

## A MOB HUNGRY FOR BLOOD.

The sun stood at midmorning and already Martok could see that the stands around the pit were overflowing—twenty, maybe thirty thousand people. Pushing and shoving against the barriers, they roared when the prisoners appeared.

They expect us to be slaughtered like animals, but we will show them how true warriors die. Martok tried to study individual faces, tried to read what he saw there, but all he could see was teeth bared with anger, eyes filled with hatred.

Such rage! Martok wondered. *But at what, truly? At the losses we endured during the Dominion War? At the alliance with the Federation and the Romulans? At the erosion of our power?* He wondered at his own thoughts at such a time, but he could not stop his mind from tracing the route it was now following. He saw that everything that had happened over the past several days, the past months and years, had brought him to this moment and to the verge of this insight. *Could this fury be something older and deeper? Is this wrath for me or is it more truly for themselves?*

Is this the face of a people that has come to despise itself?



THE LEFT HAND OF

DESTINY

BOOK ONE

J.G. HERTZLER & JEFFREY LANG

Based on Star Trek® created by Gene Roddenberry

and STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE

created by Rick Berman & Michael Piller



## POCKETBOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore Qo'noS

The sale of this book without its cover is unauthorized. If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that it was reported to the publisher as “unsold and destroyed.” Neither the author nor the publisher has received payment for the sale of this “stripped book.”

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

*AnOriginal* Publication of POCKET BOOKS



POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2003 by Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.



STAR TREK is a registered trademark of Paramount Pictures.

This book is published by Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., under exclusive license from Paramount Pictures.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.  
For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

ISBN: 0-671-78493-5

First Pocket Books printing April 2003

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

POCKET and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information regarding special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster  
Special Sales at 1-800-456-6798 or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com)

Cover art by Cliff Nielsen

Printed in the U.S.A.

To the memory of Dr. Harvey Powers, Bucknell  
University, and Coach John Merricks, Crossland High

J.G.H.

This one is for all the Klingons, but most  
particularly for my father, John Lang, more

Klingon than he'll ever know.

J.L.

# Contents

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#).5

[HISTORIAN'S NOTE](#).6

PART ONE.7

1.8

2.13

3.20

4.28

5.33

6.39

7.45

8.51

9.56

[PART TWO](#).60

10.61

11.66

12.70

13.75

14.79

15.82

16.88

17.92

18.97

19.98

[ABOUT THE AUTHORS](#).102

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I am ever thankful for the patience and talent of my editor, Marco Palmieri. I am no less grateful for the heart and wisdom of Ira Steven Behr, Executive Producer of *Deep Space Nine*; for the words of Ronald Moore, poetic soul of the Klingon Empire; and for Gene Roddenberry, the sine quanon of this grand adventure called *Star Trek*. And most humbly, I must bow to the boundless talent and craft of my cowriter, Jeffrey Lang.

—J. G. Hertzler

I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the producers, writers, and actors who made the Klingons into the rich, highly nuanced culture we know today. In particular, I'd like to pay homage to the work of Gene Roddenberry (naturally), Michael Ansara, Ira Steven Behr, Hans Beimler, William Campbell, Shannon Cochran, John Colicos, Kevin Conway, Gene L. Coon, Michael Dorn, Ronald D. Moore, Marc Okrand, Robert O'Reilly, and no doubt many others whom I omit only out of ignorance. Special thanks to the good folks at the Klingon Language Institute—in particular, Lawrence M. Schoen, Alan Anderson, Roger Cheesbro, and Lieven Lieter—for their help, and to editor supreme Marco Palmieri.

My thanks also to friends and family who have been so supportive during the “Klingon project,” including Tristan Mayer, Joshua Macy; Helen Szigeti; Annarita Gentile; my wife, Katherine Fritz, our son, Andrew; and, yes, even the dog (hi, Buster!). More than anyone, however, I owe a debt of gratitude to Heather Jarman—friend, advisor, sister in spirit—I literally could not have finished this one without you. May the next one have fewer words in italics and less raw food.

Last, of course, a bent knee and a fist in the air to my comrade and collaborator, J. G. Hertzler, without whom I wouldn't have been on this journey. *Qapla'* to the Chancellor and *kai* to the General.

—Jeffrey Lang

# HISTORIAN'S NOTE

This story is set in the days immediately following the events of “What You Leave Behind,” the final episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

## PART ONE

“You want me to become chancellor. *Me*. Tell me, Worf, how do you think the members of the High Council will react when they're asked to follow a common man from the Ketha lowlands? A man without

a drop of noble blood in his veins?”

# 1

## *THE GENERAL DREAMT.*

Martok knew he visited the twilight world of dreams, because he saw with both eyes. He saw the steaming cleaning solution sloshing around a rusting bucket near his right elbow and the quill-bristle brush in his left hand without having to move his head. He saw *chech'tluth draining through the floor grates where First Officer HomQat had dropped his mug. He saw gnawed bones, greasy with fat, cast aside when the gagh had arrived. He also saw that much of the mess hall still required cleaning. So he crawled along the floor on his knees, dragging the bucket along with him, scrubbing the grates and the table legs and the backs of chairs.*

Thick smells surrounded him, invigorated him. From the stench of engine lubricant to the overburdened waste processors and the sour sweat of too many bodies crushed in cramped quarters, he inhaled the essence of a warrior's life on a bird-of-prey. Only the deep<sup>[4]</sup> *wood-flower tang of Sirella was more seductive than this! Soon he would be with her, presenting her an offering of power, of glory, of victory. For now, he would scrub. He scrubbed to the rhythm of a warrior's song, chanting the words as he worked.*

He scrubbed until his scrub brush found smooth metal, glowing red in the half-light. He crouched low to the floor, eyeing his discovery: *abat'leth, forgotten amidst the kegs of flowing ale, the roasts, the gagh, the songs and stories. Martok ran a cautious finger over the tip, savoring the finely sharpened point. He jerked. A drop of blood drizzled down his finger. Throwing back his head, he laughed. A noble weapon, to be certain!*

Gingerly, he lifted the blade off the floor, holding it on his forearms to admire the weight, the heft, the smooth perfection of each notch and curve. He flipped the weapon off his forearms, into his palms. Curling his fingers around the handle, he twirled it cautiously to the left and then the right, challenging his unseen combatant with a thrust-and-parry rhythm. He drew deep breaths, felt battle lust surge within him. Baring his teeth, he snarled, crafting a dance of spins and jabs. To the throat! And the belly—

A dull thud and a clank told him his bucket had tipped. A hot gush flooded the deck, soaking his boots before he could sidestep the filthy fluid.

“Come now, Ketha boy,” came the mocking voice, speaking in the hated tones of the privileged class. “Startled by a little water? You'll have to do better than that if you expect a promotion—to scrubbing the plasma conduits!” *A deep, throaty laugh reverberated through the galley.*

Martok felt the eyes of the despised one fall on his *bat'leth. Clutching the handle tightly, he imagined how<sup>[5]</sup> he would gladly thrust the tip into his enemy's throat. Or not. Why grant him a swift, painless death when he could slowly eviscerate—*

“You are not worthy of such a weapon.”

Turning around slowly, Martok saw—as he expected—the detestable grin: *Kor. Growling, he lunged.*

With an effortless twirl of his own blade, Kor deflected the blow, sending Martok's bat'leth *clattering to the floor. He cackled, apparently amused by Martok's clumsiness.*

With my bare hands, then! *Martok thought, circling his foe.*

"Fetch me some bloodwine, boy," Kor said, the edge of his bat'leth *glinting in the torchlight.*

"No." Martok willed the Dahar Master to meet his eyes. I challenge you to look at me, old man. Afraid of what you'll see?

Kor scarcely attempted to hide his disdain. "Make that ale, boy. Bloodwine cools a warrior's blood after he has tasted the fire of an honorable fight. But this..." *He laughed. "...this was no fight. This was a jo—"*

Instantly, the d'k tahg *slid out of Martok's sleeve, its extra blades deployed, and targeted on Kor's throat.*

Kor tipped his head to one side and seemed to enjoy the breeze made by the blade whistling past his ear. Martok twisted around for another attack. But Kor pivoted behind him, slammed the back of Martok's knee with his boot, and wrested the knife out of his hand. Collapsing forward, Martok dropped onto all fours.

"Fool," Kor spat. "I knew of your strategy before you did. You will learn your place, mongrel!" He reached down and, with unexpected strength, pulled Martok to his feet by the scruff of his neck.

Martok resisted, twisting and jerking his body, *[6]struggling to break free.* How can he do this? An old man in his dotage holding his ground against a man in his prime? *Or was he? Martok's gaze dropped and, with horror, he saw his own withered, wizened body, his armor hanging off him like graveclothes.*

And Kor? He tossed a great, glossy black mane, his clear eyes burning Martok with each glance. Kor released his grip; the general stumbled back a few steps, but remained standing.

Laughing with wild joy, Kor swept the blade up over his head, then around his back in a showy display of prowess. "For the insolence you've displayed, mongrel," he said, "the sentence is death, but I will not soil my noble weapon with your blood. A lesser one than I shall dispose of you!" The keen tip of the bat'leth *spun down in a bright arc, finding purchase in the mess table and splitting it asunder.*

The two halves teetered and crashed to the floor. Where the table had stood, the floor groaned, the deck plating peeled away like skin, and from the bowels of the ship, a dark vapor—pierced only by a bright, flashing red light—*seeped through the floor. As the post ascended, Martok's heart chilled, for he knew whose hand Kor had designated to deal him death. He scanned the room for the Dahar Master, but the old man had already vanished, swallowed by the darkness. He threw himself on top of the post. If he could stop it, push it back to Gre'thor, from where it came ... Grunting, he braced his hands on the light, pushing down with all his strength. Sweat beaded on his forehead and he bellowed mightily.*

The post won. As it always did.

The force of the post's upward movement cast him aside like well-worn armor, throwing him hard. His

[7]teeth lacerated his tongue when his head slammed into something; he heard his bones crack.

There would be a battle.

Before the mists blinded him, he would find the bat'leth *Kor had stripped from him. With a bat'leth, he stood a chance of defeating this challenger. ...*

Dropping to his knees, he felt his way over the floor with his hands, sifting through dirt, seeking the weapon. With a dull thud, he crawled headfirst into a metal barrier, and his world spun with bright dizziness. Up the paneling with his fingers, touching the rivets, feeling the divots and dents, then something warm. Something scaly and dry with a smooth, knife-sharp claw. He swallowed hard. The mists dissipated, unveiling a score of chanting Jem'Hadar, their reptilian eyes glinting in the half-dark. The Jem'Hadar whose hand he touched gave his forehead a solid shove, sending him sprawling onto the arena floor.

Small bits of gravel clung like barnacles to his sweat-slick face, but he lay still, prone on the floor, waiting for any indicators—*heat, respiration, shadows—of Ikat'ika's location. Sensing his attacker's position by the sound of movement would be impossible: the Jem'Hadar was far too clever to let Martok find him so easily. His best chance of survival would be to reach the post. Where was the post? How could he have forgotten the post? Of all the rules he knew from his two years in Dominion Internment Camp 371, one had been ground into his bones: Never lose track of the post, whether your face has been ground into the gravel floor or your innards kicked into pulp. He had to touch the top of the post, make it stop blinking, or he would be disgraced, defeated. Maybe they would drag him back to his cell; [8] maybe they would kill him outright. Martok didn't know; he didn't want to find out. He would not give the Jem'Hadar *petaqsthe satisfaction.**

How long had he been fighting? He needed to stand. Again, he tried to push himself up, groaned, felt ribs shift under his skin and tasted blood in his mouth. Standing would not be possible, so the general crawled—damn all Jem'Hadar—and prayed to Kahless that he was moving toward the post!

Behind him, he heard sounds: light footfalls and low Jem'Hadar voices. Then, before him, he detected the crunch of a boot on gravel as Ikat'ika shifted his weight. He wanted Martok to know of his plan, wanted Martok to hesitate as he anticipated the blow to his already cracked ribs. The bone would puncture his lung and the pain would be paralyzing. Martok expected the tactic because he knew he would do the same, given the circumstances. But he would not grant Ikat'ika even a hint of victory by hesitating. Dragging himself on by his elbows, he pushed toward the post.

Martok pulled—*clawed—his way up. With only seconds left, he slapped the domed top and the blinking ceased. Martok spun around with surprising speed to face his opponent, d'k tahgdrawn. Did I not lose this weapon at Kor's hand? The thought startled him.*

The split-second reflection offered Ikat'ika an opening. The Jem'Hadar feinted to his left, dipped his right knee, then spun around, the edge of his hand moving at incredible speed. Martok had no reply for his enemy; he was helpless to block the blow. The bones of his cheek shattered on impact, splinters thrusting up through the muscle. From out of the cacophony of the roaring crowd and shouts acclaiming Ikat'ika's triumph, Martok heard [9] a noise that might have been a small piece of overripe fruit dropping from a branch and realized—*or remembered—it was his eye. The world turned black, then purple, then red. He heard a noise he recognized as his own bellow of rage and pain and tried to focus beyond the pain, the shouting, the lights, and run at his opponent, but his legs—traitors!—would not obey him.*



The general staggered, dropping his weapon. Not even shame could move him. Like the implosions of an ancient star, his perceptions had shrunk into an infinitesimally tiny mote of agony that had once been his eye. He cupped both hands over the socket, and primitive instinct tried to tell him that if he just held on he would save his eye, he would stop the slippery wet sliding down his cheek between his fingers.

But if he stood paralyzed, the fight would be over. Ikat'ika would win.

He will not win, *Martok vowed. As long as I have breath he will not win. Pushing aside self-preservation, he dredged the surrounding dirt with his boot, feeling for the d'k tang. Whether he faced Ikat'ika's direction or not, whether he could actually find his weapon or not, Martok would attack. Proudly, he would wear the honored scar—this warrior's mark—and he would wear it as a warning of defeat to any who dared challenge him.*

Elbows bent and fists balled, he assumed a fighting stance. Nearly blind, he sought Ikat'ika—

But found no one. No Ikat'ika, no Jem'Hadar, no Kor—*nothing except the damnable post, blinking steadily. He expected the low, grim laughter of a sated Jem'Hadar, but none greeted him.*

Silence.

Swirling up from the floor, mists of darkness crawled [10] *over the barriers, into the arena seats, smothering each light they touched. lime. He was running out of time. He took a single step toward the post, seeking to claim victory before the last light snuffed out. He realized exhaustion had left him; the pain from his eye socket disappeared. He took another step. And another, each one coming faster than the last. I will triumph, he vowed. He reached the post, raised his arm —*

Slow, dull clapping broke the cavernous silence in the Great Hall, accompanied by echoing footsteps.

“Well done, General.” Gowron emerged from behind a stone pillar and stood before him, wide eyes glittering with rage and madness. To Martok's eye, he was wreathed in shimmering silver as the metal links and decorations on the massive chancellor's cloak caught the flickering torchlight. The council chairs stood empty; they were alone, save for what ghosts of their ancestors had chosen to haunt this ancient place.

“Chan—” He coughed. “Chance—” His parched mouth refused to release the title. A fit of coughing overtook him, doubling him over.

“Tikacat bit off your tongue? Oh, wait.” Gowron linked his arms across his chest, looking down his nose at Martok. “On second thought, that wouldn't be a Tikacat. Worf has your tongue. He does speak for you, does he not? You are his puppet.”

“I speak for myself,” Martok snarled. “I serve the empire!”

“Traitor,” Gowron hissed, throwing a backhanded punch to Martok's face, followed quickly by a boot to the throat.

Martok reeled, his skull crashing into the post. He struggled for air. Had Gowron crushed his larynx? [11] *Would he die desperately wheezing for one more breath? Martok had seen more than one warrior—Klingon and alien alike—die that way, and it was not the ignominious end he had in mind for himself, his face first turning crimson, then black as he puffed and heaved. Salty thickness filled his mouth, gagging him; he spat out the clot, some fragments of teeth, and*

*something soft and formless that must have been a piece of his tongue.*

Using the post to pull himself off the floor, Martok twisted back around to find Gowron looming over him. Blood spraying from between his lips, the general roared, "I didn't send Worf to kill you, you stupid petaQ!*He made that decision by himself!*"

Speechless with rage, Gowron wiped flecks of blood from his face, then stepped back to set up another kick, but Martok was ready for him. When the foot came in, Martok wrapped himself around it, set his hands on either side of Gowron's knee, one above, one below, and twisted. There came a satisfying crunching noise and Gowron howled as he tumbled to the floor. Martok had lost track of his *'k tahg, but that didn't matter. There were many, many ways to kill a man with only one's bare hands and Martok knew them all.*

The thought flashed through Martok's mind as he fell on Gowron that he must be quite a sight by now. Eye gone, mouth torn open—*not at all the way a general should present himself to his chancellor. Worf would not approve....*

Wait....

Kor had died in battle against the Jem'Hadar. Worf hadn't tried to assassinate Gowron, but rather had challenged him to honorable combat and won, then made Martok chancellor. The "leader of destiny," Worf had called him. What kind of leader could Martok be now?[12]*One with half a tongue to speak and one eye to see? Martok laughed aloud at the thought and spat blood into the pile of dirt beneath him.*

Pile of dirt? The thing that he had thought was Gowron was only a rill of earth shaped like a prone figure. Martok focused his vision, saw that the body's "head" was lying against the base of the post. The post. Martok tried to reach it, but he couldn't stand. Too much blood loss, too much fighting. Collapsing in the warm dirt was better. Draw it up over his head like a soft blanket. Rest. That was what the general wanted. To rest for a long time. He closed his eye.

"You have won a great victory, my brother."

Worf? Go away and let me sleep or I will cut out your tongue and feed it to you.

"This battle is won, General. Gowron is no more than the dust you sleep in. We have been victorious thus far, but the war is not yet over."

Martok's eye fluttered open. He gazed up into the black velvet night of Qo'noS. He mapped the points of starlight and recognized them as the seasonal constellations over his homeland, Ketha. Each star pattern and the picture it formed had been etched into his brain alongside every other childhood memory. Breathing deeply, he filled his senses with the stench of refuse rotting and *warq'wasting on spits over open fire pits. Truly, he was home.*

"You must not wallow in sentimentality, brother. The time to fight is now," Worf barked.

Turning away from the night canopy, Martok saw Worf trudging toward him, arms outstretched. He carried something in his arms. *Abat'leth? No, that wasn't it. When he reached Martok's side, he dropped to one[13]knee, bowing his head and holding out his arms for Martok to take his offering.*

Martok rolled onto his side and considered the gift.

The chancellor's cloak. The heavy black cloak that bore the marks of many houses and many battles. Martok shrank away, throwing his hands behind his neck and returning his gaze to the sky. "You are mistaken, my brother. This is yours."

Snarling, Worf's eyes widened. "If you will not take it willingly, it will be thrust upon you! It is not for you to refuse!" And he threw the cloak over Martok like a shroud.

Martok struggled to free himself from the burial cloth. *I will not claim this victory for my own! But the suffocating weight pressed down, smothering him. He gasped for breath, coughing, choking. He felt his way past the post, along the ground, reached beyond the span of the cloak and discovered the chains sewn into the hem. He threaded his fingers through each blade-sharp link; the metal sliced through his palms, but he succeeded in pushing the cloak away from his face, casting it off his body, ridding himself of the unbearable weight.*

Stripped of the cloak, beaten and bleeding, he lay on his back, breathing heavily, staring up at the night sky.

The post blinked incessantly, mocking him.

Martok closed his eye. No. I. Will. Not.

"Son." The voice was pitched low, but it cut through the ache of Martok's lamentations. He knew the voice, but Martok refused to look up. He rolled onto his stomach, gripped the earth, and clenched his eye tightly shut. *No! he thought. I will not look up. He cannot be here. Even if this is a dream (for Martok had suddenly remembered that he might be dreaming), he cannot be [14] here. I never dream of him. This was, of course, a lie, one of the few that the general had ever told himself and believed.*

Temptation proved irresistible.

Martok pushed away from the welcoming earth and looked up. Urthog, his father, stood waiting, his hand extended, proffering help, perhaps even comfort.

His father looked as he had when Martok had last seen him, before he had journeyed to Sto-Vo-Kor. *At that time, so long ago now, Martok hadn't yet won honor on General Shivang's flagship, thus escaping the drudgery of the lower decks that Kor's judgment had consigned him to. His father had missed the chance to rejoice in his son's climb through the ranks to become the general...no, the chancellor. He was the chancellor....And then a thought stabbed at him. What would his father think of his becoming chancellor? Would he be proud? Or would Urthog rather have had his son remain a general, or even a common soldier of the empire?*

Urthog spoke again: "Arise, my son." He wore warrior's clothes, which was peculiar because on his infrequent visits to their home, the first thing his father did after greeting Martok's mother was don simple, gray robes. That was the way Martok remembered him: a quiet, reserved man, who spoke so softly that his son had always felt the need to lean in close and hold his own breath to hear him. Urthog's wife had adored him and mourned his passing for the rest of her life, which had always colored Martok's memory of the man. Urthog might have been a good husband and a great warrior, but he had also made Martok's mother suffer a depth of sadness that their son could never comprehend.

"Father," he said, "I have won great honor for our [15] family," but as soon as the words left his mouth, he cringed to hear the desperation in them.

“You have lost your way,” Urthog said, ignoring his son’s words.

Martok shook his head. “Because I became chancellor? That was not my choice, Father. Worf...*he thrust it upon me. Let someone else...*” And, again, Martok was saddened to hear how pitifully sad these words sounded.

Waving his hand dismissively, Urthog said again, his voice sharp with impatience, “You have lost your way.” *He folded his arms across his chest and sighed. “You fight without ceasing, but this is not what I taught you. Do not waste your time, or mine, with these endless battles. You are a Klingon warrior.”*

Were these riddles? Martok’s mind reeled. “Father,” he stammered. “I don’t understand. Help me to understand! *If I am to be a warrior, then mustn’t I fight? Isn’t that what a warrior is? One who fights the wars?*”

Urthog sighed heavily and shook his head. “If that is what you believe, I have failed.”

“No!” Martok shouted. “You did not! Father, tell me what I should know. I need to know so that I can rule wisely.” The general’s shoulders drooped and his head sagged forward. “If only...”

Urthog leaned over and set his hand on his son’s shoulder. “‘If only?’” he asked, his touch firm, but gentle. Martok felt himself being lifted up and set on his feet, as if he weighed no more than a small boy. “‘If only’ what, my son?”

Tilting his head back, Martok gazed up into his father’s eyes. “If only,” he said, “I was not so weary. I have been fighting for so long, Father. So long...*I am wounded and I fear I may never heal.*”

[16] *Urthog laid his hand on Martok’s forehead and said, “You are whole again, my son. You have vision, you have a voice, you have a family. You have wisdom. You have everything you need.”*

Looking down, Martok saw that it was true. He was himself again, healed and whole. One-eyed, yes, but he had grown accustomed to that. He had everything he had brought to the arena, everything he needed, except for hisd’k tahg. *Without thinking why, Martok looked up at his father and said, “But I have no weapon.”*

His father nodded and, without another word, thrust his hand at Martok’s chest. The armor dissolved at his father’s touch. Flesh and sinew and bone parted until Urthog cupped Martok’s heart and drew it forth, still beating, to present before his disbelieving son’s gaze. Smiling grimly, Urthog said, “Then you had better use this.”

## 2

### THE GENERAL WOKE.

He shook his head, rubbed his eye, and tried to tear himself loose from the veil of dreams. Like most veteran campaigners, Martok had long ago mastered the ability to fall asleep within seconds and awaken clearheaded no matter how little he had rested, so to still feel the fog of his slumber was distressing. *Too many soft bunks, he thought. Too much good food and rich wine. Too much song.* “Too much

victory,” he muttered aloud as he forced himself to sit up.

Rubbing his face roughly, Martok tried to remember where he was and when he had fallen asleep. He wasn't wearing armor, which was a good thing because nothing played hell with his back like sleeping in armor. He *was* still wearing his clothes—not all that unusual a situation, really—but that led him to perform the hangover inventory. Headache? Yes, but only a mild one. Sour stomach: no. Blurred vision: not notably. Dry mouth: [18]yes, but he always woke with a dry mouth aboard a ship. There was something about the air recyclers.

A ship. Yes, he was aboard a ship, *his* ship. He glanced up and there it was: the status display over his bunk. The Imperial flagship *Negh'Var* was cruising under cloak at warp five, all systems nominal. Long-range sensors indicated safe passage between here and Qo'noS, and why should they expect anything different? The mighty Klingon-Federation-Romulan alliance had scoured the Dominion from the Alpha Quadrant. He, Martok, had been one of the leaders at the glorious final assault on Cardassia. And now he was returning to the homeworld to take his rightful place as the leader of the Klingon High Council.

So, why were they running under cloak?

Because old habits die hard.

And why did he feel so miserable?

Same answer.

General Martok, Chancellor of the Klingon Empire, was the sort of warrior made nervous by unbroken streaks of good fortune. When circumstance conspired against them, when hostile hordes were about to swarm over the walls, when the last disrupter battery had been spent and the last *bat'leth* had lost its edge, on those days Martok could be depended on to say an encouraging word to every man, could be found at every station offering advice, remembered the words to every verse of every invigorating battle hymn. . . . But on the good days, when the wine flowed and the Imperial Trefoil cracked in the wind overhead? On those days, every soldier in his command knew to stay out of the general's way.

Old habits die hard: Martok did not trust good days because, sooner or later, things would get worse.

[19]He could see it all in his mind's eye so clearly. They would enter orbit over Qo'noS and, as was the tradition, the entire council would be lined up outside the Great Hall, each member dressed in his finest armor, decorations from hundreds, nay, thousands of battles glittering on their councillors' cassocks. The *Negh'Var* would drop its cloak and Martok would send the ritual greeting reporting victory in battle. The pro tem leader of the council—Martok couldn't remember his name—would invite the general to take his rightful place as chancellor and, as was the tradition, Martok would decline. Then someone else, the next most senior member, would step forward and begin to recite the general's victories, finishing with a plea that he assume the leadership of the empire. Again, Martok would refuse, so the *next* most senior member would step forward and recite the glorious history of his House and ask if he would be their leader, and on and on and on. . . .

The formalities were ridiculous. Martok was the chancellor, had been for months. He had done everything a chancellor was expected to do, been everything a chancellor was expected to be. Everything *except*, of course, go through this time-wasting exercise in pomp and fatuous behavior. If the ceremony belonged to any other species in the quadrant, the Klingons, as a people, would mercilessly mock it, but, Martok recognized, as little patience as his people had for other cultures' ceremonies, they could never

see the absurdities of their own.

And then, finally, *finally*, Martok would draw his *d'k tahg*, slice open his palm, swear fealty to the empire, and deign to be beamed down to the Great Hall where he would present the council with the bloodstained dagger as a symbol of his leadership. Then there would be receptions, revelries, and victorious processions,[20] with the accolades of citizens and civil leaders alike. The celebration would last for days. Martok snorted derisively, hoping that luck would bring a stray platoon of Jem'Hadar soldiers herding a pack of rabid *targs* into the midst of the festivities, thereby giving him something useful to do. He sighed resignedly. *Not likely*, he thought. *And, besides, Worf wouldn't let us get sidetracked.*

And then there was the problem of Worf, whom he had taken into his House, the one responsible for Martok's becoming chancellor in the first place. The council's protocol representative who had contacted him the day before had attempted tactfully—as tactfully as a Klingon can, anyway—to suggest that Worf not accompany the new chancellor when he beamed down to the First City. Though officially Worf was a war hero and now the Federation's ambassador to Qo'noS, there were still many in the empire, both of high and low birth, who did not like the idea of the chancellor sharing the limelight with a warrior they considered a traitor. Martok's predecessor, Gowron, had planted his poison about Worf widely and well.

But Martok had unequivocally explained in very small words and very short phrases exactly how unlikely it would be that Worf would stay behind. Partly, this was because Martok knew that this was only the latest volley in what was already a very long battle over his blood brother's standing within the empire. Second, one of the few bits of satisfaction the general took from the thought of the coming celebratory ordeal was the knowledge that no matter how uncomfortable he would be, Worf would suffer more. No one hated a party the way Worf hated a party.

Martok sighed again and looked around the[21] stateroom. He felt the need for a cup of *fraktajino*, which was a bad sign. Old Darok, his aide-de-camp, had once told him, "When you start feeling like you *need* something to clear your head in the morning, you're not getting enough sleep. Or too much." Martok hauled himself up onto his feet, felt aches and heard joints crack where he hadn't felt or heard anything the day before. *Victory is weakening me*. He paused. *Or perhaps I'm just getting old.*

The stateroom's computer signaled that there was someone at the door. Martok checked the security scanner: it was Worf. "Wonderful," Martok grunted. "The perfect beginning to a perfect day." It was too many steps to the damned replicator. He had to remind himself that he was not in the captain's quarters but rather the chancellor's cavernous stateroom. He would have preferred something less pretentious, but at least he had convinced them that he didn't require an honor guard to watch him while he slept. How much safer, he had asked, could he be than on a cloaked ship manned by the finest warriors in the empire? That had satisfied everyone's sense of honor. What sorts of dreams would Martok have had if he had felt all those eyes staring down at him all night?

He stopped before the replicator and rested one hand against the bulkhead. *Dreams? Dreams of someone staring down at him? What ... ?*

The computer signaled again.

"Yes," Martok growled. "Yes, I know." He spoke to the replicator, "*Raktajino*. Hot. *Twokava* ." Kira had hooked him on the stuff. He suddenly realized how much he missed the major. ... No, wait. Colonel. She had been promoted nearly a year ago. She had been a no-nonsense commander, more concerned about the[22] condition of the people under her than the number of honorifics associated with her name. A strong, proud woman, much like his own Sirella. *Sirella*. Now, *there* was a reason to want to come

home. Somewhere at the end of this long day there would be his home and his bed and Sirella. ... Well, if she permitted it ... and wanted him. ... Martok frowned and took the cup from the replicator. *Dammit*, he thought. *Here I am, the chancellor, the General Victorious, the leader of the empire, and I'm still worried that my wife might not want to sleep with me tonight.* He snarled, but at the thought of Sirella, the snarl turned into a wolfish grin, so he lifted his cup and toasted her.

Martok turned toward the door and wondered if Worf had gone away. But, no. This was Worf—of course he hadn't gone away. Martok spoke a code word that deactivated the security protocols, then told the door to open. Before Worf could enter, Martok staggered into the washroom and doused his face. Without the bracing challenge of battle to invigorate him, cold water would have to suffice. Had it been only four days since he'd come aboard the *Negh'Var*? *Bah. Four days too long.*

When Martok exited the washroom, his beard and much of his hair still dripping, he found Worf standing respectfully by the door, hands behind his back, obviously pondering his responsibilities, probably planning ahead for everything he had to do over the next, oh, twenty or thirty years. As much as Martok liked his adopted brother and admired his skills as a warrior, he considered Worf to be, without question, the stuffiest individual he had ever met. "What is it, Worf?" the general said. "Oh, wait. Forgive me: *Ambassador.*"

Martok had been teasing Worf about the title and his<sup>[23]</sup> new responsibilities since they had left Bajoran space. Martok took deep delight at the thought of Worf living at the Federation embassy among, alas for him, scores of Terrans, Vulcans, Andorians, and all the other polite species. Then there was the thought of the social functions and the ridiculous costumes the ambassador was occasionally required to wear. Someday, he knew, Worf might even have to sit across the table from a Dominion Vorta and somehow overcome the temptation to reach out and twist the smiling fool's head off his shoulders.

"Good morning, Chancellor," Worf said levelly. "We have a full agenda today. I thought it would be more efficient if we met early in the day and coordinated our schedules."

Martok grumbled unintelligibly under his breath, "Damnable bureaucracy!" And Worf's, as opposed to Darok's, being the bearer of such annoyances hardly improved matters. At least Darok could be depended on for some mildly amusing sarcasm. Worf? Allowing his brother to assume Darok's day-to-day tasks while the elder Klingon went ahead to prepare for his arrival at home might have been a bad idea. Worf had been so persistent—solicitous, even—in requesting the responsibility that Martok felt unable to refuse. "*I have an obligation as your brother, and as the one who challenged Gowron, to place myself at your disposal. I am yours to command,*" he had said. Repeatedly.

On the positive side, having Worf do Darok's job meant that Martok maintained some semblance of control over Worf's agenda, shuttling whatever bothersome nonsense their Federation allies wanted dealt with until later; letting Worf "help" had its benefits. Martok might have to crack a few padds against the bulkhead plating<sup>[24]</sup> before they reached Qo'noS, but that was of minuscule consequence in the greater design.

Dropping heavily into a low chair, Martok set his cup on the arm. The drink was beginning to revive him. "I thought," he said, "that all we had to do today was be showered with the fruits of glorious victory and allow the masses to pay homage."

Worf pulled a padd from the inner pocket of his ambassadorial attire and glanced at a display. "Yes," he said, tapping the surface with a finger. "I have those listed here. ..."

Martok grinned despite himself. *All right*, he thought. *Stuffy, but not humorless.* Then he wondered:

*Unless that wasn't meant to be funny.* There was always the chance that it wasn't. ... He sat up straighter and tried to pay attention.

"But there are other items that will also require your attention," Worf continued.

Martok sighed and began looking around for his boots. "For example?"

"The emperor has contacted me and left word that he would like to meet with the two of us privately as soon as the opportunity arises."

"'Contacted me'? 'Left word'? 'As soon as the opportunity arises'?" Martok shook his head in wonder. "This is hardly the tone I would expect from an emperor." The distance on his life journey from Ketha to the First City could be measured in more ways than *kellicams*.

"The emperor *could* command you," Worf explained, not without a touch of impatience. He knew that Martok already understood all of this. "But I believe he is simply acknowledging the fact that *you* are the political leader of the Klingon Empire. Kahless has always made<sup>[25]</sup> it clear that he did not wish for that kind of power, but chooses to influence our people through spiritual and cultural means."

"The emperor knows best," Martok muttered, lifting his left boot. "We didn't want to risk putting him on the front lines of some great battle or show him actually doing something of *value* for his people."

Worf's eyes narrowed. "The emperor has great wisdom with which to help our people. ..."

"*Kahless* had great wisdom," Martok said. "His clone—well, what proof have we that we have benefited from *his* wisdom in any way?"

"There is no doubt in my mind that though he may be the original, his is the true spirit. ..."

Martok held his hand up for silence, then lowered it slowly to indicate he regretted what he had said. "I spoke out of turn, Worf. I do not dispute the emperor's course. His choice to serve our people as an example of a different era ... it was a wise compromise. Sometimes, however, I feel there have been too many compromises, too much politics."

"And I have been thinking," Worf said, "that there has been too much war. Even for us."

"My brother," he said, grinning, "you speak much too plainly to be an ambassador. If you're not careful, someone might take offense and try to assassinate you."

Worf smiled one of his too-rare smiles and replied, "Anyone who does not like my plain speech is welcome to try."

Sliding his foot into his left boot and stamping it against the deck, Martok felt a tug on his memory. What was it, this half-remembered dream? "Worf, before we<sup>[26]</sup> reach Qo'noS, there is something I need to know, something that I still do not completely understand."

Sensing the change in Martok's tone, Worf lowered his padd. "You have only to ask. I owe you ... everything. If you hadn't stood with me at the Dominion internment camp, or, later, taken me into your House ..."

"Enough, Worf. Every damned time I try to ask you a question, you have to bring that up. I weary of



your gratitude. I did what I did because you are an honorable man with the heart of a hero. But if you say anything about it again, I will have to cut your throat.”

Worf grunted. It was as much as Martok could expect.

“My question ...” he began, then hesitated. “Gowron. The day you challenged him ...”

“I remember it.”

“I need to know ...” Martok snarled, hating himself for needing to know, for asking the question: “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you challenge him?”

He listened to Worf’s reaction to the question—a heavy sigh—and had to fight hard not to echo it. These were deep and mysterious waters and Martok had a general’s hatred for asking questions that might expose his ignorance. Above all else, a military leader succeeded best when his soldiers had the illusion that he knew the answers to all questions. He only ever asked, the myth went, because he needed to make sure the soldiers knew the answers, too.

But Worf wasn’t a soldier anymore, or even, strictly speaking, a subject of the empire. Worf was his brother; if Martok could not trust him, he couldn’t trust anyone.

“It was Dax,” Worf muttered.

Martok was surprised. “Dax? Which one?”

[27]“Ezri.”

“Ezri Dax told you to challenge Gowron?” This came as a surprise. Of the two Dax incarnations Martok had known, Ezri had seemed the most peaceable, the more levelheaded. *The least Klingon.*

“No,” Worf said, almost shouting. “She said nothing of the kind. She *observed* ...” He clearly chose his words carefully. “... that the empire had come to accept a state of affairs that we would once have found dishonorable. Gowron was a political creature and, somehow, the Klingons were also ...”

“... Becoming political.”

“Yes. Politics had become more important than serving the people. Politics was an end unto itself.”

“And you were the only one who could stop it.”

Worf snorted. “No. Not that. But perhaps it was possible because of my—*unique*—situation that I was able to accept this truth before others might have. You, my brother, would have seen it yourself, sooner or later. ...”

“But it might have been too late by then. Gowron might have already done too much damage.”

“Possibly,” Worf agreed. “Yes, that may be true. Do you understand now? I meant no disrespect to you

or anyone on the council.”

“None was assumed,” Martok said. “We owe you a debt, the entire Klingon people. Possibly more than we could ever repay. Or acknowledge. That is the greatest problem, I think. Too much pride, you know? To admit such a thing.”

An embarrassed silence hung between them. They had just spoken of things that very few brothers could easily say to each other. Finally, Worf said, “I suspect[28]that these things may be what the emperor wishes to discuss with us. He is a man of vision.”

“So they say, Worf. So they say.” Martok massaged the sole of his right foot, trying to loosen a cramp. “I have to confess I’m not sure what I should say to him. It’s times like this that I wish my father were still alive. He would have had some kind of good advice.”

“He was an eloquent man?”

Martok laughed. “Urthog? Eloquent? Hardly. He rarely said more than five words from sunrise to sunset, but when he did deign to speak, they were ... they were the right words.”

“Some might say that is the definition of ‘eloquent.’ ”

Martok stomped his right foot down into his boot, then looked up at Worf and grinned. “I think,” he said, “you spent too much time around the silver-tongued Picard. You’ve already become too subtle for me.”

“Don’t be insulting,” Worf growled, but he said it with a smile in his eyes. “Or I may have to challenge another chancellor.”

Martok laughed, feeling almost awake for the first time that day. He put on his armor, then reached for the massive chancellor’s robe. Donning it, feeling the weight of it settle on his shoulders, he said, “You are welcome to try, my brother. You are welcome to try.” Strapping on his weapons belt, he asked, “What’s first on your list?”

Worf slipped the padd back into his robe’s inner pocket. “A reception,” he said. “Of sorts.”

Stepping off the lift, Martok judged that the entire off-duty crew of the *Negh’Var* had assembled in the main mess hall, and judging by the sounds and smells, they had started quite a while ago, too. The decks and[29]the bulkheads reverberated to the beat of battle songs. The mingled aromas of stews, blood pie, and *gagh* were so dense that Martok felt he was getting a nourishing meal simply by inhaling.

“I am not in a mood for celebration,” Martok shouted into Worf’s ear. They could not communicate in any other way despite the fact that the doors to the mess hall were not open.

“The crew wished to surprise you,” Worf replied, a diplomatic way of saying, *This has nothing to do with what you are in the mood for.* ...

“Surprise me?” Martok asked. “How could they surprise me ... ?” But the rest of the question was lost in the tumult of roars and shouting that threatened to burst the seams of the *Negh’Var*’s hull plating when the mess-hall doors slid open. The ship’s great bones then trembled as the crew chanted, “MARTOK!

