
When the Stars Shed Their Armor
An Original Novella
by Joey Bonice
STAR TREK
The Lexington Adventures

“Where the Stars Shed Their Armor”

An original novella by
Joseph Bonice

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

Adapted Lyrics & Compositions:
***“You're the Voice”* (1986) — Words and Music by Andy Qunta, Keith Reid, Maggie Ryder, and Chris Thompson. Originally recorded by John Farnham.**

***“Shout”* (1984/1985) — Music by Roland Orzabal and Ian Stanley. Originally recorded by Tears for Fears.**

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Prologue - Transfer of the Crown

D-day (D-0): 0013
King Edward VII's Hospital, Marylebone, United Kingdom

The steady, rhythmic hum of the life-support monitor was the only sound left in the private suite on the seventh floor of King Edward VII's Hospital. Outside, rain lashed against the tall windows overlooking Marylebone, blurring the distant, amber lights of central London into smudged streaks on the glass. Inside, the air smelled faintly of sterile antiseptic, crushed lilies, and the distinct, ozone tang of medical units.

Queen Elizabeth III lay small and pale against the white linen. Two years of living with the off-world pathogen, contracted on some far-flung diplomatic mission somewhere, had whittled the formidable monarch down to a fragile silhouette.

On the left side of the bed, Princess Karina, Elizabeth's twenty-five-year-old and youngest daughter, knelt on the hardwood floor, her head resting near her mother's arm, her fingers tightly interwoven with the thin, parchment-like hand of the woman who had raised her. Tears silently tracked through Karina's makeup, dripping onto the duvet.

On the right side stood Angelica McKnight, Elizabeth's forty-seven-year-old and eldest daughter. She wore her Starfleet duty uniform with the silver and gold pin, signaling the rank of a captain, gleaming on her right shoulder and left cuff, placed there barely two years ago. Angelica hadn't taken off the uniform, nor left the medical suite in two days in anticipation of this event as she had rushed from Buckingham to be there when called. She held her mother's other hand, her thumb gently tracing the smooth band of the royal signet ring that Elizabeth had worn for years.

Neither daughter said a word and they didn't move. They knew any moment could be the last, a moment they were both prepared and not prepared for. Elizabeth looked up at the ceiling.

"My daughters…" she said hoarsely and barely above a whisper. Karina had to struggle to hear it; Angelica, being trained as a communications officer, didn't suffer that handicap. "I love you

both—”

She closed her eyes. The monitor above the bed gave a low, descending tone and the glowing blue sinew of Elizabeth’s neural activity flatlined into a soft, unbroken horizontal light. Elizabeth’s chest rose one last time—a faint, shallow breath—and then settled into complete stillness.

Karina let out a choked, ragged sob, burying her face into the blankets. “Mum... *oh, God...*”

Angelica didn’t cry. Indeed… there was no visual reaction from Angelica at all. But her throat locked and a cold, heavy stone dropped into the pit of her stomach even as her Starfleet training instinctively kicked in. She squeezed her mother’s cooling fingers, her eyes wide, staring at the motionless face of the Queen.

She allowed a single tear to flow in sympathy.

For ten seconds, the world stopped. There was no Parliament, no starships, no crown. Just two daughters in a quiet room with their now-dead mother.

Karina wailed loudly. Angelica stood stock-still, not saying a word. She knew what was about to happen… and had tried to avoid for over twenty-five years. But tonight, the crown had caught up to Angelica, and she met it with a mixture of defiance and acceptance. After all, it had been her duty since the day she was born in that hospital room in High Wycombe all those years ago.

The heavy oak doors to the anteroom opened with a soft, pneumatic hiss. Sir James Davies, Elizabeth’s Private Secretary, stepped across the threshold. Behind him stood the hospital’s director of internal medicine and two Personal Protection Officers, assigned from the Royalty and Specialist Protection of London’s Metropolitan Police, in sharp black conservative suits.

Davies’ face was devoid of color, holding an encrypted black communications PADD in his hands. He didn’t look at the medical monitors. He already knew what had happened, even if Karina’s crying hadn’t been a giveaway. Instead, he looked straight at Angelica. Slowly, deliberately, the elder statesman bowed his head, then bent deeply at the waist.

“Your Majesty,” Davies said. His voice was barely above a

whisper, yet it shattered the quiet like a glass crystal falling on marble. Angelica felt a sudden, dizzying wave of vertigo. She knew that under British constitutional law, the throne was never vacant. The exact microsecond Elizabeth's heart stopped beating, the crown had migrated across the room and landed right on the Starfleet captain.

Karina flinched at the words, looking up from the bed with red-rimmed eyes, staring at her older sister as if Angelica had suddenly become a stranger.

"Time of death, zero-zero-fourteen," the doctor murmured, stepping forward with a stylus to sign the official death certificate. He knew any words would be useless, but he said them out of respect anyway. "I'm sorry."

Angelica slowly stood up straight, letting go of her mother's hand. She felt Karina's hand tighten desperately around her wrist, as if trying to anchor her sister before she was pulled away into the storm. She didn't even realize Karina had moved to be beside her sister. Angelica had seen death up close and personal; indeed, she had even ordered people to their deaths during her time in Starfleet. So, she and Death were companions of a sort. However, this time, it was different. Death had struck very close to home and personal.

"Sir James," Angelica said. Her voice sounded surprisingly steady; the cold, clear timbre of a Starfleet officer taking command of a starship. "Is everything ready?"

"It is, Your Majesty," Davies replied, his eyes fixed on the floor. "The Prime Minister is waiting on a secure line. The dispatch has been prepared." Davies lifted his black PADD, his thumb resting over a glowing red icon on the interface. "With your permission, ma'am... I will now transmit the signal."

Angelica looked down at her mother's peaceful face one last time. The battle was over for Elizabeth. But for Angelica, it was just beginning. Everything her mother had orchestrated in the last two years, the promotion to Captain and the reassignment to Earth to have Angelica be her personal liaison… it had all led to this exact second.

Angelica closed her eyes for a heartbeat. "Do it," she ordered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Davies pressed his thumb against the screen. In less than a

millisecond, the encrypted message shot up through the hospital's comms system, hitting the communications net before routing directly into the operations rooms at 10 Downing Street, Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco, the Federation President's office in Paris, the BBC newsroom in London, and the FNN newsroom in New York. The message contained only one line but that one line made history.

LONDON BRIDGE IS DOWN.

Outside the hospital, the shift was nearly immediate. The bright streetlights along the avenue dimmed by twenty percent as the city's automated municipal grid acknowledged the passing of the sovereign. In Earth orbit and throughout the Solar System, Starfleet starships would come to a full stop, and their navigational lights would be dimmed in luminescence for a full minute twenty-one times in a row, a maneuver known as "The Captain's Salute." The ensign flags atop Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament were already being winched down to half-mast in total darkness, as they would at Starfleet Headquarters and the Federation President's official residence. By the end of the day, all flags throughout the Federation would be lowered to half-mast in recognition to what could be described as a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Back inside the suite, the wooden doors opened once again. Four guards from the Coldstream Guards, wearing ceremonial black armbands over their uniforms, stepped into the anteroom. Behind them stood a junior secretary carrying a heavy, crimson-leather dispatch box stamped with the gold cipher of the late sovereign.

Angelica looked at the red box coming into the room. She had never once thought of abdication; Angelica would be damned if she would go down in history like her ancestor had. Though she had made no secret in the family that becoming queen was something she didn't desire, now that the moment was here, Angelica found that she quietly accepted the authority of the monarchy, just as she would if she had been assigned to an undesirable assignment.

Sir James stepped forward, uncapping a heavy silver fountain pen and unfolding the parchment scroll of the Accession Instrument. Even in a day where everything was electronic, there were times that

required the use of paper and ink.

This was one of those times.

"Before the Prime Minister arrives at the palace, ma'am," Davies said, his voice measured and formal, "constitutional procedures requires your formal declaration for the Privy Council records." He looked up, meeting her eyes with grave solemnity. "By what name will Your Majesty choose to reign?"

It was a question laden with centuries of political maneuvering. Angelica knew the establishment was quietly hoping she would choose *Victoria* or *Elizabeth*, anchoring her reign in traditional, predictable continuity. Angelica was determined to prove them wrong. She stood tall and she didn't hesitate. She had picked out her regnal name just a few moments ago and she knew what that would do.

Like she really gave a damn what others thought. It was her name and only she would have to live with it for the rest of her days.

"Angelica," she said loudly, cleanly, and clearly so all present would be witness.

Davies blinked, a momentary flicker of uncertainty breaching his composure. "Your Majesty... tradition often favors—"

"I am Queen Angelica the First," she interrupted, her voice ringing out like tempered steel across the room. Each of the words left her lips in flawless, razor-sharp tone, stripped of all informality. "Write it down, Sir James. I will *not* hide behind the dead, nor will I reign under a borrowed shadow. For better or worse, this is my name. It's the name I was born with and it's the name I will keep!"

Karina looked over, through her tears, and caught the glint in her sister's eye. She saw the spark, a subtle, dangerous signal that Angelica wasn't going to be the passive, ornamental monarch that either Downing Street or Parliament was expecting. Instead, Angelica looked like she would bring the mindset and free spirit of a Starfleet officer directly into the ancient halls of the monarchy. It almost made Karina laugh at the irony of it all. *That's what they get when Angelica defied them all and became the first heir apparent to enter Starfleet*, she thought. *They're in for one hell of a ride!*

Sir Davies paused for a fraction of a second, feeling the tectonic shift of power before lowering his pen to the parchment.

“Queen Angelica the First,” Davies repeated softly, inscribing the words in crisp black ink. “May God preserve Your Majesty.”

“And may God help the PM and Parliament,” Karina muttered under her breath.

“Your Majesty,” Sir Davies continued, motioning to the secretary as the red box was opened. “Prime Minister Vance is en route to Buckingham Palace. The Accession Council will convene at Saint James’s at eight o’clock this morning. These are the emergency state decrees and the official declarations of national mourning requiring your immediate signature.”

Karina released Angelica’s wrist, watching as three officials gently stepped between her and her sister to give the new Queen the required paperwork and to begin preparing the late Queen’s body.

“Can’t you give her a goddamned minute?” Karina snapped, her voice breaking with raw fury as she shoved past a junior aide, nearly knocking him to the deck. “Can’t you give us at least two lousy goddamn minutes to say goodbye?!”

“Karina,” Angelica said softly, placing a hand on her younger sister’s shoulder. Her tone said it all, “Trust me, Sis. I’ve got this.’

“Angie, look at them,” Karina whispered, tears spilling down her cheeks as she glared at the sea of suits and uniforms now filling the hospital room. “They aren’t even letting you breathe. She’s not even cold yet and they’re already trying to turn you into something you’re not.”

Angelica looked at the red dispatch box sitting open on the small table. She looked at the brass pen offered to her by the Private Secretary. Her sister was right. The crown wasn’t a headpiece; it was an iron cage, slamming shut bar by bar. Not that Angelica was going to allow that. Her mother made sure of that in the last two years they had together. In fact, just before entering the hospital for what would be her last time, Elizabeth extracted a promise from Angelica. And Angelica would be damned if she would break that promise for anyone or anything.

“It’s okay, Sis,” Angelica answered as she reached over pick up the pen. “I know what I’m doing.” But what she left unsaid that only Karina could hear was ‘they don’t know what I’ve got in mind

for them yet.'

Then Angelica picked up the pen and signed her name to the first document.

History was made with a stroke of a pen.

Chapter One - Accession

D+1: 0045, The First Day
U.S.S. *Lexington* (NCC-1709-A), En route to Earth

Captain Alexander McKnight was cursing very loudly and for a long period of time. Not only had the *Lexington* gotten held up when they ran into a storm of mini black holes which necessitated the ship go to the nearest dockyard (in this case, Starbase 12) for emergency repairs, it had blown the ship's (and Alex's) schedule right to hell. If it hadn't been for that mess, he and the *Lexington* would have been back home on Earth.

Two weeks earlier, Alex had gotten word from Sir James Davies requesting his presence in London. He knew why; the recall was a cover; it meant Elizabeth wasn't expected to last and Angelica would become queen. Alex wasn't happy with the hidden meaning; he had become the Prince Consort when he married Angelica; never mind that they had married at the Academy chapel instead of Westminster. When she became Queen, Alex was quite sure that both the Cabinet and Parliament would expect him to retire from Starfleet and take up the royal life. He was sure he was ready for that; he was only fifty-seven years old and had been planning to hit the mandatory retirement age of seventy before he retired.

As soon as *Lexington* pulled into the base, an ion storm had grounded all ships going to and from Starbase 12 and it lasted thirty-six hours. All starships, even a ship as powerful as the *Lexington*, did not go into ion storms for the sheer hell of it; in fact, unless specifically ordered, ships stayed away. Even *Lexington* would receive major systems damage which would have involuntarily extended her stay. And all that time, he worried that he would not be there in time when his wife needed him the most.

What was even worse what that not only had all the ships been grounded until the storm passed but all communications to Earth were almost shut off. All orders and "critical communications" had been routed to an *Epsilon*-class manned communications array that added

many hours to the transmission time. And Alex's messages, even though important, did not rate as "critical communications." He had even begged, then tried to intimidate the base commander for even a short message but every request met with the same answer: permission denied. Alex even took a shot at going directly to the commander of the comms array; he got the same answer. *That* had added to Alex's impatience and anger. It got so bad that his crew took to actively evading him, lest they be on the receiving end of his easily triggered wrath.

As soon as the storm cleared, Alex had virtually bullied the base commander into having *Lexington* being first on the departure list. So, here they were, still hours away from the Sol System and running as fast as they could at about warp twelve point seven on damaged warp engines that were also due for an overhaul.

Doing this was, at the best of times, an iffy proposition. The chief engineer was sitting on top of the engines, both coaxing and threatening them, trying to keep them together long enough to arrive safely at Earth.

Alex was sitting in his office off the bridge, steaming mad with a half cup of hours-old iced vanilla coffee on the ancient oak desk in front of him. Alex had programmed the computer to send his messages via the *Lexington*'s transmitter the moment they could. The residual subspace disruption from the now-passed ion storm wasn't helping his nerves. For all he knew, his wife was now the queen, and they were more than halfway between Earth and Starbase 12, making Alex feel powerless and helpless. Those feelings, rarely felt by a starship commander, did not help his temper. Alex knew Angelica needed him by her side and just knowing that only served to make him livider.

He cussed loudly once again when the message failed to send and was still cursing when there was the door's chime. He bid entrance and a silent prayer for the poor soul that was going to be on the end of his wrath, however involuntary that would be.

Captain Brieanna Smith gingerly entered the office, as if she were fearing for her life. She was a captain in rank but remained subordinate to Alex. Thanks to *Enterprise* having three full captains (Kirk, Spock, and Scott), Starfleet had authorized an upgrade in the

Lexington's executive officer position from a Commander to Captain. While a step in the right direction since *Lexington* served as Starfleet's Flagship, he felt that the one more slot needed upgrading. And that's where Alex was meeting resistance. But that seemed to be the last thing on his mind as she walked across the couch area and to his office.

"Goddamn it," he raged, looking like he could actually punch the monitor in front of him. "That goddamned storm and its goddamned effects! *Goddamn it to hell and gone*!"

"Language, Alex," Smith chided him as she sat in a chair across from him.

"I don't give a flying f—"

"*ALEX*!" she shouted. "You kiss your wife with that mouth?"

Her brief outburst seemed to snap Alex out of his temper. "Sorry," he said semi-sheepishly but still with a lot of heat in his tone.

"Still mad about comms, I see," she said.

"Yeah, at this goddamned mothe—" He motioned to the monitor and stopped when Brieanna speared him with a stern look and shook her head. "And no word about what's going on back home is only making it worse. I said I'd be there if anything happened and we're busting our asses in getting back to Earth. Kind of frustrating, you know?"

"I do know… you've been miserable before we pulled into starbase and we're all suffering for it. And I'm putting it *very* mildly."

Alex eyes widened a bit. "Is it that obvious?"

Brieanna shrugged. "Omit the curse words but yes, you've been a bear to live with these last two weeks. And try as you might, you've not been entirely successful in hiding it from your crew."

Instead of getting defensive like she thought, he stayed silent, as if thinking it over. It seemed like a long time, but in reality, only seconds, before he spoke again. "What are you doing here anyway, Anne?"

She smoothed her bomber jacket before replying. "Good news. We're outrunning the effects of the ion storm much faster than expected."

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "Really?" he said, not entirely successful in hiding his relief.

"Yes. Gillian says we should be back to routine communications in an hour, maybe less."

Alex looked relieved at this news. "Great!"

"And Sophie says she's worked more of her Hawaiian magic on the warp engines." Brieanna was referring to the ship's chief engineer. "Max speed is now warp thirteen point seven five, but that's all she can give and still make it home in one piece."

He knew that Commander Sophea Bennington-Fox had been making additional repairs; in fact, he had seen her overtime reports to back up the repair schedule. He had to wonder if the dark-haired Hawaiian had gotten any sleep since their arrival.

"Has Sophie gotten any sleep?"

Brieanna didn't blink an eye. "I don't think so. She's been so wrapped up with the repairs then sitting on the engines that I think she forgot to make time for sleeping."

Alex nodded and took a sip of his coffee. "Typical Sophie. You tell her that she's to get a full night's sleep tonight. And her team too. Tell her it's not a request."

Brieanna smiled, knowing how that conversation would go. "I'll tell her."

"Anything else?"

"In a better mood now?"

Alex cracked a small smile. "No, but I should be when I found out what's going on."

D+1: 0100, The First Day
En route to Buckingham Palace

Before she knew it, Angelica was in the royal flitter, surrounded by other flitters filled with security guards, and headed away from the hospital. For the forty minutes since their mother passed away and now, Angelica could only remember signing some official papers as "Queen Angelica I." She didn't remember walking away from her mother's body and being herded into this flitter, now making its way to Buckingham Palace with only Sir Davies and Karina in attendance.

I think her death is affecting me more deeply than I thought, Angelica thought. *Had I done this back on the* Lexington*, I'd have been in real trouble. I can't even think straight!*

She tuned back into the discussion Karina and Sir James were having and it sounded like Karina was letting Sir James have it right on the chin.

"… I know all about the succession," Karina was saying, "and Operation London Bridge, but it's cold that you didn't give us just two minutes alone with Mum and you know it."

Sir Davies sighed. "Protocol demanded…"

"To bloody hell with protocol," Karina snapped. "It's still a damn dirty thing to do."

"Karina," Angelica said softly. Just that word seemed to stop their bickering. "I've… *we've* got our duty. Right now, there's a country to run and like it or not, I'm the one having to run it."

"Spoken like a true Starfleet captain," hissed Karina. "Mission first and always, right, Captain?"

Only the knowledge that Karina was hurting as bad as she was prevented Angelica from slapping her sister. But Karina saw Angelica's shoulder muscles tense; that was almost as bad as the act would have been.

"When I was in Starfleet, my dear sister," Angelica said coldly, "I learned one thing about command… you take care of the people, and they will take care of the mission. And right now, burying our mother *is* the mission. What I want is immaterial." *For the moment*, she almost added but caught herself.

Karina hunkered down even further in her seat, if such a thing was possible. "It's still not right."

Angelica chose to ignore her sister's remark. After all, Karina was closer to their mother than Angelica had been and Karina was hurting just as bad, if not worse, than Angelica was. Angelica knew this was Karina's pain being expressed, rather the real thoughts from the sister she loved.

She saw Sir Davies wanting to speak. "Go ahead, Sir James," Angelica said quietly, looking out the window. "I'm listening."

"The Prime Minister will meet you at 0300 in the Private

Audience Room," Sir James reported. "He will detail the immediate operations that must be undertaken."

Angelica had noticed the dim streetlights for the first time. "Is there something wrong with the lights?" she asked, apparently not taking notice of what Sir Davies had said.

"It's protocol, ma'am," he answered, not daring to look at the sulking Karina. "All city lights have been dimmed for your mother."

"If we still had flitters with living being drivers," Angelica commented, "we'd be in real trouble with the dim lighting." She finally looked to her mother's… no, *her* Private Secretary. "How long will the meeting with the PM last? I'm not really up to meeting him."

"I would not imagine it will take long, ma'am. Just some details to attend to prior to the Accession Council."

Angelica nodded as she returned her gaze to the outside world. Normally, even at this time of night, London was busy. But today, it seemed like everyone and everything had gone home early. They'd only passed only a few off-world tourists as they sped to the palace and some additional people who seemed to have taken some liberties with the local pubs, if their walking was any indication. Otherwise, the roads were silent.

"Just promise me one thing, Sis," squeaked Karina as the caravan approached Buckingham Palace. "Don't let them crush your free spirit."

Angelica turned to look at her younger sister. Karina did not realize the import of what she had just said.

People were starting to crowd the Mall as the royal motorcade began to approach the gates. Angelica saw people gathering around the giant fountain in front of the palace. Some were crying openly, others were laying flowers at the fence line, while still more others were looking at the Palace with a stunned or solemn look.

And it broke Angelica's heart to see such a sight.

"I'm not planning on it," Angelica said. She pointed at the crowds as they went through the gate. "For their sake, if nothing else."

D+1: 0130, The First Day
Buckingham Palace

Angelica had sequestered herself in the audience room, still trying to process the shock. She was sitting at the desk with a full glass of scotch that she had poured but left untouched. The last time she'd been like this was twenty years ago when she had lost her uncle, her ship, and her husband had gone missing. She had gone to the Scottish Highlands, found a remote village, and proceeded to get severely drunk. Later, she had went out into the snow and screamed at the universe before curling up in the snow. If it hadn't been for the alcohol and the police officer who had come to find her, it was possible she might have frozen to death. She had learned her lesson when it came to alcohol… never drink when your dark emotions were in control. Hence the untouched scotch.

She looked at the clock on the fireplace mantle and did some mental calculations. It would be about 5:30 in the evening in San Francisco… just about time for the news to hit. She had to move fast if she were going to beat the press. Angelica used her passcode to make a call to Starfleet Academy where their eldest daughter, also named Karina after Angelica's sister, was just finishing her first year at that institution. Angelica hoped that Karina, known as 'Kari' to her friends and family so she would not be confused with her famous aunt, wasn't listening to any news as the operations officer came on the screen.

"Academy Operations, Lieutenant Garcia," said the officer on the screen. "How may I help you?"

"I need to speak to Commander Barnes right away."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but Commander Barnes is…"

Angelica almost lost her temper. "I don't care *what* she is into," she said, trying to remain calm. "Get her on this line *right now*. You can interpret that as an order from a captain, Lieutenant."

That was all Garcia needed and the next minute was pure torture for Angelica as she waited for her offspring to appear on the screen. She hoped she wasn't too late.

The viewer switched to a classroom setting with cadets filing out in the background. Angelica was looking at Commander Lisa Barnes, Karina's cadet commander.

"Captain McKnight!" she said, looking surprised. If she was annoyed at the interruption, she was doing a great job in not showing it. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I need to speak to my daughter, Karina McKnight. Immediately."

"Captain," Barnes said a bit apologetically but firmly, "you know that communications with first year cadets are restricted. I can't…"

"*I'm tired of being told what can and can't be done, Commander*!" Angelica said coldly, a sign she was beyond furious. It was rare she pulled rank but, in this case, Angelica had no qualms exercising the privilege. "In an emergency, I can speak with her thfough her cadet commander. You. And since this is an emergency, I want my daughter on this line *right away*!"

Angelica didn't have to say the threat out loud 'or else pack your bags and get ready for Starbase 80!' Her cold rage, almost visibly radiating, said it all.

"One moment… she just left the classroom." Barnes left as Angelica tried to rein in her temper. It wasn't often that she did so, but when she did… Alex had once described it as being stuck in an Artic blizzard with no winter gear.

Moments later, Karina appeared. She happened to be one-half of their identical twin daughters. Though they looked exactly alike, their personalities could not have been more different. Kari's personality was more like her father while the other twin, younger by two minutes, was more in line with Angelica's temperament and personality. Kari was wearing her red hair in a bob, which actually looked good in a cadet's uniform. She smiled as she saw her mother on the screen.

"Mom!" Karina said. *God, she even sounds a lot like a female version of my husband*, Angelica thought. "What's up? You know we're not supposed to get calls until Sunday."

"Kari… Karina," Angelica said, stumbling over her daughter's name. "Have you seen the news?"

Kari tilted her head, wondering what her mom was getting at. "No. I was about to go to dinner when Commander Barnes yanked me

in here." She looked at her mom. "Something's wrong. Is it Dad?"

Angelica took a deep breath, acutely aware that she was about -to shatter Karina's world. "Honey, it's your Grand-Mum. There's no easy way for me to say this… honey… she's passed away."

Karina sat still and silent, as if she could not believe what she heard. She continued to look at the screen. "Oh… that can't be right. I just got a letter from her the other day! She can't have died."

"She passed away about an hour ago," Angelica said, wishing she could reach through the screen to hold her. Karina just sat there, just like her father would when getting bad news. *And just like Alex, she'll try to bottle it up*, Angelica thought, *and say she's okay when she's clearly not.*

"Oh, my dear baby girl," Angelica said gently, putting her hand on the screen. "I wish I were there. I want to be there."

"It's… okay, Mom," Karina was clearly fighting back tears as the twins had been close to their grandmother. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not. I can see it."

"I'm fine, Mom," Karina firmly insisted, finally letting a tear fall down her cheek. "Really."

Angelica sighed, her heart breaking with her daughters. "You are just like your father, you know that?"

"So you've told me, Mom," Karina said. "Where's Jenni? Have you told her?" 'Jenni' was Jennifer, her twin sister.

"She's here at Buckingham. Came in late this evening from Boston and visited Grand-Mum for a few minutes. I'll tell her like I told you."

"And Dad? How's he? Does he know?"

"Last I heard, Kari, he was burning up the *Lexington*'s warp engines getting here. He should be here tomorrow morning."

"Least Dad will be there with you," Karina said, still holding back her tears. She turned her head and listened to an off-screen voice then nodded. "Understood, Commander." She turned back to her mother. "I've got to go, Mom. Will you be here anytime soon?"

"I'll have to come to San Francisco so, yes, I will be there to visit you, darling." Angelica looked on with motherly concern. "Can I get you anything, or do anything?"

"No. If you can, spare me a few minutes when you get here, okay?"

"I promise. I love you, Karina. We love you."

"I know, Mom. Love you two. See you."

Angelica was reaching for the button to terminate the call when Commander Barnes came back on the line.

"Captain," she said apologetically. "Sorry, but I couldn't help but overhear. Did you say Cadet McKnight's grandmother passed away?"

"Yes."

"You have our condolences, Captain," she said. "I'll be sure to send her to the counselor and see about getting her relief for tomorrow's activities. Is there anything we should know?"

"Yes." Angelica straightened. "Her grandmother was the Queen of the United Kingdom. I wish for the cadet's privacy concerning her royal heritage to be respected."

"Can do, Captain. Anything else?"

"Ask the Commandant to call me in a couple of days. I need to ask a favor."

"Still can do."

"And I know this is against policy concerning first year cadets but… can you tell me how she is doing?"

Barnes smiled. "Actually, one of my ancestors was the first female President of the United States, so I can somewhat relate. I will let you know if Karina needs anything. On the down low, of course."

"Of course," Angelica smiled, now knowing the commander would help the grieving cadet, even if Karina didn't know it. "Thank you, Commander."

"You're welcome, Captain."

D+1: 0300, The First Day
Buckingham Palace

The heavy mahogany doors of the Private Audience Room on the first floor of Buckingham Palace clicked shut with a sharp, definitive snap. Outside, a three o'clock rain beat a relentless,

rhythmic tattoo against the tall windows looking out over the dark, rain-slicked stones of the quadrangle. Inside, the room smelled of old beeswax, damp wool, and the faint, bitter aroma of dark roast espresso.

Prime Minister Alistair Vance adjusted his silk tie and smoothed the lapels of his charcoal suit. At fifty-four, Vance was a master of political posture, a veteran parliamentarian who had maneuvered through countless crises and two coalition collapses with a smooth, unruffled charm. He had spent the flitter ride from 10 Downing Street mentally rehearsing his tone: solemn, deferential, yet reassuringly firm. He was here to guide a grieving Queen through the overwhelming machinery of state.

He found her standing at the far end of the room, near a high mahogany display cabinet housing Queen Victoria's naval chart. *How appropriate*, he thought. *I knew the Queen was in Starfleet, but I wasn't expecting it to be* this *evident.*

Angelica hadn't changed out of her Starfleet uniform. Her white turtleneck collar remained fresh, the silver and gold pins catching the soft yellow glow of the wall sconces. Her eyes were rimmed with a faint red shadow of exhaustion, but her posture was straight, feet set shoulder-width apart, hands clasped loosely behind her back in the classic stance known as 'parade rest'.

"Your Majesty," Vance said, bowing deeply at the waist. He held the position for two full seconds before rising, injecting a warm, practiced sympathy into his voice. "May I extend my deepest, most profound condolences. The entire Cabinet—indeed, the whole country and Commonwealth—grieves with you and Princess Karina tonight. Queen Elizabeth the Third was a steadying light in turbulent times."

"Thank you, Prime Minister," Angelica replied. Her voice was surprisingly quiet, but utterly devoid of tremor or weakness. "My mother spoke highly of you during your tenure with her. Please, sit."

Vance gestured toward the pair of matching wingback armchairs near the unlit fireplace, but Angelica didn't move toward them. Instead, she stepped over to the long conference table where a red leather dispatch box—her first red box—sat unlocked. Vance paused, catching himself before his eyebrows could rise. He joined

her at the table, placing a secure PADD beside the dispatch box.

"Sir Davies has informed me that you've already executed the Accession Instrument," Vance said, leaning one hand lightly against the edge of the table. "A historic moment, ma'am. Though he mentioned there was a slight…" he searched for the right word then found it. "…*irregularity* regarding your regnal designation."

Angelica turned her head slightly, her light brown eyes locking onto his. "An *irregularity*, Prime Minister?"

"He said you declared your regnal name as *Angelica the First*," Vance said, offering a small, paternal smile meant to soften the critique. "Traditionally, during times of national transition, the Crown benefits from historical continuity. *Elizabeth IV* or *Victoria II* would have sent a powerful message of stability to the markets and the news networks."

"I hate to tell you, but I am not a brand, nor will I be a reboot, Prime Minister," Angelica said cleanly. "For better or for worse, I *am* the sovereign. My mother's legacy belongs to her, as do our ancestors. However, *my* reign will be conducted under *my* own name. The one given to me at birth. I like my name and I don't see a reason to change it. *At all*."

