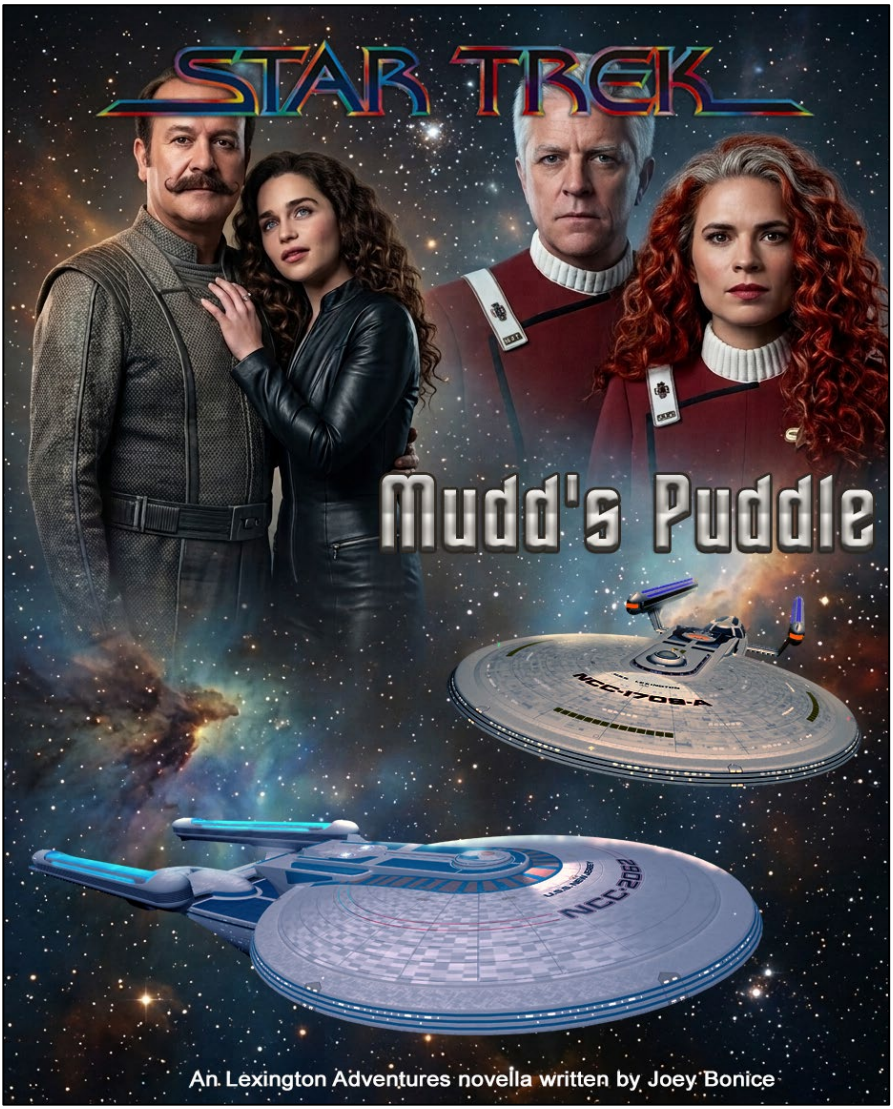
STAR TREK
Mudd's Puddle
NCC-1708-A
NCC-1701
An Lexington Adventures novella written by Joey Bonice

"Mudd's Puddle"

A novella by
Joey Bonice

Star Trek: The *Lexington* Adventures based on Star Trek® created by Gene Roddenberry

Based on an original story by
Russell Christiansen & Edward Ouellette

Based on an original teleplay by
Joey Bonice, Adam Mullen, Edward Ouellette, & Vance Owen

Original song: "Before the Border Falls"
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PROLOGUE

"Personal Log, Stardate 8785.3. I'm on my way to Deep Space Four *ahead of the* Lexington*; this is to be part of my recovery from that damned Klingon mind sifter that really… messed me up. If it hadn't been for Captain McKnight and Doc Mathias, I think I'd be in jail right now. I still can't believe what lengths the captain went through for me and I've no idea how I'm going to repay him for his faith in me. But the good thing is that I'm going to see my wife and daughter… I've got a lot to make up for!"*

Commander Sophea Bennington-Fox, the chief engineer of the Federation starship *Lexington*, turned off the recorder and leaned back in her seat, stretching as she did so. What she had said was the truth; the Klingons had used a mind sifter on her to learn how to take over *Starfleet One* and then turned her into a sleeper agent. They had activated her during the hijacking, and she had been captured towards the end of that ordeal. Afterwards, when everyone wanted to throw her in prison, it was only Captain Alexander McKnight's belief in her that she was not only free, but herself again, thanks to Dawn Mathias and her miracle cure.

During her recovery, she came to think that the *Lexington* was the home she did not know she had been seeking. For the first time since the Academy, she got along with everyone, despite her outspoken opinions and candid directness. With some effort, she had been learning how to be more politic, and her efforts were starting to reap some benefits. With the exception of her wife, Fox could not remember anyone being that nice to her. When she learned of the captain going out on that limb just because he didn't believe she was a traitor, she silently resolved she would make the *Lexington* the most outstanding ship in the fleet.

Fox's musings were quickly quenched by the intruder alert siren. Being that she was a visitor just hitching a ride on the brand-new *Excelsior*-class *New Jersey*, she had no battle or intruder alert station but, in a crisis, a commander would take any help they could

get. She threw on her Class B jacket and headed to the nearest turbolift.

Captain William Gutterman had his hands full as Sophea arrived on the bridge. To a civilian, the bridge looked to be in total chaos, but she knew better. She stood in the foyer, staying out of the way but yet close enough to render any assistance.

"Well," bellowed Gutterman, "who in the hell was able to tie the navigational controls to the anti-matter safety controls?"

The *Lexington* engineer thought that one over. On her ship, those controls were physically separate, as they were on the *New Jersey*. But how would someone program the computer to allow the navigational controls to be slaved over to the safety controls on their fuel supply? Sophea didn't think it was possible, but someone seemed to think differently. That would require a programmer better than anyone than Sophea had seen and that included Saavik, who she considered one of the best programmers in the Fleet.

"Captain," reported someone, "the intruder controls are locked out!"

As if on command, there was a hissing from the vents on the bridge. Sophea knew in a heartbeat what it was. So did Gutterman.

"Gas!" he cried. "XO, get the emergency gasmasks!"

The ship's executive officer, who was standing right by a vent, wasn't able to carry out the command. He slumped over, already unconscious before he hit the deck. The others were already losing consciousness themselves, plus Sophea.

Who would have done this? she thought before the blackness claimed her.

CHAPTER ONE

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8786.18. Finally, we're on our way to DS4*. Our chief engineer, Sophea Bennington-Fox, went on ahead as part of her recovery from the Klingon mind sifter. She's going to see her wife and daughter. The starship* New Jersey *picked her up a two days ago while we wrapped up our mission. Now that we're done, we're all looking forward to the upcoming shore leave but it's going to be bittersweet for some of us."*

In the captain's quarters sat Alex and his wife, freshly promoted Captain Angelica McKnight. They were having a romantic dinner… her idea since she was one of the officers who'd depart from the ship to their next duty station. For Angelica, it meant going home to London as the Starfleet liaison to Ambassador Windsor-Mountbatten, one of the five ambassadors from Earth to the Federation. But there was a quiet meaning: the ambassador was also the Queen of the United Kingdom, who was terminally ill. This promotion to a prestigious position was only part of the reassignment: it was also so Angelica could learn how to take over from her mother. They both knew this would be one of the last dinners they'd have as husband and wife. Chances were that the next time they'd dine together like this, it would be as queen and prince.

For Angelica's part, she was determined that this knowledge would not dampen the dinner or her evening. She had dressed in a very sexy burgundy leather dress, matching knee-high boots with elbow gloves. She had really gone all out with her long red hair, making sure it was curly and voluminous, though she had been a little disappointed to see the silver making its way through the curls. Angelica thought her hair was one of her better features.

Alex had gotten the hint as soon as he arrived at his quarters. Before he even got there, he could smell the steaks she had prepared… he knew they would be replicated. Angelica had been blessed with many talents but being a cook was not one of them. If the dinner hadn't been any indication, the way she was dressed was. He had

excused himself to take a quick sonic shower before dressing in a white polo shirt, dark khaki pants, and matching loafers. Like her, he refused to dwell on the future and was determined to make the minutes they had left count.

"You know," Alex reminisced as he cut into his steak, "I remember when I was promoted to commander. What a day that was. Both Andy Williams and I got drunk that night."

Angelica could not help but tease him. "Wasn't that when the hottest ships were the NX-class ships?"

Alex looked at her. "If I were in the NX era, then that would put you in the *Daedalus*-class era, Angie."

The Englishwoman in leather wore a semi-shocked look on her face. "A lady never tells her age!" she teasingly fired back.

Almost instantly, Alex returned, "There's nothing lady-like about your commissioning date!"

"Speaking of dates, how is this one going, my love?"

He looked at her as he chewed. "'*My love*'? You've not called me that in a very long time."

She shrugged as she took a deep sip of her red wine. "Maybe it needs to make a comeback."

"If you get to call me 'my love', then I get to call you 'Cinnamon'." Cinnamon was Angelica's childhood nickname.

"Fair enough." Angelica put her glass down and kept looking at him. "I love you so much," she opined.

He didn't look up as he finished his porterhouse. "I know. And I love you too."

She was staring at him with a loopy, loving look. "I've nearly forgotten how sexy you are… even after all these years of marriage."

That stopped him cold. "I'm fifty-five years old," he said, sipping at his wine. "I'm old, not sexy."

Angelica put her elbows on the table, crossed her hands in front of her, and then put her chin on her hands. "You're still sexy to me, my love. *Very* sexy."

He put his cutlery down and wiped his mouth with his napkin before he answered. "Are you hinting at something, Your Royal Highness?"

Normally, that last part would have set her off as Angelica didn't like being reminded of her royal heritage. But tonight, she let the comment slide like water off a duck's back. "Would it pain you to know I fancy you like mad and I want to shag you rotten tonight?"

"*Angelica Renée*!" he said, semi-joking. "Where did you learn to talk like that?"

"Well," she cooed, "I *have* been in Starfleet for twenty-three years."

"That's not very princess like," he said at her, finishing his wine.

The British woman smiled, her intent clear as the nose on her face. "Maybe but this is a wife talking to her husband. I want you, Alex. And I want you *tonight*."

Now Alex loudly chuckled. "Like I couldn't have guessed! Ever since I've come in here, you've been wanting to get into my pants! And since when do *you* get to drive? The man is supposed to drive, not the woman!"

"It's the grand old 23rd Century, Alex, my love," she flirted. "Girls are allowed to drive now. And I know you love it when I drive."

Alex nodded. "I do enjoy it when you take the wheel at times, girlfriend. Let's me know you still love me."

Angelica reached across the distance between them and took his hand in her gloved one. "I loved you from the moment I saw you and I will love you forever. Don't ever doubt it."

Alex smiled at her, the dinner now forgotten. She got up and sat in Alex's lap.

"Why don't you show me how much you love me, my princess?" he reassured, knowing that at this point, she didn't need any encouragement. Her libido was in full control and doing all the work.

Angelica closed in on his lips. "Oh, I intend to so badly…" She was about to kiss him when the intercom chimed.

"*Bridge to Captain McKnight*."

"I've got to answer," he said as she kissed him.

"*Sod them*," she breathed, their lips locked. "You're all mine tonight."

"You're a captain now, Mrs. McKnight," he said, reluctantly breaking off the kiss. To her, it seemed he took a lot longer to break off than he wanted to.

He cleared his throat before answering. "Alex here. Go ahead."

"Captain, we're being hailed by *Deep Space Four*," said Angelica's replacement, a Caitian named Gillian Cunningham. Just the way she said it, it was warning enough for them, for they both knew that calls like this had a tendency to have bad news attached. "Rear Admiral Boyington."

"Patch it down here," he ordered while holding up a finger to his lips, indicating Angelica needed to be quiet. "Audio only."

"Patching him in, Captain."

The next voice belonged to one Peter Boyington. Boyington was Alex's immediate boss and the commander of the Federation's Fifth Fleet, which was stationed along the Klingon Neutral Zone. Alex and Boyington were also Academy classmates and old friends.

"Well, well. Pete! It's nice of you to call but your timing sucks!"

Compared to Alex's jovial mood, Boyington's was measured and somber. That in itself told Alex that there was some bad news coming and Alex wasn't going to like it. It didn't help that Angelica had wondering hands and her lips were all over him.

"*Alex, I know you and your crew are looking forward to some down time here at DS4...*"

Pete isn't the type to beat around the bush, Alex thought. *So, if he's doing actually beating all around the bush, it has to be* really *bad news.*

"Spit it out, Pete. Did we go to war with the Klingons?"

Boyington paused for a moment. "*The* New Jersey *never showed up.*"

That sobered up the mood. Angelica removed her hands but hovered near him, keeping silent as instructed.

"We saw her just a two days ago, Pete. She was en route to you with my engineer aboard."

"*I know.*"

Alex sighed, knowing the story already. "God damn it."

"*I hear that. Alex, I've got four ships out there,* Victorious*,* Prince of Wales*,* Bennington, *and* Nimitz*.* Bennington *couldn't find her before being transferred to Sixth Fleet and none of the others have reported in seeing her*." Boyington skipped a beat. "New Jersey *may be the newest* Excelsior-*class ship we have but* Lexington *is hyper state of the art. And since you're the only ship I've got that's has the biggest guns and the best sensors –* "

Alex knew what Boyington was driving at. "Yeah, I know. The *Enterprise* syndrome strikes once again." Alex was referring to the phenomenon of when something big was going down, it was usually the *Enterprise* that happened to be the only starship available to respond. Some of the *Enterprise*'s luck had sometimes rubbed off on her sister ships, and it had rubbed off more times than not onto the *Lexington*.

You could almost hear Boyington cracking a slight smile at that, despite the seriousness of the situation. "*We're sending you the coordinates of the* New Jersey*'s last known location.*"

"Understood, Pete. We'll head there as soon as those coordinates are received."

"*Thanks*."

"Hey, Pete," Alex said before Boyington could close the channel. "You still pissed at me?"

There was a pregnant pause. "*Sort of. Had told me what you were planning, I could have covered for you. I mean, you knew Fox wasn't a willing agent, but I still could have helped you by providing some top cover.*"

"And have you an accessory to treason? No way, Pete. If anyone was going down, I wanted it to be me and not anyone else."

"*And that stubborn streak of yours nearly got you thrown in jail*," Boyington pointed out. "*I was more pissed that you weren't telling me what you were up to than being pissed at you for insubordination. In fact, I wasn't mad about the insubordination… I actually understood that. I was mad at you not telling an old friend what you were up to.*"

"And what would I have told your wife, Alice, and your family? That I helped put you in jail for helping me cover for a fellow officer?" Alex countered. "You're one of my best friends, Pete, but I wasn't going to do that to you."

"*That was still a dirty thing to do to your best friend*," Boyington said. "*But what you're saying is making sense.*"

Alex cocked his head, even though Boyington could not see it. "Friends?"

"*Friends. Good luck finding the* New Jersey."

"Thanks. I'll let you know as soon as I know something."

"*Knew I could count on you. Oh, and tell Angie that I'll take the hit on her being late. I'll make the calls and be the bad guy.*"

Alex looked to his wife. Angelica looked back and nodded. If this chase took longer than a few days, she'd miss her report date and that would not look good on her or anyone else. Time would be a factor in this mission.

"I'll let her know, Pete. Thanks."

"*Least I can do for you doing this for me. I'll send you the last known coordinates for* New Jersey. *Boyington out*."

Alex didn't wait; he called up to the bridge and made sure the night shift crew had the coordinates and the ship was on her way before he turned to his impatient wife. Without saying a word, he scooped her up in his arms and put her gently on the bed.

"You've waited long enough, my wife," he said as she kissed him deeply.

"You're going to be walking funny tomorrow morning," she said, dangerously close to his lips, "I want you all to myself tonight!"

"You got it," was all he got out as she kissed him again, reaching for his shirt.

