely waiting.

"You want to know something funny?"

"What's that?"

"I love you, sweetheart."

"Well, is that so? I love you too. And since I have you where I want you..." she said seductively. She stood up, slowly unzipped her jacket, and seductively took it off, tossing it behind her to end up on the floor. Angie only had on a red latex underbust corset; everything from there up on public display. Her libido was extraordinary and she kept it in check most of the time. However, there were occasions Angie caved in and this was apparently one of those times, though he thought this seduction routine was going a little too far.

Then a thought hit him: As she left, he would have sworn she'd been wearing a satin shirt and as far as he knew, she hadn't worn a corset, especially one like this. He remembered hearing Angie say once she disliked corsets, so for her to wear one was odd indeed. *Why wear one now? And why the seduction routine?*

As if she were reading his mind, she held herself, sensuously running her fingers over her body. "Do you like what you see?" she cooed.

Alex tried to say something but lost his voice, which was not often since he was responsible for a starship of the line and over a thousand people. He simply nodded his assent.

"Then you're going to like what I've got for you, Dear!" she breathed excitedly as she bent down to give him another kiss. He could sense something was wrong but he was too consumed by the moment to pay close attention. He just happened to glance up and was instantly glad he did. As she drew closer, he noticed that she had somehow grown two razor-sharp fangs!

Out of primal instinct, he threw himself away from her with all his might and weight. It was enough to tip the chair back and fall to the floor. It tossed Angelica away from him as much as it threw him back but it was enough to get some distance. He whipped around

and got up in one smooth move. Angelica remained on all fours, looking up at him hungrily with her open mouth revealing her fangs in their full glory.

“What’s the matter, Dear?” she all but hissed. “Don’t like what you see?” She shook her torso to underscore her point. It could be understood, and even forgiven, that Alex was scared out of his mind. From experience, he knew that fear could kill just as easy as a phaser, so he focused on controlling his fear instead of letting the fear control him. Even as he willed the fear to a manageable level, it took a moment for what she said to set in. Alex instinctively knew that this girl wasn’t the Angelica he knew.

“What the hell’s happened to you, Angie?” he choked out. He was naturally concerned about her, but from the way she was currently acting, it seemed like his personal health should take precedence. The tone of her voice only served to enforce that perception.

“I am so randy right now,” she said, raspy with a voluptuous tone tinged with carnal excitement. “Why don’t you come over here and give me a kiss? A kiss won’t kill you.”

Somehow, Alex thought, that with this Angelica, a kiss would most definitely kill me. He had to get out... or at least get some distance from her so he could use her attacks against herself without hurting her too much. He dove away from her but at the same moment, she launched herself at him and somehow managed to catch him in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. She was also stronger than most women and had sharper, quicker reflexes than most people. But this was more than that; it seemed like her strength and reflexes were boosted to a near superhuman level. Alex fell face first on the floor with Angie somehow on top of him.

“Oh, yes! Yes! I love it rough!” she screamed in near ecstasy as she straddled his backside. He struggled to crawl away but she held on easily, thrashing and writhing on him while keeping him pinned to the spot.

“Yes!” she screamed, picking up, then throwing his torso to the floor, knocking the wind out of him for a second time. “Don’t make it easy for this naughty girl! You won’t hurt me!”

As he struggled to regain his breath, his wife savagely turned him over, her knees pinning his arms so he could not use them. She grabbed his head with her powerful hands to force him to look at her.

What he saw there scared him to death. Angelica’s eyes were wide in anticipation, ecstasy, and triumph, as if she were on the precipice of pleasure. Her skin was flush with excitement, like an animal that had had caught her hard-earned prey. Angelica’s savage smile served to gain more attention to fangs glistening in the light, giving her an even scarier, almost demonic look. She kept grinding on him but he could not respond, especially when what he was seeing was threatening to scare him out of his ever-loving mind.

“I love it when we play rough. It’s such a turn on.”

Alex finally found his voice. “Damn it, Angie, what the hell’s wrong with you? Let me go!”

She ignored him as she urgently pulled off her gloves with her teeth. “Now for my reward. For you, there will be a moment of pain,” she cried as she tossed the gloves away, “but for me, it will be a deep and... *satisfying* pleasure.”

In an instant, he knew what she meant. That understanding brought a new sense of urgency and strength but it was to no avail; Angelica was simply too strong for him, especially in this position.

“Oh, *hell no!* Angie, listen to me...!”

She slowly walked her fingers on his face to his temples, biting her lip and whimpering. Once her fingers fell still, there was a blinding pain that pierced Alex’s brain like a hot poker. Alex and Angelica screamed at the same time, one in pain, the other in ecstasy--

-- and his screaming brought him to full consciousness. It took a full three seconds for him to realize he was screaming and a full half minute to remember where he was. He was puffing as if he’d run a marathon and felt the adrenaline rush through his veins. He looked down to see the soaked bedsheets and he could feel the rivulets of sweat still dripping off him.

What the hell kind of dream was that? he thought. *Christ, that could have been straight out of a horror movie!*

Alex threw the sheets off and sat on the edge of the bed, holding his head, trying to shake the image of Angelica, with those chilling fangs, looking at him like some sort of meat. The image was so sharp and clear that he had to seriously wonder how he could have dreamt the whole thing.

“Lights, one quarter illumination,” he puffed. Obediently, the lights came on to the point of being able to see clearly. He looked around carefully, slowly coming to the realization that his dream had been just that. Nothing seemed to be out of place, save for an old man who had woken up screaming his head off.

Slowly, he got up and ambled over to the lavatory. After relieving himself, he glanced in the mirror. He remembered that when she had touched his temples, there had been a blinding pain. Looking closely in the mirror, he didn’t see any physical marks to indicate what had happened in his dream had actually happened.

Alex grabbed a cup and filled it with water, downing the cool liquid in one long swallow. That simple act seemed to help but he still felt edgy. Disrobing, he ordered up a hot shower, not caring in the slightest about using the sonic shower this evening. As the water flowed, his body started to relax though he wished he could say the same about his mind. It kept returning to the dream and the image of a demonic... no, *vampiric* Angelica. What would have caused him to have a dream like *that*? Any other time, he’d have laughed it off but this was not one of those times. This dream was *too* real, *too* vivid, and *too* damned close to home. Despite the heat and steam, he shivered but he knew it wasn’t a physical chill.

He tried to think impartially about the situation but his mind kept coming around to the image of Angelica. Her beautiful face marred by those fangs and her purely animal look would not fade away. Why did that image concern him so much? Even some of his worst nightmares usually faded away after a few minutes but this one was stubbornly sticking around. *Or, he thought, is this the result of my overactive imagination finally gone wild?* He was barely convinced that it was only a dream and not something else.

Getting out of the shower and drying off seemed to help but try as he might, McKnight could not shake the instinctual feeling that either this was either a cry for help or a warning to stay away.

The captain walked out into the main room and dressed in blue jeans, a plain gray shirt, and a brown US Air Force A-2 flight jacket. To top it off was a US Navy ball hat that had been a gift from the director of the old aircraft carrier-turned-museum when he had taken command of that carrier's current namesake. This he put on top of his head to cover his steel gray hair, then walked out of the stateroom with a dull rumbling in his stomach.

Very good, Angelica, said Dracula. ***That should rattle his confidence for a short time.*** They were still in the botanical gardens with Dracula holding both of Angelica's temples, temporarily amplifying her mental powers with his own.

Thank you, Master. I know it would scare the shit out of me if the positions were reversed.

Language, your highness, the vampire cautioned. ***Such language does not become one of a royal rank.***

Funny. My mother used to say that to me all the time growing up.

Yes, you were such a precocious child, even then.

Odd. You seem to know me but I have no idea who you are.

The vampire chuckled. ***I used to serve your mother but I retired some years ago. You were either three or four when I retired.***

Odd that I don't remember you, Angelica admitted with a little hesitation. She felt a hunger growing but it wasn't coming from her stomach. ***Master, what am I feeling?***

Ah. I was wondering when you would start feeling the hunger. You will want to start to sup on the lifeforce of living beings shortly. It will be... delicious. Powerful. Their fear will only heighten these sensations.

Yes, Master. I can feel it. And I know who I can feed on first.

"Commander McKnight to Commander Smith."

Brieanna Smith and Lieutenant Commander Sophea Bennington-Fox were in the ship's forward lounge, named the 'Stars and Stripes' in honor of the ship's captain but it resembled a small-town British pub he was reported to be fond of. The idea was to have a place on a starship that allowed crewmembers and visitors to the ship a place to mingle without rank or status. With talk of extending missions from five to seven-year duration, designers were looking for ways of improving the quality of life on starships. This particular idea came from none other than Alex McKnight himself when he was the Starfleet Chief of Staff. The irony that he was now commanding the ship that he had pushed to receive this prototype had not been lost on most of the command staff.

Though the lounge looked like it was fully stocked with various alcoholic brands from across the Federation, the first thing Alex had done was ban alcoholic drinks from being served unless it was on his express order. He later said he had no desire to have, or be known as, a crew of drunks. After some discussion with his officers, he relented just a

little and allowed for a small amount of booze to be placed in a secure area to be used only for special occasions.

Smith had had a long day working with Bennington-Fox to ensure the ship's electrical and computers were ready against a thermonuclear attack. She was sore in places she didn't know existed but she was too energized to try to sleep at the moment. She figured a few non-alcoholic beers with Bennington-Fox while finalizing their reports would be just the trick to get her sleepy enough to get a few hours' rest.

"Smith here. What's up, Angie?"

"Brie, I need to talk to you privately for a few moments. Can you come to my quarters?"

Smith looked at a nearby chronometer and saw it was late. "I'm just wrapping up a report. Can it wait for another half hour?"

"I suppose it could." Smith could hear the slight disappointment in the Englishwoman's voice. She considered Angelica a close friend, which was saying a lot. The exec could count on one hand how many people she considered to be those kinds of friends. On the other hand, while Angelica McKnight seemed to be the girl next door with tons of friends, she had told Smith one night that, despite appearances, she also had only a small core of people she considered close friends and that the former engineer was in that small number.

"I'll make it as fast as I can," Smith surrendered.

"Thanks. I've to take a shower so just knock when you get here."

"Understood," said Smith, taking off her hat and running her hands through her mostly black with some gray mane. "Smith out."

"What was that all about?" the Hawaiian engineer asked.

"You have almost as good an idea as I do. Angie doesn't call for private conversations without a good reason."

Fox looked at her PADD. "I think we've got everything wrapped up for the staff briefing in the morning. Why don't you go see what Angie wants?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I've got this. Go ahead and I'll see you in the morning."

About five minutes later, Smith was coming up to Angelica's quarters. *That was a good walk, she mused. About one hundred fifty meters, at least. And to walk the ship itself from frame one to frame four hundred takes almost all day. Five hundred sixty-eight meters from bow to stern. Biggest ship in the fleet. And they're talking about making even bigger ships!*

Her musing came to a stop when she came to the door. She glanced down at the keypad beside the door and wondered if she should ring the bell but decided against it. After all, it had been Angelica who had asked her to be here and she knew as well as the former engineer how long a walk it was and how long said walk would take. And it seemed to be taking a long time for Angelica to answer the door. Was she still in the shower? Smith made a wicked little grin at that, imagining the communications officer's response in being caught in *flagrante delicto*. She pushed the button to announce herself.

"Come in," came a familiar voice. The doors obediently opened to admit Smith. The lights were very dim, causing Smith to strain her eyes to see clearly.

“Angie?” she called out. “Where are you?”

“Brieanna! I'm back here!”

Finally, she saw her friend in the back-office area, sitting behind the desk. She was wearing a leather turtleneck and pants. Her hair was messy but it was not wet as it should be after taking a shower. She saw faint movement in the lavatory but with the dim light, it wasn't clear if it was someone or if it was a trick of the eyes. *Did I really come at a bad time?* Something about the whole situation had Smith's red alert going at full power.

“You wanted to see me, Angie?”

“Yeah, I did.”

Smith could feel a tiredness creep up on her and didn't bother stifle a yawn. “Come on, Angie. I'm tired. What did you want?”

“It's not what I want,” she said, smiling. The hairs on Smith's neck went up when she saw fangs within the Englishwoman's smile. “It's about what *you* can do for *us*.”

Instinctively, Smith started to backpedal for the door, her right hand coming up to tap her badge. For an instant, Smith was glad *Lexington* had been picked to field this new system that didn't require a physical intercom. However, that relief was short lived as Angelica quickly plucked the device off her uniform and toss it away. Smith cursed aloud but Angelica didn't seem to notice, advancing on her with one and a half steps for Smith's one backward. Seeing her friend advance on her like that, looking at her in almost an animal type hunger, made Smith want to panic but she was too well trained and experienced to let the panic control her.

Smith made a decision and it was one that she would regret a few moments later. She bolted for the door. Angelica sprang towards the door a half moment quicker than Smith and knocked the executive officer to the deck just short of the door's sensor. The blow knocked the wind out of Smith but the adrenaline was kicking in, helping Smith to recover a little faster. She tried back crawling for the door, hoping she could get it open and call for help. Or maybe a passing crewperson would hear the scuffle inside and go get help.

Angelica appeared to know this as well as Smith did. Angelica sprang back up with more gusto than any one was entitled and reached for Smith. Smith saw her lunge and tried to duck away but McKnight's aim was true. She got hold of Smith's jacket and scooped up the former engineer up like she was a paperweight. *How is she doing this?* Smith thought, trying her best to keep her fear in check. Once standing, Angelica held Smith in such a way as to ensure she could not escape and that Smith could only see her. Smith realized that even though she was immobilized for the moment, it didn't appear it was Angelica's intention to hurt her.

I am sorry about this, Brieanna, Angelica said apologetically. ***This was the only way to get you alone.*** Smith did not see McKnight's lips move as she spoke. *Telepathy!* Smith thought. *But how?*

“How is it you're talking in my mind, Angie? You're an ESPer, not a telepath!” said Smith aloud. When she assumed the duties as the ship's executive officer, one of the first things Smith had done was memorize critical information on the *Lexington's* command staff. Smith recalled that Angelica held one of the highest ESP ratings on the ship. But

having a high ESP rating did not mean you were telepathic; it only meant you were prone to it. “Damn it, get out of my head! You’ve no right to be in there!”

“You’re wrong,” came Angelica’s familiar London accent from behind her. “Right now, I *need* to be in there. Then we will *both* serve the Master!”

“*Master?*” Smith said, trying to struggle and failing in Angelica’s suddenly brawny grasp. While Angelica was apparently stronger, it didn’t mean the comms officer was infallible. As the ship’s top Marine would say in his self-defense classes: *Don’t panic and keep your head. Your opponent will make a mistake; count on it. All you’ve to do is wait and when they do, that’s your chance to make them wish they hadn’t made it.* Calling on her inner resolve, Smith forced herself to stop trying to struggle, knowing she had to save her strength for upcoming events. The one thing working in her favor at the moment was that Angelica was answering her; maybe she could try to reason with her as well. *Lord above knows it won’t hurt to try!*

“Angie, I don’t know what’s gotten into you but we can help you if you let us!”

“I don’t need your help,” said Angelica.

“Angie, listen to me, please! You aren’t yourself! Let me help you! Just let go and we can talk! You haven’t done anything that can’t be dismissed. Just let me go and we can discuss this like--”

A laugh interrupted Smith in mid-sentence. ***Very nicely done, Angelica,*** came another, deep masculine voice in Smith’s mind. Smith looked around Angelica as much as she could but did not see anyone else. ***You chose well.***

“*Chose?* What the hell is going on here? *Who* the hell are you?” Smith said, straining to look around her friend. “*Where* the hell are you?”

There is no need for that kind of language, Brie, Angelica said. ***That’s not ladylike.***

In a moment, Brieanna, said the masculine voice, ***you will understand.***

A distinguished older man in a conservative suit appeared from his hiding place in the lavatory. Smith could not place him but she instantly knew he was the cause of all this trouble. *Damn it,* Smith cursed. *If this is what I think it is, we’re all in trouble now!*

Thank you, Master, Angelica purred. It shocked Smith to hear Angelica sound like a pet receiving a reward for doing something positive.

Your offers of assistance are amusing, Brieanna, but they do not interest me. As you have noticed, Angelica is mine to do with as I wish. No matter how hard you plead, none of it will help you.

“So, what do you want?” Smith asked aloud, refusing to give the creep the chance to talk to her in her mind. “What are you after?”

I am after your mind, Brieanna. Angelica told me you were both an engineer and the second in command. That would make you quite a catch.

“*Catch?* Why not go and *mierda*¹ yourself!” Smith shouted, using a profanity she had heard the captain utter a few times in dire situations, though he had said it in Standard.

¹ *Spanish = a word rhyming with 'duck'.*

Defiant to the end. I like that. But, as they say, you have no choice in the matter. You shall join us. Proceed, Angelica.

Angelica forced Smith to turn around and held Smith's chin with her right hand and a shoulder with her left, looking deep into Smith's eyes while the man looked on, much like a teacher would when a student was performing an exercise by themselves for the first time.

Brie, look at me. Just listen to what I am saying, mentally said Angelica. **It won't hurt. In fact, you will enjoy it. Just let yourself go and just listen to what I tell you.**

"And let myself be brainwashed? Forget it!" Smith ducked her head as much as she could in Angelica's hold. Angelica jerked up slightly on Smith's chin, causing her to gasp and look up. She found her focus was right into the Englishwoman's eyes.

Just listen to me, Brie. No harm has ever come from listening to one's friend, has it? You want to hear my voice. It is pleasing to you. You like my voice and want to hear more of it.

The more Smith listened, the more she felt tired, as if a sudden wariness was overcoming her. Smith's thoughts were starting to get foggy and hard to keep on track.

"No," she said weakly. "Angie, don't do this...!"

Angelica ignored her pleas. **Just relax and concentrate on the sound of my voice. It is like curling up in a warm blanket. You are getting very relaxed. Keep listening to my voice.**

Smith tried to think of some of the more complex warp equations but as she tried to envision them, they were out of focus and now she was forgetting what some of the variables meant.

That's right, Brie. Just relax. No one will hurt you. Let your body relax and keep listening to what I say.

The exec didn't feel her body succumbing to Angelica's vocal hypnotic effect.

Yes, keep listening to me. My voice is putting you to sleep. You want to sleep.

"Yes," she heard herself answer as if she were in a dream. "I want to sleep."

Then sleep. Close your eyes but in your mind, you will be awake. The only voice you hear is my own. My voice is the only voice.

Smith's mind surrendered in that moment. Her eyes gently closed nor did she feel Angelica release her. Smith remained stock-still in front of the Englishwoman.

Very good, Brie. Very good. Had Smith kept her eyes open, she would have seen Angelica's evil smile, highlighted by fangs. **Now, I will do something that will make you like me. It will not hurt you; in fact, it will be the most pleasurable experience of your life. You will deeply enjoy this.**

Smith didn't answer but her breathing quickened and her cheeks were flush in anticipation. Angelica tantalizingly placed her fingers on Smith's temples. Smith screamed with pure pleasure, much like Angelica had earlier. Smith did not feel the lifeforce being drained from her but the results were the same as they had been with Angelica.

The vampire had been right in saying feeding was definitely a more powerful than any other feeling Angelica had in her life. The feeling almost made Angelica quiver in pleasure and excitement as she kept feeding on her friend.

Dracula stood nearby, watching with curiosity and excitement.

In what felt like seconds, Angelica gently lifted her fingers and stared at Smith. The Dakota native's body was shivering powerfully. She was breathing heavily and her face was dangerously red. Yet, she remained as she was, eyes unopened.

Brieanna, you can now speak to me and Angelica in your mind. We will hear you.

I... hear you, she shakily responded.

Brieanna, said Dracula, ***you will act as yourself but you will obey me. You will do anything I command. I am your Master. Do you understand?***

Yes, said Brieanna. ***I will do anything you command of me. I will obey you. You are my Master.***

Chapter Three

“Nothing matters but the facts. Without them, the science of criminal investigation is nothing more than a guessing game.”

- Blake Edwards

In a very short time, Alex arrived in the *Lexington*’s officer’s mess; his nose didn’t deceive his stomach as the smell of replicated food wafted towards him. The place was sparsely populated at this time of the morning with only a few other officers and they left as soon as they saw him enter. He went to the replicator and ordered two sausage, ham, egg, and cheese breakfast burritos with a side of hash browns along with an iced vanilla coffee. Picking up his tray, he walked over to the ceiling-to-wall viewport and sat down.

He was completely lost in thought, absently nibbling on the first burrito when he heard a familiar voice asking “Can’t sleep, Skipper?”

“Yes and no. What brings you here, Dawn?”

Doctor Dawn Mathias sat down across from her captain, a western omelet smothered in a very hot salsa, a side of potatoes O’Brien (with hot peppers), and a tomato juice on her tray. Alex shook his head. Dawn had an affinity for spicy food and in many ways, her eating habits sort of reminded him of his brother, Jason. Neither Alex, their parents, nor their sister could abide spicy hot food but Jason, being the odd one of the family, could not get enough of it. So, it was no surprise that he had been in hog heaven when their father accepted a post-SAC² staff assignment with the 52nd Fighter Wing based at Osan Air Force Base in South Korea. Jason loved going to the local off post restaurants and ordering some of the spiciest food on the menu. With some of the stuff Alex had seen his kid brother and daughter-in-law eat, it was a surprise neither one had an ulcer.

“Oh, not much,” Dawn answered. “If you did sleep, it looks like it wasn’t a very good sleep.”

“You’re right,” Alex admitted, taking a sip of coffee. “Figured I’d come and eat instead.”

Dawn spied what was in front of Alex and shook her head. “Iced coffee, yuck! I never understood how you could drink that crap! It’s disgusting!”

“It’s an acquired taste, just like Guinness was when Dad was stationed at RAF Mildenhall,” fired back the captain, referring to his father’s assignment to the USAF’s 306th Strategic Wing. “And if you want to take a shot at me with my coffee, then how you can eat five alarm food like what you’ve got in front of you and *not* pay for it *has* to be a medical miracle! Some of the stuff you eat could jump start a cold fusion reactor!”

“Keeps me looking healthy, fit, and cute.”

“And pigs fly too.”

Dawn chuckled and dug into her meal. They ate in silence before Alex, almost through his first burrito, blurted, “I’m surprised at you though.”

² *Strategic Air Command*

“Oh,” said Dawn between bites. “How so?”

“You’re a cook as well as one of the best doctors I’ve seen. You’ve harped and harped about how a home cooked meal is so much better than replicator food but here you are. And this early in the morning too.”

“You’ve got me, Alex. I should have gone to my kitchen but I’m too lazy to cook right now. Surgery takes a lot out of you.”

“Surgery?” Alex looked at her, alarmed. “Why wasn’t I told?”

“Because it wasn’t a major one,” Dawn said, putting down her fork and sipping her juice. “It’ll be on the morning report. But surgery was required due to a basketball game.”

“A *basketball game*? Who in the hell was playing? Vulcans in *pon-farr* versus Klingons with hemorrhoids?”

Dawn smiled. “You’d think so but not this time. This was an all-human game with your helmsman as a guard. Went and broke his ankle. He’ll be out of commission for a couple of days.”

“Jason?” He was referring to Lieutenant Commander Jason Tovey-Whitfield. “How did he manage to break his ankle? And in *basketball*, of all things?”

“Actually, ankle and wrist injuries aren’t that uncommon for basketball players. According to him, when he was going up for a rebound, he landed oddly on his right foot. The other person was standing on his foot and when he pivoted, that’s when it started to fracture.”

“Ouch! That had to hurt!”

“You bet. Jason went on to say that he didn’t feel any pain until he went down the court and jumped again. When he was coming down, his ankle gave way and whatever bones that were still intact shattered when he made contact with the floor. That’s when he felt the pain. The bones were very fragmented. I had to go in and surgically regenerate and reset all the bones.”

“Will he be all right?”

Dawn nodded as she sipped her drink. “Well, he won’t be playing any sports for a month or two and certainly nothing strenuous for a couple of weeks but I don’t see why he won’t make a full recovery. Assuming he willingly listens to me for once. Remind you of someone else we know?”

Alex took a sip of coffee to hide his smile. “And you were paged for that?”

“Actually, no. I was already in sickbay when his teammates brought him in. Doctor Furillo did the initial treatment but I did the surgery myself.” She dug back into her food, oblivious to the heat.

“Why were you there, Dawn? You were supposed to be off duty, if I recall correctly.”

She laughed, almost spitting her food out. “What is this, twenty questions? I was in my office, refreshing my memory on radiation treatments before I drill my staff tomorrow morning.”

“Are you even going to be worth anything?”

“Doctors tend to get as much sleep as starship captains. We’re trained from the outset how *not* to sleep. When I was in residency in Sidney, I once went did 79 hours straight before I went to bed.”

Alex whistled appreciatively. "I know the feeling. I did that several time and each time, I slept like a rock for two days afterwards."

"As did I," Dawn said, finishing her meal. "Since turnabout is fair play, I get to ask you what you're doing up at this time of night. I know the negotiations have got you busy but you usually avoid night shift when you can."

The image of Angelica from his nightmare made him stop before he said what he thought. He debated on telling his daughter-in-law for a moment but decided against it. There was a limit to what he would share with his doctor. He felt that dream was too personal to share with anyone. Moreover, if he wouldn't tell his wife, he sure as hell wouldn't tell anyone else, much less the only person on the ship who could relieve him of command.

"No reason," he lied, also finishing his food. "Just too much coffee in the late afternoon, I guess."

"That would do it," Dawn confirmed. "Should have a cut off time of at least two hours before you go to sleep so the caffeine won't keep you up."

Alex leaned back in his chair, remembering. "I've said it before and I will say it once again. You should have met my dad. He drank coffee like water but he would sleep like a rock. Seemed like the higher in rank he got, the more coffee he would drink. Must have been all those late night alerts and assignments."

"I would imagine it's like being a first-year resident. I think coffee was all I drank in that year!"

Major Cullen Areniego, the commanding officer of the *Lexington's* Marine compliment was hard at work in his office despite the lateness of the hour. Areniego had decided to be ready for the worst when the ambassador and her staff beamed down into a possible hostile environment. He was re-reading Captain Kirk's reports on Vendikar and Eminiar VII to make sure he was familiar with their mode of operation and be ready for anything anyone might try. He knew he would have to be prepared for anything anyone would care to try but he felt he didn't have a full handle on the situation, which was annoying him immensely. The major rubbed his tired eyes and looked at the display again.

The Marine major grabbed his cup, drank, and spit back the hours cold coffee, muttering all the while. He got up and walked over to the replicator, ordering another piping hot black coffee. Cup in hand, he leaned back against the wall, too tired to continue but knowing he had to finish what he started. Besides, he'd have time to rest when he either retired or was in the brig awaiting court-martial.

Coming from a long line of military family members in the Philippines, Areniego joined the Starfleet Marine Corps, where he quickly earned a reputation for tackling difficult assignments and delivering results. After graduating from the Academy and completing Special Operations training, he served as a platoon leader. Seeking to expand his skill set, he attended the Starfleet Law Enforcement School, where he graduated at the top of his class. Despite receiving an offer in the Military Police that would have fast-tracked his career, he chose to remain with his unit.