Vance's smile faltered for a fraction of a second before he smoothed it back into place, recognizing the steel beneath her words. *She's not going to be a rubber stamp,* he realized. *It's a good thing to know that this early in the game. It'll help me decide how I handle my relations with her.*

"Of course, Your Majesty. Naturally, the decision is yours. I merely speak to the psychological appetite of the public." He tapped the PADD. "Now, onto the immediate matters of state. Operation London Bridge is already in motion. We've drafted the schedule for the next ten days: the lying-in-state at Westminster, the procession through the capital, and the state funeral." He picked up his PADD and passed it across the mahogany polish. "We have also taken the liberty of drafting your first address to the nation in Parliament, as well as an Order in Council temporarily expanding Cabinet emergency authorities to handle the logistics and security during the mourning period."

Angelica picked up the tablet. Her thumb flicked rapidly

across the glass screen—not reading as a casual viewer would, but scanning with the trained, analytical speed of a Starfleet officer reviewing telemetry before entering a contested sector.

Vance watched her, expecting her to pause at the lofty, poetic rhetoric of the eulogy. Instead, her finger stopped on page four.

"This Section Seven," Angelica said, her tone dropping an octave. "Paragraph Two. Emergency Public Security Directive. You are requesting temporary authority to suspend all civil broadcasts across London for forty-eight hours prior to and during the funeral."

"A standard security precaution, ma'am," Vance said smoothly. "With hundreds of domestic dignitaries, planetary and Federation dignitaries from both on and off planet, and Starfleet admirals, the Cabinet feels we must ensure security against potential security leaks."

"This isn't a security precaution, Prime Minister," she said, looking up from the screen, her gaze unyielding. "It's a news blackout. Removing the media when they have a right to be there. Cabinet is attempting to use my mother's death to choke off civilian media access because Downing Street is terrified of an unscripted public sentiment."

Vance's posture stiffened slightly. The smooth, bureaucratic veneer parted just enough to reveal the sharp, pragmatic politician beneath; not an enemy, but a man trying to manage a country.

"Your Majesty," Vance said, his voice dropping into a lower, more candid register. "Constitutional governance is a delicate balancing act. The government must manage the information environment during a period of national vulnerability. If the anyone panics or start speculative runs on the markets…"

"The Cabinet does not command this crown, Mr. Vance," Angelica interrupted quietly. She didn't raise her voice, but the sudden heavy weight behind her words pressed against the ancient wood of the room. Her tone carried the pristine, polished weight of standard court English with its clean vowels and precise consonants. But beneath the royal cadence lay a low, smoky rasp forged on starships; an accent that could address Parliament with effortless poise or strip the paint off a bulkhead with three quiet words. "I will *not* sign an Order in Council that treats the public like a political liability."

Vance stared at her across the red dispatch box. For a long

moment, the only sound in the room was the rain hitting the glass and the low, mechanical hum of the palace air scrubbers. Instead of anger, a strange, grudging realization settled over Vance. She wasn't being difficult out of ignorance; she was thinking like a commander who trusted her people to do what was expected of them after she told them what needed to be done.

"Ma'am," Vance said carefully, his tone losing its defensive edge. "You've spent years on starships exploring the frontier. Command on a starship is direct; orders are given and lines are held. But the British constitution is a web of compromises. The monarch has the right to advise, to warn, and to consent. She does *not* get to dictate policy to Parliament or the Cabinet."

Angelica leaned forward slightly, resting her fingertips on the edge of the mahogany table, directly over the open red box.

"I'm well aware of my constitutional limits, Prime Minister," she said. "My mother made sure I knew *precisely* where my authority ends. But do not mistake my uniform, nor my newness to this position for political naïveté. And do *not* assume that because I am grieving that I'm blind to executive overreach. I will sign off on the funeral itineraries. I will fulfill every ceremonial duty required of me under London Bridge. But I will not sign Section Seven as it's currently written."

She picked up the digital stylus, struck a clean thick line through the security directive on the screen, and then signed her name beneath the remaining funeral protocols: *Angelica R.*

She slid the tablet back to him. Vance looked down at the crossed-out section. He didn't yell and he didn't throw a fit. He simply let out a slow, measured breath, his jaw tightening before relaxing into a thin, accepting line. He put the tablet back in and closed the leather covered box.

"Well," Vance said quietly, a faint, wry shadow of respect touching his eyes. "The Cabinet will have to rewrite its briefing notes for tomorrow morning."

"I have full confidence in your drafting abilities, Prime Minister," Angelica replied, stepping back into her parade rest stance. *I can already see we're going to drive each other crazy*, she thought,

but I also know a good thing when I see it. He's standing up to me. That will be useful later on. What I don't *need is an arse kisser!*

Vance offered a proper, professional nod, not a reluctant court bow, but the acknowledgment of one leader to another. *She's going to drive me crazy*, he thought, unintentionally mirroring what Angelica was thinking, *but then, maybe the monarchy needs to have a fresh perspective. She's been away for almost a quarter of a century so maybe it would be good at bringing that perspective.*

"Goodnight, Your Majesty," Vance said, turning toward the mahogany doors. "I shall see you at the Accession Council."

"Goodnight, Prime Minster," she said.

As the heavy doors closed behind him, Angelica stood alone in the quiet, echoing room. She looked down at the open red dispatch box. Angelica let out a long, slow breath, closing her eyes as the first real wave of exhaustion hit her.

"Well," she murmured to the empty room. "He's going to drive me mad, but I think we have the same goal. I think we can work with that."

She pulled the PADD out of the red box and picked up her pen.

D+1: 0500, The First Day
Buckingham Palace

Angelica hadn't gotten a wink of sleep and, with tired eyes, was watching from the window as the footman posted the dark-edged notice at the gate as the first rays of the sun rose. Angelica had drafted the notice herself, against the advice of Sir Davies.

The message itself was simple: *Queen Elizabeth III died peacefully at King Edward VII's Hospital early this morning. I will remain in London until the end of the funeral. I appreciate your support and sympathy at this difficult time.*

Angelica was tired but sleep had been elusive. She wasn't a coffee drinker but today, she would be relying on caffeine to help carry her through the day. Turning from the window, she rang for a page and ordered a pot of hot coffee and a setting for two. She returned to the window, seeing the crowds forming, even at this early hour.

As for Angelica, she didn't quite feel like herself. Her feelings throughout the night had alternated between compromise, anger, and sorrow; emotions were very passionate and very dangerous. Over the last two years, Elizabeth had spent many an hour in this very room coaching her eldest daughter on British constitutional law, court protocols, the queen's duties, and such. Elizabeth had continued to mentor and coach, even while on her sick bed, on all the tricks of the trade. So, when Elizabeth had passed away, Angelica felt she was up to the task.

What Angelica didn't want to admit was that Elizabeth's passing had really hit her hard. The daughter with the red and silver hair felt angry that her mother had left both her and her sister behind to deal with this mess, though everything had been already prearranged. She also felt sadness that her mother had left her only two girls behind. Angelica felt these emotions so intently that she started to fear for her own sanity. She felt that she was going to go temporarily insane and trash everything in her way and if she didn't keep it in check that she would go mad.

Angelica pulled out her PADD that had been sitting on a nearby table and began writing. She hadn't been songwriting much lately, but she felt that she had to write something to sum up how she felt. It was as though she was simply taking dictation as she jotted down what she heard in her mind…

A Sovereign's Lullaby

The castle halls are much too wide,
Nowhere left for grief to hide.
I trace the velvet on the chair,
And turn to speak, but you're not there.
The crown is heavy on my brow,
I don't know how to rule right now.

Just a girl who misses home,
Sitting on a golden throne...

Close your eyes, the storm has passed,
Sleep the way you wanted at last.
Mother, whisper through the dark,
Guide my hand and leave your mark.
I'll keep the fires burning high,
Beneath the quiet, endless sky.

They want a queen of marble stone,
They don't know I'm standing all alone.
They see the sashes and the lace,
They never saw your gentle face.

Close your eyes, the storm has passed,
Sleep the way you wanted at last.
Mother, whisper through the dark,
Guide my hand and leave your mark.
I'll keep the fires burning high,
Beneath the quiet, endless sky.

Sleep now...

The attendant knocked with a pot of coffee and two cups on a tray in his hand. Right behind him was Sir Davies. Angelica didn't

feel like talking at the moment so pretended not to hear the two enter.

"Your Majesty," said Sir Davies in greeting as the attendant put his tray on a table and beat a dignified, but hurried, retreat. Angelica pretended not to still not hear as she looked down at the crowd, which seemed to be growing exponentially by the moment. She estimated that by mid-morning that the Mall would be full of beings from all parts of the Federation. She even saw a group on Andorians, Vulcans, and Tellarites already lining up to show their respects. The rain that had battered London through the night had settled into a heavy, woolly gray dampness, clinging to the tall glass panes of the sitting room overlooking the palace gardens.

"Your Majesty," Sir Davies repeated. Again, Angelica pretended not to hear him. *I think it would be more convincing if I were wearing headphones*, she thought. *He knows I hear him.*

Sir Davies walked to the table and repeated his greeting in a louder, but firm and respectful, tone. Angelica sighed and finally turned to him. "Sir James," she simply said as she walked to the table.

"Ma'am," he said, "I wanted to quickly brief you on this morning's activities."

She poured her a cup of coffee and put in creamer and sugar. "That's not why you're here. I know what happens today so you're really here to check up on me; seeing how I am."

Sir Davies rewarded her with a slight smile. "You caught me."

Angelica graced him with a slight smile of her own as she took a sip of her coffee. Sir Davies had been with her family for nearly thirty years and was intensely loyal to them. To check on her would not been unexpected from him. "You did the same thing with my mother in times of crisis. Thank you."

He nodded acknowledgement at the compliment. "How are you, ma'am?"

"I'm fine," she lied.

"Are you?"

In reality, she wasn't, but she didn't want to burden him with that. "Yeah, I am."

"Have you slept at all last night?"

Angelica shrugged. "An hour or two."

He knew that she was lying but there was nothing he could say or do at that moment, so he let it slide. "How about some breakfast? I know you didn't eat all day yesterday."

That part was true. In fact, Angelica had barely left her mother's bedside except to refresh herself. She was still wearing the Starfleet uniform from yesterday.

"I'm not hungry at the moment," she said and that was the truth. She didn't feel hungry though she knew she would have to have something soon.

"You should have something to eat, ma'am," said Sir Davies, not realizing he was putting words to her thoughts. "After all, it wouldn't look good for the current queen to be in the hospital literally a day after she had ascended to the throne."

That comment had hurt, though it wasn't intended to. He could see it on her face, though she chose not to acknowledge the remark.

"Sorry," he quickly amended. She wasn't aware she was wearing a look of hurt on her face when he said that. "I didn't mean offense. I meant—"

"I know what you meant, James," she snapped, maybe a little more forcefully that she had intended. She heard her hard tone and softened it. "I know you only mean well." She finally noticed that her sister wasn't with him. "Where's Karina?"

"She's sleeping in her room here at Buckingham."

"I see," she finally said.

"She should be awake—"

"She's awake now," came a fresh female voice. The now Princess of Wales, Karina, walked into the room.

"Karina, are you feeling any better?"

Karina made a beeline to the coffee and poured herself a cup before answering. "I feel awful, but I'll be fine, Angie."

"Your Highness," Davies acknowledged. "Would you care to eat?"

"Not right now, Mr. Davies. Right now, I need to wake up."

"I see." Davies could sense the two sisters wanted some alone time, so he decided to leave for the moment. "Ma'am, I also wanted to remind you about the Accession Council. It will meet at 10 AM this

morning."

Angelica looked at the clock and saw it was 7:14 AM. "I got it, Sir James. Thank you."

"Your Majesty." In contrast to the attendant, he was a lot more dignified in leaving.

Finally, the two sisters were alone. Unlike Angelica, Karina was wearing a simple black dress, signifying she was in mourning. She sat curled in the corner of a plush velvet sofa, wrapped in a black cashmere shawl, her eyes swollen as her fingers absently traced the crest embroidered on her coffee cup.

Angelica looked at the fire in the stone hearth and saw it had been reduced to a low bed of glowing amber coals. On the low mahogany coffee table was not only the coffee she had requested but also a PADD concerning the Accession Council.

"You all right, Karina?"

Karina took a sip of coffee. "I'm doing some better than I was last night, Angie. And looks like I'm doing better than you're doing."

Angelica looked down at her clothes. "I know." Angelica took a sip, grimacing at the bitter taste. "I'll go shower first, then change into a fresh uniform."

Karina looked to her sister over her coffee. "Who are you and where's my leather-crazy sister? She's the leather wearer of the family!"

The fact that she was teasing her sister showed that Karina was indeed feeling better. Angelica slightly smiled at the weak attempt at teasing. "You're right in the respect that I *adore* wearing leather clothing but, in this case, I'll make do with leather underwear."

Karina weakly laughed. "In all seriousness, Angie, how are you feeling?"

Angelica finally sat down beside her sibling at the couch, taking a drink of coffee before responding. "To tell the truth, not at all well."

"Did you get any sleep? Have you eaten at all?"

"No, and no."

Karina shook her head, having wavy brunette curls brush her face. "Mum would say that's not good for you."

"I got the riot act already," Angelica warned. "From Sir James."

"It's the concern of one sister to another. Whether you like it or not, you're the queen now. People are going to look up to you. Can't do that lying sick in a bed."

Angelica didn't answer right away. "I know," she finally said.

Karina leaned over and took her sister's hand. "Angie, I'm here for you. I'm your sister. You can tell me anything."

Angelica looked at her sister's hand. "To be honest, I've no idea how I feel. All these emotions are whirling around, and I don't know which one I should be feeling. I don't know if I should be crying my eyes out or tear up everything in my path."

Karina looked at the redhead queen. "All I can say, Sis, is to be yourself. Which you were last night with all that 'Angelica the First' stuff.

"He called it an *irregularity*," Angelica said softly, her voice carrying the dry, raspy edge of fatigue as she looked out at the mist-shrouded quadrangle.

"Who did?"

"Alistair Vance stood right there at three in the morning and told me that declaring as *Angelica the First* lacked 'historical continuity'."

Karina let out a faint, watery laugh, shaking her head. "Mum would have laughed in his face. Or given him that terrible, razor-sharp look she used when someone suggested changing something about the Christmas broadcast." Her voice softened, trailing off into the quiet room. "God, Angie... none of this… my God, it doesn't *feel* real. I kept expecting Mum to walk through the doors and ask if the rain was going to ruin the garden party."

"I know," Angelica murmured, turning back toward her sister. "I'm the same way."

Before Karina could answer, the heavy double doors at the end of the sitting room clicked open softly.

"Miss Michelle McKnight to see you, Your Majesty," said the page.

"Show her in," Angelica ordered. Michelle McKnight stood in the entryway. She was clad in a simple, tailored charcoal suit, her dark

hair pulled back neatly, carrying a messenger bag over her shoulder. She lacked the rigid, polished posture of the palace staff or a Starfleet officer. She carried herself with the calm, grounded presence of someone whose life was spent analyzing history rather than being crushed under its weight.

"I hope I'm not intruding," Michelle said gently, her voice carrying a warm, familiar American cadence that instantly cut through the stifling, antique atmosphere of the palace.

"Michelle!" Angelica cried, forgetting for a moment she was now a royal. "God, it's good to see you!"

"Likewise, Angie. Alex says he's on the edge of the Solar System so he should be here in an hour. He told me where I could find you." She smiled. "You'd think something was going here today. The guards downstairs were... *very* enthusiastic about checking my credentials."

Karina looked up, a genuine, relieved smile breaking through her quiet grief. "Michelle! Great to see you!" She looked pointedly at Angelica. "I don't think I can manage Angie all by myself!"

"*Et tu*, Karina?" Angelica said, a faint smile finally touching her lips for the first time all morning. "*Et tu*, Michelle?"

"*Someone's* got to look out for you two," Michelle said.

Michelle stepped into the room, setting her bag down near the armchair. She walked over to Karina first, wrapping her in a warm, solid embrace. "Seriously, I am so, so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Karina whispered, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment before pulling back.

Michelle then turned to Angelica, looking at her in-law up and down, taking in her Starfleet uniform and the undeniable weight trying to slump her shoulders. Michelle didn't bow, nor did she treat her like a royal. She simply stepped forward and pulled Angelica into a tight, firm hug.

"How are you holding up… uh, Your Majesty?" Michelle asked softly, stepping back but keeping a supportive hand on Angelica's arm.

"It's 'Angie' to you," Angelica replied, letting out a long, quiet breath. "I'm surviving, though the Prime Minister is already trying to

edit my name and censor the news feeds."

Michelle gave a small, dry chuckle, glancing around the grand sitting room at the oil paintings of 18th-century monarchs, the gilded molding, and the ancient red dispatch box resting near the tea tray.

"Well, as a museum director, I have to tell you, Angie… most people visit historic institutions," Michelle said, her eyes twinkling with a subtle, affectionate wit. "You've officially moved into one."

Karina let out a real, genuine laugh this time, pressing her hand to her mouth. "That is terrifyingly accurate."

"It really is," Angelica agreed.

Michelle pulled out one of the heavy dining chairs and sat down across from them, leaning her forearms on her knees. Her tone shifted into something grounded and thoughtful.

"Look," Michelle said gently, looking between both sisters. "You want my opinion?"

"I think," Angelica said, "that I'm about to get it whether I want it or not."

Michelle smiled. "Angie, I'm a curator for the Fleet Museum. I've spent my entire career studying how societies build legends out of people. They wrap them in velvet and bronze until you can't see the human being underneath anymore. What everyone wants right now is a museum exhibit. They want a predictable icon to keep the markets calm and the people happy." She looked directly at Angelica, her gaze steady. "But you're not an artifact, Angie. You're a Starfleet officer who happens to now be a Queen. Do me a favor?"

Angelica nodded.

"Don't let them turn you into an exhibit before you've even walked into Saint James's Palace today."

Angelica looked at her sister-in-law, feeling a sudden, deep sense of gratitude. Surrounded by centuries of rigid protocol, royal courtiers, and parliamentary handlers, Michelle was a breath of clear, unfiltered reality, an anchor reminding her of who she was beneath the crown.

"I'm not about to be an exhibit," Angelica said softly. "I am going to take my oath as Angelica the First. And to hell with anyone who thinks otherwise."

Michelle smiled—a sharp, proud expression. “Good. Let the historians rewrite their textbooks. It'll give my colleagues something interesting to cover for once.”

The ancient grandfather clock in the corner chimed the half-hour.

“I’ve got to shower and change before I head out,” said Angelica, getting up. “But not before I wake Jennifer.”

Michelle looked on quizzically. “Wait. Jenni’s here from Cambridge?” Angelica nodded. “And you *let* her sleep through all of this?”

Angelica nodded once more. “I did. I didn’t want Jenni to see what happened last night. I want her last memories of her grandmother to be good ones.”

“That explains one but where’s Kari?” asked Michelle.

“The *other* Karina’s still at Starfleet Academy,” Angelica responded. “She’s finishing up her first year so there’s no way they’ll let her come to the funeral. But I called and told her the news myself.”

“Surely,” cried the elder Karina, “they’ll make an exception and let her attend own her grandmother’s funeral!”

Angelica shook her head. “When she entered the Academy, both Alex and I made it a point to tell everyone that she gets no special treatment because she is *our* daughter. And first year cadets don’t get time off to breathe, much less attend funerals. But they *can* receive visits from their parents, and I will do so when I visit San Francisco in the coming days.”

Both women nodded in understanding. “Letting Jenni sleep…” said Michelle, letting her voice trail off. In those times when both mother and father were off world, it was Michelle and Karina who took care of their kids. “She’s going to be pissed at you, Angie.”

Angelica looked at her coffee, then to her sisters. “I’m only trying to give her a little peace before she hears the news. And I want to be the one to tell her about Grand-Mum.”

Outside in the hallway, the faint, rhythmic sound of polished boots heralded the arrival of the Equerry coming to escort the Queen to her new quarters. Angelica looked at Karina, then to Michelle. “It’s about time to go face the music,” Angelica said, squaring her shoulders

and standing tall.

"We'll be there," Michelle said, standing up alongside Karina. "I hope it all goes well."

"What she said," echoed Karina. "Good luck. I think you'll need it."

Angelica walked out of the room, forming up alongside the Equerry as they made their way to her new bedroom. It wasn't long before they came to Jennifer's bedroom.

"Stop here," she ordered. "I need to wake my daughter."

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said.

"I'm really not liking the 'Your Majesty' bit," Angelica said under her voice as she entered her daughter's room. Jennifer McKnight was sleeping peacefully in her bed, even with the sun shining in the room. The only way that anyone could physically make out the twins were by their hairstyles: Karina liked her red hair straight and medium length. Jennifer kept hers similar to her mother, long and curly.

Angelica gently sat down beside Jennifer, lightly stroking her hair, just as she had in those times Angelica had been home.

Jennifer moaned and slowly opened one eye. "Oh… hi, Mom." Just like her twin, she also enjoyed an American accent but with a Boston lilt.

"Hello, baby," Angelica said. "Get a good night's sleep?"

"Best I've had in a while," Jennifer admitted. "Pre-law students don't get much sleep."

"I can imagine," Angelica said, still stroking her daughter's hair. "It's pretty much like being at the Academy."

"I wouldn't know." Jennifer stretched. "I really could use some coffee."

"There's some in the sitting room. Your aunts are there already. I'm on the way to the shower."

Jennifer was no fool and picked up on one thing Angelica had said. "Wait. You said 'aunts'? As in *plural*?" She looked at her mom. "Why is Aunt Michelle here?"

Angelica should not have been surprised that Jennifer had caught on so quickly, but she was. "Yes. Your Aunt Michelle came in

this morning."

"But why…" Jennifer stopped, knowing the only reason her aunt from California would be here, especially this early in the morning. "Mom… Grandmom. Did she…?"

Angelica sighed and braced herself. "Yes. Your grandmum passed away earlier this morning."

Jennifer sat stock still for a few minutes. Angelica tried to hug her, but Jennifer stopped her.

"How long ago?" her youngest kid asked.

This was where Angelica made her biggest mistake. Instead of fibbing to spare her child, she gave an honest answer. "A couple of hours ago."

"Wait." Jennifer sat up as if shocked by a cattle prod. The icy rage in her voice made Angelica think she had just made a very big blunder. "You mean to tell me that Grandmom passed away 'a couple of hours ago' and you're just *now* getting around to telling me? What the hell, Mom!"

"I wanted you to have some peace before all hell breaks loose around here," Angelica defended, now realizing what she had done. *Yeah, just like me*, Angelica thought. *When she gets pissed, she turns into an icy, cast-iron bitch. I really stuck my foot in it, didn't I?*

"Mother," Jennifer said formally. "I… need some time to myself." That was about as close as to 'Get out of here' as Jennifer would allow herself. Angelica knew nothing she would say or do would help so she stood up and walked to the door.

"Baby girl," Angelica said, sorrow in her voice. "I'm sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing."

"I need my privacy, Mom. Please."

As Angelica shut the door, she swore she heard something shatter, as if Jennifer had thrown a glass against the wall, along with a string of invectives that would have even the most hardened sailor think twice.

I had that one coming, she thought as she walked with the Equerry to her bedroom. *And I'll deserve whatever is coming. Jenni is slow to anger but she's also quick to get over it. I hope she'll forgive me. God above knows, I was only trying to do the right thing and*

protect my daughter!

D+1: 0950 UTC, The First Day
U.S.S. *Lexington*, Earth orbit

"Welcome home, *Lexington*," said the disembodied voice of the dockmaster. "Enjoy the ride."

"*Lexington* confirms," answered Alex. "Give us a smooth ride. Thank you."

It had been a decent ride home until just a bit ago. They had learned of Angelica's mother passing as the giant starship approached the Sol System. Alex had the news piped to all areas of the ship but, to his credit, he didn't take refuge in his office. In fact, if one didn't know any better, you would say he wasn't affected at all.

But, deep down, he was not sad but worried. He knew that Angelica had just become queen; he had known that all throughout their marriage. Alex also knew that people, especially the Cabinet, would ask him to stay around and act as the King Consort. And that scared him. He wasn't a royal; he had married into the family. And he had no training to be a royal. All he knew was Starfleet. And he suspected that he would have to talk to Angelica about retirement. It was a conversation he wasn't ready to have with her, and certainly not now when he knew she needed him by her side.

On the viewer, the battleship was pulling into the drydock that would hold the vessel. Alex shook his head; the *Lexington* was one of the largest starships in the fleet but, due an oversight Alex never did figure out, no one had noticed that the doors on Spacedock One were not big enough to handle the width. Even the *Excelsior*-class ships had to be careful of coming in and out, as they had scant feet of clearance on each side. Until they widened the openings, *Lexington* and her sister *Odysseus*-class ships would have to go to the nearby drydocks in geosync orbit around Earth.

It was Lieutenant Commander Shin Ji-hoon who noticed another, more immediate issue. "Captain, we're being directed to a dock that's still got a starship in it."

That jolted Alex out of his revery. He was under the impression

that his ship would have a dock cleared in time for docking and now he was being told it wasn't so. "Jason, give me eyes on that dock!"

At the helm, Lieutenant Commander Jason Tovey-Whitfield instantly responded. The view switched from Earth to a drydock, currently occupied by a newer *Constitution*-class ship. This dock was a new one that had adjustable arms and they had been configured to accept the *Lexington* but the *Constitution* class vessel hadn't moved.

"*What the hell*?" Alex didn't take his eyes off the viewer as he barked his next set of orders. "Gillian, get me the dockmaster right now!"

It was but a second to get a channel to the dockmaster. Alex didn't waste any time on pleasantries. "This is McKnight, *Lexington*. Dockmaster, what's going on here? What is that ship doing in *my* dock?"

"Stand by, *Lexington*." It was a few minutes, and the *Lexington* was still being pulled to the dock, although slower than before. But they were still heading towards it. To avoid a collision, Alex would have to order the moorings cut and the impulse engines to go into reverse. He had no desire, nor was in the mood, to be involved in a collision.

"*Lexington*, there's been an error."

"No shit," Alex said sarcastically.

"The *Queen Elizabeth II* was supposed to have cleared the dock already. You mean she's still there?"

"She's in there and bigger than life. And you've got us going directly at her." Alex paused for a second. "Do you have another dock available?"

"Negative, *Lexington*. All drydocks are committed right now."

Alex was taken aback. Usually, there were at least two or three docks kept open for unexpected visitors. But no drydock was available for his ship? *Just what in the hell is going on here?* he thought. *Usually the dockmaster doesn't screw up and certainly not this bad!*

"Dockmaster," he said, the heat in his voice being intentional at this apparent incompetency, "either you clear *QEII* out of that dock right now or I'm pulling out of the pattern and putting my ship in geosync. Your choice and you've got thirty seconds make it."

"You aren't authorized to go to geosync orbit, *Lexington*. The pattern's full."

"Twenty-five seconds" he intoned. "Either you make the call or I'll make it for you."

For ten seconds, there was silence. Alex was about to order Jason to disengage and pull the ship into geosync orbit when the voice came back. "*Lexington*, the *QEII* will need twenty minutes to pull out as she's in cold iron status. We're putting you right behind the dock so as soon as she clears, you get the dock. Acknowledge."

What the dockmaster had told Alex was that the *Queen Elizabeth*'s engines were shut down so she was operating on dock power. She would need a tow to another dock and resume taking services as *Lexington* took her place. On the screen, Alex could already see the work bees and the shuttles already preparing to move the *QEII* so the dock could service the *Lexington*, which was needing repairs herself.

Alex was breathing easier, but he dared not let it show to his crew. "We understand and acknowledge. *Lexington* on standby." He signaled to mute the channel while he started doing some mental math. With the delay, Alex thought he would be able to cut loose to go to London about 1045 local. If he recalled London Bridge correctly, Angelica would either be in the Accession Council right now or already had it.

He was still working on his recollections when he sensed someone on his right side. A glance told him that it was Smith, waiting to talk to him.

"Yeah, Anne?"

She seemed a little hesitant but answered. "I got her, Alex. You get to London. Tell her we'll be coming as soon as she's able to see us."

He could not believe what he was hearing. "Say again?"

This time, she wasn't as hesitant. "Get your ass to London. I'll dock her."

Now he turned to look at her, still not wanting to understand what she was telling him. "Anne?" His tone was the question.

"Look, your wife… our friend, needs you. I'm qualified so let

me take her in and you get your carcass down where you can do more good than sitting up here making us miserable."

Alex thought about this for a moment. What Smith was proposing wasn't unheard of. In fact, Alex knew several captains who allowed their execs to dock the ship. But those captains had remained on the ship in case something was to happen. After all, Alex was still the commander of Lexington and if Smith were to have an accident, and, her fault or not, he would still be responsible.

Then again, what she was saying did make sense. The matter of his wife notwithstanding, he knew Smith could thread the multi-million-ton starship though the eye of a needle and she was willing to bet her life on it. And in simulations, she had performed just as well as he had in docking maneuvers. And he knew she could dock the ship so well that people would think he had done it. No one would know until it was after the fact and even so, there were extenuating circumstances so he thought that he could be forgiven this single time.

"Very well, Anne. You know where I'll be."

Smith looked a little shocked. "No argument?"

Alex gave her a slight smile. "Not this time. I'll make sure all of you can have a private audience with us. I'll put your names on the list. Thanks, Anne."

He got up and Smith slid in easily behind him. "You've said to me and some others, 'go take care of business.' This time, *you* need to take care of business. And if you can't trust me, then I don't need to be your exec. Now go! I promise I won't scratch your ship."

Normally, Alex wouldn't have been persuaded by her weak argument, much less cave in. But given the circumstances, it made sense.

"Take the conn, Anne. I'll see you guys at Buckingham."

D+1: 1000, The First Day
Saint James' Palace

The medieval gilding of the Throne Room at Saint James' Palace gleamed under the soft, recessed lighting of the high ceiling, casting a warm amber hue over a room packed shoulder-to-shoulder

with power.

Over three hundred figures filled the chamber: Privy Counsellors in black mourning coats, High Commissioners, the Lord Mayor of London with his heavy gold chain of office, a wall of Starfleet Admirals whose crisp dress uniforms bristled with campaign ribbons, and various Federation ambassadors and dignitaries. And at the center of the front row stood Prime Minister Vance, his hands clasped tightly before him, his face an impenetrable mask of statesman-like gravity.

The heavy mahogany doors at the back of the chamber swung inward with smooth, hydraulic precision.

"Her Majesty the Queen," the Clerk of the Council announced, his voice carrying clearly across the silent room. Angelica stepped across the threshold alone. She wore no velvet mourning robes, no ceremonial cloak, and no ancestral jewelry. She wore her Starfleet uniform, perfectly tailored, immaculate, and unadorned save for the silver and gold rank pins glinting on her right shoulder and left cuff sleeve, a campaign ribbon rank that would be the envy of most officers of her rank sitting under the recognizable Starfleet delta insignia, and a stark, matte-black mourning sash slanting diagonally across her chest. Her posture was erect, her shoulders back, her stride measured with the absolute, disciplined weight of a starship officer walking onto a hostile bridge.