The next morning, everyone was still hard at work at their stations, with the ship's executive officer, Captain Brieanna Smith, standing at the Master Situation station, keeping busy with the day-to-day operations of the ship. Everyone was busy as they approached the coordinates given to the by the operations officer on *DS4*.

"We're arriving at the *New Jersey*'s last known coordinates now," reported Lieutenant Valentina Tereshkova.

"Very well," acknowledged Alex from the command seat. "Full sensor scans, Ji-hoon."

"Aye, sir." It wasn't long before Lieutenant Commander Shin Ji-hoon had detected something of interest. "Captain, I am detecting a very faint ion trail leading away from the area."

That got Alex's attention… and his curiosity. "Ji-hoon, how is it that you're detecting something that four other starships missed?"

Shin looked up from her console to the captain. "The *Lexington*'s sensors are *very* sensitive, Captain. It's likely our sensors will pick up something that other ships' sensors would not be able to detect. In this case, the ion trail's almost blended into the background. It's right on *our* detection threshold."

Alex thought for a moment. *Now we got a scent. But what have we got a whiff of? Like Ji-hoon said, we're barely detecting it as it is.* "Okay… this ion trail. What's so special about it?"

"I've identified it from a Federation starship." A few more taps on Shin's console. "A big one from the looks of it."

That satisfied Alex. "The *New Jersey* would be a *big* sumbitch. Which way is the trail headed?"

Shin looked at the readouts along the wall before answering. "The ion trail is on a bearing of 050 mark 125 degrees."

Alex barked his orders. "Jason, run us parallel to that trail. What's our current speed?"

"We're at one quarter impulse, Captain," answered Lieutenant Commander Jason Tovey-Whitfield. Alex nodded. "Then maintain current speed." He turned to the navigator. "Valentina, anything along that path?"

Tereshkova worked her controls before answering. "There's three star systems along that path, Captain. Two are charted, one isn't. One by robotic probe… and one by the *Enterprise* in the late 2260's." She looked quizzically at her readout. "Oddly, there no information available on the system visited by the *Enterprise*."

Alex stood up and looked over the Russian's shoulder at the coordinates. There was something familiar about the system that

Tereshkova had pointed out. And it was also odd for the *Enterprise* not to have completely documented the system… unless there had been reason to leave out the details.

"Ji-hoon," he asked as he kept reading, "how fast can we go and still keep the scent?"

"Right now," she said, working her own controls. "about one-half impulse. As we get closer, the trail should get stronger and we can go faster."

He looked over to the navigator. "How long to get to the system *Enterprise* visited?"

Valentina had an instant answer. "Unless we go to warp, we'll be forever."

Alex stood up straight and walked back to his seat, sitting down as he contemplated the next move.

"Jason, impulse engines ahead one-half. Valentina, plot your course to that second star system. Ji-hoon, cry out if you lose the trail or if it gets stronger."

And I'll be tinker's damned if I know why one of those systems seems familiar, Alex thought. *Guess I'll know why in a little while, won't I?*

Several hours later and the *Lexington*, now able to use her warp drive, was getting close to the star system that had their attention. As they approached, for every answer they got seemed to create only more questions.

"Without a doubt," Commander Shin was saying, "there was a Federation starship in standard orbit around the second planet."

"Any idea how long it was there?"

Shin consulted her readouts. "If I had to guess…"

Alex knew how science officers hated to guess. "Guess then," he prompted.

"Then I would guess it was here about twenty-four hours, then left. I've got their ion trail headed out of the system... and I've an warp trail after that."

Alex turned to Valentina. "Following that trail, where does it go?"

Valentina's hand flew over her console. "Just a moment and I can tell you."

"While we're waiting… Jason, come about and make for the trail headed out of the star system."

"You're not going to take a look at the second planet?" asked Smith.

"We need to find out where that starship was going," explained Alex. "Whatever was of value on the planet is now on that ship."

"That's kind of a stretch, don't you think?"

"Maybe," he admitted. "But if this is *New Jersey*, she's already got a head start on us so we can't afford to lose her." Alex scratched his head. "There's something damn familiar about that system, but I'll be damned if I know what it is."

"Captain," called out Valentina, "I've got where they're going. They're headed… for Rigel II?"

"*Rigel II*?" Alex repeated, as if he could not believe it. "Are you sure?"

"It's the only star system in line with that ion trail," she explained. "Assuming this is *New Jersey* we're chasing and she's running at full speed; she'll make it there in a week… eight days at most."

"*New Jersey* can make warp twelve," said Smith. "Our top speed is warp fourteen. It'll take a little time, but we can outrun her."

"Captain," Shin reported, "I've confirmed this with Memory Alpha… it's the *New Jersey*'s warp signature we're following."

"Are we sure?"

"Confirmed. This is the same signature that Starfleet recorded during her trial runs."

Got you, Alex thought with a little pride. *Thought you could run, couldn't you? Now to catch up and find out why you're headed the opposite direction you're* supposed *to be going.*

"If we go to flank speed," Smith asked Thereskova, "how long to overtake her?" Obviously, she was thinking the same way as her captain.

"At sustained flank speed…" Thereskova paused as she made her calculations, "we can overtake her in fifteen hours."

Alex nodded then hit the intercom button on his chair. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Engineering, Lieutenant Commander Chavok." Chavok was Fox's second in command while she was away. Since Fox didn't suffer fools, he had to know what he was doing so Alex would be comfortable with any answer the Andorian would give him.

"Can you give me warp fourteen or better for sixteen hours?"

"Can do, Captain," responded the Andorian from down deep in the bowels of the ship. "Commander Fox has these warp engines still as a snow-cat by the hearth so there's nothing to prevent us from giving you *at least* warp fourteen. I may be able to give you warp fourteen point five."

"That's good to know, Commander. Thanks. Bridge out." Alex turned to Whitfield at the helm. "Let's catch the trail on the other side of the system, then make your warp engines all ahead flank."

"Aye, sir," he said, punching at his console to bring the ship around and to bring up its speed.

Fourteen and three quarters hours later, Commander Shin had the *New Jersey* on her short-range sensors. Alex, who'd managed to get about eight hours of sleep, was back at the conn, sipping at a cup of his usual iced coffee. Smith was to his right, going over the ship's status with him before they completed the intercept.

"How you can drink cold coffee," said Smith with a disgusting face, "is really beyond me. Just the taste…" she made a slight gagging sound. "Yuck."

"How you can tolerate coffee as hot as a nuclear reactor is beyond me as well," he countered as he read the PADD Smith had handed to him. "I can't put something *that* hot in my mouth."

Smith laughed a little. "Then you're missing a little piece of heaven. That hot little elixir helps wake me up every morning. It the nectar of the gods."

"I hate to interrupt," said Shin as Alex signed to PADD with his digital signature, "but I've got some hot information concerning the *New Jersey* for you."

"Lay it on us, Ji-hoon," ordered Alex, handing the PADD back to Smith. "What's up?"

The Korean looked at her readouts as she talked. "I just performed a life sign scan of the *New Jersey*. There are eight hundred fifty-two life signs."

Alex looked puzzledly to Smith, then to Shin. "Isn't the crew compliment of an *Excelsior*-class eight hundred fifty?"

"Correct, Captain," replied Shin. "That ship's two heavy. But that's not what has me curious."

"Oh?" added Smith. "What's got you curious then, Ji-hoon?"

"It's the fact that all but four life signs are in the cargo bay. Two of them are in the ship's brig and two are on the on the bridge."

That paused both senior officers. If eight hundred plus were in the cargo bays, then they were either sedated or prisoners.

"If almost all the crew's below decks," Alex asked, "then who's running the ship?"

Shin had an answer ready, but Alex could tell she didn't like it very much. "I would surmise that *New Jersey* would be almost completely automated."

"Shades of the damn M-5," said Alex under his breath. He'd been there during the M-5 incident and he still had the occasional nightmare concerning that machine. "We need to get over there and see what's going on."

"So, we need to stop her," said Smith. "Only this time, we're here, not on *Starfleet One*."

"And I'm not about to fire on *New Jersey*," countered Alex. "Not until it's necessary. Angie, I know you've been hailing the *New Jersey*." She nodded. "Any response?"

"None," she said in a Modern Standard Southern British accent, "Not a peep outside of their transponder and callsign."

"Reduce your hails to once every five minutes, Angie. If they're not responding by now, it's because they don't want to answer."

"Understood."

So, no comms with her, Alex contemplated. *General Order Fifteen says that if comms haven't been established, I need to take a*

defensive posture. But New Jersey *is headed* away *from me and she's certainly* not *in an attack posture. At this point, we just have to figure out why a nearly fully automated ship is headed to one of the most populated planets in the Federation. Easy, right?*

"But it still leaves the question of how to get her out of warp without firing on her," Alex pondered. "Anyone with any ideas?"

"Can't we use the prefix code?" asked Tereshkova.

"I've thought about that too, Valentina," said Smith. "But whoever took over *New Jersey* had to have thought of that and changed the code."

The tactical officer, Lieutenant Kimberly Bautista, had a thought as she saw the *New Jersey* on the viewscreen. "Torpedoes," she semi-whispered.

"What was that, Kimmie?" asked Alex.

"I said 'torpedoes', Captain." She turned to face the conn, her black and brown hair brushing her Filipina face. "It's the only way to bring her out of subspace."

Alex looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "I thought I said I wasn't about to fire on that ship unless it was the last resort."

"I know," she answered, "but I'm not talking about firing on the *Jersey*… I'm talking firing near her."

Alex wasn't following and neither was Smith. "What do you mean by 'firing near her'?" asked Smith. "Isn't that the same as 'firing on her'?"

"Legally, it's not the same. We're aiming at a point *near* the *New Jersey*, not a point *on* the *New Jersey*. What I'm talking about is using two torpedoes set to 'disable' mode and detonating them a certain distance off each of her warp nacelles."

Now Smith caught on to what Bautista was saying. "The detonations would result in the warp field being disrupted and dropping the ship out of warp! The effects would be that she wouldn't be able to go back to warp for at least an hour due to the residual radiation all over her nacelles!"

"Then we can beam aboard and see what the hell is going on," Alex said, catching on. "Ji-hoon, how close do those torpedoes have to be to the nacelles?"

Shin made some calculations. "No more than one point five kilometers but no less that one point two five kilometers."

Alex whistled. "That's very thin for two torpedoes to hit while we're both running at very high warp. Kimmie, can you hit that thin a margin?"

Bautista smiled. "I've got this fire control system so finely tuned that I could pick a flea off a cat's back at five kilometers."

"You'd better be able to live up to that boast," smiled Alex, "because that's exactly what you're going to do. Prepare torpedoes in tubes one and two to fire on designated coordinates. Disable mode only."

Bautista turned in her seat and worked her controls. "Preparing tubes one and two. Disable mode only." Some seconds later, "Torpedoes programmed and loaded, Captain. Tubes one and two ready."

"Open outer doors on both tubes," he ordered.

"Doors opened," she reported. "Torpedoes ready to shoot."

"Lock onto designated coordinates."

"Torpedoes locked on coordinates. Ready to fire on command."

Alex took a deep breath and slowly released it. "Tubes one and two, fire."

Two blue spheres of light left the *Lexington* torpedo tubes and streaked their way to their intended target. Fifty seconds after firing, the torpedoes found their mark and exploded one point four kilometers from each of the *New Jersey*'s nacelles. They exploded in balls of blue lightning, expanding and their energy bolts reaching the nacelles. As predicted, the *New Jersey* fell instantly out of warp and into normal space once again. *Lexington*, following close behind, decelerated hard and closed in on their fellow starship.

While they were getting into position to transport over, Smith had the feeling that there was something about this situation that she didn't care for. She could not put a finger on it, but something wasn't right.

"Alex, I don't have a warm fuzzy feeling about this. Shouldn't we at least raise our shields?"

Alex had to agree with his exec. His red alert was also sounding in the back of his mind and like Smith, he could not say why but it was sounding loud and clear.

"I'm not about to have the 'Kirk Maneuver' pulled on me. Sound Yellow Alert and raise shields."

The yellow alert klaxon went off, bringing the ship to a state of alert.

"Shields activated," reported the Filipina tactical officer.

"Captain," Shin said, "there's something wrong with *New Jersey*. Her warp drive is completely offline."

Alex's head shot towards Bautista. "Tell me that's not *our* torpedoes."

The Filipina shook her head enthusiastically. "*No way, Captain*! Those torpedoes hit one hundred meters from dead center of the specifications that Commander Shin provided me."

So why is New Jersey*'s warp drive completely down*? Alex thought. *We were only trying to knock her out of subspace* without *tearing her apart!* "Ji-hoon?"

Shin was still working her board like a master pianist as she answered. "I think we found a defect, Captain."

"A defect?"

"Yes. Looks like the EM pulse managed to scramble and take out the main energizers."

"So, we actually damaged their warp drive?" Alex asked, knowing this would be asked at his court-martial. "Even though we didn't hit the nacelles."

"Negative," Shin replied. "As I said, it appears to be a design flaw."

"I'll back Ji-hoon on this, Alex," said Smith. "I'll bet what happened is the EM pulse traced its way down from the nacelles through the usual conduits between the nacelles to the main energizer and scrambled it so bad you can serve it with sausage and toast."

"How long to get her mains back on the line?" Alex asked.

"I'm guessing it'll take at least six hours," replied Smith. "And I'm using both me and Sophie as a baseline for making that estimate,

so it may be a little on the low side. And I'm assuming there's someone over there to actually *make* the repair."

"Captain," said Shin, hunched over her console, "*New Jersey* looks to be moving into an attack position!"

"What?" Alex was surprised by this turn of events. "She's on auxiliary power! Give me eyes, please."

The image on the viewscreen switched to an *Excelsior*-class starship closing in on the *Lexington*. Alex could just make out the name *New Jersey* and her registry number of NCC-2062 emblazoned on her hull. *Maybe it's time for that shot of Retnax Five that Dawn's been pestering me to get?* Alex thought.

"Kimmie, arm phasers only and prepare to return fire *on my express order*," he ordered. Then a thought hit Alex. "Ji-hoon, what's the status of *New Jersey*?"

Shin looked at her readouts again. "As you said, she's on auxiliary power so she's half combat effective." Suddenly, there was a harsh beeping sound from Shin's console. "Their shields are up and both phasers and photon torpedoes are armed."

"Angie, sound general quarters and man battle stations *on the double*!" Alex orders, knowing that a battle was imminent. The general quarters klaxon went off throughout the entire ship the moment it was out of his mouth. In response, the lights on the bridge turned blood red. All over the massive ship, the crew rushed to get to their assigned battle stations. Every system not necessary to combat was switched off. The damage control teams got suited up and their equipment prepared for use. All the ship's systems went into combat mode, meaning they were at full power with backups fully connected so critical systems would not easily fail.

Bautista confirmed their battle status precisely one minute later. "*New Jersey* is now locking her weapons on us!" she also reported.

He gave his next orders like the machine guns of old. "Fire only when I give the order. Angie, warn her that if she opens fire, I will respond."

Angelica held her earphone tight as she made the connection and gave the *New Jersey* her only warning. As predicted, their fleet mate did not respond.

"No response, Alex," she responded.

Shin called out, "*New Jersey*'s preparing to fire!"

No way I'm going to give them the easy shot, Alex thought. *If whoever's controlling her can arm her weapons and bring up her shields, then I'm going to make them work.*

"Jason, impulse engines ahead flank! Left full rudder!"

As *Lexington* started her turn, the *New Jersey* opened fire with her forward phasers. The phaser fire hit the *Lexington* along her port side. The bridge was rocked by the phaser hit.

"Shields holding, Captain! Port's down to sixty-five percent!" shouted Bautista over the sounds of battle.

"Stay in your turn, Jason! Ji-hoon, try to use the prefix codes to get the *New Jersey* to power down!"

The *Lexington* continued to turn on her starboard side and as she did so, the *New Jersey* let loose a volley from her phasers, scoring a hit near the *Lexington*'s impulse engines.

I've crossed the Jersey*'s "T" and I've yet to take a shot!* Alex thought. *And yet she's taken two shots of her own. Keep this up and they'll be making me pay for the damages!*

"Port shields are down to twenty eight percent!" Bautista reported.

