

Dark Territory

Pride Goeth....

By DarkKush

USS Cuffe
Oberoi Sector
2372

"Sir, we are approaching the Klingon border," Lt. Commander Dhalamanisha zh'Shakobheto said, the tension in her voice along with her twisting twin antennae belied her calm demeanor.

"So?" Commander Nandali Kojo said. The lithe Kriosian was sitting on the edge of her seat, her fists clenched, and a thin sheen of sweat glistening on her cinnamon colored face. On the main viewscreen, the backside of a retreating Klingon *K'vort*-class *Bird-of-Prey* raced away from them at maximum warp.

Captain Terrence Glover glared at his first officer. "That's my line," he griped. "Maintain course." He ordered. At the helm, Ensign Jean Hajar tersely nodded.

"Those cowardly *PetaQ* are going to learn the errors of running from us," Kojo crowed. "They should've stayed and fought."

"Or they could be leading us into a trap," Lt. Commander Bheto replied, her antennae drooping.

"I think Commander Bheto is correct," Lt. Seb N'Saba said from the Science console. "This attack doesn't make a lot of sense, even for a Klingon. If this had been a simple scouting mission they could've conducted that under cloak. But even a raid to perhaps test the defenses of this sector will only lead to a buildup of defenses in this sector."

"Real Klingon warriors like challenges," Commander Kojo, the widow of a Klingon warrior, responded. "They are not a people who like easy victories."

Seb N'Saba's snout twitched. "I disagree," the lupanoid testily replied. Both the Kriosians and Alshain had a knotty history with the Klingons. The Alshain Exarchate had once ruled Krios Prime, with the aid of the Valtese, the Kriosians' mortal enemies. It had forced the Kriosians to ally with the Klingons to throw off the Alshain yoke. Yet when the dust had settled, the Klingons had quickly made the Kriosians a subject species, the merits of which were still hotly debated on Krios Prime to this day. Nandali fell on the side of seeing the Klingons as liberators and defenders against further Alshain predations or incursions from other species; whereas many others felt the Klingons had merely replaced the Alshain as oppressors.

"I think Bheto and N'Saba make good points," Glover said with authority, quickly moving to cut off another distracting debate between his first and science officers. "Either the Klingons are trying to distract us, making us focus foolishly on this sector's defense because they are seeking another target, or they are trying to do a Kor on us."

"A 'Kor' sir?" Ensign Hajar looked back, her youthful face twisted in confusion. Terrence smiled.

"I see you were nodding off during your Klingon history class," the captain gently poked. "Last century, Commander Kor attacked the Caleb IV outpost. The initial attack was merely a feint. He retreated and came back with a larger force later, catching the outpost totally unawares while in the midst of repairs. It was a devastating attack."

"If that's the case then that means we are being led right into a hornet's nest of Klingon warships," Hajar concluded.

"Exactly," Glover said.

"Sir, if you believe that scenario likely, then we are heading knowingly into an ambush," Lt. Meldin at tactical said. "Though I have every confidence in you..."

"Not to mention yourself," Glover interjected.

"Though I have every confidence in you," the Benzite continued as if Glover hadn't spoken. "I don't think that is a wise course of action. We can't take on a whole Klingon fleet."

"Speak for yourself," Kojo replied, her voice thick with bloodlust.

"We have a duty to see if an attack fleet is out there," Glover surmised. "So we can warn the Oberoi outpost. In any event we'll have to face whatever's out there sooner or later and I would rather see what I'm up against."

"Sir," Commander Kojo reluctantly ventured, after a few moments. "I've got an idea that might net us what we desire without taking on a potential fleet."

"What would that be?" Kojo sighed, allowing the bloodlust to pour out her. Glover was both pleased and saddened by the fact that Nandali was tempering her natural inclinations with her Starfleet training. When the Kriosian told him, Glover smiled. "Let's do it."

IKS Separ

Commander M'Bogh was stunned. "*Qab jIH nagil?*" He asked, both shocked and amused. Several of his bridge officers actually laughed. "Are you actually challenging me to a fight human?" The dark-skinned human glared at him across subspace.

"Do you accept or not?"

"Of course," M'Bogh jumped out of his seat. "I'm a Klingon."

"Could've fooled me the way you were running back home after your little raid on Oberoi," Glover scoffed. M'Bogh's blood boiled. It hadn't been his idea to

conduct the hit-and-run attack. It had been that *QuchHa'* General Lorath who had ordered this raid, after reading some dusty tome of best forgotten tactics. He wanted to dazzle the humans with his military genius, just like many of the other *QuchHa'* still in the service, where M'Bogh and many of his compatriots merely wanted to beat them, to do something the *QuchHa'* and even the *HemQuch* that followed them had failed to do. And this insolent human would provide the perfect example of Klingon superiority.

"I'll even come to your ship," Glover smirked, "If you promise to abide by the rules of the challenge." This was just too much. M'Bogh clenched his fists so tightly that he drew blood from both palms.

"I'm a man of honor," he thumped his chest. "If I lose," he sneered the word, impossible to even fathom, much less voice, "I will tell you what we are doing here. And if you lose..."

"I will become your prisoner," the human said. "See you soon." He cut off communication. M'Bogh stared at the large, silvery hull of the *Nebula*-class starship behind them.

He motioned for his helmsmen to bring the *Separ* about. He wanted to be facing his foes. "And many of you thought this raid wouldn't be worth it?" He bellowed, producing more guffaws across the bridge.

"It might not be," his Executive Officer Karmel replied, quelling much of the good cheer. M'Bogh glared at the woman, but he realized he couldn't stay angry with her. Though the slight, upswept ridges on her brow betrayed *QuchHa'* ancestry, her taskmaster approach and sour mien made her the most Klingon of any of his warriors. Though he wanted to dismiss her caution, he had to listen. He waved away some of the groans.

"Speak!" He commanded.

"This Captain Glover is way too confident," she warned. "He can't be trusted."

"He's a human," Science Officer Qunivas scoffed, his race serving as answer enough.

"He also served under Commander Borte on the *Dorna* as an exchange officer, and his First Officer is a Kriosian, and was the wife of a Klingon warrior."

"Serving for a brief time on a Klingon vessel is admirable, but it doesn't make one a warrior on par with us," M'Bogh countered. "Neither does taking advice from a Kriosian whore." The other officers roared agreement.

"Milord I offer a warning of caution is all."

"And I shall heed it," M'Bogh declared. "I shall cautiously drive that human's head into the deck plates and cautiously slid my blade into his heart. You shouldn't have told me about him serving on the *Dorna*. Now I shall give him no quarter and will enjoy sharing his demise with Borte the next time I see her." The bridge erupted into thunderous cheers, applause, and song.

"If there is a next time," Karmel muttered, but M'Bogh, swept up into the embrace of his other warriors chose to ignore it. He would punish her for her insubordination later. At the present, he had another human to kill.