What they didn't know what that she was shaking inside. Not from fear but from nervousness. *What was it that an old NASA astronaut said when he was up in his rocket?* she thought. *Something about 'Dear Lord, please don't let me screw this up?' Dear God, please don't let me screw* this *up!*

Beside Vance, a senior Cabinet minister leaned in slightly and whispered under his breath, "She didn't even bother getting out of that uniform..."

Vance didn't answer. His eyes never left her as she walked down the center aisle, the silent sea of statesmen bowing and bending low as she passed. He didn't feel insulted by her choice of dress; rather, a sharp flicker of amusement crossed his mind. *She's signaling to the entire Federation that she's not hiding behind 1,500 years of tradition,*

he thought. *Brilliant, if startlingly direct.*

Angelica reached the small carved velvet podium beneath the dais. On the altar sat the ancient King James Bible, bound in red leather, alongside the parchment scrolls of the Accession Declaration. She turned to face the room. Her light brown eyes swept across the assembly, absorbing the tense, expectant quiet. *If you're hearing me, Lord,* please *don't let me screw up! I don't think I could take the embarrassment of starting my reign like that!*

The Lord President of the Council, a tall, white-haired statesman, bowed deeply before stepping forward with the text of the Statutory Oath.

"Your Majesty," the Lord President began, his voice trembling slightly with the weight of the moment. "Is Your Majesty willing to take the oath?"

"I am willing," Angelica said. Despite her nervousness, her voice was cool, clear, and unhurried, a resonant tone that immediately cut through the heavy, suffocating atmosphere of the room.

The Lord President held up the ancient parchment. Angelica placed her right hand firmly upon the leather of the Bible.

"Will you solemnly promise and swear to govern the peoples of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, and your territories across the stars, according to their respective laws and customs?"

"I solemnly promise so to do," she declared in a strong commanding voice that, until now, had only been heard on the *Lexington*'s bridge.

"Will you, use your power to cause law and justice, in mercy, to be executed in all your judgments?"

"I will." She didn't glance at the holographic teleprompter screen positioned near the window. Instead, she looked directly to the Privy Council, then locked her gaze squarely onto the Prime Minister. "I, Angelica," she expressed the required statutory text cleanly, without hesitation, and from memory, "by the grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of my other realms and territories, Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Commander, do solemnly and sincerely, in the presence of God, profess, testify, and declare that I am a faithful Protestant, and that I

will, according to the true intent of the enactments which secure the Protestant succession to the Throne, uphold and maintain the said enactments to the best of my powers according to law."

She picked up the heavy brass fountain pen resting beside the Bible. With smooth, precise strokes, she signed the parchment scroll: *Angelica R.*

The Lord President bowed low once more. "The oath is taken, ma'am."

Silence gripped the room for two heartbeat seconds before the Lord President turned to the assembly. "The Privy Counsellors will now step forward to render their homage and take their oaths of allegiance to Her Majesty, Queen Angelica the First."

Vance was the first to step out from the line. The Prime Minister walked forward with measured, solemn steps until he stood directly before her. He looked at her uniform, at the captain's pin on her shoulder, and finally into her steady, unblinking eyes. For a fraction of a second, the mask slipped; there was a subtle tightening around his eyes revealing the sharp, tactical mind calculating the immense difficulty of managing a sovereign who seemed to be refusing to play the role of a traditional monarch.

Vance dropped to one knee on the red velvet cushion. He placed his hands between hers and spoke the ancient, sacred oath of allegiance:

"I, Alistair Vance, do swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Angelica the First, her heirs and successors, according to law. So help me God."

He leaned forward, briefly kissing her hand as protocol demanded, before rising to his feet. Angelica held his gaze. Her hands remained steady, resting lightly over the edge of the podium.

"Thank you, Prime Minister," she said quietly, her tone low enough that only he could hear. "I expect Downing Street to do its duty as faithfully as I intend to do mine."

A faint, knowing shadow touched the corners of Vance's mouth. He offered a crisp, formal bow. "The country is in remarkably tenacious hands, Your Majesty," he murmured back. He stepped back into line as the next minister stepped forward to kneel. Angelica stood

tall beneath the gilded arches with the heavy, electric tension of a reign that had just rewritten its first rule.

God willing and the river doesn't rise, what I started here today shall not end, she thought. *Thank you for giving me the strength to get through this, God. But this is only the beginning. Only ten more days to go!*

D+1: 1045, The First Day
Buckingham Palace

The transition from the oppressive, mahogany-scented interior of the Throne Room to the chilly morning air of Friary Court was swift. Outside, a light drizzle glinted like scattered diamonds against the damp stone walls, but the courtyard below was packed shoulder-to-shoulder with thousands of citizens, journalists, and lined ranks of Coldstream Guards standing alongside Federation ceremonial honor guards in their immaculate uniforms.

Angelica stood in the holding alcove just behind the balcony doors, smoothing her Starfleet uniform slightly.

"Just what the hell did I get myself into?" she whispered. Beside her, Karina smiled but Jennifer scowled. *She's still mad at me*, Angelica thought. *And I deserve every bit of it.*

"Captain Angelica McKnight, you look like you've just survived a round with the Romulans," a familiar voice said behind her. Angelica spun around instantly, surprise written on her face. Alex McKnight stood in the doorway. He was in his own uniform, the subtle scent of the *Lexington*'s artificial air still clinging to his jacket. He had stepped off the transporter pad at the secure palace transporter pad just minutes ago and was now pushing through protocol officers to get to her. Beside Angelica, both Karina and Michelle offered a quiet, reassuring nods before stepping back to give them space.

"Alex," Angelica breathed, stepping into his arms. He pulled her close, wrapping his arms securely around her, letting her rest her forehead against his chest for three precious seconds. No titles, no protocol, no royal courtiers, just a wife and her husband in their first embrace in two years.

“I came straight from the *Lexington*,” Alex murmured into her hair, holding her tight. “I saw the subspace feeds on my way up here. You’re *Angelica the First*?”

“You’re damn right I am,” she whispered, stepping back just enough to look up into his warm blue eyes. “Vance tried to give me a speech about 'historical continuity' but he took his oath like everyone else.”

Alex chuckled softly, a proud, tender smile touching his face. “He knows better than to pick a fight with a captain on her own quarterdeck.” He gently adjusted the rank pin on her right shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

“Terrible,” Angelica admitted honestly. “In five minutes, they’re going to tell the whole Federation that I'm Queen.”

“Just know you’re sure as hell not doing this alone,” Alex said, his voice dropping into a firm, steady anchor. “I'm right here, as are your sisters and daughter. Your friends up on the *Lexington* are sitting in orbit and they’re also supporting you. We've all got your back. ‘A lifetime bond unbreakable,’” he finished with a quote from her own song that she wrote for him.

Angelica’s jaw dropped for a second; she recognized the saying as being from a song she wrote for him but before she could answer, Sir Davies stepped into the alcove, his old silver pocket watch open in his palm.

“Ma'am,” he said respectfully, bowed low. “The Garter King of Arms is in position. The trumpeters are ready.”

Angelica took a deep, steadying breath. She smoothed the matte-black mourning sash across her chest and squared her shoulders. Alex reached down, giving her hand one firm, final squeeze before stepping back alongside the others in the gallery line.

“I’m ready,” she said. The tall velvet-draped doors swung open into the cold morning air. The roaring murmur of the crowd below instantly died into a breathless, solemn hush. The Garter King of Arms, clad in his brilliant, gold-embroidered heraldic tabard, stepped onto the balcony, holding an old parchment scroll rolled between two ivory handles. Beside him stood six State Trumpeters of the Household Cavalry, their brass instruments gleaming under the gray London sky.

The Garter raised his scroll, his voice amplified across Friary Court and beamed instantaneously across subspace relays to every station, planet, and colony in the Federation:

"WHEREAS it hath pleased Almighty God to call to His Mercy our late Sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth the Third of Blessed Memory..."

Standing just inside the glass archway, Alex watched Angelica step out onto the balcony edge. She stood straight and unyielding, her Starfleet uniform cutting a striking, modern silhouette against the medieval brickwork of Saint James' Palace. *That's my girl*, he thought with pride. *You show them who's boss. It's no wonder I fell in love with you!*

Beside Alex, Michelle leaned in slightly, whispering under her breath: "Look at her, Alex. She's bridging the centuries with a single stance."

"Now you see why I love her so much," he breathed, echoing what he just thought.

"...whereby the Imperial Crown is solely and rightfully come to the Princess Angelica! We, therefore, the Lords Spiritual and Temporal of this Realm, do now hereby with one voice and Consent of Tongue and Heart, publish and proclaim that the Princess Angelica has now become our lawful and rightful Sovereign, by the Grace of God, Angelica the First, Queen of all her Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth..."

The trumpeters raised their instruments. A piercing, brilliant fanfare echoed off the damp stone walls, soaring over the rooftops of London.

Below in the court, the crowd erupted into a deafening cheer. Across the city, the heavy booms of the ceremonial twenty-one-gun salutes began at Hyde Park and the Tower of London. Simultaneously, high in Earth orbit, the phaser banks of over one hundred Starfleet vessels, spearheaded by the *Lexington*, fired bright, silent bursts of blue ceremonial phaser fire into space, visible on the ground as solid beams of light across the daytime clouds.

The Garter turned, facing the balcony, and raised his voice to its crescendo: *"GOD SAVE THE QUEEN!"*

The thousands-strong crowd below roared their response back: *"GOD SAVE THE QUEEN!"*

Angelica looked out over the sea of faces, flags, and floating news-drones, basking in the roar of her people. She turned her head slightly back toward the balcony doorway. Across the threshold, her eyes met Alex's. He gave her a quiet, crisp US Air Force salute from her husband, fellow officer, and her love.

Angelica turned back to the crowd, raised her chin, and stepped fully into her reign.

D+1: 1130, The First Day
Buckingham Palace

"Why didn't you tell me about Grandmum earlier?"

There were times when a child's logic was most annoying and there were times that same logic hit a parent square in the gut. Jennifer's question to her mother was definitely the latter. Alex had held their daughter as soon as the group returned to the Queen's sitting room, allowing his child to release her tears without anyone outside of family to see it. Michelle was rubbing her niece's back in sympathy.

"What would you have me say, Jenni?" asked Angelica, standing in front of the hearth and drinking her coffee. "Honey, what would you have if I *had* woke you up at three in the morning?"

"You still should have told me earlier," Jennifer cried as her father held her tight.

"I'm with your mom on this one," Alex said. "You last saw her when?"

Jennifer sniffled and wiped tears from her eyes. "Last night. She couldn't talk but I was there to see her one more time."

"And how would you have her remembered?"

Jennifer looked to the man who had given her life. "What are you getting at, Dad?"

"I think your mom and I wanted your last memories of your grandmom be good ones. Not ones of her after she had passed away. Remember your grandmom with those better memories."

Jennifer looked to her mother. "Is that true, Mom?"

Angelica returned the look, already tired beyond belief. "Yes, it is. You didn't want to see what happened last night. Sir James wanted to tell you when we got back to the Palace, but I stopped him. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong but I did it with the best of intentions, baby girl."

Jennifer got up from the sofa and without breaking stride, the youngest McKnight walked over to her mother and slapped her hard.

Lucky that a sovereign's immediate family members could not be charged with assault.

Alex and Michelle stood up, ready to pull Jennifer back but Angelica waved them down. Instead of returning the slap, she grabbed her offspring and held her tightly, allowing Jennifer to cry once again. It took a while, but Jennifer finally stopped crying and kissed her mother.

"You better?" asked Angelica.

"Yes," breathed Jennifer. "Can I at least say goodbye to Grandmom?"

"I know where she is," said Michelle. "Come on, Jenni. I'll take you to her."

Michelle held out her hand and Jennifer took it, an aunt and niece together once again. Michelle looked to Angelica, who nodded. She took her niece out of the room, leaving Alex and Angelica alone in the room since Karina was taking a nap.

Alex slowly got up, walking slowly to his wife. "Did she hurt you?" he asked.

Angelica shook her head. "I've had worse. And I deserved it. I made a *really* bad decision."

He took her chin in his cupped hand and held her so she had to look at him. What Angelica saw there wasn't a battle-hardened captain but the man she fell in love with many years ago.

She reached up and held him tightly.

For the first time since her mother died, Angelica McKnight cried. She wailed into his shoulder, finally able to drop the crown for a few minutes to grieve properly like any other human would have. She was holding onto him as if her life depended on it as her body shook hard. Her wails were powerful enough that they should have

been shaking the walls. Angelica couldn't even form words, only wails of sorrow and pain.

Alex held his wife in silence, knowing that any words would be useless to utter at this point. She needed to release what she felt and he knew it. Truthfully, he could count on one hand how many times he had saw her cry and it pained him to see her like this.

Like her daughter, it took a long time for Angelica to run out of tears. She still held him tightly though. And he returned the hold, knowing she needed human contact.

"I love you, Alex," she murmured into his shoulder. "Oh my God, I love you."

"I love you too, Angie," he said soothingly, brushing her hair with his free hand in an attempt to soothe her. "I'll always be there for you."

She finally pulled away from his shoulder and looked at him with reddened eyes. "I know." She reached up and kissed him but this time, she didn't pull away. She let the kiss linger but unlike other times they kissed like this, it was not a signal to lead to anything else. She just wanted to be kissed and held without an entire country knowing about it. Angelica finally broke off the kiss but still held him.

"I'm glad you're here," she said, voice hoarse from wailing. "I really needed you, my love."

"I got here as fast as I could, Angie," he said. "I'm just sorry I'm so late."

She turned her head and put her ear on his chest. "You're not late, honey. But you're here for me now and that's all that counts." She looked up at him. "How does it feel to be married to a queen?"

"The same as it is to be married to a Starfleet officer," Alex answered. "I told you all those years ago when we first started dating that I didn't give a damn about you being royalty. I love Angelica Renee Louise Mountbatten Windsor."

She hugged him again. "Just like I love Alexander Daniel McKnight." She yawned for the first time in almost seventy-two hours.

"How long has it been since you've slept?"

"As Queen, I can't tell you." She looked into his eyes. "As your wife, I think it's coming up on three days."

He put his arm around her shoulder. "Then it's time to get you to bed."

"Not too long," she weakly protested as he led her to her bedroom. "I've got to…"

"I'll wake you up for whatever it is you've got to do," Alex interrupted. "Right now, it's a miracle that you're still standing."

With Angelica guiding him, they went to the Queen's bedroom. Luckily, it wasn't too far from the sitting room they'd been in, but he noticed he was taking more of her weight that she would have normally allowed. *She's got to be dead tired*, he thought.

He escorted her to the oversized bed and she sat down heavily.

"I'm *not* sleeping on that bed," she flatly stated.

"I saw them putting on a new mattress as I was coming in," he reported. "Like you, there's no way I'm sleeping on your mom's mattress." Angelica bounced a bit to test the firmness. "Just as I like it," she said, undoing the division shoulder strap and opening her jacket for the first time in hours.

Alex bent down and took off her boots and socks. He debated trying to tickle her feet, since they were the only place she was ticklish but he decided against it. She had already taken the jacket off and was working on the turtleneck as Alex took off his jacket.

A thought hit him. "Can I even be in here?"

She had taken off her turtleneck to reveal a leather bra and was working on removing her pants. "By Royal Decree, I order you to come into this bed with me," she said, trying to joke. Had she not been so tired that she might have gotten away with it.

"I'm serious."

"Alex, you're my husband and I'm your wife. And I'm not able to have any more kids. So yes, you can be in my bed with me. And that's where I want you." She stopped as she dropped her pants. "And before you get any ideas…"

He had already read the room and was ready with his answer. "I know you're not in the mood. You just want me to be beside you."

She nodded. "Read my mind." She started to take off her leather panties and froze.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he had shed his uniform and was

getting into the left side of the bed, a pair of boxer briefs the only thing he was wearing to bed.

"I usually sleep naked," she admitted.

"I remember. So?"

"My first day as Queen and what if someone were to come in here and wake me up?"

Alex thought for a second. "I'd be enjoying the view."

Angelica playfully slapped his arm before crawling into bed beside him. "That view is for your eyes only, Mr. McKnight." She made up her mind. "Royal decree. My underwear stays on… just for today."

"*Mr. McKnight*? You've not called me that since we started dating."

She rolled to her right side so she could see him. "What was it I said…? Oh yes, '*Until I've known you more than a day, your name is Mr. McKnight, Mr. McKnight.*'"

He rolled over to his left side. "You *remember* that?"

"I remember because a couple days later, I realized I had already fallen for you." She held him. "I'm crazy in love with you, Alex."

"You're crazy for marrying a nut like me," he replied, drawing the first laugh she had in days. She leaned in and kissed him. And he returned the kiss, but she didn't break it off. He knew she wasn't in the mood for any physical relations but why was she extending her kiss?

He opened one eye and found Angelica already sound asleep. He quietly chuckled to himself and closed his eyes, forgetting everything for the moment but the woman in his arms.

D+1: 2245, The First Day
Buckingham Palace

For the first time in days, Angelica felt almost human. She woke up an hour ago with Alex sleeping beside her, slightly snoring in that cute way he had. She gently got out of bed and used the restroom, trying her best to keep quiet so he would not awaken. She decided to

get some clothes on, lest anyone see her like this. In the walk-in closet, she was surprised to see that sometime in the last couple of days, all her clothes had been taken from Clarence House and put in here. Everything looked to have been cleaned, pressed, and hung with care. Most of Angelica's wardrobe consisted of leather but every one of her jackets, turtlenecks, shirts, leggings, pants, and even her only jumpsuit looked to have been professionally cleaned and hung so she could easily access and wear it instantly.

Angelica strolled over to the massive chester drawers and opened every drawer. All her personal belongings were there, along with leather shorts, sweatshirts, sweatpants, skirts, and t-shirts. She spied her favorite leather shorts and t-shirt; she put them on and felt normal once again. The redhead went back to the bathroom and saw her hair was a disaster. Normally, she despised putting her hair up but for now, she decided to put her hair up so she would be presentable if she were to be seen. As she grabbed a leather scrunchie, Angelica noticed the silver starting to blend in with her red curls and frowned. She had been so overtaken by events that she forgot that she was to have her hair colored today.

Should I even color my hair? she asked herself, looking and playing with her hair as she continued to ponder. *I mean, I'm a queen and I'm forty-seven. I love the rich auburn and I love the curls but the sliver? I dunno. Maybe I should leave the silver as a sign of maturing and showing everyone that I'm not a young girl trying to impress beyond her years. Maybe I'll leave it alone just appease… no, I'm not going to think like that. I start trying to appease one person and it's not long before I try to appease everyone. No. I won't do that. It's my hair and I'll do with it as I please. And I'm keeping my hair as is for now. Besides, I've always thought my hair was one of my best features.*

Making her decision, Angelica quit messing with her hair and using her black leather scrunchie, she put it into a messy half-ponytail. She located and slipped on some house slippers, then quietly snuck to the doorway. She looked to her husband, who seemed to still be asleep. Angelica blew him a silent kiss and quietly shut the door.

Angelica made her way to her office, not running into a soul as she walked the hallways. Not that she expected to at this hour of the

night. The new queen poked her head into the office and saw the red box sitting neatly in the center. Angelica entered the room and closed the door behind her. She knew she would have to read the PADD inside the red box sometime but had there been something important, she figured that someone would have woke her up so what was in there could not have been important enough to wake her up and read.

She walked over and looked out the window and saw a picture-perfect night. It was both awe inspiring and depressing at the same time.

"Mum," she said, looking at the North Star, "You told me that I needed to be my own person when the time came. Tomorrow, that's exactly what I am going to do. Before you and Almighty God above as my witness, I swear that's what I shall do."

She returned to her desk and found her personal PADD in the drawer. Only a few people had access to this room and quite frankly, she decided that she didn't care who had done it but she needed that PADD. She scooped up the tablet, turned off the lights, and closed the door, making her way to the basement of Buckingham Palace. On the way there, she once again didn't run into a single person.

She finally made it to a place only she, her mom, her sister, and her husband knew existed. Angelica put in her code into the keypad and the door obediently opened, revealing a state-of-the-art recording studio, similar to the one she had built on the *Lexington*, only smaller as she wasn't hosting a band… just herself with vocals and her trusty electric guitar. The leather clad woman made sure to secure the outer door and set the alarm for 0400 before going to the mixing board. Angelica worked the controls so the computer would act as the engineer while she was singing in the soundproof booth. Only then did she walk to the booth with its high-end microphone and professional grade wireless studio headphones exactly as she had left them days ago.

Was it a couple of days, she reflected, *or a lifetime ago that I was in here, blissfully happy and singing my heart out? I love to sing and I've been working on my songwriting for over three years now. I wrote a couple of songs since Mum died expressing my grief… maybe I should sing them?*

Angelica knew she needed to release her grief and despair and she knew her singing could be part of that. The monarch sat down on the stool and put on the headphones, testing the volume. The PADD in her hands had two sets of lyrics that she had written over the last twenty-four hours. One song she had called "The Sovereign's Lullaby" and the second "Red Box at 3AM". Ever since she was a teenager, Angelice loved to sing and being in the recording studio but tonight, they would now become part of her coping mechanism. She opened up the lyrics to "Red Box at 3AM" and, adjusting her headphones, started the music. She heard three clicks and after the third one, she began to sing.

Three o'clock and the candle's dead
State secrets piled beside the bed
A thousand lives signed away in red
While the London rain pounds overhead.
The brass latch clicks, the seal goes down,
Another burden for a dying crown.

She became lost in the song, pouring her heart into her singing.

They want a statue made of stone,
They want a voice that's not my own.

She had already worked with the computer to come up with some music bed so she knew the timing of this music. When the sharp mechanical snare hit, she started on the chorus.

In the quiet of the royal room,
Weaving treaties in the midnight gloom!
Locked in leather, bound in red—
Listen to the words I left unsaid!
Oh, the box snaps shut at three AM,

And I write the future down again.

As the music entered the second verse, she changed her voice to a sharp, rhythmic, cool delivery.

Subspace relays blinking in the dark,
A queen of space who misses Regent's Park.
They draft the bills, they check the phrase,
While I lose myself in audio arrays.

Now it where it would get tricky, she thought. The vocals would be soaring, emotional, and in layered harmony. However, the emotional part won't be an issue!

In the quiet of the royal room,
Weaving treaties in the midnight gloom!
Locked in leather, bound in red,
Listen to the words I left unsaid!
Oh, the box snaps shut at three AM,
And I write the future down again.

As the song ended, she changed to a soft, fading whisper, virtually a cappella.

Just a ghost in a leather coat...

She pressed the button to end the recording and put her headphones around her neck, pulling her hair out from under the headband so her curls would swing free down her back. She turned to look at the engineer's booth and saw Alex sitting there, smiling from ear to ear. She screamed in surprise as his smile widened a little, as if he were playing a little joke on her. She quickly put her headphones

on so she could hear him talk. She didn't even bother with pulling her hair out from under the headphones.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, holding her headphones tight. "When I left you, honey, you were asleep!"

"Angie girl, I woke up to use the bathroom and you weren't there. Figured you were either in your office or here. And knowing you as well as I know you, I started here first."

She looked at him skeptically. "You think you know me, eh? And taking to calling me 'Angie girl' again after letting that nickname lay dormant for all these years?" She smiled sweetly. "How sweet."

He decided to change subjects. "That was a lovely song, Angie. I know you've been songwriting for a while now… was this your own composition?"

She replied, "The computer helped me with the music bed but, yes, I wrote the lyrics." She held up her PADD. "I've been writing my own songs on this."

He looked questioningly. "When you back on *Lexington*, you were taking on-line courses and watching tutorials on songwriting as you were getting tired of just covering those old 1980's songs. Are you still tired of covering those old songs? I mean, you're really good at that."

"Thank you," she said, pride filling her voice. "I've been practicing a lot over these last three years. But I still listen to those old 1980's tracks and sing covers of them."

"How many tracks have you written?"

"Several but since yesterday? I've wrote two… 'The Sovereign's Lullaby' and 'Red Box at 3AM'."

Alex sat back in the comfortable engineer's chair. "Where did you find the time?"

"I stole a few moments here and there but mostly last night after I saw the PM."

He nodded. "Where there's a will…" he said. "So which one was this?"

Angelica smiled. "The one I just sang was 'Red Box'. I was going to record 'Lullaby' next. They'll be stored on my personal server."

He chuckled. "It's too bad you can't put these on an album and release it. I think you'd have an instant number one hit on your hands." The smile on her face remained frozen but it was the twinkle in her eye that told him what she was thinking. Alex sat forward and looked at his wife in the booth in front of him.

"You're going to do just that, aren't you? This isn't just your passion talking. You're actually making an album and you're planning to release it, right?"

Angelica's answer was a simple nod and a knowing smirk.

"Angie, I know how much music means to you so it doesn't surprise me that you're thinking of this. I just want to make sure your motives are pure and good."

"I just lost my mother," she replied, standing up to look at him through the glass. "I'm hurting. Crying on your shoulder helped me more than you will know but I'm still hurting."

"I know about losing parents, Cinnamon," he said, using her childhood nickname that referred to her red hair. "I lost both my parents three hundred years ago, during the nuclear exchange of Earth's last World War. I know *exactly* how you feel."

She continued, not seeming to hear him. "And I saw them. The crowds."

"You did that proclamation on the balcony today so of course you saw the crowds."

Angelica acted like she hadn't heard a word, despite the headphones encompassing her ears. "When I approached the gates last night just after word broke about Mum, I saw people at the Queen Victoria Memorial and in the Mall crying. *Crying*, Alex! People who only saw Mum on the holovision were crying and putting flowers in respect for someone they never knew! I realized the public… those *people* are hurting just like *I* am hurting; they're mourning just like I am mourning. That's when it hit me that we are hurting together. If we're hurting together, then we can heal together. And maybe my music, in some small way, will allow both me and the masses to start healing together."

"And to show everyone that you're going to add a human touch to the monarchy," he added, tracking her reasoning. "No… you're

going to show everyone that you're going to be the people's queen."

She nodded, realizing that Alex was probably the only person who could understand where she was coming from. "Right. I work for them."

Alex yawned. "Cinnamon, we're to wake up in a few hours. You've to go to Parliament later on."

"Yeah," she answered, "it's the Motion of Condolence. It's where the MPs and Lords will swear loyalty to the new crown. And now you're calling me 'Cinnamon'? Wow. I've not hear that nickname in years!"

"Didn't think I knew that, did you?" he said, standing up to depart. "Oh and by the way… I want to talk to you before you go to Parliament."

"I do to," she replied, sitting back down on her stool. "I think I got this on the first take but I want record the second song before I come back to bed."

Before she would switch to her other song, he called to her. "Angie?"

She looked up at him. "Yes?"

"I really like what you're doing," he admitted honestly. "You're asserting yourself and it seems to have an effect on you." He paused for effect. "Keep it up."

Angelica took off and held her headphones, finger brushing her hair before putting them back on. "That's what I'm planning, Alex."

Chapter Two - Condolence

D+2: 0800, The Second Day
Buckingham Palace

Alex woke up with the sunlight in his eyes. He turned to his left and saw Angelica lying beside him, reminding him of a kitten sleeping in the sunlight. She was even slightly snoring, one of those things he adored about her. Angelica was still in the same leather outfit that she had been wearing in the recording studio so there would be no worry about what the Private Page would see. He leaned in and lightly kissed her on the forehead. In response, she quietly moaned and slightly stretched.

"I could," Angelica said with a Buckinghamshire accent she had regained since coming back home, "get used to being woken up with a kiss."

"Good morning, o queen of my heart," he said.

She turned to look at him, her eyes filled with love. "Good morning, my love." She kissed him. "I could get used to being like this… again. Just you and me in bed together once again."

Alex held her in his arms. "Don't mix business with pleasure, Angie. I don't want to be reminded that I'm having to leave before long."

Angelica frowned slightly. "Nor do I. I need you right now. Just having you beside me right here… you don't know what it means to me."

He smiled at her and gave her a quick peck on her lips. "I'm just glad that I can put the captain away for now and just concentrate on being your husband." He decided to raise the subject he broached last night. "Angie, are you sure about all this? About the album, I mean."

"I am," she answered confident that she was right. "I'm not about to give up my singing any more than I could give up breathing."

He looked her right in the eye. "So you're *really* going to release an album as a sitting queen?"

She looked him right in the eyes. "Yes, I am. But if you don't

think I should, then I won't. You're the only person in the galaxy who can tell me 'no' and I'll do it. I don't give a fig what the others will think. Just you."

Alex sighed. He knew she meant every word of what she said. "Like I told you last night, Angie girl… I know how important music and singing is to you. Hell, you were moonlighting as a singer when I first met you."

"Yeah, and I had to wear all those wigs, colored contacts, and keep changing my wardrobe so no one would know it was the Duchess of Cambridge singing on the stage in front of them."

"But that netted you a husband," he said, holding her tight.

"That it did." She looked at him. "You didn't answer my question: do you think I should release that album?"

"Are you having second thoughts?" He looked a little shocked. "That's almost unheard of from you."

"Not second thoughts but…" she sighed a little, "if I'm going to do this, I want to make sure it's for the right reasons. And you'd tell me if I weren't."

"I think you are. You told me that you saw people crying at the gate for someone they didn't even know. That must have done something to you."

"Honestly, it did," Angelica admitted. "When I saw that, it made me realize that we're in the same boat. But they can express their pain and grief openly. I can't… not with them watching and looking to me for strength in a dark time. I think that by releasing this album, it would help us heal and also to humanize the monarchy. It would tell them that their queen feels the same thing they're feeling and she's expressing it the only way she can."

Alex thought on that. "Then England's about to have its first singing monarch. But let me ask you something. After this album, will there be another one?"

She shrugged. "I've not thought that far ahead yet but I would not put money on it *not* happening."

He smiled. "Perish the thought." A thought hit him. "You know you're going to catch hell from the government for just this album."

She returned his smile. "That I've already thought about. I'll release it in the public domain under a creative commons license and under a pseudonym. If I release it for free, there's no problem since I'm not taking any money for it."

"You know," he pointed out, "that some enterprising soul out there will eventually learn that you released it from here."

"If they do, they do," she said matter-of-factly.

"Then the whole damn government have kittens when the public and media figures it all out," said Alex. "Especially the PM and Cabinet."

"I'm not doing this to undermine Alistair *or* the Cabinet," Angelica replied, a little too fast in Alex's opinion.

"But they may *perceive* it that way, Angie girl. And you know about perceptions."

"And if Alistair or Cabinet or anyone else had had their way, I'd be 'Elizabeth IV' and only be used when there's a crisis they can't get out of," she pointed out a little hotly. "I work for the people, not for the PM, Cabinet, or Parliament!"

