

Dark Territory The Heart of the Matter

By DarkKush

**The Khemet Sector
Klingon Empire
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Lt. Commander Terrence Glover gave a low whistle of appreciation. This was the closest he had ever been to a *D’Kora*-class marauder. Its graceful curvature and soothing orange metallic finish seemed totally at odds with the rapacious bent of its crew.

His commanding officer, Captain Borte, daughter of Goragh, wasn’t as impressed. The sinewy woman leaned forward in her seat, her voice an eager hiss, “How much longer until we are in firing range?”

“One hundred *kellicams*,” Lt. Krastil, sitting beside him at the navigation console replied. “This is going to be good,” she said under her breath for his ears only. When Glover looked at her in response, she winked before flashing him a sharp toothed grin.

Terrence gulped his acceptance, his fingers wrapping tightly around the ship’s controls. One of the things he loved best about his assignment to the *IKS Dorna* was piloting the *K’Vort*-class cruiser.

With its archaic steering column, the power of the ship was literally in his hands, at his whim. He felt every twist and turn of the steering controls, each judder. In addition, his fairly expert flying skills had also helped him win respect on the Klingon warship.

It had been a long, hard struggle to be seen as member of the *Dorna’s* crew first, Borte’s Executive Officer second, a Starfleet officer third, and last a human.

He had thrown himself into disproving the critics and doubters on all counts, earning a multiple contusions and several broken bones along the way.

He suffered the occasional pangs and twinges of agony in silence however, though sometimes he counted down the days until he could return to Federation space to get them properly reset.

“Commander Pragh, power the disruptor cannons, prepare to de-cloak on my order!” The fierce captain snapped. Terrence glanced back to see Pragh glowering at him.

The tall, muscular Klingon was standing at his upper level console right behind Captain Borte. When the *Dorna* had been selected to host Terrence as part of Starfleet and the Klingon Defense Force’s joint Officer Exchange Program, Pragh had been temporarily demoted. Though he maintained his usual station as the ship’s Weapons Officer.

Unwilling to assassinate Borte and take command, Pragh instead had skulked around for weeks after Glover’s arrival, seeking to bully Terrence out of the Executive Officer’s position.

Even though Glover wasn’t blessed with a naturally ridged, thick skull or a bodily system of redundant organs, he was tougher than he might’ve appeared to Pragh.

And his ambition and dedication to the task at hand might’ve even rivaled the Great Kahless; Though Glover kept that comparison to himself, not wishing to offend any of his crewmates’ religious sensibilities.

A month ago, the two men had met in battle in the Mess Hall. To his credit, Glover had been able to bust the larger man’s nose, take out a few of his teeth, and had only received two cracked, and badly attended to, ribs for his efforts.

The fact that he had left a fight with Pragh still tied to the mortal coil had impressed his colleagues. And it had even spurred Krastil to begin teaching him *Mok’Bara*, a Klingon martial art form, upon his recovery.

Their sessions had even led to her instructing him in the arts of *seloh*. And the injuries incurred during those tussles didn’t bother him one bit.

“We are now within firing range,” Krastil said, her voice husky with excitement.

“Sowee TAH!” Borte was on her feet now. The image of space on the rhombus shaped main viewer wavered as the cloaking field that had enveloped the

ship dropped.

“Fire!” The captain commanded. Seconds later, a succession of red beams erupted from the two cannons mounted at the ends of the *Dorna’s* wings. They stitched across the rounded aft section of the marauder, leaving scorched and twisted metal in their wake.

“Direct hits,” Pragh gloated. “Their defensive shields and engines are gone. Life support is failing. They are at our mercy.” Gouts of quickly vanquished flames were spouting all over the ship’s hull, as the marauder spun madly.

“The Ferengi were so confident of their escape that they didn’t even have their shields raised,” Borte remarked in astonishment. “The fools,” her spittle splashed loudly on the deck in front of her.

“The Ferengi are hailing,” Communications Officer Lochem announced. The portly man sat on the left row of banks on the upper deck behind Pragh. “They wish to surrender and are requesting immediate assistance.”

Borte sat slowly back down in her seat, a contemplative look on her face. Instead of replying to Lochem, she said, “Terrence, son of Samson, what do you suggest?” Both Glover and the captain ignored Pragh’s audible groan.

“Well...I think we should help them.”

“Typical Starfleet,” Pragh spat. “That ship invaded Klingon space, and made off with personal cargo bound for the Imperial Governor of Kredak! For their insolence alone, they should be blasted into atoms!”

Borte didn’t respond. She merely continued looking at Glover. The man quickly realized it was another test, another challenge, but he didn’t know the right answer, or what the captain was looking for from him.

So, he decided to speak truthfully, “Was it insolence or courage-*kajanpak’t*-on the part of those Ferengi? Despite the consequences they dared challenge the Klingon Empire, pilfering items no less than from Governor Lorath, one of the most opulent officials in the realm. Shouldn’t that be worth a reprieve?”

“Or sentences at Rura Penthe?” Krastil added. Glover shivered. The horror stories he had heard about the infamous, ice bound penal colony during his days reading Academy texts about Jonathan Archer and James Kirk, had only been confirmed by his crewmates on the *Dorna*.

“Your heart will never be Klingon human,” Pragh sneered, stepping from behind his station. The man flexed his massive arms.

