

STAR TREK
P I C A R D
SORYA



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A Star Trek: Picard Story

By Kara Hughes

Sorya
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Chapter One — Qam-Chee

Captain's log, supplemental.

Three months have passed since the Borg assault on Earth, and the Federation is still counting its dead. When the Klingon High Council requested a Starfleet escort for a diplomatic wedding on New Romulus — a mission of peace, at a time when peace feels precious and precarious — I volunteered. I could not do it alone. But when I put the word out, they came: Riker, Troi, Data, Worf, Crusher, LaForge — every one of them. And Starfleet, in an act of uncommon sentiment, released the Enterprise-D from the Fleet Museum for one final voyage. She is old. She has been rebuilt, restored, and she carries the scars of a lifetime of service. But she is ours. And for this mission — this last mission — there could be no other ship.

Kudraga turned back to the Temple and spoke again to the servants. One of them, an older woman with streaks of grey through dark hair, bowed and took charge, barking orders at the others with the clipped efficiency of a drill sergeant. Satisfied, Kudraga gathered her travelling cloak about her shoulders and faced Picard.

“I am ready, Admiral.”

They walked together toward the beam-out point, Kudraga matching his stride easily. She was tall for a woman, her ridges subtle — softened, Picard supposed, by whatever human ancestry ran through the House of Antaak. She carried herself with an odd mixture of Klingon directness and something gentler, something almost wistful.

“Admiral,” she said, and he noticed a change in her voice — a slight tremor she was clearly working to suppress. “I must confess something to you.”

Picard glanced at her. “Oh?”

“When the High Council told me that the *Enterprise* would escort me to New Romulus, I...” She paused, pressing her lips together. “I wept. I am not ashamed to say it. I wept.”

Picard slowed his pace. “May I ask why?”

She stopped walking altogether and turned to face him. In the amber light of Qam-Chee's afternoon sun, her dark eyes were very bright.

"You spoke of my Sorya, Admiral. You asked who they were. I think perhaps you already know, or you would not have asked so gently." She studied his face. "Our Sorya served aboard your *Enterprise*, Admiral — and aboard mine. The *Enterprise-C*."

Picard felt something tighten in his chest. He said nothing. He waited.

"Her name," Kudraga said quietly, "was Tasha Yar."

The name hit him like a physical thing. He had not expected it, and yet in the same breath he understood that he should have. The House of Antaak. Narendra III. The *Enterprise-C*. It all fell into place with the terrible trade-off and neatness of history.

"Tasha," he said softly.

Kudraga watched him carefully. "You knew her."

"She served under my command," Picard said. "She was my Chief of Security. She was..." He paused, choosing his words with care, because Tasha Yar deserved care. "She was one of the bravest officers I have ever known."

Kudraga exhaled — a long, slow breath, as though she had been holding it for years.

"My father, Antaak, was at Narendra III," she said. "When the Romulans attacked the outpost, our House was there. We would have been destroyed — every man, woman, and child. The warbirds were overwhelming. There was no hope." She paused. "And then the *Enterprise* came. Out of nowhere, out of — my father said it was as though the stars themselves had sent her. A Federation starship, answering a distress call from a Klingon outpost. No treaty compelled it. No alliance demanded it. She came because it was right."

Picard felt the weight of it settle on him. He knew the history — the *Enterprise-C*, Captain Rachel Garrett, the battle at Narendra III that had cemented the Klingon-Federation alliance. He knew, too, the parts of it that sat outside the official record: the temporal rift, the alternate timeline, and Tasha — *his* Tasha — choosing to go back with Garrett's crew, choosing to stand at a battle she knew they would lose.

“The *Enterprise-C* was destroyed,” Kudraga continued. “But not before she bought enough time. My father’s clan survived. Dozens of families survived. And my father — he was young then, barely more than a boy — he saw her. On the viewscreen, during the battle, when the *Enterprise* was burning and still fighting. He saw a young woman at the tactical station, blonde hair, fierce eyes. She never flinched. She kept firing until the screen went dark.” Kudraga’s voice dropped. “He never forgot her face.”

“No,” Picard murmured. “No, I don’t suppose he would.”

“When he learned her name — years later, through back channels, through contacts in the Federation — he built the first shrine. Just a small thing. A stone, her name carved into it in both Federation Standard and tlhIngan Hol. He said that any warrior who fought like that deserved to enter Sto-vo-kor, and that if the universe would not open its gates for her, then the House of Antaak would fight to open them.” She smiled — fierce and proud and, Picard thought, very young. “When he came of age, he led his clan in the Rite of Battle in her name, so that she would be honoured among the fallen. So that Sto-vo-kor would know her.”

“She would have been honoured by that,” Picard said, and meant it.

“So, you see, Admiral,” Kudraga said, “when they told me it would be the *Enterprise* — *your Enterprise* — I could not help it. To me, that name means everything. It means survival. It means honour. It means that somewhere, across all the years and all the stars, Tasha Yar is still watching over my House.”

Picard offered her his arm. It was not a Klingon gesture, but she took it without hesitation.

“Then let us not keep her waiting,” he said.

Kudraga’s reaction when she materialised on the transporter pad of the *Enterprise-D* was something Picard suspected he would remember for a very long time. She stepped down from the pad and simply stood, one hand pressed to her chest, looking around the transporter room as though she were standing on holy ground. The

transporter chief, who had been briefed, said nothing — just offered her a respectful nod to acknowledge her rank, which she returned with a gravity that seemed to take him slightly aback.

Captain William Riker was waiting in the corridor. He greeted her with his usual warmth, and Picard noticed that Kudraga studied his face with quiet intensity, as though cataloguing every detail of every officer who wore the uniform of the *Enterprise*.

She was shown to her quarters — guest quarters on Deck 7, which had been prepared with care. Worf had quietly seen to it that a small alcove had been set aside where she might establish her shrine. Picard had not asked him to do this. He had simply done it. When Picard caught his eye in the corridor afterward, Worf inclined his head very slightly and said, “It is appropriate, Captain.” Picard did not argue the point.

They had been at warp for thirty-two minutes when the call came from the bridge.

“Admiral Picard to the bridge.” Data’s voice was calm and precise, which in itself was not unusual — Data’s voice was always calm and precise — but there was a particular quality to it that Picard had learned, over many years, to pay attention to.

He rose from the ready room, tugging his tunic straight, and stepped through the door onto the bridge.

“Report.”

“Long-range sensors have detected a Romulan Warbird, Admiral,” Data said from the ops station. “*D’deridex*-class. Bearing one-one-seven mark two-four-five. It is on an intercept course.”

Picard felt the bridge crew stiffen — a collective intake of breath, barely perceptible but unmistakable. A Romulan Warbird on an intercept course while they were carrying a Klingon bride to New Romulus. The diplomatic permutations alone were dizzying.

“Shields up. Go to yellow alert,” Picard ordered, settling into the command chair.

“Admiral,” Worf said from tactical, and there was a note of something in his voice that Picard could not immediately identify. “The Warbird is not cloaked.”

Picard turned to look at him. “Not cloaked?”

“No, sir. She is running with full visibility. Shields are up but—” Captain Worf paused, checking his readings again as though he did not quite trust them. “Weapons are not armed. Disruptors are powered down. Torpedo bays are cold.”

A murmur ran through the bridge. Riker leaned forward in his chair.

“A Romulan Warbird, uncloaked, with weapons cold,” Riker said slowly. “That’s not an attack posture.”

“No, Mr Riker,” Picard agreed. “That is a greeting.”

“We are being hailed, Admiral,” Worf announced.

“On screen.”

The viewscreen shifted from the starfield to the interior of a Romulan bridge — the muted greens and silvers, the sharp geometric lines. At its centre, standing rather than seated, was a Romulan officer in the uniform of a ship commander. She was a woman of middle years, dark-haired, with the angular features typical of her people, but there was something about the set of her jaw that struck Picard as almost familiar — a directness that sat oddly with the usual Romulan penchant for obliquity.

“Admiral Picard,” she said. Her voice was measured, formal, but not cold. “I am Commander Toreth of the Warbird *Dividices*. I apologise for the unannounced approach. I assure you, our intentions are entirely peaceful.”

“Commander Toreth,” Picard replied, inclining his head. “You’ll forgive a certain caution. Romulan Warbirds do not typically announce themselves so openly.”

“No,” Toreth agreed, and something that might have been the ghost of a smile crossed her face. “They do not. That is precisely why I chose to do so. I did not wish there to be any misunderstanding.” She paused, clasping her hands behind her back. “I am here on behalf of the Praetor’s household. I have been sent to accompany the Lady

Kudraga for the remainder of her journey to New Romulus. An honour guard, if you will.”

“An honour guard,” Riker repeated, just quietly enough for Picard to hear.

“I see,” Picard said carefully. “And the Praetor felt it necessary to dispatch a *D’deridex*-class warbird for this purpose?”

Toreth’s expression did not change, but there was a flicker of something in her eyes — amusement, perhaps, or respect.

“The Praetor’s son wished it, Admiral. Rojuk considers the Lady Kudraga’s safety a matter of some personal importance. He asked that I convey his regards to his bride, and his assurance that all preparations on New Romulus are complete.” She paused again. “He also asked me to extend a request — not a demand, Admiral, I stress that — that I might be permitted to come aboard the *Enterprise* to pay my respects to the Lady Kudraga in person. I carry gifts from the Praetor’s household.”

Picard studied her face on the viewscreen. Behind him, he could sense Worf’s disapproval radiating from the tactical station like heat from a furnace. But there was something about Toreth’s manner — the deliberate openness, the careful courtesy — that spoke of genuine intent.

“Commander,” Picard said, “you are welcome aboard the *Enterprise*. I will have my First Officer meet you in the transporter room.”

“Thank you, Admiral. I will beam over with two aides only, and unarmed. Toreth out.”

The screen returned to the starfield, and the great shadow of the Warbird hanging in space beside them — vast, green-tinged, and utterly still.

Riker stood. “I don’t like it,” he said, though his tone suggested professional caution rather than genuine alarm.

“Noted, Mr Riker.” Picard looked at the Warbird on the screen. “But a Romulan commander who approaches uncloaked, weapons cold, and asks permission to come aboard unarmed is either extending an extraordinary courtesy or setting an extraordinarily elaborate trap.”

He paused. “And if the Romulans wanted to stop this wedding, there are far simpler ways.”

“Admiral,” Worf said. “I recommend a security detail in the transporter room.”

“Agreed, Mr Worf. But discreet, if you please. We are hosts, not jailers.”

Worf looked as though he had several opinions on that distinction, but he held them in reserve. “Aye, sir.”

As Riker headed for the turbolift, Picard remained in the command chair, looking at the Warbird on the screen. Somewhere on Deck Seven, a young woman of half-Klingon descent was carefully arranging a shrine to a Starfleet officer who had died defending her father’s people — a woman who had served on this ship, under this name, and who had chosen, in the end, to stand at a battle she could not win because it was the right thing to do.

And now a Romulan Warbird floated alongside the *Enterprise*, uncloaked and unarmed, carrying wedding gifts.

What strange roads you have led us down, Tasha, Picard thought.

He straightened his tunic and waited.

Chapter Two — The Gift

Riker was waiting in Transporter Room Three when the figures materialised on the pad. Commander Toreth appeared first — compact, composed, her hands clasped behind her back in a posture that spoke of long habit. Flanking her were two aides in the charcoal grey of the Romulan diplomatic service, each carrying an ornate case of dark wood inlaid with silver.

And behind them, stepping off the pad last, was a woman Riker had never expected to see.

She wore civilian clothes — dark, well-cut, deliberately understated — and her blonde hair was cropped shorter than he remembered. But the face was unmistakable. The set of the jaw, the cool assessment in the pale eyes. She looked, as she had always looked, like a ghost made flesh.

Riker's communicator was in his hand before he was conscious of reaching for it.

"Riker to Admiral Picard. You're needed in Transporter Room Three, sir. Immediately."

Picard arrived to find Riker standing very still, his diplomatic smile fixed in place with visible effort. Toreth had stepped forward and was making formal introductions — her aides, the gifts they carried, the compliments of the Praetor's household. It was all perfectly correct, perfectly courteous, and Picard absorbed none of it, because his eyes had found the woman standing behind the Romulan delegation, and the deck beneath his feet seemed to tilt slightly.

"Sela," he said.

She inclined her head. There was no warmth in the gesture, but neither was there the open hostility he remembered from their previous encounters. Something had changed in her face — a tiredness around the eyes, perhaps, or a softening of that rigid Romulan composure she had always worn like armour.

"Admiral Picard," she said. "It has been some time."

Toreth turned, and if she was surprised by the familiarity between them, she concealed it well. “The Praetor’s household wished to send a personal representative to accompany the Lady Kudraga for the final stage of her journey,” she said smoothly. “Someone who might... bridge the distance between the two peoples being joined.” She paused. “Sela volunteered.”

“Volunteered,” Picard repeated carefully.

“Yes, Admiral.” Sela’s voice was level. “I am no longer with the Tal Shiar, if that is your concern. I hold no military rank. I am here as a private citizen, at the invitation of the Praetor’s household.” A beat. “Rojuk asked for me specifically. He felt it would be... appropriate.”

The word hung in the air. Picard thought of Worf using the same word an hour earlier, in an entirely different context, and wondered whether the universe had developed a taste for irony.

“Commander Toreth,” Picard said, “you and your aides are welcome aboard. I’ll have quarters prepared.” He turned to Sela. “We should talk.”

“Yes,” she said. “I expect we should.”

He did not take her to the ready room. Instead, on an instinct he could not quite name, he took her to the observation lounge. The long windows looked out onto the stars, and beside them, visible in the lower corner of the viewport, the great green shadow of the Warbird keeping pace.

They stood on opposite sides of the conference table. Neither sat.

“Does she know?” Picard asked. “Kudraga. Does she know who you are?”

“She knows my name. She knows my parentage.” Sela’s expression was unreadable. “Whether she knows what that means — what it *should* mean — I cannot say.”

“And what should it mean, Sela?”

For the first time, something shifted behind her eyes. “It means that her Sorya — the woman her House has honoured for two

generations — was my mother.” She paused. “It means that I am the daughter of Tasha Yar.”

Picard said nothing. He waited, because he had learned long ago that silence was sometimes the only adequate response.

“I know what you are thinking, Admiral. The last time we met, I told you that my mother was executed for trying to escape. That she was a traitor and a coward and that I felt nothing for her.” Sela’s jaw tightened. “I was lying. About some of it. And about the rest — I was wrong.”

She turned to the window and looked out at the stars.

“After my... departure from the *Tal Shiar*, I had time. A great deal of time, and very little else. I began to look into the old records — the classified files from the household where my mother was held. I told myself it was idle curiosity. Professional habit.” A thin, humourless smile. “I was lying about that too.”

“What did you find?”

“The truth. Or something closer to it than I had ever been told.” She turned back to face him. “When the *Enterprise-C* was destroyed at Narendra III, escape pods were launched. A handful made it clear of the debris field before the Romulans collected them. My mother was among the survivors. She was taken to Romulus — to the household of a minor senator — and she was...” Sela searched for the word. “Absorbed. That is the polite term. She was made a servant. A possession.”