"Just be a little careful, hon. I seem to remember another monarch who thought he was above Parliament and lost his head over that very fact."

"I know full well the lesson of Charles the First," she said. "And I'm not about to undercut the government, Alex. They work in the queen's name, after all. But I need to be my own person, not a statue locked away in an ivory tower. Look but don't touch. Stay out of reach until needed." She looked around the room. "No. I will *not* do that. If Parliament or the Cabinet doesn't like it, they can have it back. All they have to do is vote and I'm out on the street."

Angelica looked at him once again. "To be honest, I'd be more than happy to stay in Starfleet. But until the day they kick us out, I work for the people. My duty is to them and the Commonwealth. If Parliament and I can agree on that, then we can work together." She smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I didn't intend to make a speech, especially this early."

"I think you're just warming up, Angie," he smiled. "God help them all."

She kissed him and got out of bed, taking out her half-ponytail. "I've got to shower and get ready for today. I think I'm going to need you help with my speech at the Motion of Condolence."

He looked at her as she prepared to get into the shower. "Why do I have the feeling that you're *not* going to give the speech prepared by the PR people downstairs?"

She held a wicked smile as she took off her underwear. "It'll be our little surprise. Now come shower with me. I'm still not in the mood but I just want my husband with me. You don't know how reassuring your presence is to me."

"I wasn't thinking anything else but being your rock, Angie."

"Good," she smiled. "I'd hate to hurt you this early in the morning."

D+2: 1030, The Second Day
Buckingham Palace

"Your Majesty," said Sir Davies, "it's about time for you to leave Motion of Condolence. Bu first, a quick briefing concerning the trip to Parliament."

Angelica and her family were in the sitting room, waiting to depart. Angelica was in her Starfleet uniform, with all her campaign ribbons and looking perfect for the occasion. Alex was also wearing his Starfleet uniform, his campaign ribbons even more impressive than his wife's. Both had chosen to wear their Starfleet Medal of Honor, giving a silent warning to all present that they were not people to easily or quickly give in. The other three women were in simple black dresses. Both Karina and Michelle were drinking coffee; Jennifer was drinking an American style sweet tea. Angelica and Alex weren't drinking anything.

"For first flitter, the State Limousine, it will only be Your Majesty and Princess Karina so Her Majesty will walk out first and enter the vehicle, followed closely by Princess Karina. There will be a following vehicle and that's where His Royal Highness, Princess Jennifer, and Duchess Michelle will ride. The trip will not take more than fifteen minutes from here to Westminster. Are there any questions

so far?"

"Seems a little inefficient in having two rides when one could do," Alex pointed out. "Is there a specific reason or is this just one of those 'it's tradition' kind of things?"

"Leaving aside the traditions aspect," Sir Davies answered, "it is also a security issue."

Alex nodded. "Got it. Give the attacking force two targets instead of one and there's a good chance one will escape."

Angelica didn't seem to be fully comfortable with this. She expected to have her husband beside her, not her sister. "Can the State Limo hold all of us?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. It can fit only four and that is only in extreme circumstances. And since this is the Motion of Condolence, both yourself and Princess Karina must be in attendance. Otherwise, it would be His Royal Highness with you."

Now it was Alex who was uncomfortable. "Sir James, I'm not comfortable with the 'Royal Highness' bit. Can you call me 'Alex' or 'Captain McKnight'?"

Sir Davies looked puzzled. "But you're the Duke of Edinburgh now, sir. That is your official title."

Alex sighed. "I know all that but I've been a starship, then a fleet commander for the last twenty years and I'm used to 'Captain' or-- God help me-- "Admiral.' Can you indulge me… at least in private?"

"In private, I can."

"Thank you."

Sir Davies continued the briefing. "Getting to the Motion of Condolence. When you arrive at the Parliament building, it will be at the Sovereign's Entrance which is at the base of Victoria Tower. Your Majesty and the Princess will exit their vehicle first. A minute later, the remainder of your party can leave the other vehicle. None of you will walk ahead of Her Majesty..."

"Maybe I ought to walk slow just to piss you all off," Angelica interjected and got a round of chuckles to break the tension. *If she's starting to crack jokes*, Alex thought, *maybe that's a good sign that she's starting to become herself again.*

"You can pick the pace, ma'am," said Sir Davies, not joining in the laughter. "But getting back to the ceremony. As Her Majesty and Princess Karina step through the doors and enter Westminster Hall, the Royal Trumpeters will sound a fanfare in your honor. You will then be escorted by the Gentlemen-at-Arms and Yeomen of the Guard down the central aisle toward the Royal Dais. Preceding you will be the Lord Great Chamberlain and the Earl Marshal. And you, Captain McKnight," Sir Davies deliberately used Alex's name and rank this time, "will lead your daughter and sister to the Royal Enclosure to the left of the Royal Dais. Each of you will have a Gentleman Usher."

Alex interrupted. "Question. Is there a specific seating order when we get there?"

"Yes. It will be yourself, your sister, then your daughter. Oh, and you will walk behind the Royal Party but you will enter the enclosure before Her Majesty and the Princess get to the dais. You will closest to the Queen, Captain."

"So just to be clear," Alex said as if he was getting marching orders, "We're going to be behind Angie and Karina but we're to enter the box *ahead* of them getting to their thrones?"

"Correct."

"Maybe we ought to run to our seats just to make you three shag it," joked Angelica again.

"Mom," Jennifer said for the first time that morning, "you wouldn't be *that* cruel, would you?"

"No, I could be talked into it."

"She won't, Jenni," piped in Michelle. "She's joking."

Jennifer nodded and smiled. Apparently, whatever sins her mother had been guilty of had been forgiven.

Sir Davies cleared his throat, knowing time was getting tight. "If I may, ma'am?"

"You may," said Angelica, serious once again.

"Now, the Members of the Household and Advisors will arrive between twenty to thirty minutes prior to you in a separate official staff vehicle and enter Parliament via St Stephen's Porch. They will be seated with senior officials near the Parliamentary dais. All the special dignitaries and guests will arrive early via VIP transport. They will be

seated among foreign envoys, peers, and members of Parliament in the hall."

Alex snapped his fingers. "Oh, I almost forgot. Angie, all but Sophea, Dawn, and Saavik will be there in the hall. I made sure they were invited and have a good place where they can see you clearly."

"I'm flattered," she answered. "They don't have to do that."

"They said they wanted to," he said. "They said they wanted to support their friend."

"I'll thank them when I see them," Angelica said, not without a hint of pride and emotion. "But what's happened to the three that aren't showing today?"

Alex chuckled a little. "You know Sophie and dockyard workers. She's personally overseeing the warp engine overhaul. Saavik's out on the new *Shangri-La* and can't get back in time. Dawn's in the Philippines… some sort of medical emergency, I understand."

"I understand," Angelica said admiringly. She and Sophea were good friends but it was Saavik that Angelica would call one of her best friends. Dawn was actually her step-daughter-in-law as she was married to Alex's son from his first marriage but things between them were so casual and relaxed that Angelica would many times forget that tidbit.

"They all want to see you but when you can spare a moment."

"Good," Angelica answered. "I want to spend some time with my old friends without all this crap going on." She saw Sir Davies looking at the clock. "Anything else?"

"One last item. The departure will be similar to your arrival. The Lord Great Chamberlain and the Earl Marshal will walk ahead of you to clear the central aisle. Her Majesty and Princess Karina will walk side-by-side down the center aisle of Westminster Hall. Captain McKnight, your party will fall in behind the Royal Party as soon as the pass the enclosure, joining the procession as the sovereign's immediate family. As soon as you step out of the heavy doors of Westminster Hall into New Palace Yard, the State Trumpeters sound a triumphant fanfare. You will reboard your vehicles and come back to the Palace."

"Sounds way too easy," quipped Michelle. "Even I don't think I can screw this up that much."

"Sis," Alex said, looking at his biological sister, "you just follow my lead and do what I do. You'll be fine. You too, Jenni." Both women nodded.

"Are there any further questions?" Sir Davies asked, looking again at the clock. It was time to depart. "Then we are ready. Ma'am? Are you ready?"

Angelica stood up, as well as Karina. "I'm ready. Are you, Sis?"

"I'm actually shaking in my boots," admitted Karina. "I'm so scared in standing in front of all those people. How do you do it, Angie? Look so calm with all those eyes on you?"

"I learned to be calm when I got my arse chewed by several very senior admirals over something stupid," Angelica deadpanned. She turned to the others. "Ready?"

"Let's do it, Mom," said Jennifer.

"Let's go," said Alex. Only he knew of the surprise Angie had prepared for Parliament. He'd even helped her craft it.

Without another word, the five people walked down to the front door of Buckingham Palace. Angelica was the first out, just as Sir Davies had directed. The former Starfleet officer saw the crowds looking on and heard their deafening cheer as she stepped out. She waved to them, as did Karina walking beside her.

"Lord above," breathed Karina as they entered the Rolls Royce flitter. "That's nerve racking!"

"That's nothing… wait until we get to Westminster," Angelica said as she took her seat. "Just smile, wave prettily, and it's be all over before you know it."

"I wish it was that simple," Karina said.

D+2: 1045, The Second Day
Westminster Hall, Parliament

The centuries-old timber arches of Westminster Hall rose into shadow high above the sea of black wool, silk, and silver braid. Below

the medieval hammerbeam roof sat the entire political core of the British nation, the Commonwealth, and Federation. There were over four hundred members of Parliament on the left and three hundred members of the House of Lords on the right. They were, in turn, flanked by other, lower ranking British government officials, foreign ambassadors, Federation emissaries, and Starfleet Admirals in their red uniforms. At the center of the hall, elevated on a carpeted dais, sat two carved oak thrones.

The heavy oak doors at the northern entrance of Westminster Hall swung open, revealing the ancient, cavernous interior bathed in the soft glow of light spilling down from the roof. A sharp, commanding fanfare sounded from the State Trumpeters, cleanly cutting through the murmur of the assembled audience.

Inside, the members of the House of Commons, the House of Lords, cabinet ministers, and all the others immediately rose to their feet in a unison rustle of formal attire.

Leading the way, the Lord Great Chamberlain and the Earl Marshal walked backward in crisp sync, guiding the royal party onto the rich crimson carpet running down the central aisle. Angelica walked with a measured, regal poise, her expression serene yet resolute. Beside her, Karina walked in lockstep, taking her cue from her sister and receiving her sister's steady, reassuring presence. As the procession moved down the aisle, lawmakers and peers bowed and curtsied on either side of them.

And all of this is for me*?* Angelica thought as she walked. *Just thirty hours ago, I was a Starfleet officer and liaison between them and my mother. And now here I am, the damn Queen! I'm the center of attention with billions of eyes watching my every step. Nothing nerve-wracking about this, is there?*

Directly behind them followed Alex, Michelle, and Jennifer. While all eyes in the hall were fixed on Angelica and Karina, Alex walked with his head held high, his posture mirroring the gravity of the moment, while Michelle and Jennifer subtly glanced across the vast hall, taking in the sea of expectant faces.

Had anyone told me when I was a kid, Michelle thought, *that I'd be here three hundred years later with the eyes of billions on me*

for a ceremony in the freaking Parliament with my sister-in-law, who happens to be the Queen of the freaking UK, I'd have called them freaking crazy!

When the party reached the head of the hall, the procession split with precision. Alex, Michelle, and Jennifer stepped off the carpet to the left, taking their designated positions in the front row of the Royal Enclosure. They remained standing, facing the dais. Angelica and Karina ascended the low steps to the Royal Dais, turning to face the vast assembly.

As the trumpeters finished with a final flourish, a profound silence settled over Westminster Hall. Angelica gave a slight nod, permitting the assembly to sit, while her family took their seats in the Royal Enclosure. Everyone's eyes and about a hundred cameras locked on her and Karina as the ceremony started.

Prime Minister Vance got up from his seat and walked over to the dispatch lectern below the dais. He took a comfortable position at the lectern, preparing to read the formal Address of Condolence, adopted by both Houses only an hour earlier. His voice, amplified by the hall's concealed amplifying arrays, was smooth, polished, and perfectly tuned for the subspace feed.

"We offer Your Majesty our profound sorrow on the passing of our late sovereign," Vance intoned, bowing his head slightly toward the throne. "And we pledge our unwavering allegiance to Queen Angelica the First, confident that under Her Majesty's wise and constitutional guidance, the Realm shall remain a beacon of stability."

Angelica sat motionless on the throne, keeping her gaze level but sweeping slowly across the sea of faces. She saw the MPs and ministers who viewed her as a figurehead and Vance, whose rehearsed deference carried the sharp, mutual understanding of their late-night understanding at the palace.

As Vance concluded the address, he bowed deeply at Angelica and walked back to his seat. *Let's see how she does with this*, he thought. *Now we're going to see what kind of queen we really have.*

The hall fell into an absolute, suffocating silence. Hundreds of eyes fixed on the throne, waiting to see the new queen respond. Slowly and in a dignified manner, Angelica stood up. The rustle of

heavy linens echoed across the flagstones as the entire assembly rose in unison. She stepped down from the dais to the podium.

Angelica looked out across the hall as she took her place at the lectern. She waved down the crowd and looked around at the assembly. She didn't open the leather-bound folder in front of her, nor glance at the teleprompter's screen. She spoke from memory. When she spoke, her voice wasn't the soft, breathy cadence expected of royal tradition; it was the crisp, resonant tone of someone who had over two decades in Starfleet and had put her life on the line more times that she could count.

"My Lords and members of the House of Commons," Angelica began, her voice cutting through the slightly damp chill of the hall as the amplification field instantly zoomed in on her. "I receive your address with a grateful heart, on behalf of myself, my sister, and my family."

She paused, letting the words settle into the stone walls.

"My mother, Queen Elizabeth the Third, bore the crown through decades of immense structural and interstellar change. She understood that a sovereign's primary duty is not to preside over the apparatus of power, but to serve as a quiet anchor for the people when an approaching storm grows dark."

Over in the Lords' benches, Vance's jaw tightened, though his expression remained a study in professional composure. He didn't look threatened; instead, he looked like a man who was taking precise mental notes of a formidable partner. *She's completely disregarded her prepared speech*, he thought. *A most interesting development. And she's doing this all from memory without any aids or prompts. Most definitely used to public speaking. I shall have to remember this when dealing with her.*

"I stand before you today not merely as your queen," Angelica continued, her eyes locking directly onto Vance and the Lords surrounding him, "but as a woman who has spent her adult life in uniform, serving on the frontiers of space. In Starfleet, we are taught that authority is not derived from titles, bloodlines, or parliamentary decrees. It is earned through absolute integrity, a dedication to truth, and an unwavering obligation to those under our command."

A low, collective intake of breath rippled through Parliament. Clearly, this wasn't what the speech anyone expected to hear. Vance gave a slight smirk, realizing that even though they were polar opposites in temperment, their end goal looked to be the same. *She will drive me crazy the entire time I'm PM*, he thought in appreciation. *And it'll be nice to have someone who will keep me on my toes.*

"As I take up the burden of this crown," Angelica said, her voice rising with quiet, undeniable power, "I pledge to you and to the billions of citizens across this Commonwealth and the Federation that I shall hold this office with that same duty. I *shall* uphold our constitutional liberties; I *shall* defend the weak; and I *shall* ensure that the government *will* be transparent, accountable, and just to the people it serves."

She looked out toward the back of the hall, where ordinary citizens and junior parliamentary aides stood jammed behind the security barriers, hanging on her every word. She could almost hear their question: '*Is this for real? Does she really mean what she is saying?*'

"The world outside these walls is changing," Angelica said softly. "The voices of our people are loud, raw, and demanding to be heard. I hear them. And as long as I wear this crown, those voices will *never* be silenced by fear or as a matter of convenience."

She didn't add a flowery poetic closing. She didn't offer a rehearsed historical quote.

"Thank you," she concluded simply. Angelica turned and stepped back toward the throne. She let the weight of her final words linger in the air.

For a fleeting second, the vast expanse of Westminster Hall hung in total, breathless silence. Her speech had lasted less than three minutes, yet it had upended centuries of passive monarchical platitudes. It was a clear, unyielding statement of her real intent; she meant it to be a redefining of the monarchy as everyone knew it.

It didn't begin with polite nods, but with a single pair of hands beginning to clap. Within seconds, the applause spread first among the junior aides and envoys, then cascading through the benches of the Commons until even the Lords joined in. It was an overwhelming

wave of applause that broke every rule of royal decorum. The MPs in the front benches banged their desks in approval, Lords stood in uncharacteristic fervor, and from the public gallery high above, a voice called out, soon joined by hundreds of others, echoing off the ancient stone walls: *"God Save Queen Angelica! God Save the Queen!"*

On the royal dais, Angelica maintained her serene, regal composure, but her eyes glistened with quiet emotion. Beside her, Karina shared a swift, knowing glance, a silent realization that history had just been made. In the Royal Enclosure, Alex allowed himself a proud, subtle grin, while Michelle clapped warmly, watching the faces of hardened political veterans who had never anticipated such a unifying triumph freely joining in the commotion.

Vance clapped politely, his eyes fixed on Angelica as she sat back down beside her sister. There was no bitterness in his gaze, only an acknowledgment that governing alongside her would require his absolute best. *Oh yes*, he thought. *She'll be a handful. But I think I can work with her using that.*

Karina leaned over slightly, her voice barely audible under the sheer wall of noise inside the hall. "Angie... you just redefined the monarchy for the history books!"

Angelica didn't smile but she couldn't be blamed if she had as she was listened to the roar of everyone in the Parliament echoing off the ancient stone. She maintained her poise, while subtle glances between her and Karina reflected the surprising success of her impromptu speech.

"No, Karina," Angelica whispered. "I just set out my expectations."

Angelica gave a gracious, measured bow of her head to the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Lord Speaker, signaling the end of the address. As the commotion continued, the sisters turned together then Angelica and Karina stepped down from the raised dais. As the two reached the central crimson carpet, Angelica's other family members stepped smoothly out of the Royal Enclosure to fall into rank directly behind them.

"That went well," Angelica heard Alex whisper to her. She only nodded slightly but she couldn't help but agree with him. The

walk down the aisle was electric. As the royals passed, rows of lawmakers, foreign ambassadors, Starfleet admirals, and Federation dignitaries bowed and curtsied low. Angelica offered subtle, warm nods to key figures on either side, her presence commanding yet profoundly approachable. Behind her, Alex walked with squared shoulders, shielding his family with a steady presence, while Michelle and Jennifer matched his stride, doing their best not to look starstruck at the momentous spectacle playing around them.

Out of all the people crowding the hall, Alex saw his command staff, standing and applauding, each one in full Starfleet uniform. Breianna Smith caught his gaze and she gave him an old-fashioned US military salute in pride and respect. Alex didn't dare break stride but he nodded at her, making sure she had seen him acknowledge her gesture. Then the others, Jason Tovey-Whitfield, Valentina Thereskova, Shin Ji-hoon, Cullen Areniego, and Gillian Cunninham, gave him a similar salute. Alex nodded at each one in turn as they walked down the aisle. He could not have been prouder of his staff as he was at that moment.

At the massive north doors, the State Trumpeters raised their silver instruments and sounded a triumphant, ringing fanfare that announced the Sovereign's exit to the plaza outside. The heavy oak doors swung open into the crisp air of New Palace Yard. The moment Angelica stepped into view, the thunderous cheers from inside the hall were met by the roaring crowd gathered outside the gates. Thousands upon thousands of people were cheering with their chants of *"God Save the Queen!"* reverberating against Elizabeth Tower.

At the foot of the stairs, the royal motorcade stood waiting, guarded by the Mounted Regiment of the Household Cavalry in full dress armor. In the first Rolls Royce flitter, the Royal Footman held open the door and Angelica and Karina stepped inside, settling into the plush rear seats visible through the expansive glass. Immediately behind them, Alex and his party were escorted into the second vehicle, taking their seats as the doors shut with a heavy, satisfying thud.

With a sharp command from the Cavalry captain, the sabers were raised, and the motorcade began its smooth roll out of New Palace Yard.

Inside the quiet sanctuary of the second flitter, Michelle leaned back against the leather seat and looked over at Alex. Outside, the roar of the crowd was muffled to a low hum.

"Well," Michelle whispered with a slight laugh, "Angie certainly gave them something they'll never forget."

Alex looked out the window at the principal car just ahead of them, where Angelica and Karina were smiling and waving to the roaring crowds.

"Yeah," he agreed softly, a smile touching his lips. "She has a habit of doing that."

"Good for Mum," said Jennifer. "I knew she had it in her."

D+2: 2150, The Second Day
Buckingham Palace

Inside her private recording studio down in the basement of Buckingham Palace, Angelica unzipped her leather coat, draping it carefully on the back of the engineer's chair and programming the computer to pull up another song she had been working on.

On the way back to the palace from Westminster, she and Karina had smiled and waved at the crowds. Her speech was still being dissected and analyzed by the media, but what she had said in the old hall summed up how she felt about her taking over the kingdom. After all, she knew that a good commander will always lay out their expectations first and allow their subordinates get the job done without having to resort to micromanaging. She had heard the murmurs and saw the shifts in posture by some of the ministers and she had inwardly smiled. *We work for the people*, she thought as she smoothed her leather t-shirt, *and some of them have been in public service so long that they've seemed to forgotten that. I hope my speech reminded them that our bosses are the masses,* not *the corporations*.

What had surprised Angelica was the reaction of her speech. She hadn't counted on the raw enthusiasm of the crowds; that had nearly deafened her. *Apparently*, she thought, *I said something they liked. As I said, I won't be silent and I will bust my arse in working for them. Without them, I'm nothing but a wife and mother. And I'd*

do well to remember that.

Angelica sealed herself into the recording booth and reached for her studio headphones with its matte-black over-ear earpads. She slipped them over her head, feeling the soft leather earcups seal out the ambient hum of the palace's sub-surface power generators. She turned on the main monitor. The glowing neon green and blue monitors flickered to life across four digital workstations with the center station for her lyrics.

That afternoon, she had read every letter in that red box of theirs. Well, calling it a 'red box' was a little inaccurate. The classic mahogany-framed box lined in red leather remained the traditional symbol of state, but its interior housed a military-grade PADD that had been locked to her biometric signature and connected to her secure server at Buckingham and to the secure servers at 10 Downing Street. Instead of leafing through reams of paper, Angelica would simply swipe through dense legislative bills, diplomatic telegrams from Federation ambassadors, and intelligence briefings with the same precision she once used in sifting through the raw data on her old communications displays back on the *Lexington*.

When she saw policy drafts or executive directives she didn't agree with, she would use a stylus to strike through objectionable clauses, which would leave her digital seal saying she was the one striking out the offending clause. Once she completed her review, Angelica authenticated her final approvals with her biometric signature and encrypted seal, sending the files back to Whitehall via the palace's secure server and into the parliamentary network to keep the government machinery turning.

So reading her red box took her most of the afternoon and all the way up to dinner. Angelica realized that she hadn't even gotten out of her uniform so when she finished her duty for the day, she marched up to her bedroom, took off her unform, knowing the next day she'd need it again, and put on a leather outfit consisting of a jacket, t-shirt, and leggings.

After dinner, Sir Davies had built in some briefing time and, with her and Alex present, laid out the agenda for the next three days and it would be all travel. By secure transporter, she would visit

Scotland, Wales, Ireland, America, and France, receiving condolences from the countries comprising the United Kingdom, retiring from Starfleet, and accepting her post as a Federation ambassador. It was going to be a marathon but Angelica thought she was ready. Alex had promised to be by her side the entire time and his presence made her feel she could do it.

It did not make sense for either Michelle or Jennifer to just sit around the palace as she and Alex beamed all over the planet. Michelle was ready to stay but Angelica had managed to talk her sister-in-law into heading back to San Fransico and at least catch up on some work before she had to return. Same was true for Jennifer, who was a first year pre-law major at Cambridge University in Boston and like Michelle, Angelica talked her daughter into returning and catching up on homework and lessons before she would have to return. Angelica promised Jennifer that she would visit her twin sister when they were in San Francisco.

For the first time in days, she was feeling like herself. But there was something that was nagging on her mind and she had even mentioned it in her speech… something about living in fear and making a noise during an ever-changing world. She knew an old 1986 anthem, "You're the Voice" by the Australian John Farmham, was exactly what she was the point she was trying to make. During lunch, she started reworking his lyrics so they reflected what she wanted to say. But what she was going to say and what he said three hundred years ago were a lot alike.

Some things never change, she thought, reading the lyrics again. *How little did he know how John knew that his song would still have an impact three centuries later!*

"Alright," she murmured to the empty room. Her voice sounded small in the dampening-tiled space, but her heart was hammering against her ribs as she read and made some notes on her tablet. She wasn't Queen Angelica the First right now. She also wasn't a Starfleet officer who had spent twenty years enforcing Federation directives and pushing the bounds of knowledge. She was just a woman whose mother had died, sitting on a throne she never wanted, surrounded by politicians and statespeople trying to dictate every word

that left her mouth. But she had rewritten history that afternoon and she felt no small amount of satisfaction from that feat.

"Need some coffee or tea, Angie girl?" she heard in her headphones. This time, she wasn't surprised that Alex was there in the engineer's seat. He had come in just after she had sealed herself in the booth. "You virtually disappeared after James gave us the briefing."

"I've got the next track rolling around in my head," she said, putting the final touches on her lyrics, "and I was writing them down before I forgot."

Alex had a copy of her screen in the booth he was sitting in and he recognized the song she was about to cover. "*That* old song? Yeah… that's fits. You sure it's not your way of taking a victory lap?" His smile took the sting out of his last sentence.

"I'm sure," she said, straightening up. "Though it felt good to hear all that support."

"Yeah, both FNN and the BBC are still talking about it. I saw it before I came down here. You've turned things on their ear, girlfriend."

"As I intended, boyfriend." She pulled her microphone to mouth level and made sure her arrangement was also directly in front of her. "I simply set down my expectations."

"And turned over a millennium of the British monarchy's traditions on its head." He chuckled. "That's the Angie I know."

She smiled. "What is you told me… oh yes. 'Them's the breaks'?"

Now he laughed out loud. "Don't let anyone hear you say that! They'd get the wrong idea for sure!"

"Oh, yeah?" she said defiantly. "Wait until you hear this."

"Why do you think I'm down here? Let it rip."

She hit record on the console. The track started with no music—only the dark, pulse-like synth bassline she'd mapped to her own resting heart rate. 60 beats per minute. Steady. Cold. Angelica leaned into the pop filter, closing her eyes. Her opening line was soft—almost a whisper—carrying the heavy, unpolished rasp of grief.

We can write... what we want to write
We're all living in fear, such a powerful thing
Dependent on the strength of somebody's arm

The speakers in Angelica's headphones shook as the multi-layered vocal tracks she'd recorded earlier, a soaring, cathedral-like choir of her own voice erupted.

The clock is ticking and the time has come
To make a change, to start a new day
Before we lose it all...

She wasn't singing for an audience. She was singing to Prime Minister Vance. She was singing to the Cabinet. She was singing to Parliament. She was singing to all the news anchors on FNN and BBC who talked about her like she was an ornamental glass statue sitting in Buckingham Palace. Her pitch was raw; there was no autotune, no pitch correction, no smoothing. She opened her throat and let out her suppressed rage at the system that would have her keep quiet.

We're not gonna sit in silence!
We're not gonna live with fear!
Ooh-woah, talk about the passion!

Her voice began to swell, rising out of her chest as she virtually screamed into the microphone.

Make it louder, make it clear!
Oh-oh-oh, oh-oh-oh...

It was sheer human grit tearing through the high notes as she reached deep into her upper register. Her head bounced in time with

the beat, completely lost in putting out her message. She squeezed her headphones tight as the instrumental came, violins replacing the bagpipes from the original track.

We're all someone's daughter, we're all someone's son

How long can we look at each other down the barrel of a gun?

Her voice cracked slightly on "daughter", a split-second echo of the grief over her late mother before tightening into a razor-sharp, soaring belt. In her mind, she was seeing the faces of those officers and crewmembers she'd saw die in the service of Starfleet, the citizens crying in the Mall and in front of the palace, the survivors of various alien attacks, people who were tired of living under all the galactic geopolitical posturing.

We're not gonna sit in silence!
We're not gonna live with fear!
Ooh-woah, talk about the passion!
Make it louder, make it clear!
Oh-oh-oh, oh-oh-oh...

The instrumental came, violins replacing the bagpipes from the original track before it slowed, allowing her to sing the last line almost like she was talking directly to the listener…

We're not gonna sit in silence...

The track crested into a massive, thunderous synth drop, the snare snapping like artillery fire against her ears. When the final fade-out ended, Angelica stood trembling in front of the mic, her chest heaving, the headphones resting heavily against her ears.

She reached up with a hand and pressed *STOP*. For a long moment, the only sound in the room was her own rapid breathing.

"My God," was all Alex said. She looked at him, a smile on her lips, her look saying all she wanted to say. She clicked on the playback, listening to the dry lead vocal track: uncompressed, isolated, completely naked. When it was done, Angelica pulled the headphones down around her neck, letting them rest against her collarbone.

"I think the vocals are done," she said, carefully saving the track in several places on her server. She knew this song could be interpreted as dangerous. For others, it would be a direct declaration that the Queen of the United Kingdom refused to be silenced by the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, or Parliament. In her mind, she wasn't intending this as anything but her only release from the pressures of royal life and for the grief she was feeling as a daughter and a human being.

"We're not going to sit in silence," she whispered as she put the headphones back on so she could hear her spouse.

"I think you've made that point," Alex said, still in awe. He knew she was a powerful singer but he'd never seen or heard her like this. There was something that wasn't there before but it was sure to be popular with a lot of people.

"Another number one hit," he said.

"I'm not doing it for ratings," she cut him off. "It's my hope that we can heal together."

In the artist metadata field, she typed two letters: QA. Alex saw on his screen what she had typed. "Not the most imaginative you've ever been, Angie."

"Lots of things can be 'QA'," she pointed out. "But then, maybe I *want* them to know without me *telling* them it's me."

"If today was any indication of what's to come, I pity the government." He smiled slightly. "You're shown you're more than ready to take them on, play their game, and win."

"I'm showing them that I'm not their plaything," she commented. "As I've said many times today, I won't be silent."

Chapter 3 - The Tour

D+5: 0900, The Fifth Day
Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco

The last twenty-four hours were a blur for Angelica and Alex. The day after she had spoken at Parliament, they woke up early and beamed to Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh, Scotland for an audience with the Scottish First Minister and the memorial service at Saint Giles' Cathedral. No more had she finished shaking hands with everyone there in Saint Giles before they beamed over to Hillsborough Castle in Northern Ireland for more meetings and the service at Saint Anne's Cathedral service.