IKS Separ **Combat Chamber**

Commander M'Bogh sized up the Starfleet contingent that materialized in the combat chamber. Glover, his Kriosian Executive Officer, and a scrawny Benzite appeared in the center of the chamber. M'Bogh quickly sized up his competitor. The human was of formidable size even for a Klingon, tall, broad shouldered. Muscles rippled beneath his black uniform with red trim at the shoulders. But what was most surprising was the *mek'leth* the man clutched in one hand. He held the short curved blade with disbelieving familiarity.

"Where did you get that from human, a replicator?" Qunivas crowed, drawing another round of laughter from the warriors ringing the chamber.

"Silence," Karmel ordered. "Captain Glover is the master of his vessel and deserves the proper respect." Qunivas stared at the woman, his lip curling into a sneer. He ignored her and looked to his commander. M'Bogh, clutching his own stomach in laughter, could barely speak.

"She's....right," he got out. "But Qunivas also has a point." He flexed his muscles and pulled up to his full height in an attempt to intimidate the human. "Where did you get that *mek'leth* from?" For several months the Empire had been at war with the Federation after the humans choose propping up the Cardassians instead of safeguarding the entire quadrant against the Changelings. It was possible that Glover had actually taken it in battle from a Klingon warrior, but M'Bogh doubted it. He hadn't heard of any such losses of honor among his brethren.

"It was a gift, from Pragh, son of Joroq," Glover stated boldly. "We served together on the *Dorna*." The human's assertion caused a wave of grumbling and shouted denials. M'Bogh silenced his warriors.

"The human speaks truth, he did serve on the *Dorna*, but whether he served with honor remains to be seen," the commander replied. The Starfleet dipped his head in a show of acceptance at the commander's challenge. He brandished his blade, swiping it through the air. Both his subordinates took a step back.

"You will learn how honorable I am very shortly," Glover declared. The Kriosian chuckled, her eyes gleaming with an alluring battle hunger.

"So I shall," M'Bogh said. He shrugged off his heavy, medal-laden coat and motioned for his *bat'leth*. He held the larger blade with both hands, twirling it with effortless grace. He slowly moved toward the human.

"Remember your promise," Glover admonished as he slowly circled the commander, swinging his blade, seeking points of attack.

“You should remember how to stay alive human,” M’Bogh roared, moving in for the kill.

IKS Separ

The garish red light, the pulsating heat, the heady aroma of sweat and poorly washed bodies made Commander Nandali Kojo wistful as she watched her captain fight for his life. The tall, muscled M’Bogh reminded her of her husband Kojo. She had never gotten over his death, and thoughts of it and the bitter aftermath reminded Nandali once again of their children and how House Kojo had taken them from her to raise them to be more Klingon, as if she wasn’t a better example of how to be that than many of the Klingons she had encountered in her life.

Pangs of longing and regret took away some of her joy at watching the contest between the two skilled warriors, but as the fight intensified she was able to bury those feelings again, and lose herself in the gladiatorial event. Many of the *Separ’s* crew was pressed together across from her contingent, raptly watching the contest, laughing and shouting their commander on. She shared their hunger, their expectation, and when one of Commander M’Bogh’s strikes found purchase, a slash across the captain’s chest, some of the man’s blood splattered across her face, her desire for combat took over. Meldin uncharacteristically placed a restraining on her shoulder, to prevent her from joining the fray. She glared at him, growling low in her throat. “Remove your hand.”

The Benzite quickly complied. She forced herself to remain stationary, but she couldn’t help flicking her tongue out to taste the spatters of blood that had hit her face. The coppery spots made her shiver. “Make him pay for that Captain!” She yelled. Kojo wasn’t sure if Glover heard her or not, but he quickly drew blood from M’Bogh, with a feint and then a quickly stab at the man’s heart, but the Klingon quickly shifted his body to avoid the blow, opening himself to the human’s downward slash at his legs. The blade sunk into the Klingon’s thigh, before Glover roughly yanked it out, producing a bellowing moan from M’Bogh and a welcome spurt of thick dark violet blood. The Klingon captain stumbled, backing away from the human as Glover advanced. An uneasy silence settled over the crowd as Glover pressed forward. Nandali smiled. They had underestimated Glover the same as she had when she first met him. Since she had served aboard the *Cuffe* they had become regular sparing partners, practicing various martial arts styles from across the Quadrant. At first Kojo had thought she would primarily be a mentor to the younger human, due to her experience as a Sovereign Guard on Krios Prime, the elite bodyguards of the planet’s ruler, but Glover was already a strong *Mok’bara* and *Suus Mahna* student, in addition to being proficient in several Terran disciplines.

So far Glover had been able to use the much smaller, less unwieldy *mek’leth* to great effect. M’Bogh swung wildly with his *bat’leth*, forcing Glover to move back to avoid its wide arcs. But before M’Bogh could recover, it left him vulnerable to another poke from the captain. Though none of these were killing blows, some drew

blood and would eventually sap the warrior's strength. Even more important, they were sending a message to both M'Bogh and his crew, one that would likely embarrass and enrage the Klingon. And once the commander was thinking unclearly, Glover would have him.

IKS Separ

Terrence's chest burned both with pain and from exertion. Sweat poured down his face, and his clammy hands weakened his grip on his blade, but he held onto it for dear life nonetheless. It was about the only thing keeping him alive. He blocked another blow, the two men locked in a death struggle, their swords high above them. It was a test of strength and M'Bogh appeared to be winning.

Despite the blood seeping down his leg, the Klingon pressed forward, pushing Glover backward, almost knocking him over, but the captain dug in his heels and held his ground. Both men snarled at each other. "Most impressive human," M'Bogh said through clenched teeth. "You learned a lot from Borte, but your heart still is not Klingon."

"I don't need to be Klingon to beat you," he replied, before he drove his knee into the Klingon's crotch. M'Bogh screamed in pain, his fetid breath spewing into the captain's nostrils like swamp water. Glover stepped back, hoping the man would fall, but M'Bogh remained standing. Instinctively, the Klingon grabbed his injured testicles, his *bat'leth* clattering to the floor. "This should do it," Glover replied, as he kicked this time, his boot cracking the Klingon's hands. But the move had the opposite effect.

Face darkening with rage, M'Bogh lumbered forward, stopping only when Glover shoved the edge of his blade under the furious man's chin, making sure it bit his neck. "Do it," M'Bogh challenged.

"Surrender," Glover demanded.

"Never," the Klingon's eyes flashed with defiance.

"You've lost," Terrence implored. "Don't make me do this."

"I was wrong," M'Bogh declared. "You learned nothing from Borte." The stand-off began, and Glover could feel the tension rising in the chamber. He knew M'Bogh's soldiers would eventually tip the game in their favor if he didn't do something quick.

"You lost Commander M'Bogh," Commander Kojo stepped forward. "Honor demands that you admit it and abide by your agreement."

"What do you know of honor *jeghpu'wl*?" M'Bogh sneered. "This was a fight to the death."

"You didn't say that," Glover replied.

"You should've known," M'Bogh shot back.

"I'm not a murderer," Terrence responded.