HAIL, MARTOK!*KAI* THE CHANCELLOR!”

Someone thrust an overflowing flagon of ale into Martok’s hand. Smiling, he raised the flagon and shouted in reply, “Long life to the *Negh’Var!* Death to her foes!” The crew roared its approval, so Martok raised the flagon to his lips, drank it to the dregs, then threw it with all his strength against the far bulkhead, where it shattered.

A young weapons officer stumbled forward and made a slurring introduction. “Chancellor! I am K’rac. I served aboard the *Orantho* during your raid on Trelka V. I have prepared this *may’bom* in your ...” *Gods of my father*, Martok thought. *Not an original song! I may have to cut out the boy’s tongue!* Apparently, Urthog’s gods were listening, because a mountain in the rough shape of a squadron leader stepped up and punched K’rac in the throat. The younger officer dropped to the deck and [30] began to make strangling noises that might have been a description of Martok’s victory. The mob cheered its satisfaction and the older officer began a song, but the words dissipated as the crowd swallowed him up.

Perhaps this “reception “ wasn’t such a bad idea after all, Martok decided. *Just as long as we don’t stumble up the steps to the Great Hall.*

Martok found that he was holding another flagon in his hand, so he drank off the head, grateful that here, at least, aboard his too-big ship of Gowron’s, he could trust that his food and beverages wouldn’t have to be scanned for exotic toxins. The air throbbed as a tableful of grinning marines began to pound on the table and chant one of the old songs of Reclaw and his victory over the Twelve Sons of Ch’Tan. The beat took hold and soon the whole crew stomped on the floor, banged flagons on the table, or crashed their heads together in time. Martok lifted his head, opened his mouth, and roared along with them, the words tumbling forth:

Suvwl’ ’a’ ghaH ReQlaw ’e’

(For Reclaw was a mighty warrior,)

qu’ qabDaj; jev ’e’ rur

(Terrible as thunder,)

nom vIHchu’j Hov tIH rur

(Swift as starlight,)

jupDajvaD yoHbej ghaH

(Stalwart to his friends)

jaghDajvaD Heghna’ ghaH

(And DEATH to his enemies...)

And as they boomed through the long epic, some of them—only one or two at first, but more as the idea

took[31]hold—inserted Martok’s name in the place of Reclaw’s, so that by the end of the tale it was *Martok* who approached the City of the Dead and challenged the Twelfth Brother, the Lord of the Dead. At first it made the general uneasy to find himself cast in such a role, but soon he joined his voice with the crew’s, swept up in the play of imagery, the rhythm of the song, until all their hearts beat in time and the crew bellowed their victory to the starless heavens of Death’s Domain.

All in all, it was a good beginning to a good party.

The general ate. The general drank. The general talked and sang and toasted his crew.

Sometime later, Martok found himself standing (a little unsteadily, truth be told) on the bridge of the *Negh’Var* before the main viewscreen, waiting for the comm officer to clarify the image. His lower back and his right arm ached because of an arm-wrestling match he had won (though he suspected the soldier could have beaten him if he’d been less intoxicated), but, all in all, he felt better than he had in days.

Great Qo’noS, jewel of the empire, shimmered into view before him. Brown and green, banded with swaths of gray and white, it glowed with a fire that only Martok could see. *Sirella is down there*, he thought. She pulled him toward her like a great star drawing in a comet. And later, tonight, he would crash down into her, burn up in her heat. . . . The thought made him giddy. Couplets of poems, paeans to her loveliness, coursed through him, but then he remembered where he was and tried to focus on what was before him.

Worf felt inordinately pleased with his machinations. Against all expectation, Martok had been enjoying [32]himself. It had been too many long days since he had seen Martok smile.

There had been that day at the celebration on DS9, but that was the last time Worf could remember. Since then, the chancellor had sunk into quiet isolation, weighed down by some secret care. *He doesn’t feel like he’s ready*, Worf had decided, and saw, in truth, that no true warrior could adequately prepare himself for the battlefield they were about to enter. Worf knew that from the minute they entered the Great Hall, they must be prepared for the fact that behind every smile there were clenched teeth. Behind every word of praise, the promise of treachery. The chancellor knew this, too, but Worf knew such dangers weren’t the source of his anxiety.

If Deanna were here, she would have no doubt counseled something about Martok’s “processing a transition.” Ezri would have probably echoed the thought, though with her greater understanding of Klingons, she would have phrased it more plainly. “Try to get him to relax,” she would have said. Jadzia would have said, “Take him to a party; get him drunk.” With any other Klingon, she would have added, “Find him a lover,” but Jadzia had known the formidable configuration of womanhood who was Martok’s wife, and understood that after Sirella, there could be no one else.

To his great surprise, the plan had worked. Ten minutes into the party, Martok had grinned indulgently; ten minutes more and he had laughed at one of K’Tar’s jokes; twenty minutes later, after the first round of songs had ended, Martok had won an arm-wrestling match with his security chief by smashing his forehead into the other man’s nose. After that, Worf had almost relaxed, and the rest of the evening had slipped away[33]until they had received a call from the bridge informing the chancellor that they were about to drop out of warp in preparation for entering the Klingon home system. Would the chancellor like to come to the bridge to greet the council?

With great enthusiasm, the chancellor had said that he would be pleased to do so and decided to bring

along as many of his fellow old campaigners as could comfortably fit on the *Negh'Var's* bridge without getting in the crew's way. A quick glance at the chronometer showed that it was midmorning in the First City. On a normal day, the streets would be crowded with petitioners and tourists and the halls of the government temples would ring with the voices of council members debating policy. Ancient tradition dictated that ambassadorial residences and commerce buildings be built outside the first ring of government buildings, but traders and ambassadors from every system would normally be flitting from temple to temple. Not today, however. Today, only Klingons would be permitted inside the First City, and then only if they had some direct business with the council. Today had one purpose: to honor a hero and to welcome him home as chancellor.

Even as they entered orbit, outside the Great Hall of Warriors, the councillors would be blustering and arguing about status, arranging themselves rank upon rank for the moment when Martok appeared. If the information Worf had gathered from the Klingon comnet and an ever-growing army of informants was correct, then half the council, mostly the professional politicians from the middle tier of Klingon society, were less than thrilled about Martok's ascension to power, but were taking a wait-and-see attitude. So popular was he with both the [34]military and lower classes, no politician dared to risk alienating himself from Martok.

Another slice of the political spectrum, a group whom the commentators had dubbed "the New Councillors," rose to power when openings appeared owing to deaths in combat. Worf had been pleased to learn that more than one politician had resigned his position and taken up his *bat'leth* when the Dominion War began. Unfortunately, he knew very little about those who had taken the dead men's places on the council. Most were unknown quantities, but from what he had learned they were evenly split for and against Martok. Many had decided to model their own careers on the general's: Poor Boy Of Common Lineage Makes Good. The other half feared that the new chancellor might shake up the status quo even as they became members of the privileged caste.

Most of Worf's informants agreed that the general's chief danger lay in the threat from the oldest and wealthiest families, those who had felt the greatest threat to their status, though few of these openly opposed him. They would play along, allowing Martok to be a hero until the next hero emerged. And last, Worf knew, they would have to contend with the Klingon people's peculiar prejudice that made them believe that a warrior's ability to lead in battle translated into an ability to manage an empire.

It pained him to admit it, but Gowron, who had been only an adequate warrior, had not been a bad leader at first. It was only when Martok, a man of clearly superior ability, had appeared that Gowron's personal ambitions drove him to make more and more missteps until, finally, Worf had felt compelled to challenge him. On that day, Worf believed, he had been granted one of the few [35]moments of *yajchu'ghach*, "clear vision," that he would ever enjoy: he had seen the folly of his taking on the mantle of chancellor, and, instead, had thrust it on his brother, Martok.

The chancellor spoke, more softly than Worf might have expected. "Captain K'Tar, announce our presence."

"Operations," K'Tar ordered, "drop cloak. Weapons officer, drop shields. Communications, hail the High Council and announce our arrival."

Out of habit, Worf found himself standing next to the weapons officer's station. From the corner of his eye, he saw that one of the scanners appeared to be miscalibrated, and he was going to chastise the weapons officer for his negligence when he saw an energy spike on the sensor display. Taking a step toward the display, he intended to find the meaning of the reading, but shouts and gasps of surprise distracted him. Worf looked up in time to see the birth of a brilliant white star over the First City,

unaccountably beautiful and all the more lovely for its eeriness.

Startled, Worf caught his breath and wondered, *What sign is this? Who could have arranged such a display?* The star glowed brighter, and all around the bridge, crew members shouted and cheered until each sensed that something was wrong, the sounds dying in their throats.

Worf glanced at the sensor display, but refused to believe what he saw. "No!" he cried, and pounded the console. "This cannot be!" *The coordinates must be wrong!* He looked back up at the main monitor and saw that the perfect circle of white light had frayed, becoming a ragged pink oval, yellow at the ever-widening edges. Flecks of black and gray peppered the center of the explosion, and Worf knew they must be huge chunks of [36]concrete and steel, because nothing else could survive the tremendous energies that were being unleashed. Bodies, certainly, could not survive such a holocaust. Neither would his personal hope of trust or faith that Klingon honor would put his people above inflicting such unfathomable horror on other Klingons. Helplessly, Worf watched the world he had believed in come to an abrupt end. Where moments before there had been a grid of buildings and streets, the heart of the Klingon Empire, there was now nothing but a twisted gray snarl.

Around him, Worf heard only the ticks and pings of automatic instruments. An acrid scent permeated the air, a scent the scrubbers could not clear away, and Worf recognized it as the Klingon flight-or-fight hormone. *But who is there to fight and how can we flee from this?* His knuckles ached and he realized he had split them on the console, now smeared with his blood. No one spoke, and it seemed to Worf for a time that no one would ever be able to speak again until he heard K'Tar snap, "Operations: Engage cloak, then route emergency power to the engines."

The *Negh'Var's* engines groaned to life, and Worf shifted his weight to the right to compensate for the sudden thrust. The weapons officer activated the shields and weapons systems. Seeing that he was no longer needed, Worf looked around the bridge and saw that the strategic intelligence station was not manned. *Why would we need an intel officer?* he wondered cynically. *We're in orbit over Qo'noS.* He quickly activated the main sensors, coaxed them to do a short-range scan of the planet's surface and the space around them for the distance of five thousand *kellicams*; he studied the readout.

An involuntary cry escaped his throat before he could [37]stop himself, the mourning scream, the shout of rage and defiance that a Klingon bellows when a fellow warrior goes to meet Death, so that Death might know who he is about to face. But how, *how* could he scream loud enough to announce so many lost souls? How could *any* of them have been prepared for judgment?

"Worf!"

He twisted toward Martok's voice and could barely make him out, so red and burning was his sight. "Sir!"

"Report!" Martok scowled.

Old Starfleet training took hold. Worf scanned the data. And again, because what he saw was too horrific to be believed, it took him a moment to find his voice. There wasn't enough evidence to make any definite conclusions ... but, by the Sword, how could there be any doubt? "The Great Hall, Chancellor ... and the Plaza of Heroes ... where the council must have stood awaiting you ..."

"Worf: Report!"

"It's gone, Chancellor. Gone. There's nothing left ... nothing at all."

### 3

“FOOL! WATCH YOURSELF!” a sour-faced vendor snapped.

“So sorry. Really.” Alexander Rozhenko backed away, bending over to retrieve the fruit he’d inadvertently knocked onto the street when he rushed around that last corner. *The bruises won’t be too noticeable*, he thought, as he brushed the dust from the pulpy melons and shoved them back into the cart. Ignoring the vendor’s protests, he tossed a handful of coins onto the counter and pushed into the crowd swelling and filling every road and alleyway.

Alexander pushed down the nausea that usually struck him when he visited the First City. Add the stench of sweat-drenched dirty bodies to the incense of the ancestral temples, the cauldrons of *peppadugh* spice, the fresh meat hanging in the slaughterhouses, and it was all he could do to keep down breakfast. Though he honored his half-human mother for all her gifts to him, he wished that he’d inherited his father’s wholly-Klingon digestive system.

[39] A chorus of sirens shrieked at pedestrians from virtually every hovercar moving along at a snail’s pace. Visitors who couldn’t afford to stay in the inns had set up housekeeping in the public plazas, pitching tents, tying up their livestock to light posts, building fire pits in curb gutters, and lining store windowsills with pots of congealed *rokeg* blood pie. Opportunistic vendors hawked souvenirs, from “genuine” beads allegedly worn by *Lukara tovar’Hama* candles smithed by the mistresses of Emperor Todokh the Imperious. Comnet technicians worked to install gigantic viewscreens on every corner, making it easy for those milling in the streets to watch Martok’s formal installation as chancellor. With thousands of citizens settling in to watch the ceremonies, Alexander doubted he’d be able to reach the Great Hall before his father arrived from the *Negh’Var*. He checked his chronometer. *Damn it all! Drex and Lady Sirella must be waiting for me.* He hoped he wouldn’t make them late as well; they had agreed to meet at the Taklar Temple and proceed to the first ring as a group. There would be hell to pay from his father if the lady arrived late because of him. He brainstormed other transportation options, but Alexander assumed that there wasn’t a public transporter pad within two *kellicams* that had less than an hour wait.

He found himself sandwiched between a hefty Klingon matron herding a gaggle of mangy *targs* toward a water trough and a legion of graybeards in old KDF uniforms tottering along. Maybe he should joust the masses and savor the experience from a healthy distance. He could contact the lady on her personal communicator and tell her to leave without him, freeing him to find a pub someplace, order up a flagon of ale, and watch all the pomp from an anonymous stool. Contacting Sirella in this [40] crowd, however, might needlessly draw attention to the son of Worf.

Should he make the effort to reach the Great Hall, he would face another possible outcome, considering his current streak: the fool son of Worf might accidentally dump bloodwine down the front of the chancellor’s cloak while billions of Klingons watched the live feed throughout the empire. He sighed audibly, prompting one of the *targs* pushing past his leg to twist on its leash and whine at him. *Make the lesser of the bad choices, Alex*, he admonished himself.

The fact that his day had more or less started last night should have been a sign that his careful planning might be pointless. His accidental activation of the *Ya’Vang’s* waste-ejection system—the one used when a power loss forced a choice between recycling and warp drive—during yesterday’s dry-dock landing had necessitated he spend an additional shift cleaning up. That his captain had found the incident amusing had assured that Alexander would arrive at the ceremonies without *abat’leth* lodged between his vertebrae, which presumably would please Worf. What Worf expected, however, was for Alexander to

arrive without *abat'leth* lodged between his vertebrae and to be on time. Worf was always a stickler for exactness. Alexander could imagine the look on his face if he rushed in about halfway through the recitation of Martok's victory on Cardassia Prime.

He sighed again and started looking for a pub.

Since the day was originally scheduled to be one of celebration, Alexander had planned on being able to enjoy—indeed, revel in—the fact that he was a member of the chancellor's House. This condition had not been lost on his crewmates on the *Ya'Vang*. For the most part, [41] they had treated him well enough after the initial adjustment period, but it was clear that their estimation of his worth was higher than it would have been without the crest of House Martok on his uniform. If nothing else, it was always easier to get resupplied when the quartermaster learned that a member of the chancellor's House was aboard the ship.

No, his crewmates treated him just fine, but it wasn't their opinion of Alexander that mattered as much as Alexander's opinion of himself. Not being ostracized wasn't enough; he wanted to belong, but in Klingon society, he had learned, there were only so many ways to make a name for oneself.

Obviously, his first choice was to become a great warrior, but Alexander was fairly confident that this path was closed to him. He had learned enough basic combat skills to not be treated as an out-and-out liability in a fight, but that was the best he would ever be able to do. Not that being a great warrior was the only way to go. Even in the Defense Force, intellectuals and fine artists were honored almost as highly as fighters. Unfortunately, Alexander was neither a genius nor a songwriter. He wasn't one of those engineers who could fix a bad warp core with a roll of *drag* tape and a sharp glare at the plumbing and he couldn't find a tidy rhyme for *Ka'Tarlk* (the Klingon equivalent of “orange,” he felt). For a short time, he had made do with being the ship's lucky screwup, but that had worn thin pretty quickly. Alexander had learned on Earth that people find that sort of thing amusing for a little while, but sooner or later it becomes annoying. On a Klingon warship, it could be fatal.

As Alexander's grandfather would have said, he needed [42] a new shtick. Fortunately, he had learned something very important in the schools on Earth and the classrooms on the *Enterprise* that helped him out tremendously. Students, he had figured out, fell into several basic types that could be found in any classroom, and, by extension, any social situation. First there was the popular crowd, the men and women who ruled by virtue of natural ability or family background or some combination of the two. Then there were the well-developed specimens who were valued for their physical abilities. In school, these had been the athletes; on a warship, they were the frontline troops. Then there were the smart ones (school: brainiacs; ship: scientists) and somewhere below that, the tech-heads (school) and the maintenance teams (ship). The screwups seemed to hold the same position in both hierarchies. The big difference between them was that in school, the screwups generally survived to see graduation. On a Klingon warship, the position was frequently open due to attrition.

When Alexander perceived how similar the social structures were in the two environments, he did a quick compare-and-contrast and found that there was one category in human schools that was not present on a Klingon warship: the class clown.

Alexander Rozhenko decided to assign himself a new role. He figured that if he could make his shipmates laugh (while avoiding having them laugh *athim*), it might significantly improve his chances to survive long enough to find something else he could do. In any case, anything had to be better than screwup and the introduction to an airlock sans EV suit that the role frequently entailed. And, as chance would have it, Alexander Rozhenko had a gift for making other people do stupid [43] things. He decided (privately) that it had something to do with having done so many stupid things himself. As his father would



have said, practice makes perfect. At breakfast that morning, he had made a comment about Lieutenant Charak's unfortunate (and inexplicable) tendency to belch loudly just before he stepped on a transporter pad *at exactly* the right moment to motivate Charak's subordinate, Aktaj, to expel a mouthful of *gagh* through his nose. Alexander had never seen anyone do that before. It was one of those sights, that, well, if he was lucky enough to ever be an old man on his deathbed, he had a feeling he might make a comment about it.

Alexander had chosen to see it as a good omen for the day, especially since several people in his shore-leave party were talking about it like it was something they had seen at their own table (which they hadn't). All of them, even Aktaj, were treating the *gagh* expulsion like it had been some great victory and he, Alexander, had been the general at the forefront of the battle. Against all expectation, Crewman Rozhenko found himself looking forward to seeing his father later that day and actually being able to introduce his shipmates as friends.

A crackle of the sound system indicated the broadcast was about to begin. Mostly, the crowd took the cue, pausing where they stood, throwing rugs or blankets on the cobbled streets and plopping down to make themselves comfortable. A few cracked open ale kegs; still others began passing the bloodwine. *This might be more fun to watch drunk, now that I think of it*, Alexander thought, knowing how much that behavior would displease his father. He would wait until *after* the installation to imbibe, making it easier for [44]him to face his father's scowling disapproval. Alexander threaded his way around the kiosks and street stalls to an empty doorway where he had a decent view of the screen.

A grainy shot of the Great Hall appeared on the screen, prompting cheers from the crowd. The camera pulled away, revealing various High Council members clad in their finest ceremonial clothes, striding about, assuming their rank-dictated positions in the receiving line. He squinted at the footage, trying to discern the identities of the various politicians, wondering who were enemies of the House of Martok, and thus *this* enemies. Settling in against the doorframe, he shifted his armor so it wouldn't dig into his shoulder—

A concussive blast eclipsed all sound, and he covered his ringing ears with his hands. He hunched over, retreating deeper into the doorway. Glancing up, he saw a geyser of flame erupting in the first ring. An ominous rumble became a roar. Cracking and creaking of things flying combined with screams and wails.

Panic ensued.

Ominous clouds of black smoke billowed over stone walls as a haze of dust and silvery flakes of vaporized matter descended from the sky. Sharp shards showered the streets, projectiles of stone, metal, and plasteel arbitrarily wounding the unlucky. And body parts—a bloody hand, a chunk of skin and muscle—descended with building fragments. The daylight dissolved into soot and ash and palpable heat.

Blank faces, faces pinched in fear, faces scraped and bleeding from shrapnel wounds horrified Alexander. Some ran. Some dropped where they stood, numb with shock. Children cried for their parents. Hovercars, [45]desperate to escape, churned dangerously over the heads of the crowd. A chaotic tangle of life and death and madness surrounded him on all sides.

Falling back on his soldier's training, he quickly assessed the situation, his mind racing through possibilities. *We're under attack. ...There's been an accident....This is an insane assassination attempt on the council—on Martok—*

On my father.

If Martok's enemies had decided to move, all those loyal to him—especially members of his House—would be targeted. He wouldn't even be safe on the *Ya'Vang*. *I need to get out of here. Immediately. And then find my father.*

Choosing a path moving away from the city center, Alexander joined the fleeing crowds, kept his head down, and focused on recalling the maze of alleys and passageways that would provide his escape.

Qo'noS's tiny northern ice cap disappeared off the bottom of the viewscreen as the *Negh'Var* moved under cloak into a stationary polar orbit. The pole's magnetic fields played havoc with their cloak's graviton emissions, helping to further conceal the ship from those who would know how to find them. Experienced warriors knew the tricks to finding cloaked ships and even more tricks to finding a ship when magnetic fields garbled sensor readings, but finding a ship that was using both? That was sleight of hand that only captains as old and experienced as Martok and Captain K'Tar could execute. The *Negh'Var* was as concealed as it was possible to be under the circumstances.

When K'Tar looked to Martok moments after issuing[46]his orders, the general nodded his approval. K'Tar had followed the prescribed protocol for their circumstances, a set of rules that Martok himself had learned when he had been the captain of the ship: Secure the chancellor, then collect intelligence. Martok expected they would decloak shortly, once they knew who and what to attack. But for a few minutes? He wouldn't protest.

As soon as their position was stabilized, K'Tar ordered the communications officer to tap into the comnet and feed news reports onto the main viewscreen. Martok steeled himself for a cyclone blast of media outrage, but all sources were blacked out or broadcasting banal public health announcements. Several minutes of listening to warnings to citizens of the First City about breathing without filter masks needed him. "Deactivate viewscreen!" he ordered. The screen went dark, and the red glow of the emergency lights was all the illumination left

Martok stalked around the bridge like an injured sabre bear ready to snap at anyone who dared to speak. He fought his instinct to rant and roar, to call on his ancestors and threaten to tear out the throats of whoever had done this, but he dared not. *General* Martok would be allowed such histrionics, but *Chancellor* Martok could not let his emotions crowd out reason. This crew—no, the entire empire—expected his next action to be the absolute *correct* action.

And, truly, Martok had to confess to himself, if no one else, that what motivated him in that moment was shock, tempered with a good deal of rage. The general had been a warrior for most of his life, had fought in or overseen engagements that had involved cities, planets, even *systems*, but somehow this ... this attack on the[47]heart of the empire ... this *atroc*ity was unfathomable, because the worst part of it, the part that his brain kept circling back to, was one thought: *Only a Klingon could have done this.*

But, no, *no*, it was too dangerous to make such conjectures without more information. And yet it was just as foolish not to be prepared for the worst. "Captain," Martok snapped.

"Chancellor?"

"All weapons on standby. Instruct tactical to maintain sensor sweeps."

"Yes, Chancellor."

A thought struck him. “Communications? What activity on the surface military channels?”

“Minimal traffic, Capt ... I mean, Chancellor.”

Martok glanced at K'Tar, who seemed amused at the slip. He was, Martok thought, the calmest, most rational officer in the fleet, only one of the many reasons he had been appointed captain of the imperial flagship. He was also one of the most deadly warriors Martok had ever met, which was another reason. “Monitor the military channels for encoded transmissions.” K'Tar cocked his head in a manner that communicated to Martok that this was already being done, and Martok nodded his approval. *Fine*, he thought. *If it's to be battle, then let them come, whoever they are.*

He circled the bridge, glanced over his officers' shoulders, gladdened to see their single-minded focus on their duties. *Their minds may be here, but their hearts are in the First City*, he thought. *They are asking themselves, “Who do I know who might have been there?”* He wished he could grant them the chance to sing their friends to the next world, but he knew<sup>[48]</sup> intelligence was the key to making his next move. *And nothing will help purge their grief like making battle on those responsible for this destruction!*

As if on cue, the tactical officer, a young female named Tamal, announced, “I have completed my scans, Captain.”

“Report.”

“There are no ships in the immediate vicinity. No impulse signatures.”

“Everyone is moving under cloak,” Worf deduced.

“A sensible precaution,” K'Tar said.

“Then our foes have chosen not to reveal themselves,” Martok spat. “Cowards.”

“Perhaps,” Worf said. “Or perhaps they are merely waiting for some signal to reveal themselves.”

“Maintain communications silence,” K'Tar ordered. “Our first responsibility is to keep the chancellor secure.” He spoke the words to the crew, but his eyes rested on Martok.

How sore was Martok's temptation to speak up in that moment! To denounce this lurking and hiding as a coward's response! But his heart told him that he would dishonor K'Tar, who spoke correctly, if he voiced his displeasure. When he was the captain of the vessel, he too would have put protecting the chancellor above hunting down an enemy. That the former action contradicted the latter in this circumstance frustrated him more than he could express. As chancellor, he could no longer afford to think like a soldier or even a general. He was, for better or for worse, the leader of the Klingon people, and his first responsibility was to stay alive so he could serve them. For the first time, Martok felt a glimmer of understanding about how Gowron had<sup>[49]</sup> turned into the man he had become, a man who, eventually, needed to be put down like a diseased beast. The thought unsettled him.

Satisfied that they were as secure as they could be without breaking orbit, K'Tar asked Worf, “Ambassador, can you tell us what happened?”

In uncharacteristically low tones, Worf replied, “The weapon was concussive in nature, and not an energy weapon. It was very precisely targeted. My guess is that it was dropped by a low-flying robot

craft.”

“Not from orbit then,” Martok said. He had already begun to piece together several scenarios and had needed only this confirmation from Worf for it to all fit together.

“No,” Worf muttered. “Not from orbit.”

Martok watched as the navigator and the helmsman glanced at each other and snarled in unison. “The attackers must have a base on Qo’noS,” Tamal said. “How could security have missed a foreign power undertaking such a task?”

We should not be talking openly about such things, Martok thought, but before he could order silence, Worf—alas, Worf!—replied, “Why do you assume it was a foreign power?”

From all around the bridge came the sounds of suspicion and disbelief.

K’Tar, attempting to contain the spread of the uproar, said gravely, “No Klingon would destroy the Great Hall.”

Worf frowned, and Martok sensed him struggle with warring urges. The Starfleet officer would want to explore all options dispassionately, but the Klingon warrior sensed how dangerous these waters were. Finally, he settled on what he must have believed was a compromise: “*Nosane* Klingon would destroy the Great Hall.”

[50] This observation calmed some, but made others uneasy. It was an indication of how badly disturbed everyone was that two officers as experienced as Worf and K’Tar did not end the discussion.

“If this is true,” K’Tar said, forgetting his command, “we must find this *madtarg* and put it down. ...”

Martok was about to say “*Enough!*” when the comm officer broke in, “Transmission coming in over all public and military channels.”

“Onscreen.”

Alexander had been working toward the outskirts of the city for less than a half hour when a public viewscreen finally crackled to life. At first, he thought he was viewing a scene from one of the many surveillance satellites that wheeled over Qo’noS. *Have the comnet signals been garbled with the military’s?* He craned his head over the street crowd, straining for an unobstructed view. This was the first information he—and all other citizens—had heard since the explosion. As he had made his way through the confusion of the First City, he had expected to catch snippets of news reports or hear an official pronouncement from the council. What he watched now didn’t appear to be either of those. He squinted at the screen, looking for a hint of what this transmission might mean.

Red-soaked sunlight saturated the sky, casting an eerie light over the Ka’Toth plains outside the First City. The view changed when the camera lurched, racing toward the horizon, flashing over a blur of clouds, the dark rock walls of the city and fields. Jerking to a halt, the camera panned left to reveal the proud profile of the First City.

But the silhouette ...

[51]High on the central hill where the Great Hall should have stood a black cloud spiraled up into the late-morning sky. Of all the possibilities Alexander had considered while winding through the layers of the city, he hadn't imagined that anyone would be insane enough to deliberately blow up the hallowed building.

Before he could further absorb the image, the transmission cut away from the plains. A new camera moved, zooming toward the cloud, plunging into it, leaving him almost breathless with speed and vertigo. When the camera broke into the clear, it was bare meters above the ground, racing along the curve of the hill until it suddenly lurched over the lip of a vast crater. As it traveled, Alexander caught fleeting glimpses of debris: cracked stone and crumbled mortar, brambles of tangled wire and fiber-optic cable, lumps of deformed plasteel, and unidentifiable charred bulges that might be bodies.

The picture on the screen winked out for a split second and then returned, this time split between two settings. The smoking crater dominated one half of the screen; the other centered on the form of a warrior clad in the traditional garb of the Klingon Defense Force. Tall and fit enough he seemed, but to Alexander's eye, he looked too pretty to be a battlefield-seasoned warrior. He'd had dealings with those types: vain sons of high families whose primary focus was on demonstrating their superior skills before the lower houses. The warrior held *abat'leth* in his left hand, his weight well and lightly balanced on the balls of his feet, the length of the blade resting in the crook of his arm.

Show-off, Alexander thought.

Then the camera zoomed in on the warrior's face, light[52]falling on him in a very precise manner, elongating his nose, casting deep shadows under his eyes, well-formed cheekbones, and unusually high forehead ridges. *This is staged*, he realized, knowing that honest reports from disaster sites didn't have such a theatrical flair.

Pulling back and swinging up to shoulder level, the camera revealed that the warrior did not stand alone on the Ka'Toth plains but was surrounded by hundreds of warriors, all of them standing silently, their respectful attention directed at the one in the center. On the crater half of the screen, another group of warriors stood along the perimeter, seemingly oblivious of the putrid smoke and dust-rain.

A thought nagged at Alexander, and before it even had time to fully form, he heard it spoken by someone in the crowd behind him: "How did so many men manage to find their way to the center of this carnage so quickly? Why aren't they searching for survivors?" And there was no need to respond, because everyone knew the answer: *They found their way there so quickly because they created the carnage. And they aren't searching for survivors because they know there are none.*

The eyes always told the truth. So Martok imagined that he stood eye-to-eye with this warrior as he studied the viewscreen.

He decided that this foe—because surely he must be a foe—possessed intelligence, even sly wit, but his expressionless eyes evinced a chill that would never inspire fealty. A great mind could conceive clever, dangerous plans, physical prowess could make a great warrior—this foe might have both. But the eyes revealed that he would never be a great leader.

[53]The general bared his teeth and snarled loudly enough for everyone on the bridge to hear him. "Ha'Dlbah!" he barked, then looked around at the bridge crew for a response and was surprised when

there was none. *What?* Martok wondered, and looked back at the screen.

The warrior had held up his hand for attention, as unnecessary a gesture as Martok could imagine. “*Warriors, subjects,*” he began, his voice low, but clear. “*Klingons everywhere, I am Morjod. I come before you today to proclaim myself a criminal. I alone am responsible for the destruction you see.*” And as he said the words, one camera pulled back, finally offering up a clear shot of the site where the building that had once housed the Klingon soul had stood.

The general had never considered himself an emotional man, but he felt an unfamiliar heat behind his eye. Beside him, K’Tar—a warrior renowned across the empire for his icy calm—smashed his fist down on the arm of his command chair and uttered a curse Martok had not heard used since his boyhood in Ketha.

Still, despite this, no one stirred. Martok half expected he would have to begin tearing crew members away from the consoles to prevent them from attempting to rain down fiery death on this Morjod, but no one moved. It was, in its own fashion, as surreal and disturbing as the crater that had been the Great Hall. *What is wrong with them?* Martok wondered, and then realized he wasn’t doing anything, either. *What’s wrong with me?*

“Before you call me enemy, know that I am a warrior for truth, a freedom fighter.” And with these words, Morjod’s voice tightened, his eyes blazed, and Martok felt an unexpected, irrational thrill in the pit of his stomach.

[54] “*For I have on this day freed all Klingons from the grip of treachery, the treachery of the corrupt council members who waited here to meet the new chancellor. My actions have released our people from the tyranny of traitors!*” With these last words, Morjod’s voice thundered and the first of many cheers rang out from the crowd around him.

He turned around and waved his hand at the crowd of faces behind him. “*Those council members of true heart,*” he said, “*are out here with me, safe from harm, warned long before this day of reckoning. You are liberated, Qo’noS! Saved from your downfall. You know in your hearts That this is true. Look within yourselves and ask, Does the empire not stand on the brink of ruin? Some may say, ‘Have we not just won a great victory? Did we not defeat the Dominion?’*” Morjod hesitated and looked thoughtful, as if he was giving this idea serious consideration, then shook his head. “*But how could this be true? Did we, the Klingons, defeat the Dominion? Be honest with yourselves if with no one else.*”

Martok heard shouts of anger and despair from the crowd on the viewscreen and more than one muttered curse from around the bridge. *What?!* he almost shouted. *How can you—even for a moment—give credence to these half truths?* Morjod’s words troubled him, and he longed to shout his angry response, but, again, his mute protests remained in his heart when he should be rallying his crew to attack. *What could be wrong with me ...?*

“Treaties! Alliances! Compromises!” Morjod continued, his voice rough with anger. “*The policies of this council have cost us dearly. Where once we were feared, now we are mocked. Where once we conquered, now we*[55]*negotiate.*” He spat out the word as though it had left a trail of slime along his tongue. “*Where once we were conquerors, now we Klingons are a subject people, nothing more than hirelings, servants, kuve.*” Martok’s blood rose at the use of the word, and he heard answering growls from both the bridge crew and the warriors surrounding Morjod.

“Yes, you heard me—kuve. *Lowly menials of another power: the accursed Federation.*” Morjod’s

voice dropped low, and the camera zoomed in on his eyes. He continued, *“We may deny it to each other, my friends, but we cannot deny it to ourselves. In our warrior hearts, we know this to be true.*

“They have meddled in our politics, corrupted our culture...*they have even chosen our leaders for us. And the chief architect of this insidious interference? Who do I speak of?*” Martok heard the crowd’s muttered answers, but he did not have to hear them to know what they thought.

“Who?” Morjod prompted.

A grizzled veteran stepped forward from the crowd at Morjod’s feet and yelled, *“Worf!”*

“Who?”

The crowd roared, *“WORF!”*

“NO!” Martok and Worf both shouted in response, but Martok felt as though he had wrestled a wild *Grishnar* cat just to say that single word. Looking upon the faces of the bridge crew, he saw all were transfixed. He had new respect for his enemy’s powers. A formidable foe would be far more satisfying to defeat.

When Alexander heard his father’s name invoked like a curse, he knew it was his cue to get moving[56] again. Ducking his head, he hunched down and wormed his way through the wall of people gathered around one of the hundreds of public viewscreens he had passed.

Behind him, he heard Morjod snarl, *“Worf! Son of Mogh, the lapdog of the Federation, he who was the right hand of the human Picard, the last Arbiter of Succession. The Son of Mogh gave us Gowron—and now Martok! You see the pattern, my people, do you not?”*

His hollow laugh chilled Alexander to the core. Hearing grunts and seeing knowing nods in the crowd he was trying to extricate himself from, he pushed forward with renewed determination, resisting the impulse to continue watching. That had been the curious part, he realized. Though he knew Morjod spoke lies, Alexander had felt surprisingly accepting of his words as he listened. His voice had ... a hypnotic quality that lulled his doubts. *He must be using some kind of technology*, Alexander reasoned. *That’s the only way he could convince everyone to accept him so quickly.* Such techniques were not unknown, though they had been proven to be ineffective except when used against weak-willed individuals, and though Klingons were a lot of things, weak-willed wasn’t one of them. Otherwise, why would these people, with their faces streaked with soot mingled with blood, forgive the one who had wrought this horror on them only moments before?

Alexander had managed to reach the gate leading to the third ring before the pull of Morjod’s voice became too much to resist. He succumbed to his curiosity and turned around to watch.

“But the arrogant Federation made a mistake. They thought we would sit by and accept their edicts. They[57]*thought they could pour wastewater down our throats and tell us to us praise it as bloodwine, but they were mistaken. They know nothing of Klingon pride!*”

The crowd cheered, pumping their fists in the air. Any minute, Alexander expected wild-eyed anger to sweep through the crowd like a brushfire. Forcing himself to turn away, he crept through a crack in the

gate. His hurried walk steadily increased tempo until he ran—ran as if a city drunk with blood lust would shortly discover his presence and descend upon him, greedily tearing him limb from limb.

Here it comes, Martok thought. *The part where he puts me on trial. Ha! Let him try!*

Morjod paused, turned, and took a moment to look up and down the line of men and women that stood behind him, even stopped and peered into the eyes of one or two. Finally, he returned his gaze to the camera and asked, “*But what of Martok, the mongrel ...son of No One.*”

The insult to his father ... Martok’s scalp prickled, his palms itched, and his cheeks flushed. A dry mouth, gluey eye ... like emerging from a drugged stupor. Martok anticipated the day where he would slit Morjod’s throat, forever silencing the voice that spoke dishonorably of his family.

“The general has enjoyed his share of victories.” Around him on the bridge, Martok felt eyes flicking at him.

“But at what price?” Morjod asked. “*And is it not conspicuous that these great victories only began after he had been stationed at a Federation outpost? What does this mean, my brother and sister warriors?*”

“Martok conspired with our enemies. They would aid[58]him in battle if he agreed to assume the chancellorship as their agent. But I have taken steps to prevent this plan from coming to fruition.”

Ah, very clever, Martok thought. *Spin a web of lies and then say, “Don’t worry about this, because it will not come to pass.”*

“Today,” Morjod continued, “*was meant to be the day when we would welcome our new chancellor. And the Federation ambassador who was meant to be the one who stood behind the chancellor’s chair, close enough to watch everyone, close enough to whisper his poisonous counsel into Martok’s ear. Perhaps even close enough to make sure that none of us went too near and saw something we were not meant to see?*” He held up his finger and let the thought sink in, but did not linger on it. “*Perhaps. But there will be no threat from the chancellor or his master, no threat from the Federation. I have made sure of this.*” Morjod sliced the air with the blade of his bat’leth. “*I have brought down many Houses today because it is time to begin anew. We are a fallen people, but we can rise again to regain our lost glory. It is not too late! We are Klingons!*” He shot one arm to the sky, and around him rose a forest of fists. He extended his other arm, and scores of bat’leth?, shone red under the bloody sun. “*We shall rise again and WE—SHALL—CONQUER!*”

The crowd howled its affirmation. Even around the bridge, Martok saw a few fists raised, though quickly lowered when crewmates hissed warnings.

Morjod signaled for quiet. “*But we must be careful, warriors,*” he continued, his voice once again low and conspiratorial. “*This will not be a simple task, or one that can be accomplished with only courage and the[59]sharp edge of a good blade. We will be facing mighty foes. So we must have a mighty weapon.*”

The camera pulled back and revealed a large container vehicle, one typically used to move heavy equipment or herds of slow-moving animals, dropping slowly from the sky, antigravs glowing dull blue. As the large container settled, thrusters kicking up clouds of yellow grit, Morjod approached it.



As the transport left the area, Morjod could once again be heard over the whine of its departing engines. He began again, “*I want you to meet. ...*” but had to stop and search for the appropriate word. When he thought of it, he chuckled, and Martok found that his laugh was infectious. He pointed a control at the front of the container and it dropped forward with a leaden thud.

“I want you to meet...*my hunting pack.*”

What Alexander saw on the viewscreen stopped him dead in his tracks.