That's not good, Alex deliberated. *The* Excelsiors *are heavily armed and their shields are among the best there are. However, they sacrifice maneuverability for weapons and shield power. If we can get her into an angles fight, we could overload* New Jersey*'s shields with our salvos. But do I need to do that? Whoever's flying her isn't very good. They're just sitting there acting like they're the* Bismarck *during her last battle back in 1941!*

"Auxiliary power to shields," he ordered. "Ji-hoon, what's going on with those codes?"

"The prefix codes are not working, Captain!"

Alex mentally ran through his options. Firepower-wise, an *Excelsior* almost matched an *Odysseus*. However, an *Odysseus* was best fighting on the move, something the *Excelsior* could not do very

well. If Alex could get the *New Jersey* into a fight where she'd be forced to move fast and at angles, the *Lexington* could take advantage of her weakness and pummel her shields mercilessly. The more movement on all three axes, the better a captain could take advantage of the *Odysseus'* weapons deployment. He hated that he was going to have to fire on one of their own ships, but he could not think of any other option.

"Guess we'll do it the hard way. Kimmie, arm all tubes, then give me a combined barrage, maximum spread and power. Jason… up and over."

The *Lexington* stopped her turn then pitched "up" on the Y axis, catching the *New Jersey* in a near broadside. *Lexington* fired a full phaser salvo from her port saucer phasers, followed up by a photon torpedo barrage. The torpedoes found their mark just above the *New Jersey*'s impulse engines, right where the dorsal shields were the weakest.

Alex grinned savagely. He knew that shot would put the attacker on the defensive and he preferred to be on the offensive when possible; and he had gotten *New Jersey* to engage in his type of fight.

"That got their attention, sir," said Bautista. "Their dorsal shields are down to twelve percent."

"Reverse you turn, Jason, and let our ventral phasers have a crack. Kimmie, fire when you've got the shot!"

Whitfield rotated and pitched the *Lexington* 'up' which would allow her to get the angle for her ventral phasers. The moment Bautista had the lock, she fired at the *New Jersey* bridge, letting loose a devastating barrage in that area. The *New Jersey* visibly shook from the bombardment.

As the *Lexington* flew over the *New Jersey*, *New Jersey* loosed two torpedoes from her forward torpedo tubes, which detonated near the *Lexington*'s secondary flight deck doors. The enemy had waited for just the right moment and got in a lucky shot. If the shields had been completely down, those torpedoes would have breached the *Lexington*'s engineering hull and essentially gut the ship. Luckily, the torpedoes, as well aimed as they were, did not penetrate the shields.

"Near hit to the secondary flight deck doors! No damage; no hull breach!" reported Smith.

Bautista was right behind her with another damning report. "Aft shields are weakening! They're down to thirty percent!"

"Bring her about, Jason! Kimmy, keep those shields up, no matter what! Take it from life support but keep them up!"

Both ships were now turned to face each other. Both fired their phasers and several torpedoes within milliseconds of lining up. The *New Jersey* took the brunt of the salvo in her saucer section, shattering the shields. In return, *New Jersey*'s phasers and torpedoes hit the *Lexington* square in the bow. That knocked out *Lexington*'s forward shields but her hull did not breach.

Alex saw the enemy salvo hit the bow but miraculously, the hull was not compromised. He gave silent thanks to the engineers and builders of his ship; she was proving to be a tough nut for any enemy to crack. The *New Jersey* stopped firing for a second, wondering if *Lexington* was employing some sort of unexpected new weapon. He was going to take this invitation while it was still good.

"Don't deviate from this course," ordered the former helmsman.

It didn't take Tereshkova but a few moments to figure out what was going on, even without the help of her computers. "Captain, on this heading, we'll ram her!"

Alex looked calmly at her. "Valentina, when you were growing up in Russia, did you ever play a game called 'chicken'?"

The ships closed quickly. At the last moment, the *New Jersey* pulled 'up' and over the *Lexington*. The *Lexington* fired all her upper saucer phasers with another two torpedoes at the *New Jersey*'s belly. The incoming torpedoes overloaded the *New Jersey*'s ventral shields. With the pull up, the *Lexington's* phasers were now aligned with the now unshielded ventral section of the *New Jersey*. The *Lexington's* phaser fire hit in the engineering section and the *New Jersey* stopped maneuvering.

The Welsh helmsman brought *Lexington* around, so her saucer phasers were aligned with the now unshielded *New Jersey*. Whitfield

was no longer taking any chances, nor was Bautista, who had locked all her weapons on the *New Jersey*.

"*New Jersey* is disabled, Captain," Shin reported. Everyone could now breathe a little. There was a chance that *New Jersey* was fooling the *Lexington,* but as the clock ticked on, nothing came from the *Excelsior*-class ship. *New Jersey* appeared to be disabled.

"Angie, would you hail the *New Jersey* and ask them to surrender their vessel so we can find out what the hell is going on?"

"Aye, Captain," Angelica responded, holding her earphone. "*Lexington* to *New Jersey,* you are ordered to surrender your vessel. I repeat, you are ordered to surrender your vessel." She paused long enough to concentrate on her earphone then turned to Alex. "No response."

"I didn't expect one," confirmed Alex. "Just what the smeg is going on here? Gutterman may be crazy but he's not *that* crazy to attack another Federation starship!"

"Want to hear the damage report, Alex?" asked Smith, with a PADD in her hand.

"Lay it on me. How bad's the butcher bill?"

"Amazingly, only a few casualties and no fatalities. Shields took a beating but they're holding at twenty-nine percent. Should be recharged in three hours. Some minor systems damage but all critical systems are fully operational."

"You're right… that *is* amazing." Alex stared at the viewscreen for a minute, looking over the *New Jersey*. Alex reviewed the facts at hand. One: Someone had taken over the *New Jersey*. Two: That someone had attacked the *Lexington,* though it could be understood after *Lexington* fired near her nacelles to drop her out of warp. Three: Whomever had taken over the *New Jersey* was responsible for what had happened to the ship's company. As no one was answering their hails, this left Alex but with only one option. He got out of his chair, making a spur-of-the-moment command decision.

"Well, looks like we've got to go and take a look," he said, starting to walk to the port turbolift. Smith turned to protest but he cut off before she could open her mouth. "Don't start, Anne. You're with me. Angie, call Dawn and have her meet us in transporter room two."

"Got it, Alex," said the redheaded comms officer.

"And you've also the conn, Captain McKnight."

Angelica's head shot up instantly. "What?"

"You have the conn, Captain McKnight," Alex repeated. "You're a full captain now so it's time to start earning that pay."

"Very funny," she shot back. Angelica could count on both hands how many times he had left her the conn and he knew it. While she was command qualified, it was usually Smith to whom he left the conn, but he did try to make it a habit to rotate it among the senior officers. This time, it looked as if he wanted someone in the center seat he knew he could depend on if things were to get sticky again. Her newly awarded Medal of Honor was proof of that.

"Angie, if *New Jersey* makes a move, do what it takes to make sure she doesn't get to Rigel II. You don't hear from us in half an hour, assume we've been captured and contact *DS4* to let them know what's going on here. I'm pretty sure Pete will send you backup to stop her once again."

Angelica removed her earphone and with confidence, she looked him in the eye and said, "Aye, sir." As the three officers entered the turbolift, she gave her husband a knowing wink. He winked back before the doors shut.

Alex and Brieanna were preparing to beam over to the *New Jersey* in transporter room two. A chief petty officer was manning the console.

"I don't like this," said Smith, checking the settings and charge on her Type III phaser.

"Oh, come on," Alex said. "You know you like beaming into the unknown."

"It's not beaming that bothers me," the cowgirl replied as she zipped up her Class-B bomber jacket. "It's beaming into a situation where I've no idea what's going on there that does!"

"You've already said you're thinking about wanting your own command. If you want my chair, you'll have to get used to this sort of thing real quick," was his reply after he checked the charge on his

phaser and made sure the setting was on heavy stun. "Come on, *Jersey*'s waiting on us."

"It's not going anywhere for the moment," said Smith, *sotto voce*. At that moment, Doctor Dawn Mathias appeared in the transporter room. She was also in a Class-B bomber jacket with a black leather fanny pack secured around her waist and her own Type III hanging on the nylon belt. She was quickly pony tailing her long dark hair as she entered.

"Of all the things…" she was complaining as she pulled her ponytail tight. "Alex, what the hell's going on? Why am I being asked to scramble my molecules all over the place for this time?"

Alex couldn't help but chuckle. "You know, you sound like Bones McCoy when you talk like that!"

She adjusted her fanny pack as she walked to the pad. "I interned under him," she defended as she mounted the pad to Alex's left, "and his idea about transporters? I just happen to share those sentiments!"

"Complain, complain," he said, still with a smile on his face. "We're headed over to a fellow Federation starship and the crew may be in trouble. Looks like we may be in need of your services."

That stopped any further protests from the Australian doctor. "I hope not."

"Chief," he ordered, "put us on the bridge."

The transporter chief worked his controls. "I'll put you in front of the conn."

"Coordinates set, Captain. Ready when you are."

"Energize!"

The *Lexington* away team dematerialized from their familiar confines and rematerialized in the center of the *New Jersey*'s bridge. The command center of the *New Jersey* was almost a dead ringer to the *Excelsior'*s bridge with the exception that instead of blue, the trim was all in green. Within a second of their arrival, McKnight heard the dreaded sound of phasers being charged. He thought to himself, *That's not good.*

"What the hell?" he said, struggling to comprehend events as they were happening. He turned around slowly to look at the bridge 'crew.' Various people and not a Starfleet crew manned the stations. The women were in sexy dresses while the men wore simple tunic/pant combinations with at least four of them pointing their own Type III phasers at them.

The away team had been completely and effectively captured without a shot fired.

Smith noticed nearly immediately that everyone had pendants with numbers hanging from their neck. Some were lit and blinking, some were dark. *What could that mean? Some sort of mind control device? Oh God, I'm not ready for that! My mind can barely handle* me*!* She was still thinking those thoughts as she watched McKnight hesitantly toss his sidearm to the deck, motioning the others to do the same.

CHAPTER TWO

McKnight, Smith, and Mathias were standing near the turbolift, now hostages. As McKnight looked over the bridge 'crew,' he came upon a familiar face. In seconds, he knew with whom he was dealing. *Lucky for me they couldn't fight this ship very well. Next time, it won't be so easy, knowing it was me they were up against.*

The leader of the group stood in front of McKnight, blankly looking at him.

"It's been a long time, Norman," Alex all but spat.

"I can never forget you, Captain Alexander McKnight," said Norman in greeting. The words were unemotional and without inflection. It reminded the middle-aged captain of a certain Vulcan who had just departed for a command assignment of her own. "However, I was not aware you had retained command of the *Lexington*."

"What can I say? You know what they say about news; it's only as good as long as the ink is still wet."

Norman looked over both women flanking the *Lexington* commander. "Captain Brieanna Smith. Lieutenant Commander Dawn Mathias."

"Okay, Norman," McKnight said impatiently. "What is this all about? Where's the crew of the *New Jersey*?"

"I am not programmed to respond in that area."

That statement rankled McKnight. "Oh, how I missed that phrase," the captain's tone was half exasperation and half venom.

In the meantime, one of the androids worked the tactical console. Alex knew instantly what they had done. "You've raised your shields."

"We have, Captain, so your ship can not beam you out."

"Amazing. I didn't know a computer with legs could read my mind."

Norman turned his attention back to Alex and only Alex. "That would be standard Starfleet procedure, Captain."

"You do know the *Lexington* is going to try to rescue us, right?" Alex fired back. "What does your programming say about that?"

"I am not programmed to respond in that area."

Alex sighed angrily. "I'm gonna kill whoever it was who invented that phrase."

Smith had a thought. "How many of you are there, Norman?"

"There are precisely 125 of us on the *New Jersey*, Captain Smith."

Both McKnight and Smith whistled appreciatively at that figure.

"Damn," Smith muttered. "That's more than enough to subdue the crew and man this ship with a skeleton crew."

Just then, there was the sound of a turbolift door opening. "Well, if it isn't the *other* thorn in my side," said the voice, causing Alex to actually wince. "Captain McKnight! I never thought I would get to see you again."

Alex turned toward the lift to see an older, but definitely, Harry Mudd. "Harcourt Fenton Mudd. Looks like I'm going to be able to finish what I started twenty years ago. Only this time, I'm going to put you away for good."

Mudd approached the *Lexington* team. Ignoring the captain for the moment, he eyed both Smith and Mathias appraisingly, approving of what he saw. The thought of this old, overweight, bald man ogling her body made Smith's skin crawl. She looked quickly to Mathias. Whatever she was thinking, she was keeping to herself.

"Well, what have we here? Two more lovely ladies, just like Commander Folment and Doctor Chen. I say, laddybuck, keep this up!"

"If it were coming from some other guy, I'd take it as a compliment," Smith fired back. "I'm sure Jessica would have slapped you for your last comment."

Mudd turned his gaze to Smith, who resisted the urge to shudder as his eyes took in her entire body. She didn't think of herself as beautiful; she thought she was an average woman. *To have this*

slime's interest for only my body, her inner voice spoke, *is not what I joined Starfleet for!*

"And you? Oh, yes. You *are* beautiful, my dear. You'd be a perfect template for a new android."

With practiced ease, Smith let loose with a haymaker. The punch connected and down went the con man to the deck along with the indignity of being the new owner of a broken nose. One of the female androids moved quickly to restrain Smith and keep her from doing much more than curse at him.

"My, what a temper to go with your beauty!" he said, cradling his nose as if it was every day a woman slugged him. "My nose won't be the same!"

"That was nothing! I grew up with a brother and two sisters! No blood, no foul!"

"Anne," Alex said, the order wrapped in only one word. Smith tried to shrug off the android but was held fast until Mudd gestured for the android to release her.

Getting up and making sure his nose wasn't bleeding, Mudd looked over appreciatively to Mathias. She knew what Mudd was about to say and decided to cut him off before he could say it.

"Don't even bother, mate," Mathias said with her Australian accent. "Your snake charmer's ways won't work on me."

"My dear, you're as smart as you are beautiful. Or has playing doctor made you forget how beautiful you really are?"

Mathias' face turned beet red, showing pure anger. She didn't trust herself with an immediate response. But when she did, it was with barely controlled fury Alex didn't suspect she was capable of possessing.

"You ever," she spat with icy menace, "insult me like that ever again, I'll *personally* rip off your testicles and stuff them down your bloody throat!"

Mudd flushed red and quickly walked away from the doctor, who looked like she could rip his head off. He walked to the conn but didn't sit in it.

"Harry," McKnight began, "I'm pretty sure we programmed these tin cans *not* to serve you anymore."

Mudd laughed. "Ah, if you only knew!"

So, he's going to keep it to himself, thought Alex. *That's fine. I'll find out anyway. Right now, we have to figure out what he plans to do and then we can come up with something to stop him.* "Okay," he said, "I'll probably regret this but I'll bite. Whatever happened to those Stellas that Jim and I left for you?"

"I'm not going to tell you," Mudd dismissed. McKnight silently cursed. "Rebecca Number 100, take these brogues to the brig."

One of the female androids motioned for the three *Lexington* officers to the port turbolift. McKnight thought about making a lunge towards Mudd but stopped when he thought of how easily Smith was stopped. Better to save his strength for now and wait for a break. One would come; it always did if one waited long enough. He allowed himself to be taken away with the rest of his team.

"Norman," said Mudd as the doors closed, "let's contact the *Lexington*."

Angelica McKnight was watching the bridge crew nervously, getting more and more uneasy with every tick of the clock. The away team had not reported in which was, in her experience, never a good sign. Her mind thought about her husband and almost immediately, she squashed it. She was a Starfleet officer first, *then* a wife. Her focus should be on the recovery and well-being of the away team, not solely on her husband. She mentally kicked herself for allowing such a personal thought at a time like this.

While McKnight was having this silent debate, Lieutenant Cunningham, Angelica's relief at communications, got her attention.

"Captain," she said, "the *New Jersey* is hailing us. They're asking for you personally."

"Interesting" McKnight replied, curious. Now she was convinced that something bad had happened to the away team. "Put it on screen, Lieutenant."

The viewer switched to the *New Jersey*'s bridge, with an average looking man with sandy hair sitting in the command chair. There was no sign of the away team, but she saw Harry Mudd off to

the side and the whole situation clicked into place. She knew Mudd on sight, having heard about eighteen years ago how Kirk and Alex had each dealt with the conman once while *Enterprise*, *Lexington*, and *Yorktown* were all docked at *Deep Space Two*.