“I know the broad outlines,” Picard said quietly.

“Then you know that she was not the only prisoner in that household.” Sela met his eyes. “There was a boy. A Klingon boy, perhaps nine or ten years old. He had been taken from Narendra III — from the outpost, not the *Enterprise*. He was a spoil of war, a trophy, kept as a curiosity. The household enjoyed displaying him to guests. A tame Klingon.”

Picard felt something cold settle in his stomach.

“This boy,” Sela continued, “was not what the household believed him to be. He was not the child of some minor functionary. He was the son of Antaak — of the House of Antaak. A noble house. Perhaps one of the oldest on Qo’noS.” She paused. “If the Romulan

authorities had known what they had — the heir to a Klingon Great House, held in slavery on Romulus — the diplomatic leverage would have been extraordinary. The High Council would have been forced to negotiate. Concessions, territorial disputes, intelligence — the Romulans could have extracted almost anything.”

“But they didn’t know,” Picard said.

“No. Because my mother made certain they never found out.”

Sela crossed to the far end of the table and stood with her back to the window, the starlight catching the sharp lines of her face.

“The records are fragmentary. I had to piece it together from old household inventories, communication logs, maintenance requisitions. My mother was... methodical, Admiral. Patient. She spent years — *years* — planning. She befriended the household servants. She learned the security rotations. And she began, very slowly, to collect parts.”

“Parts?”

“Two old communications units. Obsolete Romulan civilian models, barely functional. She acquired them over the course of months — one from a waste disposal, one traded from a kitchen servant for her food rations. And she cannibalised them. Stripped them down, rebuilt them, modified the frequency arrays.” Sela shook her head slowly. “I have no idea how she knew how to do it. Starfleet training, perhaps. Or simple desperation. But she built a transmitter — crude, short-range, barely powerful enough to reach low orbit. And she waited.”

“For a Klingon ship.”

“For a Klingon ship,” Sela confirmed. “It took months. Perhaps longer — the records are unclear. But eventually a Klingon vessel passed within range. A *Bird-of-Prey* on a covert patrol near the Neutral Zone. My mother transmitted a coded signal — Federation emergency frequencies, which the Klingons would have recognised from the alliance. She told them what she had. Who the boy was. And she gave them the household’s coordinates.”

Picard leaned forward, his hands on the table. “And then?”

“And then she needed a distraction.” Sela’s voice went very quiet. “The household had sensor dampeners — standard for any

Romulan estate of that size. The Klingons could beam the boy out, but only if the dampeners were disrupted. Only if the household's attention was elsewhere." She paused for a long time. "So, my mother ran."

The observation lounge was very still.

"She didn't run to escape, Admiral. She ran so they would chase her. She ran toward the perimeter, toward the sensor grid, and she made absolutely certain that every guard, every security system, every eye in that compound was focused on her. And while they were hunting her down—"

"The Klingons beamed the boy out," Picard finished.

"Yes."

Picard closed his eyes. He could see it — Tasha, running in the dark on an alien world, drawing fire, drawing pursuit, knowing exactly what was going to happen to her, knowing she would not survive it, and running anyway. Because there was a child who needed saving. Because it was the right thing to do.

It was, he thought, the most Tasha Yar thing he had ever heard.

"They caught her within minutes," Sela said. "The household reported it as an escape attempt. She was executed the following morning. I was four years old. I was told—" She stopped. Drew a breath. "I was told that she was a coward who had tried to abandon me. That she had chosen to run rather than stay with her daughter. I believed it for thirty years."

"And now?"

"Now I have read the logs. The transport signature. The Klingon ship's departure vector. The timing." She looked at him steadily. "She did not abandon me, Admiral. She sacrificed herself for a Klingon boy she barely knew, because if the Romulans had discovered who he was, it would have endangered his entire House. She saved him. She saved the House of Antaak." A pause. "She saved Kudraga's father."

The silence that followed was the kind that had weight.

"That boy grew up," Picard said slowly. "He returned to Qo'noS. He led his clan. He built a shrine."

“Yes. And when he came of age, he led the Rite of Battle in my mother’s name, so that she could enter Sto-vo-kor. He named her Sorya — Saviour — and every generation of his House since has honoured her.” Sela’s composure cracked, just slightly — a tremor at the corner of her mouth, quickly suppressed. “A Klingon House has venerated my mother’s memory for decades, Admiral. They built a Temple to her. They fought ritual combat in her name so that the gates of their afterlife would open for a human Starfleet officer.” She shook her head. “And I — her own daughter — called her a coward.”

Picard moved around the table until he was standing beside her.

“You didn’t know, Sela.”

“No. I didn’t.” She straightened. “But I know now. And that is why I am here.”

“Does Kudraga know? The full truth — about the transmitter, about the distraction?”

“She does. She told me that she discovered it herself, years ago, from the same old Romulan logs I found. She said—” Sela stopped, and for a moment she looked, impossibly, young. “She said it made no difference to how her House honours my mother. That Tasha Yar was their Sorya whether she died at the tactical station of the *Enterprise-C* or in the grounds of a Romulan estate. That the manner of the sacrifice does not diminish it.”

“She’s right,” Picard said.

“Perhaps.” Sela folded her arms. “But there is a difficulty, Admiral, and I think you see it.”

“You are Tasha Yar’s daughter,” Picard said. “And you are about to walk onto Kudraga’s ship — a ship named *Enterprise* — and present yourself as a gift from the Praetor’s household to the woman whose entire House exists because your mother died saving her father.” He paused. “You are the daughter of their Sorya. To them, you may be something close to sacred.”

“Or something close to intolerable,” Sela said flatly. “I am also half-Romulan. I served the Tal Shiar. I conspired against the Federation. I conspired against Klingon interests. Kudraga’s House may honour my mother, but I am not my mother, Admiral. I am the

other thing — the Romulan thing. The daughter who was raised to despise everything Tasha Yar stood for.” She met his eyes. “How do you present that as a gift?”

Picard regarded her for a long moment.

“I think,” he said carefully, “that we should let Kudraga decide.”

He found Kudraga in her quarters. The shrine was already taking shape — a low table against the far wall, draped in dark cloth, with several of the objects from the Temple carefully arranged upon it. At its centre, illuminated by a small amber light, was a holographic image — slightly degraded, clearly very old — of a young woman in a Starfleet uniform. Blonde hair. Fierce eyes. She never flinched.

Kudraga turned from the shrine as Picard entered. She took one look at his face and her expression shifted.

“She’s here, isn’t she?” Kudraga said. It was not a question.

“You knew.”

“Rojuk told me he would try. He said it was important — that the daughter of my Sorya should be present when the houses are joined.” She crossed to the viewport and stood looking out at the Warbird. “I agreed. But agreeing and being prepared are different things, Admiral.”

“You’ve read the Romulan logs,” Picard said. “You know what Sela was.”

“I know what Sela *was*,” Kudraga said. “Tal Shiar. An enemy of the Federation. An enemy, arguably, of my people. I know all of it.” She turned back to him. “I also know what my father told me, before he died. He said that when Tasha Yar put him on that transporter pad — when she knelt down and looked him in the eye and told him to be brave — she was weeping. And he asked her why. And she said, ‘Because I have a daughter too, and I will never see her again.’”

Picard felt the words land like stones dropped into still water.

“She knew, Admiral. She knew she was going to die, and she chose my father over her own child. Not because she didn’t love Sela. Because she loved them both, and she could only save one.”

Kudraga moved to the shrine and touched the edge of the holographic image — gently, reverently, as one might touch a relic.

“Sela is the daughter of my Sorya. Whatever she has done, whatever she has been — she is what Tasha Yar left behind. And if there is one thing the House of Antaak understands, it is that the debts of honour do not expire.” She looked at him. “Bring her to me.”

Picard studied the young woman’s face — the subtle ridges, the dark eyes so unlike Tasha’s and yet, in their fierce certainty, so very like her.

“There may be complications,” he said. “Political complications. If the High Council learns that the House of Antaak is embracing a former Tal Shiar operative as an honoured guest—”

“Let them learn it,” Kudraga said, and there was iron in her voice now — old iron, the kind that had been forged in a house that had survived Narendra III and slavery and exile and had come out the other side with its honour intact. “My House was saved by a human woman who had every reason to save only herself. She chose a Klingon boy she barely knew over her own freedom, her own life, her own *daughter*. If the High Council wishes to tell the House of Antaak how to honour that debt, they are welcome to try.”

She straightened to her full height, and in that moment, she looked every inch the daughter of a Great House.

“Bring me the daughter of Tasha Yar, Picard. I have waited a long time to meet her.”

Chapter Three — The Shrine

Picard escorted Sela to Deck Seven in silence. She walked beside him with the measured stride of someone accustomed to corridors where every step was watched, but he noticed that her hands — clasped in front of her, very still — were not quite steady.

Outside Kudraga's quarters, he paused.

"I can go in with you," he said. "Or I can leave you. Whichever you prefer."

Sela looked at the door as though it were the entrance to something far more dangerous than a guest cabin on a Federation starship.

"Stay," she said. "Please."

It was the *please* that struck him. He had never heard Sela say the word before.

He pressed the chime.

"Enter," came Kudraga's voice.

The door slid open, and the first thing Sela saw was the shrine.

She stopped in the doorway. Picard saw her register it — the low table, the dark cloth, the carefully arranged objects, the amber light — and then her gaze found the holographic image at its centre, and she went very still.

It was a standard Starfleet personnel file image, slightly degraded by age and repeated copying. Lieutenant Natasha Yar. Blonde hair pulled back from a young face. Direct eyes. The hint of something guarded in the set of the mouth — the look of someone who had learned early that the universe was not kind, and had decided to face it anyway.

Sela stared at her mother's face. She said nothing.

Kudraga rose from where she had been kneeling by the shrine. She was dressed simply — dark tunic, her hair unbound — and she crossed the room without hurry, without ceremony. She stopped an arm's length from Sela and studied her with those dark, serious eyes.

For a long moment, neither woman spoke. Picard stood by the door and did not move, did not breathe, felt keenly that he was witnessing something that was not his to interrupt.

Then Kudraga did something that Picard had not expected. She dropped to one knee.

Not a bow — not the careful diplomatic incline of the head that Picard had seen exchanged a hundred times between dignitaries and ambassadors. This was a Klingon gesture, deep and deliberate: one knee to the ground, right fist pressed to her chest, head lowered. It was the salute offered to the family of a fallen warrior. The highest honour one House could pay to the blood of another.

“You are Sela,” Kudraga said, her head still bowed. “Daughter of Tasha Yar. Daughter of our Sorya.” She paused. “I am Kudraga of the House of Antaak, and I greet you in the name of every soul your mother saved.”

Sela’s composure, which had survived the transporter room and the observation lounge and the long walk through the corridors of the *Enterprise*, came apart.

It did not shatter — it was not dramatic, not loud. It simply dissolved, quietly and completely, the way a wall dissolves when the last stone is removed. Her face crumpled. Her shoulders dropped. She pressed one hand to her mouth and turned her head away, and a sound came out of her that Picard suspected she had been carrying for thirty years — a raw, broken thing, halfway between a breath and a sob.

Kudraga rose. She reached out and took Sela’s wrist — gently, but with the sureness of someone who had been raised to believe that grief was not weakness, that tears shed for the honoured dead were themselves a form of honour.

“Come,” she said. “Come and see.”

She led Sela to the shrine. Sela let herself be led. She stood before the holographic image of her mother and looked at it through wet eyes, and Kudraga stood beside her and began, very quietly, to speak.

“This was taken from the Starfleet database. My father obtained it through a contact in the Federation — a trader who owed him a favour. He said it did not do her justice. He said her eyes were

fiercer than any image could capture.” She touched the edge of the table. “This cloth is from Narendra III — from the soil of the outpost she died defending. My father carried it with him when he returned to Qo’noS. These—” she indicated a set of small metal objects, carefully arranged, “—are pieces of hull plating. From the *Enterprise-C*. Recovered from the debris field.”

Sela reached out and touched one of the metal fragments. Her fingers trembled against it.

“And this,” Kudraga said, lifting a small, battered object from the back of the shrine, “this is something my father kept until the day he died.”

It was a combadge. Old-style, tarnished almost beyond recognition, the Starfleet delta barely visible beneath decades of wear. But it was unmistakable.

“She gave it to him,” Kudraga said. “The night she sent him away. She pressed it into his hand and told him to keep it. She said...” Kudraga glanced at Picard, then back at Sela. “She said, ‘Give this to my daughter, if you ever find her. Tell her I didn’t leave because I wanted to.’”

Sela’s knees buckled. Kudraga caught her — one arm around her shoulders, steady and strong — and held her upright while she wept. It was not quiet this time. It was the full, awful, necessary sound of something that had been locked away for a lifetime finally being allowed out.

Picard turned and walked to the viewport. He stood with his back to them and looked out at the stars and gave them their privacy, and he thought about a young woman he had known — brave, damaged, fierce, kind — who had stood at his tactical station and who had died, in one timeline, senselessly, pointlessly, on a barren planet. And who had died, in another, with absolute purpose, running through the dark on a Romulan estate so that a boy she barely knew could live.

You saved them all, Tasha, he thought. *The boy. The House. And now, perhaps, even your daughter.*

After a time — he could not say how long — the sounds behind him quieted. He heard Kudraga murmur something in Klingon, low

and rhythmic, and recognised it as a prayer, although he did not know the words.

Then Sela's voice, rough and stripped bare: "She really said that? Give this to my daughter?"

"My father never lied," Kudraga said. "Not about her. Not ever."

A silence. Then: "May I — may I hold it?"

Kudraga placed the combadge in Sela's hands. Sela closed her fingers around it and held it against her chest, and for a moment the Romulan severity and the Tal Shiar training and the thirty years of carefully constructed indifference fell away entirely, and she was simply a daughter holding the last thing her mother had touched.

"It's yours," Kudraga said. "It was always meant to be yours."

Sela shook her head. "I can't take it from your shrine. It's—"

"It is not mine to keep," Kudraga said firmly. "My House has honoured your mother for two generations. We have her name, her memory, her place in Sto-vo-kor. Those things are ours, and we will hold them until the stars go dark." She folded Sela's fingers more tightly around the combadge. "But this — this was hers, and she meant it for you. I will not dishonour her wishes by keeping it on an altar when it belongs in her daughter's hands."

Sela looked at the combadge. She looked at the shrine. She looked at Kudraga.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Kudraga smiled — warm and unguarded, younger than her years.

"You are the daughter of my Sorya," she said simply. "You are welcome in my House, now and always."

They sat together for nearly an hour. Picard excused himself quietly — this was no longer a moment that required a Starfleet captain — and returned to the bridge, where he found that he could not quite bring himself to sit in the command chair. He stood instead at the rear of the bridge, looking at the viewscreen, where the Warbird still kept pace alongside them like a great green shadow.

Deanna Troi found him there.

“You’re troubled,” she said. It was not a question. She never bothered framing them as questions when the answer was written plainly enough.

“Not troubled,” Picard said. “Moved. There is a difference, although at the moment I confess the distinction feels academic.”

Troi stood beside him and followed his gaze to the viewscreen.