Having been raised by the Rozhenkos, he had grown up with the legends of Minsk: child-eating witches, baba yagas, and snarling wolves that stole babies from their cradles. All these stories provided him with a healthy array of childhood nightmares. The middle-of-the-night-wake-up-in-a-cold-sweat moments when he swore he heard claws scraping at his frosted windows. And while his upbringing had been oriented toward his human side, Alexander wasn't immune to the night terrors of a Klingon. He knew the primitive stirrings of his ancestors' fears. As he watched the scene on the viewscreen unfold, he felt his gut clench, his fists curl, his nails digging into the palms of his hands.

So he knew, without being told, what stood on the lip[60] of Morjod's container—what his “hunting pack” actually was. He saw huge heads almost brushing the top of the container. Black, wide-set eyes glistened like beetles, blinked, and a long, gray tongue flicked over narrow lips, revealing rows of evenly spaced, small but blade-sharp teeth. Two arms dangled below wide shoulders, and each hand had three long clever fingers and two opposable thumbs. A sound between a snarl and a sigh emitted from its throat.

Alexander felt some ancient part of his brain speak, a voice that lived between the base of his brain and the top of his spine, and it was telling his hips and legs that now would be a very, very good time to turn and run. He liked to believe he could prevent his legs from playing traitor, so he held himself still, but only just barely.

Nearby, he heard a hoarse whisper, “Hur'q. It's a Hur'q.”

He shivered.

Five hundred years after Kahless, they had come to Qo'noS, stripped it bare, and slaughtered nearly every living thing. The survivors of the carnage had finally driven off the plunderers with a little carnage of their own, winning back the world that had been taken from them. And while Kahless was remembered as the one who had wrought the hearts and souls of his kind, it wasn't until they'd fought the Hur'q that they had become *Klingons*.

But that was a thousand years ago, Alexander wondered. *The Hur'q are supposed to be extinct!*

He watched as the first Hur'q stood for a moment at the lip of the open container and stared around at the Klingons. Morjod looked up at it, its low-slung head a good meter above his own, and grinned. He beckoned to[61] it and the beast strode forward, appearing slow and docile, even awkward, as if it had just awakened from a deep sleep. Stunned, Alexander watched a second Hur'q follow the first. This one seemed more awake, so when it first emerged into the sunlight, it blinked its green, pupilless eyes, tilted back its head, and screeched its pleasure to the skies.

Up on the screen, near the edge of the crowd, a Klingon warrior broke and ran. The Hur'q twisted its

head to follow the man's path, then dropped its shoulders and tensed as if it was about to spring. Morjod saw these movements and called to it, "No!"

The Hur'q looked at him, lowered its eyes, and subsided. Falling into step behind the first, it stalked down from the container, and then Martok saw that there were two, possibly three more still in the box. *Slaves*, Alexander thought, incredulous. *He's made slaves of them. Or pets. But how?*

The collectively stunned crew of the *Negh'Var* watched the viewscreen with undisguised horror. Of all the scenarios Martok believed Morjod capable of, this was one he hadn't considered. Resurrecting ancient demons to terrify the citizenry into submission would be more effective than dispatching assassins or making mass arrests. Martok had underestimated the lengths the usurper was willing to go to claim victory; he would not make that mistake again.

Standing before the Hur'q, Morjod raised his arms again, *bat'leth* shining, and cried out, "I have my hunters. Now all we need is to catch scent of our prey: the cur Martok, his Federation spy, and any who would help them." He extended his weapon, then slowly swept[62] it across the heads of the crowd, inviting them inside its curve. "Would any of you help them?"

"NO!"

"Will you help me build a new empire?"

"YES!"

"Then raise your blades and tell me, who will lead you to victory, to honor, to a new day?!"

And with a sound like thunder, like a drum, like a death knell, they answered as one: "MORJOD!"

And that was when the first disrupter bolt hit the *Negh'Var*.

## 4

PHARH HAD ALWAYS considered himself a Ferengi with a very limited imagination. He took pride in the idea. Imagination, he decided, was not one of the essential ingredients for profit making. As often as not, an innovative idea could end up costing money. Pharh was fairly certain there was a Rule of Acquisition about that, but he couldn't remember exactly how it went. He never had felt a burning need for a good memory, either. He had memorized the essentials: his name, address, teleport code, and credit rating. Memorizing a bunch of rules that could all be distilled down to the same thing—don't give the other guy a chance to get one over on you—didn't prove *frinx* ing thing as far as Pharh was concerned.

If he were a Ferengi with a little more imagination (or a slightly greater inclination toward introspection), he might wonder whether it was his lack of imagination that had led him to his current situation, which was, to wit, under a table. In a Klingon bar. On Qo'noS. Just as[64] the entire planet appeared to be on the brink of going barking mad.

Or maybe I'm being too hard on them, Pharh thought as he covered his head with his forearms as something heavy bounced off the tabletop. *They've had a bad few months. Years, really. Decades, if you think about it. Maybe they just need to blow off some steam.* Sounded reasonable when you put

it that way.

He rearranged his arms and legs, trying to find a more comfortable position, when he put his palm in a puddle of something he fervently hoped was old, congealed bloodwine. Something poked him on the top of his head. Klingon tables tended to be set low to the ground, and their undersides, for some reason, were frequently festooned with pointy objects (no one ever asked why), and since Pharih was unusually tall for a Ferengi he had to be careful how much he sat up.

Back on Ferenginar, some of his friends ... well, “friends” would be inaccurate. Pharih had never really had friends. “Classmates” was a better word. But even that wasn’t quite right, either. He pondered for a moment and finally settled on the right description. Several of the “guys who used to feign friendship and then extort his money after school every day”—that was it—had been struck with the idea that one of Pharih’s ancestors had been intimate with a Klingon at some point. It was, they said, the only thing that could explain how he could have such a big head and yet be so stupid at the same time. “It must be bone in there,” they said. Pharih had never felt like he was in a position to argue the point, especially because most of the time, while the point was being discussed, two or three of the “guys” were counting his money.

The only good thing that had come of those[65]“discussions” was that they had made Pharih curious about Klingons. He pondered that fact as the twenty or so Klingon warriors around him began to chant the name of the man who had been on the 2-D screen mounted over the bar. It was a quandary: Pharih had always been fairly sure he had left Ferenginar because he had wanted to get the *krug* away from his family, but now he had to wonder. Maybe it had been the remark about Klingons all along.

Of course, there had been all *sorts* of reasons for wanting to get away from his family. His mother had wanted him to settle down with a nice, traditional Ferengi girl, never mind what Pharih thought. His moogie didn’t hold with any of the modern ideas that had started sprouting up like fungus ever since Zek had taken up with that female, Ishka. Pharih’s moogie thought a wife should stay at home, stay naked, and set the thermostat way too high for anyone else to be comfortable.

Then there was his father. Usually ... Somewhere nearby ... Usually over at Uncle Mirt’s house playing tongo. Uncle Mirt’s house, typically, wasn’t so warm, not because his wife wasn’t a traditionalist and didn’t set the thermostat too high, but because AuntMarna—the *theoretical* AuntMarna—had gone out to the store to pick up some *puja* butter about eighteen years ago and no one had thought to go look for her since. Uncle Mirt seemed to be bearing up under his loss pretty well.

Then, of course, there was the whole problem of the family business and Pharih’s place in it, which was, predictably, near the bottom. Pharih’s people had made their money by mining out landfills for recyclable resources. They had bored down through all the trash on Ferenginar ages ago and were now focusing their talents on the[66]midden heaps of alien races and peoples who were less interested in getting intimate with their ancestors’ refuse. Fortunately, most of the physical part of the business was subcontracted out to locals, so Pharih had never been expected to do any digging or sloshing or sorting as part of his training. On the other hand, he *had* been expected to learn as much as he could about the accounting end of the business, which turned out, in its own fashion, to be just as much about digging, sloshing, and sorting.

But as exciting as accounting frequently was, Pharih knew he needed something more. The adventure bug had, against all odds, bitten him; Pharih suspected it had all started when he was twelve years old.

On one of the rare clear nights, he had decided to sleep outside on the flat roof of their building to escape the wall-rattling thunder of his mother’s snoring. Pharih had fallen asleep fairly quickly despite the

oppressively uncluttered sky, but had awakened when something spiny and multilegged had crawled into his sleep sack. Pharh never saw what it was, but it made a crunch-squish noise when he rolled over on it. This, in and of itself, was not all that unusual in his home. When you were in the trash-mining business, even in the managerial area, there was, on any given night, the real possibility that something lumpy or spiny or skittery would run across the floor when the lights came on. Sometimes you knew its name. Sometimes, if you were lucky, its name was “supper.” The important thing was that Pharh had been asleep one second and the next was performing—had he but known—a very passable version of the Antareans’ *torekadora* dance. On Ferenginar—as on most worlds occupied by bipeds—this step was usually[67]referred to as “Get-it-off-my-neck-get-it-off-my-neck-get-it-off-my-neck!”

There was a ledge around the roof—Ferengi are, if nothing else, a cautious people—and it would have been high enough for any normal-sized Ferengi, but Pharh was a long-legged lad. He cleared the ledge on his third pirouette and unexpectedly found himself staring down into open air. Granted, it was open *Ferenginar* air. There were whole weeks where the skies over Pharh’s hometown were so dense that a light-footed individual could walk to the store and back again without ever touching foot to pavement, but this hadn’t been one of those evenings.

Pharh managed to twist around in midair and fling out both of his long arms before gravity pulled rank and yanked him below the level of the ledge. Even as he sat under the Klingon pub table and tried to curl himself up into a tighter ball, Pharh could recall the smell of wet concrete, the way the cloth on the knees of his pajamas frayed as he scrambled up the side of the building, and the echo of his own howling between the buildings. It was, without question, the most terrifying moment of his life.

And, though this didn’t make any sense to the very real thick, pasty core of Ferengi in Pharh, he had never felt more alive.

When he told his parents about it the next day, they simultaneously displayed relief and disappointment. Relief because an “alive” Pharh could be counted on to work for virtually nothing and be a valuable deduction for several more years. Disappointment because the conglomerate that made the sleeping sack and the pajamas had deep pockets and could have been relied upon (at some point years in the future after all the proper judges had been bribed) to cough up a hefty settlement[68]They considered suing the building’s owner, but Pharh’s parents lacked the imagination and free time to sue themselves. Not that other Ferengi hadn’t tried this and made it work well for both parties.

This was all well for his parents. But what was a young Ferengi to do when he saw the abyss yawn open beneath him, heard his heart race and his blood thundering in his ears, felt perspiration (and other liquids) soak into his pajamas, and decided that he *liked* it? He had, Pharh realized, almost died and found out that, until that moment, he had never truly lived.

Because he was a Ferengi and because he loved his parents, Pharh stayed silent. He endured what he came to recognize as the grind of his daily existence because he knew that the day would come soon when his apprenticeship would end. Pharh’s father, as his own father had before him, would take him aside and ask with a conspiratorial leer, “So, you want to take a few weeks off and go do some exploring?” Pharh was supposed to leer in response, take the offered latinum, pretend to go off for a few weeks on a wild tour of all the bordellos and casinos that Ferenginar had to offer, but secretly keep the money and use it as a stake in his first big private (that is, no sharing profit with the family) venture. It was an old family tradition.

Instead, Pharh took the money, called his cousin Mawk the travel agent, and asked (without saying why) which ship currently in dock and scheduled to leave that day was going to be traveling farthest from Ferenginar. After a few minutes’ checking, Mawk told Pharh about a slow freighter headed to Qo’noS.

Passage to the Klingon homeworld was always cheap because, basically, no one beside Klingons ever wanted to go there. Pharh almost laughed out loud. It must be, he decided, some kind of a[69]sign. After booking the passage, he then used the balance of the latinum to pay Mawk the bribe that would keep him silent until Pharh was far enough away that his parents wouldn't pay to bring him back.

Pharh spent the first few weeks of his very long trip staring at bare walls, afraid to leave his tiny cabin because he didn't like the idea of what Klingons would think of him. Then, as time passed, as he became accustomed to solitude, Pharh realized that he had never had time by himself to simply *think*. Much to his surprise, he discovered that he wasn't stupid or slow or thick-witted, but simply required a quiet space around him in order to string thoughts together. Pharh began to plan, so by the time he arrived on Qo'noS, a strategy for staying away from his family indefinitely *and* turning a profit had been formulated. He was still a Ferengi, after all.

And it had just started coming together. Pharh had figured out that, yes indeed, there were huge areas of Qo'noS that required the services of someone who knew how to mine resources out of landfills and, predictably, there weren't many Klingons willing to do it. The Young Entrepreneur had been on the verge of working out a potentially very profitable deal with one of the government councillors. But then someone dropped a building on that government councillor. The Klingons—most of whom were really fine fellows once you got used to the snarling, but everyone had their limits—had gone crazy. When the chanting had started, he knew it was time to find a place to hide. Pharh didn't think there was any Rule of Acquisition about that—"When the chanting starts, find a place to hide"—but there should have been.

Current status: One of the Klingons had jumped up[70]on the table on the other side of the bar and some other fellows looked like they were surrounding him and he was talking ... er, shouting at them. Sounded like more oratory. They liked oratory on Qo'noS. But, wait, no, it wasn't oratory; it was a knife fight. Pharh squashed himself even smaller and tried not to worry about what now soaked into his pants.

And today started out so well, Alexander lamented as he jumped up onto the barroom table. He ducked as a pewter mug flew dangerously close to his skull.

But then, he thought, drawing his *d'k tagh* and loosening his disrupter in its holster, *the sky fell*. So much for the day's low point being his father's chastisement for his late arrival (and he would have humbly accepted the chastisement, which would have pleased Worf).

Being pragmatic, he wondered if he would ever see his father again; the thought troubled him. They hadn't been at their best the last time they had talked, and Alexander had been hoping they could do better this time. Worf had still been wallowing—Alexander's word, not Worf's—in doubt about defeating Gowron in battle and anointing (again, the son's word, not the father's) Martok as chancellor, but Alexander had to assume his father's mood had improved since then. That was the hope, anyway. It was never easy to know what would make Worf happy. Even the use of the two words "Worf" and "happy" in the same thought came hard. ...

Now Alexander would be satisfied knowing whether his father was alive, happy or not.

He hoped that *he* would make it out alive to find out his father's fate. He'd come so close—not even three[71]hundred meters—to escaping the First City when he saw a flash of recognition in a face in the crowd.

Ducking into a tavern proved to be the wrong move.

A maintenance worker took a swing at Alexander's leg with a prybar. Alexander did something very few Klingons would do: he took a step backward, putting himself out of range of the backstroke. The worker stepped up on the bench, but before he could find his balance, Alexander stepped forward, within the sweep of his weapon, and jabbed him in the base of his throat with his fingers. Alexander had long known that he could not match most Klingons for strength or ferocity, so he had made a study of Klingon nerve clusters. His attacker dropped to the ground, clutching his throat, unable to move anything below his neck. He would stay that way for about three minutes, Alexander knew, and then recover quickly. It was the sort of move that should be followed by a couple of swift kicks to the midsection, but Alexander didn't have time for follow-through, not with the ring of angry faces around him. Time to leave.

Alexander leaned back against the window, felt the panes and frames give with a bit of pressure, and decided they were probably not transparent aluminum. *Good.* He drew his disruptor and the mob, as one, inhaled its breath and held it. *Also good.* He spun quickly and shot out the window, jumped down to the ground, and was halfway across the street before the last shards had chinked onto the pavement.

He counted to himself as he ran down the slick cobblestone street. If he only made it to three before the shouting started, he was dead. If he made it to ten, he would probably make it to the intersection and get away.

Five...*six*...*seven*...

[72]A roar went up behind him, and then he heard glass shattering, masonry crumbling, and name-calling: the holy trinity of mob sounds.

His father, Alexander knew, would find a defensible position, prepare his weapon, and turn to face his foes. Alexander was exactly a good enough warrior to admit that he wouldn't know a defensible position from a hole in the wall. He spotted an alley across the street. *That'll do . . .* An alley might be narrow enough that he would be able to avoid facing too many at once. If no one in the first wave or two had a disruptor, he might stand a chance. There was even the possibility that the hypothesized mind-altering effect of Morjod's transmission might wear off if enough time passed.

Behind him, Alexander heard the stomp of heavy boots and the growl of angry voices. He caught names—Worf's and Martok's—and then, every few seconds, someone would joyously howl "*Morrrr-jodddd!*" and the mob would roar again. *What the hell is going on?* Alexander wondered. *Could it all be just the pent-up rage of Klingons who have been forced to behave?* And then he cursed himself. *Will thinking about this keep you alive for even a few more seconds, you fool? Concentrate on the job at hand!*

Alexander's footfalls echoed louder as he ran into the mouth of the alleyway. A disruptor shot cracked off the stone building to his right just as he sidestepped around some trash containers, and then he slipped in a greasy puddle, almost knocking over some old crates. Back at the mouth of the alley, the mob seemed to hesitate for just a second. They were enraged, but these were all seasoned veterans. None of them would do anything as [73]stupid as rush headlong into a narrow passage without a moment's scouting. Alexander frowned. This was bad.

The alley jiggled to the left, narrowed, and then turned again to the right. *Okay, better. This is better. The mob will slow down.* Adrenaline pumping through his veins now, he felt like his feet had wings. Then, turning the corner, he ran face-first into a poured plasteel wall, the kind that seems to grow in random places all across cities like Qo'noS, usually because somebody in the distant past had grown

tired of strangers using their backyard as a shortcut. It was eight feet high and, Alexander guessed, topped with some variation of razor wire.

Alexander tried thinking like his father, to analyze and devise a tactical solution. *Go forward? Impossible. Go back? Not an option.* Listening to the sounds of his pursuers threading their way through the narrow turn, he decided they must have been acting cooperatively. *Only one option left,* Alexander decided, and felt the hormonal rush drain through his heels into the damp street. Checking his stance, he reset his grip on his weapons (sweaty palms) and tried to make peace with the idea of dying. *A lot of things I would have liked to have done,* he thought wistfully. *Including ...well, just about everything.*

When the first row of attackers inched into view, Alexander's spirits rose. There were only three of them, none of them very large and none familiar. Maybe the effects of whatever influence was upon them were wearing off and his shipmates would find him. Then the trio shuffled forward and Alexander saw the second rank behind them, each of them armed with a disrupter, which they had obviously used to "motivate" the first rank. His heart sank. Obviously, the first three were only cannon[74]fodder, meant only to make Alex waste his disrupter charge.

"Oh hell," Alexander whispered. He had learned precisely enough tactics to see how the rest of the story was going to play out. He would have time to vaporize the first row of men as they left the relative safety of the narrow turn, but that would give the second row time to close on him. Someone would grab his weapon and someone else would trip him and then they would be on him, like a pack of lions on a jackal. In that last moment before he pressed the trigger, Alexander reflected that he had felt like that too often in his life: like he didn't have a choice.

And then, at that moment, two very remarkable things happened almost simultaneously.

The first was a dark shape dropping out of the sky between him and the first rank of attackers. The form—a Klingon male, Alexander thought, though he could not be certain because of a heavy hooded cloak—made practically no sound as it hit the cobbles and rolled to its feet. The hooded man quickly sidestepped his way past the first rank of attackers and was in among the second rank before any one of them could react. He disarmed all three of the larger warriors with a single sweep of his *bat'leth*, then curled himself into a tight ball and back-flipped under the legs of the man behind him.

All this unfolded in the space of moments between Alexander's deciding to fire his weapon and actually pressing the trigger. The hooded warrior, somehow, had anticipated this and uncurled from his tumble just under Alexander's extended arm. He hooked the tip of the *bat'leth* over Alexander's wrist and yanked it downward so that the beam struck the cobbles at the attackers' feet.[75]The resulting explosion scattered the first two ranks of attackers like tenpins.

Unfortunately, there was a third rank—three *really* big Klingons—and they rushed forward with weapons drawn. The hooded warrior stepped forward, tripped the first with an outstretched boot, then caught the blade of the second with the edge of his *bat'leth*. Alexander managed to gather his wits and swung the blunt end of his *d'k tahg* into the solar plexus of the third, knocking him back into the opposite wall. Then, while the tripped warrior was trying to untangle his legs, Alexander cold-cocked him with the butt of his disrupter. He was fairly certain these men were innocent pawns, he decided, and he didn't want their blood on his hands.

The hooded figure turned the last warrior's attack away with an elegant parry, then butted him once in the midsection with the dull curved edge. When his attacker doubled over, the hooded figure lifted his knee sharply and there came a soft popping noise. The last man standing fell over like a load of dirty

socks tumbling down a laundry chute.

Alexander turned toward the hooded one to thank him, but the warrior was still poised for battle. *What now?* Alexander wondered. *Is he looking for another fight?* But, no, he saw. He wasn't. The warrior tipped his head so that Alexander would look behind him.

There had been one more attacker, though this one had stayed in the narrow place long enough to see how things would play out. He was grinning savagely, mostly because he was holding a disrupter, one of the big, old-fashioned kind that warriors with poor self-esteem liked to carry around to enhance their self-image. It was pointed at Alexander's back. Unfortunately, there[76] was nothing the hooded warrior could do unless he could make a standing jump straight up over Alexander's head. Incongruously, Alex found himself thinking, *Well, that would be something to see.* ...

Then, the second remarkable thing happened.

Alexander was expecting that the next thing he was going to hear would be a sharp, merciless, metallic click (which would be followed by a flash of light and the beating of the oars as the Barge of the Dead pulled up to the curb to wait for him). Instead, what he heard was a soft, slightly wet thud. The savage grin collapsed and the man's eyes crossed. He dropped to his knees and seemed on the verge of collecting himself when there came a second thud.

A tiny form dressed in a garish green and gold suit stepped out from behind him. It was, Alexander saw, a Ferengi. He was carrying a heavy cast-iron cooking implement. "Sorry," he said in barely comprehensible Klingon. "Had to go find something to hit someone with." He held up the frying pan and stared at it, obviously trying to remember the word.

"Frying pan," Alexander said in Federation Standard.

"Right," the Ferengi said in the same language.

"Well, thanks," Alexander said. "I think you just saved my life."

The Ferengi waved his hand nonchalantly. "No problem," he said. "Happy to do it." He looked down at the prone form. "Do you think I killed him? I wouldn't want to have to get involved in some kind of blood feud."

"I doubt it," Alexander said, holstering his disruptor. "We have thick skulls. It takes a lot to crack one open." He extended his hand, Terran fashion, to shake. "I'm Alexander Rozhenko," he said. The Ferengi introduced[77] himself as Pharh. "If there's anything I can ever do for you, please just track me down and ask." He glanced at the hooded warrior and explained, "I mean, I think I'm experiencing a profound life change right this moment, but if I live through it, I owe you both."

The Ferengi didn't appear to know how to respond to this, so he focused on the more mundane aspect. "Alexander Rozhenko?" he asked. "Doesn't sound Klingon. Are you from around here?"

"Not really," Alexander said. "But more than you, I believe. Maybe you should find someplace to hide or get to an embassy or something. I think that the world is going a little crazy."

The hooded warrior stepped up beside Alexander and tugged at his arm. "Wise words, young warrior," he said from the depths of his robe. He, too, extended his hand, to shake the Ferengi's. Alexander saw that the warrior's hand was deeply seamed and carried many scars. "Time for us to go, young



Alexander. The battle is joined.”

He tapped a control on his wrist, and a line with a bar attached dropped from the sky to their feet. Alexander looked up and saw the dull blue pulse of antigravs. Some kind of aircraft, he decided, modified to be nearly silent. *That explains how he got here, anyway.* Alexander grabbed the line and set his foot on the bar. “It’s not like I have any options,” he said before he realized what he was saying. Part of him, he understood, was simply too curious not to go along with his mysterious benefactor.

The warrior put his foot on the other side of the bar and seemed to chuckle. “There are always options, young warrior,” he said. “Though sometimes you have to look hard to find them.” He tripped a switch with his [78]toe and the bar rose smoothly into the air. Below them, Alex watched as the Ferengi disappeared up the alley toward whatever destiny awaited him.

As the blue antigravs grew larger before his eyes, Alexander found himself muttering, “And today started out so well.”

## 5

CAPTAIN K’TARDIED saving the general.

Seconds after sensors detected the decloaking ships, the first barrage sliced into the *Negh’Var*’s outer hull before the shields came online. Martok clutched the captain’s chair as the deck rolled under his feet.

The general and K’Tar ducked to the side as a power conduit over the captain’s chair burst and exploded in a shower of sparks. The breaker cut in before there was any serious electrical damage, but not before the explosion fed back into a nearby air-filtration unit, blowing out its compressor and, worse, the contaminant container. Martok—like most Klingons—had an extremely acute olfactory sense and he reeled as the black, effluent mist settled over him. Several bridge crew members retched or gagged, but no one left their station.

K’Tar waved his hand in front of his face. “Smells like Romulans in here!” he shouted, and the crew laughed bawdily. In lowered tones, he said matter-of-factly to [80]Martok, “Chancellor, I’ve told the shipyards about that design flaw. Could you ask them to correct it?”

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, Martok said, “Anything you like, Captain.”

At strategic intelligence, as he always did when he had served as Martok’s first officer, Worf assumed his Starfleet persona and began to calmly recite damage reports off a status display: “Secondary shield generators are gone; aft thrusters disabled; seventy-percent drop in power from the warp core.” He glanced up at Martok, then overcame his instinct and locked eyes with K’Tar. “Captain, the board does not show it, but there must have been a direct hit in the engineering section. We must assume primary power will fail any moment.”

“Contact the fleet,” K’Tar ordered the comm officer. “Inform them of our position and request assistance. Operations: divert all remaining power to the shields and ready primary disrupt ...” K’Tar’s voice trailed off as his eyes traveled to the ceiling. A fine thread of dust trickled onto the back of Martok’s neck.

Before he could react, Martok heard the grating creak of a large weld tearing loose. There came a sharp pressure of a hand against his shoulder and he found himself lying across the navigation console. He felt a

heavy thud up through the deck and several people shouted out simultaneously.

With a glance, Martok analyzed what must have happened: only one weld had let go, so the filtration unit had swung down as though on a hinge and pendulumed through the space where he had been standing like a giant's sledgehammer. Three-quarters of the way through the swing, the second brace must have let go and the full weight of the unit had crashed to the deck.[81]The filtration case, which had already been cracked open, must have burst on impact, and now several weeks' worth of accumulated dust and filth boiled up into the air. Seeing proved difficult, but Martok knew where both he and the captain had been standing and who had shoved him out of harm's way.

"K'Tar!" he shouted, and plunged into the billowing cloud of grime, digging for the captain under the blanket of dust. As soon as Martok knelt beside him, he began a quick but systematic triage. K'Tar was breathing, but only barely. The machine pinned him from the waist down, and Martok could tell from the way his body was twisted that his spine must be shattered. Carefully lifting K'Tar's head, the general wiped away grime from his eyes, mouth, and nose. K'Tar's eyes fluttered open, then rolled back into his head as he stifled a cry of agony.

Half of the bridge crew clustered around them and began to offer help. K'Tar's eyes snapped open when he heard them and snarled, "Back to your posts!" All but two of the crew complied immediately, returning to their stations without another sound. The last two looked to Martok to be no more than children, probably first-year cadets pushed into active duty to fill out the depleted ranks. Even through his pain, K'Tar must have seen the uncertainty in their eyes. "You cannot help me now," he said, and his voice faltered even as he spoke. "Defend the chancellor."

The pair stared at their captain, and Martok was surprised to see that one of them was Tamal. He suddenly realized how much she reminded him of the first commander he served under as a bridge officer, Captain Kevas.

The woman had been brilliant, ruthless, and terrifying: the nearest thing to a deity Martok had seen to that[82]point in his life. The thought of watching godlike Kevas die, as Tamal now watched K'Tar die, pierced him like an assassin's needle.

Tamal stared at her captain for several long seconds, and then slowly slid her eyes off him and up to Martok's face.

Morjod's words have taken root in this one, he thought, and knew he would have to watch Tamal carefully from now on. "Obey your captain," Martok barked, and knew as soon as the words were out of his mouth that he had spoken wrongly.

Her eyes glittering with anger, Tamal snapped a smart salute. Both officers returned to their posts and Martok knelt down in the filth next to K'Tar.

"Watch her," K'Tar said, following Tamal with his eyes. "I won't be here. ..." The words trailed off and he groaned as a wave of pain washed over him.

"I will, old friend," Martok said. "You honor me with your sacrifice."

K'Tar tried to respond, but before he could say anything, he turned his head and retched. Martok held the captain's head as K'Tar's life's blood ran down over his hands, sticky and warm.

When his airway was clear again, the captain wheezed, "Tell my wife ... I died thinking of her."

“I will,” Martok promised. “And I will write a song in your honor. ...”

Surprisingly, K'Tar laughed at that, and blood bubbled up between his lips. “All right,” he sputtered. “But get someone else to sing it. You have ...” He tried to draw a great breath, but from the sound of it there was nothing left inside him to catch it. “... a terrible voice.” He smiled. “Always meant to tell you that ...”

[83]“If you had,” Martok said, smiling back, “I would have killed you.”

“You could have tried, my chancellor,” K'Tar whispered. “You could have *tried* .” There came a small popping sound and Martok thought that K'Tar was laughing, so he laughed along with him. When he looked down into the captain's eyes again, Martok saw that they were glazed over. Without thinking, he put his thumbs on the captain's eyelids, forced them open, then tilted back his own head and roared at the void. All around him, from their stations, the bridge crew joined his bellow, announcing that K'Tar, captain of the *Negh'Var*, was standing at the gates of *Sto-Vo-Kor*. It was, Martok knew, meant to be a howl of victory, a moment of joy that the life of this warrior had had a noble end, but hot anger threatened to taint the joy, anger at the needless death of this fine officer. *Here is a death that should not have been. He should have lived to fight a thousand battles more*, he thought, praying to Kahless that he would have the opportunity to disembowel Morjod in K'Tar's name.

Martok dropped K'Tar's head back into the dust and stood. The deck shuddered beneath him as the general settled into his command chair. “Worf,” he called. “Tell me who we're fighting.”

He was already mindful of the possibilities, but he wanted Worf's analysis. This attack might be a coincidence, he knew. It might have nothing at all to do with Morjod, and be a sneak attack from the Dominion or a Cardassian ship looking to settle a score. Possibly, Morjod had made an alliance with the Romulans. If so, he wouldn't be the first idiot Klingon to make such a mistake. Should that be the case, however, even the *Negh'Var*[84] would be hard-pressed to defeat more than one of the big *D'deridex* warbirds. ...

When Worf did not respond immediately, Martok looked toward strategic intelligence. The fine particulate matter spewed from the filtration unit was diffusing all around the bridge, so it was difficult to see Worf clearly, but Martok almost had to believe that his brother looked ...*confused*. “Worf!” Martok shouted. “Report!”

Worf shook himself, glanced at Martok, and then his fingers flew over the controls. “Chancellor ... I regret ... It's ...”

“Out with it, Worf!” Martok could barely believe that this was the same officer who had served as his second for so many months. *Could K'Tar's death have rattled him so badly? Or perhaps Morjod's words ...No!*

Unable to complete his sentence, Worf tapped a command into his console and pointed at the main screen.

The viewscreen was tuned to the *Negh'Var*'s bow camera, the one slung-behind the belly photon torpedo launcher, which was pointed down at Qo'noS's polar axis. As the general watched, the icecap seemed to waver and distort, then turned pale blue as a ship shimmered into view. The attacking ship's main guns blazed orange and red; then it danced out of range before the *Negh'Var* gunners could lock on. The entire run had lasted about four seconds, but it had been enough time for Martok's senses to

register their attacker.

A Klingon attack cruiser.

Martok felt the question “How could they?” begin to form on his lips, but caught himself before he asked it and managed to change it to “How many?”

Without looking up from the tactical display, Worf replied in clipped tones, “There are four. Also, six [85]birds-of-prey. We have damaged one ship’s impulse engines, but have not done any appreciable damage to the others. ...” The ship shook again and the lights dimmed to half, flickered once, and then stayed low. All around the bridge, crew pulled work lights out of emergency lockers and affixed them to their breastplates. The already dense air seemed to thicken.

Worf continued to read his report while everyone worked: “Shields are down to thirty percent, and at the rate we are currently draining auxiliary power, we will be dead in space in four minutes.”

“Weapons, get a lock and fire,” Martok bellowed. “Now!”

Martok watched the gunnery chief take aim at another bird-of-prey as it shed its cloak, and was grimly satisfied to see the ship disappear in a cloud of ionized debris and blue fire. The bridge deck bucked under Martok again, almost throwing him from his seat. Even as Worf announced, “Another direct hit to engineering,” the gunnery chief pounded both fists on his now dark panel.

They were weaponless.

“Chancellor,” Worf announced. “We are running out of options.”

The main screen switched to the aft camera. Two birds-of-prey lurked back there, but they stayed out of range. *Good*, Martok thought. *They don’t know we’ve lost our teeth. But how to turn that to our advantage?* But before Martok could devise a plan, he saw shadows blocking the stars on their port and starboard sides: they had visitors. Martok instinctively knew that two of the *Vor’cha*-class cruisers had moved into position. Another pair would close in from above and below, ready to set up crossfire.

[86]If he ordered the crew to abandon ship, Martok wondered, would their attackers fire on the escape pods? *Would a Klingon blow up the Great Hall?* he thought grimly. Escape pods were not an option. Martok considered another. “Worf, can you punch a hole through the planet’s defense grid?”

From the look on his face, Martok knew that Worf understood the proposal. A ship as large as the *Negh’Var* wasn’t meant to be taken into the atmosphere, but it *could* survive, if piloted skillfully. Worf initiated a quick scan, but it was cut off when a Klaxon pounded out the double-time klang that even the most fearless veteran dreaded: a warp-core breach.

Martok opened a channel to engineering, hearing only a brief cry of rage—of defiance—before static crackled throughout the bridge. The readout on his footrest display confirmed his fears. *Fine*, he thought. *Today is a good day, after all.*

“Navigator,” the general bellowed. “Distance to nearest ship?”

The navigator barked, “Less than two thousand *kellicams* .”

Grinning wolfishly, Martok ordered. “That will do, then. Helm! One-hundred-eighty-degree turn! On my

mark, full thrusters! Ramming speed!”

“Ramming speed, aye,” the helmsman acknowledged without hesitation.

The general’s heart swelled. The crippled and dying *Negh’Var* had a fine crew. They understood his orders and moved to obey them as swiftly as if he had ordered them to deliver the deathblow to an enemy flagship. *The explosion, he thought, will probably be visible all over the northern hemisphere, even where it is daylight.* [87] Perhaps Sirella and Drex would see it and one of them could use it as a stanza in a song when, they had taken revenge on Morjod and his minions. Martok felt a bittersweet pang at the thought of his wife. It would have been good to hold her one more time, but if this was to be his fate, then so be it. *I will see her again in Sto-Vo-Korand we will speak of this glorious day of battle . . .*

The main viewscreen shifted to the bow camera again and Martok watched the image of the lead *Vor’cha* cruiser growing. Its main cannon glowed red, and the light began to blossom like the bud of a flower.

“All ahead full!” the general ordered and, faithful to the last, the *Negh’Var* leaped forward, anxious for the kill.

On Qo’noS, at the edge of the First City, in a heavily shielded room in the center of the Federation embassy, Associate Consul Annup Bommu grew much too engrossed in watching the sensor display and leaned his considerable bulk against the back of the system engineer’s chair. Iris Hume almost tumbled to the floor, but she was a small, nimble person and managed to keep her seat. “Sorry, Iris,” Annup said, and eased away from the chair. He knelt down next to the console to get a better look at the monitor, and his assistant, the intimidatingly lovely Ms. Barnum, shuffled to the left. Annup had noticed that Ms. Barnum did not like to be closer to him than three feet at any time. He knew it was probably some kind of cultural thing—natives of the Indian subcontinent were comfortable standing close to each other—but it still bothered him. *Focus on the job at hand, Annup,* he told himself.

“What are we looking at, Iris?”

Annup had received the usual training in interpreting [88] sensor information when he had gone through his training, but a lot of ceremonial wine had flowed under the bridge since those days. He wished he didn’t have to ask for help, but there was no sense in pretending he understood what the swirling lines and colorful whorls meant.

Iris pointed at a screen and explained, “We’re looking at a raw-data dump from short-range sensor scans. I’m trying to get a handle on what’s going on in nearby space.”

“Why raw data?” Annup wasn’t sure if this was an important point, but he felt like he needed to ask a question. He hadn’t talked to Iris many times since she had joined the embassy staff, but he was under the impression that she was one of those rare technicians who didn’t use a word unless it was absolutely necessary.

“The Klingons are preventing the signals from our subspace relays from reaching our ground-based computers where the signals are decrypted.”

“But you were able to get something?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“The Klingons don’t dare block the carrier wave from the ground station to the embassy. If they do, an automatic signal goes out via subspace straight to Starfleet Command.”

“Right,” Annup said. He knew this part. “A fail-safe. So you’re getting some kind of signal off the relay, but you can’t read the data?”

“Not in its refined form, no. We’d need the relay’s software to talk to the software in the ground station to make it nice and pretty, but I’ve been able to bypass that.”

“How did you do that?”

Iris wagged her eyebrows. “I’m *good* .”

[89]Ms. Barnum inserted herself into the conversation. “So, you can read this?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Iris pointed at a series of orange and yellow whorls. “This means there are several high-energy engine systems—impulse engines—in low orbit over the north pole.”

“And this?” Ms. Barnum asked, pointing at a blotch of green ink.

“Some kind of concussive force, probably a disrupter.” She pressed a control and the green blotch swirled around and shifted toward the edge of the screen. Very suddenly, a purple blot blossomed in the center of the display and covered the entire screen. Iris stopped the display and ran it back to the point where the purple erupted. “And *that* is an explosion. Uncontrolled. Very big.”

“What could cause something like that?”

“A ship,” Iris answered, not taking her eyes off the monitor.

“What kind of ship?” Ms. Barnum asked.

“A big one.”

Annup knew that Iris was just trying to avoid a painful disclosure, but he had lost patience. “*How big?*”

“There was only one thing in orbit that could have done this,” Iris replied, anticipating the next question. “*Negh’Var*. But we can’t assume we know anything until we get more evidence.”

“And where are we going to get more evidence?”

“The Klingons,” Iris said flatly. “Unless they turn off the block.”

“The one they deny is there,” Ms. Barnum stated.

“Right.”

Annup wished that all the senior diplomats hadn't gone off for the big "greet Martok" fest. He didn't relish[90]the idea of being the one to make the next decision. It wasn't that Annup didn't know how to make decisions. He did: he was a career diplomat, an embassy workhorse, unlike most of the political appointees who cycled through every year or two. But the point of being an associate consul was to be in the position of offering advice, of making the defacto decision without actually having to take the heat if something went wrong, which it almost assuredly would. These *were* Klingons they were dealing with, after all.

To forestall making a decision, he asked Ms. Barnum, "Any word from Karg?" She had been trying to get through to Annup's Klingon counterpart since the explosion at the Great Hall, with no success. "Their communications officer said he was 'unavailable.'" She had a way of talking where her lips barely moved that was fascinating to watch.

"Not 'missing'?"

"No: 'Unavailable.'" "

"Not very like them, is it?" Iris asked.

Annup shook his head. Having Klingons tell bald-faced lies was, in its way, as disturbing as massive explosions in a city center. "Any more information on what happened to the Hall of Warriors?"

"No," Iris said. "Lots of particulate matter in the lower atmosphere, but very little radiation, so it wasn't an energy weapon. I have a theory, but ..."

"A theory?" Annup asked. It wasn't the same as hard data, but it was something.

"But what?" Ms. Barnum asked.

Iris looked around at her. "But it's a very frightening idea and I don't like thinking about it."

"Tell," Annup said.