As a major commanding his own company, Areniego volunteered to integrate Marines into Starfleet security operations. His career saw him first serve as a liaison officer on the *Enterprise* before its destruction, and later as a member of the President's personal bodyguard detail during the Probe crisis. These experiences led to his current assignment commanding the Marine detachment on the *Lexington*. While his unique blend of special operations and law enforcement training made him ideal for the role, the pressures of the present job would sometimes lead him to reflect on his decision to accept the post.

His monitor started to beep, bringing the Filipino back to the present. He sighed, walked back to his desk, and silenced the alarm. The flashing light in the lower corner demanded his attention. He called up the e-mail and nearly did a spit take into his coffee cup. One of his Marines had found one of the Federation staffers in a comatose state in the compound being used for the final negotiations. *This is the last thing I need right now*, Areniego thought.

Despite outranking her by two grades, Areniego reported to Lieutenant (j.g.) Kimberly Bautista, the ship's tactical officer. While the hierarchy was unconventional, Areniego respected Bautista, who was a "mustang" by earning her commission through the rigorous "Blue to Gold" program—a challenging path for enlisted personnel that boasted a high attrition rate. Although the reporting structure initially frustrated him, Areniego adapted to his role, bolstered by their shared Filipino heritage.

It took Bautista a moment to answer. When she did answer the page, it sounded like she'd woken up. "*Bautista here*," she said drowsily. "*Ano ang kahalagahan na ginising mo ako mula sa aking kagandahan sa pagtulog, Major³?*"

"Sorry for waking you, Lieutenant," he said in Standard, "but I've got a report concerning a staffer being found in a comatose state in our compound."

She must still be asleep, he thought since it took a few moments for her to respond. "*You're joking*," she replied in Standard. "*Was it a medical emergency? Or foul play?*"

I like how she's thinking, he thought, *but it's way too early to assume foul play. Especially when we have no facts to go on. She must think this is one of those cases that she's seen in one of those old movies she watches all the time*. "We don't know. However, my people have already responded. I'll be beaming directly to the site."

"Understood. *I'll let the captain know and meet you in the transporter room.*"

Areniego mentally cursed. He wished she would stay out of his way and let him do his job. It was his opinion that most Starfleet officers, while with good intentions but few exceptions, tended to get more in the way than stay out of it. And while Bautista was a former senior chief petty officer, she wasn't a Marine. However, he had quickly learned that she wasn't above listening to him and usually taking his advice. *Most of the time*.

The major knew better than to argue with her at this point. "Copy that. Areniego out." He terminated the connection and, with a sigh, proceeded to transporter room number four. Sure enough, as the turbolift deposited Areniego near the transporter room, Bautista was waiting for him, dressed in a Class B uniform, and pulling on her ponytail.

"Slowpoke," she joked, smiling to take out any sting.

³ Tagalog - *What's so important that you woke me up from my beauty sleep, Major?*

Areniego grinned weakly in response, not in the best of moods to begin with.
“Thanks.”

“*Pagkatapos ay tapusin natin ito,*”⁴ Bautista said.

Quietly, the two officers slipped into transporter room, where they found Captain McKnight already waiting. To Areniego's trained eye, the civilian clothes the captain wore indicated he had been awake but his face said he was fully awake and alert. Alex was propped up against the operator's station, looking at the door.

“Captain,” the two Filipinos said in unison when they saw him.

“Cullen. Kimmie,” he said in greeting.

“Any word on the victim, sir?” asked Areniego. He knew it would not be to their benefit to ask the captain how he knew, why he was there, or how he had managed to beat them both there.

“Nope. Dawn and Mick are already down there; in fact, I beamed them down before the chief showed up.”

“With your permission, sir,” said Areniego, “I think we'd better get down there.”

Alex nodded and walked up to the number two pad with the Marine on his right and Bautista on his left. Areniego checked the charge on his duty phaser before nodding he was ready. Under the conditions set forth by all parties, only the Marines would be armed for security purposes during these last moment negotiations and treaty signing. This meant that McKnight and Bautista were not be armed but Alex felt comfortable as he knew both how the Marines operated and Areniego was a crack shot.

“Energize.”

The world transformed itself from the *Lexington*'s transporter room to the conference room within the compound. Over in one corner were two *Lexington* doctors working on the reported victim while the Marines were engaged in preserving and obtaining forensic evidence. Areniego and Bautista immediately walked over to the officer in charge but Alex walked over to the two doctors. He was about to say something when Mathias suddenly stood up, pulling out her ponytail and shaking her hair. Her expression was one of consternation and confusion.

“How is the patient, Dawn?”

The Australian doctor sighed. “She's alive, though I've no idea how.”

“How's that, Doc?” Bautista asked. Alex hadn't heard her walk up behind him.

“Yes, how is that, Doctor?” asked Areniego a second later. Alex cursed silently; he usually knew when people came up behind him but this evening, two of his own officers were able to do just that. *Must be more tired than I thought*, he thought to himself.

Mathias did not answer but motioned for the three officers to follow her where there was some privacy. As soon as they entered the hallway, she spun on her heel to face them. Alex and the junior officers stood against the wall with Areniego producing a PADD so he could take notes.

“Wish I could get some coffee,” Mathias semi-muttered, “as I may be a bit in explaining all of this for the record.” Mathias looked pointedly at Areniego's PADD. “And

⁴ Tagalog- *Then let's get this over with.*

before you ask, Major, let me start with physical state. The patient shows all the signs of being in stasis without being in a stasis pod.”

“How can that happen, Doctor?” asked Areniego. “Being in stasis without being in a stasis pod?”

“It can't,” she said. “You see, stasis, which itself is derivative of suspended animation, is a state where all cellular activity is slowed down to a near zero metabolic level. You're in a really deep sleep essentially but, unlike sleeping, you don't dream and your aging is extremely slow. To achieve that state, you need equipment. And before anyone asks, I can account for all the stasis units on the *Lexington* and their status. I'm currently using none and all of them are empty.”

“Could someone have used them without you or anyone knowing, Dawn?” Alex asked.

Dawn shook the dark brown hair out of her eyes as she spoke. “Nope. Our pods are in a secure compartment in Sickbay and can only be biometrically accessed,” she said. “Only myself, Doctor Furillo, and a couple of my specialists on board can access the compartment. Same with the pods themselves. You'll be checking the logs, Major, so I'm confident that you will be able to back up what I'm saying.”

“So, Doc, again, how can someone be in stasis without being in a stasis pod?” asked Bautista.

“Bugged if I know. In theory, if you drained someone's essence, their ‘lifeforce’ if you will, their body would respond in a similar manner. Drain enough energy and it would cause the body to shut down to protect itself. But nothing I know of off the top of my head can drain someone of their lifeforce or even to this extent.”

“Vampires can,” said Alex. “Least the ones of legend could.”

“Fair dinkum,” she answered. “But the ones I read about while I was in high school also drank blood, hypnotized people with their eyes, and changed their form to some sort of a wild animal. In this case, there's no blood missing. But coming back to this case, there's one thing of note so write this down, Major.” Mathias waited for the major to be ready before continuing. “Outside of depressed vital signs, which would be normal in this case, the only other evidence I can provide is that the victim's brainwave and neurochemical levels are all higher than normal.”

“Isn't that kind of *opposite* of being in suspended animation?” Alex asked.

“Yep, and there's the *real* mystery. Depressed vitals but increased brainwave activity could be indicative of some sort of telepathy at work. The parts of the brain that would be active in telepathy are active here in the patient but she's comatose. That, I cannot explain. Not yet.”

“There aren't that many telepaths on the *Lexington*, Doctor,” Areniego stated. “And none are known to be residing on either Eminiar or Vendikar. Of those that are aboard the ship, would this *modus operandi* be in line with their type of telepathy?”

“I thought that at first but I don't think so. If I remember right, all the telepaths on the ship are touch telepaths, meaning they need to have some sort of physical contact. I'd almost discount them instantly but that doesn't mean one couldn't have implanted some sort of hypnotic suggestion in someone's mind before this point in time.”

“So, discounting them at this time wouldn't be the most prudent thing then,” Alex said.

“I'm saying that I would very sincerely doubt it,” Mathias said, a bit exasperated from almost repeating herself twice. “This would be the *result* of anything they would have done and my gut says they didn't do it. However, prudence demands not automatically discounting them.”

“If that's right, then it'd have to be a new player,” commented Bautista. “But who?”

“Someone who likes to play with fire,” Alex said. “Something like this may be all it takes to break off this whole thing. Remember, not so long ago, these guys were willing to blow up each other's planet and I don't think they got rid of all their animosity within this generation.”

Mathias brushed the hair out of her dark brown eyes. “Oh, I almost forgot. There is one more thing.”

“Educate me,” Alex said without any signs of humor.

“Mind you that I noticed this at the end of the exam but the patient has some slight bruising on her temples.” She pointed at her own for emphasis. “What importance that has, I don't know. No signs of concussion or blunt force trauma. But with additional examination, this may be a clue as to what we're dealing with.”

“That's a very good observation. Bones would be proud of you,” said Alex.

“Well, they don't come any better than Doctor McCoy. He always told me that when all else fails, go with what I see for myself.”

Alex nodded as Areniego replaced the stylus into its holder on the PADD. “Then it looks like I've got an assault on my hands,” Areniego said, putting the PADD in the crook of his lowered arm. “Captain, Lieutenant, my forensics team agrees with the doctor with the physical evidence, such as the bruising on the temples. However, there's no record of anyone but the staffer entering the room until the cleaning team arrived.”

“Were the sensors disabled or jammed?”

“Not as far as we know so far, Captain. I've requested a couple of subject experts from Commander Saavik and Commander Fox's teams to help us with checking the systems.”

“So is this entity invisible to sensors?” asked Bautista, barely keeping a yawn in check.

“It's possible but unlikely,” said Alex. “It could be using a form of energy our sensors don't usually detect. Saavik's the expert in that area and I'll put her on that in the morning. Anything else?”

“No,” interjected Areniego, “Permission to remain with my team, sir?”

“Granted. Don't wear yourself out, Cullen. A tired Marine commander won't do me any good. Same for you, Kimmie, Dawn. Both of you head back to bed. We'll have a briefing later this morning.”

“That sounds good, Skipper,” Bautista said, bidding everyone good night before calling the ship to beam her out. This left Mathias and Alex alone for a few moments.

“Dawn, you look wore out.”

“Don't mind telling you I feel rather stuffed, Dad,” she said teasingly. Usually, she called him ‘Dad’ only when they were in private.

“You’d better get some sleep, Daughter. Physician, heal and take care of thyself.”

“That’s not the way it goes!” she laughed.

“Get your ass to bed. That’s *not* a suggestion.”

“You know, I...” He shot her a look that made her change her mind. “All right. I’m going to bed. Promise.”

“Good girl. Good night!” He said as Mathias called the ship to beam her up. Once she had dematerialized, Alex headed for the Marines who were working the scene. Currently, two of them were marking off the attack site while another was talking quietly to a human female off to one side. The others were taking scans of the area and methodically going through their lists as they would for any crime scene. One thing Alex could say about the Marines; they knew how to do their job efficiently and with excellent results. Alex looked on approvingly as the Marines were going about doing their jobs. Alex had to give it to Cullen Areniego; the man knew how to get the best out of those under his command.

The major was talking to someone when he spotted the captain just looking around for the moment and Areniego knew the captain wasn’t one to stand idly by for just anything. The major quickly dismissed his subordinate and made a beeline for him for the starship captain.

“Fill me in with what you’ve got so far, Cullen.”

Areniego didn’t waste time with preliminaries. “As we already knew, one of the ambassador’s staffers was in this office finishing up some paperwork for today’s meetings. When the cleaner showed up,” he paused to identify the woman in civilian clothing with a nod of his head, “she found her comatose like Doctor Mathias reported. We’re questioning the lady but I’m sure she knows nothing.”

“Anything else?”

“We’re following the standard procedures in this case. The woman is the only witness, but as she didn’t see anything but the victim, it will be a dead end.”

Alex asked, “Who’s the victim?”

The Marine referred to the PADD in his hand. “Her name is Vivian Carnahan. From her personnel records that the ambassador’s chief of staff had previously provided, she’s an excellent staff member with high review ratings.”

Alex sighed. “What’s your gut telling you?”

“My instincts say this was a calculated assault. However, the suspect pool would be very small.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Process of elimination. Like the doctor said, I think you could almost safely discount the *Lexington* crew; that is, unless we’ve got an imposter, a deep cover spy, or a terrorist aboard. Neither the representatives from Vendikar or Eminiar would have nothing to gain by attacking a member of the Federation’s delegation, unless, again, we’re dealing with terrorists or another radical element that wants to sow distrust and discontent among the delegates.”

Alex sighed again, knowing that Areniego’s gut feelings were more often right on the money than they were wrong. He had done the same process in his head and had come to a similar conclusion. “Can we account for the ambassador’s staff?”

"We're in the process of doing so now. The engineering staff duty officer is also checking the transporter logs so see if there had been unauthorized use."

"Has anyone told the ambassador of this?"

"Not yet. I was hoping to have some more data but she could be briefed on what little we do have. Sir."

Alex slightly cringed. The joy of delivering this news would fall to him and him alone. "Oh joy."

"We will continue to investigate this matter but I must warn you that it may stall due to a lack of witnesses."

"Understood," Alex said. "I'm going to have a talk with her here shortly. Get some sleep, Cullen."

"Go to bed. Aye aye, sir."

Bautista was on her way back to her quarters and bed. She knew she would have her hands full in coordinating and running interference for Areniego's team. She knew Areniego had graduated from the Federation's venerable Law Enforcement School so she was more than happy to let him take the lead in the investigation as he was better trained than she ever hoped to be. But what he could not know was that she wasn't happy with the arrangement just as he wasn't happy. Until recently, no starship security chief had to answer to the ship's tactical officer; the chief would normally report directly to the captain. From what Bautista gathered, *Lexington*, *Enterprise*, *Excelsior*, and *Farragut* had been selected to trial this change and while Captains McKnight, Kirk, Sulu, and Carter had all argued most strenuously against it, all four had been overruled. What puzzled the Filipina was why McKnight, a known individualist in his own right, didn't simply ignore it the moment they left drydock. After all, he wasn't a fan of the formal Class "A" uniforms and he authorized both the crew to wear the informal Class "B" and "C" uniform variants as soon as they cut loose from the dockside.

She was so lost in thought and looking forward into getting back to bed that she bumped into a older looking man in a civilian suit. He didn't look it but he had to have been built like a tank; the force of her collision didn't seem to faze him as she plopped unceremoniously to the deck.

"Oh, God! I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed.

"It's quite all right," he said with a British accent, extending a helping hand. "I didn't mean to be in the way."

"No," she said, taking his hand and getting up. "I should have been looking at where I was going." She looked at him and immediately, she was stuck about how handsome and good looking he was.

"Are you quite all right?" he asked. "That was a bit of a fall."

"I should be asking you that question."

"I am quite well. What is such a beautiful woman like yourself doing up this late an hour?"

"Oh... just taking care of a little ship's business." She looked at him a little better. He had the most remarkable eyes she had ever seen. "Funny. I don't know who you are."

“Forgive me, Officer, for my lack of manners. I’m Archibald Harris. I was formerly the Queen’s Deputy Private Secretary, retired.” He took her hand and lightly kissed it. “And you are, my lady?”

He’s charming, that’s for sure, she thought. “Lieutenant Kimberly Bautista. Tactical Officer.”

“Forgive me but I’m not that familiar with the military or its various roles. What’s a ‘tactical officer’?”

She giggled, noticing she sounded like a little schoolgirl. “I’m in charge of the ship’s offensive and defensive systems.”

“Sounds like a very responsible position,” he said, half absently.

“Not really, Mr. Harris. Can I ask what you’re doing here?”

He was staring at her very intensely and, under most circumstances, such a gaze would have made her uncomfortable. But this time, she found it kind of cute that such a man would take an interest in her like that. He finally noticed that she was looking at him looking at her. Most men would have found that awkward but not this man. Bautista swore she could feel her cheeks heat up.

“Forgive me again, my lady.” He lowered his eyes in respect. *He’s cute and a gentleman to boot*, she thought. *Don’t see that every day*.

“It’s quite all right,” Bautista quickly said, her breath coming just a little quicker. She could feel her body start to rise to the occasion and it surprised her to be attracted this quickly to a virtual stranger. “It’s been a while since I had a cute man look at me like that.”

He again averted his eyes. When he looked again, it was like he was staring past her at some distant memory. “You... remind me of someone I once knew.”

“I do?”

“Yes. She was very beautiful, like you. A true princess.”

“I’m not a princess.” She felt her smile getting bigger. *Oh yes*, she thought. *This one’s a good one! Worth getting to know*.

“Of course, Lieutenant. You are an officer in the service of the Federation. I did not mean to imply otherwise.”

“You are charming,” Bautista admitted, absently pulling out her ponytail. “Mr. Harris, I must admit, I find you to be... a rare man.”

“‘Rare’? I don’t follow.”

“It’s not every day I get to meet a handsome and charming gentleman such as yourself. Especially one with royal connections.”

“I was but a humble servant of Her Majesty, Lieutenant. One of many.”

Bautista could feel the heat rising in her cheeks and her attraction rising. “And modest too? *Ang galing ah...* er, I mean, ‘how amazing’!”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. But, I would not mind if we continued this coversation over a dinner. Where can one get a good meal on this ship?”

Bautista could feel her resolve melting away. “Are you asking me on a date, Mr. Harris?”

He looked deep into her eyes and said “I suppose I am, Lieutenant. That is, if it not too forward. Or allowed.”

She giggled again. "Actually, it's refreshing. Most men I meet don't normally act like you."

"I hope that is another compliment, Lieutenant."

"It is. There's a lounge in the bow of the ship called the 'Stars and Stripes'," she said. "We could go there for breakfast."

"Excellent except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"I don't know where that is. In fact, I am lost. That's why you found me here. I was on my early morning constitutional and found myself here. Wherever 'here' is."

She giggled again. "I can walk with you there. And I don't mind the company."

"Very well, Lieutenant."

"Please, it's 'Kimberly' or 'Kimmie' to my friends." She took his arm in hers. "Let's talk."

Chapter Four

“Cry the man mercy, love him, take his offer // Foul is most foul, being foul to be a scoffer.”

- William Shakespeare

“Mother,” said Valentina Tereshkova in her native Russian, “I wish you’d quit trying to set me up with someone!”

“But you and Dmitri did go to school together, dear,” replied a woman’s voice. *“And he still has that crush on you. He’s such a sweet boy.”*

The Russian lieutenant was getting ready for duty when her parents called. After making sure her tank top and shorts were presentable, she continued to towel dry her dirty blonde hair as she talked to her mother, an attractive, middle-aged woman with a study in the background.

“He was a good friend until he got my best friend pregnant! Also, Mother, I’m out here on the frontier! When and where would I be able to date him?”

“Certainly, you have some leave coming,” her mother persisted. *“I’m sure your Captain McKnight will give it to you. You can come home and I can ask Dmitri to come to dinner.”*

The navigator picked up a brush and started to comb her hair just like her mother used to do. However, it didn’t stop her from sighing loudly. Every time she and her mother would talk, it boiled down to this. Not that Valentina didn’t appreciate the thought or her concern but the boys her mother picked were a little too... plain. She even said as much and more than once.

“So where are you going to find a nice man and settle down when you’re on that starship of yours?” she retorted.

“Didn’t you and Father meet when you and he were on the *Kiev*?”

“Yes, we did. However, I was thirty-five when we married. I don’t want you to make the same mistake I did.”

“Mother, there is someone here on the *Lexington* whom I’ve been seeing but we’re... on a break.” The brushing came quicker as Tereshkova thought of the man. Too bad he had to go and piss her off a couple of days ago.

“Oh?” Tereshkova’s mother’s eyebrows went up in interest. *“Who is this young man and why haven’t you talked about him before? When are we going to see him?”*

“Tonya,” said her father in the background, *“the more you pester our daughter, the less time she has to sort it out for herself. Let her be.”*

Tereshkova wasn’t grinning but inside she was. She had always been a daddy’s girl and she knew it.

“Do you want to talk to her?” Tonya’s tone promised they would have words after the conversation was over.

“Only for a moment. Being a navigator on Starfleet’s flagship is a busy job, after all.”

The camera turned to see a bear of a man approaching 60 sitting in a reclining chair in the living room. A smile was on his face. *“Pumpkin! How are you?”*

"I'm fine, Father. Busy but doing as well as can be expected, I guess. How is work at the spaceport?"

"Busy, ever since that damn probe wreaked havoc on us. Even with overtime these past few months, we're just now catching up with the backlog."

"Well, to think that in a few more months and you will retire."

"That will be nice, though I fear I will be bored with nothing to do."

"And what," interrupted Tonya from off screen, *"makes you think you will be doing nothing?"*

"I think dinner is about ready. Is there anything we can do for you?"

Tereshkova shook her head. "Not that I can think of. What I need, the *Lexington* has."

"Except for a boyfriend, eh?" Unlike her mother, her father would only needle her about being single, not actively interfere. He'd allowed Valentina to date at a young age and, as far as Valentina knew, thought she was still a virgin.

"I am working on that. Father, I've got a staff meeting to get to this morning. I will call you soon, I promise."

"Very good, Pumpkin," he almost always used her childhood nickname, though sometimes it was embarrassing. *"How I remember those days. We love you."*

"I love you both. Do skorogo!"⁵

She switched off the viewer and leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes briefly. She'd been somewhat of a spoiled brat when growing up; her father having a weakness for his only child. Her mother had been very strict on her, which Tereshkova believed gave her the qualities to enter Starfleet. She liked the attention but did not like having no siblings like the other children she played with. Russian families, in general, were large with five or more children. Her family, though large by extension, was considered somewhat odd with only the one child. She sometimes was jealous of those who had brothers and sisters, wishing her parents had married earlier so she wouldn't be alone. Making sure she had the time, Tereshkova finished dressing in her Class B uniform and went to the officer's mess to grab breakfast.

As she ate, she logged into the ship's Bulletin Board System (known as the 'BBS') to catch up on the ship's gossip. She found several threads on the subject saying that overnight, the Marines had found someone comatose on the surface but there was not a word from the captain yet as to who it was.

That's a little odd, she thought, but knowing the captain, *he usually lets people know something as soon as he knows something to tell them. People these days with their instant news!*

The navigator was almost done with her meal when she saw Lieutenant Commander Saavik enter the place. Now Tereshkova's radar went to full power. The Vulcan science officer didn't eat much in the officer's mess. Saavik got her meal and, seeing Tereshkova, walked over for her. Not that the navigator wasn't ready to get under Saavik's skin but she didn't want to start their banter so early. Tereshkova loved to tease

⁵ Russian = *Until next time!*

the science officer with Saavik usually playing the straight man. Recently, Saavik had started to return the favor, much to Tereshkova's surprise, especially when Saavik would turn the tables and make *her* the straight man.

"Lieutenant," said Saavik. "May I sit here?"

"Sure, Commander," Tereshkova replied. As Saavik settled in, she decided to ask the million-dollar question. "What brings you here this morning?"

"I was hungry and needed to eat."

"That's... kind of obvious," she said, fighting the urge to tease the Vulcan. "But you don't usually eat here. Since you, me, and Jason came aboard, I've seen you eat here less than five times."

"Very true. I've decided to change my routine."

"If I can ask," said Tereshkova, picking up her orange juice, "why's that?"

Saavik took a bite of her scrambled eggs before answering. "If you must know, I wish to be... *sociable*."

Tereshkova could have been knocked over with a feather. She nearly dropped her glass but held onto it. Barely. "*Sociable? You? Why?*"

Saavik sighed, putting down a fork full of eggs dripping with piri-piri sauce. "Do I have to have a reason, Lieutenant?"

"We're still off duty, Saavik, so it's Valentina. And you've not attempted to be anything but work related since we reported aboard, so there's got to be a reason for a change of heart."

"A logical deduction, Valentina."

The Russian smiled. It wasn't often Saavik gave out compliments. "Thanks. But quit ducking the question."

Tereshkova would have sworn that she saw Saavik slightly sigh before she answered. "Certain... *events* have caused me to re-evaluate my status here on the *Lexington*. I now realize that I can operate more efficiently if were to know my fellow bridge officers better."

"And the fact that you found out not long ago about a twin sister who's a commander for the Romulan Star Empire has nothing to with this sudden change?"

Saavik shot her a look of anger that only lasted two seconds... a second longer than was necessary to let Tereshkova know she was about to cross a line. "My sister has nothing to do with this, Valentina. It would be wise to remember that."

Talk about touching a nerve, she thought. "Sorry. But you've got to admit; the timing of it all..." she trailed as Saavik kept looking at her, anger briefly flashing in her brown eyes, warning Tereshkova to stay off this subject. "Right. Forget I said anything."

"My reasons are... *personal*, Valentina, but I can assure you that my desire to be a more productive member of the staff has nothing to do with T'Shara."

Almost forgetting herself for a moment, Tereshkova almost asked how a Romulan would have had a Vulcan name. However, now knowing how sensitive Saavik was about her sister, she held off on that question. "And you're starting your little socialization experiment with me?" she said, attempting to deflect the conversation from such a delicate subject. "Someone who goes out of her way to tease you?"

“Yes,” admitted Saavik, her anger gone as fast as it appeared. “Angie recommended I make the first step to talk to all the bridge officers. You were here and so I decided to start with you.”

Tereshkova wasn't too sure if Saavik had insulted her or given her a back-handed compliment. “Uh... *thanks?*”

If Saavik was embarrassed by her last comment, she didn't show it. “I mean no offense but you did ask.”

“Yes I did. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I realize we were classmates at the Academy and we were aboard the *Enterprise* during our midshipmen cruise but we had very little interaction outside of the classroom.”

“True,” Tereshkova said. To Tereshkova's knowledge, Saavik had been a social hermit during their time at the Academy, only going to social events when they were mandatory. She had even seen Saavik show up to the Sadie Hawkins dance with no date.

“I wish to be... *approachable*,” Saavik said, not noticing the visible surprise on Tereshkova's face. “I have noticed you are very outgoing and people respond favorably to your presence. In fact, since we have reported aboard, you have, as you said, gone out of your way to tease me.”

That's so true, Tereshkova thought. *And this would be the perfect setup had she wanted to get me. Be cautious!* Aloud, she said, “So, in your typical roundabout way, you're asking me to help you to become approachable and friendly.”

“Yes.”

Tereshkova sized up the situation. Something had caused Saavik to reverse course from her self-imposed isolation and, as far as Tereshkova knew, it stemmed from their encounter with a modified *Nova* class battleship some months ago. At the outset of that encounter, the Romulan Commander had revealed herself to be Saavik's twin sister, whom Saavik had thought dead. The resulting battle had made it a correct thought; by all appearances, the Commander had gone down with her ship.

After the *Lexington* had limped into port for repairs, the bridge crew had been questioned on what they knew then sworn to secrecy concerning the mission. Saavik herself had disappeared with no explanation. Not even the captain knew where she had went... or at least he wouldn't tell anyone if he did know.