To round out the day, the couple had beamed once again, only this time to Cardiff Castle for her address to the Senedd and partaking in yet another service at Llandaff Cathedral before returning to London by nightfall to review her red box and another recording studio session. The only good thing was that she didn't need a brief from Sir Davies this time; she knew she was going to retire from Starfleet and she knew those procedures. It meant a trip to San Francisco.

Angelica had stayed up to 3 in the morning, being inspired once again to sing another song that she barely had time to write. Uncharacteristic for him, Alex hadn't gone down to the recording studio with her but instead had gone to bed early, saying that the long days were starting to get to him. If she were completely honest, she was feeling the very same but something was driving her to keep up her singing.

At this rate, she thought, *I'll have my album done by the state funeral*.

With the eight-hour time difference, the couple could sleep in as dawn cracked on the fourth day of Operation London Bridge. They took breakfast in bed and Angelica read her red box before lunch. She was glad to note that *The London Gazette*, the official journal of record for the Crown, had finally published her edict that Alex was officially the new Duke of Edinburgh. When she showed him that, he laughed out loud, unintentionally hurting Angelica's pride. He had to explain

to her that he was proud to take the title, which had been Angelica's first order of business in her first Privy Council, but the reason he laughed was that if someone had told him when he was a kid that he'd be the 23rd Century's equivalent of Prince Philip, he would have laughed in their face while thinking them crazy at the same time.

In the afternoon, both started the ritual of putting on their Starfleet uniforms once again. For Angelica, this time was bittersweet. She knew this day was coming but she didn't want it to end. After all, she had been a Starfleet officer for her entire adult life and it was the only life she was comfortable with. The life of a queen was new to her and by that evening, she would be a civilian again for the first time since she turned eighteen. It was not a prospect she relished but she knew it had to happen; an active-duty Starfleet officer could not also be a leader of a country and certainly not a Federation ambassador.

The entire time they were getting ready, she had the feeling that Alex knew something she didn't and he wasn't telling her. She talked at length about her upcoming retirement and how she hoped there wasn't a surprise waiting for her in California; he had skillfully ducked her veiled questions every time. That only served to reinforce the notion that he knew something was up. All her needling fell on deaf ears so she could only trust that her husband knew that whatever it was waiting for her was a nice surprise for once.

Down in the palace's transporter room did he finally give a hint of what was about to happen.

"You about ready for your ceremony, Captain?" he asked her, straightening the rank pin on her right shoulder.

"I just wish," she said with just a little exasperation, "that you'd just tell me what you already seem to know, Captain."

"Now, now, Captain Angelica McKnight," he chided as he inspected her campaign ribbons and Medal of Honor. "Classified information and all that." He flicked an imaginary piece of string off her medal. "I could tell you but I'd have to kill you. And I don't want to hurt my wife so I'm keeping my big mouth shut."

She looked at him sternly as he got ready to mount the pad. "So you *do* know what's about to happen, Alex! Just go ahead and tell me!."

"Okay," he said casually. "I'm going to see one of the best communications officers in Starfleet retire. With all that entails."

Finally, a crack! she thought. *Bloody well took long enough*!

Angelica crossed her arms. "Then there's to be *more* than a simple retirement ceremony?"

"Since you became queen," he countered, "nothing's been simple. You can't even cross the street anymore without an entourage around you." He mounted the pad. "Come on, Angie. Your other daughter is in the California morning waiting for you."

Angelica took her place on the other pad. Sir Davies and several attendants had already beamed over to Starfleet Headquarters earlier but not before Sir Davies made absolutely certain she knew what time she had to be there. *Remember, Your Majesty*, she remembered the elder gentleman telling her, *you must be on the transporter pad at precisely 5 PM London time. That will be 9 AM, California time. Your retirement ceremony will start at 9:30 AM precisely.*

She looked at the clock: **4:59 PM**.

"Guess I'm going to find out the hard way," she said, sotto voce. "Operator… send us to California."

Thirty seconds later found the McKnights in Starfleet's transporter room deep below the Admiralty and Academy grounds. Present was Admiral Ken Cartright, the Starfleet Commander, Admiral Jessia Folment, the Starfleet Chief of Staff (and one of Alex's best friends), Vice Admiral Anne Tollett, the Commandant of Starfleet Academy, along with a host of other admirals with their aides. But it was Cartright who made the first move.

"Captain Angelica McKnight," he said with his deep timbre, holding out a hand. Angelica took it in a firm handshake. "On behalf of all of Starfleet, let me offer you our sympathies and our condolences on your loss."

"Thank you, Admiral," she said diplomatically. "That means a lot to me and my family. The United Kingdom also thanks you for your kind words."

Alex stood behind and to her left and if he hadn't been so well schooled, his jaw would have dropped. Not even four days into the

job and she was already starting to talk like a diplomat. She was certainly acting like one as she shook hands with all present and smiled widely at Jessica.

"Admiral," Angelica said, her diction all spit and polish. "A pleasure to see you once again."

"Your Highness," Jessica said, not realizing she had used the wrong moniker, "I'm always glad to see you."

Cartright looked over at Alex and nodded. He and Alex didn't get along well but this was a day to put aside such animosities. "Alex. Always a pleasure to see you."

"Likewise, Admiral Cartright," he said. Normally, he would have been one of the few who could have gotten away with calling him 'Ken' in public but this time, he doubted it so he played it safe. After all, this day was for Angelica so he was determined to make certain she would be at the center of attention.

Just wait until she finds out what we cooked up, he thought. Last night, before going to bed, he had called Cartright and made sure their little surprise was on for the next day.

After Angelica glad handled the remaining admirals, Cartright caught her attention and motioned to the door. "Let us escort you out to the parade ground, Captain," he said, indicating Angleica go first. "Everything has been made ready for today."

"Thank you, Admiral. But I think I know just a *little* about the layout of this place."

There were polite laughs and chuckles but to Alex, it was a good sign. *If she's willing to crack jokes in* this *company*, he thought, *she must be feeling better. Got to ask her later if she's really feeling better or if she's putting on an act.*

They got into a waiting turbolift, taking them from the subterranean complex to ground level. On the ride up, Jessica nudged Alex in the ribs.

"How you doing, buddy?"

"I'm fine, kiddo."

"How's Angie? She seems fine."

"You should have seen her four days ago. She was a wreck."

"And now?" Jessica asked as the lift stopped and opened its

doors.

"You can see for yourself, Jess. She's even cracking wise now."

Jessica shook her head. "Keep an eye on her, Alex," the Canadian warned. "She may *look* like she's doing fine but something tells me she may be keeping it all bottled up."

You should see her in the recording studio, he thought. *Between that and my being here may have something to do with her current mood.*

"I planned to keep both eyes on her while I can," Alex replied as the entire party stepped out of the lift and made their way to the parade grounds. The crisp autumn wind off San Francisco Bay swept across the polished parade grounds of Starfleet Academy, carrying the salt air of the Pacific with the faint hum of passing shuttlecraft in the distance. It wasn't long before they got to the reviewing stand. Alex took a peek at what would be in his future when he finally retired.

The first few rows were reserved for various admirals and other invited guests. Starting with the tenth row, rows upon rows of cadets stood at parade rest, their uniforms precise and unyielding. Among them, tucked near the front rank of the freshman battalion, Cadet Karina McKnight held her chin high, keeping her eyes fixed strictly forward, though her heart beat double-time beneath her tunic when she spied her mother and father.

There's Mom and Dad, she thought as she stood at attention with the remainder of her classmates. *They seem to be doing all right. Mom certainly looks fine from here.*

As the official party mounted the grand review stand, Angelica found herself flanked by the high arches of the Golden Gate Bridge as they sat in their designated seats. Beside her on her left sat her husband, his presence a steady anchor in the swirling storm of protocol.

I still say, she pondered as she looked around, *that there's something going on that everyone but me seems to know. I'll bet even the cadets even know!*

The time was 0926.

An aide came to the podium. "The promotion and retirement ceremony will start in four minutes. Will everyone take their seats, please?"

Angelica looked at Alex in complete surprise. "*Promotion*?" she whispered. "*Promotion*?"

"Your promotion," he confirmed. "To rear admiral."

Angelica was too well trained to let her jaw drop to the ground but it nearly did anyway.

"Surprise," he said weakly as he saw Admiral Tollett walking to the lectern.

"You could have warned me!" Angelica hissed through her teeth.

"It wouldn't have been a surprise if I had told you," Alex said defensively through clenched teeth of his own. "Take the honor and smile."

"Sod off," she whispered with a smile on her lips. That smile took the bite from her words and said what she was thinking.

At precisely 0930, Tollett stepped to the lectern, her voice amplified across the grounds: "By order of the President of the United Federation of Planets, with the full concurrence of the Federation Council and the Commander-in-Chief, Starfleet, all in attendance will hear the executive decree." Tollett unrolled a heavy parchment bearing both the seals of the United Federation of Planets and Angelica's recently approved royal coat of arms.

Angelica was amazed at this level of effort that they had taken just for her. But then, it wasn't every day that one of their own took over the royal reins of a country. *They really went all out for me, didn't they?* she thought in shock. *They even brought out paper!*

"For distinguished, heroic, and unyielding service to Starfleet and the Federation; for extraordinary leadership in times of peace and crisis; and to maintain the proper constitutional parity between a Head of State and Starfleet..." The admiral looked directly at the officer-turned-queen. "Angelica Renee Louise Windsor-Mountbatten, known in the service as Captain Angelica Renee Louise McKnight, is hereby promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral, Lower Half, United Federation of Planets, Starfleet."

Alex turned toward his wife, a faint, proud smile breaking his stoic features. Together with Admiral Cartwright, Alex stepped forward to perform the pinning. He reached up, his fingers steady, and

unpinned the silver captain's rank insignia from her shoulder, replacing it with four-pointed pin arranged in a directional layout with each of the points having a polished brass finish featuring distinct horizontal ridged facets that catch the light and centered on a square light silver backing plate. The rank pin of a flag officer.

"CADETS," bellowed Tollett. "PRESENT... ARMS!"

The entire cadet corps snapped to attention in a thunderous, unified movement.

Hundreds of white-gloved hands rose to brows in a sharp salute. On the flag staff overlooking the bay, the blue command pennant of Starfleet's newest admiral unfurled into the California wind. Angelica returned the cadets' salute, her posture perfect, the weight of the moment settling on her shoulders. She was no longer just an officer in the tactical chain of command; she now held the full strategic weight of a Starfleet flag officer.

Then, as dictated by the precise choreography of the day, the tone of the brass band shifted. The solemn notes of *Auld Lang Syne* began to weave through the maritime breeze. In a quiet presession, Ken Cartwright replaced Anne Tollett at the podium and tapped on the built in display.

"Having achieved the rank of Rear Admiral, and in accordance with the Constitutional Mandate of the Crown and the laws of the United Federation of Planets, Her Majesty Queen Angelica the First now steps down from active duty to assume her duties as Sovereign of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland."

Cartwright turned to her and offered his hand. "Rear Admiral McKnight, your flag is hauled down. On behalf of Starfleet, we thank you for your service."

"Thank you, Admiral," Angelica said, summoning all her dignity as she shook his hand. She came to attention, acutely aware that she had received her commission as an ensign on this very ground twenty-five years ago. Now she was here once again, promoted to a rear admiral and retiring from the very institution she entered. *Apropos that I began and now end my Starfleet career here on these very grounds*, she thought. "I am ready to be relieved of duty, sir."

Cartwright came to attention as well. "You are relieved,

Admiral McKnight. Good luck."

Slowly, deliberately, the rear admiral's flag on the main mast was lowered. It was caught cleanly by a ceremonial honor guard, folded into a tight blue-and-white triangle, and presented to Angelica, who accepted it with a deep, respectful nod.

The formal ceremony concluded, giving way to the final review. The cadet corps began its march past the review stand. As Cadet McKnight swung her legs in rhythm, eyes snapped left toward the review stand, she exchanged the briefest of glances with her parents. Angelica's hand remained at her brow but her eyes shined with quiet, fierce pride at seeing her daughter in uniform. Angelica didn't need to look to see Alex doing the same.

Right after the ceremony, there were a lot of people wanting to wish Angelica their congratulations on her promotion and good luck in her retirement. It took quite a while for the line to finally peter out but Sir Davies finally got a private moment to pry Angelica loose. "The Commandant has made her study available to you, ma'am."

"I thought I was going to see…"

Sir Davies' eyes twinkled. "Your husband pulled some strings so you would get a private audience. Says it was part of his surprise."

Angelica could have cried had not been for half the Federation watching her. *Not only did Alex keep my promotion a surprise*, she thought, *but instead of meeting Kari in public, he's managed to get us away for a few minutes to be an honest to God family. Is it any wonder I love him?*

"If you break away now, no one will miss you, ma'am," Sir James said. "I will make sure of that. But I can only give you ten minutes. We still have to go to Paris tomorrow."

"Sir James…" her voice caught for a moment. "James… how can I thank you for this?"

"I'm happy when you're happy, ma'am." He pointed out the way. "That way."

"I still remember the layout of the campus, James. Thank you." She gave him a peck on the cheek.

"MA'AM!" he exclaimed at this breech of protocol.

"Just a friend giving a token of appreciation to another," she

said. "Give me all the time you can."

She hadn't noticed Alex had gone missing but given his absence, he was either with Admiral Cartwright talking about the Klingon situation she'd heard about or he had gone ahead to the study. She silently walked to a nearby building and opened the heavy wooden doors to the Commandant's private study.

As she guessed, Alex was already waiting for her there. She gave him a hug, then a slug in his upper arm.

"Ow," he said, rubbing the offended arm.

"That's for keeping me in the dark!" she said, only a little upset but actually happy. "You *knew* I was going to get promoted and yet you didn't say anything!"

"Ken made me promise, Angie! I swear! He said the Federation Council met the morning your mom…" Angelica crossed her arms and nodded. "… passed away and in executive session, they passed a resolution to allow you to become a rear admiral. Ken concurred so here we are."

Away from the eyes of the media and the political dignitaries, Angelica finally let out a long breath, her shoulders relaxing for the first time in hours. Alex immediately reached out, taking her hand and squeezing it tightly.

"Rear Admiral Angelica McKnight," Alex murmured, a warm grin breaking out. "Has a nice ring to it, Your Majesty."

"Oh ha, ha," Angelica replied, a soft laugh escaping her as she leaned into him. "I held the rank for less than five minutes and then I retired."

"Yeah, but you still get all the perks of a retired admiral."

"Like I need them," she pointed out. "I'm Queen Angelica now."

The side door opened, and Karina walked in, locking the door behind her. The moment the latch clicked, the younger McKnight walked to the center of the room and came to attention.

"Sir, Ma'am, Cadet Karina McKnight reporting as ordered, sir, ma'am!"

"Oh knock it off, Kari," said Alex. In that instant, all cadet formality vanished.

"Mom!" Karina exhaled, dropping her rigid posture and stepping forward. Angelica didn't hesitate; she wrapped her daughter in a tight, fierce embrace, inhaling the familiar scent of Bay air and crisp wool. Alex stepped in, wrapping his arms around both of his girls, holding his family together in the tiny pocket of calm they had carved out for themselves.

"Look at you," Angelica said, pulling back to hold Karina at arm's length, her hands smoothing the collar of the cadet uniform. "You looked so sharp out there!"

"You *saw* me? Out of all those cadets and you saw me?"

Alex answered, "Of course we did, kiddo. May not have looked it but we both were looking at you."

They sat down in the opposing sofas near the fireplace. Karina's bobbed straight red hair stood in contrast to Jennifer's curly hair. Other than that, Angelica doubted she would be able to tell them apart.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?" asked Angelica.

"***LOUSY***!" Karina said with a lot of heat in her tone. "After your call, Mom, Commander Barnes took me to her office as we waited on the counselor. Must have bawled my eyes out for twenty minutes!" The nineteen-year-old stopped for a moment to collect herself. "As soon as that counselor arrived… that's when I *really* went to pieces. Gave me two days off but no one will let me leave! What kind of bullshit is that?"

Angelica looked at Alex. "She gets it from you."

"What?" he asked innocently but he knew what his wife was driving at.

"Your temper and penchant for cursing."

Alex looked at Angelica. "And Jenni gets your temper from you." He turned to his daughter. "But how are you doing now, Kari?"

"Counselors… what a fu… *flipping* waste! I told them I wanted to be there for the funeral but…"

"I know," said Angelica, moving to take a seat by their eldest offspring, holding her by the shoulders. Karina leaned on her mother, sad but not crying. "We both attended the Academy too. But you say the word…"

“Angie,” interrupted Alex, “we made a promise, remember? Kari would not get any special treatment because of us. She would make it here all on her own.”

Angelica looked at him as a defiant mother. “I’m still her mother and I think this one time, we could break the rules.” She turned to the young woman she was cradling in her arms. “If you want, I’ll say something and you will be there.”

Karina thought for a moment, then shook her head. “Up to a month ago,” Karina said as Angelica stroked her hair, “I would have said to do it without a second thought. But now… no, Mom. I’ll be fine here. They said I could watch the funeral on the holo-vision.”

Angelica looked at her. “If you’re sure…”

“I’m sure.” Karina sat up to look at her mother in the eye. “I even caught your speech the other day. All I can say is… way to go, Mom!”

“Huh?” Angelica was clearly confused.

“Some of my friends said they pulled up the feed in Speech class and they studied your address to Parliament. You hit all the marks for a powerful and impacting speech. They even said the instructor said that was one of the best speeches he’s heard in a long time.”

“I’m a classroom subject now?” Angelica asked, still surprised.

“Welcome to the club,” said Alex. “They’ve been talking about my battle tactics here for a while.”

“When I heard that,” said Karina, “I was so proud of you.” She kissed her mom. “I am so proud to be your daughter.” She looked over to her father and kissed him too. “Both of you.”

“We’re proud of you too, sweetheart.” Angelica gave her a huge hug again. “You sure you’re all right?”

“Mom, I'm fine,” Karina laughed, wiping a speck of dust from her eye. “The survival drills in the desert were rough, and the Vulcan tactics instructor hates everyone equally, but I'm surviving. Two more months and I’m a second-year.”

A gentle knock echoed at the main door. Sir James’ voice carried through the wood: *“Your Majesty, Captain... the transporter is waiting.”*

"Give us a minute more, James," Angelica called, "and I'll give you a big bonus on your next paycheck!"

She could swear she could hear the smile in his voice. "A minute. Not any longer."

Angelica stood up, along with Karina. "Guess I've got to go again."

"Where you going next, Mom?"

"We're to go to Paris tomorrow," said Angelica. "Now that I'm a civilian again, I'll become a Federation Ambassador in addition to being a queen."

"You'll do great, Mom." She gave her mother a long hug. "I'll call you soon. I've got your private number."

"I'll be waiting, sweetheart." She looked Karina in the eye as a concerned mother. "I don't care what time it is, you call us, hear me, young lady?"

Karina smiled, then walked over to her father, hugging and kissing him too. "I've read some of your battle tactics, Dad. You're fearless in battle!"

"Only a fool would have no fear when getting into a fight," Alex said. "I don't start them but I damn well finish them."

"You do do that well. Just don't get into too much trouble on the *Lexington*, Dad."

"I'll give those Klingons sweet hell, Kari." He looked her over once more. "You listen to your mother and call us when you can."

"I will, Dad." Karina straightened her tunic, stepping back and snapping into a crisp, perfect attention stance. "Sir, ma'am, Cadet Karina McKnight requests permission to rejoin her battalion!"

"Permission granted," Angelica smiled. "And be sure to tell your commander who released you."

"Yes, ma'am!" Karina said then left, leaving the two parents along for a moment.

"Oh yes, she *most definitely* takes after you, Alex," said Angelica, pride filling her voice.

"And Jenni takes after you," Alex said. "How did we end up with the best twin daughters in the galaxy?"

Angelica laughed as she walked to the door. "I've no idea."

D+6: 0630, The Sixth Day
Buckingham Palace

The morning sun in London was rising just as Angelica was waking up. So far, it had been a whirlwind ride and today was going to be more of the same. She and Alex were headed to Paris later in the morning where she would formally become a Federation Ambassador. The setup was a holdover from post-war Earth when the New United Nations took over after the third World War. All the nation states remained the same but there was one world government so individual nations would take care of domestic matters while the world government got Earth's recovery underway.

When the Federation was founded in 2161, it was decided that the five permanent members of the New United Nations were made full Ambassadors for the United Federation of Planets. For over a century, the leaders of the United States, France, United Kingdom, China, and Russia had been 'dual hatted' as both leaders of their nation states as well as ambassadors. However, the Ambassador from the United Kingdom was the only unelected one; Parliament decided that the monarchy would take on the function since the monarch needed a role to remain relevant in the post-war world.

Angelica laid in the sunbeam, enjoying the quiet for a few minutes. She listened to Alex sleeping beside her, again with that cute slight snore. The new queen didn't dare move, knowing that he was a light sleeper, all thanks to Starfleet. She found that she was also a light sleeper but the more she stayed on Earth and time wore on, she started to regain a deeper sleep since she knew she would not be interrupted by a red alert in the middle of the night. She also noticed her accent had returned since coming home. Like her hair, she thought her accent was one of her cuter features so she was glad it had made a comeback.

Angelica finally gently turned to her right and looked at her partner. A surge of love filled her and she unwittingly sighed. He did not react. She gently took him in her arms, wanting to hold him forever. *God, I love this man*, she thought. *I really, truly love him.*

"I could get used to this again," he muttered, keeping his eyes

closed. She smiled as she continued to hold him. “You holding me; I’m liking it.”

“I could too. Holding you like this.”

“How’s retired life treating you?”

“Do you really want to ruin a perfectly good morning?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then don’t,” she warned, putting her head on his arm. “I’m happy just to lay here beside you.”

He finally opened his eyes and turned to look at her. “You’re beautiful, Angie.”

“I’m a disaster,” she said, playing with her flat hair.

“Nonsense. You’re the woman I married,” he said, leaning in to kiss her when there was a rapping at the door. She instantly shot up and looked, then remembered… unlike the other day, she didn’t wear anything to bed and he was clad only in some silk boxers that she liked seeing him wear. She quickly covered herself with the bedsheet but the sheet wasn’t thick enough.

“Bugger off!” she ordered.

“Your Majesty,” came the voice of Sir James, “are you presentable?”

“Hell no, James!” she said, now panicked. “Come back in fifteen minutes!”

“You know the schedule for the day, right, ma’am?” he asked through the door.

“*Goddamn it, I know*!” she howled. “Fifteen minutes. That’s your queen giving you a *direct goddamn order*!” Angelica was flushed in the face, praying no one would come in. There was only silence that greeted them.

“Such language from a queen,” Alex murmured.

She looked down at him, finally releasing the sheet. “I learned that in Starfleet,” she said, leaning down to kiss him and this time, she succeeded. “I’m hungry.”

His kiss told him what he was hungry for and it wasn’t food.

“I’m still not in the mood,” she warned, getting out of the bed.

“I thought as much,” he said but she could hear the slight defeat

in his voice.

"Before you leave, I promise that I'll shag you rotten," Angelica assured as she walked to the bathroom. She held out her hand. "But for now, I can use the company in the shower."

"I can do that," he said, taking her offered hand and walking with her.

An hour later and they were sitting to breakfast. Alex had a raging appetite this morning as he ordered pancakes, sausage, scrambled eggs, and iced coffee. For Angelica, her appetite was picking back up as she ordered Belgian waffles, baked beans, toast, and a coffee.

"Baked beans are for lunch and dinner," he commented. "I never understood the British propensity for having the most dangerous beans known to man for breakfast."

Angelica laughed as their drinks appeared. "I promise not to have any flatulence while we're in Paris today."

The food has no more than been served before Sir Davies very gingerly entered the dining room. "Your Majesty, permission to enter?"

"Come on in, Sir James," said Alex but he stood frozen to the spot. Angelica's face was as red as her hair.

"Your Majesty?"

"Come in," she said sheepishly. He walked over to the table but did not sit down.

"Permission to sit and give you today's briefing?"

Angelica sighed embarrassedly. "I owe you an apology, don't I?"

"Ma'am?" His tone said what he didn't.

"Okay, I deserve that," Angelica said, putting her coffee down and wiping her lips with the napkin. "I apologize for what I said earlier."

Sir Davies didn't react but you could feel the anger radiating off him.

"I should not have talk to you like that. I was… we were… I was… *indisposed*."

He finally reacted. "What Her Majesty does in the privacy of

her bedroom is her own concern."

Oh yeah, she thought. *He's really, royally pissed off as he should be!*

"I wasn't… we weren't doing what you're *thinking* we were doing. I was… let's say I wasn't presentable."

"Again, what you do in privacy is of your own concern," he fired back.

"You're really going to make me work for this, aren't you?"

He finally looked at her. "I didn't deserve to be cursed at."

"You're right," she said a little too quickly. "And I apologize for that. I was afraid you were going to walk in and see me… well, very unqueenlike. One million apologies and I won't do that again." She gave him a whipped puppy dog look that Alex knew all too well. He'd been on the receiving end of that look more than a few times. "Am I forgiven?"

"Very well, ma'am," he said, apparently mollified for the moment. He turned his attention to his tablet. "We're running a little behind schedule this morning. We're to be in Paris at 10:00 AM this morning."

"Why so early?" Alex asked. "The ceremony isn't until 11."

"Her Majesty will have an audience with the Federation President before she receives her ambassadorship," Sir Davies said. "We understand that he likes to have an informal chat before the ceremony."

"Is there anything on the agenda about what he wants to talk to be about?" Angelica asked as she dug into her food.

"There's no mention but reports indicate it should be an informal discussion. I imagine that he will just want to… get to know you before you become of his ambassadors."

Alex was already halfway through his meal before he spoke again. "So, she meets him. What's after that?"

"At 11 AM, you will be escorted to the Grand Salon of the *Palais de l'Élysée*. As host, the French delegate will present Her Majesty her Letters of Credence and Ambassadorial Mandate."

"It's *that* simple?" Alex looked shocked. Sir Davies nodded. "It can't be that easy!"

"Of course, Her Majesty will be expected to say some words, followed by a formal lunch with the Federation President, the Gang of Five, and invited guests."

"More words," she murmured between bites. "More speeches."

"I'm afraid that speeches are a part of your life from now on, ma'am."

"Sh… Crap," she corrected, remembering what she had just promised Sir Davies. "And here I thought I could stop being a communications officer."

Alex was finishing his meal. "What else, Sir James?"

"Until tomorrow, there are no other public events. You will be able to rest before you mother goes to Westminster."

Angelica's head shot up like a gunshot. "Where is she now?"

"She is in the Chapel Royal at Saint James's Palace. She will be moved to Westminster Hall tomorrow morning."

There was a slight pause before Angelica landed another bombshell. "I want to see her one last time."

Sir James looked surprised. "But Your Majesty…"

Angelica's look became cold and firm. "Make it happen, Sir James. This afternoon. After I get back from Paris. I want one last conversation with my mother."

"As you wish, ma'am."

D+6: 1000, The Sixth Day
Federation Presidential Residence, Paris

"The President will see you in a moment, ma'am," said one of the aides scurrying about in the outer office. "Something came up that required his immediate attention."

"Her Majesty was told she would have a direct audience with the President," Sir Davies pointed out. "With her ceremony in less than an hour, time is a precious commodity."

"I'm sorry, sir," she said. Angelica could have sworn the aide was literally trembling in fear in front of them. "I'll go see if he's ready."

"I'll be here," Angelica said but the aide was already going

through the doors.

"What a way to start the day," Alex said, dressed in his uniform once again. "You couldn't *pay* me enough to have that job!"

"And to think that Jenni wants to be the Federation President one day. And when did you form that opinion: *before* or *after* we saved this President's predecessor?" Angelica asked. She was dressed in a simple black dress of a conservative cut but she had worn a dressy leather blazer to help ward off the chills.

"*Before*!" he countered. "When I was the Starfleet Chief of Staff, I spent many an hour in there and it's not something I care to repeat."

"You will be doing it again as my consort," she teased, "oh Duke of Edinburgh."

"Oh don't remind me, Angie, please!" he said jokingly. "I'm still the captain of the *Lexington*!"

She looked him teasingly. "Just see this as looking into your future."

"I'll break my leg first and not tell anyone until it's too late."

Angelica smiled. "Not if I break them for you first."

The aide appeared again. "Ma'am, he is ready for you."

Both Angelica and Alex walked into the president's office. His desk was framed by the ceiling to floor windows, showing a beautiful day on the outskirts of the French city.

"Queen Angelica!" he said, dismissing his chief of staff and walking over to her. He stopped short and bowed. "On behalf of the Federation, allow me to present my deepest condolences on the passing of your mother. She was a very unique woman and one of my closest friends."

"Mr. President," she answered warmly but regally, "thank you for seeing me and thank you for your condolences. My mother spoke very highly about you."

"I've known her since I was a junior senator in the Federation Council," he said, motioning to the seats in front of the viewscreen. "And Captain McKnight. One of Starfleet's best officers. I've seen your record. Very impressive."

"Thank you, sir," he said simply as they sat down.

"Care for anything to drink?"

"No, Mr. President, we're fine," said Angelica. "Thank you though."

"Mind if I get some water? I've been in meetings since I woke up and this is the first chance I've had to catch my breath."

"I've had some days like that on the *Lexington*, sir," Angelica said. "I think I speak for both of us when I say that we *completely* understand."

He ordered a water before turning back to his guests. "I apologize for keeping you waiting. The Klingon situation is getting worse."

"*Worse*?" asked Angelica. She'd been so wrapped up with the funeral and the transfer of power that she'd almost forgotten there was an outside world with outside cares and outside problems.

"I'm afraid so. More border raids, more innocent settlers injured." He looked to Alex. "I think you'll know what this means, Captain."

"I do," he said. "Starfleet won't let you down, sir."

"And know that once your ten days are complete, Queen Angelica, that I may have to call you up sooner than I want to."

"I am at your disposal, Mr. President," she answered. "I'll be there when you call."

Nothing like getting thrown in the deep end of the pool, she thought, *and being told to swim. Looks like my on-the-job training will be for real.*

D+6: 1100, The Sixth Day
Palais de l'Élysée, Paris

The pre-noon sun in Paris broke across the polished glass and stone of the Grand Salon, illuminating the flags of the United Federation of Planets and the New United Nations. Assembled before the dais stood the ambassadors and delegation heads representing the five permanent New United Nation security council members, informally known as the "Gang of Five", standing in silence as the protocol herald stepped to the microphone.

Alex was once again beside Angelica as she stood spotless in her attire. The dress, partly hidden under the jacket she wore, bore the subtle silver accents of her newly conferred status, a stark contrast to the Starfleet uniform she had surrendered only twenty-four hours earlier in California.