[91]Iris inhaled and then let it out slowly. "All right," she said. "This is an old idea, but it would still work if you have particular goals and restrictions in mind."

"Goals?"

"Like if you want to pulverize a specific chunk of real estate without doing a lot of collateral damage."

"Like you would get with phasers or disrupters."

"Right. This is what you would do: Drop something heavy from very high in the atmosphere. Laser sights it in so you're sure you don't destroy anything else."

"Like dropping an empty hull?" Ms. Barnum said, sounding interested despite herself.

"No, that wouldn't work," Iris said. "Too much would burn off in the descent and it wouldn't fall right, either. Not aerodynamic."

"Sooo?" Annup said.

“You drop a lot of small, heavy things. The one plan I read about this suggested masses of depleted uranium, something very dense. Lots and lots of them. Make them into little pointed bars to give them some aerodynamic flow.”

“How many little uranium bars would it take to produce the kind of explosion you saw?” Annup asked.

“A lot,” Iris said. “I’d need to do some modeling to check it out, but say in the neighborhood of a thousand.”

This idea insulted Ms. Barnum’s sense of order. “How would someone get a platform over the city that could carry ten thousand uranium bars without the Klingons noticing?”

“That’s just it,” Iris said. “They couldn’t. The only ones who could do it would be ...”

“... Other Klingons,” Annup finished for her. Then he said, “Damn,” which was very undiplomatic of [92] him, especially in front of two coworkers, but fortunately neither one heard him because the alarms were ringing.

Ms. Barnum lost her calm demeanor. “What the hell is *that*?” Apparently, she had skipped drill day at training.

Iris replaced the sensor display with a shot from the security camera in the embassy’s entrance hall. Twenty or twenty-five Klingons had just entered the main doors and were efficiently dealing with the security guards.

“What are they *doing*?” Ms. Barnum asked. “This is an embassy! This is an act of war!”

“Only if someone finds out,” Iris said. “Or if they don’t care.”

“This is looking a little too prearranged for my taste,” Annup said. “The Great Hall, the *Negh’Var*, and now this.” He sneaked a quick look at Ms. Barnum and realized to his horror that she was actually perspiring. *The Ice Queen crack’d* ... “Any ideas?” he asked Iris.

“Just this,” she replied. Iris pressed a series of controls in quick succession and then Annup watched as the Klingons who had been striding through the lobby suddenly dropped in their tracks. Unfortunately, so did everyone else.

“Cordine Orange?” Annup asked.

“What’s that?” Ms. Barnum asked, her voice edged with cautious optimism.

“Nonlethal gas. Everyone will wake up with a headache, but nothing worse.”

“Do we have any more?” Ms. Barnum asked.

“No,” Iris said. “I did the whole complex except for the security offices just to be safe, though they don’t know that.” She tapped her front teeth with a stylus she had been holding. “I don’t get this. The Klingons know [93] we have defense measures.” She pointed at the sleeping bodies. “These guys were sacrificed. But for what?”



“Wheels within wheels,” Annup said. “Someone has been planning this for a long time, but I don’t think we have any choice but to wait for the next step.”

“We could *leave*,” Ms. Barnum said. “We have a ship just for that purpose.”

“They’ve thought of everything else, why not assume they’ve compromised the shuttle as well?” Iris asked. “We launch and go ‘boom’ before we clear Klingon airspace.”

“I’m willing to take that chance,” Ms. Barnum snapped.

Annup waved at both of them to be quiet. “Whoever it was who brought down the *Negh’Var* wouldn’t hesitate to shoot us down, too. No, I think we should just lock up those Klingons, sit tight, and keep trying to contact Starfleet.”

Iris nodded. “Though I think we’ll have to assume we’re on our own,” she said. “For a little while, anyway.”

“I think you’re right,” Annup said resignedly.

“And you’re the senior consul,” Ms. Barnum added—a little petulantly, Annup thought.

He groaned. This was not at all what he had in mind for today. A nice grain embargo would have been all right. When was the last time anyone had a pleasant row over grain? He pondered for several moments, then finally said, “No matter what else happens, we need to get word of what’s happened to Starfleet.”

“I agree,” Iris said.

“Me, too,” Ms. Barnum added, though Annup was no longer very interested in what she thought.

“Then we’ll need to use the Flare.”

“The what?” Iris asked. Annup was surprised. He had<sup>[94]</sup> begun to suspect she was an intelligence operative, a technician who knew more than she was letting on.

“It’s a small, warp-capable drone,” Annup said. “Shielded and cloaked as well as we could devise and programmed to avoid detection at any cost. It’s for situations exactly like this, when every other communication method is blocked.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Iris said, her voice still level and efficient, but Annup thought he detected something like relief. “How do you activate it?”

“There’s a program,” he said. “Let me at the console.”

Iris pushed her chair away from the console and Ms. Barnum took another step to the left.

Annup touched the ident pad, spoke his name and password, and waited momentarily for the brief blue flash as the security system checked his retina. The control surface shifted and displayed the Flare’s launch controls. “There,” he said. “Now all we have to do is enter our message and. ...”

Annup stared at the ceiling. *I’m on the floor*, he realized, but couldn’t remember falling. He could move

his eyes and hear, but he couldn't move his arms or legs. No sensation below his neck at all, really. Strangely, he wasn't frightened, only confused. Above him, he heard someone talking. Iris, he decided. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see she was speaking into a small, dull gray piece of metal. *It's the stylus, he realized. The one she was playing with.*

"Can you hear me now, Lady?" she said.

From the console speaker came a soothing voice with a seductively musical quality that Annup found irresistible. Strangely enough, the voice reminded him of his grandmother, Padwa. The thought of her gave him a sense of peace that he hadn't felt since he was a young boy and would fall asleep with his head in her lap, her entire house smelling of spice and incense. He became so lost in memories of her that he could barely focus on the lady's words. "*Yes, that's fine,*" the voice said. "*How are you, Iris?*"

"I'm fine," Iris said, and Annup could tell from the way she said it that she felt the same way about this voice as he did, though why Iris would be so pleased about speaking to someone who sounded like his grandmother, he could not understand. "I've done what you asked."

"That's wonderful," the woman who sounded like Padwa said, and the pleasure she imparted in the word "wonderful" sent a thrill of pleasure through Annup. "*And the Flare is available to us?*"

"Any time you're ready," Iris said. "Just tell me what you want to say and I'll take care of it."

"Excellent," the lady said. "*Iris, you've really done such a magnificent job. I'm so pleased we met. Aren't you?*"

"Oh, yes, Lady," Iris said. "I am. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Not right this moment," the lady said. "*I'm sure you've already taken care of the consul?*"

"Associate consul," Iris said, and Annup was briefly hurt. He had been thinking that Iris actually respected him. "And the little Starfleet spy, too. It was really very easy with that applicator you gave me."

"Excellent, most excellent," the lady said. "*I'm glad it worked for you. So they're both there? I can come see the embassy?*"

Iris looked down at Annup and grinned at him. She was obviously giddy about the idea of seeing the lady and didn't care who knew it. "That would be wonderful, Lady. I would enjoy that very much. Come as soon as you can." She reached down and pulled the key card out from Annup's inner jacket pocket. "All the doors will be open."

6

"IMPACTIN TEN seconds...nine...eight..." the helm officer reported calmly.

Consoles exploded as the Negh'Var swings tangled with her fellow Klingon ships.

"I will meet you at the gates of Sto-Vo-Kor!" Martok shouted over the cacophony.

"...seven...six..."

Klaxons wailed, computer panels sparked and sizzled. None of the sounds were Klingon: his crew met death with stoic honor. An opaque veil of smoke made it nearly impossible for him to see their faces. How he wished to look upon them! Truly, a magnificent memory to take with him to the afterlife.

“...five...four...”

The *Negh'Var's* convulsions made it difficult for Martok to maintain his balance across the bridge, but he would not leave this life without saying farewell to his brother. Through the haze, he saw Worf diligently [98] tapping commands into his computer, brow furrowed. Duty bound until the end, Martok thought. He really ought to rela—

“...three ...two...”

A blinding yellow light. The deck bucked, screeching as metal crumpled and bent.... A curtain drew over his mind —

The general stood upon a tall pile of rubbish and surveyed his domain. He closed his eye, inhaled deeply, and sifted through the complex perfume of his childhood: the yeasty tang of decaying garbage mingled with the acrid aroma of rust-fouled water and a sharp bottom note of zinc. Martok shifted his weight, and a foul liquid spurted out from under his heel and splashed onto his pant leg. He reached down to wipe it off with his gloved hand, then laughed and decided to ignore it. Worse than this would stain his uniform before the sun rose on another day.

Fists clenched, Martok bared his teeth, bellowing, “What in Kahless’s name are we doing here!”

Worf seemed to be obtusely unaware of Martok’s frustration, instead seeming pleased with his accomplishment. “I cycled our transporter beam through several dozen communications satellites before instructing the computer to deposit us—”

“I don’t care how we came to be in this wretched place, I want to know why we are in this wretched place!” He looked around, saw the dazed faces of the twenty or so survivors of the *Negh'Var*, and wondered if they might all be cursing the day that Martok became chancellor. Martok knew he was.

“Why the computer placed us here is a puzzle to me [99] as well. But this place offers many advantages. Morjod’s sensors will have difficulty distinguishing us from the nomadic residents of the plain,” Worf explained patiently. “Here, we can find spare parts, old equipment—establish a base of operations.”

Martok knew the truth of Worf’s words.

But he didn’t have to like them.

The bloody sun sank into the horizon, casting the hills of the Ketha lowlands into shadow, but in the middle distance Martok could see lights glowing. Some—the flickering yellow ones—were cook fires. Others—the yellowish greens—were the leaky cores of old, cracked engines half buried beneath the battered hulks of starship hulls. The orange lights that faded down into red were piles of eternally burning garbage. Once, long ago, he could identify the exact composition of a burning pile by the depth of hue and the twist of a churl of smoke, but those days were long past.

“Home,” Martok murmured. A smile would be disrespectful at such a moment—most of the crew of the

*Negh'Var* had died less than an hour earlier—but he was tempted. Instead, he spat.

Low, gray clouds scudded across the sky; the first drops of greasy rain spattered against Martok's face. He knew they had better get under shelter. Letting too much Ketha rain descend on you wasn't a good idea, either.

He half walked and half slid down the hill of loose soil and garbage, trying to move as silently as possible, his senses alert for the sound of approach, but even when he moved as carefully as he was able, Martok cringed at the amount of noise he was making. As a boy, he could have crossed the entire plain in full[100]daylight, loaded down with scrap metal, and not even a security drone equipped with motion sensors and infrared could have picked him out. Of course, he had been a tough, wiry thing wearing little more than a twist of cloth for modesty's sake, and not an old man weighed down with kilos of armor and weaponry. Martok hardly considered that an adequate excuse; the boy he had been would have laughed at the man he had become.

As he neared the bottom of the hill, Martok could hear Worf organizing the remains of the *Negh'Var's* crew into work details. "You two," he was saying to young M'Kec and a security officer Martok did not know, "go to the top of that hill and find a concealed place you can use as a watch post. Watch the north." Martok approached the trio, indicating with a wave of his hands that the two crewmen should continue listening to Worf, who was studying a relief map on his tricorder. "If anyone attempts to come in overland from that direction, they must pass through the break between the hills."

The security officer, a grizzled veteran, reviewed the display and nodded in agreement. "It will do for now," he said. "But if a reconnaissance team scans us from low orbit ..."

"They will not," Martok said. "There is too much interference from the lingering radiation in these wrecks. Back in the old days, smugglers used to conceal their bases here for that very reason. When I was a boy, I would run supplies out here for some of them—" He stopped himself before rambling on in a nostalgic reverie. Who he had been did not matter to these warriors: they looked to who he was now for leadership. "Carry on."

[101]The two guards nodded in salute and then left. As they passed him, Martok sensed their uneasiness. Neither of them liked taking orders from Worf, and perhaps they sensed that he was on the verge of—what? Reminiscing? Rambling on? Over the course of the day, his past and present had merged together in such a way that he could easily succumb to confusion were he not a stronger man. His visible surprise when they had materialized on the planet's surface, his realization that they were in Ketha, might have been disconcerting to his soldiers. For a brief, terrifying instance, he had thought that this was to be his afterlife: not *Sto-Vo-Kor*, not even *Gre'thor*, but *Ketha*. Would even Sirella have understood that? Probably not. The only person he still knew who had lived in Ketha was old Darok. He missed him in moments like this. Hopefully, the reprehensible old reptile had survived whatever had befallen himself and Sirella when the disaster had unfolded.

Darok, *gin'tak* to the House of Martok, scowled as he watched the trio of hovercraft approach the outer compound wall. They were large, well shielded, and, worst of all, uninvited. Of course, it was impossible to say whether the pilots had attempted to hail them. With so many jamming and antijamming signals flying back and forth through the ether, it was a wonder that any signals got through at all. After Morjod's speech ended, the planetary comnet went offline, which struck Darok as just too convenient for it to be a coincidence. Sirella had long ago planned for such a contingency. One did not have a mate such as Martok without anticipating that someday his enemies would make a move such as this.

[102]She had called up her network of alternative information sources before her escape from the First City this afternoon. But even given the time she took to travel home, her sources were slow and sporadic about providing dependable intelligence. Combining her firsthand experience on the day of the attack with what little information they did receive, they created a picture of what might be happening beyond Shrana. Neither of them liked the image that was forming.

Morjod had taken control of all the major military installations both on and in orbit around Qo'noS, as well as most of the minor ones. He hadn't been forced into battle on many occasions during the day, and when he had, the conflicts had been settled quickly. A large percentage of the Klingon fleet had been pulled back closer to home, though not so many that the Federation or Romulan intelligence agencies would suspect a coup was in progress. In fact, as near as Sirella and Darok could tell, practically no one off-planet knew that anything was any different. Sirella had learned that the Federation embassy, under Morjod's control, had been ordered to maintain a surface impression of normalcy. Darok unhappily found that a feeling suspiciously similar to admiration for the usurper possessed him.

On the monitors, the hoverships banked to the south, then abruptly dropped below the level of the low foothills bordering the compound on that side. This was as it should be. The south side had been designed to look as appealing as possible to a commander trying to off-load an attack force, though it was important that it not look *too* attractive. Darok pressed a series of [103]controlsthat opened three pairs of hidden doors and raised cannons onto the surface. The scanners found the hoverships quickly, and Darok opened fire.

He had absolutely no expectation that any of his shots would penetrate their shields, but the show was important. The invaders expected resistance when they landed, so he would put up resistance. One of the hoverships opened fire with its main gun and reduced the three cannons to slag within seconds.

This is ridiculous, Darok thought. He had expected them to be well prepared, but not *this* well prepared. Muttering with displeasure, Darok watched as hatches opened and ramps were extended. A word came to his lips, one that he had learned in the slums of Tor'aq back in Ketha many, many years ago. He had been all of six years old when he had first heard the word and so, naturally, had gone home to ask his mother, Most Fearsome of All Women, what it meant. She failed to successfully cut out his tongue because his neck was slippery from the blood flowing from his head wound. The memory made him smile, so he repeated the word again, safe in the knowledge that Most Fearsome was dead and wouldn't be able to punish him again until he met her again in *Sto-Vo-Kor*, which, undoubtedly, she now ruled.

One of the reasons Darok had lived to such a ripe old age was that he had never been the sort to confuse "honorable" with "stupid." He knew that on occasion running away was not only the smart thing to do but the *right* thing to do. (This was beginning to look like one of those times. There were, after all, *monsters* coming out of the hovership.)

In the transmission from the First City, he had seen [104]Morjod's creatures. But the creatures now stalking the perimeter were qualitatively different from those he'd seen on the transmission. The Hur'q on the holo vid had been fascinating—even fearsome—alien beings, but they had seemed almost like wild pets. The creatures he watched now on the monitors were nobody's pets. Rather, they radiated a malicious intelligence Darok could scarcely comprehend.

In short, he expected this to be one of those times when it would be a good idea to run. But not yet.

Darok entered Sirella's call sign and waited for her personal communicator to acknowledge him. "My lady," he said respectfully, imagining her regal mien as she sat, straight-backed, behind the ornately

carved desk where she presided over the estate. Flickering candles would cast shadows on the tapestry she often gazed upon when she wanted to meditate. The wall-sized weaving told the story of her ancestress's challenge to the emperor's court. Perhaps, while she calmly watched the perimeter security vids, she had poured herself a mug of bloodwine. Her relations had produced a magnificent vintage several seasons ago.

“Speak.”

“Three assault craft have just landed outside our walls.”

“I know,” Sirella said. “*The sensors alerted me, but I have not seen detailed scans. What have you discovered?*”

“Hur’q,” he said, knowing that she already knew of their arrival.

“How many?”

“It is difficult to say,” Darok said. “They are blocking all but the most fundamental scans. However, judging from their size and the size of the transports, I would judge between twelve and twenty.”

[105] “*Anything else?*”

“They are very large.”

“Anything else useful?”

“Hmmm.” Darok studied the images. His eyesight wasn't what it once was, but he was pretty certain ... yes. “They carry weapons. Disrupters and isomagnetic cannons, I believe.”

“Very well. Activate the defenses.”

“As you say, my lady. However, if I may be so bold, I do not think we can stop them all.”

“Neither do I. But one more we kill now is one less for my husband to face later.”

“Excellent, my lady.”

Darok smiled as he activated the defense systems. *I will stay for a little bit longer*, he decided. *It is always worthwhile to see anything she does.*

The scouts from among the *Negh'Var* survivors found the old outpost just as the rim of the sun dipped below the horizon. As soon as Martok had recognized the shape of the nearby hills, he had been surprised with the clarity of his memories of the surrounding territory. Of course he would remember: the lay of the land was etched into his bones. Fortunately, Worf was on hand to take over organizing the work details while Martok worked with his officers on a battle plan.

The outpost's main building was much as Martok had remembered it: large, open to the elements on two sides, but defensible from a ground assault and partially impervious to an air attack owing to the fact that it was half buried under one of the mounds. Martok should have been amazed that the building still stood,

but he had noticed that everything constructed by the empire in the [106]previous century had been built to outlast its makers by many lifetimes. He wondered what the men of his grandfather's generation had expected their structures to endure.

When they entered, Martok found something he had not remembered: two walls of the inner rooms were lined with banks of sophisticated equipment. How had he not noticed this? he wondered, and then the truth dawned on him: Military technology had not been a part of his child's world. Worf had become (for him) effusive when he saw the communications and computer equipment, and almost immediately he, the assistant chief engineer, Taarl, and the young communications officer, Maapek, were burrowing into the panels.

It was not long before Worf reported: "The lines to the local communications node are intact. If Morjod has not set the system to watch for our passwords, we should be able to access the comnet before morning comes."

"Do you think this is possible?"

"The idea is not beyond him," Worf said. "He has shown remarkable tactical wisdom so far; however, it would require time to find our passwords in the military databases, decrypt them, then program the network to search for us."

Martok felt encouraged. "Then we must take the chance. We need intelligence, and this is the best way to get it." He glanced at the engineer and the com officer and lowered his voice. "Work them hard as you must, Worf, but don't exhaust anyone, including yourself. We may need to move quickly, and we cannot afford to leave even one man behind."

"Understood," Worf said. "To that end, I asked Tamal [107] to scan the structure, and she reported an unusual hatch in the lowest level."

"An escape tunnel?"

Worf shrugged. "I have asked her to devote her energies to opening it. If nothing else, it will give her something to occupy herself." Obviously, Worf had observed some of what had passed between Martok and Tamal on the bridge. "We cannot permit anyone too much free time now."

Martok nodded. "I agree. It does no one else any good to think too far into the future."

"Except you." Worf looked from side to side, assuring that no one was eavesdropping on their conversation, and whispered, "You have much to consider, and I can see your thoughts straying from the here-and-now. When you returned from your reconnaissance, you appeared to be elsewhere. What did you see on the hilltop, my brother?"

Much to Worf's obvious surprise, this question prompted Martok to gasp with mingled surprise and something approaching amusement. He collected himself and then attempted to reassure his brother that he had not lost his mind. It was difficult sometimes to remember that Worf had spent very little time on Qo'noS and lacked familiarity with what he would regard as folk culture. Martok explained, "Your question, 'What did you see on the hilltop, brother?' is the first line of an ancient song, one my father and mother sang when I was a boy. The response is 'I saw rivers of our blood, my brother, our mothers' and fathers', our sisters' and our wives'." And then you would sing, 'What did you see by the river, my brother?' and the response is 'I saw mountains of corpses, the bodies of our sons and daughters.'" [108] Martok tried to remember the next line, but could not dredge it up, so he settled for saying, "It goes on

that way for a bit.”

Worf tried to maintain a neutral expression, but he was clearly wavering back and forth between disbelief and disgust. “That ... does not sound like many Klingon songs I’ve heard.”

“Most of the songs you know are not so ancient. This one was written long before the days of the Hur’q, back before the days when all songs were about battle and victory. The songs my father taught me ... some were about loss and despair, some quite merry in a way that most warriors would consider frivolous or foolish. Do you know this one?” Martok asked, and softly hummed a sprightly tune.

Worf nodded and identified it as the “Fool’s Song” from the opera *Malsandra’s Death*.

“Long before it was appropriated for the Fool, mothers sang it to their children. It was a finger-play song about a small *shum* that tried to crawl up a wall and was repeatedly washed away by a summer shower.”

Worf arched an eyebrow, charmed but not entirely convinced. “How do you know these things?” he asked.

Martok shrugged. “My father,” he said. “All things my father told me when I was a boy and all of them things I have not thought about for more years than I can count. Can you explain to me, my brother, why this is happening?”

Worf looked out through the open windows and studied the line of the hills as the sun rose over them. “You are home, General,” he said, and the corners of his mouth curled upward ever so slightly. “Someday, we<sup>[109]</sup> will travel to Earth and I will take you to Minsk where we will see what memories the smell of boiled cabbage stirs up in me.”

Martok did not know exactly where Minsk was or what boiled cabbage smelled like, but he sensed that his brother had just tried to share something of himself and so he chuckled appreciatively. He beckoned for Worf to follow him to the window where they could look out over the oozing wastes of Ketha. Down in the valleys between the piles of rubbish, shadows had deepened into night. “You did well to bring us here, Worf,” Martok said, pointing out at the gloom. “Even if Morjod believes we might have survived that explosion, he would never think to look for us here. And even if he does *that*, he will not find us easily.”

“It was not a premeditated act,” Worf said. “I programmed the transporter to snare as many signals as possible before the warp core breached and ordered it to route them through the com satellites in a random fashion. Its only other command was to materialize us before the ship lost power. This is the site the computer selected. If you must thank anyone, thank chance.”

“There is no such thing as chance in Ketha, Worf. There is only fate, only destiny. If we thank anyone, perhaps it should be Kar-Tela.”

“I know very little about these old deities,” Worf admitted, brow furrowed. “But I seem to recall that destiny is a fickle mistress and it is best not to place too much trust in her.”

“Trust?” Martok asked, grinning again. “No, never trust. But it never hurts to try to bribe her. A little bread, some wine, perhaps. What do we have to lose?”

[110] “Only our pride, General. Klingons should not rely on gods.”



“But as I have grown older, I have begun to believe that we ignore them at our peril.” Worf looked so perplexed then that Martok laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “But enough of theology. Give me your report.”

“We killed two with the first round of concussion grenades, my lady,” Darok reported as Sirella joined him in the command bunker. It was buried fifty meters under the center of the house and could be entered only through a small elevator big enough to carry only two people at a time. The reinforced thermocretewalls around them could withstand a point-blank disruptor blast from a bird-of-prey’s primary battery.

Sirella had ordered the household staff to leave via secret exits, and as far as Darok could tell either they had all made it or, more likely, the Hur’q were not interested in cooks and maintenance workers. Only the house security force remained; Sirella prepared to send them out, but it was clear she had expected more from the barrage.

“Only two? Any injured?”

“None, my lady. As soon as the first two died, the others seemed able to anticipate the dispersion pattern and moved out of blast range. They are very nimble and unnaturally fast for such large creatures.”

“Very well. Have you been able to determine their exact number?”

“Fifteen remaining, my lady. They are moving in a staggered sliding pattern, the entire line strung out over approximately a quarter of *akellicam* .”

[111]“Instruct the security teams to attack. Prepare to support them with the disrupter cannons.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The security squads moved forward on foot in wedge-shaped squadrons. Darok agreed with their commanders that this was the best formation considering the circumstances. They could move at speed over rough terrain (and the Martok lands were purposefully allowed to become overgrown), but could also support one another if they had to fall back quickly. The plan was, Darok knew, to try to break through the Hur’q’s line, maneuver around behind them, then begin picking them off one by one. If the attack went especially well, the squads could even separate, set up under cover, and create crossfire. At worst, they were to break off their attack and withdraw through a narrow canyon lined with disrupter cannons. It was, Darok decided, a worthy plan, and he felt a little bubble of something that passed for hope bob up within him.

Sirella settled back into her chair and watched the sensor displays. The lady possessed the disconcerting ability to remain completely and utterly at rest when she chose. Darok had seen fully grown warriors, leaders of thousands of men, turn into twitching, mewling boys in her presence merely because she could sit still and stare for longer than seemed possible by a living being. Even in a persona that seemed designed from birth to be formidable, it was a disquieting attribute.

On the screen, the icons that represented the security force and the Hur’q converged and, for several seconds, overlapped. Darok waited for the groups to separate or, alternatively, for the security force to withdraw into the canyon. His finger hovered over the switch that activated the cannons, and he exerted all of his will to keep his hand from trembling. Then, at first one by one, and then in blocks of three or

four at a time, the security-force icons winked out. Two lights stayed lit for two minutes after the others had disappeared, and Darok guessed that there was a song that should be sung about those men, whoever they were. He opened a channel, but they heard nothing but quick breathing, a strangled cry, and the thump of something heavy crashing into the ground.

Sirella did not stir while the battle raged, but when it ended and the last security-force icon had disappeared, Darok glanced over at her and saw that her left index finger was lightly stroking the bracelet she wore on her right wrist, her *DiHnaq*. This was the symbol of her control of the household, and it was the tradition of House Martok that when the lady was not there, the *DiHnaq* hung on a thin chain over the inner archway of the main door. The first thing she did upon entering the house, even before greeting her husband or child, the first thing she would do if the emperor himself were waiting to be served, was slide the *DiHnaq* onto her wrist.

In theory, a day would come when Sirella would be too old and weak and one of her daughters, Shen or Lazhna, or possibly a daughter-in-law, would wrest the *DiHnaq* from her, but Darok seriously doubted if there was currently a woman in the empire who could do this. Darok had once thought that Jadzia Dax might have possibilities—and *there* was a show he would have gladly surrendered his *d'k tahg* to watch—but that Dax was dead now, and he doubted the successor, Ezri, would be up to the job. Sirella could break that one in half with a disapproving sneer.

[113]The other possibility, he now mused, was that someone would break down the front door, stride over the broken threshold, and snap off Sirella's arm at the shoulder. Darok had never before imagined that such a thing could come to pass, but, then again, he had never believed his mother's tales of the Hur'q, either, and there they were up on the screen. He would have to tell this story to Most Fearsome when he saw her in *Sto-Vo-Kor*. He would, he decided, mention it to her just before he shoved her and the boulder she was chained to over the lip of a cliff. It would give her something to laugh about as she tumbled down to *Gre'thor*. *What a good son I am . . .*

Sirella stopped toying with the *DiHnaq* and asked, "What other weapons do we have?" Darok was certain she already knew, but he answered briefly: concussion grenades, which were becoming increasingly useless; and, of course, *bat'leths*.

Sirella made a sound that Darok took to indicate disapproval, though not with him specifically. Finally, she finished, "You omit the antimatter charge."

Darok didn't answer immediately, but instead found himself thinking of the lovely brook at the foot of the hill below where House Martok was situated. For the past several weeks, he had made regular trips down to the brook to soak his tired old feet in its cool waters. They had, he thought, some medicinal effect, because whenever he did this, he found that the accumulated aches and pains of decades of soldiering were leached away. He hated to think about the streambed being turned into a parched, lifeless culvert, but, finally, he was compelled to say, "Forgive me, Lady. My memory has become feeble."

[114]"I think not," Sirella said sternly. "I think, rather, that you have learned to love your wizened life."

Then something happened that Darok knew he would carry with him to the next world, another thing to describe to his mother. Sirella, wife of Martok, daughter of Linkasa, laid her hand on his wrist and smiled at him. A small smile, a tiny thing, and it looked like she had to think about what to tell her muscles to achieve the effect, but she managed it. "And mine," she said. "But I will not choose that road. We might kill them all, thereby saving my husband the trouble of doing it later, but the destruction of his House, his home, would lie heavy on his heart."

“Not to mention my death,” Darok said. Then added, as if it were an afterthought, “And yours.”

Sirella almost laughed. Almost. Instead, she slid the *DiHnaq* off her wrist and handed it to him. “Here,” she said. “Keep this safe for me. I will reclaim it when I return, or you will give it to mein *Sto-Vo-Kor*.”

“Lady ...” Darok began, but she held up her hand for silence.

“I will go to meet them at the front door as the mistress of a House should. You will wait here. They will likely leave when they have me and even if they search for you, this room is not easily found.”

The only words Darok could find were “No, Lady,” though he was not sure what he was saying no to.

“When you find my husband, tell him of my decision. If he finds fault with my choice, he may meet me in a court of combat and attempt to divorce me. But remind him that I still have two good eyes.”

Darok found he no longer had an appetite for trading barbs. “Die well, my lady.”

[115] Sirella almost smiled again at that and rose to go to the lift. “Die well, Darok.”

Worf glanced at a checklist on his tricorder.

By the Hand of Kahless, Martok thought. *In Starfleet, they must sleep with those damned things.* “We are undetected, at present,” Worf stated. “We have enough rations to last two days. No one is seriously physically injured, though I am detecting symptoms of shock and stress-related behavior in almost everyone.”

“Almost everyone?” Martok asked. They sat near the open window frame, away from the others. Martok told the few who were not on sentry duty or working on the consoles that they could light small fires, as much for comfort as for light. By the low flames, he could see sullen faces occasionally turned toward them, unhappy with the way he and Worf were spending so much time in conference. The words of Morjod, he could see, had wormed into their hearts.

“All right,” Worf corrected. “In everyone. Myself included.”

“I am not surprised,” Martok said. “Morjod’s treason, the destruction of the Great Hall—these were not the acts of a true Klingon. To wantonly destroy our heritage runs counter to everything we believe in, and yet, I see something in their eyes. We must consider the question: Could we be betrayed by one of our own?”

Worf bent his head and a growl rumbled up from his throat. “Had I not been on the bridge of the *Negh’Var* when Morjod was speaking, I would not be concerned. But I heard murmurs ...”

“As did I,” Martok agreed. “We must be on our guard,[116]but we cannot abandon our other goals, short-term and long. Can we find allies? Can we gather intelligence?” And, as if to answer the question, across the room, the communications console flickered into life. From beneath it, Maapek yelled in victory. Worf and Martok grinned at each other. “I believe you have work to do, my brother,” the general said. “See if you can find Sirella. We must unite our forces with hers.”

“Then you believe she remains free?”

Martok's eyebrows arched with skepticism. "My wife?" he asked. "How could you even doubt?"

To his mingled shame and relief, no one pursued Darok when he slipped out one of the compound's rear entrances. Judging from the damage to the living quarters and kitchens, the beasts had searched for others, but only halfheartedly. Obviously, they had been instructed to capture Sirella and, with that goal accomplished, had returned to their hovercraft and left. She had kept her com circuit open, and Darok had heard the beasts howl when they had seen Sirella stride (no doubt, imperiously) into the main hall. As they had closed in around her, the lady had ordered the beasts out of her home. Naturally, they hadn't heeded her, but it made Darok smile grimly to think of how she must have looked when she cursed them for tracking mud on the carpets.

The *DiHnaq* clanked heavily in his pocket, and the strap of his satchel chafed against his ribs. It had been a long time since he had taken a long overland hike, but there was no other choice at present. All the vehicles were either gone or disabled (the beasts had seen to that), but Darok had no doubt that he would find the [117] general and deliver the lady's message. He could not conceive of how the circumstances would conspire in any other way if Sirella wished it to be so.

And then—and *then* —he would find some way to make it back to House Martok and see that the carpets were cleaned before the lady returned.

## 7

### WARF DREAMT.

He had been sitting on the floor beside Maapek, helping to check the connections between two consoles, when Maapek had leaped up and headed for the exit that led outside. High-protein rations affected some people that way, Worf knew, so he leaned his head back against the panel and closed his eyes. Just for a second. And then he was someplace else.

*...sitting on the floor of a small wooden hut that shifted back and forth under him with a gentle, swaying motion that made him feel slightly queasy. Outside, through a narrow, jagged doorway, he could see the branches of trees move back and forth, leaves fluttering. Between the branches, there was a blue sky and fluffy white clouds scudding along. He was, he realized, on Earth and he sat on the rough planking floor of the tree house his father had built him when he was eight.*

[119] *They had cobbled it together over the course of a spring weekend in the branches of the large maple tree in the Rozhenkos' backyard. It was meant, Worf realized even then, to be something of a lure for the other children in the neighborhood, a come-on, an excuse to get them to come over and see what the big Klingon boy was doing. And the ploy had been successful, too, up to a point. Several curious boys and girls had come into the yard after the nail pounding and sawing was finished, but had fled again when Worf jumped down from his hiding place brandishing a stout tree branch. His mother tried to explain the other kids' behavior to him when he had come sulking back into the house, but nothing other children did ever made sense to Worf. He had never played in the tree house again after that and had taken a sad, sick sort of pleasure in watching it decay over the successive years. One late-autumn night when he was in his early*

*teens, a stiff wind had sent the hut tumbling out of the tree to crash on the ground, and Worf's mother had ordered him to break up the pieces and feed them into the recycler. He had found himself enjoying the work, enjoying the sound of snapping wood and screeching nails, until, quite suddenly, he realized just how much he was enjoying it and stoically forced himself to feel nothing at all.*

But here he was again in the hated (and beloved) tree house. He looked at his hands and found them to be absurdly small and soft-looking, but he felt like his head was exactly the same size and shape as the adult version. He started to reach up, to see how big his forehead ridges were, when he felt the thumb, thumb, thumb of someone climbing the two-by-four ladder his father had pounded into the tree trunk.

[120] *K'Ehleyr, Alexander's mother, poked her head up above the lip of the small porch, then pulled herself up over the edge. "Hi, Worf," she said. She wore one of the flamboyant outfits she had always favored, neither completely Klingon nor Terran in design, but a subtle intermeshing of the two. Inappropriately (considering his age), Worf felt himself yearn for her. "How've you been?" K'Ehleyr asked as she seated herself before him.*

"I am well," Worf said, his voice absurdly high and light.

"No, you're not," K'Ehleyr said. "Don't lie to me. You're a terrible liar."

"Yes," he admitted. "I am." He hadn't wanted to say that, but Worf found that he had little control over what he said.

"You're in a lot of trouble, right?"

"Yes."

"And worried that you're somehow responsible for all this."

"Yes."

"Well, get over it," K'Ehleyr said, tossing her hair back over her shoulders. "You're not. Believe it or not, this all has very little to do with you. I know that's going to be hard for you to accept."

"No, it's not... *Things are very rarely about me. Things just happen to me.*"

K'Ehleyr laughed, head thrown back, shoulders shaking. "That's rich," she said, wiping her eyes. "The best part is that I know you actually believe that. All those years on the Enterprise, *all that time on Deep Space 9, and those things just happened to you. I love it.*" She sobered suddenly and then stared at him, seemingly studying his face. "You're such an idiot. Nothing just [121] happens to you. I doubt very much if there are ten other people in the entire quadrant who have been so often at the center of things as you have in the past, oh, decade or so. Admittedly, in galactic terms, that's not a long time, but in a Klingon context, it's epochal."

Worf bristled. He didn't like the turn the conversation was taking.

Then, as if she had just remembered an old mutual acquaintance, K'Ehleyr asked, "How's Alexander?"

Taken by surprise, Worf said the first thing that came to mind. "He's grown, a soldier of the empire. I was supposed to see him today... no, yesterday ...but then all this happened."

“Do you like him?” she asked with perfect equanimity, as if she were asking what color his eyes were.

“I...*He...I love him. He is my son. I am his father.*”

“Yes, well, those two things usually go together. But do you like him?”

Worf pondered the question for a moment, then admitted, “I do not know him well enough to like him or dislike him. He is much more like you than he is like me.”

K'Ehleyr seemed pleased by that observation. “Good. I'm glad to hear that. If it's true, though, why is he a soldier? Couldn't he be doing something more constructive with his time?”

“Alexander is serving the empire. We were, until very recently, at war.”

“We're always at war,” K'Ehleyr said. “Whether we acknowledged it or not is another issue entirely.”

“He wishes to serve,” Worf said, but couldn't help but notice the note of defensiveness in his voice.

“He wishes to please his father, I think. Next time you see him, ask him what he wants to do to please himself.”

[122] “*I...All right,*” Worf conceded. “*I will. But if he says, 'Be a soldier,' I will not ask him again.*”

“Fair enough,” K'Ehleyr said, and stood up, brushing nonexistent dirt from her hands. “It's time for me to go now.”

“Wait,” Worf said, and stood up, too. The top of his head barely came to the middle of K'Ehleyr's abdomen. “I have to ask you...”

“What?”

“Why...*why are you here?*”

She seemed surprised by the question, but then smiled and reached out her hand to stroke the hair above Worf's forehead. “Because I wanted to see you. I wasn't expecting to see you as a child, but I'm glad I have. You were very cute.”

“That's all? You're not hereto ...*deliver a message or make a prophecy or offer advice?*”

“I don't think so. Or, wait...*Maybe I am. I wanted to mention this to you, anyway.*” She reached behind her back and, with a big flourish and jaunty smile, as if she were performing a magic trick, pulled a blade out of thin air. She twirled it above her head in a shining arc, then tossed it from hand to hand, twirling the blade as if it were no heavier than a juggler's tenpin. Then she grasped the blade with one hand, set the end on the point of her finger, and balanced it there while, with her now free hand, she pulled another object from behind her back. It was, Worf saw, an unadorned cup, no more than a clay or ceramic vessel. She twirled it up on her index finger and kept it there, shifting her weight lightly from side to side, both objects swaying in opposition.

“Would you like one of these?” she asked.

“What?” Worf asked. “Why would I...?”

[123] *K'Ehleyr flipped the cup into the air, kicked it out the door with the side of her foot, then grasped the bat'leth with both hands and swung it down at Worf's neck. “Wrong answer,” she said.*

Worf woke up.

Maapek stood before him, having just touched his shoulder with the tip of his finger. “Are you all right, Ambassador?”

“Yes,” Worf said. “Of course. Just resting my eyes.”

They went back to work on the communications console. The early evening after the Endless Day (Worf believed that would be the title history would bestow upon the day Morjod destroyed the Great Hall) passed uneventfully. In rotation, most of the crew was even able to rest intermittently. Worf and Maapek worked until the moon rose and Martok ordered them to stop. While Maapek ate and napped, Worf meditated, then ran through some basic *mok'bara* forms, just enough to work out some of the cramps in his back and neck. He grudgingly had to admit to himself that the years were beginning to catch up with him and he could no longer expect to work all night without feeling the effects. Even his meditation had been difficult and broken by disturbing thoughts of his son, who was supposed to have been in the First City when Morjod's madness began. Worf was uncertain whether his son was strong enough or wily enough to weather the uncertainties and trials he would face if he stayed in the city. He hoped that Alexander would have sense enough to make it to the Federation embassy. Like Worf, Alexander held dual citizenship. His next best alternative would be to lose himself in a crowd and keep quiet about his family affiliation.