When the science officer finally returned after two months, she had started to retreat even further into that Vulcan shell of hers but Tereshkova had noticed that Commander McKnight would go out of her way to be friendly with Saavik, as if she was trying her best to form a friendship with her. The navigator knew the commander well enough not to have put it past her to recommend Saavik go form friends with the bridge crew. But to see Saavik to actually take someone's advice and then to make her first attempt on someone who teased her? That was a challenge and a half and Tereshkova could never pass up a challenge.

“I love a challenge, Saavik. I'm in.”

While Tereshkova and Saavik were discussing Saavik's socialization issue, Alex was having a chat with the ambassador. Alex had dreaded having this discussion with her, not

only because he knew she didn't like him, he also knew by personal experience that ambassadors usually didn't take bad news very well. How wrong he was this time.

Ambassador Margaret Windsor-Mountbatten (a.k.a. - Queen Elizabeth III) had not acted like the other ambassadors Alex had worked with as he laid out his estimate of the situation. She didn't get angry with indignation or say anything negative, though she wasn't above a little reproach when he cautiously broached the subject of one of her staff was the subject of his investigation. Windsor-Mountbatten wasn't happy with the implications the Starfleet captain had just outlined but she knew she would have little choice but to trust him and his staff.

"So, you're telling me that one of my staff has been attacked and you don't know who it could be," Margaret summarized while sipping her breakfast tea.

"We're investigating the assault as we speak, Ambassador," Alex answered, careful in his diction and tone. He had declined the offered tea, privately wishing he could have a slug of something stronger. "The person leading the investigation is one of the best there is."

"Yes; a Major... Areniego, isn't it?" Alex nodded. "I've been told he is one of the best there is." There was no malice in her tone; it was a simple statement of fact. But Alex wanted to make sure she wasn't drawing the wrong conclusion.

"Ambassador, I have no evidence, nor am I accusing anyone of anything. I merely mentioned this to you so you could make your plans accordingly."

Margaret looked at him over her tea cup. "Plan *what* exactly, Captain?"

"Major Areniego has arranged for additional security for you and your staff when you are on the surface. His people will not interfere with your duties but they will be present in case someone tries anything."

"A prudent course of action, Captain. But are you sure there's a threat to me or my staff?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't think so but it's been my experience that you can't be too careful, especially when you're dealing with these kinds of things. I'd rather raise the shields and not need them than the reverse."

Margaret put down her cup and wiped her mouth daintily. "I see. A wise precaution indeed."

"My orders are to assist you with finalizing bringing the Eminiar system into the Federation and I will do that to the best of my ability. But I won't have an injured ambassador if I can prevent it."

"I understand completely, Captain. After all, you are responsible for the safety of all personnel involved. We will comply with any additional security measures you wish to take. My main concern is to make sure the two planets join the Federation."

At this point, most ambassadors Alex had worked with would be acting like children, whining and threatening his career, saying he was hindering them. The fact she was taking this situation in stride was refreshing but he felt it wasn't wise to let his guard down just yet.

Alex nodded in agreement. "You don't know how glad I am to hear that. I believe Major Areniego will brief you and your staff on the current status of the situation before any of you beam down today."

"I look forward to seeing his briefing, Captain. I'm most curious to know who would attack a member of my staff." *And get away with it*, he could have almost sworn he heard her say it but she didn't have to. *Problem is, she'll have to beat me and Cullen to the punch first!* Alex didn't show his surprise. He momentarily wondered if the ambassador wasn't someone else.

"I do appreciate your understanding, Ambassador. We will endeavor to make our interruptions as painless and as quick as possible."

"Of that," she said, buttering a muffin, "I am sure. I know that you will make things as safe as you can."

Now Alex felt something was wrong but he was too experienced to say anything about it. "Of course, Ambassador."

"And while you are here, I do want to talk to you about a personal matter. I would like this part of our conversation to be an off-the-record conversation between mother and son-in-law, not as an ambassador to captain." Alex nodded his assent, wondering if her illness had anything to do with her sudden change in attitude towards him. Usually, Margaret wouldn't have given him more than the cursory discussion required by protocol. And now she was asking for a *private* conversation? Angie had told him that both the news she was ill and their subsequent reconciliation came unexpectedly. Was Margaret now going to make her peace with him? He didn't know what to think of that. Not that he hated her but after twenty years of her snubbing him, she hadn't endeared herself to him either.

Margaret took a bite of her muffin and a sip of tea before continuing. "I know Cinnamon told you that I'm dying."

Alex paused so he could gather his thoughts. It was now clear that Margaret wanted to reconcile with him as well as with Angelica. "Don't worry," he finally answered, deciding to play dumb for a moment, "I've made sure that information is secure with only those who absolutely need to know."

"Alexander, may I be candid?" Alex nodded again. "I know you're surprised by my sudden change in attitude towards you."

The captain was indeed surprised but he was careful not to show it. "That's an understatement. And I'll admit to some curiosity on my part."

Margaret took another sip of tea before answering. "When one is told their demise is coming sooner than one expected, it causes one to reevaluate one's positions in life. As a Starfleet officer, I'm sure you've done so yourself at times."

He nodded in agreement. "I won't lie to you. I've had cause to reevaluate my life at times." Images of the M-5 incident came to mind and he pushed them back, not wanting to revisit that nightmare. That nightmare had visited him many times before and probably would continue to haunt him until his dying day.

"I specifically asked for the *Lexington* to bring me here one final time because when I reevaluated my life, I found that I had made some grave errors which need to be amended before I move along. I know Cinnamon already told you that we reconciled."

Alex stayed silent, not entirely sure what the Queen was driving at. Margaret continued to talk as she finished her meal. "Do you know why I took such a dislike to you, Alexander?"

"You've never told me but it doesn't take much to guess as to why."

She nodded as she wiped her mouth. “There is a specific reason I took a dislike to you. Mainly, I thought you were using Angelica to gain some social standing or to secure a life outside of Starfleet.” Margaret held up a hand to forestall his protest. “Yes, I know you very vocally denied it every time I mentioned it. But, at the time you married her, you very nearly caused a crisis.”

He knew to what she was referring. “I know, Margaret,” he said. “An American divorcee dating a senior member of the Royal family. A nearly identical replay of the scandal with Edward VIII and that Simpson woman. Or are you referring to the crisis concerning Princess Margaret and that group captain in the 1950's?”

Elizabeth seemed impressed. “The abdication and Group Captain Townsend. I'm impressed. I wasn't aware you were so well versed in our family's background.”

“I'm a bit of an Anglophile. My dad was stationed in England when I was a kid and I got my penchant for all things British when I lived there. Got to learn some of the history but it was only when I started dating Angie that I figured I'd better get better acquainted with your family's history.”

She nodded. “I see. Well, back to the point. There are some very strong similarities between those two cases and yours. Fortunately for you, the laws were amended after the third world war but there were still many in our government who felt you had no right to marry my daughter.”

As you reminded me at the time, he thought but didn't say. *You were one of them!*

“And furthermore, you married her in America and not in Westminster Abbey as tradition dictated.” She again held up her hand. “But I know my brother gave you his permission as the law dictated. And it did not bother him one bit in what you did. But it bothered me.”

Alex recalled that specific discussion over subspace radio with Margaret's brother, who was the reigning sovereign at the time. King James VIII had taken an instant liking to the young man so getting James' permission to marry his niece wasn't difficult. But James did make it a point to mention the resistance they would run into and on that point, he wasn't wrong. In fact, it was because of that resistance that Alex and Angelica had chosen to be married at the chapel on the Academy grounds instead of in London.

First, it was out of reach by those who could have interfered with the wedding.

Second, the Bishop of Canterbury had flatly refused to marry them so getting married in Westminster Abbey in London would have required Angelica to either renounce her Royal heritage or stop dating Alex, both of which were out of the question.

And third, since the Academy was on Federation, not British, property, the marriage would be legal, despite the ridiculous claims to the contrary by many that their marriage was not legal since the wedding didn't take place in Angelica's native country.

“Compounding the problem was Angelica's rebelliousness. In fact, part of the reason she and I did not talk to each other for as long as we did was because of her wanting to date you.”

Alex was very aware Angelica was a rebel during her teen years; in fact, Angelica's penchant for wearing leather apparel was a carryover from those years.

“I felt you were using her for her station. And in the few times we talked about it, you should have heard how passionately she defended you. She was convinced you loved

her for who she was and I will tell you now that she was *very* smitten by you. During those days, all she would talk about was you. And I was jealous that you were getting more attention than me, her own mother. A very awful thing, I know. But I am also human. Imagine if one of your daughters were to try to cut you out of her life but in the same conversation, she talked about her boyfriend with whom she was madly in love.”

All this was the first for Alex. That Angelica loved him wasn't a surprise; he knew that from the very early days of their relationship. But he didn't know that Margaret had been jealous of him. But then, he could see her point. Alex and Angelica had twin daughters, so he would well imagine if one of them did that to him and what his reaction would be. The kids were closing in on sixteen and it wasn't easy being a teenager, especially in this day and age. But add the trappings of their royal pedigree and it could make for a perfect storm. In fact, Angelica and Carrie recently had an argument over a boy Carrie knew at her school; Angelica disapproved of the boy but Carrie insisted she was going to date him. Angelica later said the argument with her offspring reminded her of the ones Angelica had with her mother.

“I can... see why you'd feel like that,” he said guardedly.

“So I did the only thing I could do. I kept track of you and your career over the years. If I could not know directly, then I wanted to know what kind of person my son-in-law would be by other means. And I will say that you have not disappointed. True to your word, you have taken care of Angelica. You have risen to the very top of Starfleet without any assistance from her or using the office my brother bestowed on you.”

That last part was also the truest. James had made Alex the Duke of Edinburgh just before he married Angelica, though Alex had refused to be made a prince. Alex felt he was in good company just by being a Duke, thinking of Prince Philip from his own time. When he was made the Duke, Alex resolved he would never once trade in on that or any connection to the royal family. To this day, Alex doubted that even a baker's dozen in Starfleet were even aware of his royal connection. After all, his true birthday was classified so he imagined that was classified as well.

“But what impressed me the most was the position you took concerning Genesis.” She stopped, knowing she was treading on very thin ground. “That took... courage.”

In a moment, Alex knew what she was talking about. Just under two years ago, he had been the Starfleet Chief of Staff when the affair over Genesis had erupted. During the resulting investigation, Alex had taken the stance that it had been the Council and Admiralty's fault for the whole affair. After all, it had been Starfleet brass at the time who had classified all accounts of Khan Singh's encounter with the *Enterprise* and it had been the same Starfleet brass who had sworn the *Enterprise* crew to secrecy. Given how he had been hamstrung by security at times, Alex knew how that had put poor Pavel Chekov in a very precarious position. Had Chekov been allowed to warn Clark Terrell as the *Reliant* headed for the Ceti Alpha system, he may have saved a lot of lives.

Only upon the *Enterprise's* return to Earth did Alex learn that when Chekov was with the *Enterprise*, he had been threatened with court-martial and imprisonment had he told anyone anything about Khan. The threat had come from none other than Starfleet Intelligence. So, knowing that, Chekov could not warn Captain Terrell about Khan until after they had made contact and by then, it was too late. And then upon learning of Khan's

use of the Genesis Device in the Mutara Nebula, the Federation Council had imposed super tight security around the entire project, putting measures in place that dwarfed those that had surrounded the Manhattan Project.

During this high-profile but secret investigation, most admirals and politicians had high-tailed it for any political cover they could find. Most of these people wanted to railroad Kirk and Terrell for the entire fiasco. Maybe that would have been the most politically expedient measure but then, Alex had never cared playing politics unless he had to play. Instead of being a good boy and following the pack, Alex came out in both men's defense. He contended it wasn't Terrell's fault that *Reliant* had stumbled upon Khan and his followers. It wasn't Kirk's fault that Khan had found out about Genesis and killed anyone standing in his way of getting it. It wasn't Kirk's fault that Khan had decided to go out in a blaze of glory, destroying the *Reliant*, the entire Regula system and a nebula in the process. If blame had to be fixed to someone, he said, it was the very people who were pointing their fingers at Kirk and Terrell.

The investigation was paused due to the Probe Crisis but the moment it passed, Kirk and company were brought in for a rare Council-level court-martial. Due to "mitigating circumstances," they had been found innocent (Alex thought the Probe Crisis had a lot to do with that though there was no evidence to support that theory). However, Kirk was involuntarily demoted to the rank of captain and he and his crew given a new *Enterprise* (NCC-1701-A). In another hearing shortly thereafter, the Council posthumously absolved Terrell of any wrongdoing but he wasn't awarded or promoted as was customary for those types of situations.

In the final act of the investigation, the Council turned its attention to Alex. In defending his two friends, it was seen by most that he had been borderline insubordinate during the affair. Had it not been for Admiral Morrow's intervention, Alex knew he would have been forced to retire like Morrow had been. Nonetheless, if he had been forced to retire, Alex wouldn't have regretted it. In his mind, he had stood up for what he felt was right and that was its own reward.

"You could have taken the easy road and let them separate Admiral Kirk from Starfleet and posthumously demote Captain Terrell. Instead, you not only came to their defense but you made it your personal mission to make sure everyone knew what you thought of what was happening as well."

"I didn't want to see my friends railroaded for something that was not their fault," he said. "I could not, in good consciousness, let them do that to either Jim Kirk or Clark Terrell. I'd be damned if I'd let *that* go down, much less without a fight."

"And that said a lot about your character, Alexander. Taking the least popular and most undesirable position takes a lot of courage."

"I was helping my friends," he said with a little defensiveness. "Had either one of them been in my position, I feel they would have done the same for me."

"Yes, I'm sure. But your passion and dogged loyalty to your friends against all odds and public sentiment says a lot about you. It was then that I began to understand what my brother James saw in you that allowed you to marry my daughter."

"I love Angelica. Always have and always will. That's never been in doubt."

Margaret finished her tea before continuing. "But I doubted it; at least until recently. As the saga concerning Genesis unfolded, I began to see that if you were *that* loyal to a friend, then I could see how much you must have genuinely love Angelica."

"I have always, and will always, love Angelica as the woman she is. I never gave a tinker's damn about her royal status. However, I am glad to hear you say you now believe me."

"Indeed." She paused for a minute, indicating she was about to change topics. "Now onto the crux of the situation we have here. When I took the time to evaluate my life, I found the reasons why I disliked you were wanting compared to what your actions and history tell me. I felt that it was time for me to put any animosity I had for you to rest once and for all." Margaret paused again, gathering herself. "I was wrong to think the way I did and I... *apologize* for the way I have treated you in the past. I promise you that it will not happen again."

That was one hell of a thing to admit, he thought. That had to have been tough to swallow a lifetime's worth of pride and admit she was mistaken about me and her reasons for disliking me. And if she's willing to bury the hatchet, maybe I should too. After all, she took the first step with Angie and now with me. If I don't, then I'll be one of the biggest assholes in the Federation. And I'm no asshole.

"I understand. And allow me to be as candid, if you permit me?" Margaret nodded. "From my point of view, while I knew there were similarities between us and Edward VIII, this was different. First off, while I have the greatest respect for the monarchy, this is also the twenty-third century. I know that an American divorcee dating a member of the Royal family was scandalous in those days. But, in order to survive, especially after the third world war nearly wiped out your family, the monarchy has had to adapt to the times. I was pleased to see both you and James were forward-thinking monarchs. Which is why it was such a shock to me when you opposed my very presence. Or so it seemed to me and Angelica at the time. My dislike for you stemmed from your... I think I'd call it 'hostility'... to me."

Elizabeth's expression revealed nothing. Then again, to be a senior Federation ambassador, you had to have one hell of a poker face and Alex knew a master when he saw one.

"It felt as though you were looking down your nose at me for reasons I could not fathom. I liked your brother immensely; he was one of those people I truly respected. And he and I had an understanding that if I were to marry Angie, she would always come first and foremost. And Angie has been ever since the day I met her. If she were to come in here right now and ask me to resign my commission, I'd do it without a second thought. But when I started seeing her, I felt outcast. It was you who made me feel like an outsider and that was why I was antagonistic towards you. But your brother and Angelica made me feel like family."

Now Elizabeth showed some surprise. Apparently, she didn't know how well James had liked Alex or how far their friendship had extended. Nor was she aware that Alex was fully cognizant of what marrying Angelica, the Duchess of Cambridge (at the time), would mean. And she didn't know what Alex's relationship to James had meant to him and why Alex had acted the way he had.

Vulnerabilities had been exchanged and the point of no return had been passed.

"However, with that said, I will say that I never hated you. *Disliked*, yes. But not hate. Now that I understand why you felt like you did and you understand why I felt as I did, I am more than willing to bury the hatchet between us, Margaret."

Elizabeth paused for what seemed as an eternity. "I believe we understand each other. I wished that it hadn't taken a terminal illness... I should have done this sooner, even if it were for Angelica's sake. I am a horrible person and even worse mother."

"I don't think that and I'm sure Angie doesn't," Alex automatically replied. "As you said, you're human. It took a lot of courage to come aboard a ship where your daughter and son-in-law are part of the command staff and it takes even more to ask for their forgiveness, to reconcile. And I know I say that for the two of us, it's better to be late than never in this case."

Elizabeth's mouth turned into a slight smile. "Thank you. You don't know how relieved I am right now. I will not forget what you've done here today."

"*Bridge to Captain McKnight*," came Bautista's voice over the intercom.

"Excuse me, Margaret," he said, receiving a nod in return. He tapped his badge. "McKnight here. Go ahead."

"*Captain*," said Bautista, "*you're going to want to come up to the bridge.*"

Confusion furrowed his brow. "Something wrong?"

"*I think you can say that. Our intruder has struck again.*"

Chapter Five

“Remember my friend, that knowledge is stronger than memory, and we should not trust the weaker.”

— Bram Stoker, Dracula

“Captain's Personal Log. Three people are now comatose in Sickbay without knowing as to why or who is doing this. My concern remains with my crew and our passengers. My instincts tell me this has got to be this is an inside job but without evidence, I can't very well accuse anyone. I've got the feeling I should know more, but for the life of me, I've no idea.”

In the conference room behind the bridge, Alex McKnight was huddled with his staff, minus Smith and Areniego, trying to make heads or tails out of what was happening. Empty cups and half eaten snacks adorned the conference table, signaling they had been here a while.

Alex, his Class B jacket hanging neatly on the back of his chair, looked out over the assembled officers, clearly annoyed by the lack of evidence thus far.

“There's got to be something we're missing,” Alex said. “Three people are now in Sickbay. Cullen's team has interviewed most of the telepathic crewmembers and every one of their stories have been verified thus far. So, what is it that we aren't seeing here?”

“Make it four people now,” said Mathias, reading a message on her PADD. “Another member from the ambassador's staff was brought up before I came in here.”

Alex got up and walked over to the viewscreen, which displayed a schematic of the conference center with a visual of Smith in the lower right and Areniego in the lower left corners. There were now four areas in orange, meaning a victim had been found comatose in that area. The orange spots were spread all over the building; no two spots were near one another or even on the same floor.

“We're missing something,” he repeated, keeping his gaze on the viewer. He thought for a moment before continuing. “There's no discernible pattern here. None of these attacks are in the same area or even on the same floor. Only one was near a public area and that's the one Dawn's said was just brought up.”

“And all within the last 24 hours,” Areniego added from Security Central. “The only common threads are that all the victims are human and on the Federation Ambassador's staff. Whoever is doing this is currently making sure to steer away from the Eminiari and Vendikar representatives.”

“So how do we know it's not them?” asked Mathias. “After all, there may be rogue elements in play here that are just trigger happy enough to stage all of this.”

“While I won't discount that opinion,” added Areniego, “I will point out that an attack on one of our people by either party would call down the wrath of the Federation on them, even with them on the cusp of signing the treaty to bring them membership. And the way the *Lexington* is orientated on the LaGrange point between both planets, we can make someone's life very uncomfortable very quickly if we so choose.”

“Let’s pause that thought for the moment,” Alex jumped in. “I won’t fire on anyone unless I have to but Dawn does bring up a point. Who would have the most to gain from this?”

“Klingons?” Tereshkova suggested. “Or maybe the Orions. After all, we’re close enough that the Syndicate might make an effort to get involved.”

“Unlikely, Lieutenant,” Saavik said. “The Syndicate has no known branches near this sector. The more likely benefactor would be the Klingons but with the current situation between them and the Romulans, it would be unlikely they would be able to pursue such an action at this time.”

Alex’s gaze never left the viewer, as if staring at it would give him a clue. “*Damn it.* Let’s focus on what we have in front of us and take it from the top. All the victims were alone. All in separate areas. If they saw their attacker, they had no chance of warning...” he trailed off, clearly at a loss for any other thought.

Saavik picked up on the captain’s thoughts. “Meaning that the victim most likely knew who it was and they were not expecting to be attacked.”

Alex nodded in agreement. “I thought that too. Otherwise, they would have alerted someone.”

“A logical deduction, Captain.”

“But that really doesn’t help us, does it,” said Smith from the conn. “I mean, they were alone. All the recorders in those areas did not pick up anything unusual.”

“Wait a second,” said Tereshkova. “How can this *not* be a setup? We’re *assuming* no one was with them, aren’t we?”

“What are you saying, Lieutenant?” asked Areniego.

“Maybe we’re taking *too* literal a track. Obviously, the victim entered the area by themselves but the attacker had to have known they were alone, right? No witnesses? So maybe the attacker or attackers were tracking them?”

“You think they were being tracked?” Alex asked.

“Why not? Major, you’re the expert here but let’s say, as an example, you were wanting to murder someone. You damn well don’t want witnesses around when you do the deed, right? Would this also apply in this situation?”

Areniego looked in surprise at Tereshkova. “You’re right, Lieutenant. If you want to commit a crime but don’t want to be caught right away, you’d do it where there’s little chance of a witness stumbling onto the scene of the crime immediately. The perpetrator would need some advance knowledge of the scene and of their prey.”

“Cullen,” said Alex, turning away from the screen and towards the viewport, “assuming that Valentina’s right and the victim thought it was someone they knew, could we be dealing with a shapeshifter?”

Areniego looked down and wrote a note on his PADD. “I think that’s a long shot, Captain. None of the races represented on the *Lexington*, on the ambassador’s staff, or on the planet’s surface are known to shapeshift.”

It was a moment before Saavik spoke. “Captain, there is one possibility we may be overlooking.”

“Go ahead.”

“There is still the matter of the missing pilot.”

Alex stopped for a moment, looking out the viewport to center his thoughts. Indeed, he had overlooked the missing pilot. But could this one person really be the blame for this situation? “What makes you think it’s the pilot?”

Saavik remained non-pulsed. “Since we can safely eliminate the telepathic members of the crew, then, logically, it is either one of the non-telepathic members of the crew or it’s the pilot.”

Master, thought Angelica, keeping a neutral expression on her face.

Yes, Angelica?

I assume you've been hearing this. Saavik isn't too far from the truth.

No, she is not. An unfortunate development.

We need to eliminate Saavik, interjected Smith. **She may convince Alex she's right and he'll be empowered enough to put additional pressure on the authorities to find you.**

Both of you should remember, said Dracula, **that due to the nature of these negotiations, anything he does planet side will have to have the ambassador's blessing before he goes to the authorities. And since they aren't Federation members, there's not a lot he can do but ask politely. Watch.**

“Are you suggesting,” Alex said, slowing walking back to his chair, “that I go ask the ambassador for permission to put more pressure on the authorities to find that pilot?”

“I am,” replied Saavik.

“On what grounds should I go to her?” he asked.

“On the grounds that you yourself reported she told you both she and her staff would cooperate fully in this investigation. Logically, she should be receptive to your idea.”

Alex thought for a moment before he answered. “You're right and for all the right reasons. However, given they aren't part of the Federation just yet, I can't put a lot of pressure on our hosts just yet. If you're right, then whoever is doing this is a hell of a lot smarter than most to be able to hide like this.”

Saavik didn't even pause. “I would counter that whomever is perpetrating these attacks may be using their own influence on the same security force we are relying on to prevent their exposure. Use whatever it took to prevent and hinder any investigation while they continued to make their attacks.”

That's one way of turning an argument turtle, thought Alex. *I didn't think of it like that.*

“You think they're turning the tables on us then, Saavik? But how? That would mean the attacker is well versed in investigative procedures!”

“That would be... logical to assume, Captain.”

Uh oh, said Angelica. **Master, she's closing in on us.**

I had forgotten about the Vulcans and their blasted logic. She is getting a little too close.

I'll take care of this, Master, she said.

“And why would they do that?” asked Angelica, a little stronger than she should have. “What possible purpose would it serve for someone to do these things? Saavik, who would be capable of these misdeeds?”

Saavik looked to her, no expression on her face. “It is not wise to make assumptions without data...”

“I once heard,” interrupted Angelica, “that to *assume* makes an arse out of you *and* me. You want to base our next course of action on an assumption that has almost no basis in fact?”

“Facts remain facts, Commander. Even if we wish they were not true.”

That statement made Angelica go to full attack mode. “There are no facts here. You're *assuming* that someone is guilty without a shred of evidence. Last I looked, people are *innocent* until they're proven *guilty*. Seems to me that we're forgetting that basic tenant of our legal system.”

“How can you dispute the one fact that is true?” calmly retorted the science officer. “The one fact we do know is that these attacks did not start until after the *Lexington's* arrival.”

Angelica turned her seat so she could look Saavik directly in the eyes. “Or were they before we got here? And whose purpose would be to cause this kind of disruption right when the negotiations are at their most sensitive? And now someone's attacking our personnel, making us look weak right at the worst possible moment.”

“Interesting supposition,” countered Saavik. “Who would benefit from such an action, Commander?”

“Take your pick. Romulans, Klingons, Tholians... hell, even the *Orions* could get in on the act if there's a profit involved.”

“Angie,” said Alex, now seeing the debate starting to turn into an argument.

“Commander,” Saavik said formally, “I suggest your supposition is flawed because you are allowing emotion to cloud the issue.”

Angelica knew better than to rise to that bait. “My supposition is no more flawed than yours. I contend that this has got to be the work of foreign power, trying to destabilize the balance of power in this sector and get the Federation ran out in the process. You contend it's some rogue actor who's staging this for some unknown end. And with the present situation as it is, *Leftenant Commander*, either one of us could be correct!”

“Indeed, Commander. You would be accurate in that assessment that either supposition could be correct based on the sole fact on hand.”

Very good, Angelica, said Dracula. ***You did well.***

Thank you, Master.

“Enough,” barked Alex. “As you both pointed out so well, we've only one fact to go on so everything else is conjecture. Our job is to find facts. Hard, solid facts.” He paused to let that sink in. “Cullen, you start interviewing co-workers of all the victims and I'll go have a chat with the ambassador. Let's see if we can't figure out what's going on before we have any more attacks.”

I knew it. He's going for my mother.

You could almost hear the laughter in Dracula's smile. ***But this wasn't an unexpected turn of events.***

So how will you handle my mother?

She could almost hear the smile in his tone. ***I was dealing with her before you were born. I will handle that detail.***

"Come in," said Ambassador Windsor-Mountbatten, putting down her PADD full of notes she had taken as James Davies, the ambassador's private secretary, and Archibald Harris entered the suite. Both men bowed their heads as protocol demanded when addressing the reigning monarch of Great Britain.

"Your Majesty," said Davies formally.