“I can feel them,” she said quietly. “Kudraga and Sela. Even from here. It’s...” She paused, searching for the word. “It’s like watching a wound close. Slowly, and not without pain, but — closing.”

Picard nodded. He was about to respond when Data’s voice cut through from ops.

“Admiral. I am detecting a vessel decloaking off the port bow. Configuration—” A fractional pause, and Picard knew, with the instinct of long command, that whatever came next was not going to be simple. “Klingon. *Vor’cha*-class attack cruiser. She is raising shields.”

The bridge snapped to attention. Worf’s hands were on the tactical console before Data had finished speaking.

“Red alert,” Picard ordered, moving to the command chair. “Hail them.”

“They are hailing us, Admiral,” Worf said, and his voice had taken on a quality that Picard recognised — not alarm, but something deeper. Something personal. “Audio only. They are transmitting on a priority channel reserved for the Klingon High Council.”

“Let’s hear it.”

The voice that filled the bridge was deep, resonant, and carried the particular weight of someone accustomed to being obeyed without question.

“Enterprise. *This is General Dorath of the Klingon High Council, commanding the IKS Vor’nak. I carry a formal resolution of the Council. You will reduce speed and prepare to receive my delegation, or I will consider your refusal an act of hostility against the Klingon Empire.*”

The channel closed. No pleasantries, no preamble. Klingon diplomacy at its most direct.

Riker looked at Picard. "That's not an escort."

"No, Will. That is an intervention." Picard turned to Worf. "General Dorath. Do you know him?"

Worf's jaw was tight. "He sits on the High Council. He is — old guard. A traditionalist. He opposed the Khitomer Accords. He opposed the alliance with the Federation. And he has been..." Worf paused, choosing his words with the care of a man navigating a minefield in his own language. "He has been vocal in his opposition to what he calls the *contamination* of the Empire through foreign alliances."

"And a Klingon noblewoman marrying a Romulan," Troi said quietly, "would be precisely the kind of thing he'd want to stop."

"Admiral," Data reported, "the *Vor'nak* has taken position three hundred metres off our port bow. Her weapons are powered but not locked. She is matching our speed precisely."

Picard settled into the command chair and tugged his tunic straight.

"Open a channel."

"Channel open."

"General Dorath, this is Admiral Jean-Luc Picard of the USS *Enterprise*. You are welcome to send your delegation aboard. I trust this can be resolved through conversation rather than confrontation."

A pause. Then Dorath's voice again, heavy with contempt: "*Conversation*. Yes, Picard. That is what your kind always prefers, isn't it? Very well. I will beam aboard with my guard. But understand this — I carry the seal of the High Council. The resolution I bear has the force of law. And the matter I have come to address is not a Federation concern. It is a Klingon matter, and it will be settled by Klingon law."

The channel closed again.

Riker leaned toward Picard. "He's going to challenge the marriage."

"He's going to do more than that," Worf said, and there was something bleak in his voice. "A formal resolution from the High

Council, carried under seal — there are only a handful of things that requires. A declaration of war. A territorial claim.” He paused. “Or a motion to dissolve a Great House.”

The bridge went very quiet.

“He’s going to move against the House of Antaak,” Picard said slowly.

“If the House proceeds with this marriage,” Worf said, “Dorath will argue that they have divided their loyalty — that by joining with a Romulan house, they have renounced their allegiance to the Empire. Under the old laws, that is grounds for dissolution. Their lands, their titles, their seat on the Council — all of it forfeit.”

“Can he do that?” Riker asked.

“If he has enough votes on the Council, yes.” Worf looked at Picard. “And the old guard has been gaining strength. The destruction of Romulus created instability. There are those who see this marriage not as an alliance but as a surrender — the first step toward the Empire losing its identity.”

“Admiral,” Troi said, “Kudraga needs to know.”

“Agreed.” Picard stood. “Mr Riker, you have the bridge. Mr Worf, you’re with me. And Worf—” He paused at the turbolift door. “This may well be decided by Klingon law, but it is happening on my ship, and I will not stand by while a young woman’s House is destroyed because an old man is afraid of the future.”

Worf looked at him, and something shifted in the Klingon’s dark eyes — something fierce and loyal and, Picard thought, very nearly proud.

“Understood, Admiral.”

They stepped into the turbolift together, and behind them, through the viewscreen, the *Vor’cha*-class cruiser held its position like a blade pressed against the *Enterprise*’s side.

They found Kudraga and Sela still together in the guest quarters. The shrine’s amber light cast long shadows across the room, and the two women were sitting cross-legged on the floor facing each other, speaking in low voices. They looked up as Picard and Worf

entered, and Picard saw Kudraga read his expression in an instant. She was on her feet before he spoke.

“What has happened?”

“A Klingon vessel has intercepted us,” Picard said. “The IKS *Vor’nak*, commanded by General Dorath of the High Council. He carries a formal resolution under the Council’s seal.”

Kudraga’s face went very still. Beside her, Sela rose slowly, the combadge still clutched in one hand.

“Dorath,” Kudraga said. The name came out flat, leached of emotion — which told Picard more than any display of anger would have. She had expected this. Perhaps not now, not here, but she had expected it.

“You know what he wants,” Picard said.

“Yes.” Kudraga moved to the viewport and stood with her back to the room, looking out at the stars. “He wants my House. He has wanted it for years — our lands border his own, and the mineral rights alone are worth a fleet. He has simply never had the pretext.” She turned back. “Until now.”

“He will argue dissolution,” Worf said. “On grounds of divided loyalty.”

“Of course he will.” Kudraga’s voice was quiet, but there was a current beneath it — something that hummed like a taut wire. “A Klingon woman marrying a Romulan. The daughter of a former Tal Shiar officer welcomed into a Great House. To Dorath and those like him, it is not merely a political inconvenience — it is an *abomination*. A corruption of everything the Empire is supposed to be.”

She looked at Sela, and something passed between them — a look of understanding that went beyond words.

“He will use you,” Kudraga said to Sela. “He will use your presence here, your history, to argue that my House has been compromised. That we have been seduced by Romulan influence. That the marriage is a Romulan infiltration dressed up as diplomacy.”

Sela’s face had gone hard — the old mask reasserting itself, the Romulan armour clicking back into place. “Then perhaps I should leave. If my presence is the weapon he intends to use—”

“No.” Kudraga said it with a force that silenced the room. “You will not leave this ship. You will not leave this room. You are the daughter of my Sorya, and I will not allow a petty, grasping old man to use your mother’s legacy as a cudgel against her own child.”

She turned to Picard.

“Admiral. Dorath is coming aboard your ship. That means, for the moment, this is your deck and your air. He cannot compel me to answer a Council resolution outside of Council chambers — not legally. He knows this. He is counting on intimidation.”

“What do you need?” Picard asked.

Kudraga’s eyes were very bright.

“Time,” she said. “I need time, and I need a room large enough to make a stand. And I need—” She looked at Worf. “Captain Worf. Son of Mogh. You are of the House of Martok, are you not?”

Worf straightened. “I am.”

“Then you know the old laws as well as Dorath does. Perhaps better.” She held his gaze. “Will you stand as my *cha’nob* — my legal advocate — when Dorath presents his resolution?”

Worf looked at Picard, who gave him the slightest nod.

“It would be an honour,” Worf said, and there was no hesitation in it.

Kudraga nodded. Then she did something that surprised all of them. She crossed to the shrine, knelt before the image of Tasha Yar, and pressed her forehead to the edge of the table. She stayed there for three heartbeats. When she rose, her face was calm, and her eyes were clear, and she looked, Picard thought, like a woman who had just consulted with the only counsel that truly mattered.

“Tell General Dorath I will receive him,” she said. “In the observation lounge. In one hour.”

She looked at the holographic image of Tasha Yar — the blonde hair, the fierce eyes, the young face that had never flinched.

“My Sorya stood against the Romulans with nothing but a dying ship and her own courage,” Kudraga said quietly. “I can certainly stand against one old man with a piece of paper.”

Chapter Four — The Resolution

General Dorath was exactly what Picard had expected and nothing that he had hoped for.

He was a big man — not merely tall but *broad*, built like something that had been designed to occupy space and dare the universe to reclaim it. His beard was iron grey, braided in the old style, and his armour bore the sigils of three campaigns that Picard recognised and two that he did not. He carried no weapon — a concession to the fact that he was aboard a Federation vessel — but the absence seemed cosmetic. Everything about Dorath was a weapon: the weight of his step, the sweep of his gaze, the controlled contempt in every syllable.

He had brought two guards, as agreed. They flanked him like pillars as he entered the observation lounge, and they took up positions by the door without being told, which spoke of long practice.

Picard had arranged the room carefully. The long conference table remained, but the chairs had been pushed back to create an open space at the head of the room — a concession to Klingon custom, where matters of law were argued on one's feet. The viewports behind the table showed the starfield and, visible in the lower left, the running lights of the *Vor'nak* holding position.

Kudraga stood at the far end of the room, directly in front of the viewport. She had changed — she wore a formal tunic of deep burgundy, clasped at the throat with a brooch bearing the crest of the House of Antaak, and her hair was bound in a single braid. She looked, Picard thought, as though she had been preparing for this moment her entire life. Perhaps she had.

Worf stood to her left, half a pace behind — the position of the *cha'nob*, the legal voice. He wore his Starfleet uniform, not Klingon armour, and Picard suspected this was deliberate. Worf was making a point before a word had been spoken: a Klingon in a Federation uniform, loyal to both, diminished by neither.

Sela stood to Kudraga's right. She had not been asked. She had simply taken the position when they entered the room, and Kudraga

had glanced at her once and said nothing, which was its own form of permission.

Picard stood to one side, near the head of the table. He was not a participant in this — Dorath had made that abundantly clear — but it was his ship, his observation lounge, and he intended to be present. Captain Riker stood behind him, arms folded, projecting the particular brand of relaxed vigilance that was his specialty. Troi sat at the far end of the table, quiet and watchful.

Commander Toreth, who had asked to observe, occupied a chair near the viewport with her hands folded in her lap and an expression of studied neutrality that Picard did not believe for a moment.

Dorath surveyed the room. His gaze passed over Picard and Riker as though they were furniture, lingered briefly on Toreth with visible distaste, and came to rest on Kudraga. He did not look at Sela at all.

“Lady Kudraga,” he said. His voice filled the room without effort. “Daughter of Koragh. Of the House of Antaak.”

“General Dorath,” Kudraga replied. “Of the House of Dorath. You are a long way from home.”

“I go where the Council sends me.” He reached into his gauntlet and withdrew a data tablet — heavy, ornate, stamped with the embossed seal of the High Council. He set it on the conference table with a deliberate *clack*. “I carry a formal resolution of the Klingon High Council, passed by a majority of seven to five. Shall I read it, or do you already know what it says?”

“Read it,” Worf said. “For the record.”

Dorath turned his head slowly and regarded Worf as one might regard an insect that had landed on one’s food. “And you are?”

“Captain Worf, son of Mogh. Of the House of Martok. I stand as *cha’nob* for the Lady Kudraga and the House of Antaak.”

“Worf.” Dorath repeated the name as though tasting it. “The Starfleet Klingon. The one who wears a human uniform and takes orders from—” his eyes flicked to Picard, “—from *them*. You are her legal advocate?”

“I am.”

“How fitting.” Dorath turned back to the tablet and picked it up. “Very well. For the *record*.” He read without inflection, as though reciting a cargo manifest:

“By resolution of the High Council of the Klingon Empire, it is hereby declared that the House of Antaak, in pursuing a marriage alliance with a foreign power — specifically, the household of the Romulan Praetor — has acted in a manner inconsistent with its obligations to the Empire. The Council hereby moves that the House of Antaak be placed under review for dissolution, pending a formal hearing. During this period of review, all diplomatic engagements undertaken by the House of Antaak — including the proposed marriage — are suspended. The Lady Kudraga, daughter of Koragh, is ordered to return to Qo’noS to answer the Council’s concerns.”

He set the tablet down.

“There it is,” he said. “Plain enough, I think.”

The silence that followed was absolute. Picard watched Kudraga’s face. It did not change. Not a flicker, not a tremor. She had known this was coming, and she had armoured herself accordingly.

Worf stepped forward.

“The resolution is noted,” he said. His voice was steady, formal — the voice of a man who had studied Klingon law with the obsessive thoroughness that only an exile could bring to the customs of his own people. “I challenge its validity on three grounds.”

Dorath raised an eyebrow. “Three. You have been busy.”

“First,” Worf said, ignoring him. “Procedure. A motion of dissolution must be delivered to the accused House on Klingon soil, in the presence of no fewer than three Council members acting as witnesses. You are one man, General. You carry the seal, but you do not carry the quorum. This resolution, as presented, is procedurally incomplete.”

Dorath’s expression did not change, but Picard saw something shift behind his eyes — a recalculation. He had not expected Worf to know this.

“A technicality,” Dorath said.

“Klingon law *is* technicality, General. It is ritual and form and precedent, and it does not bend because a Council member finds it

inconvenient.” Worf paused. “Second. Grounds. The resolution cites divided loyalty as the basis for dissolution. I submit that this ground does not apply. The House of Antaak is not dividing its loyalty — it is *extending* it. A marriage alliance is not a renunciation of allegiance. If it were, then every Klingon House that has ever formed a bond with a non-Klingon power would be subject to the same challenge.”

He let that hang for a moment.

“Including,” Worf added quietly, “the House of Duras. Which maintained covert ties with the Romulan Empire for decades. I do not recall a dissolution motion being brought against *them*.”

The temperature in the room dropped several degrees. Dorath’s jaw tightened.

“The House of Duras was dealt with,” he said.

“The House of Duras was dealt with *eventually*,” Worf corrected. “After their treachery nearly destroyed the Empire. The House of Antaak has committed no treachery. It has arranged a marriage — openly, with the knowledge and consent of the Praetor’s household — in pursuit of peace between two peoples who have been killing each other for centuries. If that is grounds for dissolution, then the Council has declared that peace itself is treason.”

Dorath took a step forward. He was, Picard noted, a full head taller than Worf, and he used the height advantage without subtlety.

“Do not lecture me about peace, *Starfleet*,” he said. “I have fought for the Empire since before you were born. I have bled for it. I have watched it grow soft — watched it trade its honour for treaties and handshakes and *alliances* with people who would put a knife in our backs the moment it suited them.” He turned to Kudraga. “And now this. A daughter of a Great House, selling herself to a Romulan. Inviting the enemy into our bloodline.”

“Rojuk is not the enemy,” Kudraga said. It was the first time she had spoken since the resolution was read, and her voice was very controlled. “His people lost their homeworld. Their star went nova. They came to the Federation seeking help, and they were given a new home. He is a man trying to build something from the ashes. As am I.”

“Sentiment,” Dorath spat.

“Honour,” Kudraga corrected.

Dorath turned from her and addressed the room at large, as though presenting closing arguments to a jury.

“The High Council’s concerns are not merely about this marriage. They are about what this marriage *represents*. The House of Antaak has, for two generations, maintained a — a *cult*.” He said the word with deliberate venom. “A cult devoted to a Federation officer. A human woman. They have built shrines to her. They have conducted rituals in her name. They have elevated a *petaQ* — a foreign soldier — to the status of a Klingon hero. And now the heir of this House proposes to marry a Romulan, with a former Tal Shiar operative standing at her side—” He finally looked at Sela, and the contempt in his gaze was withering. “—and we are told this is *honour*.”