[124] After Worf had broken his fast and cleansed himself as best he could, he joined Martok in front of a low fire where also sat Jaroun, K'Tar's second-in-command of the *Negh'Var* and the ranking Defense Force officer. Worf knew little about Jaroun, except that he was large and young and his family had wielded considerable political clout. Both his father and an uncle had been on the High Council, and Worf wondered if either man had been in the Great Hall when Morjod had brought it crashing down. Perhaps Jaroun now was nursing a vendetta or perhaps they had been among the conveniently absent and Jaroun held other ambitions. One way or another, Worf decided, he would have to be watched carefully.

Maapek also joined them, partly because of his exemplary work and partly because he had seen much of the information Worf was about to divulge and including him would be the best way to convey to him the need for discretion. Worf had few doubts about the communications officer's loyalties, but there was no such thing as a bad time to impress upon a young officer the importance of keeping his mouth shut.

As far as Worf knew, Martok had not slept at all, but the chancellor looked more alert than when Worf had called upon him the day before to go to the crew's celebration. While he had been working, Worf had noticed the general circulating among the fires, working on morale. Being with his warriors was like food and strong drink to him, Worf reflected. The general could sustain himself on loyalty alone.

“So,” Martok began, stirring the fire with a thin branch and staring into the flames, “tell me who he is. Teach me about my enemy.”

[125] Worf glanced at Maapek, a shared moment of disquiet, then began: “I wish there were more to tell

you. Morjod seems to have successfully kept much of his background off the public and military comnets. They present a general picture of a young warrior and politician who has been making his way up the ranks, but has managed to keep the spotlight shifted elsewhere. The press attributed this to modesty, which they find dull; Imperial Intelligence did not pursue his story because he did not match their model of a potential threat to the government.”

“Then we can only hope that their leaders were in the Great Hall when it collapsed,” Jaroun grunted.

Worf paused, pinned Jaroun to the ground with a glare, then continued without comment. “Probing deeper, however, we discovered that Morjod is quite well connected. Maapek pieced together this picture from information found in various public databases.” He turned toward the communications officer, who seemed surprised by the spotlight. It was also, Worf thought, never too late to work on your presentation skills.

“Uh, we, that is, I found that Morjod won his seat on the High Council by winning a personal combat with one, uh ...” He flicked on his padd and looked up a reference. “... V’Tec, uh, several years ago. Since then, he has used his position to attract a core group of followers to his cause.”

“Which is?” Martok asked.

“That is one of the mysteries, Chancellor,” Maapek said, warming to his subject. “It is not clear how Morjod was able to capture such devotion when his cause seemed designed only to appeal to the most conservative elements of Klingon society. He promised an empire free of influence from the Federation and the [126]Romulan Empire, but offered very few specifics about how this could be achieved. He promised a stronger military and a return to ‘the Old Ways,’ though, again, he was short on particulars. In general, he was laughed at by the progressives and ignored by the moderates who were in power.”

“Even Gowron ignored him?” Worf asked.

“I never heard his name spoken before yesterday,” Martok said. “And Gowron was distracted by the war.” He twisted the shaft of the twig back and forth in the embers, sharpening the point. “A war we were losing when Morjod won his seat on the council. I begin to understand this man. Go on.”

Maapek continued: “Over the next two years, Morjod managed to move allies into key positions through canny political maneuvering, reassignments, trials by combat, and assassinations.” He paused, then asked, “Chancellor, do you know the odds of any warrior defeating any other warrior in a trial by combat?”

Any warrior with political connections knew the answer to the question. “About fifty-fifty,” he responded. “Trial by combat is a poor way to settle an argument. That’s why it is so rare these days unless honor is at stake.”

“Precisely. And do you know how many of Morjod’s supporters have won their positions in trial by combat?”

Martok shook his head.

“Ninety percent,” Maapek said disbelievingly. “And the two who lost, we think perhaps he wanted them to lose. As if someone was getting too popular.”

“Or was figuring out more than he should,” Worf added.



“I see,” Martok said, pulling the stick from the flames and rubbing the point against the rough stone floor. “And what factions does Morjod control now?”

[127]Worf took up that topic. “It is an impressive—and strategically compelling—list.” He handed Martok a padd with detailed specifications for him to study later. “The short answer is everything he needs: worlds, stations, fleets. While the rest of the council was fighting the Dominion War, Morjod built a power base, amassing resources, preparing for the day when he could take control.”

“And now the day has come,” Martok said, briefly studying the list. A couple of entries made him bare his teeth. “Answer this: Would he have moved this soon if Gowron were still chancellor?”

Worf was prepared for this question. “Probably sooner,” he said. “If Gowron had remained chancellor, Morjod would probably have destroyed the council and claimed control in the name of winning the war. The change in power probably delayed his plans. If nothing else, he had to conceive of a new tissue of lies.”

“Ah, yes,” the general said, half smiling. “‘Martok the Mongrel and his puppetmaster, Worf.’ You have to admit, as tissues of lies go, it’s compelling. He speaks to people’s fears.” He slashed the glowing point of the stick through the air. “It cuts deep. And how have the people responded to Morjod’s overtures?”

Martok would not like the answer to this question, but it looked like he already suspected the truth. “It is difficult to know for certain,” Worf began, “since most of the news feeds have been shut down or are being monitored, but it appears as if the Defense Force and Homeworld Security have accepted Morjod as their new leader.” Worf hastened to add, “It’s not clear how deep into the ranks this acceptance goes ...”

“Stop it, Worf,” Martok said. “You do not need to be[128]concerned with my feelings. I understand what we’re facing. This sort of bold and daring action, it is ... romantic;. It appeals to a warrior’s vanity. Young men believe it is precisely the sort of thing their glorious ancestors might have done, and old men like myself, who should know better, they think it may be their last chance to recapture something they never truly had.” He sighed resignedly and once again thrust the point of the stick into the flame. “No,” he said, “I am very impressed with this strategy. It shows a depth of thinking, a slyness, that goes beyond anything even Gowron might have conceived, and*that*, my friends, is an accomplishment.”

Worf was nonplussed. He hadn’t expected this response.

Martok pulled the stick out of the flame and studied it again. Peering at the point with his one good eye, he continued, “But he is an idiot, *adangerous* idiot. First, I don’t believe for a second that the young fool I saw speaking at the Great Hall is the man who arranged all this. He does not possess ... what is the word? ... the*genTag*, the depth of character. This means someone else is doing his planning for him. Young Morjod is the true puppet, my friends, and our first task will be to find out who his puppetmaster is. Second, you must realize that whoever it is pulling the strings will not stop at taking control of the council and setting up the young fool as emperor. No, whoever it is won’t be satisfied until they’ve remade the empire in their own image. Mark my words: Within the week, Morjod will begin talking of the glory days of expansion, when the sight of a Klingon cruiser on the port bow made Starfleet captains soil their command chairs. ...”

[129]Jaroun laughed at these words, but the laughter grew hollow when no one joined him. “The risk of his strategy, my fellows in arms, is that,” Martok continued, “the Federation and the Romulans will say, ‘The Klingons have lost their minds,’ or, perhaps, ‘The Dominion has taken control again,’ or some such

excuse, and they will come here with many, many starships and when the dust settles ...” He threw the stick into the fire. “There will be no new days of glory under Morjod, my friends. No New Empire. No empire at all, in fact. He will destroy every last vestige of the Klingon soul if he has his way.”

“Chancellor ...” Maapek began, but Martok waved him to silence.

“I know what you wish to say,” the general said. “You were expecting *me* to lead you to some new beginning, weren’t you?” He studied Maapek’s face, then glanced over at Jaroun. “And you, too,” he said. “Ever it shall be when a new leader takes control. Always we say to ourselves, ‘*This* will be the one. *He* will tell us what to do, how to act, what we will need to know to be great again.’” Martok shook his head. “What is true is that we will have to fight simply to save what we have. Once Morjod is disposed of, we will have much rebuilding to do. No, there will be no New Empire, no return to glory. Morjod has assured that.”

“Perhaps this is not the best time to discuss such matters,” Worf said, worried about where this topic would take them. Martok steered dangerously close to topics that Worf knew would impact morale.

“No, Worf?” Martok asked. “Then when? When I am reinstated as chancellor? Can you see me having this conversation with the next High Council, whoever they are?”

[130] “My intention is not to deflect you, Chancellor,” Worf said, attempting to employ some of the diplomatic skills he was supposed to have learned in Starfleet. “I only meant that this time might be put to better use in planning our strategy.”

Jaroun, who had been looking like a man who had just been told to go swimming in full armor, grasped at this life preserver. “Yes,” he said. “What are we to do next?”

“Do?” Martok asked. “We stop him before he does to the entire empire what he did to the Great Hall. We find the generals who are still loyal to me and we organize an assault. ...”

“That may not be so simple,” Worf interrupted. The time had come to provide information he had really not been looking forward to imparting. “As far as we can tell, any generals with whom we may have been able to ally ourselves are either dead or have declared themselves loyal to Morjod.” He took the padd from the chancellor and brought up a new list.

Martok scanned the list and appeared to grow angrier at each new name. “Larok,” he muttered. “I fought with him on Heldriff’s World. Now ... dead. Executed! And Ag’hel ... serving for that madman.” Several other names provoked curses or exclamations of wonder and anger. If the chancellor hadn’t been agitated before, Worf saw that he was now. Martok was about to slam the padd down onto the stone when Worf saw a green light on the display flashing rapidly. Without apology or asking leave, he snatched the padd from the chancellor.

“A new transmission,” he announced. “I set the device to scan for any further public addresses from Morjod.”

Martok was already on his feet. “Where can we watch?”

[131] Maapek pointed at a monitor station that he had yanked from a console and set on a small cart. “Here, Chancellor,” he said, then pulled his padd from his belt. Starfleet padds were much prized among the more open-minded members of the Defense Force. He pointed the device at the monitor and activated it.

Morjod leaned forward over a podium, the Imperial Trefoil looming large behind him. The camera revealed only a few people seated in high-back chairs to either side of the podium, by the look of them, Morjod's new High Council. Worf did not see anyone else in the frame, but he heard the low, throbbing undertone of many voices speaking at once. It took a moment or two for Worf to recognize the location from which Morjod was transmitting, but finally he saw that they were looking at the Emperor's Amphitheater, the largest room in the emperor's official residence, indeed, the largest room on Qo'noS. It was, Worf thought, an obscene breach of protocol by the usurper. It staggered him. Only the emperor was permitted to speak from that place. *How can he be so brazen? Worf wondered. Why haven't the people risen up behind Kahless? And then he felt the sting of doubt. But where is Kahless? Unless ... he is already dead.*

Worf thrust these thoughts away and focused his attention on Morjod, who had already finished his brief preamble and was launching himself into the main body of his speech. His theme was the same as before: Klingons would rise from the ashes of ignominy, resume their warrior heritage, and become the preeminent species in the galaxy. Worf rankled at the thought that any of his race believed that there was any ignominy to rise from or that they weren't the greatest warriors in the galaxy, but he recognized that this was not the point.

[132]He was beginning to wonder why Morjod had gone to the trouble of scheduling a second address so soon after the first if there was nothing new to say when the would-be emperor got to the point. As if he could no longer withstand the pain, Morjod gripped his chest over his heart, hung his head, and dropped his voice so low Worf could barely make out his next words. *"My people,"* he murmured. *"I regret to announce that we have much to mourn this day. We have lost the five jewels of the Imperial fleet, four Vor'cha-class cruisers and the mighty Negh'Var."* And his voice cracked here and Worf had to concede it was very nicely done. Morjod inhaled deeply, seemed to rein in his emotions, then continued. *"The blood of your sons and daughters was spilled to help the cause of our Federation enemies who want nothing more than to see us kneel before them!"* he spat.

Cries of consternation and confusion erupted from the crowd. Most of the listeners had been cut off from the news feeds all day and probably did not know about the battle with the *Negh'Var* over the north pole. *As one who ordered the cruisers to attack us, he certainly has an interesting perspective on the outcome.*

Morjod looked up into the camera, his eyes infused with anger and hatred. *"Martok!"* he shouted. *"Martok is to blame! Five ships of the line destroyed —and I have cause to believe that many of the Negh'Var's crew may not have been willing warriors, but victims of Martok's madness."* (Very clever, Worf thought. *Make enemies for Martok among those families who believe the general led their children to dishonorable deaths.*) *"The cowardly traitor destroyed his own ship, taking with it the crews of the M'ganath, the Ti'voH, the Spear of Kaltad, and the Kerla. But did he die with his ship like an [133] honorable captain? No!"* Morjod brought his hand crashing down and snapped off the edge of the podium. *"My advisors believe he fled his command even as he ordered the deaths of its crew! And where, I ask you, where could he be but here on Qo'noS, profaning the soil of his people."* He looked at his hand, almost as if he had just noticed that it was curled into a fist, then held the fist before his face. *"I pledge to you, my people, that I will find him and bring him to justice!"* The crowd rose and roared its approval as one.

Beside him, Worf heard Jaroun express a desire that Morjod perform a physiologically impossible act.

But we must all be wary, my people," Morjod continued. *"This false chancellor may be a coward, but, like most cowards, he is wily. Be vigilant. Especially I ask the children of Qo'noS to keep watch."*

Morjod smiled indulgently, and the camera cut to a shot of a group of eager young faces. *"Small eyes sometimes see things that their elders do not."* Self-deprecating laughter rang out from the crowd. *"Find the traitor. Find every member of his House and bring them to me so that they may face justice!"*

A pan across the crowd provided viewers with an emotionally charged shot of cheering faces, hands raising weapons. Worf saw the cruel eyes of a people collectively hinging on insanity. *The hunt is on.*

Morjod's triumphant grin filled the screen. *"But understand, my people, we have not been idle. Even though we have not found Martok, we have laid our hands on a villain almost as vile."* The cheering tapered off as sounds of curiosity mingled with a rising blood lust rose. *"I know what you're thinking,"* Morjod said conspiratorially. *"Do we have the other traitor, the Federation whisperer, Worf? The answer, alas, is 'No, not yet.' But we will find him, my people, and bring him in chains to stand before you. Do not be troubled. But here is another of the faces that corruption may wear."*

A trio of guards half hustled and half dragged a sack-covered body out into the center of the floor. From her clothing, Worf assumed, a woman. Behind him, a low growl issued from deep in Martok's throat.

Morjod strode down the steps from the podium to the floor and grabbed the figure by the scruff of the neck. *"Fairer to look upon, no doubt, but evil may wear many guises."* He pulled the sack away and the figure stumbled to her knees, blinded by the spotlights turned onto her.

Sirella appeared momentarily disoriented until she saw Morjod, prompting her to surge to her feet, fingers curled into claws. Two of the guards snagged her arms and a third attempted to hook her around the waist. This, Worf knew, was a profound mistake on the part of the guards, but anyone who dared touch the Lady Sirella in such a manner deserved whatever punishment she would unleash.

Sirella elbowed one guard in the throat, then shifted her weight and threw the second over her shoulder. She then maneuvered her knee and hip, leaving the third rolling on the floor clutching his nether regions. Before she could direct her attack on Morjod, he deftly stepped in and skillfully struck the lady on the base of her skull with the hilt of his disruptor. Sirella crumbled forward into a heap, eyes rolling back into her head.

Morjod looked down at her, an expression of mingled pity and regret flitting across his features. *"And so has the corruption of Martok and Worf robbed us all of a once-valiant heart."* He beckoned to the guards to gather up the lady and take her away. Returning to the podium, Morjod stared into the camera. He waited for a count of three, anticipating all would be holding their breath. When all eyes rested upon him, Morjod said softly, *"In two days. In the square where the Great Hall stood. She will die."*

The transmission winked out.

Worf became aware that he, too, had held his breath; he tried to release it silently. Glancing over his shoulder at Martok, he expected to see his brother smoldering with rage. What he saw worried him even more: icy calm. The general had plunged deep down into himself, swallowing his anger to be used in another moment, another day. "My brother ..." Worf began, but it was too late for words.

"Get me a ship," Martok hissed, each word snapping out a chunk of air and freezing it into shards.

"We cannot—" Worf began again, though he knew in his heart that words were worthless.

“Get. Me. A. Ship,” Martok said again, a little louder this time. Jaroun and Maapek instinctively stepped back, giving the two a clear path to each other. “*Now*. Build it out of scrap. Steal it from an old widow. Pull one of out of your ...” He waved his hand in disgust. “Belay that,” he growled, and turned away. “I’ll do it myself.”

Worf surged forward and grabbed Martok by the shoulder. “General! You cannot! It is a trap. Think ...!” He felt the pressure of Martok’s thumb against the flat of his wrist before his other senses could register the fact that the general had spun to face him.

“Take your hand off me, Ambassador,” he hissed. “I wouldn’t want to have to slit open a Federation representative.”

Worf gritted his teeth and fought down the urge to attempt a particularly nasty reverse hold, partly because he was afraid it would not work and partly because he[136]was afraid it would. “I say again,” he said, attempting to remain calm. “*Think!* Why would Morjod do this? He’s trying to force your hand, to goad you into exposing yourself. *You’d never get within striking distance.*”

Anger and fear warred in Martok’s countenance, but just as strong as either of these was an emotion Worf had never seen on his brother’s face. Uncertainty. The general did not know what to do: not for himself, or for his wife and family, but most especially not for the empire that had been entrusted to him. Worf could practically read Martok’s thoughts: *At every turn of the battle, I am outflanked. Every time I think I know what my foe will do, I am wrong. Every decision I have made has been wrong.* And so, left with nothing, he lashed out.

“What would you like me to do then, Worf?” he shouted much too loudly. Worf was conscious of the warriors around them, the men and women who had to retain their confidence in Martok. “Let this usurper claim the empire for himself and turn it into an abattoir? And who should be the first to go to slaughter? My wife? And what of my son? Will he be next? Or perhaps yours? He’s a member of my House, too.”

“I am not counseling anything of the kind,” Worf snarled. “But we must think ... plan ...”

“*You* think and plan!” Martok yelled, spittle flying into Worf’s face. “I’ve had a belly full of it! Thinking and planning has accomplished *nothing* so far today. I say it’s time to act!” Behind them, Worf heard one or two of the warriors shout in affirmation. *No!* Worf thought. *I cannot allow this to happen! They’ll run up to the gates of the First City with their bat’leths drawn and be mown down like hay. ...*

“And if you were truly part of my House,” Martok[137] finished, “and *not* the lackey of Admiral Ross and the divine Benjamin Sisko, you would know what to do.”

Worf felt his mouth go dry and there was a sound in his ears like distant waves crashing against rocks. He closed his eyes, tried to blink the red out of his vision, then opened them again to see that Martok knew what he had just done and, in some secret way, enjoyed it, and, in equal measure, was ashamed.

Of its own volition, Worf’s hand crept toward his *mek’leth*, but before he had a chance to draw it, Maapek was standing before him, thrusting a tricorder into his face. “Worf! Look!” It was the schematic showing the crude sensor grid the sentries had set up. An indicator blinked red, on and off, on and off, and suddenly the other red, the blood lust, departed from before his eyes.

Ships were coming—a squadron of *B’rel*-class birds-of-prey, more than enough to level not only their hiding place, but all the Ketha lowlands.

The ground beneath his feet shook, and Worf heard the sound of approaching thunder.

## 8

DAROK SAT AT the crest of the low hill and studied the landscape. As far as he could see on all sides there was nothing but field upon field of yellowish purple grain swaying in the light breeze. Though he had lived in Shrana, the breadbasket of Qo'noS, off and on since he had become *gin'tak* to the House of Martok years ago, he had spent very little time outdoors and had never had the chance to see how the grain's heavy heads rippled and danced in the light breeze. He couldn't figure out for the longest time what it reminded him of and then, in all of a moment, he remembered his childhood visits to the seaside. His grandfather had owned a small boat and had made his living selling fish to the local training-camp cooks. Darok had spent almost every waking moment of those trips out in his tiny launch, the surf rising and swelling around him, and now here he was, stranded in the center of an altogether different ocean. He put his head down between his knees and inhaled [139] deeply, trying desperately to fight off the queasy sensation that he had experienced on every day of those visits.

When he had collected himself, Darok looked out over the ocean of weaving stalks and tried to estimate how far he was from the edge of Martok's estates. He had walked through the balance of the night—six hours or so—at a steady pace of, oh, about four *kellicams* per hour, so that meant he had gone about twenty-five *kellicams*, give or take a few. He sighed. Not nearly far enough. The lands around Martok's compound were vast.

As dictated by tradition, Martok was expected to produce enough food to feed every member of his House or, as was usually the case, contribute its equivalent to the empire, since few of those members actually lived on his lands. As Martok's status had grown, so had his holdings, until, by the time he was Supreme Commander of the Allied Ninth Fleet during the war, he had considerable cultivated lands under his dominion. In comparison with the holdings of the oldest families, his property was small. But for a man who had grown up in the Ketha wastelands far to the east, these fields represented a continent. Darok wondered if Martok even knew how much land he controlled, but decided he probably didn't. Warriors didn't bother with such details. That had been Sirelk's job.

Then he chided himself. *still* Sirella's job. She would return, as would the general. Darok would never admit it to Martok's face, but he doubted that the full fury of the empire at its peak would be enough to defeat the general when he gave his whole heart to a cause. This little upstart Morjod would prove to be a minor diversion, at best.

The sun crept a little higher in the sky, and Darok felt [140] sweat prickle under his heavy jacket. Before he had left the compound, he had changed his clothes and donned what he hoped would look like the garb of a transient worker. Unfortunately, there didn't appear to be any other transient workers on the road (or, indeed, possibly anywhere in the empire), so he had no idea how good a job he had done.

He studied the map on his padd and tried to decide if the road he had been traveling was the red *Une*, the blue line, or the tiny green squiggle. As an experienced military officer and the veteran of hundreds ... well, scores, anyway ... of campaigns, he had assisted with the navigation of gigantic fleets to every corner of known space, but now the task daunted him. He shook the padd and almost threw it to the ground. It shouldn't be *sofek'thrakt* difficult to figure out if the green squiggle was the Great Victory Thoroughfare or Local Service Road Number 82. Someone should mark the besotted roads. Every few *kellicams* or so would be sufficient, but no. The global positioning system had superseded maps. Which was fine unless you were a fugitive member of an enemy House who knew the government could use the

GPS to hunt you down.

That thought had occurred to Darok *only after* he had downloaded Morjod's second transmission, but since no police force had descended on him, he guessed he assumed he was safe for the moment. Though it wounded his *gin'tak* pride to consider it, he had to concede that he might not be important enough to pursue or, at least, not until other, higher-ranking members of Martok's House were brought into custody. But, no, he couldn't let that lull him into a false sense of security. As a fugitive, and [141] more, one with a mission, Darok ran with a keen sense of purpose.

The old man stroked his beard, considered for a moment how difficult it would be to toss the *DiHnaq* into a bush, throw away his other possessions, and wander into a small village. Who would question him, after all? No one, that's who. For a while. And then, after a while, when things settled down, *everyone* would question him or perhaps just skip the questioning and go right to turning him in for whatever reward there might be out there. He had seen a purge or two in his time. He knew how it worked. He clucked his tongue and slipped the padd back into his inner pocket. "Stop thinking, you old fool. Time to get moving." Darok stretched his legs, massaged away a cramp, then readjusted the strap on his pack. The butt of the weapon he was concealing in the small of his back had bumped against his hip while he had marched and there was a bruise developing. In fact, his body was one big bruise. Everything hurt except his feet because, fortunately, he had been wearing his good boots when the Hur'q came.

"All right," Darok muttered. "Probably the green squiggle is the Victory Thoroughfare, so I'm headed in the right direction." He looked down the grassy slope to the four-lane blacktop and wondered how safe it would be to travel along its verge. Not much traffic, he decided. *No* traffic, if you came down to it. Which was part of the problem. If he could flag down a friendly driver, he was fairly certain he could put on the doddering-old-man act long enough to get to the next town and get a fix on where he was, but, alas, there was nothing. Not even any military vehicles, which was odd. What was Morjod up to, then, if he [142] wasn't even allowing the military out to keep the countryside pacified?

It was quiet. Too damned quiet. Unless you counted the birds and insects and the occasional louder cry that meant some larger creatures in the woods over to the west were indulging themselves in some pre- or post-hunt bragging. Darok wasn't worried about them. Much.

Then he heard another cry, an unnatural cry, the long, swirling whine of an overstressed engine. To be precise, he decided, it was an *'Drel* groundcar. Someone was pushing it much harder than they should. *N'Drels* were meant to be used for long, slow, overland journeys where there were decent roads and some opportunities for maintenance. They were great machines if you treated them well, but whoever was driving this one had no sense of decency.

The groundcar burst out of the woods to the northwest, slashed through the fields, and mowed down great swaths of grain, antigravs blasting at full power, propulsion units pulsing red. Ten seconds later, two other *n'Drels* and a single-seated hoverbike crashed out of the brush and raced across the field in pursuit. Darok's hill was high enough to offer a clear view, but if he crouched behind his rock, he thought he would avoid detection: Feeling a twinge of something like premonition, he pulled out his tricorder and scanned the lead car. He felt absolutely no surprise when his tricorder pinged. The fleeing figure was the general's son, Drex.

Once clear of the forest, the hoverbike rider opened up his throttle and closed the gap between him and Drex in seconds. Hoverbikes, Darok knew, usually [143] traveled in pairs or trios, so he wondered how Drex might have eliminated the others. In the next moment, Darok got his answer. Drex suddenly slowed his car, let the hoverbike race past him, then slid in behind it and accelerated, the engines redlining again. Then *'Drel* barely even bumped when it crushed the biker down into the soft turf. Darok knew Drex well

enough to know that he was undoubtedly grinning broadly right that second. The fact that there were at least two much more heavily armored pursuers right on his tail wouldn't disturb him. The boy was every bit as arrogant as his father was cautious.

The two pursuers split up and arced around Drex's straining vehicle. Obviously, they had not abused their engines as badly as the boy, because they closed the gap effortlessly. A passenger in the car to Drex's right began to fire a disrupter, though, predictably, it didn't come very close to hitting. Only a steady hand would hit a moving vehicle when its car was also bouncing up and down. Drex looked back over both shoulders, obviously considering whether he could pull the same trick he had with the hoverbike, but Darok didn't have much hope for it. Even if the boy did manage to brake and swerve into one attacker, the other would pounce on him before he could accelerate. That probably wouldn't stop him from trying, though; he had never been the most creative soul and he was probably close to a berserker's rage. Darok unslung his rifle and slowly and carefully checked the sights. He was, he knew, going to get only one shot.

Drex's next move surprised both Darok and his pursuers. Instead of hitting the brakes and trying to get someone in front of him, the boy tapped his brakes,[144]then spun then *'Drel* into a sliding turn that left him pointing directly into the flank of the closest car. He hit the accelerator then and slammed into the car at top speed, rolling it onto its side. Sparks erupted out of then *'Orel's* engine box, followed by flames. Darok shook his head woefully and winced as then *'Drel's* engine ground itself down into a useless lump of ceramic and steel, thick black smoke obscuring the scene.

Meanwhile, the second vehicle did precisely what Darok (and, presumably, Drex) would have expected: it shuddered to a halt as the driver and the gunner leaped out. Darok *tsked* and lifted his rifle to his shoulder as the pair ran toward Drex's car. *What are they teaching youth these days? At least one of them is supposed to hang back.* He sighted, fired once, shifted his sight, then fired a second time. When he lowered the rifle, two stupid Klingon warriors lay dead on the ground.

There was definitely someone moving around in the smoke, Darok decided, though he couldn't tell if it was Drex or one of his pursuers. One way or another, he wasn't overly concerned; he had the advantage of surprise. Carrying his rifle low, finger on the trigger, Darok trudged down the hill, absently humming a tune and considerably heartened at the prospect of having a vehicle.

As he neared the smoking wrecks, Darok wondered if perhaps Drex was smarter than he had given him credit for. The grain was high enough and thick enough that a careful man might be able to use it for cover against pursuers who weren't smart enough to carry tricorders. Darok pulled out his own tricorder, checked, and found, yes indeed, life signs twenty meters away and moving[145]toward the woods. The boy had obviously learned something somewhere along the line.

"Drex," Darok called, loudly enough to be heard over the crackle of the burning groundcars. "It's me, Darok. You're safe, boy. Come back."

The blip on the tricorder that represented Drex stopped moving. *He's thinking about it,* Darok thought. *Good.* "I've come from the House," he called. "Your mother has been captured." *That should do it.*

Drex stood up. He was, Darok saw, bloody, beaten, and covered in black soot. "Then, shouldn't you be *bedead?*" he asked.

"Your mother commanded me to leave her before she surrendered herself."

As he strode unsteadily toward Darok, Drex said, "My mother would *never* surrender."



Darok sighed. *He's so young.* "She would surrender if it served the need of your House," he said. "But, more to the point, don't contradict me." He fished the *DiHnaq* out of his pocket and held it up before Drex's eyes. "Your mother commanded me to find Martok and give this to him. When I have completed that charge, you and I may pursue the resolution of any argument you like, but not until. Do you understand?"

Drex reached toward the *DiHnaq* as if to take it away from Darok, but then pulled back as if it might be red-hot and could burn him. "I ... I do not understand."

"Good," Darok said, and slipped the ornament back into his pocket. "Admitting you don't know everything is the beginning of wisdom. First order of business: Are you injured?"

Drex looked down at his arms and legs, seemed to [146]flex every muscle in his tall, strong body at once, then shook his head.

"Good. Then come back to the groundcar with me and we'll be on our way."

"Where?" Drex asked with some of the familiar arrogance, but he didn't hesitate to follow Darok.

"To find your father. Since I'm reluctant to use my tricorder or communicator, my first thought was to find some kind of unmonitored news feed and see if they've captured him, too. Do you know anything about that?"

Drex shook his head. "I know very little about what's happened in the past day. I was with my mother in the First City waiting for Father when the attack came. Not long before we realized how precarious our situation was we decided to separate so our pursuers would need to divide their forces."

Darok nodded. That matched Sirella's account. "Your mother made it back to the House without complication," he said. "How did you fare?"

Drex snarled happily at the burning vehicles as they walked past them. "I found that there is some pleasure to be had in playing at being prey, especially when the hunters are as careless as these fools."

"They would have caught you," Darok said, "eventually."

"They might have caught up with me, but they never would have captured me."

"These are semantic games, and you would have been just as dead either way."

Drex bristled. "Do not try to tell a warrior how to live or die, old man. I think I begin to see how you survived to have so much gray hair."

[147]Darok spun and smacked Drex on the cheek with his open hand. It wasn't a challenge-blow, but the kind a nursemaid might use on a recalcitrant child. Half-forgotten memories of his days in the nursery prevented Drex from drawing his weapon and incinerating Darok on the spot, as the older man knew they would. "You'll be fortunate indeed to live to have any gray hairs at all," he said, "with an attitude like that. Be more respectful of your elders."

Drex rubbed the welt on his cheek with the tips of his fingers and his eyes burned with shame and anger, but did not otherwise reply.

Darok turned around and resumed leading them to the groundcar. This is the critical moment, he decided. Either Drex would follow him now or he was about to be shot in the back. A moment later, Darok heard the slow *swish-swish* of Drex moving through the tall grass and allowed himself to breathe again. “The second matter at hand is whether you think there are any more pursuers.”

“Undoubtedly yes,” Drex said. He paused by one of the two men Darok had killed and relieved him of his disrupter. “This is the third time I have eluded them, and each time my enemies have found the trail again.”

“Have you checked yourself for homing devices?”

“Yes.”

Darok reflected on this. Drex might have missed something, but it was unlikely. Then how were they locating him? Satellite tracking? Dumb luck? Or was it merely that Drex was doing the predictable thing by trying to get back to his House?

“They are afraid that if any of us finds safe haven,” Drex said, “we will rally the people to my father’s side.”

[148] Darok looked in through the window to see if the driver had left the activation key. Of course he had. Darok sighed again. *They don’t teach them anything in basic training these days.* “Do you have any ideas on where we might go?”

The answer, obviously, was no, but Darok could see that the boy wasn’t going to admit that. After several seconds’ hesitation, Drex said, “I planned to contact some of my shipmates and allies in the fleet.”

“Did you see some of the faces in the crowd when Morjod spoke?”

Drex nodded wearily.

“So that plan isn’t really going to work then, is it?”

Drex shook his head.

“Then let’s follow through with my plan and ...” His words were cut off by a long, high, ululating cry. Drex leaped up onto the hood of the vehicle and began to scan the terrain in all directions. “What?” Darok asked.

“It’s the damned Hur’q,” Drex hissed. “They’ve caught our scent. That’s the sound they make when they’re closing in.”

“You’ve faced them already?” Darok asked.

“Twice now,” Drex said. “Once just outside the city and again in the middle of the night. I’m not anxious to do so again.”

Darok’s estimation of the boy rose considerably. Not only had he faced formidable opponents, but he was displaying common sense by allowing himself to know fear.

Drex jumped down from the hood and climbed into the cabin. "They're close. We have to go," he said. "Now."

"But if there's only a couple of them," Darok said, "shouldn't we try to kill them?"

[149]"There's never just a couple of them. And even if there was ..." He checked the *chargéon* the disrupter, then checked their surroundings again. "They almost had me last night," he said. "I had stopped in a tavern to get something to eat." He beckoned at Darok to climb in and start driving. "In any case, two of them—just two—tore a hole in the wall of the tavern. *Astone* wall, mind you. They waded in and the tavern owner ran up and began screaming about his wall. One of them looked at the other, then looked down at the tavern owner, and then it flicked out with its lower leg, one of the big ones. It was so fast, I barely saw it move, and then the tavern owner, the top half of him, it was *gone*. The legs and the bottom half of the torso were left standing there, blood spurting out, but they didn't fall down. They swayed ..." Drex stared out the window and a clump of tiny scars on his cheek stood out vividly.

"And then I heard a gurgling sound," he continued. "I looked down and saw the man's top half lying there, his eyes and his mouth still moving, like he was trying to make sense of what had just happened. A woman ran out then—a big woman with *katcha* sauce dripping off her hands—and went behind the bar to pick up *abat'leth* that was almost as big as she was. She started waving it around like it was a toy, and the monsters stared at her and, I swear to you, one of them looked at the other and actually seemed to *smile*." He pointed at the starter and Darok obediently turned over the engine. Pausing, he looked away from Darok's eyes; the *gin'tak* saw shadows of shame on his face. "That's when I jumped through the window." He wiped away the perspiration that had been beading on his forehead, then [150] reddened when he saw Darok's eyes following his movements.

"And that's their hunting cry?" Darok asked.

Drex nodded. "I think there's more to it than just that, but, yes. I've heard it on and off for the past several hours whenever I've stopped for more than a few moments. This is the closest they've come." He looked out at the treeline again and then said, in a voice as soft as any Darok had ever heard him use, "I wonder what happened to the woman with the *bat'leth*."

Darok was aware of a sudden movement from the corner of his left eye and jerked his head around. Standing just beyond arm's reach were a hooded figure and a young Klingon who was waving one hand tentatively. Both figures seemed vaguely familiar. Darok glanced at Drex and said, "Do you see?"

"Yes," Drex said. "I know the young one. He is Alexander, son of Worf." Darok nodded tentatively. He remembered meeting Alexander at Worf's wedding.

"And the other?" The other figure seemed to be reading their thoughts, because he quickly flicked back the hood so they could see him, men pulled it back up. Darok tried to think of something clever to say, but found he was temporarily unable to form a coherent thought. The two newcomers approached the groundcar and waved for Darok and Drex to come out. Darok shut off the engine and did as he was bid.

"So, you two have found each other?" the hooded one asked. "This is a good omen, I think."

Drex and Darok looked at each other, but neither spoke.

"Did you have a destination in mind?" the hooded one asked.

"We are going to aid my father," Drex said.

[151]From the edge of the woods there came the sound of movement through underbrush without any concern for stealth. An animal screeched and a flock of birds erupted from a clump of bushes.

“Then this should work out well,” said the hooded one. “We are, too.” He beckoned to Alexander and said, “Young one?”

Alexander, glancing at the edge of the woods with more than a little concern, joined the trio by the groundcar and slapped the combadge on his shoulder. “Lock on,” he said, “and beam out four.”

The Hur’q tried to push its way between two trees, but it quickly became apparent that it was too big to pass. A moment later, there came a loud whine, then an explosion, and the tree shattered into splinters. The Hur’q stepped into the clearing and lowered its weapon, already knowing that it was too late, but not slowing its pace. It crossed the open ground to the vehicle with remarkable speed and grace, sniffed the spot where Drex, Darok, and the other two had been standing, then checked the entire area, nose to ground, inhaling deeply. When it came to the two dead Klingons, it seemed to take some kind of delight in crushing their bodies beneath its wide, clawed feet. Then, its work complete, it tilted its head back, opened its mouth wide, and, throat vibrating, bellowed to the sky. Answering cries came from just inside the woods and several meters to the south. Moments later, a transporter beam picked up the creature and swept it away.

Over the next hour, the destroyed groundcars burned down to their frames until nothing was left but thin curls[152]of smoke and charred turf. Small creatures soon emerged from the forest and studied the bodies with interest. The wind picked up again and the heads of the grain bobbed and weaved, bobbed and weaved. Good weather during the spring and summer would assure a bountiful year if anyone was still alive to harvest when autumn finally came.

## 9

PHARH SAT UNDERhis desk and pondered fate, or, more accurately,*his* fate. Things were not looking good. His whole life plan (to wit: “Get away from the family. Find a scheme to extract sizable sums from witless hordes. Wallow in latinum like *astod* in fungus until death at an advanced age”) was not going well. Worse, he was beginning to wonder if it was a viable life plan at all and this despite the fact that it was the life plan of seven-eighths of his people. (The one-eighth who had not made this their life plan were already well into wallowing.)

It wasn’t fair.

First, there had been the whole fight in the bar and his inexplicable pursuit of the angry Klingons into the alley. What had *that* been about? He could have been seriously injured, *evenrobbed*. It wasn’t like Klingons didn’t have any need for a little gold-pressed latinum, especially with the way it looked like their economy was going. A total breakdown of social mores was one[154]of those scenarios where most people lost money and the well-prepared (or ruthless) few made some. All it required (according to a night course Pharh had taken) was a nimble mind, a total lack of scruples, and a small personal army. Most Klingons possessed only one or, at best, two of these attributes. Pharh was beginning to wonder how many he currently possessed. He was also beginning to worry that he was developing something like a conscience. It might be a side effect of spending too much time in the Ketha wastelands inspecting the mining operation. He definitely had *arash*, so there was no reason to think the pangs of guilt might not be

the result of toxic heavy metals leeching into his bloodstream and wearing down his immune system.

Well, if he was lucky, that was the answer.

Probably not, though.

Somewhere to the south, another bomb strike whumped into the ground and the walls and roof of his small office shuddered. Flecks of paint peeled off the ceiling and pelted the top of the desk. Padds containing his contracts! bills of lading! invoices!—all were getting rattled. He wasn't certain what was going on up there, but he was pretty sure that a squadron of Klingon fighters was shelling the *frinx* out of three *kellicams* of landfill that his company was supposed to be mining. Pharh knew he should care, but he didn't really. Not about the landfill, not about the mining, not about the bombing. Well ... maybe about the bombing. If one of those things went a few kilometers astray—which, no doubt, they did, what with Klingons not being the most fastidious species in the galaxy—Pharh would be a puff of smoke blowing in an oily breeze.

Beginning with the assumption that he would survive<sup>[155]</sup> till morning, Pharh wondered who he should complain to. Assuming there was Klingon government to appeal to, should he talk to them? He had a feeling that despite their much-vaunted honor Klingons were not averse to pointing fingers when it came to financial settlement. The term “rebel scum” would be used, but he didn't know exactly how that would sound in Klingon. Any other planet, and the term “act of god (or gods)” would come up, but the stupid Klingons didn't have gods, or, at least, none that they would own up to, so that wouldn't work.