"So, you've never taken a life before?" M'Bogh taunted.

"Of course...far too many, but only because I had to, to complete my mission."

"Well, what is this, if not part of your mission? I am the one who ordered the attack on that outpost. All of that blood is on my hands," the Klingon laughed, and it curdled both Glover's nose hairs and blood. He pressed the knife deep. And M'Bogh pressed forward. The blade found more purchase. When Glover moved to pull it away, the Klingon's hands shot forward, wrenching the *mek'leth* from Glover's hand, spraining his wrist in the process.

M'Bogh tossed the smaller sword in the direction of his *bat'leth*. "Now, we begin again."

IKS Separ

This is a lot harder than I imagined, Glover thought, wiping sweat off his brow. He squared his shoulders, ignoring his aching muscles and the fire burning across his chest. He crouched low in the best facsimile of an Andorian fighting style he had recently learned from Commander Bheto, hoping to throw the Klingon off. M'Bogh looked at him askance.

"You make for a pathetic Andorian," he snorted. He imitated Glover, prompting laughter from his soldiers. His temper getting the best of him Terrence stood up straight.

"Fine, let's do this man to man." M'Bogh followed suit. The Klingon yelled and charged forward. Glover ran to meet him, but he took to the air, smashing his shoulder into the Klingon's midsection. Both men hit the ground hard, but fortunately M'Bogh served as a very handy cushion. Terrence immediately began pounding the man in the face, ignoring his own pain or the sickening cracking of bones and the slickness of their blood as it mixed together.

M'Bogh tried to throw him off, but the tackle had knocked the wind out of him, and the captain's pummeling wouldn't let him get his bearings. "Enough," Glover thought he heard in the distance, but he continued his assault. "Enough," he felt a hand on his shoulder and he threw an elbow back.

He heard a yelp and a curse. Then he felt the cool metal of a disruptor barrel against his hot temple. "Enough," a voice said harshly. Terrence stopped. "Remove yourself from the commander." The barrel was removed. Glover slowly complied.

He turned around carefully. "So, your dishonor is complete." He said, frowning at Lt. Karmel.

"No," she said softly, "But it soon will be."

"What-what are you doing?" M'Bogh said, spitting out blood and fragments of teeth.

"Commander you have been beaten," Karmel said, the words slicing through the thick silence in the combat chamber. "If you will not honor your word, I will."

"You...you can't," he said, trying to sit up on his elbows but failing. He plopped back to the ground.

"I must. Honor must be sated, and you must be allowed to live. The Empire will need warriors like you in the coming days. I...on the other hand, am far more expendable."

"If-if you do this, I can't save you," M'Bogh almost pleaded. "The general will have you executed...or worse."

"I am aware of that. But this war must be fought honorably, even at the risk of death or discommendation," Karmel declared.

"Stop her," M'Bogh ordered. "Detain them all!" There was a rustle of cloth and the clank of metal as the assembled Separ crew grabbed whatever weapons they possessed.

"Balk, get us the frinx out of here, four to beam!" Glover shouted at his Transporter Chief. He roughly grabbed Karmel's wrist and pulled her close. He heard the whine of disruptors and a multitude of obscenities right before the transporter beam whisked them away.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

"Return me to my vessel at once!" Karmel demanded.

"Shut up," Glover declared as he rushed to take his seat from Commander Bheto. "Commander Kojo, restrain our guest here, and use whatever force, with the exception of deadly, that you think is appropriate."

"With pleasure sir," the Kriosian said, cuffing the woman against her temple before she could respond. Karmel thudded to the deck. Kojo quickly searched her for weapons and then had Meldin to beam the woman to the brig.

"Klingon warship has come about," Bheto said. "Powering and firing forward disruptors." The wingtip cannons on the Bird-of-Prey rattled off a staccato burst, pelting the shields.

"Let's get out of here, maximum warp," Glover ordered. "We got what we came for....I hope."

Klingon Defense Force Orbital Station-31 **Eighth Imperial Fleet Headquarters**

General Lorath could tell by the way the battered commander slowly walked down his ship's ramp that the poison of fear had seeped into his veins. Lorath spat in disgust, before demanding, "Out with it!"

"General," M'Bogh said, his tongue swollen. The man's dried blood covered his face. Lorath could also smell the tang of Terran blood in the mixture. "We encountered...a problem."

"Did you fail?"

"No, our attack on the Oberoi Outpost was successful," the commander said too quickly, with desperately inflated pride.

"But?" Lorath asked, "And where is your second?" He looked around the man for Karmel. The general always took special interest in *QuchHa'* officers because he shared their affliction and he considered Karmel to be among the best in their breed.

"She was captured by Starfleet," a wiry Klingon replied before M'Bogh could answer. Lorath turned his ire on the man, taking immediate note of his rank.

"Who are you?" He asked with disdain.

"Lieutenant Qunivas, the *Separ's* Science Officer," he stated smugly.

"Captain Ch'Pogh," Lorath motioned for his most trusted aide, "please take the lieutenant and flog him until he learns not to speak out of turn."

Ch'Pogh nodded and rushed to grab the no longer smug Qunivas by his arm. The Klingon knew better than to protest. After he had been led away, Lorath turned his attention back to Qunivas. "Where were we?"

"We completed our mission, but a Starfleet vessel pursued us. The captain...impugned my honor. He challenged me to a duel."

"And honor demanded that you accept," Lorath nodded. He had to admit that the Starfleet captain was quite cunning. "Who was this captain?"

"Captain Terrence Glover of the *Starship Cuffe*," M'Bogh said with a pleasingly cold bitterness. "When I meet him again..."

"What happened the first time you met?" Lorath asked, uninterested in M'Bogh's empty promise. The *HemQuch* could be overly bombastic at times.

"We fought...the human was surprisingly strong and a capable fighter, he...he took me off my feet, though not without resorting to using guile in the effort."

"Victory is victory," Lorath replied. "What else happened?"

"Before I got back up, Karmel surrendered." That revelation stunned the general. Once the *HemQuch* had resumed the dominant role in the Empire's affairs they had revived the old stereotypes about his *QuchHa'* brethren, spreading such vile lies about his people's courage and honesty. Karmel's actions might help substantiate the lies, and Lorath wouldn't allow that to happen.

"I want to know everything, and I mean everything," the general declared. He leaned close to the commander, grabbing both of the man's shoulders and staring him right in the eye. "Everything."

"The human...he deceived me. The price of the challenge was my revelation of our true purpose. If I lost, I would tell him that. If he lost, he would surrender."

"And the prize of a bringing a Starfleet captain back was too tempting to ignore," Lorath reasoned. "He played you well." M'Bogh glowered, but wisely held his tongue. The general urged him to continue. After the commander had finished his recounting, the general sighed inwardly with relief, though the scowl remained on his face.

"Her actions preserved your honor, and might help us secure our victory," the general replied.

"But sir, Lt. Karmel is honor-bound to reveal our plans. Captain Glover will have enough time to warn Starfleet before we can launch an attack. They will surely rally the starships in the sector in defense of the outpost, lessening our chances of success."