The word echoed off the bulkheads.

And then Sela spoke.

“You should be careful, General.”

Her voice cut through the room like a blade — quiet, precise, utterly without emotion. It was, Picard realised, the voice she had learned in the Tal Shiar, and whatever else might be said about that organisation, they had taught her how to command a room.

Dorath turned to her with an expression of incredulity. “You dare—”

“I dare because you have just called my mother a *petaQ*.” Sela stepped forward, away from Kudraga’s side, and stood in the open space at the centre of the room. She was smaller than Dorath by a considerable margin, and she did not appear to notice. “My mother was Lieutenant Natasha Yar of the United Federation of Planets. She served aboard the USS *Enterprise*. She died — not in battle, not in the way you would find acceptable — but in a Romulan compound, drawing fire so that a Klingon child could be beamed to safety. A child of noble blood. A child whose capture, if discovered, would have given the Romulan Empire leverage over your precious High Council.”

She took another step toward Dorath.

“She built a transmitter from scraps. She waited months for a Klingon ship to pass within range. She transmitted on Federation emergency frequencies — frequencies your people recognised

because of the alliance she had helped to build. And when the moment came, she ran. Not to escape. She ran so that every eye in that compound would follow her instead of looking at the sky, where a Klingon transporter beam was pulling a nine-year-old boy to safety.”

Another step. She was within arm’s reach of Dorath now, and he had not moved — whether from surprise or stubbornness, Picard could not tell.

“She was executed the following morning,” Sela said. “She was thirty-one years old. She left behind a four-year-old daughter — me — who was raised to believe that her mother was a coward.” Her voice did not waver. “I believed it for thirty years. I was wrong. And if you stand in this room and call her a *petaQ* — a woman who gave her life for a Klingon child she barely knew — then you do not understand honour, General. You only understand power. And those are not the same thing.”

The silence that followed was so complete that Picard could hear the hum of the warp engines through the deck plates.

Dorath stared at Sela. Something worked behind his face — not shame, Picard thought; men like Dorath were not easily shamed. But something. Calculation, perhaps. The slow recognition that the ground he was standing on was not as solid as he had believed.

Worf spoke into the silence.

“My third ground,” he said, and his voice was remarkably steady. “The *right of declaration*. Under Article Seven of the Klingon Legal Code, any House facing a motion of dissolution may invoke the right to declare its foundational act of honour — the deed upon which the House’s standing rests. If that deed is verified and found to be without dishonour, the motion is void. It cannot proceed.”

He turned to Dorath.

“The House of Antaak’s foundational act of honour is the sacrifice of Lieutenant Natasha Yar. You have just heard testimony — from her own daughter, who has no reason to speak well of Klingons and every reason to remain silent — confirming the nature of that sacrifice. A Starfleet officer gave her life to save a Klingon child. She did so without obligation, without treaty, without hope of recognition. She did it because it was right.”

He paused.

“If that is not honour, General, then the word has no meaning. And if the Council wishes to dissolve a House for honouring such a deed, then the Council has abandoned the very principles it claims to defend.”

Dorath did not respond immediately. He stood in the centre of the observation lounge, a big man in heavy armour, and for the first time since he had entered the room, he looked uncertain.

Picard watched him. He had seen this before — the moment when a bully realised that the thing he was pushing against was pushing back, and harder than he had anticipated. Dorath had come aboard expecting a frightened young woman and a procedural formality. He had found something else entirely.

It was Counsellor Troi who broke the silence, and she did it with the particular gentleness that Picard had learned to recognise as her most devastating weapon.

“General,” she said, from her seat at the end of the table. “I am an empath. I cannot read Klingon minds in the way I read some others — your mental discipline is formidable. But I can read emotions.” She paused. “You are not here because you believe the House of Antaak has betrayed the Empire. You know they haven’t. You are here because this marriage represents a change you do not want — a future in which the Empire’s borders become more permeable, in which Klingon and Romulan and human are not so easily separated into categories of ally and enemy.”

Dorath turned to her, his expression darkening.

“You are afraid,” Troi said simply. “Not of Kudraga. Not of this marriage. Of what comes after.”

“You *dare* speak to me of fear—”

“I speak of what I sense, General. It is what I do.” She held his gaze without flinching. “And what I sense is that you have come a very long way to stop something that, in your heart, you know cannot be stopped. The universe is changing. The question is whether you will change with it, or be left behind.”

Dorath’s hands closed into fists at his sides. For a long, taut moment, Picard thought the General might do something unwise —

might roar, might overturn the table, might storm from the room. The guards by the door had stiffened, reading the same signals.

Then Kudraga spoke.

“General Dorath.”

Her voice was calm. Not challenging, not defiant — calm, in the way that deep water is calm. Dorath turned to her, almost reluctantly.

“My father was nine years old when a human woman he had known for less than three years gave her life so that he could live,” Kudraga said. “She did not do it for the Empire. She did not do it for honour, or glory, or a place in Sto-vo-kor. She did it because a child was in danger, and she was the only one who could help. That is the foundation of my House. That is the act upon which everything I am — everything my children will be — is built.”

She moved toward him, and there was no aggression in it — only certainty.

“You call it a cult. You call her a *petaQ*. You bring your resolution and your seal and your threats, and you tell me that my House must be dissolved because we had the audacity to honour a woman who deserved honouring.” She stopped in front of him, close enough to see the grey in his braided beard, and looked up into his face. “But I do not think that is truly why you are here, General. I think you are here because you look at my House and you see something that frightens you — a Great House that measures honour not by blood, not by species, not by the borders on a star chart, but by the simple question of whether a person was willing to stand when it mattered.”

She paused.

“Tasha Yar stood. My father stood. I am standing now.” She let the silence hold for a beat. “The question, General, is whether *you* will.”

Dorath said nothing. The observation lounge was very still. Through the viewports, the stars turned slowly, indifferent to the small dramas of the people who moved among them.

Then Commander Toreth rose from her chair.

She had been silent throughout — so silent that Picard had almost forgotten she was there, which was, he suspected, precisely what she had intended. She moved into the open space with the unhurried grace of someone who understood that timing was everything.

“If I may, Admiral,” she said, addressing Picard. He nodded.

Toreth turned to Dorath. “General. I have listened with great interest. As a representative of the Praetor’s household, I feel compelled to offer a... perspective.”

Dorath looked at her as though she were something he had found on the bottom of his boot.

“This marriage,” Toreth continued, undeterred, “was negotiated at the highest levels. The Praetor himself has given his blessing. The Romulan people — what remains of us, General, after our star decided to kill us — see this union as a gesture of extraordinary significance. A Klingon Great House, joining with a Romulan family. Not through conquest. Not through coercion. Through *choice*.”

She clasped her hands behind her back.

“If this marriage is stopped — if the House of Antaak is dissolved on the grounds that alliance with Romulans constitutes betrayal — then the message received on New Romulus will be unambiguous. The Klingon Empire does not want peace. The Klingon Empire considers Romulans so contemptible that merely marrying one is grounds for destruction.” She paused. “I trust I do not need to explain the diplomatic consequences of that message, General. Your Council may have seven votes for this resolution. I wonder how many of those votes will hold when the Praetor recalls his ambassador from Qo’noS.”

Dorath’s face had gone rigid.

“Is that a threat, Commander?”

“It is an observation,” Toreth said mildly. “I am a ship commander, not a diplomat. I leave threats to people with more practice.”

Picard stepped forward. He had held his silence as long as he could, and Dorath had said one thing that he could not let stand.

“General Dorath,” he said. “You stated when you came aboard that this is a Klingon matter, and not a Federation concern. I have respected that, and I have given you the use of my ship to present your case. But I must tell you — as the captain of a vessel that bears the name *Enterprise* — that Tasha Yar is very much a Federation concern.”

He walked to the viewport and stood with the stars at his back.

“She was my officer. She served on this ship — or rather, on the ship whose name this one carries. She was twenty-eight years old when I lost her the first time, and she was thirty-one when she chose to go back to a battle she knew she could not survive, because the timeline itself needed her to be there.” His voice was level, measured — the voice of a man who had carried this for a long time. “And now I learn that even after that — after the battle, after the capture, after years of slavery on a world that was not her own — she was still fighting. Still saving people. Still doing what Starfleet officers do.”

He turned to Dorath.

“You called her a *petaQ*. You are entitled to your opinion. But I would ask you to consider this: by your own laws, by your own customs, by every measure of honour that the Klingon Empire holds sacred, Tasha Yar died a warrior’s death. She died protecting the innocent. She died so that a child could live. And two generations of Klingons have honoured her for it — not because they were told to, but because they recognised in her the very qualities that your Empire claims to value above all others.”

He paused.

“If the Klingon High Council wishes to dissolve a House for honouring *that* — then, General, it is not the House of Antaak that has lost its way.”

The silence that followed was of the kind that precedes either violence or surrender. Picard held Dorath’s gaze and did not look away.

Dorath broke first. Not dramatically — there was no roar of concession, no admission of defeat. That was not the Klingon way, and it was certainly not Dorath’s way. What happened was smaller, and in some ways more significant: he exhaled. A long, controlled

breath, released through the nose, and with it went some of the rigidity in his shoulders.

He turned to the conference table and picked up the data tablet. He looked at it for a long moment — the seal of the High Council, the resolution he had carried across light-years.

“The procedural objection,” he said, addressing Worf. His voice was quieter now — not soft, Dorath would never be soft, but stripped of its performance. “You said the resolution requires three Council members present. You are correct. I know you are correct. The Council knew it when they sent me.”

Riker frowned. “Then why—”

“Because they expected the girl to fold.” Dorath looked at Kudraga, and Picard thought he saw something in the old General’s eyes that might, in a different man, have been called respect. “They expected me to arrive with the seal and the threat, and they expected her to renounce the marriage and come home with her tail between her legs. They did not expect—” He gestured vaguely at the room, at Worf, at Sela, at all of it. “—this.”

He set the tablet down.

“I will return to the Council,” he said. “I will report that the procedural requirements were not met, and that the Lady Kudraga has invoked the right of declaration through her *cha’nob*. The Council will have to convene a full hearing if they wish to pursue this further.” He paused. “They will not. Dorath looked at Toreth. “Not with the Praetor’s ambassador watching.”

He turned to leave, then stopped. He stood with his back to the room for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice was very low.

“The woman. Your Sorya.” He did not turn around. “She built a transmitter from scraps?”

“She did,” Kudraga said.

“And she ran. Knowing what would happen.”

“Yes.”

Dorath was quiet for a moment. Then: “That is not the act of a *petaQ*.”

He walked out of the observation lounge without looking back. His guards fell into step behind him, the door hissed shut, and he was gone.

The *Vor'nak* broke formation twenty minutes later. She swung away from the *Enterprise* in a wide arc, engaged her cloak, and vanished — one moment a blade of metal and light against the stars, the next moment nothing but empty space.

Picard watched her go from the bridge. Beside him, Riker let out a breath he seemed to have been holding for an hour.

“Well,” Riker said. “That could have gone worse.”

“It could have gone considerably worse, Will.”

“Do you think the Council will let it go?”

“I think,” Picard said slowly, “that General Dorath is going to deliver a report that makes it politically very difficult for the Council to pursue this further. Whether that is because he has been convinced, or because he has simply recognised that the cost of proceeding outweighs the benefit—” He shrugged slightly. “I suspect it does not matter. The result is the same.”

On the viewscreen, the Warbird *Dividices* remained at their side — a steady, green-lit presence. Toreth had returned to her ship without comment, offering only a small, precise nod to Picard as she left. It was, he thought, the Romulan equivalent of a standing ovation.

Picard stood and tugged his tunic straight.

“Mr Data, maintain course for New Romulus. Warp six.”

“Aye, sir.”

He paused at the door to the ready room and looked back at the bridge — *his* bridge, for a little while longer. This ship, this crew, this name painted on the hull. The last voyage of the *Enterprise-D*.

He thought of Kudraga, standing in front of a General and refusing to bend. He thought of Sela, clutching a tarnished combadge and discovering, after thirty years, that her mother had loved her. He thought of Worf, who had once replaced a dead woman at tactical and who had today stood as champion for her legacy.

And he thought of Tasha. Blonde hair. Fierce eyes. Running through the dark on a world that was not her own, drawing fire, drawing death, so that a child could live.

What a crew you would have made together, he thought. *What a crew you still are.*

He stepped into the ready room and let the door close behind him.

Chapter Five — New Romulus

New Romulus was not what Picard had expected.

He had carried an image of Romulus in his mind for decades — the old Romulus, the imperial capital, all severe angles and calculated grandeur, a world designed to remind you that you were small, and it was not. New Romulus was something else. It was a young world, still being shaped, and there was a rawness to it that sat oddly alongside the Romulan instinct for precision. From orbit, the northern continent showed the neat geometry of planned settlements bordered by tracts of untamed wilderness — forest and red-stone canyon and the silver thread of rivers that had never been named until the Rihannsu arrived and began, with characteristic thoroughness, to name everything.

The capital — such as it was — had been built on a wide plateau overlooking the sea. White stone and pale metal, open courtyards, colonnades that caught the wind. It did not look like old Romulus. It looked, Picard thought, like a people trying to remember who they had been before the Empire taught them to be afraid.

The *Enterprise* assumed standard orbit alongside the *Dividices*. Two more Romulan vessels were already in position — lighter ships, escorts — and they acknowledged the Federation flagship with the crisp formality of officers who had been told in very clear terms to be polite.

Kudraga stood at the viewport in her quarters, looking down at the world where she would be married, and she was very quiet.

Sela stood behind her. She had not left Kudraga's side since the confrontation with Dorath — had taken up a position that was not quite servant, not quite guard, not quite companion, but something that drew from all three. She wore the tarnished combadge on a thin chain around her neck, tucked beneath her tunic where it rested against her skin. She had not taken it off since Kudraga had placed it in her hands.

"It's beautiful," Kudraga said softly, looking at the planet.

"It is young," Sela replied. "Everything here is young. The buildings, the roads, the government. Even the names — half the

geography was unnamed five years ago. Rojuk's household has a vineyard. The vines are three years old." A pause. "On old Romulus, the great houses had vineyards that had been producing for centuries."

"And now?"

"Now they are ash." Sela's voice was matter-of-fact, but something beneath it was not. "Everything we were is ash. This is what we have instead."

Kudraga turned from the viewport. "Then we will build something worth having."

The wedding was to take place in the Hall of New Beginning — an ambitious name for a building that was, in truth, barely a decade old, but the Romulans had always understood the power of naming things. It stood at the centre of the capital's civic quarter, a sweeping curve of pale stone and glass that opened at one end onto a terrace overlooking the sea. The ceremony would be conducted at sunset, in the Romulan fashion, with the dying light falling through the glass and painting the hall in shades of amber and copper.

But first, by Kudraga's insistence, there would be a Klingon rite.