The next shell hit so close that Pharh was almost bounced out from under his desk. His sensitive ears rang from the sudden dip, then painful increase in air pressure. Eyes pressed shut, he shook his head back and forth in an attempt to clear his sinuses and he felt something splat against his hands and arm. He opened his eyes and watched as a large drop of blood dripped onto his sleeve. *Oh, great*, he thought. Pharh didn't have the usual Ferengi response to blood. He had been exposed to too much of his own over the years, partly because of all the companionable roughhousing he had enjoyed as a lad (later revealed to be savage beatings), and partly because of the fact that he had always been susceptible to nosebleeds when he was exposed to loud sounds.

He tipped his head back and pinched the bridge of his nose. What else *could* he do? Perhaps pray. Unlike the stupid, godless Klingons, Ferengi had *lots* of gods, one for every occasion, since it paid to diversify. Was there a Ferengi god that would do in the current situation? Pharh paused to review the candidates. Caq the Chairman of the Celestial Board? No, he required a minimum latinum balance to return calls and Pharh didn't come<sup>[156]</sup> close to qualifying. Smark, He of the Quick and Painless Audit? No. That would not be at all appropriate and might invite the wrong kind of attention. Ma'Acy of the Ledger Domain? That would be a bad idea and, besides, there was always so much math involved if you wanted to invoke him correctly.

The ground shuddered again, even closer this time, and something large fell off the roof and squelched down into the compost heap in the alley behind the building. Pharh began to be truly worried. If his luck didn't improve soon, he might be closing out his account with Quirm the Revenuer. But how much worse could his luck get? he reasoned.

So, naturally, a piece of ceiling crashed into his communication terminal, instigating a feedback loop that played the last transmitted message. Pharh wouldn't have heard the message if a bomb had been hitting at that moment, but, as destiny would have it, it came during one of those pregnant lulls that soldiers talk about that seem like they must be invented, but do, in fact, happen.

It was his mother. The first thing she did was to tell him how much the call was costing. The second thing she did was to tell him he was an idiot and how dare he force them to spend all this money scouring the quadrant for him? Pharh knew this was nonsense since all his mother had to do was check with the Hall of Commerce and find out where he was filing his P-and-L statements. The third thing she did was let his father speak to him, but, as Pharh guessed, he had little to say. It was a common expression in Pharh's family that his father was a man of few words. Pharh had been in his mid-teens before he had figured out that they meant he didn't know many.

[157]Had they even noticed they were yelling at a machine?

During another brief lull, Pharh heard the soft inrush and explosive burst that meant his father had inhaled, then sighed. The twin sounds encompassed worlds, systems, galaxies. They said how ungrateful, what a disappointment, what a poor excuse for a son Pharh was. They said that he had better give up this ridiculous adventure, admit that he was fooling no one (except perhaps himself) and get his lobes home and back into his cupboard at the office just as fast as a cheap transport (that would be coming out of *his* pay) would carry him or he was out of the family *forever*. It was just about the most eloquent thing Pharh's father had ever not said.

Though he knew that he was talking to himself, Pharh began to form a reply in his mind, but, more significantly, before that reply was complete, he felt his lips begin to move. A well-worn psychic alarm system warned him that he was about to say something he was going to regret. Alas, the alarm system was not so well made that it would *prevent* him from saying it. An image formed in his mind of a wide and deep dry riverbed and there in the middle of it was himself, Pharh. He could feel the cracked mud rumble under his feet as the torrent of capitulation headed toward him. It would sweep him away, out into the great, wide ocean where he would drown, soggy and unmourned. He could feel the dreaded words—"I'm sorry"—rising in his throat. It wasn't the right thing to do. It wasn't the brave thing to do, but rightness and bravery were not especially notable features in Pharh's mental landscape, though sometimes, on a good day, he could almost see them [158] across the wilderness from atop the tiny little knob of rebelliousness that he lived on.

Some sick sixth sense told him that this might be his last chance to escape, to go be someone other than the person his mother and father expected him to be, but that same sense told him he probably wasn't strong enough. He wasn't going to be able to get away. He felt the first word—"I'm ..."—begin to come out.

But sometimes Fate takes a hand. Sometimes Fate diverts the river, plucks the almost-a-hero from the stream, makes the almost-a-fool shut his mouth before it's too late. Sometimes, the bomb falls on the wrong place at the right time and occasionally Fate sounds like a click even when it's really a boom.

The blasts from the bombing finally collapsed the ceiling. Heavy chunks of plasteel dropped smack into the companel, rendering Pharh's last connection with Ferenginar null and void, eradicating any evidence that his parents had ever contacted him. He would never know the rest of what his parents said, nor would he be able to return their call in a timely fashion. They would cut off any ties he might have to the family business.

And he didn't even have to call an accountant to initiate the dreaded "D" word: divestiture.

Pain-racked, Martokhung on the fringe of consciousness. Enemies beset him, but he could not lift his head. A weapon pressed into his side, but was it his own or an attacker's? He could not say, nor could

he move his arms to defend or attack. Sound swirled all around him, loud shouts and thumps of battle, but no light. And he was cold. Martok had never minded the cold. You couldn't grow up in Ketha and mind the cold. During[159]the winter months, the wind would howl down from the north and claw at you, shredding clothing, stripping away heat. But *now* he was cold, dammit.

Above him—no, against his back—a sharp weight shifted and the pressure lessened. He heard a familiar voice. Maapek was calling to someone: “Here! I’ve found him!” More voices. Sounds of scrabbling and things being shifted. Dust in his nose and eye.

More voices: “Help. Carefully. Watch that.” The weight lessened even more. Martok realized that he had been buried. He must have been in the rabble from the Great Hall all this time and now they were finding him. They would lift him out and see that he was not dead and that no one could kill the chancellor, not even a bomb from the sky, and he would rally the Defense Force and they would go take Morjod’s head. ...

Light. Wetness on the back of his head. Hands gripped his arms and legs. “Stop,” a voice called. “Let me check him first or you might injure him more.” Martok heard a beeping sound, a tricorder. They were checking him for injuries. Martok gritted his teeth, anger flaring, and pushed himself up from the ground. Muscles fluttered, and he felt the wet thickness in his chest move again, but he held himself up, kept himself from collapsing forward. He didn’t recognize the warrior who was checking him with the tricorder—another young recruit, he guessed—but grabbed the device with one hand and covered it.

“Don’t,” he granted. “If I can’t stand, then leave me here.” Around him, he heard voices respond, some in surprise, some in approval. He coughed again, choked wetly, then brought up a gritty gob. *No*, he thought. *Not the Great Temple. Ketha. The base. We were hiding. Collecting data. Making a plan.* ...Martok got his legs[160]underneath him and rocked back onto his haunches. “How long?” he asked.

Maapek sat on the ground beside him, his forehead covered in a dirty, bloodstained bandage. “Three hours, General,” Maapek said. “It will be morning soon.”

Confused, Martok asked, “*Three hours?! And we’re still here? Why didn’t you move? What if there are infantry, cleanup patrols ... ?*”

Maapek shook his head and tried to sound decisive when he said, “We stayed to find you, General.”

Dust and small rocks tumbled down off his shoulders and slid down the back of his chancellor’s cloak. “Where is Worf?” he asked. Then, “What is our status?” Maapek wouldn’t meet his eye and instead glanced over at Tamal, who was crouched against a rock, propping herself up with a disrupter rifle. She looked back at Maapek, then turned her head to stare at Jaroun, who, miraculously, appeared unhurt.

“The ambassador is-unconscious,” Jaroun reported. “We found him a short time ago, and the medic is tending to his injuries.”

Martok looked at the young warrior who had been checking him with the tricorder, and goaded him. “Go,” the general said. “Help Worf. We need him alive.” Martok turned back to Jaroun. “What else?”

“I ... We ...” Jaroun faltered. “There is not much to tell, Chancellor. The ships found us. You ordered everyone to the basement where they had found the door to the vault or escape tunnel or whatever it was. No one had time to explore it. I was outside, guiding others in when the building was hit. The ceiling collapsed, but the walls tumbled away from the stairwell. Those who were with me ...” He looked around him, showing Martok[161]the ones he meant. “We suddenly saw the sky above us. And the others,

those who had made it into the vault ...” Martok watched as Jaroun’s face went dark, like a winter sky before a heavy snow, and then he shrugged. *Shrugged*. He had been such a proud man, so unsullied by confusion. *And I have brought him to this*. “We tried to dig them out, but soon it became clear that there was no point. No life signs, no communications, no ...”

Martok took a tentative step toward Jaroun with every intention of laying a reassuring hand on his shoulder, but Jaroun stepped to the side even as the general reached out to him. Looking around, Martok tried to ascertain whether anyone had seen what had happened and decided from the way none of the warriors would meet his eye that they had *all* seen. *Is this a mutiny?* he wondered, and then realized it was nothing so overt. *It’s exhaustion. It’s shock and disillusionment. And why not? What have we accomplished?* Not even bothering to try to answer his own question, Martok limped past Jaroun and to the crumbling stairs and began to climb. Adding to his humiliation, his legs were so unsteady that he had to grip the metal rail to keep his balance. *Keep walking, old man*, he thought. *And don’t look back. There are demons—and worse—behind you*. Disturbingly, he could not name the demons and neither did he know their faces, but he had no doubt that they were there.

Halfway up the stairs, the smell hit him. When he had been a boy, it had been his job to gather the household trash and throw it into a large stone oven in the yard behind their house. Every week or so, his father would ignite the rubbish with his igniter and the young Martok would sit and watch it burn down to a pile of ash, the [162]black-gray smoke rolling over him, filling his senses. He used to imagine that he was standing on a cliff overlooking a great battlefield and this was how victory would smell. Only much later did he learn the truth: Victory and defeat smell the same. They reek of oil and fear and cooked meat.

At the top of the stairs Martok stopped to catch his breath. The thermocrete floor was cracked and pitted, and three of the four walls of the large room where they had camped were gone. The sun was a dim orange ball to the east, shrouded behind the leaden sky. A light breeze swept whorls of ebony ash across the concrete, but except for the soft whisper of the wind there was no sound. Much to Martok’s chagrin, he recognized that he had taken for granted the sharp cries of birds and the humming insects that must have been all around them. Now they were gone. The mounds of refuse had been leveled. Last night, Martok had stood atop one and stared out at the lights, knowing that some were hearth fires. They were gone now, along with the hearths, along with the homes. Curls of greasy smoke wound up into the black sky, and to Martok they might as well have been the bars of a cage. As a child, he had known that despite its appearance, Ketha teemed with life.

Not now. Not here, anyway. His enemies had done their job well and erased the site of Martok’s childhood. *What else are they going to take from me today?* he wondered. A gulf opened up inside him and a memory rose, unbidden, to his mind. Sirella had called him to tell him that their then fourteen-year-old daughter Lazhna had been attacked. Only a long time later, after he had heard the rest of the story and learned that Lazhna had crippled two grown men for daring to try to corner her [163]in an alley, did Martok admit the truth to himself. In the few moments between his wife’s sentences, Martok had imagined every possible form of violation and realized precisely how vulnerable he truly was.

And now it had happened to him again. *Someone has taken something from me*, he thought, *and I do not know who or how or why*. The rage, the confusion, the shock, all of these mingled together to form a brew so potent that Martok felt his senses begin to grow dull. It would be so simple to just allow himself to sink into numbness, to lose his outrage, but he would not, *could* not. He heard the groans and low moans all around him. *For my people, I must embrace my fury*.

Jaroun came up behind him and cleared his throat. “Chancellor ...” he said.



“Don’t call me that,” Martok said. “I’m not the chancellor. Not anymore. Maybe I never was.” He turned and looked at Jaroun and commanded, “Take what you have. Save as many of them as you can.”

Jaroun was confused. “Savewho?”

Martok gestured back at the collapsed building, then swept his arm around to encompass the burning landscape. “Anyone you can,” he barked. “All of them.” The general then turned away and stalked down the low hill without saying another word. Heavy black smoke swirled around him as he moved, making his eye sting and his flesh prickle. At the bottom of the hill, he spied a shallow puddle of burning oil. As he approached it, Martok first shrugged one shoulder out of the heavy chancellor’s cloak, and then the other, until it was dragging along the ground, loosely held with one finger. As he stepped over the puddle, Martok released the cloak and let it fall. He thought he would feel lighter when he[164]let it go, but it was not true. Despite that, he began to walk faster. *Sirella*, he thought. *I’m coming*. He had a lot of ground to cover.

Behind him, the heavy cloak almost smothered the blaze, but one tiny lick of flame at the edge of the puddle guttered, flickered, then began to grow.

## PART TWO

“We are not accorded the luxury of choosing the women we fall in love with. Do you think Sirella is anything like the woman I thought that I’d marry? She is a prideful, arrogant, mercurial woman who shares my bed far too infrequently for my taste. And yet ... I love her deeply. We Klingons often tout our prowess in battle, our desire for glory and honor above all else ... but how hollow is the sound of victory without someone to share it with. Honor gives little comfort to a man alone in his home ... and in his heart.”

### 10

“WHEN WELL HE COME?”

“Soon,” she said, her voice low and seductive. “He will be here soon. Do not be impatient. Impatience leads to carelessness.” Her words relaxed him like fingers stroking his furrowed brow, and Morjod’s neck muscles unknotted. Transfixed, he watched her graceful hands punctuate her words with delicate gestures as if she conducted an orchestra or wove a conjuror’s spell. He looked up from the stack of reports sliding off his desk and watched his lady as she slowly walked around the perimeter of the room. As long as he could remember, this had calmed him. She walked soundlessly, her austere black fur robes concealing her in the shadows until she stood beside the row of tall, narrow windows and her tall, thin frame cast an indistinct shadow across Morjod’s desk. Pushing aside the tightly woven braids that wreathed her face, she cocked an ear closer to the glass.

The emperor’s—that is, Morjod’s—office was on the[168]east side of the palace. Normally the morning sun would flood the room, but today the light was anemic. It was his doing, Morjod knew. Though their blow against the fossilized relics of the old empire might have been necessary, it also had the unfortunate side effect of casting tons of particulate matter into the atmosphere. Last night’s spectacular coral-scarlet sunset would replay for the next several months, the scientists said, but the price was a thin, gray-brown tint to the atmosphere that Morjod found depressing.

Serenely, she gazed out over the First City, perhaps contemplating the new world they had birthed together. He would like to hear her thoughts, listen to the silvery caresses of her words. He especially liked to see her eyes when they talked, enjoyed the sensation that he might at any second fall into them, plunge headlong into their darkness and never return again to the land of the living. She could not see him with her back turned, but he knew that she was aware of his eyes being fixed on her. If she tilted her head back, he would be able to see the tiny smile she wore when her plans were successful. To Morjod's profound delight, she had been smiling from morning till night every hour of the past several days.

"We have planned well." To Morjod's ear, she sang the words and they echoed into his heart. "He is predictable. We have only to wait."

"So you say," Morjod said, making an effort to sound grim, though it was difficult when she was so merry. He carelessly tossed the Ketha report onto the pile. Should anything slide off the desk, a nameless functionary would scurry in and tidy things, which strangely bothered Morjod. Assuming the role of the emperor should be thrilling, but he found much of it ... distasteful. This [169]room, for instance, this office. ... Except for the windows, he did not like it. It was much too large, much too ornate, and filled with useless icons, statues and ceremonial weapons. Lining the walls were rows of shelves that sagged under the weight of leather-bound books and clay canisters that contained crumpling scrolls made from pounded plant matter. He could understand the emperor surrounding himself with knowledge, but why had old Kahless been so attached to these ancient media? Disposing of the musty-smelling antiques and scanning the contents of these tomes and rolls into a computer would make this a fit room for a warrior. He made a mental note to order this done as soon as possible, if his lady agreed.

And then there were the life-size statues of mythological warriors that stood at the end of every shelving unit. Images of Reclaw and his seven companions, the traditional depiction of Mow'ga and his wife, the holy warrior T'Chen from the Second Dynasty—all of them archaic reminders of times long dead and best forgotten. For what purpose had the clone emperor put them here? *Decoration*, Morjod suspected. *And if that's true, then the old fool must be even more defective than we had thought. How can anyone expect to accomplish anything in a dusty shrine to the past?*

But Morjod understood why he had to use this office. She had explained it to him. Someday, they would remake *itand* the First City in their own image. Both would be simpler, starker, more like their home, but that time had not come yet. There was much to do first before they could reveal to the people the entire scope of their plans for the future. *It will be too much, too soon*, he thought. *She said this was true and so it must be.*

[170]"The report from Ketha," he said. "I find it ... dissatisfying." One of the generals had scurried in mere minutes ago and handed it to Morjod, but he had never taken his eyes off his lady. Morjod had absorbed it quickly and completely—would be able to recite the contents line-by-line if he was asked or the contents of any of the other score of reports on the desk. It was one of his special skills, another of her gifts to him.

"Why?" she asked. "Everything went precisely as planned. We knew one of *Negh'Var* crew would report their location. It was just a matter of time after your broadcast."

Morjod shook his head. "Yes, I know. It went as planned. But now we have lost track of him. Had you anticipated that he would leave the others behind?"

A nod.

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“Perhaps,” she said slowly, “I wanted to see how you would respond without my telling you what to expect. Someday, you might need to come to a decision without my guidance.”

Morjod grinned ruefully. He knew the game where she teased him. “I could not imagine the day,” he said. “But if it ever comes, I will honor your teachings and perform ... adequately.”

“You have always performed *adequately*,” she said, an edge in her voice like cut crystal. “But if you would honor me you must *excel*.”

“Have I ever disappointed you?”

“No,” she said. “Never.”

His heart soared and he sat straighter in his chair, though he would not allow his expression to change. This, too, was part of their game, but he sensed the [171] morning had brought a new twist to their ritual. A note of desperate joy in her voice simultaneously terrified and enticed him. He sensed in her, for the first time, satisfaction. Knowing that he had even a small part in this electrified Morjod. What would she ask him to do next? Go to Romulus and slay the entire senate with his bare hands? *Done*, he thought. *Done and done again. Ask anything of me and I will do it. I am yours: your weapon and your plaything, yours to command in all things.*

She knew his heart and mind, but she pretended she did not and returned to the subject at hand. “How should we proceed?”

He answered her truthfully, though he already knew she would not agree. For both their sakes, sometimes it was necessary to make a show of conflict. “We will send in ground troops.”

The lady shook her head. “Vengeance would overcome them and they would kill him without thinking. If he died today, he would become a legend. We cannot allow that to happen.”

Morjod understood the danger posed by a larger-in-death-than-life Martok. But that did not mean he understood her reluctance to impose a swift, ignominious death on the traitor. Why not throw him to the Hur’q and be done with him? “Then what do we want?” Morjod asked.

The sun had climbed higher in the morning sky and was peering down at them through a break in the rippling dust clouds, wanly illuminating his lady. She laid a finger on the window glass and stroked it lightly. Against all expectation, she answered. “We want him ... humbled.” Her last throaty word sent a thrill of suspense down Morjod’s spine. “On his knees before [172] the empire, before—” She paused. “—you, O Mighty One.”

“We’re certain he will come here?” Morjod said, hoping his questions prompted more brilliant insight from his lady. “And if he attempts it, can he traverse the long distance between here and Ketha before the execution day after tomorrow? The last we heard he traveled on foot.”

Her jaw clenched, and she tossed her braids impatiently. She grew irritated—perhaps he had asked one question too many? But she resumed stroking the window glass, and Morjod knew the mood had passed. Within moments, she stood as still as the stone statues that lined the walls of the emperor’s office. “Of course,” she said, a new note in her tone. “His lady is in danger. Is there any who could stand in his way?” She turned her back to him, signaling that the conversation was over.

For the rest of the day and into the night, this moment, the sound of her voice, nagged at him, but never having had any experience of envy, he was not able to recognize it when he heard it.

“You’re an old man,” the general said to himself. “An old beggar. Act like one.” *But how do beggars walk?* he wondered. *I should know this.* Beggars had been a common sight in Ketha when he was a boy, but how long had it been since he had seen one? Generals and chancellors met few beggars during battles, and he found himself uncertain about how they moved. Adjusting the loose rag over his scarred eye, he lowered his head and tried to quicken his pace without appearing to rush. The aromatic cloak and trousers he’d dug out of a trash heap helped his disguise. Around Ketha, he fit in perfectly.

[173] His feet hurt. He had left his custom-made footwear behind with his armor, in favor of two ill-fitting and worn-out laborer’s boots he’d found in another pile of refuse. *But an old beggar should limp,* he decided as he gingerly set his weight down and grunted to himself in satisfaction. If he could carry the deception, he would remain invisible.

The narrow road before him was bordered by marshy ditches and pocked with craters, several as long and wide as a man. A thousand years before, ChanTogh’s troops had fallen back to Ketha, where his soldiers had dug trenches to fight from and live in. Deforesting the plain had provided his troops with fire fuel for two seasons, but the subsequent erosion had leached away healthy topsoil and nourishing minerals. Farmers left behind their meager crops, and animal life vanished, retreating to faraway mountains and forest. Over time, the abandoned plain offered refuge to disease-bearing rodents, scavenger avians, machine carcasses, molding foodstuffs, and the desperately poor. Martok, in his most outlandish dreams, could not picture Ketha as the verdant plain on which ChanTogh had fought his battles a millennium ago.

Though a little natural camouflage certainly wouldn’t hurt matters, Martok thought, wishing for a bit more tree cover. He had left the main road about midnight, choosing to remain on the secondary roads that headed more directly west, the direction of the First City. Though Martok had to admit to himself that he hadn’t been thinking too clearly when he had left Jaroun and Worf and all the others, he hadn’t hiked far before he had begun to formulate a plan. His mission was to free Sirella. Only that. Part of him knew his cause to be selfish and quite possibly foolish, that he might stand a [174] better chance with his band of followers behind him, but the operative word there was “might.” As much as it pained him to admit it, someone in the group had betrayed their position and, possibly, had been able to relay tactical information. Morjod expected him and probably knew about the *Negh’Var* survivors, who they were and how many, and their strengths and weaknesses. For the first time *kellicams* or so, he had told himself that by going off on his own, he had regained the element of surprise. Somewhere in the middle of walking the second ten, the truth began seeping in: Martok had let his emotions take control.

There was, he reflected, as he set one foot in front of the other, his blisters sending bolts of pain up his leg, a strange dichotomy in the Klingon soul. He was old enough, he thought, and wise enough to see this: warriors allowed themselves to be swept away on emotional tides. It was part of their nature, part of the romance of their caste. But, conversely, the warriors had somehow risen to be the leaders in their society. And leaders, Martok had learned, must always deny themselves the luxury of indulging their passions, for often reason brought wisdom that emotion did not. And now Martok’s passion for his wife had taken him down a reckless path when perhaps the better choice would have been to seek the greater good for his people. Maybe the damned Vulcans had it right after all.

Regardless of why he had made the choice he had, being out on the open road again felt good, to be by

himself, to have chosen a path and said, “This way,” and not have to listen to a half-dozen dissenting opinions. Martok grinned as he thought of Worf, who, assuming he was not injured too seriously, must be fretting madly. He wondered if he should have stayed behind to see, but [175]then he shook his head. “No,” he muttered. “And what could I have done if he was? Nothing. And with me gone, they have reason to try to move an injured warrior.” Some part of Martok’s mind knew his reasoning made very little sense, but he did not care. He was going to Sirella. He had a little less than two days to get to the First City and he would never make it in time on foot.

So, what were his options?

At the bottom of the low hill he was curling his way down, there was a copse of scrubby trees and beyond that a small, scummy pond. Martok recognized the location. Around the curve he would see a wide field of gray, flinty *scorca* grass bordered by a thick hedgerow of iron thorn trees. Yes. Excellent. This was exactly what he had expected. His memory hadn’t completely failed.

He had left behind the scorched earth late in the previous night and now was almost at the border of the worst of the Ketha wastelands. Here, in the area most often described as Lower Ketha, he hoped to find one of the few offworld industries allowed on Qo’noS. And there, around the next bend, he saw the first sign: a low chain-link fence topped with razor wire. “*Ferengi*,” he spat, his tone a mixture of disgust and a strange kind of respect.

Several months earlier, when he had learned of the contract that permitted the company to mine the landfill, it had amused Martok that there were Ferengi who were willing to pay hefty fees to burrow down into the Klingons’ old trash. Then he had been shown some of the balance sheets and some of his amusement had faded. Ferengi, he learned, never did anything without turning a profit and that, apparently, included rooting around in other people’s garbage. The Klingons of past eras had routinely disposed of items that contained raw materials [176]that once could not be easily reclaimed. Now the technology existed that meant the elements could be extracted, and, more, they were absurdly profitable. A half-dozen hundred-year-old hovercraft or shuttles could yield enough raw matter to replicate the pieces of a small starship. Worlds poor in resources would pay exorbitant amounts for such raw materials.

Martok walked the perimeter of the compound until he found a gate. There was no sign above the narrow entrance, only a permit number, a warning to trespassers that the fence was charged, and a reference to a law that meant, he suspected, that anyone stupid enough to touch the fence could not pursue legal action against the owners. *Because then they would be dead*, Martok reasoned.

He peered through the chain link and saw a trio of dingy gray prefab buildings squatting about one hundred and fifty meters in the distance: an office, a communications building, and a garage or hangar, by the look of them. The communications building looked like it had taken damage in the recent bombings, possibly a stray missile, but the hanger looked intact, and that was where Martok wished to explore.

As a former general of the Klingon Defense Force, Martok knew something known to only a handful of Qo’noS’s citizens: that every Klingon-built vehicle on the planet had a device built into it that emitted a unique frequency, a signature registered with Imperial Intelligence. If circumstances required, satellites could track and identify any vehicle on the planet’s surface. This was an invaluable tool if, say, the KDF hunted a renegade chancellor, learned what vehicle he piloted, and then lost him during the chase. Intelligence monitors could then be activated and the escaped vehicle tracked.

[177]If Morjod knew this—and there was every reason to believe he did—then he would be keeping extraneous traffic off the road and monitoring everything headed from the Ketha region into the First City.

He could easily dispatch patrols to check out any suspicious travelers.

But: Ferengi-registered vehicles. Ah, there was a different situation altogether. Another thing Martok knew was that the few foreign business concerns that did work on Qo'noS were not subject to all the same laws as Klingon industries. How could they tell the Ferengi, "We'd like to put transceivers on your vehicles," without explaining why? And, truly, no one had ever really thought it would be an issue. After all, they were just ...*Ferengi*.

Now all Martok had to do was get past the fence. He pulled his disruptor from the inner cloak pocket and aimed at the gate's magnetic lock. If the energy field still functioned, it would reflect the shot, so he aimed at an angle. No sense frying himself over a little casual burglary. The first shot told him what he already suspected; namely, a bomb had destroyed the generator that had powered the fence. The lock split into two pieces, one spinning up into the air and away to the left, the other landing at Martok's feet. He stepped back to the side of the road and waited.

No one came running. The place was deserted. Just as well. Martok hated the idea of wasting disruptor energy. Besides, he could only imagine the nightmare of wrongful-death litigation the Ferengi might drag him into.

He walked quickly to the garage, his cloak flapping in the stiff north wind. Fine grit had begun to fall several hours earlier, irritating his eye and throat and turning everything gray. Martok had taken it to be a new feature in the seemingly endless miseries Ketha could inflict on [178]its denizens, but then he had realized that it was really powdered stone from the First City settling out of the atmosphere. Up until that moment, he had been doing a passable job of holding in his anger, saving it for when he had a target, but he had almost lost himself in the red rage then.

Stepping inside the garage, Martok smelled odors he remembered from Quark's bar, all things he associated with Ferengi: burned cooking oil, spiced alcohol, and fermented curd.

He pressed his eye against a crack in the corrugated steel of the garage door and grunted in satisfaction. Two vehicles. One appeared to be a heavy transport, probably used to haul trash or equipment to and from the landfill. The other was a light single-person hoverbike. Martok grinned. An image flashed through his mind: Straddling the hoverbike, he would swoop over the public stage where Sirella was to be executed. Their eyes would lock and he would pull out his dagger to cut her bonds. Then, laughing, she would fling herself into his arms. ... He shook his head, snorted, and then cursed himself for a fool. *What sort of idiotic, adolescent nonsense is this?* he wondered. *My dotage is coming on sooner than I expected.* Except it didn't feel like dotage or even idiocy. He felt *good*, potent. He had a direction, a plan, even if on some level he recognized that the plan was foolhardy.

When he pulled the door open and the solar-powered lamps flickered to life, Martok's fragile fantasy abruptly died. The hoverbike wasn't going anywhere. A beam had fallen and crushed the engine system. He recognized that the spicy smell he had detected earlier was actually coolant. He moved hastily away. A healthy whiff [179] of coolant could damage throat and lungs, and he possessed neither the tools nor the time to repair the engine block or himself.

That left the heavy transport. *Well*, Martok conceded to himself, *perhaps that's more appropriate anyway*. It was an old Federation Sporak 460, probably decommissioned twenty years ago and salvaged by the Ferengi. Any old hand in the Defense Force who had participated in a ground action had seen a Sporak at one time or another. They had been ubiquitous for the past fifty or sixty years. They were tough, nimble vehicles that could transport personnel or supplies over long distances in relative comfort and safety. Usually part of colonial equipment, the vehicles were built with three axles and could

be equipped with either four or six tires, which could be swapped in and out to accommodate the terrain. This one had four gigantic, heavily treaded, solid tires, meaning it was being used to travel primarily over mountain roads.

Inspecting the vehicle carefully, Martok decided it was a filthy, patched-together antique and riding any distance as its passenger would pound his lower back into gelatinous mush. And he still had a full night's journey ahead of him. Smiling, he decided the rickety vehicle made him feel strangely at home. *It will do*, he thought.

Yanking open the creaking door, he swung up into the cab and inspected the panel until he found the most likely candidate for the starter, then slapped the switch with the flat of his hand. There was a soft beep and a soft human woman's voice greeted him in Federation Standard, "Insert authorization key now." Martok sighed and sagged forward over the steering yoke. *They didn't [180] disable the authorization key. Who in their right mind would purchase a decommissioned vehicle and not disable the authorization key?* Then, he shrugged one shoulder, a tiny surrender. *A Ferengi, of course.*

Look in the office, he decided, *or the communications building. Look for a bulletin board or a hook by a door. The key will be hanging on a chain where everyone can get it when they need it.* Martok had seen enough motor pools in his life to know how things worked. *Not a serious setback*, he told himself. *You'll be away in ten minutes.* But the small worm of anxiety that had been eating at his gut all day had grown several more segments.

He crossed the compound to the communications shed, the closer of the two buildings, and was pleased to discover that the bomb blast had torn a large hole in its side. *Things are going better already*, Martok decided as he stepped through the gap, apparently into some kind of storeroom. Electronic equipment, fiber-optic cable, and tools were strewn around the floor.

The dark inside made it nearly impossible to see and there were no emergency battery-powered lamps as in the garage, so he spent a couple of frustrating minutes looking through the tools to see if there was anything he might find useful. Grunting with satisfaction, he pulled a hand welder with a nearly full charge from inside an overturned toolbox. Set on its lowest power, the welding arc cast a dim green light. It wasn't much, but it would be enough to keep him from stumbling into or over anything dangerous.

Entering the main room, Martok became aware of a staccato thumping, the low sound of water dripping into a basin. *Pipes might have cracked.* Water would be a valuable supply. There might even be food, though he [181] doubted if Ferengi would have anything around that he would want to eat.

Moving forward slowly, using the welder as a torch, he explored the room carefully, examining every scrap of trash and junk on the floor. When he reached the center of the room, he saw that the ceiling had collapsed inward and a supporting beam had crushed the main communications console. Martok felt vaguely disappointed by this until he reminded himself that he had no one to call.

Studying the ceiling, he couldn't find any broken pipes or dripping plumbing, but the thudding noise was definitely louder. Turning slowly in a circle, Martok decided it was coming from under the crushed comm console. *No place to find water. And I don't see any likely places for the key to be hidden. Time to head for the other building.* He retraced his steps, but paused just before squeezing through the half-open door. The thumping, he realized, wasn't perfectly regular. It would stop every few beats, then resume.

Martok stood in the doorway for the space of a dozen heartbeats, struggling with himself. *Why am I wasting time with this? Sirella waits.* But the thumping was hypnotic. A sneer of self-disgust creased

his brow, but he could not stop himself. He had to know what was making the noise.

Holding the welder low so he could see what was underfoot, Martok moved carefully to the console, the sound louder with every step. Laying the welder on a metal shelf, he studied the beam by its green glow for several moments. He couldn't lift it, he decided, but he might be able to shift it to one side. Hopefully, when he moved it the ceiling would not drop down onto his idiotic head. *Not that I wouldn't deserve it*, he decided.

[182]Bending low, Martok grasped the lowest edge of the beam and straightened his legs. The beam was much heavier than he had expected, but its position was much more precarious than he had guessed. When he tried to shift it to the left, he discovered the beam was really broken into two pieces that happened to be lying one on top of the other. The ceiling sagged and suddenly it was no longer a question of whether or not he *wanted* to move the beam. If he didn't—and quickly—both pieces and a large chunk of ceiling would become his ignoble burial marker. Tendons and muscles in his lower back and arms protested. A sudden shower of powdered mortar blinded him, and a large chunk of concrete fell to the floor, clipping his shoulder and tearing a hole in his cloak.

“Old man!” he taunted himself, imagining the expression on Sirella's face if she had been there. Drex would be appalled at how weak his father had become. Lazhna and Shen wouldn't say a word, but they would begin to treat him like a doddering relic, bringing him warm slippers and a mug of warm ale on the chilly mornings. ... “No!” he bellowed. “Not yet!” Collecting all his strength, Martok dug his toes into the ever-shifting rubble underfoot and shoved at the beam with his chest. Something in his left thigh let go, and he felt a bolt of pain shoot up into his lower back. Still, he did not release the beam and his legs churned and churned, the weight shifting by inches to the left.

Persistence rewarded him. The weight eased, and mortar stopped falling onto his head. Cautiously, Martok loosened his grip on the beam, and it did not move. There was a brief pause when the only sound in the building was Martok gasping for breath. He moved his left leg experimentally and felt the twinge of pain. *Bad*, [183]he decided. *But not unbearable*. When his breathing evened out, he realized that the thudding had stopped. *All that for nothing? You are a fool, old man.*

And then it began again right at his feet. Martok felt ridiculously grateful. Sighing, he gripped the lip of the console and tipped it to the ground. A cloud of dust bloomed up around the edges of the console, and Martok had to wait several seconds for it to settle. When it did, he found himself staring down at a body. To be precise, it was a Ferengi's body, but not a *dead* Ferengi's body. He didn't look up at Martok. In fact, the Ferengi seemed completely oblivious as he lifted his head, then let it drop down against the concrete. Every bump made an echoing thump that seemed to fill the room. *Ferengi*, Martok decided, *have a great deal of empty space in their heads. It's the only possible explanation.* He watched this performance for what seemed an interminably long time, until, finally, not knowing what else to say, he remarked, “You realize, if you keep doing that long enough, you'll break your head open.”

The Ferengi paused, finally aware of his visitor, and tipped his head back to look up. In the green glow of the welder, his face was eerily serene. “Really?” he asked hollowly. “How long do you think it will take?”

## 11

REMOVING THE DEBRIS that pinned the little alien to the floor took Martok about five minutes. During the next ten, he worked on convincing the Ferengi that if he didn't help him find the key to the Sporak, then Martok would arrange for a much more painful way for his head to be cracked open



(though, honestly, Martok couldn't think of any way more painful than the one he'd been attempting). Guiding the Ferengi through the debris by the light of the welding torch wasn't particularly difficult, either. He was compliant enough once he got under way, though there was the problem of having to listen to the little man mumble and mutter as he stumbled along. "They broke that," he would say, pointing at a broken chair, or "What am I supposed to do about that?" while staring at a hole in the ceiling and decidedly *not* looking where he was going. All the muttering stretched Martok's patience. Worse, it preyed on his sense of responsibility. The Ferengi's business wouldn't have been destroyed if [185] Morjod hadn't come looking for Martok and the crew of the *Negh'Var*.

So, after Martok had broken down the door to the office and the Ferengi had pulled the key out of the desk drawer, Martok (almost against his will) found himself saying, "You should come along with me. There's no reason for you to stay here any longer." The Ferengi stared at him for the space of three heartbeats, his eye sockets deep pools of shadow, then nodded once. He staggered back around behind the desk, quickly opened a small, cunningly hidden door, and removed a small pouch from a deep recess. The movements were mechanical, as though the Ferengi wasn't even thinking about what he was doing. Martok was curious about what was in the bag, but he decided it wasn't really his business. He would just give the Ferengi a ride to the First City and drop him at an embassy before proceeding on to rescue Sirella. It was the least he could do, since he was, after all, stealing his vehicle. Maybe Martok would be able to figure out some way to repay him later, which led him to ask, as they climbed into the vehicle, "What's your name?"

The Ferengi stared out into the darkness for a moment, clutching his bag tightly, and then the question seemed to register. "Hmmm? Oh. Uh, Pharih." He turned and extended his hand to shake. Martok knew that some humans followed this custom, but this was the first time he had ever seen a Ferengi use it. He took the hand and gripped it, too tightly apparently. Pharih winced, withdrew his squashed fingers, and asked, "And you are?"

"Tark," Martok said. He had come up with the alias within the first couple of *kellicams* after leaving the encampment, selecting and discarding details. Finally, he had settled on the simplest story. He was a retired [186] soldier who had been so inspired by Morjod's rhetoric that he had decided to journey to the First City and offer his fealty. It was exactly the sort of mad nonsense that might find favor with Morjod's loyalists and would be ignored by everyone else. Of course, none of this would explain why he felt it was acceptable to "borrow" this vehicle, but Pharih didn't seem to be in a mood to ask.

Martok inserted the key and touched the ignition switch, and the Sporak's engine groaned to life. He checked the gauges, made sure the system was stable, and gripped the control yoke. A gentle pull up on the controls, to bring it several inches off the deck before heading for the door. Nothing happened.

"You have to pull it harder," Pharih said.

Martok pulled harder. The Sporak rifted up off its pad, hovered uncertainly, and then lurched backward and crunched into the wall. Chunks of what had been ceiling banged onto the roof of the cab.

"It doesn't stop very quickly," Pharih said.

Martok fumed. "Yes? Really? Anything else I should know?"

"Well, if you'd like, I could drive. I've driven this a number of times, whereas you ..." He let the thought trail off and indicated the roof of the garage. "It doesn't look like you've driven anywhere for a while."

Martok considered. *It had* been many years since he had driven a vehicle like this ... or any vehicle,

come to think of it. Others had been driving for him. He digested this fact for a moment. He could use some sleep, he decided. But would it be a good idea to trust this Ferengi? Was it a good idea to trust *any* Ferengi? "I'll be all right," he growled and hit the accelerator. He pushed [187] forward on the yoke—more authoritatively this time—and the Sporak surged forward, pressing Martok back into his seat. He eased off on the pressure and flopped forward against the harness. Pharh screeched. There came another crash and when Martok tried to assess the source, he looked around and realized he wasn't in the garage anymore. He looked over his shoulder. He had removed about a meter's worth of wall with the Sporak's starboard side, but the vehicle itself didn't seem to be damaged. He shrugged. They were outside. That's what mattered.

"Do you have any strong attachment to the gates?" Martok asked Pharh, who was hunched against the door.

"What?"

"I thought not," Martok said and gunned the engine. The Sporak barely bumped as it rolled over the crushed metal.