The ambassador did a quick look at the other person with Davies. "Is that you, Mr. Harris?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, taking a bow as well. "When I heard you were here, I asked if I could visit with you once again. Mr. Davies said I could have a brief visit this morning before your next set of negotiations."

"So, you arranged this with Captain McKnight, James?"

"Actually, the captain was unavailable. His first officer gave me permission."

She nodded then turned to Davies. "So, James, what brings you here?"

"Ma'am," Davies quickly but politely interrupted, "I hate to interrupt but while I was talking to Commander Smith, she let me know there's been additional attacks on others on our planet side staff."

"Indeed," said Margaret. "Captain McKnight has informed me of only the one incident."

"It's four now, ma'am," said Davies.

"I see." Margaret paused to think for a minute. "What do you think we should do, James?"

"I think it may be prudent at this juncture," Davies said, "to remain on guard until Captain McKnight and his crew find out what is happening and put a stop to it."

Margaret looked to Davies with a slightly quizzical look. "How could we be more on guard? You know the Marines assigned to this ship are considered to be among the best."

"And yet they allowed Federation personnel to be attacked," interjected Harris.

"For which they cannot be blamed, Archibald. After all, it's been less than 24 hours since the first attack. Investigations take longer when you have little to go on."

"Ma'am," Harris answered. "I know I've been retired for some time but if you indulge me for a moment." He waited until she nodded her assent. "My opinion would be that, in this case, you should be taking action to protect a senior Federation ambassador as well as the Queen of the United Kingdom."

"Besides," Davies added, "how do we know these incidents aren't leading up to an attack on you?"

"They wouldn't *dare!*" Margaret exclaimed. "No member of the Royal Household has been attacked in over four hundred years!"

"That is true, ma'am, and we would like to keep that particular record intact."

Harris saw a chance to press home his point. "While we do not doubt Captain McKnight's ability to safeguard you, I think it prudent to assist him by keeping a low profile."

Maybe even holding the final negotiations virtually until the signing ceremony. In this way, we would not be additional targets and it would greatly assist the captain's security forces."

Margaret stood up and looked out the viewport, thinking about the logic of their statements as Eminiar VII rotated deceptively peacefully in the distance. She did not doubt McKnight's capacity to keep them safe but the points Davies and Harris presented had value as well. To minimize contact would, for all intents and purposes, keep her and the staff out of the line of fire while McKnight continued his investigation. The attacker or attackers would then have to penetrate a rather solid security force to get to her.

"Very well," she said finally, walking back to her seat. "Except for myself and the essential staff, all others will remain in their quarters until further notice. Additionally, save for the signing ceremony that we shall attend, all other meetings will be conducted virtually."

"Very good, ma'am," the two men said. Harris had a slight private smile as the Queen sat down.

"I will let Captain McKnight know of the situation so he can adjust his tactics accordingly," Davies said.

"I will leave that in your capable hands, James. Was there anything else?"

"Not at the moment, ma'am," Davies replied.

"Good. Thank you both. Archibald, it was good to see you again but as you can see..." Margaret trailed off, her meaning not lost on either man.

"I quite understand, ma'am," Harris said. "If you don't mind me saying so, I don't miss having to handle these types of crises."

"In some ways," Margaret said, "I envy you. Maybe when these negotiations are over, we can spend some additional time and reminisce about the old days."

"I hope we do," replied Harris. Margaret returned to her PADD, clearly dismissing the two men. They bowed their heads again and walked out of the stateroom. Davies headed one way and Harris the other when Harris ran into Captain McKnight headed to the Queen's stateroom. Harris stopped Alex just a few meters shy of the doors.

"I'm sorry," said Harris apologetically. "The Queen is not receiving any visitors at this time."

"She'll make an exception for me," Alex said. "I need to see her on a very important matter."

Harris held a hand up to stop Alex from sidestepping him. "The Queen is resting, sir," he lied. "She asked that she not be disturbed."

"She may well be in danger," Alex countered.

"Maybe if you were to tell me, I will ensure the Queen is told when she awakes."

Alex crossed his arms. "I need to ask her for some assistance in our investigation."

"Indeed." Harris put on a show of not knowing this already. "In what regards?"

"In the regards of ship's business. That's all you need to know."

"And what could Her Majesty do that you can't?" Harris probed. "She was under the impression you had a handle on your investigation?"

Alex kept what he thought to himself for the moment but his eyes betrayed his growing anger. "And just who in the hell are you? I don't ever recall seeing you on her staff."

"I was one of the deputy private secretaries to Her Majesty. I'm retired now but I was asked to advise Her Majesty on some issues."

Alex looked and cocked his head slightly. *Bullshit*, he thought. "I feel as though I should know you and I don't."

"Apologies, Captain," Harris apologized. To Alex, he didn't even make the effort to cover the sarcasm. "Her Majesty was just seeing me before she went to rest."

Harris's pompous ass bureaucrat attitude was getting under Alex's skin but the veteran captain knew better than get into a pissing contest in public with a public servant. "Whatever. I still need to see the Queen and what is said between the commander of this ship and her in a private meeting *will* remain in private, mister...?"

"Harris. Archibald Harris."

"... Mr. Harris. If I were you, I'd take care not to make what you may or may not *think* you know public knowledge."

Harris puffed up a little at the captain's thinly veiled threat. "Is that a threat, sir?"

Alex didn't back down. "Take it as you want, Mr. Harris. But I'm going to see her. *Now.*"

The older gentleman backed down but refused to move. "I'm still afraid the Queen will not be available for a while. I will make sure to pass along your... query."

Alex didn't immediately respond but when he did, his tone could have instantly frozen a gallon of ice cream. This wasn't a hill he was willing to die on and he knew that arguing with this jackass would get him nowhere. "Make sure you do."

Harris stood his ground as Alex turned on his heel and walked the same way he had come. Had he waited a minute more, he would have seen Angelica come up behind Harris.

"He suspects us, Master," she whispered. Telepathic communications in public would have looked extremely suspicious. "I tried to put the doubt there but I don't think he entirely took my bait."

"It's clear that he suspects *something*. Otherwise, he would not come to talk to the Queen. We shall have to watch our feeding tonight."

"The Hunger is almost on me, Master. I don't know if I will be able to wait."

"I didn't say we had to wait. Just that we must be careful. These people are no fools, Angelica. Your meeting proved that."

They walked along together, finding an empty conference room so they could carry on their conversation mentally.

I find it tiresome to speak vocally, Dracula admitted. ***One day, I shall not have to resort to such primitive communication in public.***

I find languages fascinating, Angelica replied. ***I have learned over three dozen languages. It's a fascinating study, Master.***

Yes but, as I recall, you also have an enormous appetite for singing music. Old music. From the 1980's, if I'm not mistaken.

Angelica laughed. ***Yes. I love that era of music.*** She stopped, feeling a desire trying to overcome her. ***The Hunger, Master. I feel it coming.***

You must learn control, Angelica. Much like eating food, you can ration feeding the Hunger. And we must do so unless we want your husband to find out about us.

He'd be furious, I'm sure. She paused. ***But it's not like I'm cheating on him.***

In a way, you are. Remember when I converted you? That act was more intimate than any lovemaking you had performed with him.

Dracula could feel her surprise. ***Master, is that how you have... sexual relations?***

He didn't bother answering. ***You must feed. And I think I know who you can feed on next. It will serve to 'kill two birds with one stone' as the saying goes.***

Saavik was coming off duty, making her way to the officer's mess when she encountered Angelica along the way. Had Saavik been human, she would have been furious with her friend at the way she acted at the morning's meeting. She had noticed the high level of passion in Angelica's counter-argument; though Angelica had done a great job of using that passion to her advantage during the latter part of the meeting. Something didn't seem right about Angelica, Saavik concluded, but kept her doubts to herself for the time being.

"Saavik!" Angelica said. Saavik noticed that Angelica had found time to change into one of her trademark outfits, plus some gloves, which was a little unusual for being on a temperature-controlled starship. "I was hoping to run into you."

"Me?"

Angelica smiled charmingly. "Yes, you. Listen, I'm sorry for the way I acted towards you this afternoon."

Saavik blinked. To the experienced eye, it was the Vulcan equivalent of being amazed. "You did seem to be... not quite yourself, Angelica."

"I'm fine," Angelica quickly said. *Almost a little too quickly*, Saavik noticed. "It's just... well, I lost my temper for no reason. I should have realized you weren't doing anything more than pointing out something we should have been considering. And I apologize for my rudeness."

Saavik looked at her. "Apology accepted, Angelica. Isn't that what friends do?"

"Yes!" the princess said, again a little too quickly. "Friends forgive each other. Listen, I need your help on something. Can you spare a moment?"

"I was about to have my dinner."

Angelica smiled. "Oh, I didn't know you were going to dinner and I normally would not ask this but this is really important."

Saavik cocked her head to one side. Something was odd about this entire encounter but Saavik wasn't sure what it could be. "What is it that you need my assistance?"

"Oh, it's that damn studio computer again. It isn't responding."

Saavik looked to Angelica, raising an eyebrow. Usually, Angelica handled the maintenance of anything connected to the recording studio; after all, she had designed and built it, as well as being one of its prime users. "I was under the impression you disliked anyone but yourself performing any maintenance on the studio in question."

“Usually, yes,” Angelica admitted. “But this time, I’m stumped. I don’t know what I did but the computer isn’t responding to anything I do. You’re the best computer person aboard and I thought I would ask for your help. If you didn’t mind, that is.”

Saavik, though a little bewildered, could not help but consider her friend’s request. She didn’t see anything wrong with helping; after all, wasn’t helping one’s friend part of being a friend?

“Please, Saavik! It won’t take you long and I’m on my time now. Kimmie’s booked it right after me and I don’t want her mad at me because I broke something!”

“Very well,” said Saavik. “I will help you.”

“Great!” Angelica said. “I won’t keep you long, I promise!”

As they made their way to the recording studio, Saavik noticed that Angelica’s enthusiasm seemed to be just a little too excessive for this occasion. Saavik could not recall anytime she had seen Angelica this exuberant. Then again, Saavik had only just started dabbling in emotions with the help of this woman. *I’ve a long way to go*, Saavik thought as the door to the studio loomed in front of them. *Maybe one day I will learn how to use my emotions to my advantage.*

Angelica led the way into the control room, allowing room for Saavik to enter. Saavik had only been there once and that was to celebrate Angelica’s birthday. However, Saavik clearly remembered the layout. The offending computer terminal was off to one side, the screen blank.

“You see,” Angelica said. “Dead as dead can be.”

Saavik saw the problem almost immediately. “But you said it wasn’t accepting input. A switched off computer cannot accept input.”

“Oh, I turned the monitor off before I left,” Angelica said. “I didn’t want to damage it any further. Can you take a look at it?”

“Certainly,” Saavik replied. As Saavik approached the offending terminal, she didn’t see Angelica take off her red leather gloves, nor hear her quietly unzip her cropped jacket. A pair of studio headphones were sitting atop of the terminal. Angelica seemed to know the question before it was asked. “Sorry,” she said, brushing past Saavik. “I had these on while I was working, in the process of learning the lyrics of a new song.” As Angelica reached around Saavik, her hand gently brushed against Angelica’s for a moment. In that moment, Saavik made brief mental contact with Angelica’s mind. And what she found would have shocked even a full Vulcan.

There were two minds where there should have been only one.

Saavik involuntarily pulled back from Angelica with a gasp. Now it was clear what was happening right now was a smokescreen, a ruse. Someone was controlling Angelica’s mind and they were making her act like this. Angelica, leaping to the correct conclusion, smiled, revealing fangs.

“Yes, Saavik,” she said huskily. “I belong to the Master.”

“I knew something was wrong,” Saavik noted. “I just didn’t know what it was.”

Angelica quickly took off her jacket, revealing a black leather crop top. “You’re on the mark, as usual. There is someone who’s been improving me. What he’s done... it’s made me powerful. Better. A new woman, as it were.”

“As the captain would say, ‘those sound like famous last words’.”

“So what are we waiting for?” Angelica reached for Saavik but she ducked just in time.

“Please, Angelica,” she said. “Do not do this.”

Angelica did not answer but again reached for the science officer. This time, Saavik was a half second too slow and Angelica managed to grab Saavik’s sleeve. Saavik pulled away as Angelica pulled her, causing the sleeve to rip off. Angelica didn’t stop, dropping the cloth and rushed towards her friend. Saavik had little time and no room to react as the princess slammed into Saavik’s midsection, knocking the wind out of her. Together, they slammed against another console, the rack threatening to break away from the wall from the impact. Saavik managed to throw Angelica into the main console. Angelica made contact, breaking the touch screen before falling face first to the deck.

“Angelica,” Saavik begged, “do not do this. I do not wish to hurt you.”

Angelica flipped over to look at Saavik. “You won’t hurt me,” she purred, licking her lips and smiling despite getting the better of the exchange of blows. “In fact, you’re making things interesting.”

Looking quickly, Saavik saw her chance to escape. She bolted for the door but when she got into the door sensor’s range, it didn’t open. Undaunted, Saavik lowered a shoulder and slammed against it. Even with her Vulcan strength, the door stubbornly refused to budge.

“You control your fear very well,” declared Angelica, picking herself up from the deck, not bothering to reset her clothing. “I like that.”

Saavik turned around to see the commander now on her feet, dusting herself off. “What has happened to you, Angelica?”

Angelica smiled again, revealing her fangs. Instead of an answer, Angelica launched herself at the science officer and caught Saavik once again in the midsection. And like the last attack, Saavik had little time to react and nowhere to go. The two women slammed into the door and this time, it was with enough force to momentarily stun Saavik. Angelica took the few moments’ pause to stand up and delivered a vicious backhand. The blow stunned Saavik even further. She slumped over the arm of the chair beside the door in a daze. Angelica pulled her up and turned her so Saavik could see her face.

“The game is over, sister,” she said, starting to bring one of her hands to Saavik’s temple. Saavik knew Angelica was not capable of a mind meld so whomever was controlling the princess’ mind could apparently make some sort of mental contact to take over the victim’s mind. Not that Saavik was about to allow someone else to control her mind.

While Angelica’s full attention was on Saavik’s eyes, Saavik brought her knee into Angelica’s abdomen, remembering that her Vulcan strength could easily cause massive damage to human tissue. Angelica grunted and doubled over, letting Saavik go. Saavik saw a slight opening in Angelica’s defenses and attempted to exploit it by grabbing Angelica’s left shoulder so she could administer a neck pinch. Angelica sensed Saavik’s move more than she saw it and blindly grabbed Saavik’s wrist, twisting it painfully. Angelica stood up. Saavik was easily stronger than Angelica with better reflexes; however, this time, Angelica seemed stronger and faster than the science officer.

By this time, Saavik was beginning to run out of tricks to stop Angelica's onslaught of attacks. With a silent apology, Saavik backhanded Angelica with her free hand. The blow caused Angelica to fly backwards, releasing Saavik's wrist as she fell back and away from the science officer. Now free, Saavik could feel the offended wrist pounding, meaning that Angelica had, at the least, severely sprained it. Before she could take any more stock of her physical damage, Angelica sprung back into action with a haymaker, connecting on Saavik's head. Saavik stumbled over the table and fell to the floor, dazed once again.

"We could keep going on like this, Saavik," panted Angelica as she walked over to Saavik who was slowing but doggedly getting up once again, "and don't think I'm not enjoying this. But it's time I ended this."

Even though the haze of give-and-take combat, Saavik received Angelica's hidden meaning. She feigned tiredness, giving Angelica the impression she was on the last of her reserves. She waited until the moment Angelica was close enough, then Saavik summoned all her strength to pick up her friend off the desk like a paperweight and throw her through the booth's window. Angelica landed with a crash and heavy thud, glass and Valentina's cymbal set falling over her body. Saavik leaned against the console, keeping an eye on her opponent.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Saavik made her way to the booth door which connected the control room to the recording booth itself. Angelica hadn't moved but Saavik was no fool. She cautiously opened the door, keeping a wary eye on her friend. Saavik reached up to tap her badge to page a medical team only to find it missing.

"Looking for something?" Saavik heard. Angelica turned herself over, various cuts marring her face and cuts and bruises were all over her upper body areas where her crop top wasn't covering it. In her hand was Saavik's badge. "That's cheating."

"Angie, I didn't want to hurt you but you forced me to defend myself."

"This game's not over, Saavik." Without warning, she kicked the stand by her foot, sending it into Saavik's legs. Saavik, not anticipating her fresh attack since it looked like Angelica was finished, got tangled up and tripped over the stand, landing face first on the floor. Angelica got up first and this time didn't bother turning Saavik over. She placed her fingers on Saavik's temples.

Saavik screamed at the moment of contact as it felt like very sharp needles were stabbing her brain. She reared her head up, hoping to break Angelica's hold but Angelica kept a vice-like grip on Saavik's temples, forcing her to stand up. Saavik's mental shields were holding against the battering they were taking but they were already showing cracks. She forced herself to remember the mental exercises to reinforce her shields.

That won't do you any good, Angelica said, seeing what Saavik had in her mind. ***I will win.***

What are you doing to me?

I'm draining your lifeforce. When I am done, you won't know what happened.

Saavik felt her body slowly being drained and she screamed again when she felt fresh pain in her mind, her shields starting to collapse. ***Stop this, Angie! You're hurting me!***

Stop resisting! The pain will stop if you give in.

No! My mind is my own! You will not control me!

Who said I was wishing to control you? Master only wants you out of the picture. Feeding on you was my idea.

Saavik could feel her body starting to succumb to the hellish experience. And she could feel her mental shields failing against the incessant onslaught. For a telepath, having your mind invaded was a horrible kind of hell. And it looked as though the force would succeed in taking over her mind and Saavik could feel her body weaken with every passing second. Conversely, Saavik knew that Angelica was feeling stronger and she reveled in the feeling of dominance and power it brought.

Just as she thought she could not keep her shields up much longer, Saavik summoned up one final mental command and that was to shut her conscious mind down. This would attempt to deny an enemy from the use of her mind and as she fell unconscious, she was not sure it would completely work.

Angelica kept holding onto Saavik's temples, continuing to feed until she got her fill. Finally, mercifully, she let Saavik go. Saavik's lifeless body slumped to the floor. Angelica, flushed with excitement and victory, stood over her friend in triumph.

"Now the game is over," Angelica said, flashing her fangs in victory.

Sometime later, Saavik vaguely became aware of her body. She could hear sounds but her battered mind could not make out anything useful. Her world of black was slowly turning gray and with it came more awareness. Saavik could feel a slight chill, meaning she had been moved from the studio to somewhere else. She did not dare to open her eyes now.

You're right in that you're not in the studio anymore, Saavik, she heard Angelica say. ***But from now on, what you know, I know. What you see, I will see. What you hear, I will hear.***

Why... why didn't you kill me? Saavik weakly asked, confused as to Angelica's intentions. ***Logically, you don't want witnesses.***

Master does not want us to kill when we feed. Only to get our fill. Besides, being our spy will serve a better purpose than killing you.

Do you think I will spy for you or whomever is controlling you?

You've no choice, Saavik. You will be our spy and later, you will become a disciple!

Losing control for a moment, Saavik shouted ***Screw you two!*** As her anger peaked, she felt the connection break, only to be replaced a moment later. Saavik could feel a lingering presence in the background. It wasn't Angelica's consciousness but the one that was controlling the comm officer's mind. She timidly reached out with her mind but the presence retreated.

For the moment, Saavik rested as she heard a familiar Australian accented voice. "She's regaining consciousness. Thank God for that tough Vulcan constitution! Vitals?"

"Coming up to normal, Doctor. Brain activity is very high though."

There was a pause. "Yeah, signs of neurological trauma. Her telepathy centers are going crazy. Ten cc, scalpaline." Seconds later, Saavik could feel the slight pressure on

the side of her neck and a puff of cold air as the doctor injected her. Almost immediately, she could feel the alien presence in her mind subside.

“Saavik?” she heard. “Can you hear me?”

Saavik tried to form words but found her throat was so raw and dry that she temporarily could not speak. *Sedate me*, she thought. *Put me down before I do any damage!*

“Open your eyes. Slowly.”

Saavik did as told and found herself looking up at a white ceiling.

“Don’t try moving anything, okay?” Mathias said. “Just be still. You took quite a beating. Broken wrist, a few bruised ribs, broken nose, and a black... well, *green* eye. I didn’t realize that Vulcans could *get* a shiner until I saw you come in here.”

Saavik cleared her voice and found she could finally speak. “Doctor?” she croaked as glimpses of her fight with Angelica flashed in her mind so her memories gave her an answer as to why she was in Sickbay. “How did I...?”

“Kimmie found you,” answered Mathias. “She found you there among the wreckage that was formerly our recording studio and we brought you here. And if I didn’t know better, I’d almost swear you went a few rounds with a Klingon who’s got a severe case of hemorrhoids and drunk on bloodwine. Whoever you squared off against did a real number on you.”

Saavik looked at the doctor. “Please, Doctor,” Saavik muttered. “Sedate me. Put me to sleep.”

“Saavik, you’re going to be fine. There’s nothing...”

“Dawn,” Saavik pleaded. Mathias blinked; she had never heard Saavik call her by her first name before. “They’re in my mind! Whatever I see and hear, they do too. You need to sedate me before they know too much!”

Mathias ran her scanner over Saavik again. “I don’t understand, Saavik.”

Saavik reached up and grabbed the doctor’s arm, being mindful to not put much pressure on it. Human bones were much more fragile than Vulcan bones. Saavik could feel Angelica and the other person just lurking, as if waiting. “You need to sedate me before it’s too late! What I see and hear, they do too!”

“Who are *they*, Saavik?”

“It’s... *arghhh!*” she screamed just as a blinding pain shot through her mind just as she was about to say Angelica’s name. The pain subsided just as quick as it came. ***Oh, that is very much cheating!*** she heard Angelica say through the haze of pain in her mind. ***You can’t spill the beans like that, Saavik.***

Stay out, Angelica! she shouted. Once again, neither Angelica or the other bothered to give Saavik an answer, content to lurk in the background of her mind.

“Saavik?” Mathias said, concerned. “Are you all right? Your pain receptors shot up...”

“*Dawn!*” Saavik cried, trying to tighten her grip on Mathias’ arm but failing. “Sedate me! *Now!*”

Mathias turned to look at someone; Saavik painfully turned her head to see Captain McKnight enter Sickbay, concern and worry evident on his face. He walked straight to Saavik’s bedside.

"I came as soon as I heard," he said, taking position opposite Mathias. He looked down to his science officer. "How are you feeling, Saavik?"

"Alex, please, have Dawn *sedate me!*" Like Mathias, Alex also blinked in surprise at her use of his first name. "They're in my mind!"

"Who?" he asked. "Who is in your mind?"

Saavik violently shook her head. "I *can't!*" **Yes**, she heard Angelica say. ***I will hurt you if you try to tell them I'm here!***

Alex looked up at the doctor. She nodded and he looked back down to Saavik.

"What you need us to do?"

"Alex, you must sedate me! They see and hear all I see and hear! *Please!* I can't let them know what we know!"

Alex didn't hesitate. "Okay, Saavik. Dawn, give her something."

Instead of arguing, Mathias produced a hypospray and injected Saavik on the neck. Almost instantly, Saavik fell asleep; her hold on Mathias' arm released and her hand fell limply to her side. Mathias gently put her arm back on the table and covered Saavik with a light blanket. The doctor ran her scanner over her patient and, apparently satisfied with the readings, motioned for the captain to follow her. Once again, she led him to her office.

"This is rapidly becoming a habit of yours to drag me in here when you want to talk about a patient," Alex asked, semi-jokingly. "What in the hell happened to her?"

Mathias wasn't in the mood for levity. "We're lucky Saavik's with us *at all*. She took one hell of a beating." *Which is saying something, coming from Dawn*, thought Alex. *She grew up with two boys and two girls in an Australian port town.* "And she's complaining about someone in her mind. I asked her who it was and her pain receptors shot through the roof."

"Why isn't she like the others?"

"I'm not sure. Her metabolic levels are low, even for a Vulcan, but not in the levels needed for status. However, her telepathic center is in overdrive, again even for a Vulcan. If I had to guess, I'd say we're seeing an allergic reaction to whoever attacked her."

"An *allergic reaction?*"

"Akin to one, yes."

"How do we cure it?"

Mathias leaned on her desk. "I'm can't give you a firm answer without some more research. There are indications of neurological trauma; maybe that will give me some indication as to how to proceed."

Alex sat down in one of the seats, processing the information. "So, she's in contact with them?"

"I'd have to say yes. Her electroencephalogram readings seem to confirm what she's saying. And it would explain why they're so high."

"Maybe we can..." he stopped, thinking and not liking the answer he was coming up with. "No, I can't do that to her."

Now he had Mathias' full attention and she could easily guess what he had planned. "You're not suggesting that you... that you letting her lead you to whoever is doing this?" Alex's silence confirmed it. "That's... *wrong!* It's more than wrong, it's *inhumane!* All we

have is Saavik's word but she's in so much pain that she may not realize the importance of what she's saying!"

"Don't you think I already know that? You think I *want* to do use her as bait? Believe me, if there were another way, I'd take it but there's none. Unless we use her to stop them, there will be more attacks, more comatose people."

"But Dad, the pain she suffered when she tried telling us who it was would have made any one of us pass out on the spot. And you want to subject her to that *again*? What right do we have to do this?"

Alex looked sternly at his daughter-in-law. "I think she would agree with the reasoning behind my thinking, Dawn. 'Needs of the many over the one' type of deal. Now what can you do to help her fend off those mental attacks?"

Mathias knew she had lost the battle with her father-in-law but she couldn't resist a final say in the matter. "Nothing I can say is going to change your mind, will it?"

"I'm afraid not," he admitted. "I don't like it but using Saavik right now to fend off any more attacks is something I can live with."

Mathias sighed and took a seat behind her desk, tapping on her monitor screen. "I think I can help her manage the pain." She looked at her screen in intense concentration. "We could suppress the telepathic parts of her brain with a cortical stimulator and a mix of drugs. The stimulator should help with the voices and the drugs will help with the pain. But there's no guarantee this will work. Whoever is in Saavik's mind is a *bona fide* expert. Vulcans have very strong mental disciplines and Saavik was trained by some of the best on Vulcan. For this person or persons to just use her as a spy..." Mathias paused and looked up at the captain. "Even with all my medical know-how, they could still take over her mind at any time."

"A chance I'll have to take. How long for you to set up?"

"About an hour. And in that time, I implore you, Alex... look for another option. This isn't right in what you're about to do to her."

"Trust me, I know it's not right but it's the only option open to me at the moment." He sighed. "Some days, this job doesn't pay me enough."

Alex walked into Security Central where he found Major Areniego pouring over a PADD, a semi-hot cup of coffee untouched on his desk. The troopers in the outer office were steering clear of both the major and his office, telling Alex this might not be the best time to be intruding. Just as he had mentioned before, there were some days where it just didn't pay to be a starship commander and today was one of those days. He really didn't want to put Saavik at risk by using her as bait but he had to look at the whole picture. He wasn't lying when he told Mathias that he regretted his decision but he knew he would regret it even more if he didn't take the chance.

"Cullen?" he said as he approached the open door. Areniego looked at the door with a sentence on his lips but held it as he recognized the captain. Alex could guess what the man was about to say and he did not blame the major one bit; he had already said it silently and once out loud in the turbolift car on the way here.