She had been precise about this. The marriage would honour both traditions — the Klingon oath-taking at dawn, the Romulan bonding ceremony at dusk. Two peoples, two rituals, one union. Rojuk had agreed without hesitation. His household had agreed with varying degrees of enthusiasm, ranging from genuine warmth to the carefully calibrated tolerance of Romulan elders who had survived the destruction of their world and were disinclined to argue about wedding arrangements.

The Klingon rite required a *tawi'Yan* — a sword-bearer — and Kudraga had asked Worf.

He had accepted with a solemnity that, even by Worf's standards, was considerable. He had spent the previous evening in his quarters sharpening a bat'leth that had not needed sharpening, and Picard suspected he had also been rehearsing the ritual responses,

although Worf would sooner have walked into a plasma fire than admitted it.

Picard had been asked to serve as a witness — a role that crossed the boundary between Federation protocol and Klingon custom, but Kudraga had been clear. “You are the captain of the *Enterprise*,” she had said, as though that settled the matter entirely, and Picard had found that it did.

Rojuk was waiting for them on the terrace.

He was younger than Picard had expected — perhaps thirty, with the angular features and dark eyes common to Romulan men, but there was a steadiness to him that sat oddly with his youth. He wore formal robes of deep green edged with silver, and he stood very still as the party beamed down, watching Kudraga with an expression that reminded Picard, unexpectedly, of the way Beverly sometimes looked at him when she thought he wasn’t paying attention.

Kudraga stepped off the transport point and stopped. She and Rojuk regarded each other across ten metres of pale stone terrace, and then something broke — some dam of formality — and she was moving toward him, not running, not hurrying, but moving with a purpose that had nothing to do with ceremony, and he was meeting her halfway, and they clasped hands and stood forehead to forehead for a long, wordless moment.

Picard looked away to give them their privacy and found Sela standing beside him, watching the couple with an expression he could not read.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly.

“I am not sure,” Sela said. She said it without deflection, without the Romulan habit of answering a question with another question, and Picard took that as a kind of progress. “Rojuk asked me to watch over her, Admiral. When he sent me with Toreth — when he asked me specifically — he said, ‘I am trusting you with the most important person in my life.’ He said it simply. Without qualifications. Without surveillance protocols or verification procedures or any of the

machinery that I spent twenty years building around the concept of trust.”

She paused.

“No one has trusted me with anything since I left the Tal Shiar. Not truly. My own people regard me as a curiosity at best, a liability at worst. The Federation sees a former enemy. The Klingons see a Romulan.” She looked at Kudraga and Rojuk, still standing forehead to forehead on the terrace. “And this man — this young, earnest, impossibly sincere man — handed me his bride and said *I trust you*. As though it were the simplest thing in the world.”

“Perhaps for him it is,” Picard said.

“Perhaps.” Sela straightened. “I will not let him down, Admiral. Whatever else I am uncertain about — and I am uncertain about a great deal — I am certain about that.”

The Klingon rite took place at dawn, as tradition demanded.

The Hall of New Beginning had been transformed overnight. One half of the great, curved space had been given over to the Klingon ceremony — torches in iron brackets, red and black banners bearing the crest of the House of Antaak, and at the centre, a raised stone platform where the oaths would be spoken. The other half remained as it was, open and light, waiting for the Romulan ceremony at dusk. The division was stark — fire and shadow on one side, glass and sea-light on the other — and Picard thought it was, perhaps unintentionally, a perfect metaphor for what was being attempted here.

Worf stood at the platform in full Klingon ceremonial armour. He had, Picard noted, polished his baldric to a mirror shine, and the bat’leth he held across his palms gleamed in the torchlight. He looked, for once, entirely at home.

The oath-taking was brief and fierce, as Klingon rituals tended to be. Kudraga and Rojuk faced each other across the platform. She spoke first — the challenge, in Klingon, her voice ringing off the stone walls:

“tlhIngan jIH. batlh jIyIn. batlh jIHegh. DaH SoHvaD jIlay’.”

I am Klingon. I live with honour. I die with honour. Now I pledge myself to you.

Rojuk answered in Klingon — accented, careful, clearly practised, but spoken with a sincerity that forgave any imperfection: “*jIlay’ je. wo’ Hol vIjatlhlaHbe’qu’, ’ach tIqwlj DayajlaH.*”

I pledge also. I cannot speak your Empire’s tongue well, but you can understand my heart.

A murmur went through the Klingon attendants — not disapproval, Picard thought, but surprise. A Romulan speaking Klingon at his own wedding. Even badly. Even haltingly. It was a gesture that landed.

Worf brought the bat’leth down between them, and they each placed a hand upon the blade, and the oath was sealed. It was, like all Klingon ceremonies, over almost before it had begun. The Klingons did not believe in lingering over such things. You made your vow, you kept your vow, and everything else was decoration.

The hours between dawn and dusk were given over to celebration — or rather, to the particular kind of controlled chaos that occurred when Klingon and Romulan hospitality traditions collided. There was food — vast quantities of it, from both cultures, laid out on long tables in the courtyard. There was bloodwine, and Romulan ale, and a local vintage from Rojuk’s three-year-old vineyard that was, Picard had to admit, surprisingly drinkable.

Data circulated among the guests with the earnest curiosity that was his hallmark, engaging a Romulan senator in what appeared to be a deeply technical conversation about viticulture. Riker had found a balcony and was leaning against the railing with a glass of ale, watching the proceedings with the satisfied expression of a man who had been to enough diplomatic functions to know when one was going well. Troi moved through the crowd like a current — quiet, attentive, gently steering conversations away from difficult topics with a skill that bordered on art.

Dr Crusher had beamed down with the afternoon party and was examining the local flora with undisguised fascination. She had

already collected three samples and was in animated discussion with a Romulan botanist about the adaptive properties of transplanted Romulan plant species.

And Sela — Sela was watching.

She stood at the edge of the courtyard, near a stone pillar, and she watched everything. Not with the cold surveillance of her Tal Shiar training — or not only with that. There was something else in it, something restless and vigilant that went beyond professional habit. She watched the perimeter. She watched the entrances. She watched the faces of the guests — Klingon and Romulan and the handful of Federation officers who had beamed down — with the particular attention of someone cataloguing threats.

Picard noticed. He crossed the courtyard to her.

“You look like a woman who is expecting trouble,” he said.

“I am a woman who spent twenty years *being* trouble, Admiral. I know what it looks like.” She did not take her eyes off the crowd. “Dorath backed down. But Dorath is one man. The resolution had seven votes. That means six other Council members wanted the House of Antaak destroyed, and Dorath’s retreat does not erase their ambitions.”

“You think someone may try something.”

“I think this wedding is the most visible symbol of Klingon-Romulan unity since the alliance was first proposed. I think there are people on both sides who consider that an abomination. And I think that the distance between political opposition and direct action is shorter than civilised people like to believe.” She looked at him. “I have been on the other side of that distance, Admiral. I know how short it is.”

Picard studied her face. “Have you spoken to Worf? To the Romulan security detail?”

“Commander Toreth has her people on the perimeter. They are competent. Worf has his own team covering the interior.” She paused. “But there are gaps. This building was not designed as a fortress. The terrace is open to the sea. The courtyards have seven access points, only four of which are covered. And the guest list—” She shook her head slightly. “Three hundred people from two civilisations that have

been killing each other for centuries. Any one of them could be carrying a grievance sharp enough to cut.”

“What would you recommend?”

Sela looked at him with something that might have been surprise. “You are asking me?”

“You are the most experienced intelligence operative on this planet, and you have a personal stake in the safety of the bride. Yes, I am asking you.”

She considered this for a moment. “Double the coverage on the terrace approach. Move the evening ceremony indoors if possible — the glass walls are beautiful, but they are a tactical liability. And—” She hesitated. “And let me stay close to her. Not as a guard. Kudraga would not accept that. But close enough.”

“Rojuk asked you to protect her.”

“He asked me to watch over her. There is a difference. But yes.” She straightened. “I gave him my word, Picard. It is the first word I have given anyone in a very long time that was not part of an operation, or a deception, or a stratagem. It was simply a promise, made to a man who trusted me to keep it.” She looked out across the courtyard to where Kudraga was laughing with a group of Romulan women, her head thrown back, utterly unselfconscious. “I am not entirely sure what I believe about any of this — the marriage, the alliance, the shrine, the idea that my mother’s death was something sacred rather than simply wasteful. I am not sure about any of it. But I am sure about the promise.”

Picard nodded. “Stay close to her.”

“I intend to.”

The sun began its descent toward the sea at the seventh hour.

The Hall of New Beginning filled slowly as guests took their places for the Romulan ceremony. The glass walls caught the light and held it, turning the interior to gold and then to copper, and the sea beyond glittered like hammered metal. It was, Picard admitted, breathtaking. The Romulans understood beauty in a way that was

architectural — not merely decorative but structural, built into the bones of things.

Kudraga had changed into Romulan ceremonial dress — a flowing robe of deep silver-blue, edged with the green of Rojuk's house, her hair unbound and falling to her shoulders. The House of Antaak's brooch was pinned at her throat, and beneath it, visible only if you knew to look, was a second pin — small, simple, bearing the outline of a Starfleet delta. She had not told Picard about this addition. She had not needed to.

Rojuk waited at the far end of the hall, beneath an arch of woven branches — a Romulan tradition, Picard had been told, symbolising the shelter that a new household would provide. The Praetor's representative stood beside him, an elderly woman in white who held a ceremonial torch that would be used to light the bonding flame.

The hall was full. Three hundred guests, seated in curved rows that followed the sweep of the walls. Klingon warriors in ceremonial armour sat alongside Romulan senators in formal robes. Federation officers in dress uniform occupied a middle section, deliberately placed. Data sat with his hands folded, observing everything with the meticulous attention of someone who intended to write a very thorough report. Riker sat beside Troi, and Picard noticed that at some point during the afternoon, their hands had found each other.

Crusher caught his eye from across the aisle and smiled.

Worf stood at the rear of the hall, in full armour, arms folded. He was not seated because he had chosen not to be. He was watching the room with the same systematic attention that Picard had seen from Sela, and Picard wondered whether the two of them had coordinated, or whether the instinct was simply the same — different training, different loyalties, same refusal to let their guard down in a room full of strangers.

Sela stood three paces behind Kudraga's position at the processional entrance. She wore dark civilian clothes — simple, unadorned, chosen for ease of movement rather than ceremony, although Picard suspected that only a handful of people in the room would have noticed that distinction. Her eyes moved constantly — the

entrance, the glass walls, the terrace beyond, the faces of the guests, back to the entrance. A circuit, repeated every few seconds, as automatic as breathing.

The Praetor's representative raised the ceremonial torch. The hall quieted.

And then the processional music began — a single sustained note from a Romulan wind instrument, clear and high, joined slowly by deeper tones that built into something that was more vibration than melody, something you felt in the chest before you heard it with your ears.

Kudraga began to walk.

She moved down the central aisle, alone — Romulan custom required the bride to walk unaccompanied, a symbol of free choice — and the light from the glass walls caught her silver-blue robe and turned it to fire. She walked steadily, her chin up, her dark eyes fixed on Rojuk, and she did not hurry.

Sela followed at a distance. Not in the processional — she was not part of the ceremony — but moving along the side of the hall, parallel to Kudraga's path, keeping her in sight. Three hundred people were watching the bride. Sela was watching everything else.

Kudraga reached the arch. Rojuk took her hands. The Praetor's representative began to speak — the old words, the bonding invocation, a prayer to the elements that the Rihannsu had carried from Vulcan and reshaped over two thousand years into something entirely their own.

Picard let himself breathe. Perhaps Sela's caution had been unnecessary. Perhaps the threat was theoretical, a phantom born of professional paranoia and old instinct. Perhaps—

The glass shattered.

Not a single pane — three panels, simultaneously, along the western wall. The sound was enormous — a percussive crack that turned the air white with fragments — and through the breach came figures. Dark-armoured, faces covered, moving with the practised speed of soldiers who had rehearsed this exact action many times.

Six of them. They came through the shattered wall in a wedge formation, disruptor pistols raised, and the first shot hit the stone floor

three metres from the bonding arch, blowing a crater the size of a man's chest in the pale marble.

It was a warning shot. They wanted the room's attention, and they had it.

The hall erupted. Guests surged to their feet. Someone screamed — a high, sharp sound that cut through the chaos. Romulan security guards along the perimeter drew weapons, but the attackers had positioned themselves between the guards and the arch, using the crowd as cover. A hostage geometry, ruthlessly efficient.

Picard was on his feet, reaching for a communicator that would not help. "Picard to *Enterprise* — emergency transport, lock onto—"

"Transport inhibitors," Data's voice came back, clipped and precise. "A localised dampening field has been activated within the hall. We cannot establish a lock."

The lead attacker — taller than the others, broader, moving with a particular heaviness that Picard recognised — tore the covering from his face.

He was Klingon.

They were all Klingon.

"Kudraga!" the leader bellowed, and his voice was raw with a fury that sounded less like ideology and more like something feral, something that had been feeding on its own rage for a long time. "Daughter of Koragh! Traitor to the Empire! You will not complete this *obscenity*!"

He raised his disruptor and pointed it directly at Kudraga.

What happened next took less than four seconds.

Worf moved first — surging forward from the rear of the hall, bat'leth drawn, roaring a challenge that shook the walls. Two of the attackers swung toward him, firing. He deflected the first shot with the flat of the blade — an act of reflex so extraordinary that Picard's mind simply refused to process it — and closed the distance to the nearest attacker in three strides. The crack of bat'leth against armour rang through the hall like a bell.

Romulan security guards opened fire from the perimeter, catching two more attackers in a crossfire. One went down. The other

dove behind an overturned bench and returned fire, disruptor bolts chewing into the stone walls.

But the leader — the leader had not moved. He stood with his disruptor levelled at Kudraga, and everything else was noise and distraction, and his finger was tightening on the trigger, and Kudraga was standing at the bonding arch with Rojuk's hands still holding hers, frozen in the half-second between recognition and reaction—

Sela hit her from the side.

Not a push — a full-body tackle, low and driving, the kind of impact that came from someone who had committed absolutely everything to the act. She caught Kudraga around the waist and drove her sideways, off her feet, away from the arch, and the disruptor bolt that would have struck Kudraga in the chest instead caught Sela across the back.

The sound she made was not a scream. It was a sharp, truncated gasp — the sound of someone whose body had been told something it could not immediately comprehend. She and Kudraga hit the stone floor together, Sela on top, shielding, and the smell of burned cloth and cauterised flesh filled the air.

A second bolt struck her left shoulder. She jerked but did not move. She stayed where she was — covering Kudraga with her body, one arm wrapped around the younger woman's head, pressing her face into the stone floor, away from the debris and the light and the killing.

"Stay down," Sela said, and her voice was steady, impossibly steady, as though the two disruptor wounds that were burning through her back and shoulder were happening to someone else, someone she would deal with later. "Stay *down*."

The leader fired again. The bolt hit the floor centimetres from Sela's hip, spraying stone fragments. She flinched but held her position. She was, Picard realised with a horror that bordered on awe, deliberately making herself the largest possible target — drawing fire away from Kudraga, absorbing it, refusing to move.

I gave him my word, she had said. It is the first word I have given anyone in a very long time that was not part of an operation.