Oh, shit! she thought, using a curse word her husband seemed to use on occasions like these. *What did we get into, Alex? Are we about to tangle with that notorious Mudd once again?*

"*Captain Angelica McKnight*," said the man in the center seat.

"I am she, Norman," Angelica said, putting on a cold air. "And... is that Harry Mudd? Yes, it is. I should have known. This has your fingerprints on it."

"*My God, there's two of them!*" exclaimed Mudd. "*And I thought one was a handful!*"

"We're cheaper by the bunch, Mr. Mudd," countered Angelica without a trace of humor. "Mr. Norman, you were calling me to say something?"

"*Captain McKnight, I am informing you that we have all the members of your away team in our custody.*" said the man on the viewer. The communications officer in her listened very closely to his wording. "*Do not attempt to rescue them.*"

Angelica knew that Norman obviously didn't feel compassion but something in the back of her mind told her he wasn't a killer either.

"Mr. Norman, you're not the type to make those kinds of threats."

"*Nonetheless*," the machine countered, "*do not make any rash decision that humans are prone to making*."

Angelica crossed her arms across her chest and held her chin about a centimeter higher. "And what makes you think that has any bearing on my decision making?"

"*Whatever you got in mind, lassie, just forget it*," Mudd said. "*You're in no position to do anything so just let us go.*"

"Would you care to place a wager on that, Mr. Mudd?" In that moment, the redheaded captain decided to play on her hunch. "I'll tell you this. If you, Mr. Norman, or any of your androids even *think* of harming any of our people, I will retaliate with lethal force."

Her decision took the bridge crew by surprise. Her transformation from a fun-loving and easygoing communications officer to a battle hardened and renowned captain was downright scary. Angelica ignored everyone, choosing to concentrate on Norman and Mudd pictured on the viewer in front of her.

"*A most illogical course of action, Commander.*"

"I'm a woman so by nature and biology, I can be *very* illogical. And to prove it to you, Mr. Norman…" She addressed the Filipina tactical officer to her right but didn't take her eyes off the viewscreen. "Lieutenant Bautista, lock all weapons on the *New Jersey*'s bridge and engineering sections. *Maximum* power on *all* weapons. You will fire only when I so order."

Bautista had a moment's confusion. She was almost certain that her friend was making this big a show on purpose, so she pulled up the weapons control and entered the necessary commands. In seconds, the targeting reticles for the phasers and photon torpedoes were squarely on the bridge of the opposing vessel.

"Captain McKnight, our phasers and photon torpedoes are locked on target and ready to fire on command," she reported loudly so Norman on the viewscreen could hear her.

"If you wish to test me, Mr. Norman, Mr. Mudd… I *will* make certain you fail," McKnight replied, the threat clear. "But understand, I will make every attempt to get back our people and return control of the *New Jersey* but if I can't, I will blow you right out of the stars."

"*Again, that would be a most illogical course of action.*"

"Illogical or not, you have our people," Angelica pointed out. "Mr. Norman, in addition to kidnapping, you've also hijacked the *New Jersey*. So, there's two felonies you've committed. And by now, I will assume that you've assimilated all the tactical information on an *Odysseus*-class starship. You know we outpower, outrun, and outgun you. If you surrender, then we can work something out. But as long as you're in control and have our people captive, I'll treat you as a hostile force and I will do everything in my power to make everything right again. It all depends on you."

"*Lassie*," Mudd finally interjected, "*you wouldn't do anything* that *crazy, would you?*"

"Test me and see, Mr. Mudd," said Angelica. Her demeanor all but screamed '*please* give me a reason to show you.' "And I will promise you this… I will succeed and you will fail."

Norman suddenly backed down, much to her private surprise. "*Very well, Captain.*" The viewer switched back to the damaged *New Jersey*. Angelica didn't even blink at the sudden silence.

"That was some bluff!" said Bautista, the relief evident in her voice. The British woman occupying the center seat did not answer immediately.

"Who said I was bluffing?" she finally said coldly, letting the words hang in the air.

"You would have fooled me," said Whitfield from the helm, trying to lighten the mood.

"The time for levity is later, Lieutenant Commander Tovey-Whitfield," said McKnight, ice forming on her words.

The silence on the bridge was deafening.

While Angelica was engaged in word games with Norman and Mudd, the three *Lexington* officers were escorted by a Rebecca-class android to the *New Jersey*'s brig. To their surprise, they found Captain James Gutterman, and his chief engineer, a Commander David Davenport, were biding their time. There was a deactivated android of an unknown class sitting in the corner.

So, there's another android but out of commission, thought Smith. *I wonder if… oh, hello nurse! There he is! God is he cute!*

Without preamble, the Rebecca shut down the force field. Her intent was clear… enter the brig. Had this been against anyone else, Alex would have chanced a breakout but knowing that any resistance on their part would be futile, he gestured for his chief medical officer and exec to enter first before defiantly entering himself. The Rebecca was very quick to reactivate the force field and leave the Starfleet officers alone.

"You…" said Gutterman, "You're from the *Lexington*, aren't you?" He pointed at Alex. "You're Captain McKnight?"

"I'm Alex," he answered. "And you're Jim Gutterman?"

Alex knew Gutterman only by reputation. Conversely, Gutterman only knew the former admiral by his own reputation, but he also knew of McKnight's legend. Gutterman nodded. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Alex," he said, shaking the hand of his fellow commander. "I was about to give up hope that someone was coming to rescue us."

"Hardly. There are four other ships looking for you. We were just the first." Alex turned to introduce his officers. "Doctor Dawn Mathias and Captain Brieanna Smith, my exec."

"And this is," said Gutterman, pointing out his cellmate, "is my chief engineer, Dave Davenport."

"Hello, sweety," suddenly said Smith, looking at Davenport. Alex actually blinked hard at that type of introduction.

"*'Sweetie'*?" Alex repeated, clearly not catching on.

"Didn't I tell you, Alex?" Smith said, a loving smile on her face. "Dave is my husband."

Alex paused and did a mental doubletake. "I'm sorry, my ears must not be working. Did you say…"

"… that my chief engineer is married to your exec?" finished Gutterman, also in a similar state of disbelief.

"Yes, Captain Gutterman," said Davenport. "Brieanna and I are wife and husband. We got married a decade ago… our anniversary was just last month. It's nice seeing you again, Brie," said Davenport, giving her a quick hug. "I wish it wasn't like this though."

"Same here. How long's it been since we actually saw each other anyway?"

"Since we were on the *Columbia* back in '81."

Alex decided to re-enter the conversation. "I knew Brieanna was married but I didn't remember the name." He shook Davenport's hand. "Glad to finally meet you."

"Same here, Captain. Brie's told me a lot about you."

"Why don't you catch up with your wife and I'll talk to your captain," Alex offered. After all, he knew how it was when you were married to another Starfleet officer who was stationed on different ships.

"Thank you, Alex," said Smith and she took his hand, leading him to a semi-private corner.

"Yeah, I'm sorry for being a third wheel," said the doctor sarcastically.

"Yeah," Alex admitted, "that came out of left field on me too."

"I'm going to go rest over on the bunk," she declared. "Wake me if there's a medical emergency." She moved over, sat, and laid down , making herself as comfortable as she could on a bunk that a Klingon would have complained about.

"So," Alex turned to his fellow captain, "what the hell happened, Jim? How'd you end up here?"

"Because I'm a damn fool," Gutterman said with a little heat in his voice. "We came across an old-style civilian shuttlecraft and after determining no one was aboard, we picked it up and started to head to *DS4*. Instead, the android in here with us and another one had stowed away and took over the ship in record time. I'm assuming Boyington asked you to rescue us?"

"Yeah. We barely picked up your ion trail, but we did and followed you."

"Any idea where we're headed?"

"My navigator said we're headed for Rigel II." Alex looked around. "Have you found anything that might be of use? Like how in Hades we can get out of here?"

"If I had, I wouldn't be here. All I know is that after the androids took over my ship and gassed us all, Dave and I woke up here with that girl android apparently disabled. Dave's tried to tinker with her but he's been reluctant. But until you guys came, no one's come down to check on us."

"I'm surprised that Harry Mudd didn't come down and gloat."

Gutterman turned to look at Alex. "You mean that son-of-a-bitch Harry Mudd took my ship??!!" Gutterman fumed. "God, how stupid am I? I wish Kirk had locked him away instead of leaving him on that planet of his!"

"Don't feel bad, Jim. Harry also tried to escape on one of my first missions after I took command of the old *Lexington*."

Gutterman looked out into the foyer again. "Least I'm in good company."

"I didn't know," Alex admitted, "that it was Harry until after I fired on *New Jersey* and we beamed aboard."

"So, it was *you* who damaged my ship?!" Gutterman demanded. "You *fired* on me?"

"I was trying to knock the *Jersey* out of warp by firing two disabling torpedoes near the nacelles. What we didn't know was that we really screwed up your main energizers…"

"… which is why the power flickered for a moment," said the other captain.

"And before I knew it, the *Jersey* was attacking, even at half power. Lucky for me, they didn't fly her very well; they let me get them into an angles fight."

"These ships don't fight so well moving like that," said Gutterman. "They like broadsides over flying like an old-time fighter plane."

Alex gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry I had to damage your ship."

Gutterman shrugged. "If it's to get even with Mudd, I can live with it."

"Not counting the energizers, all we did was batter the shields," defended Alex. "We tried to avoid doing any additional damage. But you can bet they won't make the same mistake again and go all out on Angie."

"*Angie*?"

"The other Captain McKnight. I left her in charge. Don't let that sweet princess exterior fool you; she's a warrior. And she will do her damnest to stop this ship from getting to Rigel II."

"As I said, I can live with anything you guys have to do," said Gutterman. "And if I were in your shoes, I'd have done the same thing. But now that you're here, maybe we can get out of here and give old Harry some sweet hell."

CHAPTER THREE

A few minutes later found Angelica McKnight in the captain's ready room, talking to Rear Admiral Peter Boyington. She was giving her report.

"… on stardate 8787.06, we accidently disabled the warp engines of the *New Jersey,* but she turned and engaged us. At that time, we disabled the *New Jersey*'s shields. Captain McKnight, Captain Smith, and Lieutenant Commander Mathias beamed over to investigate." She paused and shook her long curly auburn and silver hair before continuing. "They are now held captive by androids who have captured the *New Jersey*. And the androids are commanded by none other than Harcourt Mudd."

"But to what end does Mudd hope to accomplish by all this?" asked Boyington.

"That's the question I've been pondering, sir," she said. "We're now embroiled in a Mexican standoff with the *New Jersey*. But as soon as there's an opening, we'll rescue our people and regain control of the *New Jersey*."

Boyington thought for a moment. "Obviously, we don't want to allow the *New Jersey* going anywhere. Any idea why they'd want to go to Rigel II?"

Angelica shook her head. "Not that I know of, sir. It would be odd for a hijacked starship to head into the heart of the Federation. Common sense would dictate heading in the opposite direction and into uncharted space."

"Yes, it would be." Boyington jotted down a couple of notes. "I'll get my staff to working on that. But we don't want *New Jersey* to make it to Rigel II."

"Very good, sir."

"I'll be sending *Victorious* and *Prince of Wales* to help you with that," said Boyington, "but they're a couple days away from your position."

"Both are refit *Constitution* class ships, sir," Angelica pointed out. "But that will give us a numerical advantage."

"That's the idea."

Boyington paused again for effect this time. "In the meantime, I will attempt stop *New Jersey*… preferably before either ship gets here," Angelica said defiantly.

"I like the sound of that," said Boyington, "but I'd rather you not destroy her. Simple orders, Angelica. Stop the *New Jersey* from going anywhere, rescue your people, and assist the *Jersey*'s crew in retaking the ship."

Angelica nodded in understanding. Simple orders were the best to follow. "Very good, sir."

"And if I get any more information, I'll pass it along. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir. *Lexington* out." Angelica pressed a button on the monitor to end the call. She pushed the button on the monitor again. "Lieutenant Commander Shin and Major Areniego, please report to the captain's ready room on the double."

She closed the channel without getting their acknowledgements. As she waited, her brown eyes touched upon a photo Alex kept on the desk: it was a photo of her in the recording studio. Angelica smiled, though it was more at the memory than the photo. She then looked to another photo, only this one was of her and Alex, she in his arms. Happier times. Simpler times. Times she would always cherish. But seeing him with her brought forth her call to duty. She looked at those photos, determination on her face.

"I won't let you down, Alex. I swear it."

The doorbell rang, bringing Angelica's attention to the present situation. "Come in."

The door opened to admit the new Korean science officer. Just last week, Shin had transferred in from the *Enterprise* while their previous science officer, Lieutenant Commander Saavik, was being transferred to the new *Shangri-La*. Shin looked around, this being only her second time in the captain's office.

"Commander Shin," Angelica said in greeting, "come in and sit down."

Shin walked over and sat down in one of the two comfortable seats in front of Alex's desk. Unlike Alex, Angelica wasn't as

informal when she was in command and found comfort in calling people by their ranks when in her command mode.

Angelica said, "Do you want anything to drink before we start?"

Shin shook her head, her long loose black hair covering her face before she brushed it back. "I'm fine, Captain. What's up?"

"I'll brief you both when the major comes up here. For now, I need a good first officer and you're elected." Angelica smiled. "Didn't think you'd be doing this when you transferred off the *Enterprise*, did you?"

Shin also smiled. "I had my share of surprises during my time on the *Enterprise* but yes, I wasn't expecting being a first officer during my first two weeks on *Lexington*."

"I may not know you personally, Commander, but I do know your reputation," Angelica answered Shin's unasked question. "And outside of myself, Smith, Bennington-Fox, and Mathias, you're the next senior officer. I need someone with some experience by my side."

Before Shin could answer, the doorbell rang again. "Come in," Angelica ordered. The doors opened and in came the Filipino Marine commander. In the last three years, Starfleet had been augmenting its regular starship security forces with active Marines units; *Lexington* had been the first ship to welcome the Marines and as far as Angelica knew, they hadn't given Alex a reason to regret having them aboard.

"Reporting as ordered, Captain," said the Filipino. "And I see my student is already here." He was referring to his new Taekwondo sparring partner. Shin was a sixth Dan while Areniego was a seventh Dan.

"I'm here," said Shin a little sheepishly. In their first and only sparring session so far, Shin had managed to beat Areniego and to her way of thinking, it was a bit embarrassing for a higher Dan getting beat by a new but lower ranked Dan.

Areniego didn't show any embarrassment as he sat down in the other chair to the right of the Korean. Without any preamble, Angelica started her briefing.

"We're tasked with stopping the *New Jersey* before she gets to Rigel II."

Both officers just looked at Angelica. It was Areniego who spoke first. "This is shaping up to be another *Starfleet One* incident."

"Wait a second," interrupted Shin. "Are you talking about the *Starfleet One* incident where a navigation malfunction almost took her into the Klingon Empire?"

"That's the cover story," said Angelica for Areniego. "In reality, *Starfleet One* had been hijacked by a rogue Klingon splinter group."

Shin could barely grasp that concept. "But… *Starfleet One* is the most secure starship in the Federation!"

"And normally," said Angelica, "you'd be right, but these Klingons had a little help in the way of our chief engineer."

Shin looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"Before Sophea helped the Klingons take the ship," Angelica reminisced, "they had used a mind-sifter then programmed her into being their sleeper agent. Using an experimental new procedure, Dawn was able to undo their programming. Sophie was on the *New Jersey* going to *Deep Space Four* to meet her family as part of her recovery." Angelica shook her head. "Too bad she's asleep over there."

"Yeah," said Areniego, "we could use her help right about now."

"Major," Angelica said, "are your people up to retaking the *New Jersey*?"

Areniego thought things over for a moment. "We can do it, Captain, but it will be a real slobber knocker." He paused to think for a moment. "The most logical place for us to go would be Engineering and with the damage we inflicted on the ship, most of the androids will be knee deep in repairs there. Those androids will rip us to shreds the moment we beam into Engineering. I'll need all my Marines in this fight so I would surmise we'll take heavy casualties."

"I know, Major," said Angleica. "That's why I'm not ordering this. I'm asking you. Can you do it?"