The delegate from France stepped forward, holding the heavy leather-bound portfolio containing the diplomatic seals of the Federation Council and the five permanent member states. "By authority vested in this council," he said in English, "and in accordance with the sovereign covenants of Earth and the United Federation of Planets, we present the Letters of Credence and Ambassadorial Mandate to you, Her Majesty Queen Angelica the First."

Angelica stepped forward, her movement precise and commanding, and accepted the portfolio with a measured nod.

"*Votre Excellence* LeBeau," she said in French before switching to English. "I accept this charge you and your colleagues have placed on me. Thank you."

There was a round of light applause as she walked to the podium. Placing her hands on the podium, she surveyed the gathered delegates, her voice clear, resonant, and effortlessly bridging her roles as sovereign, retired Starfleet flag officer, and now newly accredited Federation Ambassador.

Once again, Angelica was not reading from any notes or teleprompters.

"Members of the Council, distinguished delegates, and colleagues. Again, thank you for the warm applause.

"Yesterday, on the shores of San Francisco Bay, I closed a long and cherished chapter of my life. I hung up my uniform, surrendered my commission, and stood down as a rear admiral. But as my Starfleet duty concludes, another, far broader in scope and higher in responsibility, begins.

"In accepting this diplomatic mandate today, I am aware of the unique burden it carries. I do not stand before you merely as the sovereign of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, nor as a servant of the crown. Today, I stand before you as an accredited ambassador of

the United Federation of Planets, joining this council not to divide our focus, but to strengthen our collective resolve.

"The Federation… indeed, our galaxy stands at a crucial crossroads. The frontiers are expanding, new species are reaching out to make contact, and the peace we have cultivated demands an ever vigilant, steady, and unyielding stewardship. The principles that built the New United Nations on this world two centuries ago are the very same principles that anchor our Federation today: dialogue over discord, justice over tyranny, and unity through shared purpose.

"To the all our distinguished members and our allied delegates across the quadrant, I say this. Know that in our embassies, no matter where, you will find a partner of resolute action and transparent counsel. Where crisis emerges, we shall bring order; where conflict threatens, we shall deploy diplomacy backed by unwavering resolve.

"I accept these credentials with humility, with pride, and with a firm commitment to the peace and security of the Federation and all its member worlds.

"Thank you."

A resounding applause echoed through the Grand Salon as the ambassadors bowed in formal acknowledgment. Beside the podium, Alex offered her a subtle, knowing glance, a quiet moment shared between them amidst the applause of the galactic stage.

With the seals stamped, the oath recorded, and her ambassadorship active, her whirlwind 72-hour tour was officially complete.

Back in London, Prime Minister Alistair Vance watched the live transmission from the Grand Salon on a secure display inside 10 Downing Street. His reaction was a complex mixture of sharp political calculation, reluctant respect, and a deep awareness. Vance knew that having a reigning monarch serving as a dual-hatted Federation Ambassador presented both an opportunity and a parliamentary headache. In the old days, a Prime Minister controlled foreign policy, while the Crown remained a ceremonial figurehead. Today, the Prime Minister worked solely on domestic issues but the crown was also a full Federation Ambassador seated among the infamous "Gang of

Five." Angelica now wielded a genuine diplomatic influence that Whitehall could not have a say, much less easily override or censor.

As he watched her speak, he became impressed in how smooth her delivery was and without a single pause or misstep. In short, her speech was flawless. Domestic polling across the UK and the Commonwealth would soar as the masses would begin to view their new queen not as an out-of-touch monarch, but with as a human… a proactive and progressive leader defending their collective interests. The traditionalists, of which Vance belonged, couldn't openly oppose her progressiveness without looking petty or unpatriotic.

Turning to his Chief of Staff as the applause on screen faded, Vance folded his hands and offered a slow, deliberate nod.

"Our new Queen played that brilliantly," Vance admitted, his tone appreciative. "She managed to anchor the authority of the Crown straight into the Federation and United Earth framework into a single point of contact. And she did the entire thing from memory. We couldn't have written a better script ourselves."

While Vance would handle the day-to-day governance of Parliament, the United Kingdom, and domestic relations, Angelica would be their premier voice in the Federation and out on the deep-space frontier. It was a delicate balance of power, but one that ultimately placed the UK and the Crown in an extraordinarily strong position on the galactic stage.

D+6: 1500, The Sixth Day
London

Angelica McKnight walked in the open Mall. She was no longer in a dress and she was not easily recognizable; she had put on a leather sweatshirt and joggers with her hair ponytailed with a black leather scrunchie. She also wore sunglasses and a black leather ballcap holding all her hair. She snuck out of Buckingham Palace, using one of the subterranean passages connecting the palace basement directly to the nearby Saint James's Park. About 20 meters behind her was a mix of several Royal Protection or Starfleet Security officers, dressed as plainclothes civilians, to act as a shadow without drawing attention.

Before she became queen, Alex would have let her go without assistance (after all, she'd been using these tunnels since she was a child) but this time, both he and Sir Davies insisted on protection. Hence the agents trailing her.

Angelica walked the walk the fifteen minutes to the chapel at Saint James's Palace with her escorts always in sight. She saw the agents take up their positions as they approached and when she was satisfied, the incognito queen walked into the hall, unafraid and determined. The casket was sitting solemnly in the center of Chapel Royal with only two royal chaplains standing vigil over the late queen. The casket itself was of old English oak and an ordinate piece of work.

"Ma'am" said one of the chaplains when they spotted the leather clad woman, "you cannot can be…"

He stopped cold when Angelica took off her sunglasses and hat.

"Your Majesty!" he called out, warning his partner that the Queen had showed up unexpectedly. Both bowed deeply to her. *That's one thing I will never get used to*, she thought as she motioned them to rise. *I* hate *the bowing!*

"Would it be okay if I had a few minutes with my mother?" she asked quietly. "Privately?"

"Of… of… of course, ma'am!" They could not walk fast enough out of the chapel, leaving mother and daughter alone one last time. Angelica put her sunglasses in her hat and put the hat onto a chair before she approached the coffin.

"Hi, Mum," Angelica said, keeping her voice low and respectful as she approached. She pulled up a chair and sat down beside the coffin. "Sorry I didn't visit before but… well, you know how it is. You did this very same thing when Uncle James passed away. I wanted to have one last conversation with you before… before… before we bury you."

Her eyes began to tear up. "Mum… I have to confess something. I was a bad daughter. I should never had stayed away like I did. I should never have pushed you away."

She paused to collect her thoughts. "You told me on the *Lexington* that our arguments hurt you more than I knew. Now I know what you meant. It was my pride that kept me keep you at a distance.

I couldn't admit that I may have been wrong. I *was* wrong."

Angelica looked up, fighting the tears. "And I tried my best to make it up to you these last two years… I'm glad I got that." She looked back at the coffin. "I wish I had more time with you. I wish we hadn't had that gap between us that I put there. I hated being a royal and I took that out on you. And I shouldn't have. I should have kept it to myself but I couldn't."

She felt a tear streaking down her cheek. "I know you're looking down at me right now. God, why did I let my pride get in the way? Mum… I've only told you this in the last two years but I didn't say it nearly enough. I love you, Mum. Oh my God, *I love you*."

Now the tears were coming down her cheeks out she refused to wipe them away. She got off the chair and knelt in front of the coffin.

"I am a horrible daughter, Mum. And for that, I am sorry. I am *so sorry*… you will never know how much I'm sorry. If I could, I'd take back all those years we spent fighting and be a good girl… a good daughter. I can't tell you how sorry I am! I can't! If I could, I would trade places with you right now."

She bowed her head, said a silent prayer for her mother's soul before looking up again, tears still running freely down her face.

"I swear to you and to Almighty God above… I will do my best to be a good Queen. I will do what I can to make you proud of me. I'll always remember what you told me about not letting the crown break my free spirit but to stay within the law you drilled into me. As you and God as my witness, I shall do so. If I ever break my word, may God strike me dead!"

She stood up, still refusing to wipe away her tears. "That's about all I wanted to say, Mum. I know you'll be watching over me and I thank God for that. I was blessed with an amazing husband who I know I can count on and we've given you amazing grandchildren." She kissed the coffin. "I love you, Mum. That, I can say with absolute certainty."

Angelica started to walk away but half way back, she stopped and turned to face the coffin once again.

"From here… oh, you know what's about to happen. I won't be able to say this but I want you to hear it in private one last time… I

love you, Mother."

Angelica McKnight gathered her belongings, putting on her glasses and stuffing her curls into the hat before turning one last time to see her mother's coffin.

"Goodbye."

As Angelica left, these words were ringing in her head:

If I could make a bargain with the stars,
I'd trade this crown and all of these iron bars.
If I could reach across the cosmic veil,
I'd swap my breath before your spirit failed.
No royal laws, no palace left behind—
Just leaving human sorrow far behind.

And if I only could,
I'd make a deal with the void…
And I'd take your place, Mother.

Chapter 4 - Vigil of the Princes

D+7: 1530, The Seventh Day
The Precession to Westminster

Angelica, in formal black royal mourning attire, was standing behind her mother's hearse while the procession was preparing to move. To each side of the gun carriage was the escort of Household Cavalry and Foot Guards along with Starfleet Honor Guards. Beside Angelica was her husband, back in his Starfleet uniform. To her right stood her sister, similarly dressed in a black mourning gown.

"Are you okay, Angie?" he whispered so only she would hear him. "You know I'm here for you."

She took a deep breath and stared straight ahead. "I may have said my goodbyes yesterday," she whispered back, "but it still doesn't make any of this any easier."

"I'm still here for you, Angie. Remember that." He gave her hand a quick squeeze before anyone could see it.

"I know. And thank you. I really need you right now."

"I'm here for you too, Sis," whispered Karina.

"As I am for you, Karina." Angelica quickly squeezed her sister's proffered hand before regaining her composure. On the bugle call, the procession began to make its way. Angelica walked behind the gun carriage with Alex in step beside her. As they walked down the Mall, Angelica saw the sheer number of people lined up as far as she could see. Many of them were crying while others were bowing their heads or holding their hands over their hearts.

Angelica's heart went out to them.

I promised them a new day, she thought, recalling her last two public speeches. *I promised them I would listen and act on their behalf. And I will keep that promise, even if it kills me. Just look at these people! Almost all of them didn't even know her but only saw her on the holo-vision or in the media! Yet here they are, delivering their final respects like she was one of their own family members! I won't forget this and I will repay their kindness. Their grief is my grief. Their pain is my pain. We are hurting as one; we shall heal as one.*

The procession turned and headed to Whitehall before making another turn to the Palace of Westminster. Every glance she stole at the crowds, the more Angelica's heart went out to them and the more her resolve hardened. By the time they got to Westminster Hall, she knew what she had to do to start the healing process.

It was something she didn't think Vance and the government would approve of if they knew about it.

Pallbearers in the form of a joint Sovereign's Bodyguard, Household Division, and Federation Honor Guard, took her mother's coffin off the carriage and moved it indoors. Angelica and Alex followed it in and watched in stony silence as they placed it on catafalque in the center of hall. Angelica silently took her place at the head of the catafalque alongside Alex, watching as the bearer party positioned the coffin and observed the Guard step into place. Once the bearer party gently lowered the coffin onto the raised catafalque, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Dean of Westminster conducted a brief, solemn service but Angelica could not have told you what they had said. Her sole attention was on the coffin in front of her.

At the conclusion of their service, the Mounting of the Guard took place to establish the continuous military watch over the monarch. Four sentries, drawn from the Sovereign's Bodyguard, the Household Division, and the Federation Honor Guard stepped slowly out from their positions around the hall. You could have heard a pin drop from the silence in the hall. The atmosphere was hushed and reverent.

The Officer of the Guard would signal the guards by striking the heavy ceremonial pace stick against the stone floor. On the first tap, all four guards marched with slow, deliberate, friction-less steps toward the four corners of the catafalque. On the second tap, they reached their assigned corners and halted in perfect unison. The Officer of the Guard gave a silent sword cue called "Rest on Arms Reverse" and on cue, all the guards turned inward to face the coffin, then inverted their weapons, pointing the points of their swords down toward the carpeted dais, placing both hands over the pommel before bowing their heads in a posture of mourning and deep deference.

Normally, Angelica and Alex would have left but Angelica remained where she stood at the head of the catafalque, as if she too

were standing guard. Alex didn't dare say a word but he did shoot her a questioning glace. As Sir Davies briefed, once this initial watch was set, it would remain as continuous 24 hour a day operation with the guards changed out at every twenty minutes with a single sharp tap of the staff on the stone. This would be the signal the incoming relief guard to march out, step onto the corners of the dais, and relieve the outgoing sentries without a single word being spoken. To say Alex was impressed with this precision was an understatement. He'd never seen anything like it and he was very awestruck by it.

He also knew Angleica, Karina, and Jennifer, in her royal debut, would have to stand their own watch, which Sir James had called the 'Vigil of the Princes.' Angelica had made their standing of the guard for tonight at 7 PM. He and Michelle would be there for the vigil but neither one of them would be a part of the ceremonies; they would be nearby, ready to provide their silent support to their family.

Finally, Angelica stirred and with Alex taking his place to her left and Karina on her right, they made their way out and into the evening. They had their flitters already waiting outside and they got in. Alex had insisted on all three of them in the flitter; Angelica had made it an order.

It wasn't until the door closed before any of them said anything.

"Wow," he said. He was still floored by the precision he had just witnessed. Angelica wasn't listening but staring out the window, waving but wearing a sad expression. Alex hoped that the events of last night and today didn't cause her to slip back into that dour mood she had when he first appeared. All day, she hadn't cracked a joke or even a smile and her answers had been curt and short, as if it was an effort to speak.

"How are you doing, Angie?" Karina dared to ask, not knowing what kind of answer she would get.

At first, Angelica didn't bother to answer. She sighed deeply a few times before she said, "Miserable."

"I understand," Alex said. "But ever since you got back from your private viewing, you've been in a crap mood."

"Am I supposed to be jumping up and down that we're burying my mother?" Alex could tell with the way she had put ice into those

words that she was getting really angry but holding in check. Just. Alex took Angelica's hand. She didn't pull away but she didn't encourage it either.

"I just want to know what happened over at Saint James's Palace."

She sighed as Buckingham hove into view. "You know what happened."

He loved her but she was being infuriating with her avoidances. "No, I don't. Before you went over there, you were actually happy that you were able to sneak out and dress up like yourself again. When you came back, you went straight down and locked yourself in the recording studio. I didn't even see you until this morning and by then, you were down in the mouth. Not that you don't have a reason but after seeing you seeming to bounce back with the teasing and joking, I thought you may have been returning to normal."

"*Normal*?" Fury flashed in her eyes and it made Alex sit back a little. "Do you think anything will be *normal* ever again? I had a life in the stars and I had to give it all up for this! At least you get to chase your dreams for a while longer! *I get only this*! ***Goddamn it***!"

It was rare for Alex to be speechless but this was one of those times. The flitter stopped at the doors and Angelica didn't even wait for anyone to open it. She opened the gull wing door herself and stormed into the palace, as if daring someone to stop her. She took the stairs without stopping or looking. Jennifer had come out to greet her parents but one look at a furious Angelica and Jennifer stopped instantly. Instead, she went to her father as her mother left their sight.

"What's wrong with Mum?" Jennifer asked. "She looked mad enough to start a nuclear reactor!"

"I think," Alex said, taking his daughter's hand in his, "your mother has just hit the anger portion of her grieving. I'm going to go find out."

"Dad," Jennifer protested, "do you really want to tangle with Mom in *that* mood?"

"I've got to, Jenni," Alex pointed out, "And I'm pretty sure I know where she'd go to be by herself." He hugged his daughter, kissed her lightly on the top of her head. "Trust me."

He traced the steps that Angelica had used going up towards her office. But he knew she hadn't gone to her office. And there was more than one way to get to where he knew she had gone. And he took that way down to the recording studio down in the basement.

Sure enough, Angelica was there in the booth, sitting on the stool, completely closed off to the rest of the world. She hadn't changed clothes nor was she wearing her headphones. Instead, she wore a furious look with a vacant stare, looking into nothingness. Knowing that she would not be able to hear him, Alex walked over to the booth's door and slowly opened it, wondering what reaction he would get. Angelica sat motionless, still looking into the void. He gently shut the door behind him and wondered if it would really be a good idea if he should disturb her. But it was the lack of reaction that had him curious.

He walked over to her and said gently, quietly, "Angie?"

"*GODDAMMIT*!" she suddenly exploded. "WHO IN THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?? WHY IS IT THAT YOU'RE HERE AND NOT HER? SHE SHOULD BE HERE! WHY ARE YOU ALIVE AND SHE ISN'T*?* WHY??!!"

Alex backed up a step and almost unloaded on her in return before catching himself with a sudden realization. He had seen… no, he *knew* Angelica had been holding *something* back ever since she came back from Saint James. He knew she finally had that private goodbye at the catafalque and somehow, that visit had somehow broken the emotional dam she had built, leaving her at most raw, primitive… human. When Angelica had stormed to the only private sanctuary remaining to her, that's when the pressure valve blew. It was a sign that the human behind the crown was feeling the full weight of her loss.

"IT'S SO GODDAMMED UNFAIR… ALL OF IT! WHY IS IT ME? WHY WAS I PICKED TO HOLD THE DAMNED CRUSHING WEIGHT OF THE CROWN? WHY? WHY IS IT ME, GOD? I DIDN'T ASK FOR ANY OF THIS! NONE OF IT! *AND WHO ARE YOU, ALEX, TO SEE ME LIKE THIS? I CAME DOWN HERE FOR PRIVACY AND HERE YOU ARE WATCHING ME FALL APART! DO YOU LIKE WHAT YOU SEE, EH? YOU LIKE SEEING*

ME IN PAIN?! WHY ARE YOU MAKING ME SUFFER, GOD? WHY??!!"

His instinct had been right… she was raging at the universe in general. He just stood there as Angelica looked up at the ceiling as if she was howling at it. She barely took a breath before continuing, her rage in full control.

"***ARE YOU HAPPY, GOD? JUST WHEN THINGS WERE RIGHT BETWEEN MY MUM AND I, YOU TOOK HER AWAY FROM ME BEFORE I COULD FINISH WHAT I HAD STARTED! WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT? WHO MADE YOU THE JUDGE AND JURY BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH? GODDAMN YOU! GODDAMN YOU AND GODDAMN ME!***" As sudden as her rage appeared, it disappeared. "Goddamn me."

Angelica collapsed to her knees, her legs unable to hold her weight. Alex kneeled down beside her and took her tight to his chest. Tears were gushing as well as her thoughts as the full weight of the last few days came crashing down on her.

"Oh my God… what am I going to do? What will I do now that she's gone? Two years wasn't enough… I screwed up… I screwed up bad… I'm such a bad daughter… I barely talked to her for almost twenty years… my damn pride blinded me…" she kept crying into his chest as he held her. Alex didn't bother saying anything, hoping that by holding her, it would reaffirm his bond and love for her.

"It was… it wasn't… oh God… I screwed up… I am so sorry for screwing up, mum… I'm so sorry for everything… I'm a bad daughter… bad mother… bad queen… how I wish you were here now so I… could say goodbye right… I don't know how I'm going to face everyone… how can I face you, Alex… how can I go back and see you… I can't even cry because of the crown… everyone's looking to me and I… can't bear it…"

Angelica barely took a breath. "How can I lead when I'm this broken… how am I going to face anyone… and I can't say goodbye in public like I want… the damned media analyzing me like a princess in a glass tower… don't they see how hurt and broken I am… oh God… forgive me for everything I've done wrong in my life… I tried to do right but I was so wrong… mum, come back… I love you so much

and I never got to tell you until we made up… I'm such a bad daughter… I miss you so much… I wish I could talk to you one more time… I wish I could make up those years we didn't talk to each other… but I have to say goodbye and I don't think I can… I'm not strong enough… tough enough…"

The tears were starting to subside but she still held on tightly. "Give me the strength to say goodbye one more time… I miss you, mum… I hope you now know how much I love you… and forgive me for being such a horrible daughter… please forgive me, mum… I was such a fool… mum, I love you."

Angelica finally ran out of steam and tears. She looked up to her husband. "I owe you…"

"Nonsense," he said. "You don't owe me anything. You don't owe anyone anything."

She wiped her tears, ruining her makeup. "Alex, I yelled at you…"

"Angie," he said, gently taking her chin in his hand, "you're human. And you're going through your own grief in your own way. I should have guessed it earlier… you've got to process your grief in your own way. But my place is beside you. Know that I am here for you and I always will be."

"You're… you're not mad at me?" she pleaded.

"How?" he answered honestly. "Anger is a part of grief. The fact you held it in until you came here… it's amazing. I don't know anyone else who could have done that. I couldn't and you saw me in some pretty bad situations on the ship."

She put her head on his chest and held his hand. "Anyone who could see that and still want to be with me… deserves my love."

He put his free hand on her head. "When we got married, we said we'd be there for better or worse. That means we see each other through the good times and the bad. I vowed to be there and I meant it."

"I love you, Alexander," she said. "And thank you for letting me…"

"There have been times you were my lightning rod. Let me be yours this time. Let me help."

She looked up and kissed him. “You don’t know how much you already have.”

D+7: 1900, The Seventh Day
Westminster Hall

The air inside Westminster Hall was thick with centuries of cold damp stone, the heavy scent of lilies, and the beeswax smoke of four towering yellow tapers flickering at the corners of the catafalque.

High above, the 14th-century oak hammerbeam roof seemed to absorb every sound, turning the quiet footfalls of thousands of filing citizens into a rhythmic, distant tide. Outside, the light autumn rain beat against the stained glass, but inside, time had stopped.

At the center of the vast stone floor, elevated on a purple-velvet dais, lay the lead-lined coffin of Queen Elizabeth III.

Covered in the rich crimson and gold of the Royal Standard, the casket supported the sovereign’s Imperial State Crown, its diamonds catching the candlelight in sharp, icy facets beside the royal orb and scepter. Four officers of the Sovereign’s Bodyguard stood frozen around the raised platform, their heads bowed, hands resting on the pommels of their reversed swords.

Up in the elevated stone gallery overlooking the great hall, two figures stood quietly in the shadows behind the carved balustrade.

Alex McKnight, after a change of jackets, stood closest to the head of the casket, peering down through the iron scrollwork with solemn eyes. Beside him stood Michelle, her sharp gaze taking in the towering hammerbeam roof, the flickering candles, and the massive historical weight of the ritual unfolding below.

Below, the subtle, rhythmic strike of polished heels against the flagstones cut through the silence. The queue of silent citizens, teachers, Starfleet personnel, pensioners, civil servants, tourists from Earth and throughout the Federation, and young parents holding children, was halted at the security line near the northern entrance.

The Officer of the Guard signaled by striking the heavy ceremonial pace stick against the stone floor. All four guards marched with slow, deliberate, friction-less steps toward the four corners of the

catafalque.

A low, collective whisper rippled through the gallery as they saw the figures climb the stone steps onto the raised dais.

Angelica took her position at the head of her mother's casket and to the right. She wore her own Starfleet uniform, her admiral pins immaculately gleaming beneath the flickering candlelight, her red and silver hair perfectly curled to frame her face. Her mourning sash cut diagonally across her chest. Opposite her, also at the head of the casket but on the left, Angelica's sister Karina took her place. Karina wore the unform of an honorary lieutenant commander in the Starfleet Reserve, her shoulders squared, her hands clasped tightly behind her back in an identical stance. A single stray dark curl fell across her temple, her pale face illuminated by the warm, guttering candlelight.

On Angelica's right at the right foot of the casket, Angelica's daughter Jennifer took her place. Jennifer's sharp, monochromatic attire, a black ankle-length dress in silk velvet, featuring subtle nods to classic British tailoring while wearing no jewelry, dark leather boots, and auburn curly hair flowing freely down her shoulders, highlighted her transition onto the public stage. She was standing not just for herself, but for her twin sister stuck thousands of miles away at Starfleet Academy lecture hall in San Francisco, watching via livestream. Both Angelica and Alex could feel the quiet strength in Jennifer's posture. At this vigil, she was stepping for the first time into an intense public role alongside her mother and aunt, holding her position without flinching as the media got their first real good look at the princess.

At the left foot was Admiral Jessica Folment, the same Chief of Staff that had been present at Angelica's promotion and retirement a couple of days ago. Angelica had tried to talk Alex in being down there but he felt that for the vigil, his presence at the dais wouldn't be appropriate. Alex suggested she ask Jessica, since not only she was Alex's best friend but she was there when Alex and Angelica first met but afterwards, she had become one of Angelica's best friends as well. Jessica had instantly accepted with only the question of when she needed to be there.

On the second tap, they reached their assigned corners and

halted in perfect unison. The Officer of the Guard gave a silent sword cue for "Rest on Arms Reverse." On cue, all the women turned outward to face the coffin. As instructed, the women inverted their weapons, pointing the points of their swords down toward the carpeted dais, placing both hands over the pommel before bowing their heads in a posture of mourning and deep deference.

Up in the gallery, Michelle looked over at her brother. "You think they'll be okay?" she whispered softly.

"Yeah. They know they're holding the line," Alex murmured back, his blue eyes fixed intently on his wife, sister-in-law, daughter, and best friend standing across the open hall, fiercely proud of each of them. "They'll stand there motionless for twenty minutes. That's something I doubt I can do."

"How'd you get Jess to attend? She's the Starfleet Chief of Staff so I can't imagine she would be able to break away at a moment's notice."

"You'd be surprised at what a single call and a single question from a queen will do," he answered. "I've known Jess my entire adult life and Angie's known her almost as long. She'd drop everything if one of us asked… as we would for her."

He saw Angelica's eyes flicker to them and they softened, meaning she was secure in the knowledge her husband and sister-in-law was nearby. "She saw us, Sis."

Michelle placed a comforting hand on Alex's shoulder, watching her sister-in-law embody an empire without losing an ounce of her soul.

The Vigil of the Princes had begun.

For twenty minutes, absolute silence reclaimed the hall.

Angelica stood motionless, a statue in Starfleet red and white. But beneath the stoic posture, her mind was fighting the crushing physical and mental exhaustion of eight straight days of state protocol and her breakdown from earlier. Her calves burned; her lower back ached from not being able to move. She hadn't stayed at attention like this since the Academy.

Every breath felt heavy in the damp chill of the hall. Angelica could hear the quiet *tick-tick-tick* of the ceremonial guards' breathing,

the faint hiss of the hidden air filtration units in the stone walls, and the distant, muffled murmur of London traffic beyond the heavy oak doors.

Below the dais, the procession of ordinary citizens resumed its slow, reverent crawl past the coffin.

A young Starfleet petty officer in a damp dress uniform paused at the base of the platform. He didn't look at the crown or the velvet; he looked up at Angelica. He snapped a crisp, razor-sharp hand salute toward the new queen, not as a monarch in a palace, but as a fellow Starfleet officer who had walked the same decks as he had.

Angelica didn't break her vigil as protocol strictly forbade breaking posture but she set her jaw firmly, her brown eyes softening for a fraction of a second in silent acknowledgment.

Across the length of the casket, Karina's eyes glistened. A single, clear tear escaped her lashes, tracking slowly down her cheek into the high white collar of her tunic. She didn't reach up to wipe it away. She couldn't. Angelica caught the subtle shift in her sister's breathing across the coffin.

Jennifer also had a tear streaming down her cheek, a sign of what she was feeling. After Angelica's breakdown, they had caught up with their youngest daughter and she had a breakdown of her own. She had then demanded she be in the vigil as her and her sister's way of saying goodbye to a grandmother they both loved dearly.

At first, it was Alex who was hesitant, as both he and Angelica had decided to keep the media away from their kids as much as possible. Despite being princesses, they had been mostly raised in California by their Aunt Michelle so their exposure to British customs and traditions had been limited. But it had done the trick… until today. Ultimately, it had been Angelica's call and Angelica accepted without hesitation.

In the vast, cavernous hall, surrounded by thousands of strangers and centuries of dead kings, the two sisters with their daughter and niece were united and entirely alone together in their grief.

The air in the hall seemed to vibrate with a low, ambient frequency—a mixture of the hum from the nearby Thames, the soft

rustle of coats, and the mournful, continuous sigh of a city saying goodbye.

A sharp, metallic *clack* echoed from the far end of the hall as the shift guards marched forward to relieve them.

Twenty minutes were over.

Angelica slowly raised her head, her eyes meeting Karina's across the Imperial Crown. A silent, unspoken message passed between the two sisters: *We survived.*

Angelica turned, clicked her heels together, and led her entourage down the stone steps of the catafalque, stepping back into the shadows of history as the next guard took their place. Up in the gallery, Alex and Michelle stepped back from the balustrade, ready to gather their family home.

As they came to the private area set aside for them, they all quickly sat down as the two McKnight kids entered.

"I hadn't stood like that since the Academy," said Jessica.

"Me either," echoed Angelica.

"How did you do it?" Karina asked, taking a boot off and rubbing her foot.

"Yeah, Mum, Aunt Jessica," chimed in Jennifer. Unlike the three older women, she didn't seem to be fazed by standing stock still for twenty minutes. "Is that all you do at the Academy? Practice standing around?"

"Smart arse," said Karina.

"You guys were good out there," Alex said in appreciation. "And thanks for the assist, Jess."

"Alex, you've been my brother from another mother since we ran into each other at the Academy." She looked over at Angelica, drinking some water. "And Angie's my sister from another mother since you two met and fell head over heels in love with each other. You guys ever need me, I'll be there. You've always been there for me."

"I still say you should have been out there, Alex" said Karina, without any malice in her tone, just tiredness.

"This was your ceremony, Karina," Alex answered. "You, Angie, and Jenni. I just didn't think it would have been right for me

to be out there."

"I hate to cut this short but I need to get back to HQ," Jessica said. "The Klingons are still raising hell out there… oh, and that reminds me. Ken Cartwright wanted me to tell you that you guys need to get out there ASAP. He mentioned that *Lexington* was to leave as soon as this was all over."

Angelica shot a sharp look at her. "I thought he'd have a few more days."

"So did I, to be honest, but they really need your battleship out on the line. And don't be too surprised, Your Highness, if the President didn't call for you soon either."

"It's 'Your Majesty', you crazy Canadian," Angelica laughed. "And you know it."

"Whatever," dismissed Jessica with a wave of her hand. "I delivered my message. You should be getting orders for departure in the next twenty-four hours."

"Can't I get up to the day after the funeral?" Alex asked.

"I think I can talk Cartwright into it… at phaser point if I have to" she joked. "But I doubt I can get more than that."

"That's all I can ask for, Jess. Thanks. You're a lifesaver."

Jessica smiled. "That's what us sisters are for." She hugged everyone, including Karina. "I'll talk to you before the depart, Alex."

"Got it. See you soon."

D+9: 1710, The Ninth Day
Buckingham Palace

"Your Majesty," said the floorman, "you have visitors."