Rojuk was moving — lunging away from the arch, toward his bride, toward the woman covering her — and then Toreth was there,

materialising from the chaos with two guards, and she put herself between Rojuk and the attacker with the calm efficiency of a woman who had commanded a warship and understood that sometimes the captain's job was simply to be in the way.

The leader turned his weapon toward Toreth. It was the last mistake he made with any freedom of choice.

Worf hit him from behind. The bat'leth took the disruptor out of his hand and most of the hand with it, and the Klingon went down with a bellow that shook the remaining glass in the walls. Worf put a knee on his chest and the edge of the blade against his throat and held him there, breathing hard, his face a mask of controlled fury.

"Yield," Worf said. It was not a request.

The remaining attackers were down — two unconscious, one dead, two restrained by Romulan guards who did not look inclined toward gentleness. The dampening field died with a whine as someone — Data, working from the *Enterprise* with LaForge — found the emitter and burned it out remotely.

The hall was full of smoke and dust and the sharp ozone smell of discharged disruptors. Shattered glass glittered on the stone floor like scattered diamonds. Somewhere, someone was weeping — the thin, shocked sound of someone who had not yet processed what had happened.

Picard reached Sela first.

She was still lying on top of Kudraga, still covering her, and she was conscious — that was the first thing he registered, with a relief that surprised him with its intensity. Her eyes were open, fixed on the middle distance, and her breathing was shallow and rapid. The back of her tunic was burned through, and beneath it the wound was ugly — a disruptor burn that ran from her right shoulder blade to her lower ribs, the skin blackened and split, weeping fluid that was not quite blood.

The second wound, on her left shoulder, was smaller but deeper. Picard could see the white of bone.

"Sela," he said, kneeling beside her. "Sela, it's over. You can let go."

She blinked. Focused on him. Something that might have been recognition moved through her eyes.

“Is she—” Her voice was a rasp, scraped thin by pain. “Kudraga. Is she—”

“I’m here.” Kudraga’s voice came from beneath her — muffled, shaking, but alive. “I’m here, I’m not hurt, you can let go, *please* let go, you’re hurt—”

Sela shook her head — a tiny movement, barely perceptible. “Not yet. Not until—” She looked at Picard. “The room. Is the room clear?”

“The room is clear,” Picard said gently. “Worf has the leader. The others are down. It’s over.”

Sela held his gaze for a long moment, as though measuring the truth of it against every betrayal she had ever experienced, every lie she had ever been told by people who looked her in the eye and said *trust me*. Then, slowly, with the careful deliberation of someone dismantling a barricade one stone at a time, she released her grip on Kudraga and rolled onto her side.

The pain hit her then. She felt it arrive — the full force of it, no longer held at bay by adrenaline and purpose — and her face went grey and her jaw locked and a sound came out of her that was barely human. She pressed her forehead to the cold stone floor and breathed through it, and her hands curled into fists.

“Picard to *Enterprise*,” Picard said, his communicator already open. “Medical emergency. Two to beam directly to sickbay.”

“Locking on now, Admiral,” came the transporter chief’s voice.

Kudraga had pulled herself free and was kneeling beside Sela, and her hands were shaking but her voice was not. “You stupid, brave, *impossible* woman,” she said, and there were tears on her face, but she was not sobbing — she was furious, the particular fury that comes from watching someone you care about throw themselves into harm’s way for you. “Why did you do that? Why—”

“Because he asked me to.” Sela’s eyes found Kudraga’s face. The pain was there, enormous and growing, but behind it was something else — something clear and fierce and, for the first time since Picard had known her, unguarded. “Rojuk asked me to keep you safe. He trusted me. He *trusted* me. Do you understand what that—”

She broke off, grimacing, and when she spoke again, her voice was very small. “No one trusts me. No one has trusted me in years. He handed me the one thing that matters most to him and said *I trust you*, and I was not going to — I was *not* going to—”

“You were not going to let him down,” Picard said quietly.

“No.” Sela closed her eyes. “Not this time. Not this.”

The transporter beam took her, and she dissolved into light, and the last thing Picard saw was her hand — still curled into a fist, still holding on.

Crusher met them in sickbay.

She took one look at the burns on Sela’s back and the exposed bone of her shoulder and said nothing — simply moved, with the decisive efficiency that was her particular genius, issuing orders to her team in a voice that was calm and level and left no room for hesitation. Sela was on the surgical biobed within thirty seconds, the tissue regenerators already humming.

“The spinal column is intact,” Crusher reported, her eyes on the readouts. “The primary burn is extensive but superficial — the disruptor was set to a wide dispersal, which actually saved her. If it had been a focused beam—” She didn’t finish the sentence. She didn’t need to. “The shoulder is more serious. The bolt penetrated the deltoid and clipped the scapula. There’s bone fragmentation. I’ll need to reconstruct.”

“Will she—” Picard began.

“She’ll live.” Crusher looked at him over the biobed, and something softened in her expression. “She’ll be in considerable pain for several days, and the shoulder will need multiple sessions, but she’ll live. She was lucky, Jean-Luc. Another five centimetres to the right on that back wound and we’d be having a very different conversation.”

Sela was conscious — barely, fighting the sedatives that Crusher had administered with the stubborn resistance of someone who did not trust unconsciousness. She turned her head on the biobed, searching the room with glazed, unfocused eyes.

“Kudraga,” she said. “Where—”

“She’s safe,” Picard told her. “She’s not hurt. You made sure of that.”

Sela stared at the ceiling. The sedatives were winning, pulling her down into the dark, and she let them — slowly, reluctantly, like a sentry who had been ordered off watch.

“Tell Rojuk,” she murmured. “Tell him I didn’t... I kept my word.”

“I’ll tell him,” Picard said.

She closed her eyes. Her fist uncurled, and the tension went out of her, and she slept.

The attackers were identified within the hour.

Worf conducted the interrogation of the leader — a man named Kolgar, formerly of the House of Grevak — in the *Enterprise*’s brig. Picard observed from behind the security screen and let Worf work. It did not take long. Kolgar was wounded, disarmed, humiliated, and the only weapon he had left was his contempt, which he deployed without restraint.

He was part of a splinter faction — six men, all former warriors from minor houses, all united by the conviction that the Klingon-Romulan marriage was not merely an insult but an existential threat. They did not work for the High Council. They did not work for Dorath. They worked for no one but themselves and an idea — an idea of Klingon purity that had curdled, over years of nursing it, into something toxic.

“You think you have won,” Kolgar spat at Worf through the forcefield. “You think this *wedding* will change anything? The Empire is rotting. Rotting from within. First the Federation, now the Romulans — how long before there is nothing left? How long before we are just another species in your Federation zoo, performing tricks for humans?”

“You attacked a wedding,” Worf said. His voice was level, almost conversational, which was, Picard knew, far more dangerous than shouting. “You tried to murder an unarmed woman at her bonding

ceremony. You injured a civilian who was protecting her. And you call yourself Klingon.”

“I *am* Klingon! More Klingon than you — you, in your Federation uniform, taking orders from—”

“You are a coward,” Worf said, and the word dropped like a stone into still water. “You did not challenge the House of Antaak in open combat. You did not petition the Council. You did not even declare yourself. You hid your faces and crept through broken glass like thieves, and you tried to shoot a woman in the back while she stood at her own wedding.” He leaned closer to the forcefield. “There is a word for that in every language I know, Kolgar. In none of them does it translate as *honour*.”

Kolgar had no answer for that. He turned his face to the wall and said nothing more.

It was Rojuk who came to sickbay.

He came alone, without guards, without attendants — a breach of protocol so severe that Toreth, when she heard about it later, was reportedly rendered speechless for a full three seconds, which those who knew her considered a record.

Crusher let him in. Picard, who had remained in sickbay without entirely knowing why, stood and moved to leave, but Rojuk shook his head.

“Stay, Admiral. Please.”

He crossed to the biobed where Sela lay sleeping. The tissue regenerators had done their work on the surface wounds, but her shoulder was immobilised and her face, even in sedated sleep, was tight with pain. The chain around her neck had been removed during treatment, and the tarnished combadge sat on the small table beside the bed — Crusher had made sure of that.

Rojuk stood looking down at Sela for a long time.

“They tell me she covered Kudraga with her body,” he said. His voice was quiet — not the formal register of a Praetor’s son, but something younger, something rawer. “That she took two disruptor bolts and did not move.”

“She did not move,” Picard confirmed.

Rojuk reached down and very gently took Sela’s hand. She stirred but did not wake.

“When I asked her to watch over Kudraga, I did not mean—” He stopped. Pressed his lips together. “I did not mean for her to do *this*. I meant for her to be a companion. A bridge between the two houses. Someone who understood both worlds.” He looked at Picard, and the young man’s eyes were wet. “I did not ask her to die for my wife.”

“No,” Picard said. “You asked her something far more difficult. You asked her to be trusted.”

Rojuk was silent for a moment. Then: “She told you that.”

“She told me that your trust was the first real trust she had received since she left the Tal Shiar. She told me she was not sure about any of this — the marriage, the alliance, the shrine, what it all meant. But she was sure about the promise she had made to you.”

Rojuk closed his eyes. He stood there, holding Sela’s hand, and Picard watched a young man carry a weight that was, perhaps, too large for his years but not too large for his heart.

“We will complete the ceremony,” Rojuk said at last. “When she is well enough to stand. Not before.”

“Kudraga may have opinions about the delay.”

“Kudraga will agree.” Rojuk gently released Sela’s hand and placed it on the blanket. “She will agree because I am going to tell her that the woman who saved her life should be there to see the bonding completed. That if Sela is the daughter of their Sorya, and if the House of Antaak honours that debt above all others, then the wedding can wait until the Sorya’s daughter can witness it.”

He straightened, and Picard saw — just for a moment — the man Rojuk would become. Not just the Praetor’s second son, not just a young husband, but something larger. Something that understood that the world being built on New Romulus would be built not from stone and metal but from acts of grace — from the willingness to wait for the wounded, to hold the hand of a woman who had spent her life believing she was unworthy of trust, and to say: *You are worthy. You have always been worthy. We were simply the first to see it.*

“Admiral,” Rojuk said, turning to leave. “Thank you. For bringing her here. For bringing all of them.”

Picard inclined his head. “It has been — and I say this with some understatement — an extraordinary voyage.”

Rojuk almost smiled. “It is not over yet.”

He left. The sickbay doors closed behind him, and the room was quiet again — just the hum of the regenerators and the steady, slow rhythm of Sela’s breathing.

Picard looked at the combadge on the bedside table. Tarnished, battered, the Starfleet delta barely visible. The last thing Tasha Yar had touched before she sent a boy into the light and walked into the dark.

Your daughter kept her word, Tasha, he thought. She kept it the way you would have kept it — with her body and her blood and every part of herself she thought she had lost.

He straightened his tunic, and he waited.

Chapter Six — Final Entry

Three days.

Admiral Crusher had said it would take three days before Sela could stand without assistance, and she had been precisely correct — a fact that surprised no one who knew Beverly Crusher and would have surprised Sela, who had attempted to leave the biobed after thirty-six hours and been returned to it with a firmness that left no room for negotiation.

“You have bone fragmentation in your left scapula,” Crusher told her, in the tone she reserved for patients who confused stubbornness with recovery. “The regenerator has rebuilt the primary structure, but the microfractures need time. If you stand on that shoulder before I clear you, you will undo two days of work, and I will sedate you for a week. Are we clear?”

Sela, who had faced down Tal Shiar interrogators and Klingon assassins and the slow unravelling of everything she had believed about her mother, looked at Beverly Crusher and decided that this was not a battle she was going to win.

“We are clear,” she said.

On the second day, Kudraga came.

She came every few hours — sometimes for minutes, sometimes for longer — and she sat beside the biobed and talked. She talked about the wedding preparations, about the repairs to the Hall of New Beginning, about the messages that had begun arriving from across both empires — outrage from some quarters, support from others, and from the Klingon High Council a silence so conspicuous that it constituted its own kind of statement. She talked about Rojuk, who had refused to leave New Romulus’s surface and was personally overseeing the reconstruction of the shattered glass wall, insisting that the new panels be made from a Klingon-Romulan glass composite that did not, strictly speaking, exist yet but which he was confident could be invented in time.

“He is an optimist,” Kudraga said, with the particular mixture of exasperation and tenderness that Picard was beginning to recognise as her default setting when discussing her husband-to-be.

“He trusted me with your life,” Sela said from the biobed. “Optimist is an understatement.”

Kudraga laughed — a real laugh, sudden and unguarded — and Sela looked startled by it, as though she had not intended to be funny, and then something happened to her face that Picard, who was passing through sickbay at that moment, had never seen before.

She smiled.

Not the thin, calculated smile of the Tal Shiar operative. Not the bitter twist of the mouth that passed for humour among people who had forgotten how to be amused. A real smile — brief, uncertain, gone almost as quickly as it arrived, like a bird landing on a branch and taking off again before it could be certain the branch would hold. But real.

Kudraga saw it. She did not remark upon it. She simply reached over and adjusted the blanket on the biobed, and continued talking about Rojuk’s impossible glass, and the moment passed — but it had been there, and Picard thought that perhaps it would come again, and that perhaps, given time, the branch would hold.

It was on the evening of the second day that Data came to sickbay.

He came alone, at a time when the medical staff had withdrawn to the outer office and Sela was resting — not sleeping, but lying still with her eyes half-closed, conserving energy with the disciplined patience of someone who had learned that recovery was simply another form of waiting.

He stood in the doorway for four point seven seconds. Picard knew this because Data told him later, with his usual precision, that he had required four point seven seconds to formulate an adequate opening statement and had ultimately concluded that no such statement existed.

He entered and stood beside the biobed. Sela opened her eyes and looked at him, and something moved across her face — recognition, wariness, and beneath both of those, something older and less easily named.

“Commander Data,” she said.

“Sela.” He paused. Then: “I trust I am not disturbing you.”

“I am lying in a biobed with a reconstructed shoulder and nothing to do but contemplate the ceiling. You are not disturbing me.” She studied him. “You have been very quiet, Commander. Throughout all of this. I have noticed.”

“You are observant.”

“I was trained to be.” She shifted carefully on the biobed, favouring her left side. “You knew my mother.”

It was not a question. Data registered this and did not pretend otherwise.

“Yes,” he said. “I did.”

“You served with her. On this ship.”

“Yes. She was the Chief of Security. I was the Operations Officer. We served together for—” He paused, and the pause was unusual, because Data did not typically pause for lack of information. He paused because the information he had was not the information that mattered. “For approximately one year, four months, and sixteen days.”

“That is very precise.”

“I am an android. Precision is inherent to my design.” Another pause — longer this time. “I have found, however, that precision is not always adequate.”

Sela watched him. She was very still, in the way that people who have been badly hurt learn to be still — not from calm but from the knowledge that movement costs something.

Data reached into the compartment at his belt — a small, recessed space that most people did not know existed — and withdrew an object. He held it in his open palm and extended it toward her.

It was a holographic emitter. Small, circular, clearly of Federation manufacture but old — years old, perhaps decades. The

casing was worn smooth in places, as though it had been held many times.

“May I?” he asked.

Sela nodded.