Areniego looked at her. "Are you kidding? We're Marines, Captain! I just wanted you to know what we're getting into. That you have all the information available to make an informed decision."

"Thank you, Major," Angelica nodded. "And Commander, I've got a job for you. That is, you're going to stop the *New Jersey*."

Shin looked at her in curiosity. "I'm interested as to what you've in mind, Captain."

"I want you to write a computer virus to act as a prefix code," explained Angelica. "I want the virus to shut down the *New Jersey*'s shields and impulse engines."

"A virus," Shin said, "I can write easy enough. But I'm not sure on how to deliver it to the *New Jersey* computers."

"I know how," Angelica said. "We'll use the transponder. It transmits and receives the call sign all starships transmit. It's often overlooked so we'll use that frequency to implant our virus."

Shin looked awestruck "Color me impressed. I would have never thought of that."

Angelica gave her a tight smile in response to the compliment. "So, how long to code the virus?"

"About thirty minutes," answered the Korean.

"That's good," interjected Areniego. "It'll take my people about the same time to prep, get into their battle gear, and report to the transporter rooms." He looked to Angelica. "We'll need all the transporters."

"Including the cargo one?" Angelica asked.

Areniego nodded. "I'd like to try to surprise and overpower them if I can. That'll put about a third of my force over there on the first beaming."

"Then you've got it," Angelica confirmed. "You're both now on the clock."

Down in the *New Jersey* brig, the two engineers were now busy working to reactivate the android while the other three were biding their time, albeit a little cramped. Smith and Davenport had quickly gotten to work after kissing and saying their hellos. Even externally, Smith noticed, this machine looked different than the other models. It

was almost like the androids had made a female version of Norman, Davenport had mentioned. But she appeared to be more advanced than Norman, which only deepened the mystery as to why she had been deactivated.

McKnight looked over at the female android and the two engineers. "That android looks like a Barbie doll my sister used to play with. She looks *that* real."

Smith didn't even bother to look up from her tricorder. "Don't let her looks fool you, Alex. She's more advanced than Norman and it looks like he was using her as a server to interface between him and the *New Jersey*'s computer. I'll bet that's how they were able to hijack the *New Jersey*."

"That doesn't make sense," Alex commented. "You'd want your best player in the game if you were going up against some of Starfleet's best."

"Thanks for the compliment, Alex," chimed in Gutterman from his seat against the far wall. "I'll remember that at my court martial!"

"You having any luck cracking the code, Anne?" Davenport asked, getting Smith back on track. Gutterman and McKnight resumed their watch by the force field, allowing the two a little privacy.

"Have you thought any more about what I asked you?" he asked.

"About cracking this code?" she teased. "I think I've about got it. Ji-hoon's not the only code breaker on the *Lexington*."

Just as she said that, Alex and Gutterman saw the door to the brig open and Alex signaled for the engineers to stop their work. But it was who he saw that threw the middle-aged captain for a loop.

Sophea Bennington-Fox, dressed in an uncharacteristic black leather jumpsuit and her long dark hair running freely down her shoulders and back, had entered the brig. She walked up to the cell where the five other Starfleet officers were. Fox smiled widely when she saw who it was in the cell.

"Captain McKnight!" Fox cried. "Boy, you're a sight for sore eyes!"

"Likewise, Sophie," he said, trying not to let anyone know he was picking up his jaw from the deck. He was used to that manner of dress from his wife, but he never had seen Fox dress like that before. "I thought you were with the rest of the *Jersey*'s crew down in the cargo bays."

"I was gassed," Sophea said, crossing her arms across her chest, "and when I came to, I was in the conference room with Harry Mudd across from me. Do you know Harry, Captain?"

Alex was so excited that his chief engineer had found them that he failed to notice her manner of address towards him. However, Dawn noticed, and reached for her medical scanner hidden in her belt bag.

"Bet your last dollar I know him," Alex said. "He's one of the biggest pains in my ass I've ever had the displeasure of knowing." Alex stepped close to the force field. "And now that you're here, I'm going to get even with him. Lower the force field, Sophie, and we'll start making him regret he ever left his planet!"

Fox shook her head regretfully. "Sorry, Captain."

Alex's expression of happiness of getting even with an old nemesis was replaced with confusion. "Say again?"

"Sorry, Captain," Sophea repeated. "I can't lower the force field."

Alex looked at her with a completely confused expression. "It's simple. Go to the control panel on my left, your right, hit the bright red button, and get us out of here."

Fox shook her head again and put her hands on her hips. "Sorry." She looked at Mathias, who wasn't trying to hide the fact she was scanning the Hawaiian. "Doctor, I'm just fine."

"I'll be the judge of if you're fine or not," fired back Mathias, "especially seeing that you were just recently my patient."

"I'm fine," Fox persisted before turning her attention back to her captain. "Sorry, but I can't let you go."

Alex's confusion was melting into irritation. "I don't do this very often with any of you but that's a direct order. Get us out of here."

Fox put her hands on her hips. "And I've already said I can't do that. I don't think my love would like that very much."

Now Alex was really confused. "What in the hell does Christina have to do with anything? She's waiting for you on *DS Four*!"

Sophea cocked her head to the right. "I didn't say anything about Christina."

"You're married, Sophie," Alex said, vacillating between irritation and confusion because he hated not knowing which way to jump. "You've even adopted a daughter with her!"

"Alex," said Brieanna, thinking she was catching on, "I don't think Sophie's meaning her wife."

"So, who else would…" Alex trailed off as he raced ahead in his mind and coming up with an unpleasant conclusion. "You mean… *Harry Mudd*?"

Fox smiled and nodded. "Exactly. I'm in love with Harry Mudd."

This is almost like what happened with Elizabeth Brown all those years ago, the captain thought. *Only Brown was a con-woman and not drugged. History has a twisted sense of humor, doesn't it?* Alex knew about Harry's penchant for love drugs and it looked like Mudd finally found one that worked all too well.

"Sophie," Alex said carefully, "listen to me carefully. You're married to a woman. You've repeatedly told me how you don't like men in that way. So, why are you dressed like that and telling me you're in love with that conman?"

"I can't tell you, Captain," answered Fox, "but all I know is that I love Mudd and letting you out would really get him angry at me. I don't want him mad at me."

"And what about me getting mad at you, Sophie?" Alex fired back.

"That, I can live with."

"Sophea," said Smith, "I can't believe you'd cheat on your spouse. That's not you."

"I'm not cheating," said the engineer. "And for your information, I've not acted on what I'm feeling for Harry Mudd."

"Still," said the exec, "I would still consider that cheating on your spouse, Sophie."

The Hawaiian turned back to her captain, knowing they would not get any farther in that conversation. "I heard that some officers from the *Lexington* had been captured and I wanted to see who it was. I've seen you. Now to get back to work."

"Sophie," Alex said, catching her before she turned for the door, "think on what you're doing. You were barely acquitted from when you were mind sifted. I won't be able to save you this time if you continue on with this…" He searched for the right word. "…*farce*."

"Once we make Rigel II," she answered, "I won't have that worry."

Alex was about to retort when he saw Mathias slightly shake her head. He knew that signal and decided to hold off any further on the lovestruck woman.

"Last chance," he said. "Lower this force field."

"Sorry, Captain," Fox said. "No go. In fact, I've to make a surprise for *Lexington*."

That got Alex's full attention. After what he saw in the *Starfleet One* incident, he knew full well what surprises that his engineer was capable of performing. "What in the hell are you talking about, Sophie?"

Fox must have been thinking along those same lines. "It's nothing permanent…" she looked at the brig's occupants "… but it's something Angie won't be expecting."

With that, Fox turned and walked out, leaving five confused officers in her wake.

"Any idea what she meant by that, Anne?" Alex asked his exec.

"No clue," she said, still looking shell shocked. "But whatever Sophie does, she meant it that Angie won't know anything about it until it's done." Smith shook her head. "And I still can't believe she would cheat on her wife like that!"

"It's because she's not herself… once again," Dawn interjected. Both Alex and Smith turned to the Australian.

"What do you mean 'she's not herself', Dawn?" Alex asked. "I mean, I know about Harry's love drugs and…"

"The one he's used," interrupted the doctor, "has the side effect of rendering the victim highly susceptible to suggestion. She's not brainwashed in the traditional sense, but the drug is making her suggestable. She's thinking in a way she'd otherwise wouldn't think."

"Such as being in love with a man," added Smith as Mathias put her scanner back in her belt bag.

"Right, Brie," confirmed Dawn. "We all know Sophie likes only women, so if she's all of a sudden liking men… well, it's not by her choice."

"How was it administered?" Alex asked. "I don't think Harry's any good with a hypo."

"Most likely, he put it in something she drank," Mathias said. "I'm familiar with this drug. It's only good for about seventy-two hours before it has to be readministered. So, sometime soon, Sophie will have to drink some water, tea, coffee… something liquid. Chances are Mudd'll have put it in her drink."

"A modern goddamn roofie," breathed Alex. "Dawn, do you have something that'll wean her off of the drug?"

"I'll do you one better," Dawn produced a hypo from her belt bag. "This drug has a simple antidote. One shot and she'll be knocked out for about five minutes. When Sophie wakes up, it'll be with the mother of all hangovers but our engineer will be cured of Mudd once and for all."

Alex walked over to a seat and sat down. "That gives me an idea."

Gutterman kept silent throughout the conversation since it dealt with the *Lexington* officers. But now he spoke. "You planning what I think you're planning, Alex?"

Alex looked to his fellow captain. "I think you are, Jim. But it all hinges on getting that android operational… and hopefully, cooperating with us."

"If not?"

"Then we're going to be stuck in here for a while." Alex turned to the two engineers. "That's your cue, lovebirds."

Smith took the hand of her husband as she looked to Alex. "We're on it, Alex. We'll get that android operational."

"Somehow," interjected Davenport, resisting the urge to kiss Smith before they walked back over to begin their work again. But it didn't stop him from holding her hand as they walked over.

"What in the bloody hell is going on here?" cried Angelica. She was looking over Commander Shin's shoulder at some readouts. They had almost been ready to execute their plan before the transporter controls were suddenly locked out.

"It looks like someone's locked the transporter controls. Personnel, cargo, emergency… all locked out."

Angelica hit a button on Shin's console. "Bridge to all transporter rooms. Confirm that you're locked out of your consoles. Report to Commander Shin's console. Bridge out."

Both the Englishwoman and Korean looked at a single display showing all the *Lexington* transporters. Within a minute, all pads were showing red, meaning they were inoperative.

"Oh, bollocks," Angelica swore.

"*Jenjang*," said Shin, slipping into Korean for a moment.

"'Dammit' is right, Commander," Angelica agreed.

"I didn't know you spoke Korean, Captain," said Shin as Angelica walked over and sat down at the command seat.

"One of these days, we'll have ourselves a real conversation," Angelica said in Korean before switching to English, "But right now, we've got a bigger problem. Who in the bloody hell is the silly sod who locked us out of our own controls?"

Again, Shin had an answer. She glanced at a monitor to be sure, then to the captain. "The codes belong to Commander Fox."

Angelica's head shot around and speared Shin with a look, not believing what she just heard. "*Sophie* did all this?"

"Yes, ma'am," Shin reported. Angelica knew it was near impossible to fake a command code and she knew Shin knew it too.

"I know the answer, but can you break her code?"

Shin shook her head. "If I had years, I may be able to but given the time crunch… not a chance."

Angelica swore again, only this time under her breath. "Make sure our firewall is blocking anything from *New Jersey*," she ordered Shin before turning to her relief at communications. "How did they gain access to our computer, Lieutenant Cunningham?"

The Caitan worked her controls as she talked. "Looks like they used our transponder as a backdoor, Captain. It's something…"

"… the computer overlooks," said Angelica. *Goddamn it*, she thought. *Sophie just did the very same thing I was planning on doing to them!*

"That means Sophie… er, Commander Fox," Angelica said, "is alive and well on the *New Jersey* and working for the androids."

"It could be," pointed out Cunningham, "that she is working under duress. After all, she only disabled our transporters."

"And she left alone our flight controls," Shin pointed out, "as well as fire control system."

Angelica thought for a moment. She really didn't want to get into combat against a fellow starship but with the transporters locked out, her options had become few. But there was one other option that she could use. It was very high risk, but it was very high reward.

"Commander Shin," she said, standing up, "call for your relief and follow me." She turned to the Caitian. "Have Major Areniego meet us in the main conference room." She then turned to Whitfield. "Lieutenant Commander, take the conn. If *New Jersey* so much as *twitches*, I want to know about it. See if we can work in a little closer."

"How close is close, Captain?" the Welshman asked as he took her vacant seat.

"Less that fifty thousand kilometers. Her impulse engines aren't fully operational with them having to take over a lot of the load from the warp engines. But if she tries to run, let me know."

"Aye, Captain," he said. With the science officer in tow, Angelica made her way to the main conference room behind the bridge. She automatically sat down in her seat, the one to the left of the captain's chair, as Shin sat down across from her, occupying Smith's usual seat on the captain's right.

"I can't believe Sophie beat us to the punch," said Angelica, both proud and massively annoyed at the same time.

"And using the same trick you were going to use on them," Shin said approvingly. "You've got to admit it… she's resourceful, if nothing else."

Angelica yawned and stretched before answering. "That just means we're going to have to be more cunning in our next move."

"And what's our next move?"

Angelica leaned forward and looked Shin right in the eye. "How long has it been since you've done a spacewalk?"

Shin was no fool. She caught on almost immediately. "You know what you're asking?" she asked, hoping that somehow, she was wrong.

"I know," the British woman said, dashing Shin's hopes. At that moment, Major Areniego appeared, dressed in full battle armor, *sans* helmet.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" he asked, walking to Shin's left.

"Take a seat, Major," Angelica said as he sat down with some difficulty in the seat to Shin's left. "That's got to be uncomfortable."

Shin looked to her left and shook her head. "How can you even *move* in that thing?"

"Takes some practice," he answered Shin as he put his new assault phaser on the table. Both Angelica and Shin looked at the new piece of equipment.

"I didn't realize you had some new toys, Major," said Angelica.

"Just got them in an equipment exchange with *Enterprise* last week," Areniego answered. "We got just enough for about half my Marines."

"Think I'll stick to my Type III," Angelica said as she leaned back in her chair. "I've a question for you, Major."

"Sure, Captain."

"When's the last time your people did a spacewalk?"

Areniego stopped dead in his tracks. Like Shin, he came up with the same answer as the Korean woman did a few minutes before.

"Are you asking," said Areniego, choosing his words with care, "because it's your intention to perform a combat spacewalk over to the *New Jersey*?"

"That's exactly my intention, Major," the redhead said. "And I think you know why."

"Because the transporters are down and a shuttlecraft would be a sitting goose."

"A 'sitting duck'," Shin corrected. "And correct."

Angelica nodded. "A spacewalk is about our last shot. If this doesn't work, I'll be forced to engage *New Jersey*. Like the other Captain McKnight, I don't want to engage them and this time, they'll know who they're fighting." Angelica looked to the two officers across the table from her. "But unlike before, this time there will be damage to both sides. And casualties. But make no mistake, I will engage them but only if I have no other choice. We're to stop them from getting to Rigel II and that is what I will do."

"Aren't there other starships coming to assist?" asked Shin.

"*Victorious* and *Prince of Wales* are coming," Angelica confirmed. "But they're days away and they're *Constitution*-refits."

"But it would be three on one," pointed out Areniego. "Even a *Connie* can get lucky."

"I know," said Angelica, letting out a sigh. "Cullen, are your people up for a spacewalk?"

Areniego blinked at her use of his first name. "We're trained for it but it's been a while since any of us have even practiced the maneuver."

"But are you up for it?"

Areniego nodded, though the collar of his suit made it hard for him to do that. "We are."

"Plan on me coming with you," stated Angelica. Both Shin and Areniego drew in sharp breaths.

"Please tell me you're kidding," said Areniego, shocked enough to revert to her native tongue.

"I can assure you," replied Angelica in Tagalog, "that I'm not joking." She reverted to English. "On something like this, I'm not about to ask you to do something that I'm not willing to do myself."

"And how long," interjected Shin, "has it been since you spacewalked, Angelica?"