"Sir!" Areniego said, rising to his feet. Alex waved him down and entered, standing close to the desk. Unlike Alex's office, which featured models and photos of old

battleships and aircraft carriers along with other sundry items to make it feel at home, Areniego's office was spartan. Only a diploma hung on one wall and that was the extent of the decoration.

"Looks like you're a busy guy," said Alex.

Areniego sighed in frustration. "You've no idea. Sir. None of this... it's just not making any sense!"

"Looks like we might have a break in the case. Commander Saavik has been attacked."

Areniego looked in alarm, thinking he was remiss in his duties. "I knew that but where is she?"

"She's in Sickbay right now. And forget getting anything from that crime scene... the recording studio is such a shambles I doubt you could get any clues from it. I told your people as much and I dismissed them, though the booth is sealed for the time being."

"That's not the correct procedure, Captain."

Alex nodded. "One of the perks of command is knowing when you can break from procedure and when you can bend them. Besides, there's been a development that I wanted to talk to you in private about anyway."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. These attacks... you and I agree they're most unusual."

"You can say that again, Captain. The victims, outside of being Federation personnel and human, have no connection to each other or as to why they were attacked. And now one of the ship's crew has been attacked?"

"But there's a difference this time. Saavik not only awake but she says she's in mental contact with her attacker."

The Marine looked at Alex as if he had grown a second head. "*Nakakahiya!*⁶ How the hell is *that* possible?"

"I've no idea. Doctor Mathias seems to think this is a kind of an allergic reaction to whoever is in Saavik's mind." Alex could see the major's next question and decided to forestall it. "And whenever Saavik tries to tell you who it is, she reacts in severe pain."

Areniego looked down at his PADD to make some notes. "Sounds a lot like biofeedback," he commented offhandedly.

"I doubt Saavik would agree with you on that sentiment."

Areniego looked up, flush with embarrassment. "Sorry, Captain. I didn't mean it that way."

Alex nodded. "I know. Don't worry about it. But even without telling us who's trying to take over her mind, I think she can still lead us to whomever is behind this. I've ordered Dawn to make Saavik ready. But Saavik's under immense stress and pain. It's not right in having her as bait but, under the circumstances..."

"It would be better than letting these attacks continue," finished the major.

"Exactly. Along the lines of 'good of the many over the one' mantra. I don't like it but unless you give me another option, I'm going with this one."

⁶ Tagalog = *Goddamnit!*

Areniego sighed heavily, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his tired eyes. “We’re now up to five victims and Commander Saavik is the only lead we’ve got. Everything else is a dead end.”

“And I’ve yet to contact the ambassador about interviewing her people,” Alex said. “I got the feeling I’m being stonewalled.”

“‘Stonewalled’?” Areniego’s tone indicated that he did not know how Alex was using the term.

“Purposely being blocked. When I tried to contact her earlier, she was unavailable.”

“Who’s telling you this?”

“Someone on the ambassador’s staff who’s a real pompous ass. This guy even went to far as to trying to blackmail me with making some recent confidential information public if I didn’t stop trying to contact Margaret.”

That piqued Areniego’s interest. “That’s kind of odd, don’t you think? Trying to blackmail a senior captain and a commander of a Federation vessel?”

“It is but I also threatened to come down on him like a ton of bricks if he carried out his threat. So, I’m not surprised he would stonewalling me in retribution.”

The major steeped his fingers in front of his face, lost in thought. He wasn’t looking at anything in the room; he had a vacant stare, as if looking beyond at something. “This is a real *non sequitur*, isn’t it?” he finally said.

“That’s saying a lot. Just *what* doesn’t follow?”

Areniego still had that thousand-yard stare. “The person who threatened to blackmail you. Who is this person and what position do they hold on her staff?”

“Name’s Harris. He’s a retired deputy private secretary.”

“So not the one who you would normally speak to when attempting to speak to the ambassador?”

Alex made the connection. “That’s Jim Davies’ job. Come to think of it, I haven’t spoken to Davies since we pulled into the system! *Goddamn it!*” Alex swore. “Why didn’t I think of this sooner?”

“You’ve got a lot on your mind,” said Areniego, standing up and grabbing his uniform jacket from the back of his chair. “Let’s go pay this Mr. Davies a visit.”

“Bet your ass we are. Computer,” Alex called, “where is James Davies?”

“That information is classified,” the computer instantly answered.

Alex looked at Areniego in astonishment. “Computer, this is Captain Alexander McKnight. Confirm voiceprint.”

“Voiceprint confirmed. McKnight, Alexander Daniel. Rank: Captain. Current Assignment: Commanding Officer, U.S.S. *Lexington*, NCC-1709-A.”

“Provide current location of Mr. James Davies, Private Secretary to Ambassador Margaret Windsor-Mountbatten.”

“That information is classified.”

“Retry voiceprint with inactive rank of Admiral. Clearance: Alpha Level Two. Repeat inquiry.”

“New security classification confirmed for McKnight, Alexander Daniel. Inactive rank: Admiral.” A pause. “That information remains classified.”

“The hell it is,” Alex muttered, “not at that security level and rank. Computer, who classified that information?”

“That information is classified.”

Now Alex’s astonishment turned to anger. No one on the ship should have been able to classify information above his clearance level, even with his inactive rank. And there was no one on board who could trump his classification level.

“Computer, identify my security classification.”

This time, there was no pause from the computer. “Admiral clearance has been selected. Incumbent meets all security requirements. Security level is Code Alpha, Tier Level Two.”

“Then provide me the location of James Davies!”

“That information is classified.”

Alex would have let loose with a string of invectives that would have turned even the most hardened Marine blue but Areniego stopped him in time.

“Computer, security override. Priority access. Authorization, Areniego Alpha Seven One. Provide location of James Davies.”

“That information is classified.”

“Damn it,” Alex spat. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“Then let’s try getting to the ambassador ourselves.”

“No,” Alex said, looking at a chronometer. 2315. “Send someone to look if you can. Let’s go check in with Dawn and Saavik. I’ve the feeling Saavik can bust this case wide open.”

Chapter Six

"The Almighty tells me he can get me out of this mess but he's pretty sure you're [screwed]."

- Stephen (David O'Hara), Braveheart (1997)

It was nearing midnight, ship's time, and Harris, Smith, and Angelica were in the botanical gardens, Smith arriving only a couple of minutes ago after she had programmed the computer to hide their whereabouts. Both women were also cherishing their latest attacks while Harris contented himself on feeling them savoring their feelings. The women had their heads on each of his shoulders, an act that would have made their husbands instantly jealous.

Isn't attacking Her Majesty's private secretary going to confirm Alex's suspicions? asked Smith. ***After all, he's already suspecting a foreign power isn't responsible for these attacks.***

I agree, Angelica interjected, ***Alex knows something's wrong and he's getting close to our trail. If I hadn't been listening in on Saavik earlier, she would have told him about us and he'd be coming for us right now.***

That was fortunate for us, Angelica, responded Harris, reaching out to feel Saavik's mind. ***Excellent! Commander Saavik is still in no condition to answer the captain now. Though Doctor Mathias is working on something to block us.***

Smith asked, ***What will happen if you're blocked from Saavik's mind, Master?***

I am not sure, admitted Harris. ***It's been so long since I've ran into another telepath.***

What if he decides to go to the ambassador again? inquired Smith. ***He's bound to try once more.***

I have convinced Her Majesty to keep her staff in place and only go out for critical meetings until the crisis is over. Being the sensible person she is, she will think she is helping Captain McKnight. But the reality is that she will be only helping me.

While Anne was locking Alex out of finding out about Davies, I've routed all their calls to your quarters, Master, Angelica said. ***When a call is received, they will get the recording.*** Angelica was referring to a pre-recorded message stating that the Queen or Davies was unavailable but if the caller were to leave a message, they would pass along when either became available.

There's also a time factor, Master, Smith added. ***Alex and the rest of the command crew are one of the smartest in Starfleet. They will find out about us sooner or later.***

Yes, answered Harris. ***I know that. But like all humans, they can be fooled easily enough and for as long as we need.***

It's still a dirty thing to do to my mother, said Angelica, a little indignant. ***And here I thought she was your friend.***

It may be an underhanded thing to do on the Queen, Harris said, ***but it's far better than when your husband finds out there's a vampire and his two servants aboard. Imagine his reaction when he finds that out.***

And knowing Alex as well as I do, Master, mentioned Smith, ***we're about to find out rather soon.***

Mathias looked fit to be tied as she busied herself with her scanner, checking on Saavik's vitals and brain activity. "I want this *on the record*," Mathias said just as the captain entered Sickbay, "that I don't agree with what you're planning to do. My patient requires rest and treatment, not chasing after shadows."

Alex nearly smiled when he saw Saavik, sitting on the edge of her biobed with a cortical stimulator on her forehead blinking like a Christmas tree, but managed to keep it to himself.

"I'm not," Saavik heatedly fired back as Alex came up to the two women, "'chasing after shadows.' I can feel Angelica's and another person's presence in my mind." She turned to Alex. "Though I still think it wiser to sedate me while you can."

Alex sighed, leaning against the empty biobed behind him. "You're the only lead, Saavik," he countered. "Believe me, I don't want to do this but it's the only one option open to me right now. If there's even the *slightest* chance I can confront who it is who's perpetrating this, I might be able to talk some common sense into them and stop this nightmare before it gets really out of hand."

"Or they may want to use your goodwill to their advantage," Saavik responded, oblivious to the doctor's scanner. "Whoever is controlling Angelica and is also with me doesn't seem the type to be reasoned with."

"We've got to try, Saavik. I just wish I knew who it was who is doing this to you." He held up his hand. "Don't. Don't even try to answer."

Saavik nodded. "Thanks."

Alex could not help Saavik's use of Standard had changed since she woke up; it was very informal. "You know, it's not like you to use contractions or informal language. May we even see some emotions here soon?"

Saavik shrugged; again, that was out of character for her. "I think it has to do with whomever is in my mind. Their speech patterns seem to be imprinting on me."

So who do we know who talks like that, Alex nearly asked before catching himself. *Just about everyone aboard, so don't bother. Another red herring for you to chase and time's running out.*

"I'll admit that it's a surprise to see you like this," said Mathias, keeping a critical eye on her patient. "I'm used to seeing you cold and unemotional, Saavik."

"Maybe that's a benefit, Dawn," answered Saavik. "Maybe it's time to get my head out my arse and start being sociable."

Alex's ears perked up on Saavik's use of the word 'arse'. "*What* did you say?" he asked, though he knew what he heard.

"I said, 'maybe it's time to get my head out my arse and start being soc...'" Saavik stopped, realizing what she said and how. "Oh my."

"You said 'arse,' not 'ass'," Mathias pointed out. "And in the time I've known you, I've never heard you curse."

"Indeed, Dawn. Well bugger me."

Alex got up and looked at the science officer intently. "'Bugger me' is a British term, Saavik. You're not British."

"I know I'm not. But it would be logical to assume whomever is in my mind is British or, at the least, knows the British dialect of English."

"British curse words is more like it." Alex said. "I'd say that would narrow down who this could be."

"Yeah, from one thousand to only a couple hundred people," Mathias pointed out. "Those terms are also used by most people from the old British commonwealth. Including yours truly from Australia."

"But it's a starting point."

"A damn near non-existent one, Captain."

"But it's a place to start and I'll take that." He looked to Mathias. "Can you track Saavik's vital signs?"

Mathias sighed, blowing hair out of her eyes. "Don't you worry, Skipper. If I'm not glued to my monitor, I'll be having an earphone glued to my ear. I'll be watching her like a hawk."

Oh, blast, said Angelica, suddenly sitting up as if prodded by a cattle prod. **I think I slipped.**

I heard it too, Smith said. **No way he's not going to miss that clue!**

Harris turned to his left to look at the auburn-haired princess. **As did I. What are you thinking, Angelica?**

I wasn't, she protested. **I was remembering something.**

Like what? pressed Smith. **For a moment, Saavik sounded just like you.**

I was remembering something from when I was at the Academy and thought I had my head up my arse. When I heard that come from Saavik, I cursed, though I didn't use that word specifically.

This is interesting, Harris said. **It seems that Saavik is starting to pick up on your thoughts and feelings.**

How is that possible, Master? I thought you had only a one-way link!

In feeding on another telepath, the link goes both ways. I forgot that when I had you feed on Saavik.

Then I'm going to be a liability, flatly stated Angelica. **If I'm reading her mind and she's beginning to read mine, she'll be able to tell Alex about me and it'll be game over for us.**

Harris thought, gently getting up to face the viewport and stars. It was some time before he would speak again. **Maybe we could use that to our advantage.**

The captain had taken Saavik to his office where Major Areniego had been waiting for them. Areniego was standing a good eight feet away, hand resting on the phaser on his hip. Like Mathias, he didn't care for the situation, hence the phaser, already set for

maximum stun. He knew from seeing how Saavik performed in combat and if whoever was in her mind decided to take over, Areniego knew he could stun her in two seconds. Alex was behind his desk, drinking his ice coffee in silence while working on paperwork to while the time away. Saavik was sitting in a chair across from Alex, looking into nothingness.

"Something's up, Alex," suddenly said Saavik.

"Oh yeah?" Alex sat up straight in his seat, paperwork forgotten. "Can you hear them and what they're planning?"

"I can't hear but I have the feeling that they're planning something." She brushed her hair in a very Brianna Smith-like manner. "The best I can describe it is like having a dance in a pitch-black room. You can sense your partner there but you can't see them."

"That's damn little to go on, Lieutenant Commander," said Areniego.

"Sometimes, I feel like I can almost hear them talking but it fades into the background when I concentrate on it." Saavik shrugged a very Angelica McKnight-like shrug.

Alex leaned back and sighed. He could feel the weariness creep up on him but, like all other times when he was in a crisis, iced coffee kept him going. He rubbed his tired eyes, then looked again at Saavik, who was pointedly looking at him with a most peculiar look in her eye.

"What?" he barked, regretting what he said almost immediately.

"I didn't realize you were so cute." She smiled flirtatiously.

"What the hell? *Saavik!*"

Saavik shook her head hard, the machine on her forehead barely remaining in place. "I'm sorry. That was... *inappropriate.*"

Now it was Areniego who was looking intently at Saavik. "Captain, I think she's just given us another clue."

"How so, Cullen?"

The marine didn't move, keeping his eyes on the science officer. "With your permission, Captain?"

Alex didn't know precisely what the young man had in mind but he didn't dare second-guess him. "Go ahead. I'm interested to see what you're thinking."

Areniego didn't acknowledge him. "Lieutenant Commander Saavik, please forgive me if I am being too forward but this is strictly in the cause of investigation. Do you understand?" Saavik nodded. "Under normal circumstances, would you find the captain attractive?"

Alex barely contained his embarrassment as Saavik turned to look at the marine commander. *What the hell, man?!*

"Must I answer?"

"Yes," Alex answered, pushing his embarrassment to the side for now. "Consider it an order."

"Then my answer is no," Saavik instantly answered. "I don't find the captain attractive, though I think he is handsome in his own way."

Ouch, Alex thought, fighting to keep his expression neutral. *I know Saavik's as honest as the day is long but to hear that aloud? Wow. Glad my dating days are long over!*

"So why did you call the captain cute?"

"I... don't know. For a moment, I had the feeling that I was somehow attracted to him. No offense, Alex."

Alex didn't bother with an answer; after all, he had ordered her to tell them. Areniego paused, already deep in thought. "Captain, I think that's another lead."

"Oh?" Alex was suspecting that Areniego was thinking the same thing he was. "Tell me."

"Let's look at facts for a moment. The commander's speech patterns change constantly but seem to focus on either American or British grammatical patterns when Vulcans use neutral grammar. She momentarily thought you were attractive, though she does not find you attractive normally. Therefore, it would follow that the commander must be connected to someone who knows you personally, Captain."

"So far, you and I are on the same page. Someone who uses American and British slang and finds me attractive. Kind of narrows it down, doesn't it?"

Areniego nodded. "And we know there's more than one person that's connected to the commander's mind. And we know that she fought Commander McKnight not so long ago. It could be that both Commander McKnight and the other presence are not aware that Commander Saavik is reading their thoughts and feelings as well as they are reading and feeling hers."

"My thoughts exactly, Cullen." He turned to Saavik. Saavik flushed. Alex got up from his chair and looked to a photo of the archaic American *Montana*-class battleship *New Hampshire* on the viewer against the far wall. "Am I crazy" he finally said, "or is part of the answer staring us in the face?"

"I think it is, Captain," answered Areniego. "But I don't blame you for wanting to think otherwise. If we're right, then she will be formidable."

"I once read that when you've eliminated everything else, what's left has to be true." Alex swallowed hard. "And this time, I wish it weren't true."

Chapter Seven

"I had," he said, "come to an entirely erroneous conclusion, my dear Watson, how dangerous it always is to reason from insufficient data."

- Sherlock Holmes, *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*

"Captain's Personal Log. Our investigation is taking us down the rabbit hole a lot more than I would have guessed. And as for *where* it's taking us, Lord above knows and I don't like *not* knowing. But, when faced you are with facts, it doesn't matter what you feel but what the facts are."

Alex McKnight was walking at a quick pace to Angelica McKnight's quarters, hoping like hell he was completely wrong in his current estimate of the situation. But his gut was telling him he was on track. *Especially when we saw her attack Saavik in the recording studio on the flight recorder*, he thought as he rounded a corner, *Please, just once, just once, please let me be wrong. Especially when my wife is involved!* He didn't slow down but noticed that as he approached, no one came up to stop him.

This feels wrong, he thought as he came to her door. *If I'm right, why aren't she trying to stop me? Or is it I'm walking into a trap, like Cullen said just as I left my ready room?*

As he reached for the panel to announce himself, the doors opened. Cautiously, he peeked in and what he saw surprised him. The suite was lit with candles spread around the room and from the starlight pouring in from the viewports above. A bottle of wine was on the table, already opened, with two frosted glasses. He slowly entered the suite, fully on guard, though he could not say why he was so jittery. If he didn't like what this was adding up to before, it was only going to get worse from here.

"Hello there, sailor," said a familiar voice from the lavatory doorway. He spun to see his wife, leaning on the door jamb. Angelica was dressed in the slinkiest, most revealing black leather dress he had ever seen her wear. The dress barely covered her; in fact, her knee boots and elbow-length leather gloves seemed to cover more of her than the dress did. She had styled her hair so her natural auburn curls would glisten in the dim light. Her makeup was done in such a way as to accentuate her face's natural beauty.

Though he kept his expression as neutral as he could, he could feel his body react to the sight of her. "Angie?"

"Of course," she said, getting up. "Who else would it be?"

"Uh... never mind," he said carefully, praying that his excitement wasn't noticeable.

"Oh leave it out," said Angelica, swaying her hips as she walked to the table. Alex kept himself aimed at her, lest she get behind and surprise him. "Least you're on time." She smiled at him temptingly, promising him upcoming pleasure.

"What's all this for?" he said, forcing himself to remain on track. Though with the way she was acting, most any man would have been forgiven for thinking otherwise. He had always found her desirable, but, right now, business was business. He forced himself to remember why he was there, desperately trying to ignore her best effort to seduce him.

"I don't know," she replied evasively. He knew at that point that she wouldn't volunteer any more information.

"Angie, how did you even know I was coming?"

She poured a glass of wine, then the other, before responding. Her smile was promising. "'Call it a woman's intuition.'" She picked up a glass and gave it to him.

"Angie, cut it out," he protested, putting the glass down. It sounded weak, even to him. "It's too early in the morning for this nonsense. Besides, I need to know where you were last night."

She picked up the other glass, playfully toying the rim with her finger before tantalizingly sucking on a finger. "You know, I've been thinking," she cooed, "that we've been too wrapped up with work lately. I want to be with my husband and I want to be with him *right now*."

Now he knew for certain something was wrong with her. And he needed to remind her who they were before this got any further out of hand. "You're not answering my question," he answered, placing his glass back on the table. "Where were you last night?"

She took a sip of wine, keeping her eyes on him. She slowly put her glass back on the table. "What's so important about that?" she purred. "You know, no one will notice that we're gone for a short while. Put the captain away and be my lover. I want you to make love to me."

"Angie," he protested, "we can't. Not here. Not now."

"Why not?" she asked, sliding up to him. One hand went up to caress his face. The other went down. "I want you, Alex. I know you want me."

"Stop it, Angie..."

Her caressing got slightly faster, teasing him. "Stop what? I want to make love to you."

Angelica leaned up to kiss him. Alex felt himself giving way inch by inch until he looked down at her brown eyes, as he usually did just before kissing her. What he saw wasn't a wife's engaged libido but an almost animalistic craze. And when he saw that, he flashed back to his dream a couple of night ago and those feelings came back in full force. It scared the hell out of him. He yelped and jumped back a couple of feet, barely missing a chair. Angelica looked at him hungrily.

"You're not getting out of it that easily, lover," she said, fangs starting to grow.

Areniego was getting nervous, not a good disposition for someone who needed sleep and having a phaser in his possession. Captain McKnight had quickly briefed him on what was going to happen and the Marine wasn't happy about it. The captain was essentially playing the role of bait in the hopes of drawing out whomever was behind this and Areniego wasn't sanguine about a senior officer offering himself as bait. He had left Saavik with him in his office. For her part, she had not said a word since the captain left but had fixed her gaze on him. Her gaze was also a little unsettling; as if the young lieutenant commander was looking beyond him at something else.

The Filipino looked at a nearby clock: 0615. He could not remember the last time he slept but there was the one time he had stayed up over 100 hours. And slept for two days

straight after that. He had no doubts he would sleep for a day or two after this but he could use a pick me up.

"I'm going to make some coffee," he declared. "You want some, Commander Saavik?"

Saavik remained silent, not acknowledging his statement. Mentally shrugging, Areniego walked over to the replicator in the alcove. "Coffee, hot, triple sweet with double cream," he ordered. In moments, the machine produced the hot liquid. Areniego picked it up and about to savor the flavor when Saavik suddenly shouted, "No!"

"What?" he asked confused. "I can't have coffee?"

The science officer shot up on her feet like a gunshot. "No! You can't do that!"

Areniego put down the cup. "Commander? What is it?"

Saavik didn't seem to hear him. She started to walk to the door he was standing in front of; the door led to a private turbolift station for the captain's use. "I won't let her do that to him! *I won't!*"

Areniego was still bewildered but knew enough to guess that she was seeing something in her mind. "Commander Saavik!" he said, making his first mistake by putting his hands on her shoulders. "Snap out of it! You're safe!"

His second mistake was assuming she was hearing him. She yanked his hands off her shoulders, snapping one of his wrists. Before he could register the pain, she threw him to one side as if she were tossing a rag aside.

Cullen Areniego was unconscious before his body hit the deck.

Alex McKnight wasn't faring much better than Areniego. Angelica had been chasing him around the room, almost pinning him a couple of times. While this wasn't exactly like the nightmare he had, this was close enough and it scared the living hell out of him. Seeing her fangs wasn't helping the issue either.

"Give it up, lover!" she shouted, clearly enjoying herself. "You're not going to get away from me!"

"Angie, stop this! I don't know..."

"Stop what you're doing, Angie!" He was interrupted by the doorbell. Alex was startled for only a moment. It made sense that if Angelica was going to feed on him, she'd lock the door so she would not be interrupted and after she had fed on her husband, she would simply unlock the door and leave.

Angelica stopped for a moment and hissed at the door, as if she knew who was there. Alex saw the door open and when he saw who was in the doorway, he was only a little relieved.

Saavik shouted, "I know what you are planning to do!"

Angelica looked to Saavik, looking angry at being disturbed. ***You are in no position to stop me, Saavik!*** she said telepathically, one more baring her fangs at her friend. Saavik took up a defensive position between Alex and Angelica. Alex relaxed a bit more as he knew he wasn't going up against a tag team.

"Get out of here, Alex. Just go!"

"Saavik, I can't...!"

The look she shot Alex made him think twice about helping her. "Go! Now!"

Alex decided that living was infinitely better than what Angelica seemed to have in mind for him. He left, leaving the two women to face off in battle once again.

Think again, Angelica. Stop what you are doing and help us to help you.

You really think you can step up and play with the big girls? She smiled, deliberately showing her fangs. ***I made you.***

No. You thought you could feed on me. I know this isn't you, the real Angie who is my friend. I know what happened to you. We can help you if you let us.

Angelica put her hands on her hips, looking like a vengeful angel. ***Are you kidding me? You really think I want help? I'm better than I was before! He made me better!***

You were better person before all this, Angie! Saavik matched Angelica's pose. ***You can't really think you are better. I liked the Angelica before she was brainwashed by that other person!***

Angelica's face screwed up in anger and tried to wound Saavik with a stab of pain. Her attack easily slid off Saavik's now restored mental shields and she had been anticipating her action. ***Your trick won't work. Your mistake was keeping your mental link with me. You should have severed it when you had a chance.***

Angelica tried attacking again and each time, it was deflected. A tear formed in one corner of Saavik's eye, hurt to see her friend attacking her impotently like this.

Angelica, I don't want to hurt you, said Saavik. ***You're my friend. Don't make me hurt you.***

You won't hurt me, Saavik. You know that from last time.

I now know what happened to you, Angie. You are not yourself. You are being controlled. Stop attacking me and we'll help you. Only then can we stop this madness and we'll stop it together.

No! came the vehement response. ***I like being this way! I don't need your help and I certainly won't let you get to my Master!***

So be it. Forgive me, Angie.

Saavik narrowed her eyes and it was Angelica who screamed, holding her ears in pain. Angelica lost consciousness as Alex entered, a Type IIB phaser in his hand, already drawn. Saavik turned to face him as he looked at her first and then the unconscious Angelica.

"I didn't want to hurt her," Saavik said apologetically. "I am sorry, Alex."

"I know." Alex put his phaser on his belt and went to his wife, taking off his jacket and placing it on her. "McKnight to Sickbay. Medics to Commander McKnight's stateroom." He didn't even bother closing the connection, which the computer would disconnect after three seconds of silence. "What happened after I left, Saavik?"

"I put the illusion of a hypersonic attack in her mind. It only stunned her. She should awaken in a few minutes."

"Who in the hell would want to control Angie?" he asked, quickly checking Angelica's vitals. She was sleeping fitfully but she was asleep. Alex knew he could not take another round with her. Once was enough. And with the way she was currently dressed... she knew his weaknesses, that was for sure.

"It's someone she called 'Master'."

He checked to make sure she was decent as he talked. "Are you sure?"

“Not only did she admit it but I can feel a second presence in the back of her mind, much like mine. Much like a puppet master and, just like a puppet master, they’re a shadow.”

Alex shook his head. “And her fangs?” He mentally shook when he forced himself to look at her again.

“Fangs would be indicative of being a vampire, if the literature is to be believed.”

“Vampire?” He gently lifted her lip and sure enough, she had the fangs. Even unconscious, she instinctively nipped at him. He pulled back, barely missing getting bitten. “Shades of Dracula,” Alex said, not knowing how right his statement was.

“And if she is a vampire, the stories and myths surrounding vampires say they are not alone. This would mean she would be an acolyte.”

“Acolyte? As in a *follower*?”

“An unwilling one but yes, a follower. And vampires rarely have only one follower.”