Data activated the emitter. A small holographic image appeared above his palm — perhaps fifteen centimetres tall, rendered in soft light. It showed a young woman in a Starfleet uniform. Blonde hair, pulled back. A face that was striking not for its beauty — although it was beautiful — but for its directness. She looked out from the hologram as though daring the universe to try something.

Sela made a sound. It was barely audible — a catch in the breath, a hitch somewhere deep in the throat — and she pressed her lips together and did not look away.

“I have carried this image for thirty-eight years, in my various forms,” Data said. He looked at the hologram, and his yellow eyes — which now — held something that Picard, had he been present, might have called tenderness. “It is the only personal item I have ever kept. I did not collect mementos. For many years I did not require them — my memory is eidetic and comprehensive. I can recall every conversation I had with your mother, every duty shift we shared, every moment of the one year, four months, and sixteen days we served together. I do not need a hologram to remember.”

“Then why did you keep it?” Sela asked. Her voice was very controlled.

Data considered the question with the seriousness he brought to all questions, which was to say: completely.

“Because in the timeline I experienced — the primary timeline, as we refer to it — your mother died on Vagra II. She was killed by an entity called Armus. It was—” He stopped. Started again. “It was a death without purpose. Without meaning. Without the qualities that humans and Klingons assign to the concept of a ‘good death.’ She was not defending a position. She was not saving a life. She simply encountered a malevolent being, and it killed her, and she was gone. She was twenty-eight years old.” He paused for a moment, “I believed I did not grieve her. I now believe I was mistaken. I missed her in a sense that you miss a colleague – but it was not until many years later,

many decades later when I had the opportunity to experience emotions myself that I began to understand.”

The holographic Tasha continued to look out at the universe with her fierce, direct eyes. She did not know she was twenty-eight years old and running out of time. She did not know that in one reality she would die senselessly on a barren world, and in another she would choose to walk back into a battle she could not win, and that the choice would ripple outward through decades and across empires and into the lives of people she would never meet.

“I kept this image,” Data continued, “because her death troubled me. I was an android. I did not experience grief as humans understand it. I did not feel loss. And yet — and I have spent thirty-eight years attempting to reconcile this — and yet, her absence has occupied a space in my consciousness that I cannot adequately categorise. It was not grief — not then. It is not regret. It is something closer to—” He searched for the word with the visible effort of someone reaching for a tool that did not exist. “Incompleteness. As though the universe had made an error. A misallocation of outcome. She deserved — I believed she deserved — a death that *meant* something. And instead, she received one that was arbitrary and empty and cruel.”

He looked at Sela.

“I have carried that for thirty-eight years. The sense that the universe owed Tasha Yar a debt it had not paid. That her death was — I believe the human term is *a waste*.”

Sela’s jaw was tight. The muscles along her neck stood out like cords. She was holding herself together through an act of will so fierce that it was almost visible, like a forcefield running at maximum.

“And now?” she said.

“And now I am standing in the sickbay of the *Enterprise*, beside the daughter of Tasha Yar, who three days ago threw herself over a Klingon woman to absorb disruptor fire because a young Romulan man trusted her with his bride’s life. And I have learned that in another timeline — a timeline I did not experience but which is no less real — Tasha Yar did not die senselessly on Vagra II. She chose to serve aboard the *Enterprise-C*. She fought at Narendra III. She

survived, and was captured, and spent years in captivity, and used those years to save a Klingon child at the cost of her own life. And that child's House built a shrine to her. And then a Temple. And they fought ritual combat in her name so that she could enter Sto-vo-kor. And two generations of Klingon warriors have spoken her name with reverence."

He turned the holographic emitter slowly in his fingers. The image of Tasha rotated with it, looking out from every angle with the same unyielding gaze.

"I believed the universe owed her a debt," said Data. "I was wrong. The debt was paid. Not in my timeline — not in the reality I inhabited — but in another. In another reality, Tasha Yar was given what I always believed she deserved. A death that meant something. A death so honourable that an entire Klingon House has built its identity around remembering it." He paused. "And the daughter she left behind — the daughter who was raised to believe her mother was a coward — has just proven that whatever else was taken from her, the thing that made Tasha extraordinary was not. It survived. It is here, in this room, lying on this biobed with a reconstructed shoulder and two disruptor burns, because it chose — as Tasha chose — to put itself between danger and someone who needed protecting."

The sickbay was very quiet. The regenerators hummed their low, constant note. The holographic Tasha looked out from Data's palm, forever twenty-eight, forever fierce, forever running out of time and refusing to flinch.

Sela was crying.

She did it silently — no sound, no sob, just the slow, steady fall of tears down her face, dropping onto the biobed pillow and darkening the fabric. She did not wipe them away. She did not turn her head. She looked at the holographic image of her mother and she let the tears come, and there was nothing performative in it, nothing dramatic — just the quiet, exhausted surrender of a woman who had spent thirty years building a wall and had finally, completely, run out of materials.

"You kept her," Sela whispered. "All these years. You kept her."

“Yes.”

“Why? You said you don’t need mementos. You said your memory is—”

“Eidetic. Comprehensive. That is correct. I do not *need* to keep her image.” Data looked at the hologram, and his voice — which was, by design, incapable of trembling — did something that was not quite trembling but was not quite steady either. “I keep it because I choose to. Because I do not wish to live in a universe where no one is carrying her. Where she exists only in databases and service records and the fading memories of people who knew her. I keep it because someone should. Because she mattered. And because—”

He stopped. For Data, stopping mid-sentence was the equivalent of a human breaking down entirely.

“Because I loved her,” he said. “I did not understand that at the time. I was an android. I believed that I did not feel as humans did. It was only later, when I came to understand emotion more fully, that I understood what love meant — and that I had loved her all along.”

Sela reached out her hand — her right hand, the uninjured one — and Data took it. His grip was precise, calibrated to avoid causing discomfort, and Sela held on with the desperate strength of someone who had found, at the end of a very long road, the one person in the galaxy who had been carrying her mother for as long as she had been trying to forget her.

“She would have been proud of you,” Data said. “Not of what you were. Of what you are becoming.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No,” Data agreed. “But I knew her. And I believe it to be true.”

They stayed like that for a time — the android and the half-Romulan, holding hands in the quiet sickbay, with the holographic image of Tasha Yar glowing softly between them like a candle that someone had lit thirty-eight years ago and which had, against all odds and all reason, refused to go out.

On the morning of the third day, Crusher cleared her.

“Light duty,” Crusher said firmly. “The shoulder is functional but fragile. No sudden movements, no impacts, no — and I cannot believe I need to say this — no throwing yourself on top of anyone.”

“I will attempt to restrain myself,” Sela said drily, and Crusher almost smiled.

Kudraga came to collect her. She arrived with a garment draped over one arm — a robe of deep silver-blue, identical in cut to her own ceremonial dress but sized differently, and edged not with Rojuk’s green but with a border of gold that caught the sickbay lights and held them.

Sela looked at the robe. She looked at Kudraga.

“No,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Kudraga, I am not—”

“You are the daughter of my Sorya.” Kudraga’s voice was gentle but absolute — a door closing on an argument that had never been open. “You saved my life three days ago. You took disruptor fire that was meant for me, and you did not move. Do you know what that means, in my House? Do you know what word we use for it?”

Sela was silent.

“We call it *Sorya*,” Kudraga said. “Saviour. The word we gave your mother. The word that means someone who stands between our House and destruction.” She held out the robe. “You will walk beside me today. Not behind me. Beside me. At the bonding arch, in the light, where everyone can see you. The daughter of Tasha Yar, standing with the House of Antaak. Where she belongs.”

“The political implications—”

“Will be extraordinary,” Kudraga agreed. “A former Tal Shiar operative, half-Romulan, standing in the place of honour at a Klingon-Romulan wedding. The High Council will have opinions. The Praetor’s court will have opinions. Half the quadrant will have opinions.” She smiled — fierce, bright, unrepentant. “Let them. My House was built on the act of a woman who did not care what the galaxy thought was possible. I see no reason to start caring now.”

Sela took the robe. She held it for a long moment, running her fingers over the gold border, and then she looked up at Kudraga with

an expression that Picard — standing in the corridor, listening, knowing he should walk away and finding that he could not — would remember for a very long time.

It was not gratitude. It was not submission. It was the look of someone who had been lost for a very long time and who had just been told, clearly and without conditions, *you are found*.

“Thank you,” Sela said.

“Do not thank me,” Kudraga replied. “Get dressed. The ceremony is at sunset and Rojuk has spent three days building a glass wall. The least we can do is be on time.”

The Hall of New Beginning had been rebuilt.

The western wall — shattered three days earlier by Kolgar’s assault — had been replaced, and Rojuk’s impossible glass composite had, against all reasonable expectation, been invented. The new panels were neither purely Romulan nor purely Klingon. They were something else — a pale amber that shifted toward deep red as the light changed, as though the glass itself were uncertain which tradition it belonged to and had decided to honour both. The effect, as the afternoon sun moved across them, was extraordinary: the hall filled with light that was warm and strange and entirely new.

Picard beamed down with the full senior staff. Dress uniforms, polished boots, the full complement of ceremony — because this was, as he had quietly informed his officers, the last formal occasion at which the crew of the *Enterprise-D* would serve together, and he intended for them to do it properly.

They took their places in the hall. The curved rows of seats had been rebuilt, and this time the guest list had been pruned, and the security arrangements were — as Worf had put it with grim satisfaction — *comprehensive*. Romulan guards covered every approach. Klingon warriors from allied houses stood at the entrances. And a security detail from the *Enterprise*, handpicked by Worf and equipped with the particular intensity of people who had seen what had happened last time and had no intention of allowing a repeat,

maintained an inner perimeter that was, in Riker's assessment, approximately three times denser than strictly necessary.

"Worf does not believe in proportional response," Riker murmured to Picard as they took their seats.

"No," Picard agreed. "And today I find I agree with him."

The Klingon dawn rite had been completed three days earlier. Tonight was the Romulan ceremony alone — the bonding at sunset, the lighting of the flame. One rite, to complete the union.

Rojuk stood beneath the arch of woven branches, in the same deep green robes he had worn before. He was calm — preternaturally so, Picard thought, for a man whose wedding had been interrupted by an assassination attempt and who had spent three subsequent days inventing a new form of transparent building material. But there was something in his stillness that spoke not of composure but of certainty. He knew what he was waiting for. He had always known.

The Praetor's representative took her position with the ceremonial torch. The hall quieted.

The processional note sounded — the same high, clear tone from the Romulan wind instrument, building slowly into the deep harmonic resonance that vibrated in the chest. Through the new glass walls, the sun touched the horizon and the light turned to fire.

Kudraga appeared at the entrance to the hall.

She wore the silver-blue robe, the brooch of the House of Antaak at her throat, the small Starfleet delta pin beneath it. Her hair was unbound, falling to her shoulders. She stood in the doorway and looked down the length of the hall to where Rojuk waited, and her face held the same expression it had held the first time — calm, certain, unafraid.

And beside her — not behind, not following, but *beside* — stood Sela.

She wore the silver-blue robe Kudraga had given her, the gold border catching the sunset light. Her left shoulder was held slightly stiff beneath the fabric — the only visible evidence of the disruptor bolt that had torn through muscle and bone three days earlier. Around her neck, on its thin chain, the tarnished combadge rested against her chest. Her face was composed, controlled, the Romulan mask firmly

in place — but her eyes were bright, and she held her chin high, and she walked with the careful, deliberate gait of someone who had been told she could not stand and had decided to stand anyway.

A murmur moved through the hall. Three hundred guests — Klingon, Romulan, Federation — watching a former Tal Shiar commander walk beside a Klingon bride in the place of highest honour. Watching the daughter of Tasha Yar take her position at a wedding that had nearly killed her to protect.

Picard heard the murmur and understood it. It was not disapproval. It was not surprise. It was the sound of three hundred people recognising, in the same moment, that they were watching something that mattered — something that would be talked about and argued over and remembered long after the details had softened and the names had faded and only the shape of the story remained: *a woman stood beside a woman, and neither of them flinched.*

Data sat very still. His hands were folded in his lap, and his yellow eyes tracked the two women as they walked the length of the hall. He did not move. He did not speak. But Troi, sitting beside him, reached over and placed her hand on his arm — gently, briefly — and he did not look at her, but he inclined his head, very slightly, and she understood.

Worf stood at the rear of the hall in full ceremonial armour, the bat'leth across his back. He watched the procession with dark, unblinking eyes, and when Sela passed his position — walking steadily, her injured shoulder held with rigid discipline, the combadge glinting at her throat — he did something that no one in the hall expected.

He brought his fist to his chest and bowed his head.

The Klingon salute. Offered not to the bride, but to the woman walking beside her. To the daughter of a woman he had replaced at tactical thirty-eight years ago — a woman whose death had given him his career, whose sacrifice had haunted a ship and a crew and, he now understood, an entire House had honoured for generations. He saluted Sela not as a Romulan, not as a former enemy, but as the blood of a fallen warrior — and in that gesture, brief and fierce and absolute, he closed a circle that had been open since the day Tasha Yar died and a

young Klingon officer had stepped into her place and wondered, privately, whether he would ever deserve to stand where she had stood.

Sela saw it. She did not break stride. But she met his eyes as she passed, and something moved between them — not forgiveness, because there was nothing to forgive; not understanding, because they would probably never fully understand each other. Just acknowledgement. The simple, wordless recognition of two warriors who had each, in their own way, been shaped by the same ghost.

They reached the arch. Kudraga and Sela stopped, and Kudraga took Rojuk's hands, and Sela stepped to the side — one pace, no more — and stood at Kudraga's right shoulder, where the most honoured member of a Romulan household was traditionally placed.

The Praetor's representative raised the ceremonial torch. The sunset poured through the new glass walls — amber and red and gold, the light of two traditions fused into something that had never existed before — and it fell across the bonding arch and the two people standing beneath it and the woman who stood beside them, and for a moment the hall was so bright and so still that it felt, to Picard, as though the universe had paused to pay attention.

The bonding words were spoken. The old invocation — carried from Vulcan two thousand years ago, reshaped by exile and loss and the particular Romulan genius for transforming pain into beauty — rang through the hall in the representative's clear, measured voice. Rojuk and Kudraga spoke their responses. His voice was steady. Hers was fierce. They spoke in Rihannsu, and then — at Kudraga's insistence — in Klingon, and the two languages sat together in the air like instruments in a chord that should not have worked but did.

The ceremonial torch was lowered. The bonding flame caught — a small, bright point of light at the base of the arch — and it held, and it burned, and the hall filled with warmth and the scent of something aromatic, something carried across light-years from old Romulus, one of the few things that had survived the nova and the exile and the long, uncertain years on a new world.

The representative spoke the final words.

“The bond is sealed. Two houses, one flame. What the fire has joined, let neither darkness nor distance divide.”

The hall erupted. Not in the polite applause of Federation functions or the formal acknowledgement of Romulan ceremonies, but in something rawer and more joyful — Klingon voices raised in what was either a cheer or a war cry (and was, Picard suspected, both), Romulan hands striking the stone benches in the rhythmic pattern of approval, and somewhere in the middle of it all, unmistakably, the sound of Riker whistling through his teeth, which was conduct unbecoming an officer and which Picard decided, on this occasion, to overlook.