"Yes," Lorath nodded, before chuckling. He rubbed the commander's knotty brow as if he were a child. "That would be a matter of concern if Oberoi was our true target."

"I-I don't understand," M'Bogh said. "I thought Oberoi was our *true* target."

"That's what I wanted you to think," the general smirked. "In case you were captured. In any event, I knew the raid would draw Starfleet's attention to the outpost and they would expend resources there. But Karmel's surrender will make them swallow my bait completely."

"Sir, I still don't understand," M'Bogh said.

"Oberoi isn't my target," he clapped the perplexed younger man on the back. "Sherman's Planet is."

"*SermanyuQ*!" M'Bogh said, understanding glinting in his eyes. Even though he cared little for history, he knew of the importance of that planet, that the Federation and Klingon Empire had fought over it on more than one occasion in times past, and how it remained both an important strategic and symbolic target. "If we take possession of *SermanyuQ* it will give us a significant foothold in Federation space."

"Yes it will. The humans won't think we are bold enough to strike such a deep blow. Perhaps they have been lulled by the thinned blood of the Klingon colonists living alongside them on Sherman's Planet, but they will learn the errors of their ways. And if you fight well today I might commute your execution."

"I would prefer to die in battle," M'Bogh replied truthfully.

"You will get your chance," the general promised.

USS Cuffe

Captain's Ready Room

(In Orbit of Oberoi II)

Four Days Later...

"Where are they?" Captain Glover huffed. "That Fleet should've been here by now."

"Patience Captain," counseled the older Captain Selmek of the *Starship Concorde*. "Klingons aren't known for their punctuality." Glover's jaw tightened, but he kept his composure. He had nothing personal against the accomplished, dark-skinned Vulcan; he disliked relinquishing command of Oberoi's defense to the Selmek and his *Galaxy*-class vessel.

"Selmek is right Terrence," chimed in Captain Meera Prabhakar of the *Shallash*. Terrence had briefly dated Meera when they attended the Academy. He hadn't seen her in over a decade. "But if I recall, patience wasn't one of your virtues."

"Now you realize I had virtues," Glover grinned. "A little too late for that." Selmek frowned at the less than subtle inferences to some emotional incident between the two. Prabhakar laughed.

"Keep your mind on your work Captain. That's an order."

"I sense a lot of subtext going on here, care to share?" Napean Captain Muna, of the *Armillary* asked; her widened dark eyes as big as moons.

"No," Selmek answered for them. "I think it best to focus our efforts solely on the task at hand."

"Waiting?" Glover winced as the question slipped from his lips. Selmek stared at him so long that Terrence almost squirmed in his seat. Almost.

"Captain Glover it was the intelligence you gleaned from the Klingon captive that revealed that the Klingons planned a full-fledged assault on the Oberoi sector. My first combat experience was against the Klingons during our first war with them. I know for a fact that patience isn't one of their virtues either. If your intelligence is credible, the Klingons will come and they will come in force. It will then be a simple matter of surviving against overwhelming odds." With the wide-flung war spreading Starfleet forces far too thin, the best Command could do on such short notice was assemble a four-ship taskforce with promises of reinforcements as soon as they could be rustled up. The taskforce just had to hold off the Klingons until help arrived. Despite his displeasure, he knew that Selmek had enough experience to do just that.

"Oh, Terrence is pretty good at that," Meera chimed in. "Remember our Temporal Mechanics class?" Terrence couldn't help but chuckle. He was glad that Meera had been assigned to the taskforce. His old friend's good humor was definitely refreshing. Though Selmek wasn't smiling; instead he was staring at Terrence.

"Karmel told us the truth," Glover replied, feeling defensive. "She said that General Lorath intended to take this sector."

"Then we shall wait for him to attempt to do so," Selmek said. "I recommend you all run more tactical drills in the interim." The Vulcan severed the comlink. Muna signed off afterwards.

"I guess that settles that," Glover groaned.

"Cheer up Terrence," Meera remarked. "Soon, we'll be knee deep in Klingons. That's a prospect sure to brighten anyone's day."

"You always had a way with words," Terrence replied.

"Put your phaser back in your holster." She held up her wedding band. "I'm already spoken for."

"Wow, Meme, congratulations!" Glover said. "While we've got a little time to kill, I would like to hear about this guy. I-uh, I also am thinking about jumping the broom myself." Prabhakar's eyes twinkled like stars.

"Now this I've just got to hear about."

USS Cuffe
Detention Center
Ten Hours Later...

Captain Glover stormed into the detention center, Captains Selmek and Prabhakar, on his heels. He pulled up at the energy screen that locked Lt. Karmel in her cell. The woman was in the middle of a furious set of push-ups. She looked up casually at the Starfleet captains, finished her rep, and then stood up. Sweat dripped down her face and made her detention coveralls cling to her shapely figure. "What's your angle Karmel?" Glover charged.

"What do you mean Captain?" The Klingon sounded honestly perplexed, which angered Terrence even more.

"Just where the hell is Lorath's fleet?"

"If you're asking that means he has yet to arrive," Karmel said, still the picture of serenity. "Perhaps you should be grateful for the small amount of time you have left."

"What kind of game are you playing at Lieutenant?" Glover asked. "I don't take kindly to be toyed with."

"I don't 'toy' with anyone. I am a warrior, and I thought you were one too. What I told you was the truth as I was bound by honor to reveal. If I had wished to deceive you I would never have agreed to come with you in the first place, and advised Commander M'Bogh to lead you back to our fleet."

"That would make sense," Meera conceded. She looked at Terrence. "I don't think she's lying Terrence."

"Neither do I," Selmek said. One of his eyebrows arched. "I think we have all been duped."

"Duped?" Glover asked, incredulously. "No, that's what she's trying to do to us again. Perhaps I should've interrogated her instead of my Security Chief." He moved to the cell's control panel. Karmel calmly watched him go, but he was a student enough of Klingon martial arts to see how she subtly tensed her muscles for combat. As he was inputting the release code, his combadge chirped.

"This is Glover, go ahead," he said tersely.

"Captain," Commander Kojo said breathlessly, piquing his interest and dread immediately, because the woman rarely ever was excited. "We're receiving reports from Sherman's Planet. It's the Klingons sir. They are attacking Sherman's Planet!"

"What?" Terrence asked, looking around to his compatriots. Karmel looked equally shaken.

"Oh gods," Meera gasped. "We've got to do something." Selmek stepped forward.

"I need both of you to prepare for immediate departure," the Vulcan said before tapping his combadge and ordering his crew to transport him back to the *Concorde*. Meera glanced at Terrence, terror marring her beautiful, darksome face.

"Sherman's Planet is almost two days away at maximum warp. We won't make it in time," she said, her voice clotting with horror. "And we shifted our resources here, leaving them defenseless."

"The old *bok-rat*," Karmel said, with a snort. "The general had planned this all along," she said in amazement, "but how dare he deny me battle!"