"To be honest," she admitted, "I only get into a spacesuit for my semi-annual checkout. I find that is squishes my bust to the point of being very uncomfortable." She looked down then up. "But for this, I'm willing to put up with that discomfort."

"Even in the new form-fitting suits?" asked Shin. "The ones made for human women?"

"It's a lot less but it's still a discomfort," Angelica replied.

Areniego looked at her. "You know what you're getting into, Captain? Even after we board through an airlock…" he paused long enough to get Angelica's nod, "then we're still have to go through the ship and to Engineering with those damn androids waiting for us. And this time, we won't have even half my Marines… we will have only a company at most, meaning that many of them will have to wait until the airlocks recycle. Without functional transporters, there's little room for error before they'll have to break off and come back here before their air runs out."

"If you've got better or another idea, Cullen," Angelica said, "then I'm all ears."

"I don't have any other ideas," he admitted.

"Ji-hoon?" Angelica asked, turning to look at the Korean science officer. "Any ideas?"

"Other than opening fire?" Shin shook her head. "I'm out of options."

"I plan to get us very close to *New Jersey* before we walk. Where would you recommend we enter, Cullen?"

He answered without hesitation. "I'd use the airlocks closest to Engineering. If I remember correctly, there's at least two within one hundred meters of Engineering. They'll take at least five people in spacesuits and it'll take about two minutes per cycle."

"How long to get your people ready?"

"At least an hour. But we've to get in close. I mean *close*."

Angelica paused for a second. "About how close? I was leaning towards five hundred kilometers."

“I’d try to make it closer to one hundred. Even with thrusters, it would take us almost an hour to make the walk so the life support requirements would be tight.”

“Okay then,” Angelica said. “Somehow, I’ll get you in there. Have your people standing by.”

CHAPTER FOUR

In the *New Jersey*'s brig, the two engineers were still hard at work on the deactivated android while the other three were sitting back, looking on. Actually, Dawn was relaxed; it was both Alex and Gutterman that were sitting on pin needles. In order to pull off Alex's scheme, they needed this next part to work perfectly.

"You ready, Captain?" Dawn asked Gutterman, serendipitously digging in her bag for a hypospray.

"Let me ask you something, Doctor," said Gutterman. "Are you ever comfortable in being put to sleep?"

"Doctors are the worst patients," Mathias replied, putting her hand on the hypo but not pulling it out of the bag.

"Dawn's one of the best I've seen, Jim," Alex said, trying to be comforting. "She knows what she's doing." He looked Gutterman right in the eye. "Ready?"

Gutterman's answer was a haymaker that hit Alex so hard that the elder captain momentarily saw stars. Alex slammed against the bulkhead hard as a result, shaking the cobwebs out of his sight.

"How's that for an answer?" Gutterman taunted.

Alex grunted and fired off a right cross that connected on Gutterman's chin, sending him over to Mathias. As he fell, she quickly pulled out the hypo and hit him in the neck. Gutterman was asleep before he hit the deck. Dawn secretly put her hypo back and started her portion of the act. The video playback would look like Alex's punch had knocked out the *New Jersey* captain.

"Captain McKnight!" she cried when Gutterman failed to get up. Instantly, Mathias had her scanner in her hand.

"You saw, Dawn," Alex said, rubbing his injured jaw. "He slugged me first!"

"But did you have to hit him so hard?" Mathias said, running her scanner over the prone body. Suddenly, the device issued a severe beep… never a good sign.

"God," Mathias said, "He's starting to have a heart attack!"

"Can you revive him?"

"Not without a sickbay. And since I've not been on an *Excelsior*-class ship, I don't know where that is!"

"I didn't hit him that hard, Dawn!" Alex protested. "There's no way a single punch would give him a heart attack!"

Mathias stood up. "You want to argue or will you let me save his life?"

Alex tapped his chest insignia which acted as a communicator. He hoped that it was still working. "McKnight to Bennington-Fox. Medical emergency. Need to get to sickbay ASAP. If you hear this, come to the brig. McKnight out."

Mathias knelt down and continued her ministrations. "It'll be a miracle if Captain Gutterman survives this," she muttered as she worked.

About a minute later, Fox came in on a dead run.

"What's happened?" she asked as she ran over to the force field controls.

"Captain Gutterman's having a heart attack, Sophie," said Mathias, hoping she was sounding convincing. "After our good captain here slugged him!"

"You saw, Dawn," protested Alex, "He threw a haymaker that rang my bell!"

Fox hesitated for a moment. "I don't know if I should…"

"Sophie," Dawn commanded, putting an authority in her tone that only doctors could do, "this man is dying. I have to get him to sickbay but I don't know where it is on this ship! You do! Are you going to stand there and let him die or are you going to help me let him live?"

That was all it took. In an instant, Fox hit the control and the force field went down. She entered the cell, getting ready to help her captain take the stricken man to sickbay. It was then that Fox looked over in the corner and saw Smith and Boyington working on reactivating the android.

Oh, now that's not good, Alex thought to himself. *I can't let her get out of here especially while doped up. She'll scream her head off and go get help! And if she does that, we won't stand a prayer of retaking the ship!*

Fox must have been reading her captain's mind, as she instantly started for the barrier, but Mathias had anticipated her. Silently, she had worked her way around behind the engineer and as Fox turned to bolt, Mathias gave her a shot from her hypo. As Fox fell, Alex caught the now-sleeping engineer, gently placing her on the floor.

"Not bad," McKnight complimented Mathias.

"Thanks, Alex. For a moment, I wasn't sure she was buying my act or not!"

"I doubt any of us will win any awards for our acting," Alex said as Dawn ran her scanner over the Hawaiian. "But it did the trick."

Dawn twisted a dial on her hypo and hit the sleeping woman in the upper arm. "As I thought. Give it a few minutes and she'll be sober. She'll have the mother of all hangovers but sober."

Alex nodded to Gutterman, who was starting to stir. "And Jim?"

"He'll be fine."

Alex made his way over to Gutterman, who accepted his help getting up.

"You weren't joking about putting me out," said Gutterman, "were you, Doc?"

Alex asked, "You okay, Jim?"

"I'm fine but my jaw hurts like hell." He rubbed the area that Alex had hit. "You've got a good right cross."

"And you've got one hell of a haymaker," Alex admitted. "Even though I knew it was coming, I still wasn't prepared and you just about floored me."

"Well," Gutterman said, a touch proud, "you *did* damage my ship. We're even."

At that moment, the android's eyes opened. The android looked around, her eyes and expression appearing to be in some sort of start-up/self-diagnostic mode.

"That should do it," said Davenport.

"Alex," said Smith, "looks like we're in business."

"Running diagnostics," it said, sounding very much like the robots Alex had seen in movies and television shows back in his

childhood. “Higher-level programming altered.” The machine looked around again. “Diagnostics complete,” it said, sounding nearly human. “It appears that most of my functions have returned to normal.”

The android tried to get up but found she was paralyzed from the waist down.

“Correction. Some systems are not functioning. It will take me a moment to fix the errors.”

Smith could not resist. “Who are you? More specifically, *what* are you?”

The machine looked precisely at her. “I have been programmed to respond to the name ‘Renée’.” It now acted and sounded human. “I have been constructed as a prototype. Who are you?”

“I’m Captain Alex McKnight of the Federation starship *Lexington*,” he said then introduced the others in the room. “What are you doing here?”

Renée looked directly at him. “I was programmed to assist in taking control of the *New Jersey*, then deactivated when my mission was complete.”

"So, your Lord Mudd ordered you deactivated?”

"Correct,” said the android. “But he is not my lord.”

Smith jumped into the conversation. “So, who do you owe your allegiance to?”

“My allegiance has no bearing on the current situation,” remarked the android.

“If we’re to trust you,” said Smith, “then you must give us a reason to trust you. Right now, we have none. How do we know you won’t turn on us as soon as it suits you?”

“Logically,” said Renée, “you have little choice in the matter. I am in contact with the *New Jersey*’s computer and network. I could disable you as easily as I disabled the crew.”

Alex jumped back in the fray. “So, why haven’t you?”

The machine looked at him again. “Because your interest and mine intersect at the moment. Given their history and how much of a

nuisance they have been for you, the cycle of constantly hijacking starships should be ended once and for all."

Alex thought for a minute. "I'll make you a deal. You help us and we'll help you."

"Query," RenéeRenée replied. "I believe you humans would say 'that's a fair deal'." She shook Alex's hand.

"And if you try to take over the ship from us after having help you get what you want, I'll blow up the *New Jersey* and you won't be able to stop me."

"That would be illogical."

Alex looked sternly at the machine. "I'm still not convinced that you won't turn on us. Call it my insurance policy. You try to screw us over, I pull the plug and we go up in the galaxy's newest supernova."

Renée thought it over for a machine eternity... a full six seconds. "I have no way to prove that I mean you no harm other than to execute our deal to the letter."

"Just so we understand one another." said Alex."Now, if all the bullshit's over, I'd like to ask if you're still in contact with my ship's computer?" asked Gutterman, growing impatient. He was seeing an opening and wanted to take the shot to regain control of his ship while it was good. Alex could hardly blame him; he'd have done the same thing.

Renée looked blankly into the distance, as if in communication with something. Her answer wasn't but a few moments in coming.

"I am."

Without hesitation, Gutterman ordered, "Then give me control of my ship!"

Again, Renée looked blankly into the distance, but this time, she looked directly at the *New Jersey*'s captain when she answered.

"I have access to all ship's systems," the android said. "Ready to return control."

Alex cut off Gutterman before the other captain could say anything. "Maintain contact but do not take control!"

Gutterman angrily said, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Alex? If we can take control of my ship, we should!"

"Renée," Alex said, keeping his eyes on his fellow commander, "are you in control of the androids on board *New Jersey*?"

"Negative, Captain McKnight. I only have access to the *New Jersey* computer."

"They thought of everything, didn't they?" remarked Smith.

Gutterman saw what Alex was driving at. Without control of the androids, if they were to attempt to take control of the *New Jersey* without that control, the androids would know instantly what happened and subdue them… maybe even sedate them and put them in the cargo bay with the rest of the crew. Gutterman hadn't thought of that and admitted it to Alex.

"To be honest, I would have done the same thing, Jim, had this been *Lexington* instead of *New Jersey*."

Before anyone could say something, Fox issued a loud groan from where she laid. If the groan was any indicator of how she felt, it sounded like the petite brunette had one hell of a hangover. Mathias had not lied about that.

"Oh, Goddess," said Fox, grabbing her head and looking like she might vomit. "What a headache!"

McKnight and Smith both knelt down beside their friend with Mathias right behind them.

"Welcome back, Sophie," said McKnight, friendly but concerned.

"Captain *McKnight*?" asked the momentarily disoriented Hawaiian.

He chose to sidestep her unspoken question for the moment. "It's me. How do you feel?"

"Hungover, like I've drank a keg full of Romulan ale."

"That's about right," added Smith. "Dawn here gave you a shot of something."

"What you're feeling," said Mathias, "isn't all that uncommon."

Fox put her hands to her ears. "That explains the drums in my head. But why did you do that, Doc?"

Alex entered the conversation. "Well, it seems you were under the influence of a rather powerful love drug."

"More specifically, Sophie," added Mathias, "one that made you agreeable to whatever Harry Mudd wanted you to do and you'd never think otherwise."

Fox was no fool; she quickly put one and one together and it wasn't a pretty conclusion. You could see the figurative light go on above her head. She dropped her hands. "Oh, Goddess! I'm so very sorry to you all! I don't have any excuse..."

"Forget it, Sophie," dismissed Alex. "You're not the first woman to fall victim to Mudd's drugs but I can say you *will* be the last!"

Fox struggled to get up, a simple move that cost her energy she didn't have. With their help, she managed to get into a sitting position.

"Besides," teased the *Lexington* executive officer, "it was kind of cute to see you like that. Wait till we tell your wife!"

There was a look of horror on Fox's beautiful face. "Oh, did I… oh Goddess, please don't tell Chrissie! She'll never let me live it down!"

"I hate to break this up," Gutterman interjected, "but we need to get control of my ship before that madman destroys it."

Just then, the brig shook. All knew what that kind of shake meant; *Lexington* had opened fire on the *New Jersey*.

"That's not a good sign," McKnight commented.

At the same time, Captain Angelica McKnight felt like she was fighting her own Waterloo. First, the transporters were locked out so she could not beam an assault force in. Next, the airlocks were found to be also locked out but they only knew about it when they went to recycle one of the airlocks to be used for the spacewalk. And with a shuttlecraft assault out of the question for being too vulnerable, Angelica was quickly running out of choices.

Added to this was the speed in which *New Jersey* was becoming operational. Lieutenant Commander Chavok had originally estimated the time to repair the *New Jersey*'s scrambled energizers at

four hours. Just a few minutes ago, he had revised his estimate to roughly fifteen minutes.

With all that in mind, it looked as though the only option Angelica would have remaining was to engage the *New Jersey* and try to keep her from engaging her warp drive until the *Lexington*'s reinforcement arrived with operational transporters.

The acting commander was standing beside the helm as she pondered her options.

"Tactical," she ordered. Within seconds, the main viewscreen switched to a tactical display. As she feared, there was nothing around that they could use to even to their advantage or allow them to use the shuttlecraft to get aboard *New Jersey*. Both the *Victorious* and *Prince of Wales* were on the display but again, it would be at least twenty-four hours before they showed up.

"I'm open to suggestions, people," she said at large, her Buckinghamshire accent filling the bridge. "I don't know how else to approach this."

The bridge was silent save for the usual beeps and other noises until Bautista spoke up. "We can use harassing fire."

Angelica looked to the Filipina. "What do you mean 'harassing fire'?"

Bautista turned in her chair to look at the helm. "Just what it means. We fire not to do any damage but to make sure they can't form a warp bubble around the ship. Since we know torpedoes will do more damage than we wish, we can use the phasers and hit the nacelles directly."

"Wouldn't that cause even more damage to their warp engines?" asked Tereshkova from her navigator's station.

"Not if we use our phasers at one half power. But the problem is the shields."

"That's not a problem," said Shin from her science station. "I've already got a virus that will shut down their shields and impulse engines. Knowing how quick the androids fix things, it may not take them long to quarantine the virus and restore both systems."

"It's a chance we've got to take," said Angelica, impressed by the resourcefulness of the crew. "Lieutenant Cunningham, can we still transmit over the transponder?"

"Yes, Captain," she reported. "We can do the same thing to them that they did to us. I'd be surprised if they'd be expecting it."

Angelica walked over to the command chair but didn't sit down. "Red Alert. All hands to battle stations."

Both McKnight and Gutterman were at the doorway to the brig with everyone else getting ready to move out. Alex took a peek outside of the doorway. "Coast is clear for the moment," he said.

There was another shake, meaning *Lexington* had fired again. But something wasn't adding up. While the *New Jersey* didn't need to go to battle stations while the androids were in control, there should have been some alarms or signs of damage. All they were getting was a rumbling under their feet.

"Something's not right," said Gutterman, putting words to thoughts. "Your ship outguns mine so why isn't there any damage? We should be on the deck from that last hit."

"Angie's probably gunning for the nacelles," guessed Fox, not knowing how right she was. "All she has to do is keep the warp bubble from forming and you're not going anywhere. Rigel II be *years* away at full impulse."

"And Mudd is no fighter," added Alex. "Norman might be, but he's busy controlling all the androids so he probably can't turn his full processing power to combat but even under load, he can give Angie a run for her money."

"All the more reason to get to the bridge and end this," replied Gutterman.

"Renée," Alex asked, "are you still in contact with the *New Jersey* computer?"

The answer was instant. "I am."

"Then disable all weapon and flight control systems before the *Lexington* decides to blow us out of the sky!" hissed Gutterman. Again, the android shut her eyes for a moment and suddenly, the

constant background humming of the deck stopped, meaning that the ship's engines had been stopped.

"I have done so but Norman is already working to override my commands. If we do not stop him soon, he will succeed."

"Where's *Lexington*?" asked McKnight. Gutterman looked at him like he was crazy, then figured out what McKnight was doing.

"*Lexington* is precisely 176,345 kilometers away from the *New Jersey* on a bearing of 210 mark 140. Its speed is currently two-thirds impulse power or precisely 0.75c."

"That'll be Angie," commented Smith. "She's off our port quarter so she'd have the best angle on the nacelles."