Kudraga turned to Sela.

The noise of the hall fell away — or seemed to, as though the two women existed in a pocket of stillness at the centre of the celebration. Kudraga took Sela's hands, carefully, mindful of the injured shoulder.

"You stood," Kudraga said simply.

"I stood," Sela agreed.

"My Sorya would be proud."

Sela's composure held — just. The bright eyes, the tight jaw, the tremor at the corner of her mouth that she suppressed with visible effort. But she did not break. She stood in the golden light, in the robe that marked her as honoured kin of the House of Antaak, with her mother's combadge against her heart, and she held.

"I hope so," she said. And then, quieter: "I am beginning to think she might be."

The celebrations filled the Hall of New Beginning with noise and warmth and light, and no one noticed when Data slipped away.

He did not go far. Kudraga's quarters on New Romulus — a suite in the Praetor's residential wing, still only half-furnished — were quiet and unlit. The shrine had been set up that morning, reassembled with the same careful arrangement it had held aboard the *Enterprise*: the dark cloth, the hull fragments from the *Enterprise-C*, the soil from Narendra III, the holographic personnel file of Lieutenant Natasha Yar glowing softly in the dim room. The only thing missing was the combadge, which was where it belonged — around Sela's neck.

Data stood before the shrine. He was alone, and he was precise about this — he had chosen a moment when Kudraga and Rojuk were occupied with their guests and Sela was resting in the alcove and the corridor outside was empty. This was not a thing he wished to perform. It was not a gesture. It was a conclusion.

He reached into the compartment at his belt and withdrew the holographic emitter.

He held it in his open palm. He did not activate it. He did not need to — he knew the image it contained in every detail, every pixel, every photon of light that composed the face of the woman it held. He had memorised it thirty-eight years ago, in the first microsecond of activation, and he had carried it every day since. Twelve thousand, seven hundred and forty-two times he had taken it from its compartment. Twelve thousand, seven hundred and forty-two times he had looked at her face. And twelve thousand, seven hundred and forty-two times he had put it back, because there had been nowhere else for it to go.

He looked at the shrine. At the fragments of hull plating, scarred and dark, carried across decades. At the cloth from Narendra III. At the holographic file image — the official one, the Starfleet record, the young woman with the direct gaze and the guarded mouth.

His image was different. His was not from a file. It had been captured during a moment on the bridge — Tasha turning from the tactical console, caught mid-word, her expression open in a way that the personnel file never showed. There was the beginning of a smile. Not a full smile — Tasha's full smiles had been rare and startling — but the start of one, the slight softening around the eyes, the suggestion that behind the armour and the fierce gaze there was someone who could be surprised by warmth.

It was the image of a woman who did not know she was being remembered. Who did not know that an android who could not feel love had captured this moment and kept it, not because he was programmed to but because he had chosen to, and that the choice — sustained, deliberate, unending — was the closest thing to love his design would allow.

Data placed the emitter on the shrine.

He set it beside the hull fragments, in the space between the Narendra III soil and the holographic personnel file. It fit precisely — as though the shrine had always contained a gap exactly this size, waiting for someone to notice and fill it.

He activated it.

The second Tasha appeared — smaller, more intimate than the official image, warmer in its light. The two holograms faced each other across the dark cloth: the formal record and the private memory. The officer and the woman. The Tasha the universe knew and the Tasha that Data had carried alone for twenty-three years.

He stood very still.

“I have kept you for thirteen thousand, nine hundred and twelve days,” he said. His voice was quiet — not a whisper, because Data did not whisper, but pitched for a room with no audience, a conversation with no respondent. “That is not a long time by some measures. By the lifespan of a star, or the age of the Federation, or the geological history of the world beneath us, it is negligible. But by the measure of a human life — by the measure of *your* life, which was twenty-eight years, four months, and nine days — it is significant. I have carried you for longer than you lived.”

He paused. Not for effect — Data did not pause for effect — but because the next sentence required a precision that even his positronic brain found difficult to achieve.

“I am not placing you here because I wish to forget you. I am incapable of forgetting. Every conversation, every duty shift, every moment of the one year, four months, and sixteen days we served together is stored in my memory with perfect fidelity. It will remain there for as long as I function. This is not forgetting.”

He looked at the hull fragments. At the cloth. At the two images of Tasha, facing each other in the quiet room.

“I am placing you here because I have carried you alone, and I have come to understand that this was never the correct arrangement. You were not meant to be carried by one person. You were meant to be —” He searched. Found the word. “Shared. You belonged to this ship, and to this crew, and to a Klingon House that built a Temple in your name, and to a daughter who spent thirty years trying to forget

you and could not, because the thing that made you extraordinary was in her blood, and blood does not forget even when the mind insists upon it.”

“I kept your image because I believed that someone should. I was correct. But I was not the only someone. And this —” he looked at the shrine, at the careful arrangement of relics and memory and devotion that two generations of a Klingon family had tended like a flame, “this is where you belong. Not in a compartment at my belt. Not carried in silence. Here, where people come to honour you. Where your name is spoken aloud. Where the word they use for you — *Sorya* — means that you are not a memory but a living debt. A presence. An ongoing act of gratitude.”

He straightened. He did not touch the emitter again. It sat on the dark cloth, glowing softly, and the two Tashas looked out at the empty room — one official, one private, both fierce, both young, both forever.

He looked at the small emitter resting on the shrine.

“I understand why. Setting you down here has relieved me of a burden I did not realise I was carrying.”

A pause.

He looked at Tasha’s face one more time — the private image, the almost-smile, the open expression that he had guarded for so many years and that now belonged to a shrine on a new world.

“Goodbye, Tasha,” he said. “You are home.”

He turned and walked out of the room. He did not look back. Behind him, the two holograms glowed in the darkness — the officer and the woman, the record and the memory, side by side on a shrine built by a House that had never stopped saying her name.

The door closed. The room was quiet. And on the dark cloth, in the soft light, Tasha Yar smiled — almost, just barely, as though she had been waiting for this, and was glad.

The celebrations continued long into the night, but Picard slipped away before midnight.

He beamed back to the *Enterprise* alone. The ship was quiet — running on a skeleton crew, most of the officers on the surface — and the corridors had the particular hush of a vessel at rest, the low thrum of systems idling, the occasional murmur of a console running its diagnostics in the dark.

He did not go to the ready room. He went to the bridge.

It was empty. The lights were dimmed to their night setting, and the viewscreen showed New Romulus turning slowly below them — the lights of the capital visible on the night side, a constellation of white and amber that had not existed a decade ago and that would, if the fragile thing being built down there survived, grow brighter with every passing year.

Picard stood in the centre of the bridge. His bridge. For a little while longer.

He looked at the empty stations. Ops, where Data sat with his perfect posture and his endless curiosity — and where, until tonight, he had carried a holographic image of a dead woman in his belt compartment because he had decided, thirty-eight years ago, that someone should carry her. He had carried her for longer than she had lived. And tonight, quietly, without ceremony, he had set her down — not because he had stopped holding on, but because he had found, at last, the place where she belonged. Tactical, where Worf stood with his rigid discipline and his complicated honour, holding the line between two worlds because he refused to believe that belonging to one meant betraying the other. The conn, the science station, the engineering console — each one a post, each one a place where someone had stood and done their work and become, in the aggregate, something greater than any of them could have been alone.

This was the last voyage. When they returned to Earth, the *Enterprise-D* would go home to the Fleet Museum — restored, honoured, and finally at rest. The name would go on — there would be other *Enterprises*, other crews, other captains who would sit in this chair and stare at the stars and wonder whether they were equal to the task. The name was bigger than any single ship. It always had been.

But this ship — *this* crew — had been his. And tonight, on a young world orbiting an unfamiliar star, they had done something

worth doing. They had carried a Klingon bride to her wedding. They had faced down a General and an assassination attempt and the accumulated weight of centuries of mistrust, and they had not blinked. They had stood witness to a union that should have been impossible — that *was* impossible, by every reasonable measure of political reality — and they had helped to make it real.

And they had done it because of a woman who had served on this very ship — who had walked these corridors, stood on this bridge, and called it home — and who had died saving people she barely knew, not once but twice, in two separate timelines, because that was who she was. Because Tasha Yar did not calculate the odds or weigh the cost or ask whether the people she was saving deserved it. She simply stood, and she fought, and when it was over she was gone, and the universe was left to reckon with what she had done.

Picard sat down in the command chair. He reached for the log recorder — an old habit, a captain’s reflex, the need to set things down in words before the moment passed and the words lost their shape.

“Computer. Begin captain’s log. Stardate—” He paused. Smiled slightly. “Stardate doesn’t matter. This is not that kind of log.”

He leaned back in the chair and looked at the viewscreen. New Romulus. The lights of a young capital. The beginning of something.

Captain’s log. Final entry aboard the USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-D.

He paused, gathering the words.

We came here to escort a bride to her wedding. A simple task — or so it appeared in the mission briefing. Starfleet does not typically assign Galaxy-class starships to matrimonial duties, but this was to be our final voyage, and I suspect that someone at Command — someone with a sense of poetry that is not always evident in Starfleet’s bureaucracy — understood that there was a certain rightness in the assignment.

He looked at the empty tactical station.

They were correct. There was a rightness. But not the kind that any of us anticipated.

The bride was a young woman named Kudraga, of the House of Antaak. Her House has, for two generations, honoured the memory of a Starfleet officer — a woman who served aboard the Enterprise-C and who gave her life to save the House's heir from Romulan captivity. That officer's name was Lieutenant Natasha Yar.

He let the name sit in the silence of the bridge.

Tasha served under my command. She was my Chief of Security. She was brave, and fierce, and damaged in ways that she rarely spoke of, and she died — in the timeline I knew — at the age of twenty-eight, killed by a malevolent entity on an unremarkable planet, in a death that had no meaning and no purpose and that I have never fully made peace with.

But I have learned, on this voyage, that the timeline I knew was not the only one. That Tasha — another Tasha, a Tasha who chose a different path — lived longer, and fought harder, and died with a purpose so profound that it echoed across decades. She saved a child. She saved a House. She gave a people their Sorya — their Saviour — and they have remembered her with a devotion that I find—

He stopped. Cleared his throat.

That I find deeply humbling.

And her daughter. Tasha's daughter, Sela — a woman I have known only as an adversary, a woman who was raised to believe her mother was a coward — stood beside the bride today. She stood in the place of highest honour, wearing the gold of the House of Antaak, with her mother's combadge around her neck. Three days ago, she took two disruptor bolts protecting the woman she had been charged to keep safe. She

did it not because she was ordered to, but because a young man trusted her — simply, unconditionally, without reservation — and she discovered that she could not bear to let that trust be broken.

I think Tasha would have understood that. I think she would have recognised, in her daughter's act, the same impulse that drove her to run through the dark on a Romulan estate so that a child could live. The willingness to stand. The refusal to calculate the cost. The bone-deep, irrational, magnificent conviction that some things matter more than survival.

He looked at the stars.

This ship — the Enterprise-D — will return to the Fleet Museum when we reach Earth. Her name will go on. There will be other Enterprises, and they will carry the name into whatever future awaits the Federation and its allies. But I want it recorded — I want it remembered — that the last thing this ship did, on her final voyage, was to carry the daughter of Tasha Yar to stand beside the woman whose House exists because Tasha chose to die saving it.

We began with Tasha. We end with Sela. And between those two points — between the mother who gave everything and the daughter who is learning, slowly and painfully, how to give anything at all — there is a line. A thread. A continuity that runs through this ship and this crew and this name painted on the hull, connecting us to every Enterprise that came before and every one that will come after.

He paused.

Below us, on New Romulus, a Klingon woman and a Romulan man have been joined. It is a fragile thing — as all new things are fragile. There will be forces that try to break it. There will be cynics who dismiss it as theatre, and hardliners who condemn it as betrayal, and pragmatists who calculate its

strategic value and miss its meaning entirely. But it happened. It is real. Two peoples who have been at war for centuries chose, today, to try something else. And an old ship — the last ship to bear this name in this form — was there to see it. That is enough. That is more than enough.

He reached for the recorder.

This is Admiral Jean-Luc Picard. USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-D. Final log entry.

He switched off the recorder. The bridge was silent. The stars turned.

After a long moment, he stood. He tugged his tunic straight — one last time, the old habit, the reflex that Beverly teased him about and that he would never lose — and he walked the length of the bridge, running his hand along the railing as he went. He touched the conn. He touched ops. He stood for a moment at tactical and rested his palm on the console, and if he closed his eyes, he could see her there — blonde hair, fierce eyes, never flinching.

“Thank you, Tasha,” he said quietly. “For all of it.”

He walked to the turbolift. At the door, he turned and looked back at the bridge one more time. The empty stations. The viewscreen. The stars.

Then the door closed, and the bridge was empty, and the *Enterprise* hung in orbit above a young world, patient and vast and full of ghosts, waiting to go home.

Below, on New Romulus, the celebrations continued.

In the Hall of New Beginning, beneath walls of amber glass that had not existed a week ago, Klingon and Romulan voices rose together in songs that neither people quite knew the words to but were learning, line by line, verse by verse. Rojuk and Kudraga moved among their guests — his hand at the small of her back, her laugh ringing off the stone walls — and if there were moments when the

weight of what they had undertaken settled on them, they carried it together, and they did not bend.

In a quiet alcove off the main hall, Sela sat alone. The celebrations eddied around her but did not touch her — she was an island of stillness in the noise, her injured shoulder aching, her body exhausted, her mind running on the last fumes of a will that had been burning at full capacity for days. She held the combadge in her hands — the tarnished, battered delta that her mother had pressed into a child's palm thirty years ago — and she turned it over and over, feeling the weight of it, the wear of it, the years it carried.

She did not know what she believed. Not yet. Not about the shrine, or the House, or the word Sorya, or the idea that her mother's death had been sacred rather than simply sad. She did not know whether she would stay on New Romulus or return to — where? She had no home. She had not had a home in years. Perhaps she had never had one.

But she knew this: she had stood. When it mattered, when the glass shattered and the disruptors fired and the only thing between Kudraga and death was her own body, she had stood. Not because she was brave. Not because she was honourable. Because a man had trusted her, and a woman had knelt before her, and an android had shown her a hologram of a mother she had spent thirty years trying to forget, and all of it — every thread, every debt, every ghost — had converged in one moment, and she had chosen.

She had chosen to stand.

In the quiet alcove, in the amber light of a new world, Sela closed her fingers around her mother's combadge and held it against her heart, and she thought: perhaps that is how it begins. Perhaps that is how all of it begins. Not with certainty. Not with understanding. Not with the grand, sweeping clarity that stories pretend comes at the end.

Just with the choice to stand.

Above her, the Enterprise waited, patient and vast, her running lights steady against the stars — an old ship on her last voyage, carrying the name that meant, to a young woman on Qam-Chee and a half-Romulan exile and a Klingon House and a Starfleet captain and an android who had never stopped holding on, everything. Everything.

*The lights of the capital burned. The bonding flame burned.
The stars burned.*

*And in the morning, the Enterprise would turn for home, and
the future — fragile, uncertain, bright — would begin.*