“Damn. We’re back to where we started then.” Alex paused to look up at the science officer. “How are you feeling, Saavik?”

Saavik paused for a moment. “I feel... *better*. But I can feel my link growing in strength...”

“...And your brain activity is showing it, Saavik,” interjected Mathias with Areniego close behind in a wrist cast. “Your levels have spiked in the last few minutes. What the hell were you doing?”

“I was... talking to Angelica. I believe when you scan her, you’ll find her telepathic centers of her brain to be overstimulated, bordering on overload.”

Mathias pushed her way to the prone Angelica, scanner already in hand. She scanned the unconscious communications officer, then reached into her handy belt bag and produced a hypospray, injecting the communications officer.

“You’re right, Saavik,” Mathias admitted. “Telepathy center activity is almost off the chart. Metabolic rates are low but above stasis threshold.” She stopped long enough to look up at Saavik. “Did you do this?”

“I was forced to stun her, Doctor,” Saavik admitted. “I planted the illusion of a hypersonic attack in her mind so that’s why she’s unconscious.”

Mathias muttered something (Alex was sure he didn’t want to know what she said) before putting her hypo and scanner away in her belt bag. She then motioned for her two medics to put Angelica’s inert form on a zero-gee stretcher so they could take her to sickbay. All looked around the trashed stateroom but if there had been any further clues in Angelica’s quarters, the two of them had done a fine job in obliterating them. Areniego made a comment like that and earned a dirty look for his comment.

“So why is she here in her quarters? And dressed the way she is? That dress leaves very little to the imagination!”

Alex shrugged, his earlier embarrassment coming back. He motioned for the medics to stop, then lifted her lip to show Mathias Angelica’s fangs. Again, she instinctively nipped at him and once again, he barely avoided getting bitten.

“Think there may have been a reason?” Alex said sarcastically before allowing the medics to leave with their charge. “I wanted to confront her about what happened in the recording studio. Instead, she did her damndest to seduce me,” Alex said. “And when *that*

didn't work, she attacked and we made this mess as a result. She had to have known I would come to see her, hence why she was dressed the way she was. I don't think she was counting on Saavik busting in. And I'm glad she did."

"If Commander McKnight is a follower, are there any more?" Areniego asked.

"I can only feel two minds," answered Saavik, "Angelica's and the vampire's. I think I would have felt a third mind if there was one."

"It's clear that since we have a vampire, we've to find them before there's any more damage," said Alex. It was then that he noticed Areniego's cast. "What happened to you, Cullen?"

"Commander Saavik is what happened to me, sir. Broke my wrist and threw me against the bulkhead like I was a rag." Areniego was rather upset.

Alex slowly turned to Saavik, who didn't flinch. "Yes, I'm responsible. I could feel Angie wanting to feed on you and I couldn't permit her to do that. There was no time to explain. I'm sorry for what I did to you, Major."

"A warning would have been nice, Commander. I don't like being a punching bag."

Smith looked on as Harris finished feeding on her again. Angelica had played her part as she was trying to seduce, then feed, on Captain McKnight. It made sense; after all, who better than his own wife? The irony of the situation was palpable. Both Smith and Harris had felt the two women fighting in their minds but was when they heard Saavik's hypersonic attack on Angelica that they knew their plan had fallen apart.

Her powers are growing, commented Harris. ***I must admit, I would not have expected this.***

We're playing with fire, Master, Smith commented. ***If Saavik can read Angie, she'll be able to read you or me very soon.***

She is already trying, Brieanna. I can feel her reaching out, seeking us.

And Angie's attacks didn't do anything to Saavik this time. It's only a matter of time before she tells Alex what's really going on.

Harris paused. ***I believe you are correct, Brieanna. Maybe it's time to confront the good Captain.***

You know how that will turn out, Master.

I suspect I know what that outcome would be but for once, it will be nice to be out in the open to confront my foe.

In Sickbay, Mathias was looking over the now-sedated Angelica. The doctor had covered the Englishwoman with a sheet, for modesty's sake if nothing else. Alex couldn't thank Dawn enough for that; with Angelica dressed like this, he could feel his yearning for her. He was reminded of their wedding anniversary where Angelica dressed in a similar manner. Hell, for all he knew, it was the same dress. But back then, the outcome could not have been more different than the one an hour earlier. He chuckled at the memory, drawing a glance from the Australian.

"What's so damned funny?" she snapped with her attention riveted to the monitor above Angelica's head.

"Nothing," he said. "Just thinking."

"I hope it's with your head," the doctor said.

"Anyone ever tell you that you are a dirty minded doctor?"

"Yeah, my hubby when he sees me on our first night when I get home," Mathias deadpanned. "But back to the present."

Mathias' tone sobered Alex right up. "Yes?"

"Okay, we know that Angie's a very sensitive ESP. Even a human, it's extremely high on the chart. According to these readings, it's that part of Angie's mind that's very active. Even more active than Saavik's."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that whomever is linked with her is doing almost all the work to maintain that link. If you think of Angie as a radio, she's very powerful receiver but a very weak transmitter."

"And as with any transmission, you interrupt the signal, you sever the channel."

"Right! So, if I were to put a cortical stimulator on her like I did with Saavik, I may be able to break that link. Or disrupt it enough so she will be herself."

"How long to rig another one of those devices?"

Now it was Mathias who chuckled. "A good doctor is always prepared. When I made Saavik's, I made a spare in case something was to happen to it."

"Nice thinking," Alex complimented as Mathias walked to her office. A minute later, she had a device like what Saavik was wearing in her hand. Gently, Mathias placed it on Angelica's forehead and pressed it slightly so it would make good contact. She then pressed a button, lighting the device. At first, to Alex's untrained eye, nothing happened. He, along with Mathias, was looking at the monitor when he saw a slight drop in one scale.

"It's working," said Mathias.

"If you say so," said Alex. Another, more noticeable, drop in the same meter. Then another. Then it was a steady progression to a little green mark.

"Activity is dropping now," Mathias said. "Other vitals are starting to come up."

Alex looked down at Angelica and while he knew she was still asleep, he thought maybe she could hear him. "Come on, girl," he whispered. "You can do it."

Mathias pulled out a PADD and tapped it. Alex looked up at her. "Slight adjustment," she said, not bothering to look at him. Looking back down, he would swear that he could see her eyes flutter.

"She's coming around," he remarked. On cue, Angelica slightly moaned and blinked.

"Take it easy, Angie," Mathias ordered. "Don't move. Don't try to talk." She produced a hypospray and gave Angelica another injection. "Take it easy. Don't push it."

"Where am I?" she asked with a raspy voice. She opened her eyes, blinked hard, and closed them again. "Oh God, I've the mother of all headaches."

Mathias gave Angelica a third injection. "That will help."

"And it did," Angelica said, her voice getting stronger.

"How you feeling, Angie? You can open your eyes now."

"Not sure I want to with this band playing in my head," she quipped before experimentally opening her eyes. This time, she didn't blink quite as hard. She looked to her left and saw Mathias standing over her.

"Where am I?"

"Sickbay."

"What?" Angelica asked, clearly confused. "How? Why? Did I...?"

"No," Mathias said soothingly. "You weren't in an accident."

"So why am I here? I remember being in my quarters and going to sleep. What am I..." she trailed off, trying hard to remember why she was in Sickbay and failing.

"And?" Alex prodded. Angelica turned her head to look see her husband and a slight smile lit her face. This time, there were no fangs present.

"And *nothing*. I was going to sleep in my bed and the next thing I know, I'm in bloody Sickbay." She looked down and saw the sheet covering her. She lifted it slightly to see the skimpy dress she was wearing and frowned. "Uh... I wasn't wearing *this* when I went to bed! I was in my jammies, not this leather dress!"

"You seriously don't remember what's happened in the two days?"

Angelica laid her head back, dropping the sheet covering her. "No. Seriously, what's happened to me? I look like I was gagging for a shag!"

Alex gave her a tight smile. "A little bit ago, you tried your damndest to get me to do *exactly* that with you."

"Oh?" A look of confusion crossed her face. "Was I? You'd think I'd damn well remember something like *that*!"

"Angie," Mathias said, "it looks like you've been under mental control of someone."

Angelica's face screwed up in consternation. "In the vernacular, you're saying that I've been *brainwashed*?"

"To loosely use the old vernacular term," said Alex for Mathias, "yes."

Angelica looked up at the ceiling, clearly trying to remember what happened to her. "Me? How? I don't remember hooked up to any machine or being drugged."

"We're sure this wasn't done by a non-conventional method," Alex answered. "But somehow, someone got into your mind and you've been under their control until a few minutes ago."

Angelica shook her head slightly. "No way. I'd remember if someone tried to brainwash me." She paused. "And if I am brainwashed, how come I'm talking to you now?"

"I've got you on a cortical stimulator that's repressing the telepathic centers of your brain," said Mathias. "While it may account for some short-term memory loss, it won't account for you not remembering the last two days. But that stimulator's what's allowing you to talk to us right now."

Angelica looked to her husband. "Outside of trying and apparently failing to shag you, what else did I do?"

Alex shrugged. "All I know is that you attacked Saavik, then tried to seduce me. I didn't want to believe you were under someone's control until you tried to get me into your pants. That was my second clue that something wasn't right. My first was seeing you beating the shit out of Saavik in your recording studio."

Angelica paused. "I beat Saavik up? She's Vulcanoid; she should have beat me to a bloody pulp!"

"I think," said Mathias, "that whomever was in your mind was helping you out. Or at least giving you an edge."

"And what possessed you to wear a dress very much like the one you wore on our wedding reception?"

She looked under the cover once again and grimaced once again, clearly not happy with what she was seeing in a public place. "I do *not* wear things like *this* out in public," she said. "This dress is..." she paused to look down again, "it's the original from that night. And well, let's say it's now for your eyes only."

Alex could feel his cheeks flush, a bit embarrassed to have even this little bit of their private lives exposed. "Uh, Angie..."

"I don't suppose someone can get me a shirt and a pair of leather trousers from my quarters?" Angelica asked. "It's a bit chilly."

"Right," stepped in Mathias and made a motion for a nearby nurse to get the requested clothing. "But for now, you're in no condition to do anything but lay here and relax."

"Okay," the princess answered, looking to her husband lovingly. Seeing her smile like that brought up the memory of her looking at him like a piece of meat, fangs out in force. Alex forced it out of his mind for the moment and smiled tightly at her. "I guess I've no choice in the matter?"

"No," Mathias confirmed, "you don't."

Alex resisted the impulse to lean down to kiss her. He contented himself in giving her a quick squeeze of her hand. "Don't go anywhere for a while."

She weakly giggled. "That's a bad and overused pun, especially coming from you."

"Best I can come up with at the moment. I'll be back."

"Promise?" Angelica teased. Least for the moment, she was back to her usual self. Alex nodded to Mathias and walked out, headed for the conference room where Areniego and Saavik were waiting on him. Areniego was keeping a wary distance from Saavik, who sat with her back against the viewport.

"Angie's okay for the moment," he said without preliminaries. "Whatever magic Dawn did to Saavik seems to be working on Angie for now."

"Did Dawn say anything about me?" Saavik asked.

"When I left, Dawn had an earphone glued to her ear. Trust me, she's keeping a close eye on you."

Saavik nodded. "As she should. I can feel my connection with the vampire growing."

"How do you know, Commander?" Areniego asked skeptically. "There's no evidence to back up that claim."

"Other than I'm connected to someone's mind and I'm starting to be able to read them as they're reading mine," she retorted. "If you seek proof, I've none to give you other than my word and the doctor's readings."

"With the evidence at hand," chimed in the captain, stopping any further argument, "I think we can safely say this is a vampire of some sort. And if that's true, then we should be able to find out from the computer how to stop them."

Saavik turned to the terminal and began her work. "This may take a while since the computer will review and cross reference all known cases of vampirism in the Federation." She tossed her hair out of her face much like Smith would.

"The only vampire I'm even familiar with," said the captain, "was the mythical one, Dracula."

"*Dracula*?" Areniego could barely believe his ears. "Captain, with all due respect, but are you out of your mind? Dracula's a folk tale! A myth!"

"Actually," interjected Saavik, "if you think about it, Cullen, there's a lot of similarities between what powers Dracula was reported to have and the *modus operandi* being used in this situation. He mentally controlled people, much like we saw with Angie. He fed on people, though in this case, it's not blood but the person's life force. And whomever this is has deliberately made sure not to confront you, Alex."

"It fits," admitted Alex. "Thus far."

"So we're to go on the supposition that this vampire is on board and feeding on people or brainwashing them to do his bidding?" Areniego scoffed. "Sounds like something from a movie!"

"Aren't you the one who told me about going with the facts, Cullen?"

"But these... can we even call them *facts*?" Areniego shook his head. "Outside of Commander Saavik's statements, there's no evidence. *Hard* evidence, not circumstantial, which is all what we've got here."

Alex could understand the Filipino major's skepticism. He would have thought the same thing if he hadn't seen the effects up close and personal. And it could be that whomever Saavik was connected to was using her to bait them into doing something stupid. However, when one had only one option available, decision making became simple. And trusting Saavik was his only option.

"Cullen, don't think I don't understand where you're coming from. Hell, if Angie hadn't attacked me or seen the footage of her attacking Saavik, I don't think I'd believe it either. With that said, I think we should pursue this course of action. Unless you've got something else to give me to go on."

Areniego shot him a dirty look. "You know I can't give you another option, Captain."

"There you have it," said Alex with a tone of finality. Areniego knew that to argue with the captain now would do him no good. "How's the computer search going?"

Saavik was reading her screen as she spoke. "It will be a while still, Alex. I think you'd better go with whatever you're planning while our inquiry is running."

"Captain," said Areniego, "I want you to know I don't agree with basing our plans on this circumstantial evidence. It goes against everything I was taught about investigations."

"And you're free to disagree," countered Alex. "I want people to be able to speak their minds."

"Then I very much disagree with this course of action. *Sir*."

"Your objection is noted, Cullen, and you're free to note it in the ship's log. But, for now, this is what we're going to do."

Areniego knew an order when he heard one and Alex had just given him one. "Aye aye, sir."

Chapter Eight

"We shall find the answer when we examine the problem, the problem is never apart from the answer, the problem IS the answer, understanding the problem dissolves the problem."

- Bruce Lee

"Talking about this with the ambassador won't be nice," Alex was telling Areniego as they walked to the ambassador's stateroom. "If I were her, I'd hate to have someone tell me that one of my staff was committing high crimes."

"But we need her permission to interview her staff," pointed out Areniego. "Assuming Commander Saavik is right about what she feels."

"Saavik isn't in the habit of lying," answered Alex. "But I will concede that she might be forced to lie but my instincts are saying she's not."

"And mine are saying all this evidence, such as it is, is razor thin." He sighed. "Maybe this will help firm up the commander's case."

"Or the prosecutor's when I get court-martialed for this," quipped Alex as the two officers arrived at the stateroom doors. Alex reached for the panel to ring the bell.

"Enter," came Margaret's voice. Both Alex and Areniego entered the spotless stateroom. Margaret was straightening up from her console, meaning she had wrapped up a call. Both men gave the proper greeting and waited for her to acknowledge them.

"Captain and Major," she quickly said, putting them at somewhat ease. "How can I help you?"

"May I ask who you were talking to, ma'am?" Alex asked.

"A Vendikar representative about this morning's schedule of events," she answered. "I'll admit I'm a little nervous after all that has happened at the compound lately."

"I don't blame you, ma'am" Alex said. "And thank you for restricting your staff as it seemed to help. But, unfortunately, I'm here on other business."

"I was afraid of that," she said, taking a sip of tea. "Those attacks you mentioned earlier. You're here to ask me to interview the staff."

Alex nodded. "You're right. We've reason to believe one of your staff is the perpetrator."

"Any evidence?"

Alex looked to Areniego, then to the Queen. "Nothing solid. It's all quite circumstantial currently."

The Queen didn't react immediately and that worried Alex. It was quite some time before she spoke again. "What is the evidence you do have at the moment?"

Now it was Areniego's turn to speak up. "Ma'am, one of our officers was attacked. She is Vulcan. Instead of being placed in a comatose state like the other victims, she is mentally connected to her attackers. She has indicated that one of your staff may be that attacker and as such, they would be the primary person of interest in the case. We believe she can identify the attacker if she were to see him or her."

“How certain are you of her positively identifying her attacker?”

“Better than eighty percent, ma’am.”

You had to have pulled that out your ass, Cullen, thought Alex. I’ll give it to you, buddy. You can pull off a convincing lie when you have to.

The Queen thought about it. “Very well. But I want to be present when you conduct your interviews. If you can prove the attacker is on my staff, then I share in the responsibility. And I owe it to you to put this to an end.”

Later in the day, both Alex and Areniego were feeling the effects of being too busy with too little sleep. They had interviewed about all the ambassador's staff and all of them had airtight alibis. Alex had Areniego put the private secretary last, fearing that if the attacker were him, the ambassador would take offense. Not that Alex would have blamed Margaret for that type of reaction but given the current situation between her and him, he didn't want to give her cause to revert to her previous attitude.

Unlike the two men, both women showed no sign of fatigue, though Margaret was showing a little boredom. Then again, investigations like these weren't in an ambassador's skill set, so having to take a back seat while her staff were being asked all sorts of questions might have been a bit on the boring side for her. Saavik, for her part, would simply shake her head when either Areniego or Alex would look at her. Though the person being interrogated had no idea why they were being subjected to this odd type of questioning (though one staffer had asked if they were being subject to a telepathic scan), it meant a lot to the Starfleet officers; when Saavik shook her head, it meant that she wasn't picking up on them as one of the two people she was reading in her mind.

“Well, we're down to Davies,” said the Marine as the last staffer left. “Your private secretary, ma'am.”

“This would be rather embarrassing,” Margaret said as Areniego went out to talk to one of his Marines, “if your attacker were him. I've known Jim for years and I would be very much surprised if he were your culprit.”

Alex sighed. “If I were in your shoes and it was one of my command staff being accused of a crime, I'd be saying the same thing.”

Areniego came back in with an odd expression on his face. “This is odd. Davies hasn't answered his page.”

“You're joking,” Alex said.

Areniego shook his head. “I wish I were, sir. We've had the computer try several times and no response to any of his pages.”

“That's very odd,” Margaret said. “Usually, he comes to my side before I even know I need him there. I don't think he's even taken a sick day in all the time I've known him.”

“Cullen, have a squad go to Davies' quarters and see if he's there. If so, have him escorted here under guard.”

“Under guard?” repeated Areniego, wanting to make sure he heard right.

“Yep. Under guard to the conference room here.”

Areniego looked to the Queen for confirmation. Normally, Alex would have been irritated with that kind of blatant second-guessing but in this case, he would make an exception. After all, Areniego's Marines would essentially be putting one of the Queen's

personal staff under arrest and Alex did not want to have to explain things to Starfleet Command were she to decide to complain.

"I agree with the captain," Margaret said, surprising Alex once again. "It's not like him to be late."

"Yes, ma'am," said Areniego, already heading to the door. As Areniego left the room to personally issue the orders to the guards outside the door, Margaret looked to Saavik, who had remained silent the entire time.

"How are you feeling, dear?"

"I'm... fine, ma'am," Saavik answered. She didn't look like she hadn't slept in two days, though seeing her with her hair down was still taking a while for Alex to get used to. He was used to seeing the science officer with her hair pinned up in the recommended style. In recent years, Starfleet had relaxed the rules regarding women's hairstyles. Women like Smith, Angelica, Bautista, and Tereshkova were only too happy to obey the new regulations and left their hair down; they hated pinning up their hair. Mathias and Bennington-Fox usually ponytailed their hair because their duties required them. Saavik kept her hair pinned up in a bun on her crown but last night she was wearing it with moderate curls going past her shoulders but it was still neat and tidy.

"I envy you, Saavik," Alex said, taking a sip of his iced coffee. "Up for all this time and you still look fresh."

Before Saavik could answer, Areniego popped his head in the room. "We've found Mr. Davies, Captain. Comatose."

"What?" Margaret all but shouted that word. "How?"

"Let's go take a look. Lead the way, Cullen," Alex ordered. All four people made their way to Davies' stateroom. While not as big or plush as Margaret's stateroom, it was still comfortable. Three Marines were there, already scanning the area with another, a medic, checking over the inert form of Margaret's aide.

"Step aside," said a familiar Australian accented voice from behind Alex. Mathias and two of her medics were trying to squeeze into the room. Mathias muttered a curse when she saw Davies lying on the floor as she pulled her medical scanner out of her belt bag.

"Goddamn it," Mathias cursed again, not paying attention to the ambassador beside her. She ran the scanner over the man as Margaret knelt to look at her longtime aide.

"Just like all the others. Comatose and in stasis." Mathias looked a little closer at a reading on her tricorder. "Only he's been like this for a lot longer."

"How much longer?" Margaret asked.

"He's been like this for almost a day now." She put back her scanner and tricorder. "I've got to get him to Sickbay; his body needs to get on life support now." She motioned for her medics to take care of him as she got up and faced the captain and ambassador. Only the ambassador was still kneeling beside Davies.

"How is this possible? James... my oldest aide and... friend."

Saavik answered before Mathias could say anything. "This is the work of the vampire who is attacking our crew."

“*Vampire?*” Margaret got up and looked at Saavik. “Are you quite sure, Lieutenant Commander?”

Saavik didn't even blink. “Yes, Ambassador. I can feel two people in my mind. I can say for certain that one of them is a vampire.”

“But vampires are of myths and legends,” countered the Queen. “They don't really exist.”

“I beg to differ,” countered Saavik. “Captain Kirk and the *Enterprise* crew encountered a salt vampire on Planet M-113. It killed a couple members of the crew and almost killed Doctor McCoy before it was destroyed.”

“I can vouch for that story,” Mathias jumped in as she put away her equipment. “I interned under Doctor McCoy and he told me what happened. One touch and the vampire drained all the salt out of the victim.”

“And that’s what we're seeing here?” the Queen asked again, apparently trying to digest all the information and not quite succeeding.

“Took us a while,” added Alex, “but we now think there's a vampire loose who's telepathically controlling other people. Angie was one of them...”

“Not Angelica!” Margaret cried.

“She's no longer under the vampire's control, Ambassador” Mathias assured her. “She's in Sickbay with a cortical stimulator,” she pointed to the one resting on Saavik's forehead, “like this one Saavik is using. It's able to suppress the telepathic centers of the brain.”

Margaret looked as though she could not stand. Mathias gently guided her to a nearby chair to allow her to sit. Margaret looked as though she was in a state of shock.

“Not Angelica,” she muttered. “Anything but that.”

“Captain,” interjected Areniego, walking up to the small group. “Doctor Mathias, your medics have left with Mr. Davies.”

Mathias nodded, kneeling beside Margaret in support. “Thanks, Major. Doctor Furillo will know what to do.” She turned to the still in shock Queen. “Angelica is okay for now; I’ve made sure of that. But we've got to get this vampire before he can do any more damage.”

“And how do you propose to do that, Dawn?”

Little did they know that the answer was about to present itself.

“Did you see what I saw, Gunny?” asked Lance Corporal Denise Decker. Automatically, she activated the tricorder built-in to her combat suit and scanned the area. Like the others on her team, she was tired from being on duty for the better part of 24 hours but she was a Marine and Marines didn't complain about their conditions. Gunnery Sergeant Chae Song Cho approached the corporal quickly and with purpose. Unlike Decker, the Korean didn't look like she'd been pulling a 24-hour shift. In fact, she looked refreshed, which is something you would not normally associate with the Starfleet Marine Corps. Once, Decker had seen the little Korean sergeant, extremely polite and as feminine as a figurine, pick up someone twice her size and put them along the far wall without breaking a sweat.

“What did you see, Denise?” she asked. Even the sergeant's voice seemed too feminine to belong to a Marine.

Decker pointed up the corridor. “A shadow where one should not have been.”

“Stelmev, make sure there's no one reported to be in this area,” Chae ordered. Each suit had its own communications suite in it, connecting the wearer to others on the team and it could be connected to the ship's intercom.

“None listed, Gunny,” Private First Class Stelmev reported over the intercom. Then, “I've got a lifeform reading,”

“Just the one,” Decker confirmed. “Human.”

“Everyone, check your weapons; heavy stun only. Stelmev, take point. Approach with caution.”

“Like I needed a reminder,” muttered the Andorian, low enough so he wouldn't be caught on the air saying that. Being the newest Marine in the company, he'd been assigned to one of the more experienced platoons in the outfit. Sergeant Chae didn't mess around and trained hard but, as Stelmev found out, she also played hard and took care of the Marines assigned to her command.

Behind him, the platoon had their Type IIIB phaser rifles at the ready, expecting the worst. Slowly, he crept to the corner where Decker and he had received the life sign readings. Keeping as low as possible, he slowly snuck his head out, quietly glad his helmet wouldn't allow his antennae to poke out. He saw a human female working on a console. What was odd that the woman was working on the console and she wasn't in a Starfleet uniform; she was dressed in what appeared to be a cowboy outfit. A dark leather shirt with dark pants and matching cowgirl boots hat weren't something that was worn while on duty. Using the eye pointing device built into the visor of the helmet, he snapped a photo and sent it to Chae before retracting his head.

“I've got a human female about ten meters ahead,” he reported. “She is working on a console. She not in uniform. Sent you a photo.”

“Got it. Good job, Stelmev. Keep an eye on them while I call this in.” She tapped the controls on her left forearm to send an e-mail to Major Areniego, whom she knew was nearby Captain McKnight.

Captain McKnight, Major Areniego, Doctor Mathias, Lieutenant Commander Saavik, and Ambassador Windsor-Mountbatten were in the main conference room to the rear of the bridge to regroup and plan further ahead when Areniego got his e-mail from his troops.

“A lead?” asked Alex.

“Yes, Captain,” answered Areniego. “One of my platoons saw a woman on deck 16. Unauthorized movement and not in uniform. We've got ... I'll be *damned*!”

“Got what, Major?” asked the ambassador.

Tapping his controls, he brought the photo Chae attached to her email onto the main viewscreen. The photo contained Commander Brianna Smith working on a computer console, outfitted in one of her favorite cowgirl outfits.

“‘I'll be damned’ is right,” Dawn muttered. “What's she doing there and out of uniform? She's supposed to be on duty, right?”

“Yes, she supposed to be but I really don’t know what she’s thinking she’s doing. What’s she working on?”

Alex studied the image for a moment. “Can you get video?”

Areniego nodded and in a minute, a real-time feed from the Andorian private was on the viewscreen. Smith didn’t know she was on camera but as she worked, she tossed her hair to get out of her face and it was then that the two men saw it.

Smith had fangs similar to Angelica.

“Goddamn!” breathed Alex. “So that answers *some* of our questions. She’s spying for that vampire.”

“Not only is she spying for them but also she’s the one that been locking me out of the computer!” Alex watched the video for a moment longer before speaking. “Can your people take her?”

“You give me the word and it will be done.”

Without hesitating, Alex gave the order. “Take her down.”

“Spartan Two-Two Bravo, this is Spartan Six Bravo,” crackled Chae's helmet speakers. “‘Go’ for capture. Repeat, ‘go’ for capture.”