Two hours passed in relative silence. Pharh bleated every once in a while when Martok forded streams or accelerated sharply to get up a steep hill. He had decided to seek an off-road route as much as possible to get as close as he could to the First City without encountering patrols. He knew he would sooner or later, but later was better than sooner. The Sporak was not the ideal vehicle for overland trekking, but Martok watched the indicators carefully and eased back on acceleration when the engine showed signs of overheating.

Around the second hour, they finally passed out of the lowlands and entered the edge of the wide, flat plain that encircled the First City. Archaeologists and environmentalists argued about the origin of the barren wasteland. Had the plain once been a lush garden that had [188] been destroyed by a military action? Could there have been an environmental disaster that had shifted the course of a once-great river? Since Klingon recorded history went back only fifteen hundred years—and the ruins unearthed from beneath the First City were much, much older—it was impossible to say for certain. Martok held the opinion that the Ka'Toth plains (for such were they called) had been ever as they were and that a wise warlord had built his stronghold in the most inhospitable place on the planet in order that he and his warriors would always remain strong. If anyone had asked him, Martok would have admitted that the idea made no strategic or historical sense, but since no one ever asked generals or chancellors such questions, it was a moot point.

Sometime in the middle of the third hour, Pharh uncoiled and began to take an interest in what was going on outside his window. By this time, Martok had found a fairly smooth, flat access road that was headed in the right direction. According to the maps stored in the Sporak's memory, the access road would join a primary route about a hundred *kelllicams* up that led directly into the First City. It would be nearing the middle of the night by then, and Martok's plan was to stop, grab as much sleep as he could, then proceed on after explaining to his traveling companion what dangers they would face. Martok assumed Pharh would choose to part ways at that point, and if Martok left him a couple kilos of water, the Ferengi would be able to make it to some safe refuge.

But something bothered him, and Martok knew himself well enough to know that the nagging curiosity wouldn't disappear when the Ferengi did. He would, he [189] knew, very likely be dead before the week ended, and this wasn't the sort of thing he wanted to be thinking about in *Sto-Vo-Kor*. So, he asked,

“Why were you banging your head against the floor?”

The Ferengi answered without hesitation, almost as if he had been pondering the question throughout their travels and he had just formulated an answer. “When the roof fell in,” he said quietly, “I had been listening to a message from my father on Ferenginar. I think he was telling me that I had to call and tell him that I was coming home or I could just forget about ever coming home again.”

“And you were planning to call and tell him that you were coming home?”

Pharh shrugged. “Not necessarily.”

Martok pondered his response, then asked, “Certainly he would understand why you didn’t respond to his message. You could contact him once you reach the First City.”

“I could,” Pharh said. “I suppose. If I want to. And it’s possible that they wouldn’t have finished the contracts yet.”

“Contracts?”

“The disowning contracts. The ones that mean I’m out of the family.”

“They would do that?” Martok asked. “So quickly?”

Pharh snorted. “They say that Klingons have a reputation for ruthlessness, but they don’t have anything on Ferengi when there’s shares of a family business on the line. *Asuccessful* family business.”

“The trash business?” Martok asked. “There’s profit to be made?”

“Spectacularly so,” Pharh said. “Especially when[190]you’re dealing with a people who, well, the kind who don’t like to think about their own past.”

“And Klingons are that kind?”

Pharh looked over at Martok and seemed to suddenly realize with whom he was conversing. “No offense,” he said. “But yes, Klingons are that kind.”

“Why do you say that? Most other species believe that Klingons are obsessively concerned about their past, the stories of their family’s line.”

“For the past two, three hundred years, yes. But before that,” Pharh said, “not so much. And in trash terms, in ‘resource reclamation’ terms, it doesn’t even get interesting until you go down a couple hundred years.”

“Why is that?”

“Because that’s where you start to find stuff that people threw away because they didn’t know how to reuse the things it was made of. The nanotech necessary to make matter compilers cheap and affordable didn’t become available in this part of the galaxy until about two hundred fifty years ago, and that was mostly in the Vulcan and Andorian allied worlds. Nobody was handing out tech like that to ... others.”

“To Klingons, you mean.”

“Yes. To Klingons.” Pharh looked over at Martok again and seemed confused by his behavior. “None of this bothers you?” he asked. “What I’m saying.”

“Why should it? It’s all true. It’s all history.”

“Yes,” said the Ferengi. “But my experience with Klingons is that they like to interpret history from their own perspective.”

Martok grinned and rubbed the ridge of bone over his missing eye. “Well,” he said. “I’ve learned to see things[191] a little differently than most Klingons. But let us return to your father. Why can’t you just call him and talk about your situation? Why choose to bang your head on the floor?”

Pharh sighed and stared out the window. “My father is difficult,” he finally said. “He isn’t easy to talk to. Somehow, banging my head against the floor just seemed simpler.”

Martok laughed appreciatively as he flipped the switch to run a quick passive scan of the road ahead. The results came back in seconds: All clear. Distressingly all clear. He was beginning to wonder whether Morjod’s alliance had begun to crumble already if he couldn’t arrange for routine roadblocks. He glanced at Pharh and realized that the Ferengi had been staring fixedly for several seconds. To cover up his discomfort, he said, “Fathers can be difficult.”

“Is yours?” Pharh asked.

“No,” Martok said. “Not anymore. He’s been dead for many years.”

“Oh. Sorry. But he was?”

Considering the question, Martok realized there was no simple way to answer it. Klingon fathers are supposed to be many things: stern, demanding, and even, he supposed, ruthless. But difficult? No, he supposed not. A Klingon child always knew precisely what his or her father wanted from him or her. Didn’t they? Martok thought about Drex and wondered if his son had ever felt like his father was being unnecessarily obtuse. And what about old Urthog? Martok had felt like he was disappointing his father, but he couldn’t say precisely why. Did that qualify as being difficult? He shook his head, as much to answer his own question as Pharh’s. “No,” he[192]said. “My father was not ‘difficult.’ I did not understand him, but that was not his fault. I think he was waiting for me to understand him, but I was never able to do that. Perhaps if we had had more time together before he died ...”

“I’m pretty sure the only thing my father’s trying to tell me is ‘Make more profit.’ ”

“What’s so difficult about that?” Martok asked, shaking off his revelry. “It sounds like the same thing every Ferengi says to his children.”

“It is,” Pharh replied. “But I think that I wanted to hear a little more than that.”

“Such as?”

He shrugged. “Other things. I don’t know. Maybe ...” But the thought trailed off into silence.

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe, like ‘Why?’ ”

Martok laughed and pounded the steering yoke. “Gods of my ancestors, we are in mortal danger! A philosopher! Save us all from philosophical Ferengi!”

Pharh squirmed, embarrassed. “I’m not ... philosophical. Anything but. I think I might just be simple. Too stupid to get it all. Everyone else seems to.”

Chuckling, Martok shook his head. “I knew a Ferengi like you once,” he said. “A long way from here. You two would like each other.”

Pharh looked at him curiously, but didn’t press him for a name. Martok thought they were both talked out and, more, that it was time to consider stopping for a rest, when Pharh said, “Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

This might be the right moment to bare my teeth and snarl, Martok thought, but stopped himself. The boy [193] had been willing to answer his own rather personal questions. And, besides, if he was talking, he might be able to stay alert longer. “Go ahead,” he said.

“Why is the chancellor of the Klingon Empire wearing beggar’s clothes and driving a fifty-year-old Federation vehicle across the Ka’Toth plains?”

He stared directly at the Ferengi for much longer than was strictly safe, but he wanted the boy to squirm a little. Surprisingly, he didn’t. “You’ve mistaken me for another.”

“Please,” Pharh said. “I’m simple, but I’m not stupid. And I watch the news feeds. Shouldn’t you be off with your army somewhere preparing to take back the First City or something like that?”

Glowing out at the road, Martok found that it was getting too dark to see without the headlamps, so he jabbed the button that turned them on. In the sudden glare, he discovered that his eye ached badly. He needed to sleep soon. “I’m going to meet my army when we get into the city,” he said.

Martok could feel Pharh staring at him. Finally, after several seconds, he said, “Uh-huh. How big is your army?”

“Vast,” Martok answered quickly. “Huge. And they’re all going to transport into the center of the First City and crush Morjod on my command. It will be a glorious bloodbath.”

“Right.”

“I withdraw my earlier comment. You *aren’t* much like most other Ferengi I’ve met,” Martok growled, then jerked the steering yoke to make sure they hit a rut in the road as hard as they could. “Most of your people, I’ve noticed, tend to try to ingratiate themselves to others. [194] Particularly when those others might be potential customers.”

While retightening his shoulder harness, Pharh responded, “Probably because you’ve never met a Ferengi when you weren’t in a position that they would want to ingratiate themselves.”

It required a moment’s thought to untangle the syntax, but when he finally did Martok let go with a short bark of a laugh. “You’re probably right,” he said. “But don’t you think you should be trying to curry favor now while you have the chance?”

“Probably,” Pharh said. “But it’s been a long day. I’ve most likely been written out of the family contracts by now and I’ve had a roof fall in on me. Oh, and had one of my trucks stolen by a Klingon chancellor. Perhaps I’ll be more polite after I’ve seen your army.”

“Perhaps,” Martok said, and jammed on the brakes, bringing the Sporak to a skidding, sliding stop. Then he turned off the engine and fixed a stare at the Ferengi. “And perhaps this is the place where you should get out and start walking.”

“Walk?” Pharh repeated, his voice rising. “*Where?*”

“Anywhere you wish,” Martok answered. “But not with me. The road ahead ...” He inhaled and let his breath out sharply. “... is mine. Thank you for the use of your vehicle. I will endeavor to make sure you are compensated for its use.”

The dashboard lights cast strange shadows around the Ferengi’s eyes, but Martok could see them glitter and found the returned stare to be disconcertingly direct. Neither one spoke for several seconds until finally Pharh lowered his head, then reached for the release on his harness. But just as he was about to pull up on the[195]buckle, his hand jerked away and, instead, tugged on the straps. “No,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think*what?*”

“I don’t think I trust you to remember to send me compensation. I think you’re exactly the kind of Klingon who will forget to do something like that.” His voice grew deeper and more nasal. Martok suddenly felt like the Ferengi had been possessed by the channeled spirit of Quark: “ ‘Vehicle? What vehicle? Did I borrow a valuable piece of equipment from a struggling entrepreneur and forget to pay him for its use and/or destruction? Oh, well, never mind, I have too many other important things to do, people to see, and enemies to kill. It’s only*money*, after all. Nothing that a*warrior* should be concerned with.’ ” Pharh shook his head. “No, I’m coming with you. To see your ‘army’ and talk to your quartermaster.” He looked back up at Martok. “Unless you object.”

Martok glanced out the windshield at the darkening sky. They had reached the inner circle of the Ka’Toth plains and he knew that by dawn they would be able to see the spires of the First City in the hazy distance. He turned his gaze back at the Ferengi and asked, “Do you know how to drive this thing?”

“Yes.”

Martok opened his door and said, “Fine. I’ll be back in five minutes, and then you can take us as far as the edge of the city. We’ll talk again then.”

“Alright.”

Before he slid out of the truck to look for a private place to relieve himself, Martok looked back over his shoulder at Pharh and asked, “Do you have any idea[196]why you’re doing this? I mean, besides wanting to get paid for the use of the vehicle?”

The Ferengi blinked once, furrowed his brow in thought, then said, “None whatsoever. Maybe I’ll think of something while I’m driving.”

Martok nodded as he slid out onto the packed earth. “Well,” he said, “at least you’re honest about it.”

# 12

THE LADY SIRELLA'S slower back ached, as did her thigh and calf muscles, her neck and, more than anything, her feet. She had been standing for more than twenty-three hours, if her internal clock was accurate and, naturally, it was. Standing with her back straight, her feet together, and her head up, Sirella maintained the correct posture to look down her nose at anyone who dared peer at her through the cage bars.

If she desired, Sirella could sit, but that would mean resting in the foul, freezing water that covered the floor of the room into which her enemies had put her after parading her before the populace. She suspected she was in the basement of one of the government buildings near the Great Hall, which would explain the cracked walls, the broken plumbing, and the gritty mist filling the air. Adjusting her footing slightly, Sirella permitted herself one tiny cough, just enough to clear her throat.[198]She refused to give her captors the satisfaction of believing she might be uncomfortable.

The red glow of a single emergency lamp lit the room (obviously power had not been restored to the district, a problem that would not linger if *she* was in charge), and though she did not see a surveillance camera, Sirella assumed there was one somewhere nearby monitoring her. In truth, Sirella lived her life believing that somewhere nearby, everywhere she went, there was a surveillance camera monitoring her.

They meant to publicly execute her the next day. She knew this much and conceded that this was, from a strategic point of view, an excellent plan. If Martok was still alive—and there was no doubt in her mind that he was—he would attempt to rescue her then, as would Drex and any other member of her House who could find his or her way into the First City. The daughter of Linkasa had no illusions about whether members of any of the other Houses would aid her. Her family's Houses—her father's and her mother's—had been powerful, but never popular. They had not attempted to make alliances with the High Houses or curry favor with the Low. It had not been their way. And the House of Martok? She allowed herself a small, satisfied smile. The House of Martok had not needed alliances or popularity, for they had possessed a power no chancellor's House could claim for many generations: merit. Martok, she believed, had risen to power because it was Right. He was the only man who could lead the people through the dangerous days that she perceived before them, days of flux and change, days of chaos and wonder. At times, Sirella felt a mist before her eyes, a veil that she felt she might be able to lift aside and peer through to see the glorious future.

[199]There it was now before her. Sirella lifted her hand to push the veil aside, expecting wondrous enlightenment. Before her mind could open, a shock wave of what might have passed for giddiness in other women passed through her.

A form approached her. Sirella noted the light walk on the balls of its feet and guessed that a woman approached, a tall, powerful Klingon woman, and not some tiny alien thing. As she came closer, Sirella observed that her visitor wore neither boots nor armor, though she carried a weapon, an unsheathed blade, above her head. The warrior woman moved in a slow, stately manner that befitted a member of a noble house, but her gestures evinced a playful side. Pride and dignity existed in this woman, yes, but also a wicked gleam, a sense of humor that Sirella found entrancing. Here is one whom I could call friend.

A sword's length away from the cage, the woman stopped, her blade extended so that its tip touched one of the bars. For a fleeting second, Sirella wondered if she was meeting her executioner and then concluded she could not be. It was too soon. Would she be freed? This seemed just as unlikely. A mist still hung between them so Sirella could not make out the woman's face. She tried to ask "Who are you?"

but the words caught in her throat.

Abruptly, the swordswoman shifted her grip, spun around on her toes while twirling the weapon, then swung it forward in a glittering arc. It is an execution after all, *Sirella thought, struggling to keep her arms stiff at her side. She would not scream or give them the satisfaction of seeing her surprise. There was no way to avoid the blow, so she would not dishonor herself or her family by trying.*

[200] *But the blow did not come. The tip of the weapon hung in midair and Sirella saw that it was not abated after all. The woman vanished and there, before her, hung the prow of a Klingon ship. Its running lights blinked serenely and the engine nacelles pulsed with silent power. Sirella reached out to touch the bridge, the place where she would sit when the time finally came, when she would see ...*

“What do you think she sees,” a woman’s voice asked, “that she stares so intently?”

Sirella resisted the urge to jerk her head toward the sound, instead slowly sliding her eyes toward the patch of shadows farthest from the red lantern.

A second voice, a man’s, responded, “I cannot imagine. She may simply be transfixed with terror.”

The woman chuckled, a low, throaty laugh that echoed ominously in the dank darkness. “The Lady Sirella transfixed with terror?” she asked, her tone chiding. “I think not.”

“Then plotting her escape?”

“Perhaps, though I suspect that by now she has correctly analyzed the situation and determined that there is no escape.”

“Composing her last words?”

Again the chuckle. “I doubt if the lady would waste her last seconds with something as mundane as *words*. She has always let her actions speak for her, has she not?”

The patch of shadows shifted and Sirella perceived two figures, both wearing long cloaks with deep mantles. Sirella had an astonishingly good memory for voices and though she had identified the male voice as Morjod’s, she was certain she had never before heard the woman’s.

[201] “Perhaps,” Morjod said, “she would like to say her last words now so she’ll have more time for actions later.”

Sirella considered a couple of choice epithets, but decided gathering information took precedence. She knew she wouldn’t be able to ask direct questions, but she might be able to make inferences from her captors’ responses. “It is a mistake to give your enemies time to compose last words or consider last actions,” she said haughtily. “I can assure you that my husband and I will not make this error when our positions are reversed.”

With a chuckle, the woman replied, “Should we find ourselves in that situation, I only hope that you will act swiftly. I don’t believe I could stand to be in near proximity to so much smug self-satisfaction.” *No useful information there, Sirella thought. Except, of course, that she hates us.* But this led to another, more interesting thought: *Why do they hate us?* She could understand that Morjod and his ally (lover? mentor?) coveted power and felt that she and Martok were impediments to their rise, but hatred? What



value was there in hatred for a warrior or even a political opportunist?

Morjod left the shadowy corner and stared at her, his eyes blazing. “You are smug, aren’t you?” he asked. “You will not be when you learn your fate tomorrow. Would you like to know what we have planned for you?”

Yes, Sirella decided. *He hates us. Or me, at least. He would reach through the bars and strangle me if he dared. This is most interesting.* She replied, “I do not need to know. My fate has been assured since the day I was born. It is the same as all living things: I will die.[202] Everything dies, little dictator, but death does not frighten me. Can you say the same?”

Morjod’s gaze flickered almost imperceptibly, though not before Sirella saw that she had scored a hit. He clenched his teeth together and hissed, “Today is a good day to die.”

“Is it?” Sirella replied and arched an eyebrow. “I think it would be a much better day to kill.”

Reaching for his *d’k tahg*, Morjod launched himself at Sirella’s cage, and she silently praised her mother’s name for the opportunity she was about to have. First, she decided, she would wrest his weapon from him and pin his arm; then, a little work on the eyes and nose. Sirella didn’t like his cheekbones, either. There was much work to be done there, too.

“Morjod!” the woman commanded. “Stand away!” And Morjod instantly took two steps away from the cage.

Oh, ho, Sirella thought. *And now we know who holds the leash. What a miserable little targhe looks.* Sirella almost laughed out loud when she saw the expression on Morjod’s face, but resisted the urge because she knew she was about to learn something valuable.

“Leave us now,” the woman said softly.

“But ...”

“Leave us. *Now.*”

Morjod stepped back into the shadows and slunk away through the hidden entrance. Even when she stared directly at it, Sirella could not see how the door was concealed, but she knew that if she could free herself from the cage she would be able to find her way out.

“He listens well,” Sirella said when the two women were alone.

[203] “He does,” her visitor agreed. “Most of the time.” And the tone of her voice answered one of Sirella’s questions.

“Children can be both a blessing and a curse,” Sirella said. “Depending on how well they were raised.”

“He had the best upbringing,” the shadow woman replied, “but he is still young, impulsive. He requires guidance.”

“Which you are happy to supply.”

“It is my role. I am happy to fulfill it.” Sirella sensed the woman’s smile when she answered. She knew

that Sirella knew the truth, but she did not wish to end the game. Oddly, Sirella realized that she, too, was enjoying their discussion. Perhaps she was more vulnerable to loneliness than she would have suspected. “And what of your son, Drex? Have you not found him to be ... challenging?”

Sirella hesitated before responding. She did not want to give the enemy any information that would lead to Drex’s capture, but as she considered her situation, she decided she could probably gain more data than she could possibly give up. “He is,” she said, “his father’s son. In more ways than one. He reminds me so much of his father when we first met. He has his father’s pride, his temper, his ... stubbornness.”

“But not his ...” The woman hesitated. “His sagacity? His wisdom?”

Laughing out loud made her back and shoulder muscles ache, but Sirella could not resist, then despised herself for her weakness. “Ha! No. Not those. Perhaps someday, but not yet. To be fair, my husband did not develop those qualities until he was much older than Drex is now, and not without help.”

“So you understand what I face?” the visitor said.[204]“Men require guidance. Even when the raw stock is good, they must be molded and shaped. Don’t you agree?”

Sirella kept her face immobile, but she could not help but remember Martok when they first met, he little more than a callow boy. Even then, he had possessed many of the virtues she required in a husband, but they required refining. Making him into a man had been difficult. Not unpleasurable, but difficult. Losing herself in memory for several moments, it was an effort of will to bring herself back to the present. Again, she was appalled by her weakness and an edge of anger crept into her voice. “Enough. This discussion serves no purpose and you bore me.”

The visitor chuckled, then stepped from the shadows, almost but not quite within Sirella’s reach. She was smaller than Sirella by almost half a head and wore a simple black robe that accentuated the curves of her hips and slender waist. Only the lower half of her face was visible by the dim emergency light, but Sirella could see that her mouth was wide, her teeth small and unpointed, and her lips red. There were no visible lines of age around her mouth, which was baffling.*How could this woman be Morjod’s mother? She isn’t old enough to have children!*

Smiling, the visitor said, “Then just one question and I will leave. Answer it or not, I do not care, but I think you will see that there is no possible way it could further imperil either yourself, your family, or your husband.”

Sirella considered briefly and decided to take a chance. “I will answer your question truthfully,” she said, “if you answer one of mine.”

“As you will, Lady Sirella. And to show my good faith, you may go first.”

[205]Sirella did not hesitate, but asked the question that had been plaguing her since the attack on the First City: “What has happened to my children?”

“Ah. So, more a mother than a wife.”

“No,” Sirella said defiantly. “But I know my husband must be at least at liberty or you would not be here wasting time with me.”

The smile, a moment ago so charming, disappeared and her tone lost some of its warmth. The visitor turned away from the cage and Sirella realized she, too, stood in the freezing ankle-deep water. It was a

small thing, but significant. *She may be a lady, but she is no comfort-addled dilettante.* “Very well,” she said. “Drex is missing. Our forces pursued him out of the city and into the countryside near your estates, but then we lost him.”

His father’s son, Sirella thought. The visitor continued: “Your eldest daughter, we knew, was on patrol aboard her ship, *Korrin*. We believe she attempted to leave Klingon space when she learned of the destruction of the Great Hall. No word has come back of her fate, but small craft like the one she piloted have a limited range and she was far from any inhabited world.”

Shen, Sirella thought. *But no. Do not give in to despair.* “And your youngest, Lazhna,” the visitor said, and here her smile grew wide. “She fought well. You should be proud.”

Though she had been steeling herself for precisely this kind of news, Sirella felt as though her heart had stopped beating. A pain swelled in her chest, hollowness. Lazhna was gone, cleaved away from her in a single, jagged stroke. Her knees bent and the ache in her shoulders grew intolerable. *Lazhna. My child. My little* [206] *warrior.* She had been, in so many ways, the most difficult of her three children, the most surly and unresponsive, but always, deep in her heart, Sirella had to admit to herself (if no one else) that Lazhna was her favorite. *And why?* she asked herself. *Because she was the one least like me. She was something new in my life, something that I could not control or entirely understand. Lazhna was the girl I wished I might have been if I had been given the chance.*

She almost sagged against the bars of her cage, but then Sirella thought of Drex and Shen. “Ask your question,” she commanded, “then leave me.”

Her visitor had leaned slightly closer to the cage, her waist bent, the better to drink in Sirella’s pain. *Just a little closer,* she thought, *and then we will play other games.* But Morjod’s mother did not comply. Instead, she asked, “How old were you and Martok when you first met?”

The question startled Sirella. The woman had said that she would not ask any question that had strategic value and Sirella, strangely, had believed her, but this? How was this relevant? But a promise was a promise, so she responded, “I was in my twenty-first year and Martok ...” She thought for a moment, remembering the first time she had laid eyes on the man she would take as husband. It had been only a few years after he had repelled the Romulan attempt to seize Shivan’s flagship and he had become famous through the Defense Force, though just as infamous because of the lowly status of his family.

Sirella had not cared. His proud bearing, his calm, observant nature, and the obvious high regard his crewmates held for him had instantly transfixed her. *Here,* [207] *she had thought, is a man of destiny. And only a woman of destiny should be permitted to claim him.* And so she had. “Martok was twenty-five, almost twenty-six. It was the year ...”

“I know what year it was,” the visitor snapped, all of her forced cheer suddenly evaporated. “I know,” she said again quietly, as if to herself. She stepped back into the shadows and, raising her head, said, “Good-bye, Lady Sirella. Tomorrow you will die. Do it well or not, as your courage permits. I can say for certain that it is not a death that I would want.”

And, with that, Sirella knew she was alone. She raised her hand and almost, *almost* touched the bars to steady herself, but at the last moment lowered it. They might still be watching, after all. Someone, she knew, was always watching.

Worf's ribs ached, though it was not an entirely unpleasant pain. In the insulated darkness inside his own head, he tried to figure out why this might be. The most probable cause of his present condition would be injury-related. Sedation produced odd mental side effects, though he could not remember ever feeling this way when he had been under sedation in the past. The potions, pills, and powders that Starfleet doctors had used to put him under made his teeth throb and his bladder feel like it had shrunk to the size of a peanut. This sensation, this gray woolly fuzziness, felt quite pleasant in comparison with his experiences with Starfleet Medical.

The other possibility had potential: He might be dead. If he was dead, it certainly wasn't what he had expected death to be like. He'd painted a mental picture of a tenor[208]choir singing *jajlo 'Sto-Vo-Kor*, a radiant sun glinting off the glorious gates, and bloodwine gushing from stone. His wife, the magnificent Jadzia Dax, would be waiting for him, *bat'leth* in hand, a hint of *feral seloh* in her eyes.

Death didn't sound too bad.

Worf tried lifting his hand to feel his way to a light of some kind, but his hand remained limp, as if the muscles were gone, at his side. He knew this sensation should concern him, but he couldn't work up the energy to be upset.

A voice said, "Wake up, Worf."

Jadzia's voice, *lam here*, *par'machkai!* He tried snapping open his eyes, but found he could not. Or maybe he had, but the gray wool was too thick for any light to penetrate, so he murmured, "I am awake."

"Then open your eyes."

Seeing Jadzia again offered him hope. Shaking away any fuzziness lingering in his mind, he opened his eyes without hesitation, but the dreamlike quality did not lift.

Worf stared up into a circle of blurry faces and, beyond that, into the sky. Jaroun was there and behind him and to his right was Martok's son, Drex. *Warriors, both. They must have died noble deaths.* To the left, just at the edge of Worf's field of vision, was old Darok, looking somehow simultaneously concerned and inconvenienced. Darok moved aside so another face could move into view: Alexander. He reached out to pat Worf on the shoulder. "Hello, Father," he said.

Perhaps I am not dead.

Worf tried to say, "Hello, Alexander," but the sound that emerged was something between a croak and a wheeze. Someone handed a clay cup to Alexander, who[209]then held it to his father's lips so he could drink. The water was warm and flat, and there were some chunks of either vegetation or wood splinters in it, and it was the most delicious thing Worf had ever drunk. He finished it all, then nodded his head. "Thank you, son," he said, and Alexander smiled gratefully. A thought welled up from nowhere and Worf found himself asking K'Ehleyr's question. "Are you doing what you want to do?"

Confused by the question, Alexander glanced to his left to look at someone Worf could not see. Whoever it was must have signaled the boy to answer, because he said, "I'm here with you, Father. So, yes, sure I'm doing what I want to do. Why?"

Worf considered for a moment, then croaked, "Because if you would rather do something else, you should."

Alexander smiled then, grateful, and Worf thought he saw a hint of a tear in the corner of the boy's eye. *So much like his mother*, he thought.

"I'm fine, Father. For now I'm fine."

The person to Alexander's left moved into view now, and it took Worf several seconds before his identity registered, so different did he look than he had the last time Worf had seen him. The figure extended his hand, and he and Worf greeted each other after the fashion of old comrades, hands locked around each other's forearms. Then, with little apparent effort, he drew Worf up to his feet and asked warmly, "How are you, Worf?"

Worf was surprised to find that the answer was "Fine. I am fine." He felt none of the aches or pains he had expected to feel after having had a ceiling fall on him.

"Have you enjoyed your dreams of late?" he asked.

[210]Worf regarded him curiously, but without rancor. "They have been," he said, "illuminating."

"Excellent, Worf. That is excellent, but it is time to get up now, my friend. We have far to go and have a great deal of work to do."

And much to his own surprise, Worf felt himself grin with anticipation. "All right," he said, and felt the weight lift from his chest. "Tell me what I must do."

## 13

*"WHAT THE HELL is happening on Qo'noS?"*

Colonel Kira Nerys, commanding officer of Starbase Deep Space 9, knew that Admiral Ross must be upset; he was not a man who employed casual profanity. She could sense his frustration through the viewscreen. Unfortunately, she lacked any information that might alleviate that frustration.

She had, of course, received and read the Starfleet Intelligence report earlier that day, but the information therein had been scanty at best. Reading between the lines of all the usual intel nonsense and conditionals, the gist of the report was "Something on Qo'noS blew up, but we don't know what and the Klingons are saying, 'Blew up? Nothing blew up.'" It was, Kira strongly suspected, something *political*, if the word could truly be said to apply to an entire species of large, armored men and women who enjoyed swinging heavy metal objects at one another's heads. When they *liked* each other. She [212] sighed. "I have nothing to add to the official report, sir." Ross pursed his lips and gave her a look that eloquently conveyed his opinion of empty responses.

In Kira's experience, the admiral could usually be depended on to be understanding, if not sympathetic, when he didn't receive the answer he wanted. This, apparently, was one of the rare occasions when he expected her to improvise some nonsensical suppositions to make him feel better. *The Federation Council must be leaning pretty hard on Starfleet for answers*, she thought. Unfortunately, she literally had nothing to offer him. "Sorry," she said. "I don't know exactly what you expect me to know that you don't. Starfleet Intelligence has more resources than anyone on the station or on Bajor. If it means anything at all, I've checked our logs and we have about forty-two Klingons on board the station right now, which is, I admit, extraordinarily low in comparison to recent days, but ..." And here Kira shrugged.

“The war is over. Chancellor Martok went home, and my impression was that it was going to be one hell of a party. Can you blame them for wanting to go home?”

Ross grimaced and settled back into his chair. “No,” he muttered. “*Of course not. I wouldn’t have expected anything else. And thank you for checking the logs.*” Ross rubbed his chin and asked, “*Do you notice anything unusual about who was or wasn’t there?*”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“The Klingons on board the station—*did anything about them catch your eye? Any common denominator?*” “Well, sure. Most of them are from the same ship.” She punched a couple of keys on her desktop comp, checked the docking and repair records, and then tapped the commands to transmit the data to Ross. “The[213]*Kem’A*, a scout ship. It lost its main deflector array in a minor argument with an asteroid. If you read between the lines of the repair report, the engineers were left with the impression that someone was taking some unapproved target practice and found himself a pocket of hydrogen or methane in a rogue comet.”

“Ah,” Ross said, studying the report. “*Boys will be boys.*”

“Not this time,” Kira said. “The gunner was a woman.”

“All right. That accounts for...*what? Twenty-six of the forty-two. What about the rest?*”

“Ten are merchants, all known, all accounted for. Two are in the brig. Too much bloodwine on an otherwise slow night at Quark’s.”

Ross nodded. He had been in the bistro on nights like those.

“The other four are diplomatic personnel.”

Ross’s eyebrows shot up in question. “*Do we know them?*”

“We know of them,” Kira explained. “You’ve met three of them yourself: Sor’cha, Mubarak, and Klow.”

Ross nodded, recognizing the names. “*And the fourth? Let me guess: former second-in-command on a Vor’cha-class cruiser? Communications officer at a Romulan embassy?*” Kira shook her head twice. Ross searched his memory for likely candidates. “*Aide to a High Council member?*” Kira raised a single finger and touched the tip of her nose.

Ross smiled grimly. “*What’s his name, who did he work for, and what’s he pretending to do here?*”

“*Her name is Marasa and she used to work for council member Tor’ash. Name mean anything to you?*” Ross shook his head and Kira replied, “Me, either, so I[214]asked Dax to do some research for me.” She pulled up a file on the desk comp and read, “‘Tor’ash is a key figure in a small but active coalition of conservative’—read that ‘reactionary’—‘council members around which a nucleus of several other traditional’—read that ‘xenophobic’—‘splinter groups have formed. Unlike most of the other members in this coalition, Tor’ash has seemed to make it a policy to keep a low profile; however, observers’—I think the word you want here is ‘spies’—‘have stated that council member Tor’ash does not seem to possess a natural inclination toward such self-effacing behavior.’” Kira glanced up at Ross. “It worries me how easily she falls into this kind of language.”

Ross shrugged. *"She's a counselor. And sometime before that, an ambassador."*

"Scary combination," Kira muttered, then continued reading. "It is not known at this time who might be influencing the council member or how wide his or her activities are. There are several candidates among the best-known political infighters, but none has yet shown conclusively that he or she possesses the resources or the will to inflict significant damage on the Klingon Homeworld or, more significantly, the First City."

Ross grimaced. *"Dax knows what happened."*

"Admiral, *everybody* knows. But no one wants to say anything about it until the Klingons come forward and either ask for help or make some sort of statement. Whatever it was, it clearly wasn't directed at the Federation or its allies. Either the empire is experiencing internal strife—and it's not like we haven't seen *that* before—or they've got a technological disaster on their hands and they're embarrassed about it. If so, it[215] wouldn't be without precedent. I know the Klingons once managed to blow up one of their moons. ..."

Ross nodded. *"Yes, Praxis. Over eighty years ago ...Indirectly it led to the Khitomer Accords."*

"Right. Well, doing the same thing twice in less than a hundred years, and this time in their capital city ... Maybe the Klingons want to try to settle something on their own before they announce it to the quadrant."

Ross rested his thumbnail against his lips, a gesture that Kira had noted usually meant he was about to make a decision he didn't like. *"In the absence of any other explanation, that's what Starfleet Intelligence has decided is the most likely scenario."*

"Hasn't anyone on Qo'noS reported anything?" Kira asked. "There's a Federation embassy, isn't there?"

"Unfortunately, we've been out of contact with the embassy since the alleged crises started," Ross said. "It may be equipment problems related to the present circumstances ..."

"But it's impossible to say for sure," Kira finished for him. "Communication from Qo'noS is nothing if not erratic."

Ross nodded, lines of exhaustion and frustration tight around his eyes. *"So, I thought I'd try a different angle and find out if Ambassador Worf has contacted anyone on Deep Space 9."*

"Ezri, you mean."

Ross nodded.

Kira knew that Ross made it a policy not to become enmeshed in the personal lives of his subordinates, but he had spent enough time on DS9 to learn a great deal about the sometimes painfully complex web of social interactions. For example, he knew that Ezri Dax and Dr.[216]Julian Bashir were currently taking the first, tentative steps in forming a romantic relationship. He also knew that the previous Dax host had been married to Worf.

"I don't think Ezri has heard from Worf," Kira replied. "But if she had, and what he told her had any

strategic value, she would have reported it to me.”

“I can accept that,” he reluctantly agreed. “*I assume you’ll inform me if circumstances change?*”

“Immediately, Admiral.”

“All right then. Ross out.”

Kira turned from her viewscreen and looked out her window at the stars. In all likelihood, if Worf had contacted Ezri, there was a good chance she wouldn’t inform Kira, strategic information or not. For years, she’d watched Jadzia Dax trot off on all kinds of crazy escapades to fulfill obligations made by Curzon Dax. From what she’d seen from Ezri so far, Kira believed that Dax’s unbroken streak of unfailing loyalty to the Klingon people would continue. And honestly, knowing that someone with Dax’s abilities might ultimately help the Klingons deal with the mess they’d made for themselves made Kira feel a lot better.

Replicating *araktajino*, she raised her mug in what she hoped was the general direction of Klingon space and toasted to Martok, Worf, and the empire. Whatever they’d managed to get themselves into, Kira was confident Chancellor Martok was the one to get them out.

Pharh asked, “Are we going in?”

Martok didn’t answer, but only stared through the Sporak’s windshield at an ochre glow. It was, Pharh knew, light from the First City, and it had grown larger and brighter the closer they came to its dark walls.

[217]First Pharh looked at Martok’s profile, the light from the dashboard casting heavy shadows in the mass of scar tissue around his eye, then glanced out the window at the tiny shack on the other side of the road. They were idled on a narrow gravel strip that served as a parking lot for the eatery or inn or whatever it was. Pharh had noticed several other places like this along the roadside in the past hour and had decided they were the Klingon equivalent of refreshment stands. After they had passed the last one, Martok had said, “Stop at the next one,” and then gone silent again. *It might be nice to go inside*, he thought, *and have a, well, not a hot meal necessarily*. Klingons didn’t go in much for hot food. They tended, he had noticed, to prefer things that were either cut into glistening chunks or served in slimy, wriggling blobs, but these were usually either cold, at room temperature, or, at best, steaming from their own quickly dissipating body heat. Still, it was better than nothing, and if he was lucky the place would serve *cranch*, the green goo that Pharh had largely subsisted on for the past several weeks. He had recently learned that *cranch* was a kind of algae grown in large vats and was usually served to very young children and/or pets. This made Pharh wonder about Klingon parenting (and pet ownership), but it didn’t stop him from buying it by the gallon jug. The thick, gritty texture and the smell of fermented plant made him think of home and the theoretical meals that Moogie was supposed to have made if Moogie had made meals, which she hadn’t, but there he was getting into muddy wish-fulfillment waters again.

One way or another, his stomach was tightening into little knots and making ominous noises. Pharh was startled to discover that the idea of glistening chunks or [218] wriggling masses of alien meat was starting to sound appealing. He asked again, “Are we going in?”

Martok didn’t answer.



Maybe he didn't like the look of the place, though why make Pharih stop driving if it wasn't safe? The Sporak vibrated roughly beneath him, the throb of the engine reverberating inside Pharih's empty gut. He was sick of the vehicle, sick of the way it didn't so much roll *aslurch* along the road. He was sick of the layered-in smell of old garbage and the sharp tang of leaking coolant. He *needed* to get out of the damned thing, if only for a little while.

He cast his mind back a few hours, to when he had thought to tell Martok about the fight in the bar a couple of days ago and the mob's pursuit of the one young warrior—Alexander, a funny name for a Klingon—and the sudden appearance of the cloaked warrior. "All very dramatic," he had said. "Just like something out of a space-adventure holo." The only thing missing had been a swelling soundtrack, maybe a crack of punctuating lightning. Oh, and a female character. No ladies had been anywhere in sight unless you counted that one with the murderous gleam in her eye who had been carrying the big nugget of corrugated steel, which Pharih, a seasoned veteran of such scenarios, did not.

Martok had grown very quiet after Pharih had told him this story. Sirella, his wife, would be executed the next day, which would account for *some* of the old Klingon's distraction, but Pharih had a feeling there was more to it than that. The gears were turning. *Aplan* was coming together, Pharih thought, something amazingly devious and clever.

"I think I need to use the washroom," Pharih said. "Maybe they have one. And a drink would be good, too.[219]Some delicious Klingon bloodwine. Mmmm. Wouldn't that be lovely?"

Martok didn't stir. You had to admire that kind of concentration. Wheels were just whirring away, Pharih figured. Had to be something fiendishly clever, whatever it was, but when was he going to share it? Over supper, perhaps. That seemed sensible, but then doubt began to trickle in: Was there *anything* sensible about Klingons? Was there anything sensible about someone who *traveled* with Klingons, but didn't know where they were going or what they would do when they got there? *What's happened to me?* Pharih wondered. *Why am I doing this? I have other options. I could go home. Get out of the vehicle now, find a ride to a spaceport, and hire a ship. I would have to use credit, but that would be all right. I'd find some way to pay it off ...eventually. And I could even go home. My parents would make me suffer, make me stand on the doorstep and beg, but only for a day or two at the most. It wouldn't cost much....Just my pride, and what Ferengi ever gave two strips of gold latinum for his pride? Pride is nothing. It's the thing you have left when you have nothing left. ...* And at this, he paused and rephrased the sentence so that it came out, *It's the only thing I still have that I can call my own.*

Pharih reached over and poked the general in the side with his finger. "Mr. Chancellor, sir," he said. "What are we doing?"