"Oh, you're going to get a battle," Terrence turned back to her, his eyes becoming slits. "And take heart that you'll be on the side that's going to be standing when it's all over."

Karmel's rasping laughter reverberated throughout the room and stayed with Terrence long after he returned to the bridge.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"Sir, long range sensors are picking up several vessels, of varying configurations," Lt. Commander Bheto replied. Glover was on his feet in an instant. He pounded over to her station, peering over the Andorian's shoulder. "On screen," he ordered after a few minutes. The view shifted to four small dots. "Magnify," he commanded. The image resolved to provide a better image of the four vessels. As Bheto had said, they were all of different designs; one was even a past ancient 22nd century *Conestoga*.

"Get Captain Selmek and the others on the horn," the captain said. But the screen's view shifted again to a triple split screen before Meldin could carry out his orders.

"You have detected the four vessels," Selmek said. Glover nodded. "So have we. I will initiate contact with them. Stand by." The screen blinked back to the four ships.

Selmek's voice issued through the bridge's intercom. "This is Captain Selmek of the *Starship Concorde*. Please identify yourselves." The link filled with static before the voices ran over each other, merging into an almost indecipherable babbling. Eventually, a deep, resonate voice broke through.

"We...are from Sherman's Planet. W-we need help. We have sick....wounded."

"What happened?" Selmek asked. Glover groaned inwardly before he sent a message to his chief medic to prepare Sickbay. "Did the Klingons attack Sherman's Planet?"

"Yes," another voice, female, shrieked. "Those monsters overwhelmed our orbital defenses! They strafed our cities, destroyed our homes!"

"And those foreheads had help, from the inside!" Another voice charged. The link filled with other angry voices.

"We can assess blame later," Selmek said. "At the moment, we will render assistance. Stand by." Afterwards Selmek hailed the other captains.

"Captain Glover, once we debrief these survivors I want you to accompany me to Sherman's Planet. Both the *Armillary* and the *Shallash* will stay behind to assist them, with the *Shallash* following behind us after the survivors have been properly attended to."

"That sounds like a plan," Captain Glover said.

"It sounds like suicide," Captain Prabhakar retorted. "Despite your two ships being the most powerful in our little taskforce, you can't take on the whole of General Lorath's fleet."

"And that is not my intention," Selmek said. "However, any reconnaissance we can perform, any intelligence we can provide to Command, and any help we can render we must do so. Now is not the time to...stick your head in the sand, as an old human colleague of mine was fond of saying." Terrence was starting to like the old Vulcan more by the nanosecond.

"Selmek's plan is sound," Muna remarked, "we can't forsake our duties."

"And I'm not suggesting we do," Meera said pointedly. "But we also have a duty to our crews, not to risk their lives needlessly."

"We're fighting a war with the Klingons right now," Glover replied. "We all know the risks, and I'm sure all of our crews are willing to pay it, especially if it can prevent the Klingons from taking over Sherman's Planet or any more Federation territory."

Meera glared at Terrence, but eventually she relented. "All right. I'm in all the way."

Terrence chuckled. "Meme you were never so agreeable in college."

"Ha," she winked at him.

"I will work out the process for the transport of the survivors and inform you of the procedures. Selmek out," the Vulcan replied with his usual brusqueness. The other captain's followed suit.

About fifteen minutes later, Lt. N'Saba called out. "Captain, we are within transporter range of the vessels."

"Lower shields and prepare to transport the crew of the closest vessel to the main Sickbay." Selmek had assigned each ship a vessel.

"Captain," Meldin said, his tone suspicious. "I'm detecting massive energy distortions surrounding the four ships."

"What type of energy?" Glover said, even though he had his suspicions. Before anyone could answer a large swath of space began to undulate around the hapless vessels. Once space had stopped twisting, at least twenty Klingon warships surrounded ragtag convoy.

"Pretty kind of them to bring the battle to us," Glover joked. "Raise shields, battle stations!"

"Klingons are powering their weapons systems," Meldin called out.

"Do the same," Terrence ordered. He got out of his seat and walked toward the prow of the ship. "Ensign Hajar, at my command, lay in these coordinates." He quickly relayed them. When the young woman looked at him askance, the captain grinned. "They'll allow us to go under and behind the Klingons." He explained. "Think you got the skill to do it?" He teased.

"I won't let you down sir," Hajar promised. He resisted the urge to paternalistically pat the brunette on the head. He had been a mentor to her when she served on Nova Squadron and he had defended Hajar after she got wrapped up in a tragic accident that cost the life of a cadet. He had gone to bat for her and so far she had proven him right. Terrence had no doubt she would do so again and continue to.

"We're receiving a hail from the Klingons," Commander Bheto said.

"On screen," Glover ordered. A crusty, silvered Klingon glared at them.

"I am Brigadier Wojaf and I order you to surrender or be destroyed."

"Open a channel," the captain demanded. Once Meldin nodded in affirmation, Terrence said, "We'll never surrender, you *toDsaH!*" The venerable Klingon reared back as if he had been struck.

"Stand down Captain Glover!" Captain Selmek came on line, anger brimming just beneath the surface of his calm demeanor. "I am in command of this taskforce."

"And what say you Vulcan?" The brigadier pressed. "Surrender and allow us to annex the Oberoi sector with as little bloodshed as possible. If you resist, you will be destroyed and the bloodlust you incite in my warriors will bear unfavorably on the citizens of the Oberoi sector."

"So now you're threatening civilians?" Glover scoffed. "How honorable is that?"

"Stand down," Selmek said, less heatedly than before, but with just as pointedly.

"You know as well as we do that the Oberoi Outpost is staffed by Starfleet officers and the denizens of that sector have arms, which makes them capable of combat. You will not goad me into making a mistake like you have goaded others, Terrence, son of Samson," the admiral smirked.

Damn, Glover thought, but he tried to keep the disappointment off his face.

"Despite Captain Glover's lack of composure," Selmek said. "We will not surrender. You might defeat us, you might kill us even, but we have all pledged to defend the Federation with our lives if need be. To allow you to invade the Oberoi sector unmolested would be a violation of our deepest principles."

The brigadier nodded in respect. "I had hoped you would say that. May you all die well," he remarked before cutting the link.

"Now Ensign," Glover said just before a wall of disruptor fire broke loose from the Klingon fleet.

USS Shallash

Main Bridge

"That damn Terrence," Captain Meera Prabhakar mused as she watched the *Cuffe* dipped beneath the destructive torrent, warping briefly, turning on a dime and lighting up the Klingons from the rear. "He always did know how to get the party started," she finished marveling as the salvo slammed into the shields protecting her own, less maneuverable ship. "Let's get to work," she ordered as five Klingon ships rushed toward them.