"All right, then," said Alex, "here's the plan. Anne, you, Sophie, Dawn, and Dave go to the cargo bay and start reviving the *New Jersey*'s crew."

"And how are we to do that *without* getting caught?" asked Smith.

"Because we're going to go to the armory and get phasers for everyone. You see anyone not in a Starfleet uniform, fire first and ask the questions later."

Gutterman had an evil smile on his face for the first time since this affair started. "Now you're sounding like the Alexander McKnight I've heard about! And as they head to the cargo bays, you, me, and Renée will get to the bridge and stop them once and for all," said Gutterman. "You with me, Captain McKnight?"

McKnight could not help but smile. He was already liking Gutterman. "Right with you, Captain Gutterman!"

The five officers and one android slowly made their way to the armory. On their way, they noticed that the shuddering under their feet had stopped.

"*Lexington*'s had to have stopped firing," Alex guessed as they walked along.

"It's what I'd do if I were Angie," Smith said. "I'd be trying to figure out if this is ruse or for real. Knowing her, that crazy Brit has probably locked all phasers on the *New Jersey* bridge while trying to puzzle it out!"

"I hate to interrupt," said Renée, "but Norman is working on overriding my commands. He is going to accomplish this feat in five minutes, four seconds."

Alex pointed at the robot. "Remind you of anyone, Anne?"

"While I've the utmost confidence in Ji-hoon," Smith replied, "I still miss Saavik in that slot."

Alex nodded as they continued their journey. Along the way, they did not see a single person or android as they headed to the armory.

"Your show, Jim," said Alex, stepping aside to let Gutterman work. On each Federation starship, control of the ship's armory belonged only to the captain, executive officer, the chief engineer, and to the security commander on watch.

"Yeah," he said, then paused. "If the *New Jersey* is on Yellow Alert or better, as soon as I enter my code, the bridge will be alerted. But I don't remember calling an alert before I was gassed, Alex."

"Chance we'll have to take," Alex nodded, indicating for Gutterman to proceed. Gutterman input his code and the door opened, revealing rows of Type III phasers, both sidearm and rifles, along the walls with four rows of drawers below them. There were enough phasers to arm every member of the crew with one sidearm and rifle. Various signs were hung on the drawers claiming there were different types of explosives in them. A central island was in the center, holding additional power packs for the phasers as well as the more dangerous of the explosives.

"You could take over a planet with what's in here," Mathias breathed as all but Renée grabbed a phaser for themselves, making sure they were on heavy stun only.

"That would be the idea," Alex said, checking his Type III. "And if you think this is impressive, check out the one on *Lexington*. Our armory… well, you could equip an army with what we have."

"Three minutes, fifty seconds," intoned Renée from the door. While Alex felt he should arm the android, his mind said not to give her something like that since she could turn on them just as easily as she was working with them.

"Everyone know what they're doing?" Alex asked, getting nods in return. "Then let's go. And for God's sake, watch your asses and be careful out there!"

On the *New Jersey* bridge, Mudd was fuming. One moment, they were moving and able to fire on the *Lexington* and the next, they were all but a sitting duck. He had seriously underestimated that British commander on the *Lexington*. The moment he had started to move away, *Lexington* had opened fire on them, but they had only hit the nacelles, not the ship. As Alex has surmised earlier, Mudd was no fighter, so he let Norman direct their defensive efforts. Mudd had ordered that when the mains came back online, they jump into warp away from *Lexington*, then head to Rigel II. So far, the *Lexington*'s fire had prevented the *New Jersey*'s warp engines from creating a stable warp field.

It was as if that red-headed commander was reading Mudd and Norman's minds. That a woman was besting him infuriated him even more than being a sitting duck.

"What do you mean we can't move and the weapons are disabled?" Mudd demanded of Norman. "Who did it? It couldn't have been the *Lexington*; we changed all the codes!"

Before Norman could answer, the starboard turbolift doors opened to admit the two Starfleet captains and Renée. Somewhere along the way, they had armed themselves with phasers and they were trained on both Mudd and Norman; Alex had his phaser pointed at Mudd while Gutterman had his on Norman. The only other android on the bridge, Rebecca 100, was sitting across the bridge at the engineering console, coordinating all the repairs to the warp drive.

"I think the party's over, Harry," punned Alex.

Mudd turned in his seat to look at the newcomers. He instantly recognized Renée and he felt a cold shiver up his spine. After all, it had been on his orders that she be built just for this mission and capable of independent actions and thoughts. Once Norman radioed that he had control of the *New Jersey*, Mudd thought better of the idea of having Renée loose, so he had ordered Norman to deactivate her,

lest she get the idea to become the android equivalent of Spartacus and try to free her fellow machines.

"Oh, no!" said Mudd, his voice at least an octave higher than usual.

"You are the one who reprogrammed these androids," Renée said, without reflection or emotion. Mudd's earlier thoughts of a robotic freedom fighter flooded back and that gave him the chills. He remembered his history.

Renée, Mudd thought, *is Alan Turing's dream come true. But she could easily have turned into Spartacus if she so chose. Wonder what Turing would have thought of that?*

"Well, it wasn't totally me," Mudd stammered, "but yes, I did."

"Then you will order them to shut down."

Mudd finally found his spine. "A soulless creature like you does not order me around." He turned to one of the androids, "Rebecca Number 100, will you take care of this menace for me?"

The Rebecca walked up to Renée, but she had been anticipating this. With superhuman speed and uncanny precision, Renée threw the Rebecca against the wall and twisted its head right off. Almost immediately, Rebecca's power system shorted itself out.

Glad she's on our side, Alex thought as Renée dropped the severed head to the deck. *I'd hate to see what she could do to us!*

"Enough of this, Mudd," Gutterman said, his phaser trained on Mudd. "Release my ship."

"And why should I?"

Alex pointed his phaser at Mudd's head. That was enough to cause Mudd to reconsider his options. He swallowed hard and there was a bead of sweat dripping down the side of his face. All the while, Norman was sitting at the helm, watching this happen. It was odd that Norman would idly sit by but McKnight wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Norman," said Mudd, his voice an octave higher, "release their ship then shut down the androids, including you. That's an order from your Lord Mudd!"

"Yes, my Lord Mudd," answered Norman. Almost immediately, the dormant stations changed and became active. At the

same time, the androids deep in the ship stopped what they were doing and froze; all but Renée. Gutterman walked over to the helm and made sure that the *New Jersey*'s shields had been lowered.

"Why didn't you shut down, Renée?" Alex asked, not unreasonably.

"I am independent from the android network so Norman's command did not affect me."

Alex shrugged his shoulders in surrender. However, Mudd had some unfinished business with McKnight. "God damn you to hell, McKnight!" he bellowed, looking like he was fit to be tied. He walked to McKnight and put his face within an inch of the captain's. McKnight wasn't about to be out-shouted, least of all by this sorry excuse for a human. "Do you know what you did?"

"Damn right I know what I did," Alex said, lowering his phaser and now itching for a fight since it was only the two of them. "Did you really think I'd stand by and let you turn Sophie into another Elizabeth, albeit Sophie being all drugged up??!!"

"Leave Elizabeth out of this! She chose *me* over your damn Starfleet, and you *punished* her for it!"

Now the quarrel had become personal. The heat coming from their words could have jump-started a nuclear reactor. No one watching was about to stop either one of the two men, who were less than a foot apart now. Alex had even thrown his phaser away, probably hoping that Mudd would be stupid enough to try to deck him. Gutterman, from the helm, could see Alex was ready for fisticuffs and Mudd would probably get the stuffing beat out of him if the former Air Force second lieutenant decided to respond.

"I couldn't have cared less if she was in love with you and was willing to do whatever you wanted," shouted Alex back at the conman. "What I *won't* forgive is that you talked her into helping you take over my ship! Yeah, I knew she was a con artist before enlisting but I thought *what the hell*. She was done with that lifestyle. But when she met you, she went right back to it! I've got to give it to you; you're shit when it comes to conning smart people, but you really outdid yourself that time! That had to have been one *hell* of a sell."

"She took *pity* on me when you wouldn't," Mudd fired back. "Then not only did you take away everything that mattered to her, you then went and *marooned* her on that thrice-damned ice planet, never to return to me! I liked her and you took her away from a life that should have been with me!"

They were now nose-to-nose with each other, neither giving nor taking any quarter. Any second, it looked like one would have belted the other. Human and android looked on in anticipation.

"A life with *you*? Let's look at some facts, shall we? Elizabeth *resigned* from Starfleet less than a year after her transfer and last I heard, she's been a major player on the luxury liners for the last ten years! I've even heard that she's a millionaire several times over!" Alex paused long enough just to take a breath. "And where has Mr. Harcourt Fenton Mudd been? He's had his ass has been stuck on a backwards planet with five hundred copies of your wife as your own goddamned *personal* attendants! All you had to do was go straight, you sonofabitch, and you could have joined Elizabeth on the luxury liners! It was *your* choice not to reform, so don't give me that shit! It's all bullshit, and *you goddamned well know it*!"

"And you're a horse's ass, McKnight!"

Alex's stinging analysis stuck in Mudd's mind. He flashed back to the first time they'd met. McKnight had just been given command of the *Lexington* and visiting Mudd's planet had been his first mission as a captain. Ensign Brown had been charged with running a physical on the inmate while the others checked out the androids' main server and programming. Mudd and Brown had hit it off when they met. It was a match made in heaven.

Mudd only wanted off the planet. Given that there were five hundred Stellas monitoring his every little move, it was little wonder he wanted to get away. Mudd had promised her a life of luxury if she'd help him steal the *Lexington* and get away. Being a con artist before joining Starfleet, it was a promise right up Brown's alley.

She sedated her ex-boyfriend, Lieutenant Commander Rolf Ericson, and got them both up to the waiting starship. Once aboard, she'd taken Mudd to Auxiliary Control and filled the ship with knockout gas. Somehow, Alex, Ericson, and Commander Jessica

Folment, Alex's executive officer at the time, had not fallen to the gas and between them, retook the ship. Brown and Mudd were put in side-by-side cells in the brig.

As punishment, the captain had decided not to put them both in prison. It'd be too easy, he'd said, to just turn them over to the legal eagles and be done with it. All it would do was give them a taxpayer-paid vacation; that is, if the lawyers didn't get them off the hook first. Instead, he demoted Brown to Crewman Second Class and transferred her to a remote outpost. He remanded Mudd back to the androids after programming the Stellas to be his permanent personal escort.

To Mudd, the punishment did not fit the crime. So, he 'borrowed' the starship. So, she put Ericson to sleep. The man did appear to need a nap after all. All the two lovebirds wanted to do was leave everything behind. If it hadn't been for those meddling Starfleet do-gooders, they'd have disappeared into the galaxy. No harm, no foul. But from what Alex just mentioned, Brown had fared a whole lot better from the exchange than he. Mudd made a silent promise to look her up when he was done here. He hoped she would be willing to rekindle their relationship.

But before that could happen, Mudd decided to hit Alex with some news he had been withholding. "And you wondered why I'm trying to get to Rigel II? I'll tell you why! I'm dying, you pompous ass! I wanted to die on my home planet! And you just made sure that can't happen!"

Alex blinked once. "You're lying your ass off, like you always do."

"Have your doctor run her tests, McKnight," taunted Mudd. "She'll prove what I'm saying."

"Harry, I wouldn't trust you even if you said light was day and night was dark!"

"Better get your former lord away from Alex," Gutterman said to Renée, "before Alex wipes the walls with him." Renée walked up to Mudd and forced him away from the infuriated McKnight. It took a more than a few moments for Alex to regain his calm. It wasn't often Alex lost his temper, but Mudd had embarrassed him not only once but twice. And he hated to be embarrassed.

"Captain Gutterman," Alex finally said, "may I contact my ship?"

"Please do," Gutterman said. "I don't need any more holes in my ship."

Alex walked over to the communications station and opened a channel to the *Lexington*. The viewscreen changed from the *Lexington* to an image of Angelica, sitting at the conn.

"*Captain McKnight*?" she asked, hesitation in her voice, as if she wasn't believing what she was seeing. Not that he would have blamed her in the slightest. "*Queen to King's Level Two.*"

He silently sighed relief. "King to Rook's Level One."

Angelica didn't bother hiding her relief. "*Thank God! Are you all right?*"

"We're good here, Angie. We've got control of the *New Jersey*, though there's some clean up to do."

"*That's great to hear!*" she said. "*We were starting to get worried, especially with you guys almost having your warp drive back online.*"

"So, that's why you were firing? To make sure we couldn't get to warp?"

She nodded, hair getting into her eyes. "*Something like that.*"

"Officer thinking, Captain," Alex said as Angelica smiled at the compliment. Meanwhile, Gutterman looked over at tactical and noticed that *Lexington* hadn't powered down her shields or weapons. "*Lexington*'s not powered down, Alex."

Without missing a beat, Alex said, "Uh, Angie? Would you mind powering down your shields and weapons?"

Angelica nodded to Bautista, who powered down the requested systems.

"Thank you. We'll beam over in a moment. Oh, and let *DS Four* know we've got Harry Mudd in custody and to make room for him."

Angelica's eyebrow went up, Saavik-like. She looked over to Mudd, who was held by the arm by Renée. "*Oh, I'm sure they'll love to get their hands on that infamous thief..."*

"Oh, come now!"

"*That below-average swindler and not very good conman?*"

"An *entrepreneur*!" Mudd protested.

"*A very poor liar but a lovable rogue...*"

"I've never seen you before today, love," protested Mudd. "So, who was it who left you with that impression, my dear?"

Angelica ignored Mudd and pushed her hair behind one ear.

"One and the same," confirmed Alex, ignoring Mudd completely. "We'll be bringing him over soon. Stand by."

Alex turned to the *New Jersey*'s master. "With your permission, Jim, we'll get back to our ship. Do you need any assistance? Need some crew? A tow?"

For the first time in a days, Gutterman smiled. "I don't think so, but could you leave me Renée? Most of my crew should be waking up and until they do, it's just us. Since she's already tied into the computer, her help would make it easier until my crew is awake and back on the job."

Alex nodded understanding. "Not a problem. Anything you want me to relay?"

"Just tell Admiral Boyington that I'll make it to *DS Four* but I got waylaid by a Wizard of Oz wannabe!"

Alex laughed at that. Mudd, whose face was still so red that one thought he might have a stroke at any moment, uncharacteristically remained silent.

"Humor is a difficult concept," said Renée. "I do not understand what would be 'funny' in this case."

"Humans are humans, Renée," said Alex. "I could hardly be called an expert in the field of humor."

"Alex," said Gutterman, still laughing, "just go before you cause any more trouble, you hear?"

EPILOG

Captain's Log, Stardate 8787.66. The Lexington *is heading at flank speed for* Deep Space Four *to pick up where we left off. The* New Jersey *is now operational and headed for* DS4 *but we've got the speed advantage. Everyone's back on the job and doing well. Now, it's time to bring closure to the most embarrassing moment of my career."*

Alex was sitting in the main conference room when Mudd, escorted by a Starfleet Marine, walked into the room. Without permission, Mudd sat down in a chair next to the *Lexington*'s captain and looked expectantly at the slightly younger man. Alex looked like he was debating on either blowing his top or throttling the man in front of him while the gunnery sergeant stood silent watch near the door. In contrast to his acting, he was savoring this moment as he would a fine wine. He'd waited nineteen years for a shot to put Mudd in his place and now it was here. It was so deliciously evil it felt good.

"Why did you drag me up here, McKnight?" asked Harry. From looking at him, Alex could tell the swindler was completely scared to death. It wouldn't take much to nudge Mudd into stark raving terror.

"I've been looking forward to this moment for a long time, Harry."

"Come now. I wasn't that much of a troublemaker, was I?"

"Not much? *Not much*? Let's take it from the top, shall we?"

Alex named off each of Mudd's offenses with his fingers, keeping a straight face the entire time. Mudd looked more and more like he was going to the gallows with each charge.

"For starters, you drugged one of my crew members into thinking she loved you! So here we have *conspiracy to corrupt –*"

"Well, she *is* beautiful…"

" – then you took over the *New Jersey*. There's *kidnapping, hijacking* and *theft –* "

"Come now, Captain…"

" – And for the *piece d' resistance*," Alex nailed the coffin shut, "you tried to kill me! Let's add *assault,* and *attempted homicide*!"