Angelica was preparing for an Eve-of-Funeral Broadcast as makeup and hair artists were swarming over her to make her holovision debut as the queen. Unlike her last two speeches, she wasn't memorizing it but she had heavily rewritten the version provided by her own press office.

"Show them in," she said.

Almost immediately, the entire command crew of the *Lexington*, minus one Gillian Cunningham entered the White Drawing

Room. Angelica smiled warmly as the approached her. All were wearing their Starfleet uniforms.

"Guys!" Angelica cried, feeling her smile go wider. "So great to see you all!"

"We had to come and see you before we ship out," Brieanna Smith said.

Dawn Mathias jumped in, "We've been meaning to come and see you but with you being busy and stuff…"

"Thanks, guys," Angelica said. "Take a piece of advice and don't get an army like this to do your makeup and hair. I'm so used to doing my own that it's killing me to let someone else do it for me!"

All seven officers laughed.

"Where's the captain?" asked Valentina Thereshkova. "I'd thought he 'd be here."

"He's been tied up in San Fransico all afternoon. Something about getting the *Lexington*'s sailing papers all in order." She looked at Sophea Bennington-Fox. "And there's my favorite engineer. I missed you at Parliament the other day, Sophie."

"Sorry about that… uh, *ma'am*? *Your Highness*?" Sophea shook her head and paused for a moment. "What *do* I call you?

"All of you call me 'Angie'. We're family."

Sophea started again. "Sorry about that, Angie. We had three shifts of dockyard workers repairing and overhauling my engines and I wasn't about to turn them loose without me being there. They nearly screwed it up until I showed them how to do it properly."

"You mean how to do it your way," Angelica commented.

"Same thing."

Angelica then turned her attention to Shin Ji-hoon. "Kind of surprised to see you here, Ji-hoon. We only served together for a couple of weeks before I left the ship."

"You left quite the impression on me… especially during the Mudd incident. Besides," she gestured around the room, "when I tell my friends in Busan that I personally know the Queen of the UK and actually stood inside Buckingham Palace, they'll flip!"

Angelica leaned towards Ji-hoon, "Between you and me? I'd rather be in Montana."

Ji-hoon's grin got bigger as Angelica turned to Jason Tovey-Whitfield, the only one remaining at attention. "Oh, for God's sake, Jason! You're going to throw your back out if you stay at attention much longer!"

"I'm comfortable, Your Majesty," the Welshman said.

"Then as your sovereign, I'm ordering you to come to parade rest before Dawn has to fix your back!" Angelica joked. Jason came to parade rest but remained rigid.

"How's the whole dating thing going?" asked Angelica. "Doing well?"

Jason actually flushed a bright red as he answered. "It's fine, ma'am."

Angelica speared him a look as they were finishing up with her makeup. "If you're going to have only short, canned answers and refuse to call me 'Angie,' I'm going to be very cross with you."

Jason finally cracked a smile. "I wouldn't want that, Angie."

"See? I'm still the Angie you know. Only instead of wearing that little earphone, I wear a crown… and the damn thing's heavy as hell."

Another round of laughs as Angelica came to her sister in music, Kimberly Bautista. "How's the band doing, Kimmie?"

"Retroplay's doing fine, Angie," the Filipina answered. "But we're missing your vocal. You brought a great voice to the band. You still keeping up your singing?"

"You'd better believe it," Angelica said. "A day without singing is a day without sunshine."

"Which are most days in the UK," teased Dawn with a smile. Angelica mock threw a makeup brush in her direction. "Smart arse," she said. "And since our resident doctor volunteered to go next…"

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner," Dawn apologized. "One of the weather regulators in the Philippines went down and as luck would have it, a Category Five typhoon hit Samar just as *Lexington* was docking. Medical in Manila put out an "All Hands" alert and I volunteered, thinking it'd be a couple of days." She paused. "We just got done with the last of the casualties a few hours ago."

"Oh, Dawn!" Angelica looked shaken. "I didn't know!" She

picked up her PADD and made a few notes. "I know this isn't much but I'll send a letter of support and have the PM send some relief if he hasn't already." She turned to Kimberly. "Kimmie, was it your province that was hit?"

"I'm from Manila," she said a little chilly. "But I would think my family is fine."

"You… *oh*." Angelica remembered that Kimberly was part of the Campos family in the Philippines and after she returned from one leave, all Kimberly would say was that she had sworn off her family forever. "I forgot."

"It's fine, Angie. My friends are fine. None were in Samar at the time."

"Thank God for minor miracles." Angelica turned to Brieanna. "Your turn."

"I was at my parents' ranch. I knew you were too busy for company so I watched everything… on adjusted time, of course."

"Of course," Angelica echoed.

"I saw both of your speeches… no wonder they called you one of the best comms officers in Starfleet."

"Thank you for the compliment." Angelica smiled at them once again. "God, it feels good to see all of you again."

"What's going on here, Angie?" asked Brieanna. "Looks like you're getting ready to go on holovision or something."

Jason beat Angelica to the answer. "She's about to make an Eve-of-Funeral Broadcast. That hasn't happened much in monarchy history but there is precedence."

"As Jason said," Angelica said. "I feel like I've got to say something before tomorrow." She held up a hand to forestall the question at least three of them would ask. "Tomorrow is when my mum's to be interred at Windsor."

Brieanna looked at the assembled officers, then to Angelica. "Angie… I've been authorized by these officers to say that we're all with you in mourning for your mother and you have our condolences."

"Thank you," Angelica said, a tear threatening to form her newly applied makeup. "That means a lot, coming from all of you. I mean that."

"I'm also authorized to say that if you need anything, you call and we'll be there. Even if we have to steal a starship and get here, we will be there."

There was no describing the pride and warmth she left for these seven people she called her friends. "I shan't ask you to steal a starship but I thank you all the same."

"Alex likes to say that the command staff is like a family," said Ji-hoon. "You are part of our family."

Angelica was at a loss for words. "I… don't know what to say." A pause. "Except to say thank you and I feel the same way about all of you."

"Ten minutes, Your Majesty," said an FNN technician.

"Thank you." She got up and checked her makeup and hair. She was dressed in a simple black dress with a set of pearl earrings and her weddings rings being the only jewelry she wore. She primped her hair a bit before turning to her friends. "I've to go make another speech. You're all welcome to stay and watch."

"Can we?" asked Valentina. "The guy we ran into made it sound like we couldn't."

"One thing I've quickly learned about being a queen is that I usually get the final say." Angelica smiled. "If you guys want to stay, you stay. End of discussion."

"Thank you, Angie," said Jason. "I think we're all staying."

"My assistant will… God, I've got an assistant now?" She chuckled. "I must be getting ahead in this world. My assistant will show you where you can stand and watch. I don't think I need to tell you to be silent." Angelica motioned for one of her aides. "Show these officers where they can stand. And make sure they have a really good view."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, then turned to the *Lexington* officers. "This way, please."

Only Dawn remained behind after the others left. "How you doing, Angie?"

"I'm fine…" Dawn shot her a warning look and that turned Angelica honest. "No. No, I'm not. I just want to get this behind me and have some time to myself."

"I understand," Dawn said.

A memory hit Angelica and suddenly, she blurted, "How are *you* doing, Dawn? Isn't it…?"

"Yes," Dawn said, suddenly looking sullen. "One year ago, today."

"So you're asking how *I'm* doing when I should be asking *you* that very question."

"They say 'misery loves company'," said the Australian. "Good thing we're in-laws."

The FNN tech came in again. "Five minutes, ma'am."

"Got it." She turned and gave Dawn a hug. "Hang in there, youngster. We're in this together."

"Don't worry," Dawn answered and smiled. "I'll still have Alex to beat up."

"Not if I beat you to it," teased Angelica. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've a speech to give."

Angelica broke off the hug and walked over to the antique desk. She looked to the teleprompter, which held her edited version of the speech. Soft, warm light spilled across the white-and-gold paneling, casting a gentle glow over the desk. Off-camera, the technicians speak in muted whispers, adjusting the lenses and sound levels while the *Lexington* crew was just off to the side, ready to witness history. Outside the tall palace windows, the low, distant hum of the crowds lining the streets carries softly into the room.

Angelica took a slow, steadying breath, smoothing the fabric of her dress. She checked her reflection once more in a small monitor and was pleased with what she saw; no royal insignias, no crown, just an understated, human presence. She looked out past the camera lens, imagining the faces she saw in the street earlier: the tears, the shared nods, the quiet grief connecting millions across the realm and out into the stars.

The floor manager holds up a hand, counting down on his fingers: *Five... four... three...*

He pointed silently. The red tally light atop the primary camera illuminated. Angelica leaned forward slightly, her eyes warm, steady, and filled with deep, genuine empathy, and began to speak.

It was precisely 6 PM.

“Good evening. As the sun sets over London tonight and the final hours of our public farewell draw near, I wanted to ask for just a few moments of your time and have a heart-to-heart talk.

“Over these past nine days, I have looked out across the crowds. I have seen your faces in the streets, watched you waiting in the cold through the dead of night, and seen the tears so many of you have shed as you walked through Westminster Hall. To see so many of you from every corner of our islands, our Commonwealth, and the far reaches of the Federation drawn together in such tender, honest grief... I cannot tell you how deeply that has touched me. It has pulled at my heartstrings in ways I will never forget.

“In those moments, looking at you, I realized something profoundly comforting: we are not bearing this weight by ourselves. We are grieving together, as one family. Every tear you have shed, every prayer you have whispered, every hour you have spent waiting in line has felt like a warm embrace around me, my husband, and my family when we needed it most. And it will not be something I will ever, ever forget for as long as I shall live.”

Angelica paused for a moment to let that sink in before continuing.

“Tomorrow, we lay Queen Elizabeth the Third to rest. She was a sovereign who loved her people with every fiber of her being, but to me, she was simply ‘Mum.’ She was my guiding light, my comfort, and my constant anchor. Seeing how much she meant to all of you doesn't just honor her memory; it reminds me of the extraordinary bond we, both you and I, share.

“Standing on the threshold of tomorrow’s events, surrounded by your kindness, I want to reassert my promise to you. Just as my mother dedicated her life to you, I reaffirm, with all my heart and soul, my own commitment to serve you, to care for you, and to walk alongside you in the years ahead, both in times of sorrow and in times of joy.

“To everyone who has traveled, to everyone who has held a vigil in their home, or are aboard those starships out among the stars watching this: you have my personal gratitude. From the very bottom

of my heart, thank you for loving her and for keeping my family in your hearts during this time.

"May you rest well tonight and may God bless you all. Thank you."

Chapter 5 - The Funeral

D+10: 1044, The Tenth Day
The Quadrangle, Buckingham Palace to The Mall

The digital clock on the command console inside the equerry's office flickered to **10:43**.

Outside, London held its breath.

Inside the quiet sanctuary of the Privy Purse entrance, Angelica stood motionless. She wore the stark, solemn black of mourning, a tailored suede leather gown with a subtle collar, draped in the heavy velvet mantle of the sovereign. Beside her, Alex adjusted the cuffs of his red Starfleet jacket, the white turtleneck collar sitting crisp against his neck. He stepped closer, his hand reaching out to gently find her leather gloved hand. For a fraction of a second, she squeezed his fingers tightly—the last private tether before the grand machinery of state claimed her completely.

"Ready, Angie?" Alex whispered softly.

"As long as you're here," she answered, her voice steady despite the raw ache in her chest, "I'll be fine."

A sharp, synchronized crispness echoed through the courtyard as the Bearer Party from the Queen's Guard raised the coffin onto the State Gun Carriage of the Royal Artillery. The coffin, draped in the Royal Standard, bore the Sovereign's Orb and Scepter, along with a quiet arrangement of white gardenias and pine sprigs from Balmoral, one of Elizabeth's favorite places.

At precisely 10:44, the double gates of the Quadrangle swung open. The heavy, rhythmic crunch of boots on gravel broke the silence. The Queen's Troop Royal Horse Artillery led the way, their black horses stepping in solemn cadence. Behind them came the Household Cavalry, their breastplates catching the pale autumn sunlight, followed by the muffled beat of wrapped drums playing Purcell's *Funeral Music for Queen Mary*.

As the carriage crossed the threshold onto The Mall, a sea of black coats, lowered flags, and silent faces stretched as far as Admiralty Arch. Tens of thousands of citizens, from every part of the

Federation, lined the grand avenue.

Angelica stepped out behind the carriage, her chin held high, walking in strict procession beside Alex and the other members of the Royal Household. As the first toll of Big Ben boomed in the distance, echoing across the Thames, the heavy silence of the crowd was broken only by the sharp, distant crack of the minute guns firing from Hyde Park.

She didn't look at the cameras, nor at the dignitaries watching from all over. Her eyes remained fixed on the standard covering her mother's resting place, taking her first formal steps as Queen into a new and uncharted realm.

1058
The Great West Door, Westminster Abbey

In the sheltered alcove just outside the Great West Door, shielded for a single fleeting breath from the eyes of billions of citizens and assembled ambassadors, heads of state, and other dignitaries, the world fell silent.

The distant thunder of minute guns at Big Ben dissolved into the ancient stone walls of the abbey. Outside, the Bearer Party was preparing to lift the coffin from the State Gun Carriage. Inside, the Great Choir waited in solemn stillness, their crimson vestments pooling under the vaulted gothic arches.

Angelica stopped just short of the threshold. Her hand, clasped firmly around the heavy folds of her mantle, trembled so slightly that no camera lens from the press galleries could ever catch it. Alex noticed. Without a word, he adjusted his position beside her, blocking the media's line of sight from the entrance corridor. He reached down and took her gloved right hand in both of his, wrapping them around her fingers with a firm, grounding warmth.

"Look at me, Angie," he murmured softly, his voice low enough to belong only to the two of them. She turned her eyes to his. In his crisp, impeccably fitted Starfleet jacket and anchored by the gold insignia of his captain's rank on his right shoulder, he stood as her quiet, unyielding anchor amidst the tide of empire and history.

“Don't carry the whole world down this aisle,” he said gently, his thumb brushing over her knuckles. “Just take it one step at a time. I’ll be right behind you. I’m not going anywhere.”

Angelica drew a deep, shuddering breath, holding his gaze as the knot of ice in her chest began to give way to steady resolve. “If I look back...”

“I'll be here by your side,” he promised, his eyes fierce with unconditional devotion. “Always.”

She nodded, giving his hands a tight, desperate squeeze before slowly letting go. She straightened her spine, lifted her chin, and felt the heavy weight of the Sovereign’s mantle settle onto her shoulders, no longer a crushing burden, but as armor.

Precisely as the great clock tower struck eleven, the massive oak doors of the Great West Door swung open. A cool autumn breeze swept into the nave, carrying with it the scent of frankincense, polished oak, and ancient stone. The entire congregation, presidents, prime ministers, Starfleet admirals, Federation Council senators and representatives with other Federation leaders, rose to their feet in a single, rustling wave of reverence.

The Archbishop of Canterbury took his place at the head of the procession, his staff held high. Then, the silence was shattered by the soaring, triumphant brass of the State Trumpeters, sounding the Fanfare as the choir burst into the opening anthem: *“I was glad when they said unto me, we will go into the house of the Lord...”* The Bearer Party stepped forward in unison, bearing the Royal Standard-draped coffin high upon their shoulders.

Immediately behind her mother's resting place walked Queen Angelica I. Her stride was measured, regal, and absolute, the long, dark train of her mourning robe glided across the medieval Cosmati pavement. Her face was set in a mask of dignified composure, but her eyes, clear, bright, and steadfast, looked forward down the long, carpeted aisle toward the High Altar.

And just one step behind her left shoulder, walking in silent, vigilant protection, Alex kept his post, keeping his solemn promise to the woman he called his wife.

As the choir’s final notes faded into the high stone arches,

Angelica reached the Lantern, that open intersection of the Abbey's transepts. Before her stood the High Altar, draped in gold and crimson, flanked by tall beeswax candles casting a warm glow over the floral tributes.

She stood motionless at her place of state while the Royal Standard-draped coffin was lowered gently onto the catafalque. During the First Lesson, Angelica's gaze remained fixed on the Sovereign's Orb resting upon the coffin. Beside her, Alex maintained his quiet watch, his presence a steady anchor in her peripheral vision.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury stepped forward to deliver the sermon, he addressed not only the nation's grief, but the continuity of duty. *"We commend to Almighty God our departed Sovereign, who bore the mantle of crown and realm with selfless devotion. And we pray for Her Majesty Queen Angelica, as she takes up the sacred weight of service to her people, to the Commonwealth, and to the stars beyond."*

Angelica bowed her head slightly. As the congregation joined in the solemn strains of *"Abide with Me,"* she stepped forward to the altar rail alone. She knelt on the velvet cushion, placing her right hand over her heart in a silent moment of personal dedication—committing her reign to her mother's memory, to her duty, and to the silent promise she and Alex shared.

As the ancient iron doors of Westminster Abbey swung open at 12:15 PM, the formal service came to a close, giving way to the massive, historic spectacle of The Last Procession Through London.

The coffin was lifted once more by the Bearer Party and secured back onto the State Gun Carriage of the Royal Artillery. Ahead lay the grand parade—a sweeping 1.5-mile route through the historic heart of imperial power, marching down Whitehall, sweeping across Horse Guards Parade, down the broad avenue of The Mall, past Buckingham Palace, and finally reaching Wellington Arch at Hyde Park Corner.

12:15 PM – 12:45 PM
The March of State

The air across central London was thick with the scent of gunsmoke from the minute guns firing from both Hyde Park and the Tower of London, echoing every sixty seconds in rhythm with the solemn tolling of Big Ben. Over 3,000 representatives from across the across the nation, the Commonwealth, Starfleet, and Federation marched in precise, foot-crunching unison.

Starting the precession was the Household Cavalry in their high-polished breastplates, followed by detachments of Federation and Starfleet officers in dark, red jackets standing at rigid attention. Following the Cavalry was the gun carriage that was carrying the coffin of Angelica's departed mother. It was pulled by 142 Starfleet personnel, dressed as old-fashioned Royal Navy sailors, using white drag-ropes; a tradition dating back to the funeral of Queen Victoria. Walking immediately behind the carriage, Angelica walked with crisp, dignified grace, her black mantle sweeping slightly behind her. Just half a pace off her left shoulder walked Alex. On her right at the same distance was Karina. Both Michelle and Jennifer were waiting for them at Wellington Arch.

As the precession turned past Whitehall and Horse Guards, hundreds of thousands of citizens stood behind security barriers, holding a staggering, almost reverent silence.

At 12:45, the procession turned onto The Mall, a sea of lowered flags and silent faces. As the Royal Family neared Buckingham Palace, her mother's home for decades and now Angelica's home and seat of sovereignty, the palace staff stood lined outside the Victoria Memorial, heads bowed, white-gloved hands folded.

Angelica didn't break her forward stride, but as she passed the palace gates, her eyes caught her own Sovereign's Royal Standard flying at half-mast above the roof. She had approved the design the other day and now it was already flying a flag at half-mast over the palace. Alex, walking beside her, noticed the subtle tightening of her jaw. He glanced sideways, offering no words, but letting his synchronized stride act as a physical reminder: *I'm right here.*

At exactly 1:15 PM, the lead ranks reached Wellington Arch at Hyde Park Corner. The procession halted with crisp military precision under the shadow of the monumental archway. The Bearer Party

carefully transferred the casket from the State Gun Carriage into the Royal State Hearse for the final road journey down to Windsor Castle.

As the hearse doors closed, the Royal Artillery offered a final Royal Salute, and the Band of the Coldstream Guards struck up the national anthem: *"God Save the Queen."*

Angelica offered a lingering, solemn hand-salute as the hearse began its slow roll toward Windsor. Beside her, Alex rendered a flawless salute, his eyes fixed on the retreating vehicle until it disappeared into the crowd.

4:00 PM

The Committal at Saint George's Chapel, Windsor

By four o'clock in the afternoon, the bright autumn daylight had softened into a cool golden twilight over the grounds of Windsor Castle. Inside Saint George's Chapel, the atmosphere shifted from the vast public scale of Westminster Abbey to a more personal, intimate stillness.

The coffin now rested above the entrance to the Royal Vault. The Dean of Windsor read the committal prayers, his voice echoing through the medieval quire beneath the banners of the Knights of the Garter.

The moment of final farewell had arrived.

Lord Chamberlain stepped forward and broke his Wand of Office in two, placing the pieces atop the coffin, symbolizing the end of the late Queen's earthly service.

Then, Angelica stepped forward. From a small velvet box handed to her by the Master of the Household, she took the Imperial State Crown, the Orb, and the Scepter, placing them on the cushion beside the catafalque. For the first time since Elizabeth's accession, her mother was stripped of the symbols of sovereignty, resting simply as a daughter of the realm. Angelica dropped a small campstool-sized Silk Color of the Grenadier Guards onto the casket.

As the coffin slowly began its downward descent into the Royal Vault below, the Garter King of Arms proclaimed Angelica's full royal styles and titles:

"Thus, it hath pleased Almighty God to take out of this transitory life unto His divine mercy the late Most High, Most Mighty, and Most Excellent Monarch Elizabeth the Third... and to publish and proclaim Queen Angelica the First, by the Grace of God, Queen of the Realm and of Her Other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith."

Inside the quiet chapel, a single piper played a lament, his melody fading slowly into the castle corridors as he walked away into the cloisters. Angelica stood at the lip of the vault, watching until the casket settled into the shadow below. Alex stepped up alongside her, placing his hand gently on the small of her back. She did not shed a tear in front of the assembled court, but her hand reached back to touch his fingers, a quiet acknowledgment that the long days of mourning were ending and her reign had begun.

7:30 PM
King George VI Memorial Chapel, Saint George's Chapel, Windsor

The public grand spectacle of state heraldry and broadcasting cameras had long passed. The massive crowds had dispersed from the long expanse of the Long Walk, and the heavy iron gates of Windsor Castle were closed for the night.

Inside the tiny, secluded alcove of the King George VI Memorial Chapel, bathed only in the warm, flickering amber light of tall altar candles, an intimate stillness descended. There were no foreign heads of state, no television crews, and no heraldic proclamations.

Only the immediate family remained.

The simple black limestone ledger stone had been lifted. The coffin sat waiting beside the final resting places of past kings and queens, Elizabeth's parents and brother, and Angelica's father, who had passed away when Angelica was very young.

Perhaps it's a small mercy, Angelica thought as she stared at the casket, *that I never knew my father. Or my step-father, Karina's father, for that matter. This is bad enough and I would not care to go*

through this ever again.

Angelica stood at the lip of the vault, stripped of the grand mantle of state, wearing only the same simple black dress she wore earlier. Beside her, Alex stood in quiet, steadfast support, his hand resting gently against the small of her back—a warm, steady anchor grounded in love rather than protocol.

The Dean of Windsor led a brief, four-minute prayer—whispered softly, so as not to echo beyond the small stone archway. *"Into thy hands, O Lord, we commend the soul of thy servant... Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."*

Angelica stepped forward to the edge of the stone. From a small silver dish, she took a tiny handful of soil, collected earlier that spring from the gardens of Balmoral, and sprinkled it over the casket below.

She closed her eyes for a single, quiet moment, bowing her head in silent farewell.

Goodbye, Mum, she contemplated for the final time. *You will be missed. I love you.*

When she stepped back, Alex took her hand in his, interlacing his fingers firmly with hers. Angelica looked up at him, a subtle look of profound relief passing between them. The public duty had been fulfilled; her mother was finally at peace, resting alongside their ancestors in the quiet heart of Windsor.

In the parlance of Starfleet, Angelica now had the watch.

2130
Buckingham Palace

The heavy oak doors of the sovereign's private suite clicked shut, sealing out the endless hum of palace staff, equerries, and security detail. For the first time in ten relentless, exhausting days, the silence was absolute. And Angelica was enjoying the hell out of it. The state jewels had been returned to their rightful place. The heavy mantle of mourning and the dress were gone, replaced by a soft, oversized black leather sweatshirt and sweatpants. After she had put her clothes on, Angelica walked over and stood by the tall sash

windows of the Sitting Room, staring out into the foggy darkness of the palace gardens. The distant, muffled murmur of London felt light-years away.

Alex entered quietly from the adjoining dressing room, having shed his Starfleet uniform for a simple pair of dark sweatpants and a soft grey shirt. He carried two steaming mugs of tea, setting them down on the low mahogany table near the fireplace. He walked over to where she stood, stepping up behind her without a word. He didn't offer grand speeches, guidance, or words of wisdom. He simply wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin lightly on her shoulder, his chest a warm, steady furnace against her back.

Angelica leaned into him, letting her head drop back against his shoulder. The rigid posture she had maintained in front of world & galactic leaders, cameras, and congregations melted away. For the moment, they were simply husband and wife.

"It's over," she whispered, her voice barely more than a breath. "She's at rest."

"That she is," Alex murmured gently, tightening his hold around her. "And you carried her home with every bit of grace and dignity she taught you."

Angelica turned in his arms, her eyes clear, steady, and filled with a quiet, burning intensity. She looked up at him, her gaze trailing over his sharp jawline before resting firmly on his eyes. "I want you, Alex," she said softly, but with absolute certainty. "Tonight."

Alex blinked, taken slightly off guard. He smoothed a loose strand of hair behind her ear, searching her face with tender concern. "Angie... are you sure you're really in the mood? You've just been through ten days of hell."

A faint, mischievous smirk touched the corner of her lips—the familiar, spirited sparkle returning to her eyes for the first time in a while.

"You're deploying tomorrow morning," she countered softly, her hands resting against his chest. "And I seem to recall promising you that I would shag you rotten… it'll be something unforgettable to take with you."

"Angie--"

“I never break a promise, Captain,” she interrupted gently, reaching up to frame his face with both hands, pulling him down until their lips were just inches apart. “No protocol. No crown. Just us. I want you. Now.”

Alex’s gaze softened into a warm, helpless smile as he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her flush against him. He reached out, his thumb gently tracing a silver curl tucked behind her ear, where the warm crimson of her youth still burned underneath. He liked the silver. To the rest of the world, the silver was a noble symbol of a sovereign; to him, it was the result from every storm they had weathered together.

“Far be it from me to tell a Queen she can't keep a promise.”

He leaned down and kissed her deeply, possessively, and filled with two years’ worth of built-up devotion as the firelight flickered quietly in the hearth, shutting out the rest of the universe.

Chapter 6 - Session I

D+13, 1:00 PM
Meeting Room, 10 Downing Street

It was 1 PM yet and already Prime Minister Vance felt like he had put in a full day. He'd started the day at 0600 with a jog on the treadmill before breakfast. Breakfast was eaten over reading media reports that had come in overnight. As he had expected, the Klingon border raids were getting worse. Starfleet was responding by sending almost one hundred additional ships to the Neutral Zone, lead the infamous Task Force 23 and Alex McKnight's *Lexington*, to try and deter any further violence. If not, Starfleet's rapid response, commanded by one of their finest combat commanders, would ensure a rapid and punishing response.

After breakfast was the usual morning briefing and sync. This meeting ran long as there were a lot of projects that had been deferred due to Operation London Bridge but now that it was over, it was time to return to domestic issues. After a working lunch, he had met with some other government officials and started to catch up on the items that had been sidelined due to the ten days of the state funeral.

Not surprisingly, the day after the funeral, the Queen had decided to head to Balmoral for some well needed rest and relaxation. That had come as no surprise. Her husband had departed early that morning so Vance wasn't in the least surprised that the new queen would leave London to clear her head. Princess Karina had the same idea but she went to a private island in the Caribbean with her long-time boyfriend.

The meeting concluded, Alistair had a few minutes before his next engagement. He made himself a cup of coffee as his chief of staff, Charles Denham, came in, possessing a look of controlled panic on his face.

"Prime Minister," he said without any preamble, "we may have a security issue. And it appears it may involve the Queen herself."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. "An issue."

"Yes, sir."

Alistair sat down in his usual seat before responding. "Not even a fortnight on the job and you're telling me she may be in trouble?"

Denham just looked at his PADD. "I'm not quite sure…"

"Charles," Vance interrupted, "why don't you start at the beginning and explain it to me like I know nothing, which is putting it mildly."

Denham took a breath before starting. "At midnight this morning, an album called Session I, created by an artist known only as 'QA' hit every streaming service in the solar system. It was put in the public domain under Creative Common Zero, which is…"

"I know what CC0 is, Charles," Vance cut him off. "And I also know there's got to be a hundred albums dropped daily throughout the Federation, though why they almost always pick midnight is beyond me." He looked to his friend and confidante. "So why do you look so panicked over a single album release?"

"Sir, at about 9 AM, a young amateur DJ on Luna, a sixteen-year-old, heard the album and wanted to make a remix. Since songs like this do not normally appear on the public domain, he wanted to make sure that this was legitimate. So he traced it... all the way to Buckingham Palace's IP address range."

That started to arouse Vance's attention. "You have my attention but I still fail to see how any of this can be traced back to the Queen herself."

"As soon as he found out that there could be a royal connection, he stopped and contacted the local law enforcement."

"Good lad." Vance smiled.

"And he reported it to the local media as well."

"*Bollocks*." The smile turned into a frown.

"It wasn't long before FNN and the BBC picked up the story and did some digging of their own. They also traced the album back to the Palace. And as soon as they did, traffic to the server went up over 10,000 percent. The servers were almost overwhelmed but traffic has settled down since."

Vance took a sip of coffee. "So far, you've not presented any evidence that any of this is tied to the Queen. All you've proven is that someone released an album using an apparent Buckingham

Palace's IP address. Do you know how many people have access to that server?"

"Too many," said Denham. "Which is why Palace security launched a trace as soon as the traffic settled down. They were able to trace it to Balmoral… more specifically, to the Queen's personal terminal."

Now Vance could see why there could be a reason to panic but he was too experienced to jump to immediate conclusions.

"And how many people have access to her terminal?"

"Only her and nineteen others. The nineteen are technicians and maintenance personnel."

"That narrows it down but how to we know any of them, the queen excluded for the moment, wouldn't have planted it to try to embarrass her?"

"All have top security clearances, Prime Minister, and they are being questioned. However, I've another piece of evidence. If I may?" Denham gestured to Vance's PADD. Vance nodded and Denham picked it up and called up one track from the album. He hit play on the media player and Angelica's voice came through the room's speakers.

We have the chance to turn the pages over
We can write what we want to write
We're all living in fear, such a powerful thing
Dependent on the strength of somebody's arm

The clock is ticking and the time has come
To make a change, to start a new day

Charles pressed stop and the room went silent. Vance looked impressed and surprised at the same time.

"That sounds a lot like the Queen," he speculated.

"It is," Denham confirmed. "We did a vocal analysis, using the Queen's public speeches as a baseline. We just got the results back…

that is 100 percent her. No deepfakes, no cloning, no autotuning, nothing. That is most assuredly the Queen's voice."