“No matter how many tolerate you here, or use you as a toy, you will never understand the warrior’s spirit that courses through a true Klingon’s veins. If you did, you would know that no higher honor can be bestowed, no greater mercy than to fall in battle at the feet of a superior’s blade.”

“I doubt those Ferengi over there would understand your brand of kindness.”

“My point at exactly hew-mon,” Pragh drew out the word in imitation of the Ferengi oft-mispronounced of Terrence’s species. Though his body screamed in protest, Glover jumped to his feet, prepared to face another challenge. He cracked his knuckles.

“Perhaps it’s time I rearranged your nose again Pragh.” The Klingon threw back his head, long, thick dreadlocks flying in every direction. Clutching his stomach, he roared with laughter.

“Stay where you are Commander Glover!” Borte bellowed. She smiled devilishly. “I have made my decision.”

(Several Hours Later...)

Krastil slammed a goblet of steaming *Bahgol* tea in front of him, most of its contents splashing on his lap. The woman roared in laughter, clamping a hand down on his shoulder, squeezing it painfully.

He bit back the burning pain as the liquid soaked into the crotch of his breeches. Glover was glad that he long ago ditched his red and black Starfleet uniform for more durable Klingon attire. The *Bahgol* might’ve eaten through his old suit like acid. Terrence gave her a grimace-laced smile. “Thanks.”

Still chuckling she leaned down, her lips at his ear. “Tonight,” the woman said, biting his earlobe, just hard enough to remain pleasurable. She clapped his shoulder again and then sashayed out of the mess, her lithe frame drawing several lustful glares, and a few leering sneers in Glover’s direction.

After she was gone, he took a sip of the rich red tea still in the goblet. Despite their hardened martial image, the Klingons found a way to celebrate the most

mundane events. Their dinners were often elaborate affairs, highly ritualized, and filled with songs and stories of battles and victories past.

And dinners were even more raucous after a great victory, as Captain Borte, sitting at the head of the long officer's table, was spinning their confrontation. Or more so, a great haul. A golden diadem adorned the inebriated woman's head.

The Ferengi had offered little resistance, and seemingly more afraid of the unexplained streak of mercy on the parts of the Klingons had revealed all of the secret caches littering their ship.

The treasures had been so great that Captain Borte had allowed the Ferengi to limp back to whatever recess they had slithered out from, after Glover and Engineer Kuttch had made sure that the marauder was space worthy.

Terrence hadn't totally agreed with the captain's decision of letting the raiders go free, but at least he had helped prevent their wholesale slaughter. He hoped, but doubted, that their near brush with death would teach them the error of their felonious ways.

The riches looted from Governor Lorath were only the tip of the iceberg. After Glover did some cross-referencing with Starfleet, he had discovered that they had apprehended DaiMon Drux, one of the most notorious privateers in the Beta Quadrant.

Despite Drux's meticulous planning for the heist, he hadn't anticipated the sudden reassignment of the patrol ship *Kaj*, and its more indolent Captain Chitagh with the younger, more aggressive Borte.

The captain had remained tight-lipped about the new mission, though Krastil had speculated that it had much to do with Borte's open displeasure with Chancellor Gowron's regime. Captain Borte and her crew were being placed out in the sticks as punishment. Glover hoped that Gowron wasn't so petty, but after spending months aboard *Dorna*, he wouldn't be surprised.

"I misjudged you," Pragh crowed, placing another crushing hand on Glover's shoulder. He could see the glint of the man's jewel encrusted fingers out of the corner of his eye.

Pragh settled down beside him, placing a dish with a bloody, raw hunk of meat in front of him. The meat's rancid smell made Glover's eyes water. He

pushed his own plate of *pipius claw* to the side.

“Not hungry tonight Terrence, son of Samson?” Pragh asked mockingly. “No matter,” he pounded Glover on the back.

“Your foresight will keep all of our families feed for several years, no matter the storm brewing between Gowron and the Duras. Your heart might be Klingon after all,” he paused, wrapping a massive arm around Glover’s shoulder and pulling him close. Pragh smelled like he had showered in *bloodwine*. “There is one way to find out for sure though.”

“And that would be?” Glover wasn’t certain how much of Pragh’s camaraderie was alcohol induced, but he wanted to seize on any opportunity to bury a hatchet between them, before Pragh or one of his cronies slid a *dk’tahg* in his back. “I’ll do it,” he said before thinking about what it might entail.

“That’s the spirit!” Pragh roared again, his hand clapping like thunder against Glover’s back, the force of it almost throwing Terrence halfway across the wooden table. With one paw on his back, Pragh used the other to slide the plate of bloodied meat over to Terrence.

Glover restrained himself from pinching his nose or gagging. “What’s that?” He said only after he was certain he could keep the *pipius claw* he had ingested earlier in his stomach.

“A delicacy,” Pragh said, his face darkening slightly, “Something that grunts like us never get to experience. But because it was your mercifulness that won us these treasures, it is only honorable that you partake of it first.”

“What is it?” Glover repeated, his nose hairs curling.

“Raw heart of *targ* of course,” Pragh answered, smacking his thick lips, “How do you humans say it,” he paused, his ridged brow furrowing, as he pushed Glover toward the plate. “Dig in.”