IKS Tik'leth Command Bridge

"Impressive," Brigadier Wojaf remarked as he watched the *Cuffe* slicing into his rear guard. His bridge was a welcome hive of activity as his staff coordinated the fleet's attack. The brigadier had ordered five ships to attack the four doomed Starfleet vessels. But Glover's actions had thrown off his plans slightly. Glover was his only true concern. The man had lived among Klingons and served with them. From his review of the *Dorna's* logs before General Lorath had given him this mission, Wojaf had come to respect the human's diligence and ability to not only survive, but thrive under the harsh conditions of service to the Empire. His quick thinking and unorthodox move had already underscored his threat potential, however the numbers weren't on his side, and Wojaf was perfectly willing to sacrifice a few ships in order to catch the prize of the Oberoi sector.

"Brigadier, we have a communication from the *Separ*," his adjunct B'teq called out over the din.

"On screen," he grouched, forcing himself to tear away from a schematic of the battle inset into his chair's armrest. The brigadier had ordered five ships to attack the four doomed Starfleet vessels. Commander M'Bogh's fierce countenance flashed on the screen. "What do you want?"

"Permission to break ranks so I can take on the *Cuffe*," he asked.

Wojaf smiled. "You want to restore your honor is that it?"

"My honor was never taken," M'Bogh boldly replied. "I want revenge."

"That works for me to," the brigadier chuckled. "Your request is granted."

USS Concorde Main Bridge

Captain Selmek looked to his Tiburonian Flight Control Officer. "Lt. Ryjon, move us in a position to defend the *Armillary*." The *Galaxy*-class vessel was the biggest, best armed and shielded among the taskforce. Even after the heavy barrage from the Klingons, *Concorde* hadn't lost shields, engines, or weapons. But the

smaller, *Miranda*-class *Armillary* was faring poorly. Hull breaches ran across the ship like scars as it vainly tried to fend off the strafing runs from the Klingons. All the while, Brigadier Wojaf hung back from the fray in his fortress-like *Vor'cha* attack cruiser. Once the *Concorde* had been sufficiently weakened, he knew the brigadier intended to swoop in for the kill. He would do his best not to allow that to happen.

"Course laid in sir," Ryjon remarked.

"Engage," the Vulcan captain ordered.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

The ship rocked from the explosion. "There goes another one," Glover remarked tightly. "Now we've got a straight shot to the civilian ships. Let's fly by them, drop shields for a split second, pick up as many as possible and then swoop around and try again. I want precision on this people."

"Aye, aye sir!" The bridge crew shouted in unison. It made Glover's heart swell with pride. This might be their final hour, but at least they would die working to save the lives of others.

IKS Separ

Main Bridge

"That *petaQ* is quite cunning, but his typical compassion will be his undoing," Commander M'Bogh replied as he watched the *Cuffe* streak toward the civilian vessels. He ordered his own vessel to pursue them. "When the *Cuffe* drops its shields, fire."

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"We're within transporter range," Lt. N'Saba informed the captain. Glover glanced at the main view screen. He saw a Klingon warship rushing toward them from opposite the stranded vessels.

"You know that ship is going to fire as soon as we drop the shields," Commander Kojo warned.

"And not before?" Glover quipped. "Lower shields and energize all ship's transporters, wide beam."

"Klingons powering forward disruptors," Meldin said.

"We've also got another Klingon warship approaching us aft," Commander Bheto remarked. Glover gritted his teeth. He tapped a button on his chair.

"What's the status of the transports Mr. Balk?" He asked the Transporter Chief.

"We're still beaming them over sir, we've got thirty percent," the Tellarite replied.

"That's all we can do at the moment," he said. "Raise shields."

"Too late," Hajar said softly. A red ball of destruction blazed towards them.

"Brace for impact!" Kojo shouted.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

Glover opened his eyes. "I thought we would be space dust by now," he admitted.

"No," Kojo replied, her tone a mix of wonder and suspicion. "Not us," the Kriosian pointed at the screen. The *Bird-of-Prey* that had been coming at them from the rear listed in space, its engines leaking plasma.

"Sir, we're getting a hail from the Klingons," Meldin said.

"Put them on," Glover said, still perplexed.

"Captain Glover," M'Bogh smirked. "No one will claim the ruttred hull of your vessel but me."

"Bring it on," Terrence said.

IKS Tik'leth

Command Bridge

Brigadier Wojaf watched raptly as the two starships barreled toward each other, their forward weapons arrays slicing through space.

One of his aides looked up from their terminal and was instantly transfixed. "You don't think they are going to ram each other sir?" The comely young woman asked.

"We could only hope," Wojaf smiled. "The explosion would be glorious."

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"Sir, we have to break off now!" Lt. N'Saba shouted as the Klingon ship throttled toward them. The bridge shuddered as it the ship absorbed another fierce barrage.

"No," Commander Kojo said forcefully. The woman was leaning forward in her seat, licking her lips, her eyes glinting with a berserker fury.

"Hey, that's my line," Glover joked. "Keep her steady Ensign Hajar. Full impulse."

IKS Separ
Main Bridge

"This human might truly be insane," Lt. Qunivas marveled. "Sir, we can't hope to survive a head on collision with a Nebula-class starship. Look at the size of that thing's saucer section."

Commander M'Bogh snarled at the man before returning his gaze forward. "Ramming speed!" He yelled.

USS Cuffe
Main Bridge

With proximity alarms blaring, Glover shouted. "Ensign Hajar break left! Break left!" She nodded as input the data, turning the ship port. The captain tapped his combadge. "Pedro," he said hoarsely to his Chief Engineer. "Go to warp. Now!"

IKS Separ
Main Bridge

Commander M'Bogh stood up in triumph as he watched the *Cuffe* veer off slightly. "The coward!" He crowed.

"Sir we'll still impact with the *Cuffe*, only not head on." Qunivas said rapidly as he read the information streaming down his console screen.

"Our shields can handle a glancing blow."

"Not one at this proximity...at warp speed," Qunivas looked up, a shameful look of fear in his eyes.

"What?" M'Bogh asked, not quite grasping the significance of what his Science Officer had just said.

"It's too late," Qunivas said, pointing at the screen. M'Bogh's smile evaporated as he watched the wide saucer section of the *Cuffe* turn quickly and then elongate as it engaged warp engines, tearing through his starboard wing.

M'Bogh heard a terrible grinding metal and then a scream he slowly realized was his own. And then he heard nothing.

USS Cuffe
Main Bridge

"Damn good flying Jean," Glover crowed. The ship trembled as it was caught in the shockwave from the *Separ's* destruction. The young woman glanced back at him, a shy expression on her face.

"I do the best I can Captain," she said softly, her focus returning to navigating the ship safely from the *Separ*'s debris.

"Sir, that bit of theater took out our main deflector and it caused a furrow-like hull breach along our ventral section," Lt. N'Saba huffed. "It will take us weeks to recoup from this stunt."

Terrence merely grinned at the fuming Alshain. He turned to his First Officer. "Shouldn't it be your job to be chewing me out about this 'stunt'?" But Kojo was too caught up in the moment to offer much criticism. The Kriosian pumped her fist in the air, an amusing appropriation of a Terran gesture.

"Now, that's get the rest of these *petaQ*!" Kojo declared.