Chae acknowledged with a terse reply and turned to her team. “We've got the go ahead to get her. Stelmev, keep eyes on her and let me know if she tries to make a break for it.”

“Copy, Gunny.”

“The rest of you, take up covering positions on both sides of the junction. Make sure your weapons are on heavy stun only. Fire only if she sees you or on my order. Move.”

As one, four of the Marines broke away from the huddle and moved silently to the junction, peering both ways before sprinting in pairs to the other side. Chae's group moved to behind Stelmev, who was still peering around the corner.

“Anything, Private?”

“No... uh oh. The woman looks like she’s about to wrap up.”

That was enough for Chae. “Do it quietly,” she calmly ordered. Stelmev and his partner on the other side of the junction laid flat on the deck, pointed in the commander's direction while their backups rounded the corner, taking a silent knee. All four brought their weapons up and fired as one unit.

Smith didn't stand a chance. She fell to the deck stunned before she had heard the shots that had gotten her. Chae was filled with pride at her unit's performance so far. They had executed the mission without a single mistake but it would be all too easy to make one now.

“Caution!” she hissed over the intercom. “Decker, Jones, Rynco, Hill, take point and secure. All others, form up on me in the intersection.”

The four that Chae had called on moved towards to fallen woman, rifles at the ready, eyes searching for any signs of an ambush. The other Marines fell towards the Korean sergeant, who stood at the ready in the middle of the archway. Like her troopers forward, she had her rifle up, ready to shoot. The Marines with her took up positions around her, checking for any signs of an ambush or counterattack.

“All clear,” said one of her Marines.

"Be sure, Jones," Chae answered. "Hill, Rynco?"

"Target is down, Gunny," said Hill. His Carolinas accent was sometimes hard for Chae to understand but he was one of her best. "Scans are negative for anyone else here."

"I second that," Rynco said. In contrast, her accent was pure Pacific Northwest. "Nothing abnormal on scans. Target is alive but stunned."

"Very good. Put her into submission and let's take her to the brig." Chae smiled, though her visor prevented anyone seeing it. "I think we may have earned our pay for the day. Beer's on me when we're off duty."

She smiled again at the cheers in her helmet.

"Son of a bitch," Alex remarked, looking at the live video feed from the Marine platoon on the viewscreen. "They got Anne, all right."

"They will be taking her to the brig," said Areniego. "She won't be spying for our vampire anymore."

Margaret looked to her son-in-law. "Captain, I just had a thought."

Alex gestured to her, saying 'go ahead'.

"I think that I may know who it is," she said. "It's got to be Harris."

Alex could have slapped his forehead if he wasn't in front of his officers. He noted similar expressions on both Mathias and Areniego and, to a lesser extent, Saavik too. It never occurred to him to think of that; he had dismissed Harris out of hand. *The man was easily in his sixties and was the night...* he thought then it hit him. Everything fell in place. This time, Alex did slap his forehead, looks be damned.

"Good Lord," breathed Mathias. "The ruddy answer was right in front of us all along!"

"Best place to hide is out in the open," said Areniego, looking angrier by the second for not putting it all together to begin with. "And he was able to hide in plain sight all this time!"

Alex didn't waste any time. "Get your Marines on this guy's trail," he ordered. "I want him *found*. Do *not* engage him when you find him. Shadow him and let me know the instant someone spots him."

"Aye aye, sir," Areniego said, walking out of the room to carry out his orders. Alex sat down in front of Margaret so he could clearly look at her. "Your Majesty," said Alex, using Margaret's royal title to get back on track, "when did Mr. Harris enter your employment?"

His use of her title had the desired effect. "Long time ago," she answered. "Back before my brother James and I were born. He was with our family for years. He only retired a couple of months ago. He traveled with us only a few times. Always took some time off whenever we left the country." She shook her head, not wanting to believe where this was going. "There's been a vampire hiding in Buckingham for all these years and no one was able to put it together!"

Alex could not help but feel sorry for his onetime foe. He could empathize with her situation but it also called into question about their recent reconciliation and if that were legitimate or if it were one of the vampire's ploys. Something instinctively said that

Margaret had been completely sincere about her desire to end the hostilities between them. There had been an openness and honesty there that Alex could not deny.

"He's a crafty one, Margaret," he said. "And he's cunning enough to have hidden his true identity for years." He turned to the doctor. "Dawn, can someone be completely honest, even if they were hypnotized?"

The Australian doctor thought for a moment before answering. "If they were instructed to be, yes. But the whole point of hypnotizing someone is to do something they would never normally want to do. Say if I wanted to hypnotize someone to be an assassin, I'd want them to be able to lie about it; throw the pursuers off the trail, as it were. To condition someone to tell the complete truth while hypnotized really wouldn't make much sense. Especially with all the work to be done... it'd be better to use some of the more effective interrogation techniques that the Romulans would use. Hypnosis just takes too much effort and not enough return for the investment; Hollywood movies be damned with their nonsense."

An idea hit Margaret. "You're a Vulcan, right, Commander Saavik?" Saavik nodded. "Then do a mind meld on me." She held up a hand to forestall the expected protests. "I know the risks but it's certain to bring out the truth. If he's hypnotized me, I want to know."

Alex was very leery. "Dawn?"

"It's possible," said the doctor. "But you could open Saavik up to the very presence she is fighting."

"I think," said Saavik, surprising everyone, "that it is an acceptable risk. I won't lower my mental shields but I will be able to sense if the Queen is under any programming."

Alex finally shook his head. "No. I don't want to..."

"It's not your risk to take, Alex" Saavik said forcefully. It made Alex involuntarily take a step back. "It's mine and I will do so. Ma'am, if you are ready?"

Elizabeth took a quick breath. "I am ready."

Saavik brought her hand up and lightly touched Elizabeth's *katra* points. Both closed their eyes but kept silent. It didn't take but a minute for Saavik to remove her fingers. Both nodded slightly before Saavik said, "She is herself."

Dawn was by the Queen's side. "You all right?"

"I'm fine, Doctor." She looked to Saavik. "I hope your ordeal ends soon, Commander. I don't like seeing people suffer."

"I'll be fine, ma'am. Let the doctor check you physically."

Elizabeth nodded in understanding, letting Mathias lead her out of the room. Alex just had to ask the question.

"She is herself, Alex. I didn't sense any hidden commands or conditioning."

Alex sighed in relief. "That's one thing down. Cullen, look for that vampire. That son of a bitch won't be hiding for much longer."

Chapter Nine

Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once.

- William Shakespeare

Doctor Mathias came from the exam room in Sickbay, where Alex McKnight was already waiting. Mathias' expression was unreadable, which made Alex slightly uncomfortable.

"Well?" he asked when his Australian daughter-in-law didn't immediately say anything.

"Good news," she said. Alex's patience was nearing its end and it must have showed because Mathias' tone instantly changed. "She's perfectly fine."

Alex sighed a sigh of relief. He'd been expecting worse but hoping for better news. This was about as good as it would get. "You going to keep her here?"

"She actually insisted on it, Skipper," Mathias replied. "She's kind of paranoid, now that she knows Harris is behind this. Not that I would blame her if the positions were reversed."

"I agree."

An alarm sounded on a nearby console. Mathias quickly walked over and grabbed her earphone, looking intently in the distance. "I think we'd better get back to the conference room. Saavik's not doing too good."

"How so?"

She listened to her earphone for a moment. "Her brainwave activity is going back up again. I need to adjust her stimulator and give her another dose of medication."

"And if you don't?"

"If you think Angie was bad when she was under the vampire's control, try a Vulcan in the same position."

Both Alex and Mathias trotted into the conference room with a nervous looking Areniego looking on at Saavik, who was on the other side of the room, holding herself and looking down at the floor.

"Thank God you're here, Doctor," breathed Areniego. "The commander's not looking very good."

"So I heard." Mathias motioned for the two men to stay where they were as she approached Saavik cautiously. It didn't escape Alex's notice that Areniego's good hand was on the phaser on his hip. Clearly, he didn't trust the situation.

"Saavik," called Mathias calmly, "It's me, Dawn. Are you feeling okay?"

Saavik looked up, tiny fangs forming in her mouth. She was sweating profusely, which was abnormal for her.

"He's about to get in, Dawn," Saavik said breathlessly.

Mathias took another tentative step. "I can help with that if you'll let me. Just let me come to you."

“Dawn,” she answered, “I don't know how much longer I can keep him out of my mind.”

“Just let me help.” Mathias took another step, carefully keeping her gaze on the Vulcanoid in front of her.

“I don't know if you can!” Saavik spat. “This damn thing doesn't seem to be working anymore!” With that, Saavik tore off the cortical stimulator on her forehead and threw it against the bulkhead, breaking it in several pieces. For a moment, it appeared if Saavik were about to attack the doctor. Mathias stopped. Areniego drew his phaser and pointed at Saavik in the space of a single heartbeat, ready to shoot in a moment's notice. Saavik let loose a cry of pain; she was clearly fighting for control of her mind. Tears streaked down her face, testifying to the sheer amount of pain she was feeling. After a couple of minutes, her look of pain lessened.

“Hurry, Dawn,” Saavik breathed. “I've got him at bay but not for long. Sedate me while you can!”

Mathias was still wary but knowing she had to get to Saavik, she cautiously approached the ailing woman, hand already in her belt bag, feeling for her trusty hypo. As she got within range of the science officer, Saavik let loose with a primal roar and viciously grabbed the doctor, knocking the Australian off balance. At the moment Saavik grabbed Mathias, the Marine's finger tightened on the trigger as Saavik twirled the doctor around and used her as a human shield.

“I warned you,” Saavik said huskily. “You should have sedated me while you could!”

Areniego glanced to Alex, who nodded. “The hell I can't,” said Areniego and fired, stunning both women. They collapsed in a pile on the floor. Both men went to them, Areniego maintaining his aim on the Vulcan woman. Dawn was sleeping but Saavik was struggling to wake up, alarming both Alex and Areniego. Areniego's phaser was on heavy stun so it should have put both women to sleep for at least an hour. To see Saavik already starting to wake up was surprising.

Alex took Saavik in his arms. “Saavik, can you hear me?”

Her voice was weak as she answered, “Yes.”

“You can hold him off a little longer. I know you; you're a tough girl. Remember what happened on Genesis?”

Saavik blinked at the reference. “How do you know about that?”

Alex grinned a little to disarm her. “I know what happened there. And I know about you and David. What happened out there would have broken lesser people but not you.”

Saavik looked at Alex. “You can't possibly know about David.”

“But I do. And getting over something like that isn't easy but you did. You were a tough nut then and I know you are now.”

“You know nothing, Alex!” Saavik cried. “You can't possibly know!”

“You think you're the only one who's hurting? I lost my whole family in World War III! So, you don't think I'd recognize a soul in pain? Trust me, I know! And it takes a lot to get up off the floor and get back in the saddle. Or else why are you here?”

Saavik remained silent, clearly pondering on Alex's words.

“You're as tough as they come. Anyone who could bounce back from what happened at Genesis is someone I'd want by my side in any situation. You can beat that vampire, Saavik. I *know* you can.”

Tears were freely flowing down Saavik's cheeks and Alex could see the pain in her eyes; not only from the vampire's relentless mental attack but also the memories he had forced her to recall. Slowly, Saavik started to get up, with a little assistance.

“If I'm wrong, then I'll pay with my life.” Alex said. “Go on. Feed on me like Angie wanted to. I won't resist.”

Alex lowered his guard, allowing Saavik to attack him if she so chose. Saavik shook her head, as if she wasn't believing what Alex was opening himself up like this. “No, I can't do that. It would be wrong!”

“Then help me fight this vampire, Saavik. We'll put an end to this one way or another.”

Saavik looked at Alex. “I want this to end. I want your help.” Saavik shook her head again, only this time to clear it. “I will lead you to him and together we can destroy him.”

“Great. Can you hold him off that long?”

Saavik shook her head in the negative. “I doubt it but I will try. For David.”

“So how can we stop him?”

Saavik paused before she answered him. “We need to keep the lights at daylight settings. It won't kill him but it'll weaken him.” She graced him with an evil smile. “That should hurt him.”

“I like the sound of that. Let's quit yapping and let's start doing!”

A few minutes later saw the group back in Sickbay, watching Mathias' second-in-command, Doctor Mick Furillo, working furiously on the broken stimulator. He finally straightened with the machine in his hands.

“This is the best I can do, Captain,” said Furillo as he placed the patched up cortical stimulator on Saavik's forehead once again. Mathias was in Sickbay, still sleeping off the phaser stun she received. “Throwing equipment like this against the wall... it's a miracle it's still working at all.” The pain in Saavik's eyes seemed to recede some as Furillo reactivated the machine. “How's that?”

“It's... bearable now, Mick. But he's still trying.”

“Persistent bastard, isn't he?” Furillo said, looking at his tricorder's readings. “Unfortunately, this is the best that we can do.”

“No drugs?” Areniego asked, not keeping his hand off his phaser.

“It's past the point they'll do any good,” Furillo replied. “Any additional doses could lead to brain damage, heart complications, or even death.” She looked up at Alex. “Whatever you're planning, you'd better do it quick. There's no guarantee on this stimulator working for much longer.”

“Do you know where the vampire is, Saavik?”

Saavik closed her eyes, concentrating. “I believe he's in the botanical garden, Alex.”

Alex turned to Areniego. "The last place that we would look. Bastard thinks he thought of everything, didn't he?" He looked at the Marine commander. "Cullen, get one of your companies together, heavily armed. They're to confirm he's there but under no circumstances are any of you go in."

Areniego was turned for the door and did a double take when he heard the last part of the captain's order. "Sir?"

Alex gave the Marine a stony look. "You heard me correctly. No one goes in. Just Saavik and I only."

Areniego shook his head in disagreement. "Captain, with all respect, that's crazy. We have the target. Let my Marines take care of him."

Now Alex shook his head. "I appreciate the enthusiasm but I won't risk anyone I don't have to. That goes for your Marines."

"Sir," Areniego argued, "let's think this through. My Marines should go in first. You're the captain; if you go down, we all go down. And we can ill afford to lose you!"

Alex shifted his stance, his look hardening as he did so. "Sometimes, a starship commander's life doesn't count. My orders stand. Secure the area but do not go in and definitely do *not* engage. If something happens to Saavik and I while we're in there, *then* you go in and leave no one standing. Am I unclear in any respect?"

It was clear that Areniego wasn't happy with the orders but he would obey them. "Yes, sir. Do not engage. With your permission?" Alex nodded and Areniego walked away.

"Alex, we need to hurry," Saavik said with some urgency. "Even with this machine's help, I don't know how much longer I can hold off the vampire."

Alex looked at Saavik with some concern. "Think you can make it down there?" Saavik nodded. "Thanks, Mick. Can you check on Dawn?"

"Sure thing, Captain," he said. "And welcome."

They were out the door, Furillo going in one direction and the two others in the opposite direction. "I'm sorry for getting you into this mess," Alex said to Saavik as they made their way to the door and the turbolift beyond.

"It was only logical," Saavik said, her normal self emerging for a moment. "You are doing only what is required."

"But not at the expense of your mind, Saavik." The turbolift arrived and they got in, Alex punching their destination into the pad mounted beside the door. "I didn't want this. I feel *really* bad about this."

"Alex, don't feel bad. If you hadn't done what you did when you did it, you would have more bodies in Sickbay and still have no idea who was doing this," countered Saavik.

"It may make sense but that still doesn't make me feel any better about using you to get to him."

Saavik smiled, baby fangs starting to visibly form. By this time, Alex was getting used to her displays of emotion. "Don't worry, Alex. One way or another, this ends shortly."

"I hope so. Just don't feed on me, okay?"

Saavik barked a laugh. "No promises, Alex."

The turbolift arrived near the forward entrance to the gardens. Several heavily armed Marines, in full battle gear, were already there, waiting for something to happen. Areniego's deputy, Captain Diana Angeles, was present. She came to attention when she saw the captain, as did the other Marines with her. He waived them down as there was no time for formalities.

"Cullen already brief you on what's happening here?" Alex said without preliminaries.

"Yes, sir," answered Angeles. "My team has secured the forward entrance and Sergeant Chae's the aft. No one going in and no one is coming out."

"Anyone in there?"

"From our scans, there's just one person. Human male."

Alex sighed. "I've got one more order. Do not come in. Leave us be."

Angeles did a figurative double take just like Areniego did before her. "Sir?"

"Do *not* come in. At this point, you'll be more in the way than out if it. Come in only if it looks like we're in trouble. Then go to town; leave no one standing. And shoot anyone that's coming out. Just don't kill us."

"Yes, sir," she said, slightly smiling at his dark humor. She produced a wicked looking assault phaser and handed it to the captain. "Just in case, sir," she said with something akin to a smile.

"Thanks," answered Alex, taking the phaser and putting it on his belt, noticing that Saavik was paying attention to it.

"A sensible precaution, Alex," Saavik said. Alex simply nodded in return. Both she and the captain walked to the door leading to the garden section of the ship. Taking a moment to steel himself, he breathed deeply and silently let it out. *Dear Lord, if this is where I meet my end, then so be it*, he prayed. *Just allow me to go down fighting to the very end. I won't go peacefully into that eternal night. And if it's Your will, allow me to take this bastard with me. Amen.*

Finally braced for what was coming, he tapped the control to open the door. The garden was dark, meaning that someone had overridden the environmental controls since the ship's lighting system was now in their daytime setting. Alex could barely see and if it hadn't been for the starlight coming in from the windows, he would have been fumbling around in the near-darkness.

Saavik didn't suffer from that handicap. "There he is," she whispered, pointing at the figure near the port windows. It took a couple of moments for Alex's eyes to become adjusted enough to see what Saavik was pointing towards. He could just make them out... he was just sitting there from what he could tell.

"There's the vampire," Saavik repeated, keeping her voice in a whisper. "That's who's in my mind."

"Indeed," said a deep baritone voice. "And you've been trying to get into mine, Lieutenant Commander Saavik."

"Harris?" Alex asked, wanting to confirm it was the person he thought responsible for this entire situation.

"Indeed, Captain McKnight. I am he, though you know me by another name. I am Dracula."

“Pretty clever... wanting to use a name like that,” Alex said, drawing the phaser but pointing it down at the deck. “Though I doubt you're in the same caliber than the one Bram Stoker wrote about.”

The figure got up from the bench and turned to face the two Starfleet officers. “You are correct there, Captain. But then, the name just has a ring to it that I could not resist.”

“I'll admit that you're good, Harris.” Alex refused to feed the ego of the vampire any more than he had to. “Hiding out in the open like this for as long as you have. Took guts and brains to do that. And to come all the way out here and feed where no one would notice? Nice touch.”

“And for you to figure out who I am... well, let's face it. If I hadn't told Angelica to put your Commander Saavik out of action, you would still be trying to figure out who I was.”

“And that was a fatal flaw on your part.”

“Call it a miscalculation on my part. But your Commander Saavik has been correct from the beginning. You and your crew are to be commended.” Harris slightly nodded, like a knight of old showing respect to an enemy. “You certainly did piece things together much more quickly than I had anticipated.”

“But you didn't count on me,” said Saavik. “Rather, you didn't count on my reaction to Angelica's feeding on me.”

“I did not. It has been so long since I've faced another telepath that I almost forgot how it worked.”

Alex turned his attention to Harris, finger inching towards the trigger. “Now that the mutual bullshit is over, let's get down to business.”

Harris nodded. “By now, you're wondering why I've allowed you to get this far.”

“The thought's crossed my mind,” Alex admitted. “But I'm wondering why, after all that you've put us through, you would commit a tactical error but allowing us to pin you to an area that's got minimal access points.”

“With your Marines covering both access points with 'shoot on sight' orders.”

Alex slightly sighed. “So why are you revealing your intentions now?”

“Because I am tired of hiding in the shadows, Captain.” Resolve filled Harris' tone. “I am tired of striking defenseless targets. There's no fun in the hunt anymore. It's time for a change, so to speak.”

“That answers part of the question, Harris, but not all of it. Why now and here at Vendikar?”

“Does that really matter, Captain?”

“Not in the grand scheme of things, but it does lead to a rather interesting question. What were you going to do from here?”

Harris sighed. “I have taken great pains not to kill anyone and you don't know how that feels for someone like me,” he admitted. “I feed just enough and it's never enough. If I were to get my fill, I could easily kill.”

“Yet, you chose not to kill. Why is that? Has humanity grown on you that much?”

The vampire bristled a bit at the veiled insult. “It was in fear that I would be discovered. Which is easier to explain away: a person found comatose in an out of the way park or a murder along a riverbank?”

"I think that's obvious," countered the captain, keeping his finger near the trigger. "But you've still not answered why."

"There comes a time when one must embrace the moment and I've chosen this time."

A most peculiar thought hit Alex at that moment. "So, you ran away to Eminiar VII and roamed in complete freedom until we got here. And attacking our people must have been a treat after what you had here."

Harris smirked. "Eminiar VII was a most interesting diversion for someone like me. It was on Earth for almost five hundred years and these people were a lot like your back then. And you should know, seeing as how you are from the late 20th century."

Alex knew better than to take that bait. "You could have walked away and we'd not have known about your involvement. But I have to wonder; is it ego that is driving this drama, Harris? That you can't leave humanity behind without us knowing who was behind it all?"

Unlike Alex earlier, Harris took the intended bait. "Call it whatever you like, Captain. But I plan to stay here, roaming at will between Eminiar VII and Vendikar. And I will feed like I never have before."

Alex straightened a bit at what the vampire was implying. He knew the history of Eminiar VII and Vendikar and how Jim Kirk barely managed to stop the computerized war between them. A place like Eminiar VII or Vendikar, even being full Federation members now, could be a haven for a vampire like Harris; with no one on either planet caring enough to follow up on an insignificant homicide... hell, almost 20 years ago and under false pretenses, they had kidnapped Kirk and tried to destroy the old *Enterprise* so what was a random murder compared to that? There was no doubt that Harris could get away with a lot more here than he could have on Earth. Alex had to hand it to the vampire; he had done his homework.

"And what if you manage to trigger a war? How can you feed if everyone's an irradiated zombie?"

"Let that be my problem. Look at your Earth, Captain. Your own species almost destroyed its own planet, and itself, with far more primitive weapons."

Alex willed himself to keep from wincing; Harris was right once again. "That's not the point. We're not barbarians but it did take a nuclear war to make us realize that."

"Yet, this ship, the *Lexington*, is more than capable of destroying a planet completely on its own. A little hypocritical, don't you think? You say you're not barbarians yet you command far superior weapons with very little oversight."

"Someone I knew in my youth once said 'With great power comes great responsibility', Harris. We've learned that lesson at great cost. Which is why I'll do anything I can to prevent you from making a ghost town of this system. They grew up and are ready to join the galaxy, just we did."

"So how do you figure that my presence would upset that delicate balance? I've lived on Earth for five centuries and I am certain that I did not upset that planet's history."

The captain had to wonder why Harris was bringing this up now of all times. It was beginning to have the feel of an Academy debate. "Almost twenty years ago, they were running a little bloodless war. But now, with them on the verge of becoming Federation

members, if you take out the wrong person at the wrong time and not only will they hunt you but they will take it out on the Federation as well.”

Harris haughtily laughed. “So, I'm supposed to stop being who I am simply because you're *asking* me to? I can't help being born this way any more than you can help being born human, McKnight.”

Alex saw an opportunity that Harris had presented and decided to take it. “What I am asking is that you let the Federation help you. Let's get you back to Earth and let our best minds help you overcome your feeding. Or at least develop an alternate method.”

“Don't you think I've *tried*? As you've seen with your Commander Saavik, there's certain alien species that I cannot feed upon without great danger to myself and the victim.”

“But did you ask for help?” Alex could not help but poke a little hole at Harris’ way of thinking. “Or are we seeing more of that ego? An ego that would not allow you to ask for help?”

Alex knew he had wounded the vampire in the one place it did the most damage; his sense of self. Now he was getting Harris pumped up. “Ego has nothing to do with this, McKnight. We're talking about my right to survive.”

“And I agree. You've a right to survive like any other sentient being. But to live on the lives of other sentient beings? I'm no philosopher but that's not right in my book.”

“So, I should die of starvation because of your high and mighty morals, McKnight?” Harris scoffed. “This coming from a barbarian!”

“I may be what you call a barbarian but I know right and I know wrong and I have the grace to know which is which. And if you're so superior, then you also know the difference. So I'm not buying your excuses for one moment.”

“It doesn't matter what you think, McKnight. All that matters is what you are capable of doing and how you can do it. And you can do it at any time of your choosing.”

An idea hit Alex just like a thunderbolt at that moment and he was quick to capitalize on it. “Look, Harris, we can debate this until the second Doomsday and we won't get anywhere. I'm willing to meet you on a middle ground and all I ask is that you listen.”

Harris was intrigued by the captain’s notion and nodded. “Very well. I will listen.”

The captain was feeling a little encouraged; if you could get an enemy to listen, you were on the road to a resolution. And that was part of a successful negotiation; just sit and listen. Problem was to get people to think that listening was in their favor. And Alex had started to get Harris thinking in that direction. “Let Doctor Mathias put you in a stasis pod and get you back to Earth. I will guarantee that the Federation's best will be on your case. They'll help you with your feeding. Alternately, if we know where your home planet is, we will guarantee safe passage there.”

Harris looked slightly sad for a moment. “I'm what you would call an exile. In my society, I am considered an extreme conservative and that is... frowned upon, as you would say. I have no wish to change our ways and for that, I was banished from my home. And as we easily can live a millennium of your time, that is a long time. Going home is not an option.”

“You said over five hundred years have passed since your exile, right?” Harris nodded. “The Federation could speak on your behalf to your planet's government. We can make the effort to help you get back home, can't we?”

It took Harris a while to respond. He was impressed by the human's offer and could not help but think that he was being sincere about his offer. Harris called out to Smith telepathically, ***Is he telling me the truth, Brianna?***

Harris could feel Smith was recovering from her stun and she was in some sort of cage or confinement. He had to work on the telepathic connection with Smith since she was still rattled.

I'm in the brig, Master. But yes. What he says is the truth. He has no reason to lie to you.

Now the offer held more promise and for the first time in a long time, Harris began to hope just a little. ***So, the Federation would plead my case for me?***

It stands to reason that we would. Alex would not lie about something like that. He's nothing to gain from lying.

And what if I could not go home again?

Then the Federation would try to help you with the Hunger.

And if I refuse?

Smith paused for a moment. ***Then Alex would have no option but to stop you. As you have seen, he and this crew are very resourceful. He will find a way to stop you.***

Harris thought on his options for a moment. ***Would he kill me?***

If he has no other option, he will. He will try to find another way of stopping you but, trust me, Master, he will kill you if he feels he has no other option.

Harris turned back to Alex, starting to grow impressed with this human that had been such a formidable foe. “I must say, I did not think you could put together such a convincing argument.”

“I'm talking common sense and you know it, Harris. And you know I can't allow you to escape, no matter how much I think you and those people down on the planet may deserve each other. I'd rather end this cleanly but the decision is yours to make. Either I can help you or I will stop you.”

“Meaning you would kill me.”

“*Meaning* that if you force my hand, I will stop you with any and all means at my disposal. I'd prefer not to use lethal force but I've no qualms about using such force if required.”

“And I am given to understand you are one of the Federation's best combatants. You know the meaning of death.”