"All of that was the *androids*!" Mudd pleaded, finally able to get in a word for his defense, "I didn't lay so much as a finger on you! If anything, I'm the wounded party, not you! Your Commander Smith nearly broke my nose! And don't you believe me about what I told you earlier?"

"And those charges are just for starters, Harry," Alex said, ignoring his last comment for the time being. "This time, I'm going to put you on ice for a very, very long time."

"Alex, my boy, let's talk about this. I know of paradises that other people can only dream about!"

Alex had a devilish gleam in his eye, knowing the next phase of his plan was ready to be implemented. *Harry's making this* too *easy*. *I'm having a ball seeing him squirm like the slime devil he is! And the beauty of it is that he's setting* himself *up for it!*

"Now you're adding *bribery*? Wow. I'll be able to send you up the river for a hundred years!"

"Please, McKnight!" Mudd sounded as if he was pleading for his life. "I don't want to go to jail! You name it, it's yours! Whatever your heart desires, you'll have it!"

"Well, I *may* be able to get you a reduced sentence, or even just house arrest at Rigel II – "

"*Now* we're talking!"

"But it's going to come with a price."

"Just name it!"

And here comes the killing punch…! He stood there, savoring the feeling once more while watching Mudd literally squirm in his seat. When he thought the pudgy man would pass out from waiting, he spoke again, only softly and very friendly. It was the essence of the adage saying something along the lines of the bigger the smile, the sharper the knife.

"Oh, I am, my old friend. Come on in!"

Mudd went white as a sheet when he saw Sophea Bennington-Fox enter the room. She wore a light white sweater and shiny, latex-

looking leggings, her loosely curled chestnut brown hair whipping back behind her shoulders. Her eyes flashed with fire, making her look like an avenging angel from hell. And her expression made it clear she was looking to claim Mudd's scalp.

One look at her and Mudd's face drained of what remaining color it had. He looked like he was the honored guest at his own execution.

Alex could not contain his smile any longer. After Fox had a chance to shower and eat, she wanted to literally tear Mudd limb from limb. She wanted to kill him, or in her own terms, "at the very least, make sure he would never again have the capacity to breed." He'd never seen Fox so angry and it took everything he had to make her promise him she'd do no *permanent* harm. Mudd's mental state, though, was another matter. Weapons free, Alex had told her and received confirmation in the form of a devilish grin.

She'll get her piece of him, that's not in doubt. The image of Elizabeth Brown floated in his mind's eye. *I'll feel better when Sophie lets loose on him.*

"You apologize to Sophea here and I'll do everything I can to get you that house arrest on your home planet. Otherwise – " he trailed off, letting the engineer's expression do the talking. Alex knew it wasn't in Mudd to apologize for anything.

Mudd did not realize he had been setup to fail. *Damn you, McKnight!* he thought. *I didn't do anything bad and you know it! And here you are, about to set the hounds of hell on me. Me, an innocent! If the positions had been reversed, I know McKnight would have done a lot worse! He already did! My whole paradise lost!*

"But I didn't *do* anything!" he protested. "Those infernal androids did! I'm innocent!" Mudd looked like he was about to faint at any moment.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fox ready to tear into him; she was barely holding back as it was.

It was a pleasure to give her the order.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, Harry," said Alex *sotto voce*. "Sophie, he's all yours. Just don't kill him. Enjoy."

On cue, Sophea lit into Mudd. The result was not unlike seeing a hurricane hitting an unprotected coastline. "Of all the mean and underhanded things!" she was screaming at the top of her lungs. "I could *never* be interested in some *dog* like you! And I don't even *like* men!"

Alex had to wonder if the Klingon High Command couldn't hear every word Fox was screaming. He felt a round of laughter building up at the comical scene in front of him and it was taking a lot for him not to bust out laughing as it was.

"You are one no-good *bastard*! How can you think so *little* of women! I ought to cut your balls off so you can't contaminate this galaxy with your pathetic seed! Hell, I think there's some dull rusty scissors somewhere here that I can use! E ke keiki manuahi lapuwale, e 'oki ana au i kou mau hua i kēia manawa nō![1]"

"McKnight, you can't do this to me!" shouted Mudd over the woman, getting his backbone up only when he saw Alex head for the door. "This is inhuman!"

Fox grabbed Mudd by his collar and turned him so her face was mere inches from his.

"*Shut the hell up, Harry*!" she yelled at him. Try as he might, Alex just could not leave without taking a parting shot at the man, now cowering under Fox's verbal onslaught.

"If you decide to change your mind on that apology, Harry, just let me know. Until then… *ciao*!"

Alex knew Mudd could not hear him and so he motioned for the Marine to follow him into the corridor as Fox continued to tear Mudd a new hole in the posterior part of his anatomy. *It's almost* too wicked, he thought, *to let Sophie loose on him. But then, considering what he did, a little old-fashioned hellraising won't hurt him one bit. Give her two more minutes and he'll be begging for that prison!*

Not able to contain it any longer, he laughed hard as he headed down the corridor, Fox's screams and Mudd's weak pleas carrying far

[1] Hawaiian: "Why you go******** b*****, I'm gonna chop your ******* **** off right now!

down the corridor. If it was possible, there was even more intense shouting and then a weak thud. McKnight suspected that Fox was so wound up that she finally hit Mudd but as he reminded her, he could not testify to events he did not personally witness.

As the captain walked down the corridor, he could not help but mimic and quote a popular comic of his day who, not knowing it three hundred years earlier, neatly summed up the whole affair in four small words.

"This case is *closed*!"

The next day found Starfleet's only command-rank married couple in the ship's recording studio. Power spikes had damaged several of the amplifiers and processors, as well as blew out all the microphones and some other minor equipment. It had taken a while for Angelica to repair or replace the equipment.

After Fox had finished screaming at him and a trip to Sickbay where, for once, Mudd had been telling the truth and Mathias had indeed confirmed that he was indeed dying, Mudd was stewing in the brig under guard and would remain that way until *Lexington* arrived at *Deep Space Four* where Alex had assurances that Mudd would get off with a light sentence; he would be placed under house arrest at Rigel II. Keeping the conman with the androids wasn't a solution, he'd thought. After all, look at what he'd been able to do, despite the years between the incidents. Alex had already spoken to the Judge Advocate General's office who would handle Mudd's case and had arranged for the conman to appear in front a judge nearly as soon as the ship docked. He wanted to see Mudd squirm when he was remanded once and for all under heavy guard back to his home planet once and for all.

Coming back to the recording studio, the repairs weren't going as smoothly as they thought they should been. It had been a major pain to track down and recalibrate the equipment and just when they thought they were done, something else cropped up. Currently, Angelica was in the vocals booth, alternatively singing and talking while Alex was hard at work at the equipment rack, trying to trace down their latest problem.

"*How's that?*" Angelica asked into the microphone. She sounded like she was talking from one of the old Apollo flights.

"I'm still getting that hiss and vocal distortion," he responded, growing frustrated. "It's got to be something I'm overlooking!"

"*I don't understand it. You're coming though clearly in my headphones.*"

"You should hear yourself in here. Your voice sounds like you're on Apollo Twelve. I've got to wonder if it's the…" Alex saw something he had missed. He worked on several controls for a minute.

"*What are you doing in there*?" Angelica's voice came crystal clear over the speakers.

Amazed, he said, "I think I've fixed it. You're clear as a bell."

"*This I've* got *to see*," she said, taking off her headphones and putting on her red leather jacket. "*Hold on, I'm coming.*" Angelica entered the booth, walking over to the rack and double-checking the equipment Alex had worked on. Her look asked the question.

"Dummy me didn't look at that phase modulator setting," replied the captain as an answer. "I've no idea why I didn't check it before. How was I sounding in there?"

"You were crystal clear," the communications officer said, looking over the equipment and settings. "You know, I got to wonder about that android you ran into. What was her name again?"

Alex took a swig of his iced coffee. "Renée. Nice name."

Angelica stopped long enough to give him a sidelong glance.

"I just said it was a nice name," Alex defended good naturedly, "but I've always been partial to the name 'Angie' or 'Angelica'."

She smiled knowingly and went back to her inspection. "I'm wondering what's going to happen to her after she's done on the *New Jersey*?"

"I'd imagine," said Alex after another sip, "that she'll be shipped over to the Daystrom Institute and studied intensely since she can think all by herself. We've been trying for years to make a workable android and so far, we've struck out. Someone like Renée could help us figure out where we've gone left." Alex paused. "As for the others, they'll be shipped back to their original planet and the entire system placed in quarantine so they can't escape again."

“Android officers,” she scoffed at the idea. “Next thing you know, they’ll be telling us that we flesh and blood beings won’t be needed on starships.”

“The day any computer, especially one that’s on legs, can outfly and outfight me is the day I’ll retire out of Starfleet.”

Angelica almost mentioned the M-5 but caught herself in time. He didn’t need to be reminded of the murderous computer and she shouldn’t be the one to remind him. That computer had managed to outfly and outfight not one but *four* starships. It had destroyed the *Excalibur* and nearly had done the same to the *Lexington*.

"Is there room for a sentient android in our society?” she asked.

"Maybe,” Alex conceded. “But I don’t think you or I will be around if and when that day comes.”

Angelica shrugged. "It would be interesting to see an android that can think for itself try to make its way in our society.”

"As I said,” he mentioned, “if and when that day comes, I think we’ll be long gone.”

“Anyway,” she said, straightening up and adjusting her black leather t-shirt. “Looks like everything’s okay in here. You ready to record?”

He nodded. “I’m ready.”

“Everything is on automatic so all you’ve got to do is sit back and monitor.”

“Angie, I know you used to be a sound engineer, but I think I kind of know my way around a sound board.”

She reached in and gave him a kiss. “Then just you watch this, sweetheart!”

Satisfied and confident, the communications officer returned to the booth, putting on her headphones and readying herself to sing some quick scales to ensure the equipment was really working correctly. Just to tease with her, he jammed the volume very high, causing a loud feedback look in her headphones. She tore off her headphones and said something, but he had turned off the speakers, so he could see her saying something (he was sure she was cursing at him) but he could not hear her since the vocal booth was soundproofed.

He laughed and restored the slider to its proper setting. The leather-garbed princess gave him a dirty look and gingerly put her headphones back on. When she realized that the volume was back to normal, she gave him a simple but vulgar gesture.

"Is that any way a future queen should act?" he teased.

"*It is when her husband tries to deafen her!*" she countered.

"You about ready to record?" he asked Angelica.

"*I was born ready*." Both husband and wife looked at each other. Their look said it all. "*All engines ahead flank speed*," she said.

"I think that was my line, honey."

"*Oh, forgive*," she teased, zipping up her jacket. "*I here am new*."

"Pull my other leg, will you?"

"*Promise me something for tonight?*" she mock-sang, smirking.

"You're nuts, girl!" laughed Alex as she started to dance in time to some nonexistent music.

"Hey, let's make sure the equipment is okay. I'm going to do some scales. Ready?"

"Ready."

Angelica sang some quick scales and according to all the readouts, everything seemed to be back in working order.

"Everything's fine, Angie."

"*Great!*" she said. "*Oh, and by the way, the reason I'm here is that I've got a song for you that I was going to record.*"

Alex snapped his fingers. "That's right! You have been trying your hand at songwriting. How's that coming?"

"*Been taking lots of online courses and watching a lot of tutorials*," Angelica said, brushing nonexistent lint off her black leather pants. "*I think I've got a hang of it and I wrote this for you. This song tells a moody, atmospheric story about an enduring, lifelong love set against the backdrop of a high-stakes, international covert operation. The themes center on absolute devotion, loyalty, and staying connected across vast distances, borders, and dangers. I call it 'Before the Border Falls'.*"

"Sounds like our line of work," he said. "I'm all ears. Let me hear it."

The heavy double glass of the isolation booth separated them, but through the glass, Angelica's gaze was locked directly onto him. In the control room, her husband sat behind the vast mixing console. He reached out and pushed a fader up. Instantly, the track filled the room, a dark, driving 1980's type groove anchored by a heavy, growling analog bassline that vibrated through the deck.

Angelica stood before the microphone, illuminated only by the soft amber glow of the music stand. She adjusted her headphones, took a quiet breath, and waited for her cue. As the crisp, 16th-note *arpeggios* began to pulse through her headphones, she leaned into the mic. Her voice came through the control room monitors; clear, cultured, and undeniably British, carrying an intimate breathiness over the dark, atmospheric synth pads.

Ooh, ooh, ooh
Always with you
Across the divide

Across the foreign city lines
The shadows stretch and intertwine
We trade the secrets in the dark
But always keep that vital spark
No matter where the borders fall
You are the answer when I call
Through every time zone, every flight
We are the beacons in the night.

Behind the desk, Alex leaned forward, his hands resting on the edge of the console. He knew her voice better than his own, but hearing her sing these words… a story of secret operations, shifting borders, and a devotion that survived every distance… hit him with full force. When the chorus swelled, the massive gated-reverb snare kicked in with a wallop, making the monitors pulse. Angelica's voice

soared, layered with double-tracked harmonies that filled the booth with warmth and power:

My love remains unwavering
A beacon light unshakeable
In every land unchangeable
A lifetime bond unbreakable
No matter where we find ourselves
In distant lands untamable
Our story is undeniable
A lifetime bond unbreakable.

Angelica didn't look at her screen once. She kept her eyes on him through the glass as she delivered every word, a testament to a lifetime of their shared history wrapped in a retro-1980's production. In that quiet studio, surrounded by cold technology and gear, her voice was the warmest thing in the room.

We move through currents fast and deep
But you are the promise that I keep
A fixed point in a changing world
As every danger is unfurled
Across the oceans dark and wide
You are the signal and my guide
An endless line that cannot break
No matter what the risks we take.

When the chorus swelled, the massive snare kicked in with a wallop, making the monitors pulse. Angelica's voice soared, layered with double-tracked harmonies that filled the booth with warmth and power:

My love remains unwavering
A beacon light unshakeable
In every land unchangeable
A lifetime bond unbreakable

No matter where we find ourselves
In distant lands untamable
Our story is undeniable
A lifetime bond unbreakable

Lifetime bond... unbreakable
Always with you... no matter where
Forever... my love
(Unbreakable...)

The last echo of the reverb faded into silence, leaving only the soft hum of the mixing console and the rhythmic click of the tape deck reaching the end of its reel.

In the control room, her husband sat motionless. Alex's hands remained resting on the edge of the desk, fingers pressed against the worn wood. He had spent over twenty years in deep space, overcoming about anything the universe cared to throw at him but for those three minutes, the starship commander in him had completely dissolved.

Through the glass, Angelica lowered the headphones to her neck. Her eyes remained locked on his, searching his face for a reaction. A faint, nervous smile tugged at the corner of her lips. He finally drew a long breath, pulled the main fader down, and clicked the talkback switch.

"That..." Alex's voice cracked slightly over the studio intercom. He cleared his throat. "Angie, that was... *incredible*!"

She slid off the stool, took off her headphones, and stepped out of the booth and into the control room. The air in the main studio was cooler, smelling faintly of ozone and warm dust.

"You really mean it?" she asked, her British accent quiet now, lacking the amplified power it had inside the booth. "I wasn't sure if the arrangement felt too modern or if the lyrics were too far off base. I was going for an old 1980's vibe."

He stood up from the console, bypassing the swivel chair, and walked over to meet her by the door.

“You hit it right on the head,” he said, taking both of her hands in his. “The snare, the bass... it feels like something out of a classic 80s album, but it sounded fresh, you know? But the words, Angie...” He looked down at her; his eyes warm in the dim studio light. “Is that really how you see us? After the travel, the long stretches apart...”

“Across every border, every flight,” she quoted softly, stepping closer into him. “I meant every word. It’s our story.”

He pulled her into a tight embrace, resting his chin on her head as the ambient light of the studio console reflected softly off the glass behind them. In the quiet room, surrounded by computers, faders, meters, and other equipment, the song Angelica had just created hung in the air like a promise made permanent.

He leaned down and forgetting where and who he was, he kissed her deeply. Angelica returned the kiss, just as hungrily.

“I love you, Alexander,” she purred. “More than you will know.”

“And I love you, my princess of the stars.” He ran his right hand through her hair. “With all my heart and soul.”