"Helm, bring us about," Glover commanded.

IKS Tik'leth **Command Bridge**

An unsettling silence had fallen over the bridge. Everyone was stunned by Glover's innovative trick but Wojaf. He ordered two ships away from the beleaguered *Miranda*-class starship. "The game is afoot," he grinned.

USS Shallash **Main Bridge**

"Bring us about!" Captain Prabhakar shouted. "And fire at anything green! Delta Pattern Four." The *Ambassador*-class ship swung abruptly about and fired on its pursuers. Meera held onto her armrests as the Klingons responded. The ship rattled as structural integrity and shields took the bulk of the pounding. The captain was really proud that the old ship hadn't broken apart under the punishing, relentless assault.

"Captain, we can't go toe to toe with these guys," Commander Richards said. "We're down to 15% percent shields."

"So, that's why I feel every hit right down to my bone marrow," Prabhakar quipped. "Sorry, but I'm tired of running."

"Captain," Richards said, his voice frayed. "You might be, but we have a duty to protect our people."

"Yes, we do," Meera said quietly, recalling her previous conversation with Terrence before her thoughts shifted to her husband Bhim. She briefly touched her stomach, her thoughts switching to the life growing within her. She hadn't even told her husband yet, and now he might not ever know. "But our people just don't reside on this ship. The people of the Oberoi sector are just as much our people as this crew, and we must do everything to stop the Klingon advance here and now. Cut power to all non-essential systems and redirect it to the forward shields. Helm, move us forward."

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

"Just what the hell is Meera doing?" Glover said aloud, though the question was rhetorical.

"It appears that she is heading bow first into a nest of Klingon ships on a suicide run," Lt. N'Saba answered. Glover glared at him.

"We've got to help her before she gets herself killed," he replied.

"Uh sir," Hajar's voice squeaked. "I think we have problems of our own." He followed her voice to the screen. Two more Klingon ships were bearing down on him.

"Evasive maneuvers," he commanded, though his thoughts were on Meera. *Hang on Meme, I'm coming.*

USS Armillary **Main Bridge**

Lt. Commander Charlie Beck, ship's Second Officer, rose unsteadily to her feet. She tried not to look at the smeared remains of Captain Muna or the corpse of Lt. Commander Hammond, the former Executive Officer. Almost everyone else on the ruined bridge was dead or unconscious.

She nervously ran a hand through her tousled blond hair, ignoring the caked blood sticking to her fingers. The pain from the head wound she had received had slowed to a persistent throb, no longer the paralyzing agony that had afflicted her several seconds ago. "Wh-what's our status?" She asked the literally green junior lieutenant that had taken over at Ops. The man merely looked at her, blinking without speaking.

Beck cleared her throat and spoke again more forcefully. "Mr. Kerrigan, what is our status?" When he still didn't respond, Charlie hobbled over to him and slapped him. The man shook his head, slowly pulling himself out of shock.

He glanced down at his board. "We-we've lost shields, the structural integrity field has just collapsed..." he paused as a devastating Klingon barrage punctuated the lack of shielding. Charlie was thrown halfway across the deck, slamming into a bulkhead.

"Commander Beck!" The young man screamed, rising out of his seat right before his console exploded. The force of the blast flung him toward Charlie. She just moved to the side before his body hit the wall like a missile. From the sickening crunch of the impact, Charlie knew that the young man was dead, but she couldn't help but stare transfixed at his shredded uniform and lacerated back, as if she could read scars like reading palms.

Her compin chirped. She fought unconsciousness to answer it. "Beck here," she said wetly, spitting out blood. "Beck here."

"You're the only one left," the voice on the other end said. It wasn't a question.

"Chief Stukov, how bad is it?" She asked.

"Very. We've lost containment. A warp breach is imminent."

"Thank you. Initiate evacuation procedures."

"What about you?" The man asked, concern deepening his voice.

"I'll be buying you time," she said. "Beck out." She struggled to get up, the deck pitching up and down. She slowly threaded her way to the still intact helm console. Routing what power remained to it, she aimed the ship like a flaming dagger into the heart of the Klingon fleet, her eyes locked on the flagship.

USS Concorde

Main Bridge

"Damn it," First Officer Raynor said through gritted teeth. "We're not going to make it in time."

Captain Selmek looked up from his inset console to briefly glance at the end of the Armillary. The small ship lurched toward the Klingon flagship, but a battery of *Birds-of-Prey* stood in its way. They carved into the ship, slicing it apart before it exploded. In relief of the bright explosion, Selmek saw almost a dozen escape pods. "We must secure those pods."

"We're a little tied up right now sir," Tactical Officer Gamboa responded as the Klingons attacking them made another strafing run. The ship shuddered again, more terminals sparked, and Selmek's inner eyelids protected his eyes against the acrid smoke. Despite their few victories, the Klingons remained too numerous.

"I think it's time we did more to even the odds," the Vulcan replied.

"How so?" Raynor eagerly asked.

"Create several photonic shockwaves," the captain calmly. Gamboa snorted.

"Sir, just doing one of things is damn near impossible, but several?" The hardy woman asked.

"Contact Captains Glover and Prabhakar, encrypted comline."

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"It sounds like a plan to me," Glover said, with a noticeable pinch of jealousy.

"If we're going to do something, we better do it fast," Meera added. "My shields are almost caput."

"We are in agreement then," Selmek said. "You each have your targets. As soon as I fire, you follow suit."

IKS Tik'leth **Command Bridge**

"Sir, the Starfleet ships are firing photon torpedoes wildly, going between, around our vessels, on purpose it appears," Lt. Khlas, at the Tactical Station, scratched his head ridges. "This doesn't make sense. Have they gone mad?" The other bridge officers started to nervously laugh. "It wasn't a joke," Khlas growled.

Brigadier Wojaf shot to his feet, his mind reeling through battle strategies until he finally seized on one. "Fall back!" He roared. "Fall back! Tell the fleet to fall back, full reverse! Full reserve!"

While his Communications Officer was on line, the Starfleet ships followed up unloading their torpedoes with a barrage of phaser fire. Wojaf shook his head, in impotent fury, as the phasers bypassed the Klingon ships to hit any torpedo they contacted. Wojaf covered his eyes against the flash burning across the mainscreen.

"Massive photonic shockwave is forming," Khlas reported right before the screen burned out from the blast. Wojaf merely sat back down and prepared himself to meet Fek'lhr.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

The crew erupted into cheers as the photonic wave slammed into the Klingon ships. When the wave had dissipated the ships hung powerless in space. Seconds later, Lt. Meldin informed him. "Captain Selmek is hailing us."

"Put him on screen," Glover said. A less severe Selmek, followed by a greatly relieved Meera filled the main viewer.

"Excellent work," the Vulcan said, dipping his head in respect.

"Excellent plan," Terrence said, and he meant it. "If I recall, the Battle of Vorkado," he said. Selmek almost smiled.