“I'm not proud of it but I have a passing acquaintance with the Grim Reaper.”

He means what he says, Master, added Smith. ***He may be using old English slang but he means what he says about death. If you force him to fight, then he will stop you from escaping.***

Harris paused for a moment. ***Meaning he will kill me.***

Be reasonable, Master, Smith pleaded. ***I've known Alex for most of my adult life. I've not known him to use force when he didn't need to but I've also seen him use it as***

skillfully as a doctor wielding a laser scalpel in surgery. He's no stranger to combat. I would not want to cross him in battle.

"I wish you'd just say what's on your mind, Harris," said Alex, interrupting the telepathic conversation. "Drives me crazy seeing you having a conversation and I can't hear it."

"They're talking about your honesty and your desire to avoid conflict, Alex," answered Saavik. "I can hear them and their conversation."

Alex simply nodded. "It's all on you, Harris. I'm willing to help you or I'm willing to stop you. What happens next is all up to you. I've said all I can say; anything else is bullshit."

"I quite agree, McKnight," answered Harris, more impressed by the minute. "You have presented a very convincing case. You should have been a lawyer."

"Thank you. But there is one other area I want to discuss with you that has some bearing here. I want you to let go of everyone you've attacked. Release them from your control."

Harris smiled. "It's not often had followers and those I have had... well, their only release was their death. By natural causes, of course."

"That may be," Alex said forcefully, "but this *isn't* negotiable."

The hope that Harris felt a moment ago instantly faded. "Setting terms now, Captain?"

"Call it a stipulation. And it's the only one I've got."

Harris paused for a moment, thinking the situation through. At no time in his life (and he had a long one), no one had made as sweet an offer as the captain just had. And at no time had no one demanded that he release those who he was controlling.

Captain McKnight had just done both.

But Harris had not lied either; he did not know how to release anyone from his control, though he had heard that some on his homeworld who had mastered that art. McKnight's offer of help was enticing but Harris doubted that he could meet the captain's terms. While he was coming to respect the captain (face it, most officers would have come in with phasers blasting and took him out without a thought; McKnight was reasoning with him before it came to combat), he wasn't shy about attacking. Though Harris questioned if combat would have any effect or what good that would come of it.

"What would you say," Harris said, making his decision to try to meet McKnight in the middle but showing it wasn't him that was not holding his end up, "if I could not meet that term because the only release I know is either my death or theirs?"

Without missing a beat, Alex answered, "Then I say you've a hard decision to make."

"And the good doctor's devices on Saavik and Angelica?"

"Stopgap. And as you're see, Saavik's losing her battle with your mental onslaught. Angie and Brianna won't be far behind if Saavik is any measure."

Harris paused to consider that. He was gaining respect for the captain and his passion for his crew was evident. He did not want to give up his control on these three women but he did not want to give the captain a reason to fight. After all, they had been negotiating in good faith and in all his years, no one had even tried that with Harris.

"I do not like this arithmetic."

"Should have thought of that before you started tinkering with these women's minds."

Harris grimaced. "Do you have no sympathy, Captain?"

"Should I be sympathetic, Harris? If you were in my shoes and been through what you've put us through, would you show any sympathy to us?"

"I suppose not." He looked to Smith, then Saavik. All three came to the same conclusion at the same time.

This isn't fair, Smith said. ***You know what he's asking for!***

Yes, interrupted Saavik. ***Have you ever deliberately broken mental contact with those under your control, Master?***

Harris smiled but kept it from his expression. He knew he had Saavik now but it was too little and too late to do much good. ***I've never had a need to do so before. The captain makes an attractive offer then sets the price very high.***

What about a mind meld? Smith asked. ***Saavik, you've melded with me a couple of times and...***

This is different, Brieanna. I didn't establish the link, nor can I dissolve it like a mind meld.

"I hate being kept in the dark," said Alex.

"We're discussing it, Alex," Saavik said. Alex turned to see Saavik remove the device from her forehead and drop it to the ground. She stomped on it, crushing it under her boot. That told Alex all he needed to know. To be honest, he was surprised she was able to hold Harris off as long as she did.

"It's done?" He asked. She nodded, confirming what he suspected. "I'm sorry for putting you through hell."

"Don't be. This has been a learning experience for me in emotions, though I could have done without some of the more... *unpleasant* experiences."

"Still, I'm responsible. I wish I hadn't been forced to put you through this."

"If I were in your shoes, I'd have done the same thing, Alex. You had no other choice. I did and I accept it."

"Still. I owe you, Saavik."

Saavik chose not to acknowledge his comment as she walked over to Harris's side.

"You set a high price, McKnight," said Harris. He was steeling himself for what he knew had to be done. It was the price of one or the price of three.

"Sorry, but you danced the dance, Harris. Now it's time to pay the piper."

"You do know that I could kill you right here and now then all of us just run away, never to be found again."

"Sure you could do that," admitted Alex. "I'm outnumbered two to one and between you two, you could easily kill me. But think of this. You murder me, a senior Starfleet captain, and there's nowhere in civilized space you could go. You'd never be able to show your face again, much less go home. Starfleet would hound you until you were brought to justice. That is, if you were able to get off the ship. Cullen and my crew would make that task rather difficult."

Harris nodded agreement in the estimate of the situation. "That they have thus far, so I would expect them to continue in their duty. Or I could take you hostage and still accomplish the same thing."

"I'm expendable in this situation. Those Marines will shoot on sight and take me down with you. And where would you end up but in the brig and in the same situation you're in right now?"

That is true, Master, said Saavik. ***He did leave orders with Major Areniego to that effect.***

A Mexican standoff, added Smith. ***We kill him; the Marines get us. We take him hostage, same thing. We keep him talking and the Marines can't do anything to you two.***

And he can't do anything to me without me doing something to you, said Harris. ***There's only one way to end this.***

"I don't have to be psychic to know what you're thinking," Alex said, breaking in once again. "I meant what I said about helping you but that was before I knew you can't dissolve your link without someone dying. If you're right, then this situation's only got one way out. It's a matter of who is going to take the fall. One or three."

He's right, Saavik said. ***Even if all of us were to go into stasis and they were to find a way to feed the Hunger another way, the link still remains. You're the only one who can dissolve it between us, Master.***

And I cannot dissolve the link, said Harris admiringly.

But he's sincere about helping you, said Smith.

Give it up, Brieanna, answered Harris. ***I know all of you want to help me but this is one time you won't be to.***

"If I'm being honest here, Harris, I don't like the math either," Alex announced, as if he were party to their mental conversation. "If that's any consolation to you. I don't want anyone to die today. It's never good business."

"No, it isn't," fired back Harris. "I have to wonder if you didn't maneuver me into this situation."

Now it was Alex's turn to be flattered. He knew was good but he also knew he wasn't that good. "I'm not that good, Harris."

"Or are you?" Harris sighed. "You have been a worthy opponent, Captain McKnight. One of the best. I salute you, sir."

Smith could see the plan in Harris's mind and what he was thinking was beyond insane. ***Are you kidding?!***

Do you see any other way? At least this will end on my terms. McKnight has a point; you don't deserve to pay for my sins.

Have you ever seen the after effects? I vomited the first time I saw it!

But it is the only sure way this ends, Brieanna. Harris smiled gravely. ***I think McKnight is being honest but he's also right that this must end. Let me end it the way I need to end it.***

I second her concern, Master, Saavik said. ***This is a very foolish plan.***

But it will have the desired outcome. Harris took a deep breath, filling himself with resolve. ***When I say so, Saavik, I want you to rush towards him so that McKnight will fire towards you. I will do the rest.***

Master! cried Smith. ***Please don't do this!***

Harris could see tears forming in Smith's eyes. That tugged at his heartstrings but he knew the end game had come.

It's enough to know that you will remember me, Harris said. ***That will be reward enough. Saavik, attack.***

Alex was roughly twenty-five meters from the two vampires. Suddenly, he saw Saavik break rank and slowly charge towards him, eyes blazing and fangs showing. The captain took a few steps back, setting his phaser to heavy stun.

"Don't you do this," he warned. "Marines!"

Instead of the door opening to allow the Marines in, the doors stayed stubbornly shut.

"I sealed the doors after you came in, Alex" Saavik said savagely, looking for all the world like a demon coming to life. "So shoot... if you've got the balls to shoot!"

Saavik lunged at Alex, causing the captain to turn his phaser at her. He started to backpedal and as he did, he fired at Saavik. His shot was wide of his target, as he was mid-stride when he fired and he had rushed his aim. The shot hit the bulkhead by the windows.

What Alex didn't see was Harris ripping the bench off the deck, using it as a makeshift battering ram. He ran as hard as he could at the closest viewport. The bench weakened the transparent aluminum but it wasn't enough to cause it to shatter.

Make him fire at the window! Harris shouted as he tried again. ***I need his phaser to weaken it!***

Saavik rushed towards Alex once again and Alex back peddled to get some distance. And once again, he fired off-balance but it was more aimed than the last shot. His shot barely missed Saavik and hit the viewport Harris had hit, causing it to implode. Instantly, Harris was sucked out into space, along with the air in the compartment. The two *Lexington* officers were over fifteen meters away when the viewport gave way and both began to tumble towards the open hole in the ship's side. He grabbed a tree and held on for dear life, praying that Saavik had done the same thing. Dying in space was gruesome enough but dying in a compartment that was exposed to space was even worse.

Remembering his training, Alex pushed all the air out of his lungs and closed his eyes tightly, praying that this ended soon. He knew that he and Saavik would have less than 15 seconds to live. Already, he could feel his lungs give out. Luckily, Starfleet engineers were always prepared and the explosive decompression of a compartment had been anticipated. The computer instantly recognized the loss of pressure and activated an emergency forcefield over the hole where the viewport once was. When the forcefield was in place, automated systems kicked in to repressurize the compartment. Alex knew that alarms would sound all over the ship to indicate the loss of pressure and that medics would be on the way.

He could feel the return of air and he opened his eyes. Saavik was grasping a bench that was broken on one end and dangerously close to the open viewport. Her uncovered

skin was really bruised so he could only imagine what he looked like. Suddenly, he felt the transporter beam take hold of him and he was grateful for it.

He was unconscious before the beam released him onto a biobed in sickbay.

Epilog

Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.

- Mark Twain

“Captain's Log, Stardate 8486.32. Mr. Archibald Harris, the self proclaimed ‘Dracula’, has died at his own hand, nearly killing myself and Lieutenant Commander Saavik in the process. As we recovered in Sickbay, Ambassador Windsor-Mountbatten accomplished her mission and we’ve two new members in the Federation family. *Lexington* is now enroute for a rendezvous with the *Constitution* II class starship *Leyte* to take the ambassador and staff home to Earth while we head to drydock to repair our damage.”

Angelica McKnight was sitting alone in the recording studio, completing her repairs from the damage it had suffered at her hand. She had been testing the equipment by practicing her lead song for a concert she was putting on later that day. Whether she knew it or not, she was changing some of the lyrics to match how she currently felt. She did know that she felt bad and that was putting it mildly.

After Harris had committed suicide rather than killing the women he was controlling, he had exposed Alex and Saavik to the vacuum of space, which was never a nice experience. And after it was all said and done, all four affected officers (Alex, Saavik, Smith, and herself) needed rest so Angelica found herself on temporary medical leave. In her quarters, she took some time and read what was in the ship’s logs for the last couple of days. And the more she read, the more dismayed she became. Angelica could not believe that she had done what she had, being brainwashed not being an excuse in her mind for what she was reported to have done.

Back in the studio, she reached over to a small table and took a glass of water off it, taking a couple of sips before putting it back. The cool water did little to assuage her guilt, nor was practicing her set for the concert she had hastily decided to put on. Usually, being in the recording studio was akin to going to the spa for her; it was almost as relaxing and Angelica would lose herself in the music. This afternoon though, her guilt over what she had done was overriding any sense of relaxation she would have normally felt.

She grabbed the studio headphones resting around her neck and was preparing to put them on when she saw someone come into the control booth. She went ahead with putting the headphones on her ears but looked down and away from the window so she would not see who was in the control booth. Angelica was already ashamed enough at what she had done and hopefully, the person who had the audacity to intrude would get the hint and leave.

“Angie,” she heard Saavik’s voice in her ears. Angelica instantly looked up and saw Saavik sitting at the engineer’s panel, dressed in a decidedly non-regulation white sweater. Angelica’s embarrassment hit new heights and all she wanted to do at that moment was

disappear into the nearest bulkhead. She busied herself with the monitor in front of her, pretending like she didn't hear anything and hoping like hell Saavik would leave her alone.

"I know you can hear me with those massive earphones on you, Angie, so please don't insult my intelligence by pretending to ignore me."

Angelica sighed, then looked up, crossing her arms across her chest, her leather jacket's slight creaking muffled by her headphones as she did so. "You're interrupting, Saavik," she said, coming really close to adding *so leave me the hell alone!*

Saavik mirrored her friend's stance. "Which is what I had intended."

"What do you want?" She decided to change tack. "What are you doing here anyway? Dawn said we were supposed to be resting until this evening."

"Dawn let me out early, provided I didn't try to go back on duty. The captain is napping in his quarters, as is Brianna."

"So why aren't you doing the same, Saavik?"

"I could ask you the same question, Angie."

Angelica cocked her head slightly. "I asked first."

Saavik held her ground. "Because I felt we needed to talk."

Angelica would swear she could feel her cheeks flush but she stayed silent, not knowing what to say.

"Silence does not become you, Angie," Saavik pointed out.

Usually, it took a lot for Angelica to lose her calm but after everything that happened, her anger and vehemence came out of her like water bursting from a dam.

"What would you have me say, Saavik?" growled Angelica, arms dropping to her side. "A simple 'I'm sorry'? Fine! I'm *sorry!*" As she spoke, the volume in her voice went up to the point she was shouting. "I'm sorry for *everything!* Okay? *Satisfied?* *Is that okay?* *I am sorry!* *Goddamn sorry!* *Happy now?* *Are you, goddamn it??!!*"

If anyone had seen Saavik, they would have sworn that she was unfazed by Angelica's rage. What they didn't see was Saavik holding back any possible retort. She had learned not long ago to not speak to your friend in anger, a lesson that Angelica either was forgetting or ignoring at the moment. "You usually don't display such behavior, my friend," Saavik said calmly.

Had Angelica really had been listening, she would have caught onto the fact that Saavik had called Angelica her friend. But her anger was in control and she missed it, focused on being angry rather than trying to calm down. "Right now, I don't give a good tinker's damn about my behavior. After what I did in the last couple of days, I'm surprised you even want to speak to me!"

So that was what was bothering her, Saavik thought. *She was upset about what she had done while brainwashed by Mr. Harris. Even though it was not her fault, she is taking all the blame on herself.* Saavik leaned back in her chair and let her arms relax. "Which is precisely what I wanted to discuss with you. You are aware of what transpired then."

Something in Saavik's calm demeanor was calming the princess down. She expected Saavik to go high order on her. And when the Vulcan hybrid didn't rise to the occasion, it took most of the wind out of Angelica's sail. "Somewhat," Angelica admitted, starting to calm down. She slightly adjusted her headphones for a better fit on her ears. "There's a few log entries and what I did read was shocking enough."

“Did you read in those logs that you and I fought in this very room?” Saavik looked at the British princess. “And that you fed on me afterwards?”

Angelica shook her head hard, almost throwing her headphones off her head. “*Don’t!*” She readjusted her headphones once again, then wiped off her jacket. “*I don’t want to know!*”

“You’ll find out sooner or later, Angie.”

“*Stop it!*” Angelica shouted, her previous anger coming back. “Just stop! I don’t want to hear! I know I did some bad things, Saavik! And there’s not enough commiserations in the world to make up for what I did! Is that what you’re wanting to hear?! *Is it, goddamn it?*”

“It is not,” said her friend. “I wanted you to know that I have no bad feelings towards you.”

“*Feelings?*” Angelica scoffed. “*Feelings?!* Saavik, you’ve just started to express emotions and now you’re an expert on them? And you’re going to sit there and tell me that *you* have no bad feelings towards *me?*” She scoffed again. “That’s rich!”

Saavik finally decided to show Angelica just a sliver of her anger. She stood up so fast that her chair flew against the far wall. “How *dare* you mock me for my feelings! You’re the one who encouraged me to give in and show my emotions. And when I do, you feel the need to mock me when I *do* show them? Then may *the gods damn you!*” Saavik huffed for a minute to show her friend that she was serious then retrieved her chair.

The fact that Saavik was showing some true anger for the first time really did shake up Angelica. It was enough to placate any embers of anger that Angelica had. The commander finally sat down on the stool, opening her jacket to show a black leather tank top.

“Guess I deserved that,” she said as she saw Saavik cool down. Saavik did not say a word until she put the chair back and sat back down in it.

“I didn’t come here to fight you, Angie, because I came here to make amends with you. You think you’re responsible for what you did while you were under his control. What you did... you can’t blame yourself. All of us who know and care about you know you would never willingly or knowingly do those things.”

Angelica shook her head, only this time she did not dislodge her headphones. “Brainwashed or not, I’m still responsible, Saavik. I mean, I fought you. Twice! Who in the hell does that with a Vulcan like you?”

“And, as Alex would say, ‘you’ve a mean right hook’.” Saavik slightly smiled. “My jaw still aches when I think of that fight.”

“See what I mean? I did that some pretty bad things, especially to you. Willingly or not is immaterial. I made a mistake and I should pay for it.”

Saavik sighed. “You’re being too hard on yourself, my friend. Take it from someone who spent years beating herself up over a single mistake.” For a moment, she flashed back to her time on Genesis, seeing their Klingon guard stab her lover in the heart, instantly killing him. With effort, she pushed away the memory. “You’re taking responsibility for things that you had no control over.”

Angelica paused. *Maybe Saavik had a point. Am I being too hard on herself?* After all, she knew that someone whose mind was controlled by another was not legally

responsible for their actions while under their influence. Morally was another story, she felt.

“You wouldn’t be the Angie we know if you didn’t feel the way you’re feeling right now,” said Saavik, unintentionally mirroring what Angelica was thinking, “But I can tell you that you have nothing to be ashamed of. No one will hold your actions against you. Especially me.”

Angelica was touched by the gesture but she still felt guilty. For a communications officer, she was at a loss for words. “I don’t know what to say, Saavik,” she finally said after what seemed like an eternity.

“I’ve learned that friends forgive and forget. And I still want to be your friend, Angie. Friends?”

For the first time in a while, a smile came to Angelica’s lips. “Friends.”

Several hours later found Captain McKnight and a high percentage of the ship’s crew in the starboard recreation deck. Against the forward bulkhead where an alcove of photos of previous ships named *Lexington* were on display, a stage had been erected with a keyboard, drums, and a couple of guitars. The main area had portable chairs placed in rows but from what Alex could see, people were standing on the catwalk on the second floor; this made the event standing room only. Alex knew Angie and her band, Retroplay, was a popular attraction aboard the *Lexington* and this instance was no exception. In fact, most any port they went, Retroplay was always asked to play at least one night.

As captain, he had a seat reserved in the front row and he slowly made his way there, taking time to greet and talk to various members of his crew. Sometimes he would perform with the band but after everything that had transpired, especially after trying to breathe vacuum, he felt he would pass this time. In fact, he had been somewhat surprised to see the band’s request on the evening schedule and he had instantly approved it. The crew needed something to both celebrate the good news and to blow off some steam. Having Retroplay perform tonight looked like a good idea to get the ball rolling in that direction. The crew really liked seeing the senior officers in this light and Alex thought it made the senior officers more approachable, in his opinion.

Alex had made it to his seat and was talking to the crew members around him when he heard “Attention on deck!” over the compartment’s speakers. Instantly, the crew that was sitting stood up and everyone came to attention. Being the captain had one good perk; there were few people he had to come to attention for. So, he was free to come to the center aisle and see who it was that was causing the attention, though an educated guess wouldn’t have been far off.

Ambassador Margaret Windsor-Mountbatten had appeared on the recreation deck, waiving everyone to sit down almost as soon as she entered. “Please, sit,” she said but the word took a few moments to circulate before the assembled crew went back to what they were doing. Alex walked over to meet the ambassador, certainly surprised by her presence. Especially at a retro-1980’s rock concert like the one that was going to happen, where Margaret hated rock and roll as much as her daughter loved it.

“Ambassador,” he said in greeting when he got within earshot. “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Captain,” she replied. “May I attend this event or is it Starfleet only?” Before a couple of days ago, he would have found that insulting. The twinkle in her eye and the good-natured smile suggested she was joking. As in honest-to-God joking.

“Of course, Ambassador,” he said, her grin not escaping his notice. “Everyone's invited, though I'm surprised to see you here.”

“Since we've signed the treaty of membership and are headed home, I thought I'd come and enjoy what amenities you've got on this ship.” She looked around. “I can see now what the fuss was all about when this class was being debated in Council chambers. Those blueprints, sketches, and renders don't do it justice.”

He knew she had been on the fence during the *Odysseus*-class debates but ended up being one of the decisive votes for the class. “Glad you approve. Can I show you to your seat?”

“Please.” She took his proffered arm and they started to walk back to where he had been sitting.

“I understand some of your senior officers will be performing a concert tonight,” Margaret said. “Including Angelica.”

Alex heard the hidden question. “She enjoys performing when she's not in the recording studio. Music a little more than a hobby to her.”

“Indeed,” the Queen said as they reached their seats. “I remember she had a passion for a certain era of music. I made her wear a headset whenever she would listen to it when she lived with me in Clarence House.”

“She still listens to music of that era,” conceded Alex. “*And* she sings them.”

“And she will be performing songs from that era then?” Alex nodded. “I see.”

Alex could not tell what she was thinking but her admission confirmed that she didn't care for her daughter's taste in music. “Ma'am, I'm not so sure this would be a good idea.”

Margaret turned her head to look at him, then shook her head. “No. I need to be here. I've never seen her perform before.”

Alex wasn't too surprised at that. “I see.”

“Oh, I've heard her sing, especially when she had those things on her ears. She would go up to her room after one of our arguments and slam the door. Minutes later, she would be singing. I would sneak up to her door and listen. She was a rather remarkable singer. It was no wonder she wanted to be a professional singer. That is, until the space bug bit her and she went into Starfleet.”

Now Alex was surprised; to his and Angelica's knowledge, they had not known that Margaret had known about Angelica's secret moonlighting in London.

“Don't look so surprised, Alex,” Margaret said. Alex silently cursed himself, thinking he had somehow let the cat out of the bag. “You think I didn't know Angelica was sneaking off to be that music engineer or being that singer in the club where you two met?” She giggled. “There's very little that I *didn't* know.”

“Angie will be appalled if she ever found out,” Alex countered, sort of relieved that he had given away their little secret. “She never wanted you to know because she knew how much you disapproved of her doing it.”

"I disapproved of her actions at the time because she didn't tell me, not because she was doing it," Margaret said, delivering as many shocking twists in as many minutes. "As a mother, I wanted her to do whatever made her happy. As the Princess of Wales, I had to make sure she was ready to succeed me when the time came. A bloody conflict of interest, I'll admit. But, letting her sneak off to let her do her thing and blow off steam was better than arguing about it. She was going to do it no matter what I said so I let her, and, from what you just told me, she thinks she got away with it."

The lights flickered three times. In any other time or place, Alex would have been on the intercom to Commander Bennington-Fox and find out what was going on with the power grid. In this case, he knew that it was a warning to the audience that the concert would be starting in two minutes. This would allow the audience to get settled in before the performance.

"Just make sure I'm not around when you tell her you knew about that," Alex said.

"I promise, Alex. In fact, let's keep it between us, shall we? Is there really any reason for her to know?"

"She's going to be surprised when she sees you here," deflected Alex. "She's a smart cookie. She may piece it together herself."

"Then she does," said Margaret. "It's past time I support my daughter. Even if I have to sit here and listen to music that's three hundred years out of date."

"It's still rock-n'-roll to me'," quoted Alex. "Angie won't disappoint."

"She never has," said Margaret when the lights dimmed. At the same time, a spotlight powered up, bathing the stage in its warm glow. From one of the wings bounded Tereshkova, Mathias, Bautista, and Angelica. All were in civilian dress with Angelica in her usual leather outfit. Quickly, the four girls took their positions: Tereshkova behind the drums, Mathias behind the two-tier keyboard, Bautista and Angelica with their electric guitars. As was her custom, when Angelica put the guitar around her, she looked around the audience; her eyes slightly widened when she saw her mother sitting beside her husband. From the corner of his eye, Alex saw Margaret nod and smile. Angelica's expression slackened when she caught the hidden meaning.

"How's everyone tonight?" Angelica asked, the amplifier field zeroing in on her. The crowd cheered. "Oh come on! I know the best crew in the fleet can do better than that! How's everyone tonight?" The crowd cheered even louder. Angelica mock shook her head as she finished tuning her guitar. "And here I expected better from the crew of this ship! Come on, *Lexington*! Let it rip! How are you doing?" The resulting roar was near deafening but it seemed to satisfy Angelica.

"Better! You know who we are but I see some new faces in the crowd so let me introduce you to your own Retroplay!" Shouts went up as she introduced everyone in the band; the roar seemed to be tied for all of them, least to Alex. He sat back to enjoy the event and noticed Margaret starting to smile.

"You know, we've had some tough times in the last couple of days," Angelica said, obviously energized by performing on stage. "For a couple of us here on stage in particular. So, instead of our normal starting song, I'd like to sing something that's from the heart."

Angelica turned to face the girls to give them some last-minute instructions. On cue, Mathias began working her keyboard in an opening chord that was hauntingly familiar

to Alex but he couldn't immediately place it. About fifteen seconds later, Angelica stepped up to center stage and started to sing, almost *a cappella*. "You leave in the morning..."

As Angelica continued, Margaret leaned over to Alex. "Do you think she's singing about me?" she whispered.

Alex whispered back, "If I remember, the song's originally about a boy that is rejected by his father for his... *alternate* lifestyle. It can be a heartbreaking song."

That half-evasive answer seemed to placate the Queen for the moment. As the beat went up-tempo, Bautista and Angelica joined in with their guitars, Mathias with her synthesizers, and Tereshkova with her drums. Angelica's pitch and volume started to go higher than the original singer's. Noticing there was something different, Alex looked up at Angelica and could see a sad expression on her face. On an impulse, he quickly glanced at the Queen; he saw that Margaret's expression was closely matching her daughter's on stage.

Like a train, it hit Alex why Angelica had picked this song to lead off with. Though there was no way Angelica could have known her mother would show up to the concert, it was serving a two-fold purpose. To her friends, Angelica was expressing her shame over her recent actions. To her mother, Angelica was expressing all the hurt feelings that she could never express in any other way.

As the song progressed, the more passionate Angelica became and was really going all out with her modified lyrics. Rarely had Alex seen Angelica be as passionate in her singing as she was at that moment. The dual meanings weren't lost on her intended audience, especially on her mother. Margaret was coming to understand Angelica's hidden message of teenage angst, especially when she was singing about was their tumultuous relationship.

"I never knew that was how she felt," he heard Margaret whisper, dabbing the corner of one eye. She looked up and for a moment, mother and daughter made eye contact. "She won't feel that way anymore," Margaret swore as Angelica proceeded to finish the song.