"I didn't even know she could sing." Vance finished his coffee. "What's the media saying?"

"They're not saying that this 'QA' is the new Queen but they are certainly thinking it out loud. And there's enough speculation and interest that when the new rankings come out tomorrow that Session I is projected be an instant success with at least two number one hits."

"But that's still not enough for me to accuse the Queen of anything just yet." Vance thought for a minute. "I know she will ask me this but did she break any laws?"

"Sir, the Queen enjoys sovereign immunity so she would not…"

"In any other case," interrupted Vance, "you would be right. But this Queen will say that she is not above the law. So did she break any laws?"

"It's the opinion of the legal office that she did not. She used a pseudonym and released it in the public domain under CC0 so she neatly avoided any commercial entanglements."

"Next question. Did she violate any security or diplomatic protocols?"

"Again, the legal, ethics, and security offices concur that none of tracks violate any security or other protocols," said Denham. "There was a slight concern about the last track… the one where she clearly says 'we're not going to sit in silence and we're not going to live with fear'. The concern is that some fringe elements may try to spin it that she is calling for an open break with Whitehall and Downing Street."

"I don't believe she would do that," interjected Vance. "I may not know her well but I like to think I would know that Queen Angelica the First would not willingly call for anything of the sort."

"Again," Denham reported, "it's only a slight concern but it is their conclusion that there's nothing in any of those tracks that could be called subversive."

"Let me see the track list," Vance ordered. Denham gave the Prime Minister back his PADD with the track list called up. There were only eight tracks on the album:

The Sovereign's Lullaby
Red Box at 3 AM
Windsor Stems
Chains of the Crown
Trade with Fate
Pressure on the Throne
Crowns & Control
You're the Voice

What in the bloody hell is she trying to do? he thought as he read. She should know better than pulling a stunt like this!

"What's the political situation?" Vance suddenly asked.

Denham was already ready with the answer. "The opposition is already in a bloody uproar over this, saying, privately of course, that the Queen should not be a pop idol. But with her not breaking any laws or violating security, there is very little they can do but complain."

"Except they're right and she should not have done it," Vance declared, rising from his seat. "What's the Palace saying?"

"For the moment, they are saying they are not confirming or denying a wild rumor."

"Then we will be in lockstep for the moment and say the same but we will add that in the interest of transparency and concern, we will be investigating the issue. I'm sure the Queen will understand." He sighed. "Looks like I'm beaming to Balmoral and confronting the Queen. We will…"

"Sorry, sir," Denham interrupted, "but there's terrible sunspot activity this morning and transporters on the Continent, parts of Asia and North America are affected. We should have transporters back on line by late tonight."

"Then we take the flitter straight to Balmoral."

On the ride up to Scotland, Alistair Vance vacillated between mild irritation at being caught blindsided and a grudging appreciation for what the Queen had done. Only Charles Denham had accompanied

him and he was in real-time contact with Downing Street via his own PADD.

Vance looked out and issued a humorless laugh.

"What could possibly be so funny, Alistair?"

"I was just thinking… the queen's outmaneuvered us once again. And she seems to be making a habit of it."

"What are you talking about?"

Alistair turned to look at his old friend. "The woman spent twenty-five years in Starfleet. All but the last two, where she served as her mother's Starfleet liaison, she was a communications officer. I think she wanted to be caught."

"How do you figure that?" asked Denham.

"Anyone who was a communications officer for various starships and installations has to know how to hide her tracks if she wanted to. She's had access to the best systems the Federation… hell, she may even know Sol System's own network better than most of the experts who maintain the system!" He pointed at the PADD in Denham's hand. "So don't you think it's a little more than obvious that she's released an album under an easily identifiable pseudonym and didn't covering her tracks all that well, knowing someone would trace it back to the Palace and that the Palace would trace it to her personal terminal?"

"Let's assume for the moment that you're right," countered Denham, playing devil's advocate. "Why would she want us to trace it back to her?"

"Because she wants us to know without her telling us it's her." Vance paused. "Think for a moment. Let's say that she did come and ask for permission to release this record. What would our answer have been? A very resounding 'no' and then we'd be on the lookout. By doing this, she's neatly sidestepped us and did what she wanted to do. Again, I will point out that while she didn't break any laws, this may not look well on the crown. Even if she did it with the best of intentions."

"The dignity of the crown could be tarnished," agreed Denham. "Monarchs need to keep their distance from everyone else. They cannot appear to take sides."

"And I agree with that!" Vance acceded. "But this queen is already proving to be something else. She's trying to show the human part of the monarchy and that will come around to bite her if she's not careful."

"Let's not forget that if she keeps this up and does what she wants when she wants could be construed as being a rogue monarch. With all that entails."

Vance looked out the window at the passing countryside. "I have the feeling she would not go rogue but you never know."

8:30 PM
The Library & Billiard Room, Balmoral Castle

The rain over Royal Deeside hit the leaded glass windows of Balmoral's study in a steady, rhythmic pattern. Inside, the peat fire crackled in the stone hearth, casting long, warm shadows across the tartan carpet. The only sound in the vast library was the crackle of the massive granite fireplace, competing with the rhythmic pulse leaking from the headphones Angelica was wearing. She sat half sitting, half laying on a deep burgundy leather sofa, her knees bent upwards. She wore a slouchy, dark olive-green casimire sweater paired with black leather sweatpants, a look that was unapologetically modern, comfortably edgy, and entirely antithetical to centuries of royal precedent. A mug of Earl Grey tea steamed on the table next to her.

In her hands was her red box's PADD and the huge pair of wireless studio headphones were clamped over her unstyled hair. She sat alone on the sofa, the ever-present red box open beside her, sipping tea with old 1980's music in her ears creating a sanctuary of private, brooding solitude. Her head and right leg were keeping the beat to the music and she would sometimes break into a slight singing as she read. If she wasn't singing, she put her stylus in her mouth, mock chewing on the end as she read her dispatches.

Angelica looked up and caught her reflection against the dark window pane. At forty-seven, she was in the absolute prime of her life, a woman possessing an understated, electric power. Her hair was a dense, voluminous cascade of deep and rich auburn curls, burning with

natural warmth in the firelight. Here and there, striking threads of silver-platinum caught along where her hair naturally parted, a badge marking years of being on various starships. She reached up, tucking a curl under an earphone, feeling the thick crimson strands weave around those gleaming silver threads. She loved the red but the silver gave a sharp, unforgiving edge of her authority.

A sharp, single knock echoed through the room, cutting instantly through the song.

Angelica casually reached up with one hand, pulling the earcups down until the headphones rested around her neck. The faint music trailed off, swallowed by the sudden silence of the hearth. The Page of the Backstairs opened the heavy oak door.

"Your Majesty, Prime Minister Vance has arrived. He requests an immediate audience."

Angelica didn't look up immediately. She calmly placed her PADD inside the and closed it before raising her eyes.

"He can *request* all he likes. However, you shouldn't have opened the door."

Arthur bowed swiftly, clearly uncomfortable.

"Let him in," Angelica added, her voice dropping into a quiet, commanded Starfleet register. "Since he is already here."

Vance strode into the library a second later, the dismissive, patronizing speech he had rehearsed already sitting on his tongue. He had expected a grieving heir overwhelmed by the weight of state affairs.

Instead, in the amber glow of the hearth with her long red-and-silver curls tumbling over her shoulders, Angelica radiated a formidable, youthful authority. Vance froze mid-stride, his confidence subtly wavering. Here was not a fragile monarch to be directed or outmaneuvered; here was a sovereign in her prime, possessing an iron spine, decades of leadership behind her, and zero patience for incompetence and political games.

Angelica didn't move from her sofa, though she offered him a small, bright smile. She slowly took off the huge headphones and put them on the table. To anyone who knew her, that said volumes. She was preparing for battle.

“What was so important that warranted an unscheduled audience, Prime Minister?” she asked. “Come. You look frozen to the bone. Sit by the fire before you turn into a statue.” When she first spoke, her voice had the soft, relaxed warmth of home, the classic, unhurried southern English tone of her youth. But as she went along, the soft edges vanished. Her diction tightened into a crisp, icy received pronunciation, every syllable clipped with terrifying, effortless precision.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” he said, walking up to the fireplace.

Angelica sipped at her tea. She returned to her reflection in the darkened windowpane. She still loved the fiery red but something said it would be almost sacrilegious to dye out the silver. Every grey strand had been paid for in sweat, blood, tears among the stars.

“I’m thinking about coloring my hair,” she said coyly, “but I can't decide if I should go back to being an all redhead once again or just let the silver slowly take over. I’ve always loved the color of my hair but the silver seems to suit me. Never knew sliver could be my color.”

Vance didn't smile. He slowly unbuttoned his suit jacket, folded his hands behind his back, and stood squarely opposite her hearth.

“Your Majesty,” Vance said, his tone dry, heavy, and devoid of small talk. “Playing coy is beneath you. And with all due respect, I didn’t come up here to discuss the color of your hair.”

Angelica paused, holding his gaze for a long moment before letting out a soft sigh. She slowly uncurled her legs, dropping her feet to the floor, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. “Alright, then,” she said. Her voice was pure Buckinghamshire court; smooth, articulate, and dangerously quiet. “Down to business then.”

“Ma’am, there’s no easy way to say this so allow me to be blunt.”

“I prefer being blunt,” she said. “And I’m rather curious as to why you’ve come all the way from London to Scotland for an unscheduled audience.”

“Are you ‘QA’?”

There was a pregnant silence. Finally, quietly, she looked him in the eye and simply said, “You weren’t kidding about being blunt. Yes, I am QA.”

Vance sighed, kind of hoping against hope that ‘yes’ would not have been her answer. She could have lied about it but the look in her eye said she was completely honest.

“Did you release an album this morning at midnight called Session I?”

Again, that pause before she looked him square in the eye again. “I did.”

Vance looked deflated. “I thought as much.”

Now Angelica went on the attack. “Prime Minister, did I break any laws?”

“No,” Vance replied instantly.

“Did I violate any Crown or Federation security protocols?”

“No.”

“Did I compromise any classified intelligence or diplomatic secrets?”

“No, ma'am.” Vance took a slow, deliberate breath, stepping closer to the fire. “But you dropped Session I into every major streaming service in the Sol System without *any* warning. A reigning British queen releasing a retro-1980’s album under a pseudonym that the media is speculating is you. It tarnishes the dignity of the Crown, ma'am. It is not what people expect when they look to their sovereign.”

Angelica tilted her head, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “Define 'Dignity of the Crown’ for me, Vance. I don’t think I’ve never had it explained to me.”

Vance blinked, caught slightly off-guard by the directness of her challenge. “It’s the *stability* of the institution! It’s the distance required to maintain an air of impartiality as required by the Constitution. Sovereignty requires reverence, not a commercial streaming jukebox!”

Angelica didn’t hold back. “What I did wasn't commercial, Prime Minister. It's CC0—Creative Common Zero, open access, free for the world,” she corrected calmly. She stood up, smoothing down her cashmere sweater, and began pacing slowly around the hearth.

She's almost too *calm*, he thought. *I would have expected more of a passionate reaction.*

"Tell me, Prime Minister," she continued, her voice taking on a sharp, precise edge. "Did you think I would do anything illegal?"

"Of course not."

"Did you think I was being subversive? Trying to undermine Cabinet, Parliament? Did I compromise security?"

"No."

"Do you think, for *one single second*, that I would *intentionally* do *anything* meant to harm the people, the country, the Commonwealth, the Federation, or the Crown?"

"No, Angelica, I don't!" Vance raised his hand, his voice rising slightly before he caught himself and smoothed his tie. Angelica blinked at his use of her first name. But she didn't rebuke him. To be honest, the whole 'majesty' bit was growing thin on her so using first names would be refreshing.

He let out an exhausted breath. "Angelica, I know your loyalty to this realm is absolute but that isn't the problem!"

"So, Alistair," she asked, deliberately using his first name so he would know this conversation had now become informal, "what have I done that was so bad? *Where's* the problem? *What's* the problem?"

"The problem is that I have to *govern* this country!" Vance said, his exasperation evident. "I've got to manage the Cabinet, Parliament, the Federation Council, *and* the public without the entire damn press corps believing there is a rogue sovereign sitting in Buckingham Palace doing whatever she pleases whenever the mood strikes her!"

"You know damn well that I'm *not* a rogue queen!" she fired back, still maintaining her calm. "It's not like the entire country collapses because I released an album!"

"But there's the potential, Angelica! And that's the point I'm trying to make! It looks like I'm not able maintain order in our own government if the queen can't even talk to me before she does something!" Vance looked at her, his eyes dead earnest, standing up to face her. "If I cannot maintain order, if the public believes the government has lost its grip, then I can't govern. And if I can't govern,

I will tender my resignation right here, right now."

The room went completely silent except for the crackle of the peat fire. Angelica stopped pacing. She looked Vance dead in the eye, her expression softening into something deep, sincere, and unflinching.

"Oh, sit down, Alistair," she said softly, gesturing toward the armchair. "This isn't Prime Minister's Questions."

Vance hesitated, then slowly sank into the chair, looking up at his monarch. Angelica paced along the mantel twice before she said anything.

"I'm not going to ask for, nor will I accept your resignation," Angelica said firmly.

That came as a surprise. "Why's that?"

"Because I need you," she said, stopping in front of him and crossing her arms. "I don't know you all that well but I can tell we drive each other completely nuts. You know it and I know it. We sit on the polar opposite ends of the traditionalist spectrum." She paused to let that sink in. "And believe it or not, I *need* your traditionalism, Alistair. I need you right where you are; my PM."

"Oh now you're pulling my leg, Angelica," he said, not fully believing but not fully discounting what she was saying. *So what I thought about her was true*, he pondered. *And she is thinking the same thing I'm thinking. We may drive each other insane but it's also true that we also need each other professionally. We see the same end state but we don't agree on how to get there. How can we make this work? I know there's got to be a way!*

Angelica must have been thinking something similar. "Alistair, there's common ground between us… we've just got to find it. In all my leadership classes, I learned that if everyone if thinking the same way, someone isn't thinking. And I've seen too many commanders more concerned about getting their arses kissed instead of kicked." She paused to let that sink in as she walked to her desk.

"What's that got to do with finding a middle ground?"

"I know a good thing when I see it," she conceded, "and I see a good Prime Minster in front of me. I need someone who has the guts to walk up to me and tell me when I'm crossing a line, someone who can rein me in when my instincts pull me too far out into the deep end."

She leaned against the edge of her wooden desk, crossing her arms. "And if you really want to be technical and stick to traditional rules, I'd have to abdicate this every evening."

"*Abdicate*?" he said, expressing his shock. The word itself was like poison. "No monarch has abdicated since Edward VIII in 1936!"

"And you know your history," she said. "You're a traditionalist, Alistair, and if we're playing by *those* rules, I'll have you know that my husband is a divorced American."

Now he was absolutely beside himself in shock that she was even suggesting such an act. "Angelica, you know as well as I that the rules were changed after 2055 to allow the monarchy to survive!"

"Yes!" she pointed at him. "It took a whole damn world war to change that silly law! But if we weren't looking to the future then, it's entirely possible the monarchy would have died. So sometimes change is a force for good!"

It made some sense at what she was getting at but it still didn't fully assuage him. "Change for good… yes, I can support that. But releasing an album…"

"Is not the same as marrying an American, I know, but the principle is similar." She intently looked at him. "And if I were to accept your resignation over an album… this government would collapse. Instantly."

"And if you were to abdicate, the monarchy would collapse. Instantly." Vance watched her, the tension in his shoulders subtly easing, though his brow remained furrowed. "Let's put our cards on the table, shall we? You've made a solid case but I need something more. Explain this… help me understand why you would break centuries of protocol and do something like this without good reason."

Angelica turned toward the window, looking out at the mist rolling over the Highland hills.

"Alistair… music isn't just a hobby. It's my *passion*. It's how I stay human… and grounded," her accent softened, dropping into a warm, husky lilt. "When my mother died and was handed this crown, I wasn't allowed to mourn in public like a normal human being. I had to stand there stoically, hold my head high, read speeches, and force a smile even though the only thing I wanted to break down and cry in

my husband's arms. I couldn't break down like everyone else. So, I did the only thing I knew to do that I knew would keep me from completely losing my mind. Session I was me putting my mourning into something tangible."

She turned back to face him, the firelight reflecting in her eyes. "I'll let you know something else," she confided. "And not even my husband knows this. In her final days, my mother made me promise her something. She held my hand and told me: *'Angelica, do not let the crown destroy the free spirit in you. Find your own way, but remain loyal to the law, the people, and the country.'*" She looked at the floor, then to the elderly gentleman. "I fully intend to keep that promise to her, Alistair. To the letter."

Vance sat in silence for a long, heavy moment. The rain tapped against the glass. The Prime Minister, a man steeped in decades of strict parliamentary protocol, looked at the queen and saw, perhaps for the first time, the immense human weight she carried behind the royal mantle. A slow, wry smile touched the corner of Vance's mouth.

"Your mother was a remarkably insightful woman," Vance murmured quietly. He leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees. "And you've made a very powerful case. Those speeches you made without prompts weren't accidents. You really meant it."

"I was as serious as a heart attack," Angelica said, hoping she was getting the quote right. "As I am now. I can admit that I made an error in not telling you. I apologize."

She's apologizing to me? he thought incredulous. *That had to hurt! But now there's a chance to really see if she was serious about finding that middle ground!*

"No apology needed," he said. "But if we are to survive working with each other, if you're going to continue to make albums," he paused and she nodded, "then we need ground rules. Nothing formal but a gentleman's agreement between you and I."

Angelica grinned, walking over and leaning against the hearth mantle. "I agree. What do you propose?"

"In exchange to letting you continue to release your music," Vance said, holding up a finger. "You may only release your albums under 'QA' and keep all releases in the public domain as CC0. But my

office must be notified in advance. No more surprise drops like today."

"I can live with that," Angelica concurred. "How about I give you two weeks' advance notice for every album?"

"That's fair. Second," Vance added, holding up a second finger, "All lyrics must be cleared through my office prior to release. If any lyric touches on any politically sensitive themes or violates security, my team gets to push it back to you to fix. It'll be to ensure it doesn't accidentally interfere with active legislation or treaty negotiations."

"That's easy enough," Angelica said smoothly. "And in exchange, you don't leak my unreleased tracks to the press, especially when you're pissed at me for some reason. I want to get the drop on the BBC for a change."

Vance let out a quiet laugh before looking her up and down, sweeping a gesture toward her ensemble.

"And finally... on the subject of your wardrobe, Ma'am. I sincerely hope this is strictly confined to privacy. If you step out at State Openings or Federation summits dressed like this, the press *and* the Cabinet will have a collective stroke."

Angelica laughed out loud, throwing her head back. "Oh, now you're really asking for it, aren't you?" She looked him the eye and gave him a knowing smirk. "Guess what, Alistair. I've worn leather ever since I was a teenager, back when I was the Duchess of Cambridge."

Her voice took on a quality as she brought back some memories. "In fact, I remember the very day I got into wearing leather. My best friend and I were out and about when she saw a very pretty leather dress. She talked me into trying it on and when I saw myself in that mirror, it clicked." She paused, lost in that memory. "I thought to myself 'Now *this* is who I am.' I loved that look so much that I bought *and* wore that dress out of Selfridge's *that day*."

"Didn't you get into trouble for that?"

"Damn right I did!" Angelica admitted. "I got plenty of flak from the media back then for wearing leather in public as a duchess! But you know what else I got?" Angelica paused for a second. "A hell of a lot of sympathy and public connection. I found out very quickly that people *liked* seeing a human being behind the crown, not

a museum exhibit. Leather is almost is as important to me as my music; it's a part of who I am." She paused, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Besides... I may not look it but I raised absolute hell as a teenager."

Vance snorted, a full, genuine laugh breaking through his stoic exterior. "Oh, I can believe that. Your mother told me a lot about you in our meetings so I shouldn't be surprised at the hell you're giving me right now as Queen."

"So," she said after chuckling. "Let me make this deal with you. I'll wear leather, such as leather suits, formal dresses, and things like that for most occasions, like during our formal meetings or when I come to Cabinet meetings but the styles and cuts will be traditional, elegant, and regal. I won't wear leather sweatpants to address Parliament or the Federation Council!"

Vance stroked his chin, pondering. "You know the press will still examine you ruthlessly. They may even call it rebellious."

Angelica grinned, taking a step closer. "Your office and mine will spin it as a part of the new image I'm making for the crown." She could tell he was vacillating so she knew she had to make her offer a little bit better. "Tell you what… I'll even sweeten the deal. When leather is flat-out inappropriate, such as state dinners and banquets, memorials, religious ceremonies, and the like... I'll be the traditional queen during those times and wear something traditional and appropriate. But when I come to a Cabinet meeting or for our weekly meetings, don't be surprised if I'm wearing a leather suit or dress. Will that satisfy you?"

Vance looked at her for a long moment, weighing the compromise in his mind. A traditional cut, dignified presentation, but with a distinct, modern edge that belonged uniquely to her. He believed she could pull it off.

"I believe you missed your calling," Vance said quietly then paused to think. "It's a deal."

"Thank you," Angelica said, a warmth settling over her face. She walked over to the antique mahogany side cabinet, lifting a crystal decanter of aged Highland malt whisky. "Now, Prime Minister... I believe we've earned ourselves a drink. Care to join me?"

Vance stood up, unbuttoning his vest slightly as he approached

the cabinet. “After the trip up here and the haggling, Your Majesty, I won't refuse a drink. Besides, you drive a hard bargain.”

“So do you, Prime Minister,” she said, putting the conversation back into the correct formality. She poured at least three fingers of whisky into two heavy amber glasses before handing one over to him. Vance held his glass, looking across at his sovereign. The differences between them hadn't vanished; he would be the guardian of tradition and she would be the progressive, free-spirited monarch. But now they had a mutual understanding where they both got and lost something, mutual respect for the other, and a common goal to work for.

She’ll make one hell of an ambassador, Vance thought.

Angelica lifted her glass, her eyes shining in the firelight. “To our agreement,” she said softly, raising her glass in a light salute. “And to making this work, Prime Minister.”

Vance raised his glass, clinking it gently against hers.

“To making it work, Your Majesty.”

Epilogue

D+15: 1430
U.S.S. Lexington, en-route to the Klingon Neutral Zone

"I've had about enough of just sitting here," Alex McKnight announced to the bridge at large. "Think I'll go do something productive and work on some paperwork."

Behind him was Breianna Smith as the Master Systems Display. She was looking over the modifications and upgrades the shipyard had made when she heard Alex say that. She called over her shoulder, "Now *that* would be a first for you. Going to *willingly* work on paperwork? Normally, I've got to get you to sign papers at phaser point!"

That got the laughs she intended. She turned with the most innocent look to Alex, who was looking at her wryly.

"There's always a first time, Anne," he said. "And since I've got the feeling we're going to tangle into something big very soon, I'd better get my desk cleared!" He nodded to Brieanna. "You've got the conn. Steady as she goes."

She started to walk over to the command chair as he talked. "Got it."

He turned on his heel and started towards his ready room, just forward and to the port side of the bridge when the Caitian communications officer, Gilling Cunningham, called to him in that sweet feline voice she had, "Captain? You've got a message from London."

"London?" he paused for a second, then realized the in-between message Gillian was trying to convey… 'it's your wife'. "Oh *that*! Pipe it to my ready room, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks." He walked into his ready room, trying his best to keep his excitement under control. It had been almost a week since they left and this was the first letter from Angelica that he had received in this deployment. He still remembered the first time she had sent a letter. They had just married and had deployed on separate ships right

after their honeymoon. Boy, had she surprised him by being… he shook his head to keep his mind clear. That had been twenty-five years ago and she had only done it twice. Besides, he had no reasonable expectation for her to make this time the lucky third time.

He quickly got his iced coffee before settling down behind his oak desk. He pulled up the new message. Sure enough, it was Angelica, standing in front of her desk at Balmoral and dressed completely in a leather turtleneck with matching pants. She had even taken the time to style her curly long red and silver hair in the way she knew he liked.

He felt his breathing quicken. This wasn't a queen but his lover. He hit 'play' and she began talking.

"My dearest Alex," she said, her accent dropping into that warm, husky lilt that belonged only to him, "If I timed this right, you should be getting close to the Klingon Neutral Zone. I may be an ambassador now but please don't go making a mess out there and I've come to clean it up."

Alex laughed at loud at that.

"Oh, and before I forget, Alistair… you know, the PM? He and I came to an agreement the other day about my music and leather. We understand one another… we both won and lost. And we'll keep driving each other insane but I believe his goal is the same as mine. I think I can work with him. I think he's up for election in a year or two. Boy, I no more than break this PM in and I may have to break another one in!"

He laughed with her image on the screen. "You both are nuts," he said to the monitor.

"I wanted to ask you something." She played with her hair as she talked. "I've attached a photo of me… call it a pre-photo shoot to a photo shoot. I've been debating on coloring my hair back to pure red I but this mix of red and silver is most becoming on me. I want your opinion before I take my official photos."

"Keep it as is," Alex answered. "I've always been a sucker for redheads but I like the silver that's coming in."

Angelica's image went from happy to serious. "Alex, the real reason I'm sending you this letter is… oh, how do I say it? Pretty bad

for a communications officer, isn't it? Can't say what she wants to say?"

"Yeah," he agreed with her image. "Just like when you're drunk. Can't make heads or tails out of what you're saying."

"Alex… I want to say thank you for everything. You were here for me when I needed you and I don't think I could have gotten through this if you hadn't been there for me. To hold me when I cried. To hold my hand before I went out in public. Just knowing you were a half-step behind me all the time gave me the strength to go on." She looked up at the ceiling before looking back at the camera. "You're my pillar, my strength, my everything. I know I can come off as a cast iron bitch, especially when I'm in that 'wearing the crown' mode that Sir James has recently dubbed."

"You've never been that, my love," he said softly. "You're the most caring woman I know."

"But I want you to know that what you did… you don't know what that means to me. And… I'm sorry for yelling at you in the recording booth a few days ago. I was so out of my mind with grief… and you held me, being my lightning rod when I needed it most. I am so sorry I said what I said and I hope you forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, Angie," said Alex. "It's all a part of grief and you're just as human as the next girl."

She stared into the camera as if she could see him. "Alex, I thank God that he sent you to me. I thank Him daily for letting us meet so I could fall so madly, deeply in love with you. I really do love you, Alex."

"And I love you," he said, starting to get choked up. "I know you know that."

"There are no words in the English language that can encompass just how much I love you. I know you'd say I don't have to but I still want to thank you for being beside me when my world fell apart. Thank you for being my rock as I fell apart. Thank you for holding me when I needed to be held. Thank you."

Alex sighed, trying to break the lump in his throat. "You don't have to thank me, Angie girl," he squeaked. "I'm just glad I could be there for you when you needed it."

She picked up her headphones on the desk beside her and held them in her hands. “I made something for you. The other attachment is a song I wrote for you. I’m still in Balmoral and there’s no recording studio here so I had to find a quiet room and record it. The acoustics stink and I’ll make a better track when I return to Buckingham.” She looked at the headphones in her hands. “I based it on an old 1980’s song called “When She Cries” by Restless Heart. But my version, I’m calling “When I Cry.” I won’t be releasing this track… this track will be only between you and I. I think it sums up everything I feel right now.”

Angelica clamped the headphones over her hair and tapped a hidden control on one earcup. “I think this is one of the better songs I’ve written. However, I really need to get into the booth and clean up the vocals. But this will do for now.”

“I’ll take a listen in a moment, baby girl.”

“Well, I’ve got to go.” She listened to her own song as she closed her message. “Yeah, I think this pretty much sums up how I feel. Alex, I am already missing you and I’m counting the days until you fall into my arms again. Just remember that I’m there with you, Alex, despite the distance. God, I love you so much, Alexander Daniel. I love you so much it hurts. I can’t wait to hear your voice again so write when you can. I love you with all my heart and soul, my love.”

With that, the image of Angelica faded off the screen, leaving a choaked up Alex. He called up her song and put it on the office’s speakers. As the piano opened the song, he could swear he could hear her love and her gratitude. As he listened, he really started to choke up. The song was extremely beautiful… it may have been based on an old power ballad but she had definitely made it her own.

As he replayed the song, the doorbell chimed.

“Come,” he called out as Breianna entered. She froze as she heard Angelica’s song over the speakers. Realizing he had screwed up, he quickly paused it.

“Oh sh… what can I do for you, Anne?” he quickly said, not wanting to show how emotional her song had gotten him.

“I came in here to ask you something but… are you okay, Alex?”

“I’m fine, Anne.”

"And I'm a monkey's uncle," she retorted. "That song… that was Angie, wasn't it?"

Alex nodded, rapidly getting his emotions back under control as Brieanna took a seat across from her friend.

"That little bit I heard… it's beautiful. She drop a new track?"

Alex shot her a dirty look. That look said what he was going to verbally say.

"I know… you asked everyone not to say that 'QA' is Angie," Brieanna said, "And no one has that I'm aware. I'll admit, I downloaded her album and it's damn good. And it's being downloaded and played like wildfire throughout the lower decks."

"I'm sure Angie… I mean *QA* would like to know she… *they* are appreciated."

Brienna looked a little hesitant. "If I'm out of line, let me know but would you play that track for me?"

"I don't see why not. Just don't ask me for a copy. This is between Angie and I. We're the only two in the galaxy with this track."

"I understand."

With that, Alex pulled up her lyrics before restarting the track. He turned the monitor so Brieanna could follow along.

The road that I've traveled on,
Was paved with a heavy crown,
Littered with expectations,
And a world that was crashing down.
When all of my strength was dying,
And I couldn't keep up the pride,
You didn't ask me to be a queen,
You just pulled me close inside.

And when I cried in the quiet night,
Thinking no one could reach my soul,
You stayed right there in the darkest dark,
And helped put together the whole.

I thank God for the day you came into my life,
For being my anchor when oceans rise,
For catching the tears from a breaking heart,
And holding me safe as I cried.

You've always been there for me,
Whenever the walls gave way,
When nobody else could understand,
You knew just what to say.
I don't know how you take the weight,
Or how you stay so strong,
But standing here in your arms tonight,
I know that this is where I belong.

And when I cried in the quiet night,
Thinking no one could reach my soul,
You stayed right there in the darkest dark,
And helped put together the whole.
I thank God for the day you came into my life,
For being my anchor when oceans rise,
For catching the tears from a breaking heart,
And holding me safe as I cried.

You saw the fear that I hid away,
Stripped of the armor and gold,
And you gave me a love so steady and true,
The safest place in the world.

So if you ever wonder what you mean to me,
Just look in these quiet eyes...

Thank you for standing beside me, my love,
And I love you… so much more than words can say.