"Correct Mr. Glover. Of course the tactic is an extremely risky one, but with the combined arsenal of our three vessels I theorized that we would possess enough torpedoes to generate a sufficient wave."

"And to knock out enough of those ships," Meera added.

"But not all," Meldin interrupted. "Sir, three of the Klingon vessels are heading in our direction, and they are powering weapons."

"Here we go again," Glover groaned.

"Hail the flagship," Selmek said calmly. "Captains please take care of those vessels while I negotiate terms of surrender with Brigadier Wojaf."

"My pleasure," Terrence said.

"Our pleasure," Meera added.

IKS Tik'leth
Command Bridge

Brigadier Wojaf's despair gave way to anger and defiance. "I would never deny any of my warriors a chance at *Sto'Vo'Kor*. I will not pull them back."

"Then we will be forced to destroy them," Selmek said, a hint of sadness in his voice.

"I hope that you do, and once you're finished with them you will do the same thing to us," the Brigadier retorted. "That way at least our honor can be restored."

USS Cuffe
Main Bridge

The *Nebula*-class ship rushed into the fray, its remaining phaser banks pounding away at the Klingon vessels. Despite Glover's anger, he ordered Meldin to only disable the ship's engines and weapons. He knew that leaving the Klingons defenseless was a far worse fate than death. It was an insult. A stripping away of their honor from which they would never recover.

Once the *Concorde*, still the most powerful ship left in the battle, joined in, the three Starfleet ships stopped the Klingons' charge. Selmek hailed them again.

"Disabling their weapons and propulsion systems was prudent thinking," he said.

"Sir, permission to do the same for the rest of the Fleet? We don't know how long it might take them to restore power to their systems." Selmek nodded.

"You and I will handle that. *Shallash* incurred far more damage. Captain Prabhakar I want you to return to the Oberoi system, but first I want you to collect the survivors from the *Armillary* and track down the Sherman Planet refugees."

"Aye sir," Meera said. "It was a pleasure serving with you both. Even you Terrence."

He chuckled. "See you around Meme."

Sherman's Planet
Governor's Mansion
Three Days Later....

General Lorath stood stiffly by the teleportation pad. He nodded tersely at the soldier behind the transport console. The reddish beam whined loudly as three figures resolved on the pad. Two burly guards were holding up Brigadier Wojaf as if he had skeleton had been ripped from his body. The general was certain that at least his spine was.

"What happened?" He asked, even though he had read the report his scout ships had relayed to him several times already. He had waited anxiously for news from Wojaf that Oberoi had fallen and that the sector had been annexed. But as the hours multiplied, his anticipation and self-satisfaction turned into a leaden fear. Lorath had ordered a recon team to discover what misfortune had befallen his fleet. Even he hadn't believed the stories that a mere four starships held off twenty. But it had happened.

Wojaf's incompetence had cost the Empire dearly, but even more importantly, it would make Lorath the laughingstock of the Empire. He had worked hard to maintain his position, to increase his holdings, despite the bias many *HemQuch* expressed for his kind. But now Lorath would be blamed for the knobby headed Wojaf's failure.

He pulled a rusty *dk'tahg* from his sheath, provoking looks of surprise and disquiet from the guards, but Lorath ignored them. Wojaf managed a smile. "You're going to kill me with a rusty *dk'tahg*. A most dishonorable death."

The general shook his head. "But still too honorable for you. You cost us the Oberoi sector." Wojaf bowed his head in shame, nearly making Lorath retch at his weakness.

"I'm not going to kill you. You're going to kill yourself."

"What?" Wojaf started to stir. "No. I-I can't. You know that is the ultimate dishonor."

"And hasn't your blunder cost thousands of lives and billions in damages? What's more dishonorable than that?"

"I can't take my own life!" Wojaf stood firm, yanking his arms away from the guards. Lorath ordered them not to grab the brigadier again. "I won't. Kill me. I deserve that."

The general laid the knife on the pad at Wojaf's feet. "If I do not get the results I desire your family will suffer and I will ensure that not only your name but the name of all of your ancestors will never be spoken of in the Empire again."

He turned his back on the man. He motioned for the guards and the soldier at the transporter. "Let's give the Brigadier his privacy. We have more important matters to attend to."

Oberoi Outpost Centennial Park Oberoi Sector

Captain Terrence Glover walked along slowly, enjoying the breeze and the sunlight. He had spent so much time aboard starships that the heavily scented air, a mix of flowers, grass, and other things nearly bowled him over. However, the heady, raw mixture was much more pleasing than the smell of burnt circuits and flesh. It

would take a week or more to clean up the damage the ship had suffered during the Battle of Oberoi Sector as the Federation News Service was now calling the standoff.

Terrence had to admit that he was enjoying the notoriety, but right now his mind was on other things. He gingerly placed a hand over Meera's midsection. She swatted it away. "Will you stop that?"

"Sorry," he shrugged. "I just can't help it. I can't believe there's a little life growing inside you." He said, amazed. Hopefully Meera didn't hear the tint of sadness and regret also in his tone. Terrence had once been a father himself, though the mother of his child had chosen to terminate the pregnancy without consulting him. It had torn him apart.

Meera, oblivious to his private pain, replied. "Don't worry. It'll happen to you to someday if you stop tomcatting around."

Covering up his hurt, Glover winced. "Ouch," he chuckled. "Hate the player. Don't hate the game."

Meera sighed before laughing. "The more things change...."

"Well, FYI I have met someone...special." Meera's dark eyes twinkled with curiosity.

"So, you really weren't kidding about jumping the broom huh? Dish already," she urged. Now Terrence sighed.

"It's...well....it's complicated."

"You love her." The *Shallash* captain stated plainly.

"Whoa, how do you know that?" He asked, more than a little embarrassed.

"Because you never stammer or stumble when you talk to or about any woman, even me," Meera remarked. "So, what's her name?"

"Jasmine," Terrence said, with some reluctance. He was still mulling over Meera's observation. How the hell did she know him so well? And why did she have to name it. He had been pleased with keeping his feelings for Jasmine undefined, perhaps so he wouldn't have to deal with them, but now that Meera had put it out there, he really couldn't deny it. Though he tried to. "I....listen, it's just....we don't seem to have that much in common. And when we're together it's like we're arguing all the time."

"But when you're apart you're thinking about her all the time?" The *Shallash* captain sagely asked.

"How did you know?"

"That's how it was with me and Bhim. If you love her Terrence why don't you tell her?"

"Well...I...I guess I don't want to put myself out there," he admitted.

"And get rejected?" She finished, nodding her head knowingly. Glover lowered his. "It's all right." She squeezed his shoulder. "Though I'm surprised that you would even be concerned about something like that, with your big head, but the fact that you really shows me that Jasmine means a lot to you. Whatever you do, don't let

another day go by without telling her that. I didn't tell Bhim about our child and I almost lost the opportunity to. I won't take time for granted like that again."

Terrence nodded, smiling with a renewed vigor and purpose that even swatting back a Klingon war fleet couldn't give him. "Aye, aye captain."

THE END