Martok stiffened suddenly, inhaled sharply, and glanced about. "Sirella," he said absently, fixing his one good eye on Pharih. "Where?"

"Here," Pharih said, his appetite and his determination draining out of him. "We're right here. Outside this ...[220]place. An inn, I think. You told me to stop at the next one. Are you hungry?"

"What time is it?"

Pharih pointed at the chrono in the dashboard. "Going on midnight."

"Then we're not too late?"

Pharh shook his head. “No, of course not. The execution is tomorrow morning. We have ...” He calculated. “We have about ten hours, maybe more, to go about twenty klicks. That’s more than enough time. I figured you would want to stop and get something to eat, tell me our plan, figure out what we would do to prepare.”

“*Our* plan?” Martok asked. “There is no *our* here. I get out here and start walking. You turn this thing around and go back where you came from or where you’re going next.”

Pharh felt heat rise on his face. “But you *owe* me,” he said.

“Yes, I owe you,” Martok said. “I owe it to you to keep you alive because you will almost certainly die if you come with me.”

“And if you don’t take me, *you’ll* almost certainly die,” Pharh retorted. “Or are you expecting your *army* to protect you?”

Expressionless, Martok reached down into an inside pocket and pulled out a piece of jewelry. Pharh saw it was a ring. Martok held it out, waited for the Ferengi to extend an open palm, and then dropped it. The ring was unexpectedly heavy, and even by the dim light of the dashboard Pharh could see that it was little more than a worn, unadorned piece of metal.

“What’s this?” Pharh asked.

“The chancellor’s ring,” Martok answered. “They[221] took it off Gowron’s body and gave it to me. I’ve never worn it—wouldn’t have until the ceremony—but I’ve always carried it with me. Now it’s yours. Payment, one way or another. If I survive, you bring it back to me and I’ll reward you. If I don’t, it should be worth a lot to someone, somewhere. A collector’s item. Or perhaps the new chancellor would like it.” He grinned deviously. “He’s not going to get it from me, though.”

Pharh hefted the ring in his hand and considered. There could be no question that such an heirloom would be worth a considerable sum. When things calmed down, he could sell it or trade it for ... well, just about anything. He wouldn’t have to go crawling back to his family or sell himself into indentured servitude to some bank or loan shark (Pharh was enough of a Ferengi that the two were practically synonymous in his mind). It was a considerable amount of profit for several hours of driving and a moderate amount of terror. All he had to do now was lie low and wait for the waves of chaos to settle down. No matter what, eventually events would begin to resume their usual course. That was how business worked. He closed his fingers around the ring. “All right,” he said. “Anything else I can do for you?”

Martok looked out the windshield again at the glow on the horizon. “I can’t think of anything else at the moment,” he said, then cracked open the passenger-side door and the warm, rank breath of the Ka’Toh plains began to seep in.

Slipping out onto the ground, the general began to close the door, then stopped halfway and reopened it enough to poke his head in. “On second thought,” he said with a wry grin, “do me a favor. Afterward, if you[222] find yourself in a position to tell anyone about me, exaggerate nothing. Don’t make me bigger than life.”

Pharh frowned in confusion. “But, General, you *are* bigger than life.”

“I’m not a general,” Martok said.

“All right, Chancellor.”

“Or that.”

Pharh sighed and gripped the ring tighter in his hand. “Then what are you?” he asked.

“Just a Klingon. Just a man.”

“Who’s looking for his wife.”

Martok nodded once.

“Well, then, good luck.”

“In Klingon, we say ‘*Qapla*’. It means, ‘Success.’ ”

“Then *Qapla*’.”

“*Qapla*’, Pharh, son of ... What was your father’s name?”

“Just Pharh will do,” Pharh said.

Martok nodded once-again and repeated, “*Qapla*’, Pharh. May your storehouses grow ever fatter with wealth and your account books always balance.”

Pharh laughed and said, “*You have* spent time around Ferengi,” but Martok didn’t hear him. Pharh watched the tall figure hunch into himself and raise the hood over his head before he disappeared into the night. It probably wouldn’t be a good idea for him to go inside and ask about *cranch*, Pharh decided, so instead he turned the Sporak around with a series of convoluted reverses and ground gears, then headed back down the road into the east and the rising moon. There was a lot of road between him and the landfill, but, somehow, Pharh doubted he would run into anything he couldn’t handle.

## 14

ASDAWN APPROACHED and the streetlights of the First City began to dim, Martok concluded that his plan was going about as well as he could expect. He was in the city, near the site of the Great Hall, and had managed to find a guardsman who was stupid enough to let Martok kill him and take his uniform. He was surprised that Morjod had kept the guardsmen on duty, since they were usually more closely allied with some sort of civilian authority, but perhaps that was just one more indication of how deep into the power structure the usurper had penetrated. It didn’t matter. Martok’s only concern was that guardsmen wore helmets where Defense Force soldiers did not, offering him a way to maintain his anonymity, and that there might even be a logical reason why a guardsman would be inside the Emperor’s Palace.

Still, he was beginning to wish he had not let Pharh take the Sporak. The last *kellicam*’s walk to the city [224]center had felt like eternity. His pain from cramping leg muscles had been exceeded only by the excruciating ache of his feet. Fortunately, the deserted-looking home he had broken into really had been deserted, and both their larder and medical-supply cabinet had been well stocked. In fact, in the last two hours, Martok had noticed that many homes inside the city limits appeared to be deserted. Either Morjod

had been making arrests or, more likely, civilians had decided it was time to visit their distant relations. Martok couldn't condemn them. It was one thing to be asked to fight in a war or to take sides in a revolution; it was quite something else to back a coup. Perhaps more Klingons had come to that conclusion than Morjod had anticipated. They might, Martok reflected, even be willing to fall in behind a deposed chancellor if given the opportunity. Martok shook his head, finding the thought distracting. Whether he had a future as chancellor didn't matter. Not immediately, anyway. Rescuing his wife came first. After Sirella was safe, after he had ascertained what had happened to the children, *then* he would decide what to do about the chancellorship and Morjod. For all he knew, the usurper might be precisely what the Klingon people wanted or needed. *Or deserve*, he thought wryly. Not even Kahless had shown up to say anything one way or another, though Martok had to consider that the emperor was either in Morjod's power or dead. Strange how few people had even mentioned the clone emperor's name in the past few days, almost as if they had all been looking for an excuse to forget him.

He shrugged and felt the unfamiliar straps of the guardsman armor bite into his back and shoulders.[225] Pulling on the helmet, he scanned the area, memorizing the location of doors, stairways—potential escape routes—should he come back this way. From the silence, he determined that the area surrounding the palace must be mostly empty, so he felt safe moving deeper into the compound.

As dawn approached, the periwinkle sky brightened, lending him light to see by. He passed through winding alleys and small courtyards, each step bringing him closer to Sirella. He mentally mapped each section, noting which alleys dead-ended and which might be a good hiding place, should he require one. After twenty minutes of twisting and turning through the mazelike passageways, Martok crossed the deserted square to the Emperor's Palace, the identification card he'd lifted from the guardsman snugly cupped in the palm of his hand. If it didn't work, he would attempt a diversion. Martok knew that he didn't stand much of a chance if forced to fight his way in and then out again.

The disgraced lady was being held in the emperor's gaol, the first person to be so honored in many hundreds of years. Morjod had heavily publicized her location, so Martok anticipated a trap. What he hoped was that Morjod and his conspirators had planned on defending against a much larger group, possibly even an army or a guerrilla strike. A single guerrilla, on the other hand, would be difficult to prepare for. Though the odds were heavily stacked against him, he knew that stealth was the one weapon that could conceivably defeat Morjod's layers of security.

The adjoining plaza where the Great Hall once stood had been cleared of all but the largest chunks of debris. Where the most ancient of Klingon edifices had once[226]risen above the city was only a shallow crater half *akellicam* across. Cracked stone and concrete edged the crater, but raw earth filled in past the three-meter mark, most of this churned up into mud by heavy demolition equipment. The openness of the setting would make it difficult to stage a rescue in the crater, should circumstances require that approach. Crude bleachers ringing the sides assured that hundreds if not thousands of citizens with unknown loyalties would be in attendance. *I will have to rescue her before she is removed from her holding cell.*

In the center of the crater, Martok could see carpenters still putting the finishing touches on a platform where stood the execution device. Martok had seen pictures of the *cha'ta'rok*—literally the “machine that tears”—in history books, but he had never imagined that he would see a working model. In the days before the original Kahless had unified the empire, some nefarious genius had created the device, intending it to be both an instrument of execution and a test of a warrior's strength. The concept was deceptively simple: the victim was strapped down to a platform and four long flexible poles were pulled toward him or her. The poles had leather thongs at their ends and these were tied to the victim's arms and legs and around the neck. On a signal from the chieftain, the executioner would release the straps that bound the victim to the table and then the stays that kept the poles bent. If the victim was weak or

had simply surrendered, the poles would instantly snap back into position, pulling his or her arms, legs, and head from the sockets. It was a messy, intentionally humiliating death, but, by the standards of its era, mercifully quick.

[227]Conversely, if the warrior was strong, he could keep the poles from snapping away for minutes or, as had been reported in legends, for hours at a time. Every young warrior was told the story of Mighty Borma, who won his freedom by holding the poles bent for so long that the tops sprouted roots that grew into the earth. Even with the thrilling, heroic stories the *cha'ta'rokhad* inspired, its creation had not been, Martok concluded, the Klingons' finest hour.

Beyond the crater, on the opposite side of the plaza, Martok crossed the gardens fringing the palace walls. Dingy gray ash coated the usually lush grounds. Plants and trees were still alive—it had only been two days since the attack—but Martok was surprised that Morjod's vanity hadn't compelled him to have them cleaned. During his visits here, he had become friendly with one of the gardeners, an old woman named Gratach, who had been tending the emperor's gardens since Urthog's day. Because she reminded him of Darok, Martok had enjoyed his conversations with her. Could Morjod have been so unwise as to imprison or dismiss Gratach? It seemed inconceivable, but there wasn't any other explanation. Except ...

Of course. She had been part of the receiving party at the Great Hall. Gratach would have wanted to see him enter the Hall and take the oath. Staring at the dirty trees, Martok clenched his fist. *Thousands must have died yesterday!* Reaching up, he took a leaf between his fingers and brushed it until pale green showed. *I shall avenge you, too, old woman. ...*

Beyond the gardens, Martok noted pairs of guards on duty at every corner and at all the palace entrances. The guardsmen and the Defense Force patrolmen[228]appeared to be exhausted and oblivious of everything save the workmen at the center of the crater. He moved slowly, purposefully, toward a particularly droopy pair of guards, a satchel that he had found in the guardsman's kit folded under his arm. The sound of the workmen cranking one of the winches almost made him stop to listen, but then he maintained a courier's weary pace toward the secondary entrance he had chosen.

The pair of guardsmen beside the security barrier barely glanced at Martok as he swiped the identification card through the scanner, though one asked him to identify himself.

"Gorsh," he replied, and glanced at the voiceprint analyzer.

Neither guard bothered to look at the display, because they knew what Martok knew: The analyzer at this gate was poorly calibrated and would not give either a definite positive or negative ID. He pointed at it and said, "They still haven't replaced that?"

One of the guards shrugged.

"It was like that when I was posted here two years ago. I called maintenance every week," Martok continued.

This time the second guard shrugged and said, "They'll fix it when it pleases them. They have other, more important projects now." He nodded toward the crater and Martok shook his head in sympathetic disgust. Pushing past the barrier, he silently thanked Gowron for his indifference to day-to-day maintenance minutiae. He walked briskly to the second door just past the barrier, but then turned around and casually mentioned, "I didn't see any of his pets outside."

Both guards looked at each other uneasily and one<sup>[229]</sup>replied, “They haven’t been around since yesterday afternoon. Where have you been?”

“My unit was in the lowlands looking for rebels.”

“Did you find anything?” one of them asked.

Martok shook his head in the time-honored manner of all weary soldiers. “I do not know,” he said, and held up the satchel. “But my *petaQ* commander does not like me and I was selected to bring this report.”

One of the guards laughed. “Too bad. Maybe he’s keeping the pets hungry just for bearers of bad tidings.”

“Or for her,” the other said, and nodded his head toward the center of the castle. “For Martok’s widow. After they’ve used the *cha’ta’rok*.”

“His widow?” Martok asked, surprised. “You think he’s dead.”

The first one touched the *d’k tahg* on his belt and replied evenly, “He must be.”

Martok glanced at the man’s eyes. “Why do you say that?”

The guard shook his head, but refused to speak. The other, either less fearful or less circumspect, answered for him. “If the general was alive,” he said, “he would be here by now.”

He acknowledged their answers, turned his back, and headed for the inner door. Once safely through, he ducked into the nearest storage closet, leaned his back against the wall, slipped off the stifling helmet, and breathed deeply. *Steady, Martok*. Those last comments had unnerved him: the rank-and-file soldiers believed he was dead. *They would follow me—I sensed it. I could see it in their eyes*. The prospect of leading an army against Morjod revitalized him.

[230]He pulled the *bat’leth* off his back and hefted it with one hand. From the appearance of the dull blade, Martok could see that it had not been used much in recent years. He decided he liked the old, off-balance, and slightly blunted weapon; it felt companionable. *You need a name*, he thought, and decided on the spot to call it *Dagh*, which in Klingon meant simply “tooth.” He slung it back over his shoulder and felt better for it. Arriving in *Sto-Vo-Kor* with a blade that had a name would be honorable.

Far more important than the *bat’leth* was the guard’s confirmation that Sirella was here.

Replacing the helmet, he continued on his way. Up ahead, he remembered, and around the corner was a T-intersection with stairs leading up to the right. Couriers would proceed up the stairs to the main reception area, where the administrative adjunct would relieve couriers of their satchels or parcels. To the left was another stairway he had never taken, one that led down into the bowels of the palace. Instinct told him that this was where he would find Sirella.

Peering around the corner down at the T-intersection, he saw a single guard, this one looking considerably more alert than any he had spotted outside. He touched the slim knife in the sheath on his forearm. He had been surprised to find the blade on the guardsman’s wrist, but, unlike the *bat’leth*, he reasoned, this was precisely the sort of thing a soldier who worked the streets of the First City would want to have at hand. Sweeping around the corner in what he hoped looked like an officious pace, he fervently hoped he would not have to kill the guard, possibly drawing needless attention to his presence.

[231]As he turned left at the T, walking confidently toward the stairs, the guard called to him. Martok tugged the blade in its sheath.

Somewhere below, Sirella waited for him. He would do what he must.

## 15

THE DUNGEON'S NARROW hallways and low ceilings scraped the top of Martok's head. Putting the helmet back on might protect his skull, but his vision and hearing would be further impaired. Shuffling along as fast as he could, head held low, he felt exposed, anxious. What if he was spotted? Even worse, recognized. The dimly lit hallways prevented him from seeing more than a few meters ahead; a guard station could be in the next patch of deep shadow and Martok wouldn't know until he had practically stepped into a disrupter's muzzle.

He stopped and tried to quiet his breathing enough that he could listen for cues about the path ahead, but it proved difficult. The air was so dry and close that Martok had to consciously resist the urge to take deep draughts of air. He strained to catch every ambient noise. *Nothing*. He heard nothing, not even the to-be-expected slow drip of leaky plumbing or the gasp of a dilapidated ventilation unit. Where was Worf and his [233]precious Starfleet tricorder when he was really needed? Nothing else to do, really, except press ahead. He filled his lungs, released it, filled them again, and, for the first time in many days, felt the muscles in his neck loosen. He did not realize, until that moment, how much weight he had been carrying there.

And who am I carrying? he asked himself. *Sirella? Worf, Jaroun, K'Tar, and every other warrior who has died these past three days? My father, even the little Ferengi and his father? Drex, Shen, and Lazhna?* And here he felt shame. *My children ... I've barely spared them a thought. How can that be? Have I been so focused on Sirella that I forgot them?* And, again, he was shamed because he knew the answer: Martok loved his children, but he had not truly known them. They existed through Sirella. Even Drex had only become fully formed in his mind when he became a soldier of the empire. And then there was the consideration of what kind of soldier, what kind of man, his son was. And the truth was, it was something he did not care to think about.

"What am I doing here?" he asked aloud, and Martok knew himself well enough to know that the question did not address only this corridor in this dungeon in this palace at this moment. What was he doing here? He had an answer, but Martok—Martok the warrior, Martok the general, Martok the chancellor—felt fear creep up his spine, but knew, absolutely *knew* he had to speak the words aloud.

He whispered his answer, but then, feeling a coward, he spoke them again and the words tore at the dry, still air. He said, enunciating each syllable as clearly as he could, "I do not know." A nameless dread clawed at him, [234]and Martok suddenly found himself remembering a childhood game where he and his friends would dare each other to speak a mythological demon's name three times while staring into a mirror. Would the demon appear behind the glass? None ever had, but there was no way to know if this time would be the one. *And now what demon have I unleashed?* He watched the shadows and waited. He felt his heart in his chest and counted the beats.

The answer, apparently, was none.

And then he heard her voice.

“Martok?”

He wondered if it was his imagination playing tricks on him. It might well be. He had slept no more than three hours in the past three days. His eye felt like a dry bit of charcoal in the socket, but it was impossible to resist the temptation to answer.

“Sirella?”

“Here.”

“Where?” Her voice was little more than a rasp and indistinct, as if through a wall or ... “Speak again.”

“I am here, husband. Beneath you, I think.”

Martok took a step forward and saw a soft glow on the floor no more than three paces before him. It was a tiny drain, though for what, Martok could not guess. He knelt down and peered through. “Sirella?”

“Yes. You are louder now and above me. There must [be] a grate in the ceiling. I thought I heard you speak earlier, but I could not be certain.”

“Sirella, keeper of my soul and my honor ... Hearing your voice, my weariness falls away and I am whole again.”

“It is good to hear your voice, too, my husband,”[235]Sirella said. She sounded, if possible, even more exhausted than Martok had felt.

“How do I get down to you? Can you see a door or a stairway?”

“No, but there must be one. I have had visitors—the usurper and one other—and they came from a dark corner, though this room is not large, I think. If I can judge, the door and where you are speaking from are near each other. Check the walls near you.”

“I will. Be strong, my wife. I will be with you soon.”

Before he could straighten up, Martok heard Sirella say, “Have you ever known me to be anything else?” He smiled.*Same old sting in her voice. At least that has not changed.*

Once he knew what he was looking for, finding the lip of the hidden door was simple. He slipped the tip of his *bat’leth* into the crack and slowly worked it around until he felt it catch on something. Probing carefully, he checked for a tripwire or an alarm, but detected nothing. This troubled Martok more than if he had found something, but he had no choice except to proceed. The door was opened with a kick plate on the floor and when he pressed it, a section of wall slid back. Martok pushed on the door and it slid aside as if [it] was on a track. *Very clever, he thought. And quiet, too. When I am the chancellor again, I will have to consult the original plans. ... He stopped then, surprised to be thinking about the future. One thing at a time. ...*

Halfway down the stairway, the steps suddenly became slippery and the air grew clammy. *Some kind of reservoir beneath the palace?* Martok wondered, and added that question to the list of things he would investigate if he ever had the opportunity.

[236]He found another door before him and felt for its edges. It opened, as had the other, without a



sound, and Martok stood in a pool of blackness, but he decided that made no sense. He had seen a soft glow in Sirella's cell. How could he be sheathed in darkness? He reached out carefully and touched a heavy black curtain. *Ah. Clever.* He swept the curtain aside and stepped forward. Unfortunately, he did not know that the curtain marked the edge of a low shelf and he stumbled awkwardly off it, splashing into ankle-deep water and almost dropping his *bat'leth*.

"Clumsy oaf. Can't you be more careful?"

Sirella stood before him, arms folded across her chest, back straight, head held high, lips curled into a delicious sneering smile. Martok felt the oily water soak into his boots and he had to fight a sudden need to pass water of his own.

"Good to see you, too, Sirella. Are you ready to leave?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether you're prepared to be chancellor again."

Stung, Martok asked, "What makes you think I'm not?"

"You have taken a long time to get here. I can only assume you've been dallying. Questioning your future. Second-guessing the past."

"Ah. Yes. Well, about that ..."

"Not now, husband," Sirella droned. "We should be leaving. I trust you have a plan?"

"Of sorts," Martok said, stepping closer to examine the cell door. It was not a complex lock, but it was strong, much too strong for a blow from *abat'leth* to have any effect. A disrupter bolt might work, but it [237]would be risky in such tight quarters. Perhaps the hinges ...

"The keys are over there," Sirella said, and pointed to the opposite side of the room.

Martok glanced at the opposite wall. The keys were on a peg. This was distressingly simple. "I do not like this," Martok muttered.

"Really?" Sirella drawled. "I cannot imagine why." Another kind of chill suddenly froze the air around them. "Martok," she said. "Tell me you have guards watching the entrance."

Martok winced. She only used his name when she needed to tighten her grip on him, one way or another.

"Sirella ..."

"Tell me..."

"I'll get the keys." He splashed across the room.

"Martok."

“I’ll have you free in a moment.” He splashed back.

“You must leave,” she said softly, but firmly. “They cannot capture you.”

“No,” he said, his voice just as soft. “I’ve come too far to find you. You must come. They’re going to execute you. ...”

“Do you think I’m as stupid as you are?” she hissed. “Don’t you think I know that?” She reached through the bars and snatched the keys from his hand and pulled them to her breasts. Then, with the other hand, she grabbed Martok’s beard and hauled him to the bars of the cage. “They killed our Lazhna,” she whispered. “Shen and Lazhna are *dead*.”

Martok’s chest tightened and his throat closed. *My daughters ... Our daughters...* The anger, the pain, both boiled up inside him and behind that bolus of rage[238] came the thought *I barely knew them. ... I barely had a chance to know them. ...* And then he said, “Drex?”

What about Drex?”

“She told me he still lives,” Sirella said. “She said that he was on the run, but that he had escaped.”

“She? She who? Who are you talking about? What about Morjod?”

But Sirella wasn’t listening. “Find her, Martok. Escape this place and kill her in my name. She slew my daughters. What happens to me is irrelevant. I ask only for the chance to throw her off a cliff to *Gre’thor* once you’ve dispatched her to the afterlife. If you open this door, they’ll know you’re here and they’ll come, but if you turn around and leave, you might still escape so that you can find her. I command you in the names of our children and our fathers and mothers. Find her. And when you do, *kill her*.”

“Kill who?”

And from behind him, Martok heard a light soft laugh and a voice say, “Me, Martok. She means me. But you tried to do it once before, so I doubt if you could do it this time.”

Martok felt something creep up his legs, into his chest, and out the top of his head. He fell against the bars and heard Sirella do the same. Darkness descended.

“Little warrior, you are needed.”

Pharh lifted his head and cracked it against something sharp. Fortunately, he possessed a very thick skull (many had remarked that it was his best feature), so there he didn’t hurt himself very badly. Pain—lots of pain—but no damage.

He was in a little cave. Grasping his head and saying,[239] “Ow, ow, ow,” he tried to remember why he was in a little cave. It was a nice enough little cave, to judge by all the available evidence. It was pleasantly cool and damp, in fact. As had been the case so often lately, his pants were soaked through to his skin.

Then, straining, he remembered. The Sporak had broken down ten clicks down the road from where he

had dropped off Martok. It was much too far back to the landfill, so the logical plan was to head into the First City. He had left the road for what he had thought was a shortcut, then had ended up stumbling across a wide stretch of orange sand and gray rock. From his previous trips into the city, he knew that at this point it began to sweep back and forth in great curves, no doubt some kind of primitive defense mechanism. When he had been riding, the trips were enjoyably scenic, but as a pedestrian, he found them positively sadistic. The First City had been right *there*, right in front of him, and he couldn't seem to get any closer. Deleting the curves and moving cross-country had seemed like a good idea. Less heat, less dust, fewer big birds.

At first, the birds had been yet another interesting sight. They were about half his height when they stretched out their long necks, had large, heavy bills, beady eyes, and thick, sharp talons. They also had a thick crest of red feathers over their eyes that made them look faintly comical when Pharih first saw them. He had enjoyed watching them watch him. They sat by the side of the road, watched him approach, pivoting their long, thin heads on their skinny necks, then watched him walk past. As soon as Pharih moved a few paces past, he would hear a heavy *wump, wump, wump* as they spread their heavy wings and seemingly by sheer force of will [240] levered themselves into the air. Then they would land a short way ahead of him and the whole performance would repeat itself.

At first, Pharih had been amused, even grateful for the company, but as time passed and the birds' attention had grown more *avid*, he had begun to worry. Confusing cause and effect, he had decided that if he left the road, the birds would leave him alone.

Unfortunately, now it seemed pretty clear that the big birds hadn't been sitting by the roadside because they liked it.

"You're an idiot," Pharih had said to himself, because he thought that if he had had company, that's what they would have said. Pharih didn't like to disappoint anyone, even the people who weren't with him. The next curve of the road hadn't shown up as he had expected. In fact, he had been fairly certain that he had somehow gotten completely turned around and was now headed *away* from the First City. It was difficult to say for sure, because the sun had been almost directly overhead and he was hot and tired and thirsty and his water had been almost gone and the birds had been getting *even friendlier* and resting somewhere had seemed like a good idea.

At that point, he had stumbled into a small dell and found the little cave. Actually, the "cave" was more like a pile of rocks, but Pharih wasn't in a position to be picky. Looking over his shoulder, he had noted that the birds were still following him and when they spotted the cave, they had looked *disapproving*, which had struck Pharih as a good thing. Being an old hand at seeking emergency shelter, he had not simply stuck his head in the cave and crawled forward. These sorts of [241] havens were frequently occupied, so he had thrust in the nearly empty water container and moved it around for several seconds, then had waited to see if anything would emerge. When nothing had, Pharih had backed in feet first and pulled the water container after him, using it as a shield-slash-door. As soon as he had disappeared down his hole, the birds had *wump-wumped* to the entrance and begun to peck at the water container. Pharih wondered if maybe that's what they had been after all along. He had considered shoving the container out to them, but decided it wasn't worth taking a chance. He had a feeling that the beaks had been employed on more than one occasion to dig out things from tight places.

So, with the sounds of frustrated pecking echoing in his ears, Pharih had sunk into an exhausted slumber and awoken to the sounds of a soft, pleasant voice whispering strange things in his ear.

"Who ... ?" he asked, not certain which who he meant. *Who are you? Who needs me?* They were both legitimate questions, and Pharih decided it might be best to let the mystery voice choose which option it

preferred to address first. He waited, listening intently. He had good ears even for a Ferengi, so he heard many things: the slight breeze outside stirring the dust, the slow trickle of water down the inside of the rock, the scurry of some small creature above, the notable absence of a pecking beak, but no voice.

Should he call out again? Seemed dangerous. Perhaps the voice had been a guard or search party, but his ears told him that no one that large was anywhere nearby. Finally, Pharh worked up his courage and said aloud, “*Who needs me?*”

[242]The breeze picked up and wheezed through the cracks in the rocks, sounding almost like a voice. Pharh closed his eyes, concentrated, and listened as hard as he knew how. The wind picked up and thrummed through the chinks between the rocks, but there no one spoke.

Maybe he had imagined it. That made a lot of sense. He had been walking for a long time in the hot sun and stupid Martok hadn’t given him enough to drink. What did a Klingon know about a Ferengi’s fluid-replacement needs, anyway?

The wind whistled again and Pharh felt himself trying to make it sound like someone was saying something, but it refused to cooperate. *If I die out here, I’m going to track Martok from the Divine Treasury to wherever the Klingon afterlife is and ...and...* He struggled with possibilities. Kicking Martok in the rear end seemed like a bad idea even in the afterlife. If there was an after-afterlife, a Klingon could probably send him there.

Pharh pouted. He knew he should try to get out from under there, squeeze the water out of his pants and into the bottle, then try to find his way back to the road. If he followed it, eventually he would make it to the First City. Then he would try to figure out if Martok was still alive, and if he was, he’d get some money from him—if he was chancellor again, *alot* of money—and then, and then ...

Pharh sighed, then twisted to the side to try to make himself more comfortable, which was almost impossible in such a tight space. Feeling a sharp pain in his side, he wiggled his fingers into an inner pocket and withdrew the object that was attempting to insinuate its way into his kidney through his epidermis. The ring, Martok’s ring. *Damn him, anyway*, Pharh thought, then shoved the water container out of the way. It wasn’t [243]quite dark, but neither was it bright daylight. Crawling out, he looked about and decided it was sunset or maybe sunrise. Sunset would be better, he knew. If it was sunrise, he was in trouble. Too damned hot and too much time gone by.

“I’ve been looking for you,” someone said. “You’ve been hard to find.”

Pharh turned around and saw that there was a figure perched on a small pile of rocks. It was difficult to be certain, but he was fairly sure it was the same hooded figure he had seen in the alley ... how many days ago now? Two? Three? It was difficult to remember. The oddest thing about his appearance was that Pharh felt absolutely no surprise at seeing him. “Really?” he asked. “I guess I’ve always been good at hiding.”

“A valuable skill,” his visitor said, hopping spryly off the pile. “Something worth cultivating.”

“Every chance I get.”

“Are you ready to leave now? Have anything to bring?”

Pharh held up his water container. “Just this. Uh, where are we going?”

“To help Martok. Are you willing?”

Pharh rubbed the tip of his finger over the carved exterior of the ring, then said, “He’s the reason I’m out here, you know? And I mean that in the worst possible way.”

“Yes, I know. In every possible way. But are you willing?”

Pharh looked up into the sky and noted that the stars were fading. Yes, definitely sunrise. “One of those stars,” he said, “might actually be Ferenginar.”

The hooded one nodded his head. “Possibly,” he said. “I don’t really know.”

“But probably not,” Pharh concluded.

[244]“Probably not.”

“It’s where I was born.”

“Home, then.”

Pharh looked up at the many stars, then slowly shook his head. “No,” he decided. “Not really. Not anymore.”

“All right then,” the hooded one said. “So ... where?”

Pharh hefted the water container so it was under his arm. He patted his clothes and the dust blew away on the slight breeze. “So,” he said. “Martok. Wherever he is.”

“I know.”

“I had a feeling you would.”

Nearby, on the peak of a rocky outcropping, one of the big birds—the lone holdout—gave a short cough, but otherwise did not stir. Any chance of eating that evening had just evaporated, it decided in its practical way, and there was no point in wasting any more energy.

“Fool. You would have done better to die in the war.”

His wife’s words of comfort greeted Martok when the edges of consciousness went from charcoal to gray threaded through with red and white.

He attempted to nod in agreement, but his head weighed too much and, besides, someone was taking care of it for him. Another voice, this one softer, more amused than the first, agreed. “Yes,” it said. “You *are* a fool.”

“As usual, you are correct, my wife,” he said, his throat seemingly choked with gravel. The gray shapes developed edges. It was brighter than Martok would have liked, but he was certain that this wouldn’t bother him as much if someone weren’t stabbing him in the brain through his eye. He tried to lift his head and wondered if the voices would leave him alone now. He had [245]aged fifty years since he had closed

his eye. Every muscle in his body ached.

“I’m afraid we cannot allow that,” the one with the softer voice said. It was not Sirella speaking. Martok was certain of this. Sirella’s voice put steel in him, even when—*especially*when—she was speaking seductively. This new voice sapped his strength, his will. He trusted this woman. He would trust her with his life, his family, his ...

Wait.

He knew this voice. Martok snapped his head up. He was hanging against the outside of the cage, his wrists in shackles and a chain around his chest. He attempted to stand, but when he put weight on his legs and straightened, a second chain tightened around his throat.

“Don’t, husband,” Sirella warned. “I watched them bind you. You must stay as you are.”

Martok grunted, tried to stand again, and felt his wind cut off. *I could take a breath and hold it*, he decided, but when he attempted to inhale deeply, a strap around his chest contracted. He choked and gasped and then felt Sirella strike him on the forehead.

“Did you think I was making up a story for my own amusement?” she asked. “Stay still.”

“Yes ... wife.” A quick glance told him that they were still in the room where Sirella had been held captive. The black curtain that had covered the door had been pulled aside and there on the narrow stage stood Morjod, tall and broad, and one other, a tiny, small-framed woman wearing long, flowing robes. When she saw his head turn and his eye fix on her, the woman stepped out of the shadows, revealing her face.

[246]“Ah,” Martok said, partly because it was the only sound he could get past his lips and partly because he could think of nothing else to say. “Ah,” he repeated, and then, “Of course.”

“Then you remember?” she said, and smiled. Her teeth caught the low light and he felt, as he always had, that there must be some sort of trick to that. No one’s teeth should shine so brightly in such low light. It would be precisely the sort of thing she would think of.

He chose his next words carefully, aware that his response could spell the difference between death here and now and, well, another death that awaited them in the not very distant future. But Martok did not want to die. He had to know how *she* could be here. “How could I forget?” he rumbled, putting as much pleasure as he dared into his voice. Caught with this one before him and Sirella behind ... Martok shuddered, and not because of cold or shock. Bring the Romulans and the Federation before him. Array the whole of the Dominion and the Cardassian fleets behind and Martok in an old D-5 junker with a clogged disrupter and ion propulsion. Better that than this.

“I would say that you must have forgotten many, many years ago,” she said. “Or you would never have allowed yourself to be in so precarious a situation.” She smiled again and the light danced again. Martok looked in her eyes and almost felt himself shrink back. They were flat ebony pools, like tiny singularities. They took everything in, but nothing escaped their pull: not light, not warmth or life or hope. “Why don’t you introduce me to your *wife*?” she said, and there was such venom in the word that Martok thought that this must be the end.

[247]But Martok still needed to live so that he could find out what had happened, and how, so with as much courtly deference as he could summon, knowing that she would enjoy his discomfort, he said,

“May I have the pleasure of presenting my wife, the Lady Sirella, daughter of Linkasa.”

On the narrow shelf, the tiny woman inclined her head. “It is my pleasure to greet the Lady Sirella,” she said, her voice light. “We met previously and enjoyed a stimulating conversation. Wouldn’t you agree, Lady?”

Behind him, Martok heard Sirella shift her feet.

“And now introduce me, Martok,” she said, fully facing him.

Martok cleared his throat and tried to inhale. “Sirella,” he began, but had to stop. Suddenly, he remembered that Shen and Lazhna were dead, killed if not at the hand then surely at the command of this woman. And there, beside her, stood her ally, Morjod, the Usurper. *One good breath*, he thought. *One good breath and I could break these chains. My bat’leth must be in the water where I dropped it. They wouldn’t have bothered to move it. I’m a toothless old targnow. Nothing to fear. Ha! One swing; one, and I could have both of their heads. ...But not yet. Not yet. There may be a chance, but I must stay alive. I must stay alive so I can kill...* He made a choking sound to cover the pause, then continued. “Pardon me. My throat is dry. Sirella, please allow me the pleasure of presenting to you Gothmara, of the House of Kultan. I don’t believe I have ever mentioned her to you, but we were acquainted back in the days before you and I knew one another. I served under her father’s command.”

Sirella said only, “Gothmara,” as if she were [248]etching the name in her mind. On her stage, Gothmara bowed.

“ ‘Acquainted’?” she asked, her voice tight. “This is a euphemism I have never heard before, Martok.” Unexpectedly, Gothmara began to laugh, a breathless cackle that bordered on hysteria and seemed to cause her as much pain as pleasure. The laugh rolled on and on, growing weaker as she ran out of wind, until Gothmara was literally doubled over. At first, Morjod tried to laugh with her, but the longer she went on the more nervous and confused he became. Even more frightening, Martok saw, this was not the first time the whelp had seen her break down this way.

This is worse than I could have imagined, Martok thought. *She isn’t merely mad, but fundamentally damaged.* Finally, she reached out a delicate hand toward Morjod, who took it cautiously, as if afraid that he might break it. Reaching up with the other hand, she brushed the hair away from her eyes and still, Martok saw, there was no light in them. Gothmara smiled brightly at Martok and he found himself wondering at her unlined, youthful face. There were no lines there, no signs at all that time had passed since he had last seen her ... how long ago now? Decades?

Inhaling deeply, Gothmara took control of herself and grinned, her merriment almost bubbling up out of her. “Speak freely, Martok. Your delicacy in choosing words exhibits manners I don’t recall you having, but those manners are best saved for strangers. There are no strangers here,” she said, and almost broke down in laughter again. “Please have no fear about that.” She took Morjod’s hands in both of hers and pressed them. “But where are *my* manners?” Morjod seemed about [249]ready to melt with pleasure. In that moment, Martok saw something in his eyes, something about the way his forehead swept up and behind him, he heard Sirella come to the same insight and heard her whisper, “No.”

“And please allow me to present to you,” Gothmara continued, “our son. Morjod, say hello to your father.”

MAKTOK HUNG, his wrists in chains, on the outside of Sirella's cage until the executioners made all ready outside in the crater. He could not see her, could not even know if she was conscious, but since all he could do was talk, he talked until his mouth grew dry and his tongue thick. Sirella did not reply. "What is it, woman?" he shouted, even long after his lips were chapped and cracked. "Say something! Is it because I touched a woman before I knew you? Because it *was* before I knew you! When I saw you the first time, I knew I could never gaze upon another with desire in my heart." Only the nearness of an almost certain death could have prompted Martok to *attempt* to discuss interpersonal affairs outside the privacy of their home. Sirella maintained strict rules about outsiders knowing their business.

It didn't help that the two guards Gothmara had left behind were seemingly enjoying his distress so avidly. *By the hand of Kahless*, Martok thought. *Even if I was*[251] not the most popular chancellor who ever walked the planet, how has she turned them so quickly? He had noticed that when she issued the guards their orders, they hung on her every word. A peculiar sensation prickled at the back of his neck when she spoke, but Martok had attributed it to being an aftereffect of being electrocuted or drugged or whatever they had done to bring him down. Then he remembered the way the crew of the *Negh'Var* had acted when they heard Morjod speaking, first on the bridge, then later in the ruins of Ketha. *A device?* Martok thought. *Or more likely, knowing the source, something biological. That would explain much.* Considering his circumstances, Gothmara's tricks were irrelevant, but it was easier to ponder such a puzzle than to worry about what Sirella thought of him.

In the face of Sirella's silence, Martok dozed off. The strain of the past three days had taken a toll and, despite the pain in his limbs and his heart, he slept for he knew not how long. When a guard jostled him awake, he recalled only that he had been dreaming of a young woman and decided it had been his daughter Shen. He felt guilty, knowing he would never keep the promise Sirella had demanded from him. His lady would go to *Sto-Vo-Kor* and Gothmara would live on.

When the two guards unbound his limbs, they had to hold Martok up by his arms or he would have tumbled forward and drowned in the shallow water. His arms and legs were numb, and it was several minutes before blood began to flow again and agonizing sensation returned. *Just in time to be torn limb from limb.* As soon as he could, Martok turned to see how Sirella fared and was, as ever, impressed by her regal carriage as she stepped[252] stiff-legged, but unbowed, from her cell. Then, almost faster than he could follow, Sirella found a secure placement for her left leg and whipped her right up in a perfect arc that caught one of his guards in the jaw. Martok heard a crunch of shattered bone and felt himself tumble. He tried to fall so that he took the other man with him, but his arms and legs were still unresponsive. The best he could do was trip one of the men with his body, but it was too little, too late, and, judging from the way the room filled with more guards, Martok knew they had planned on this attempt. *So Gothmara may be insane*, he thought as he gagged on the fetid water, *but she's not overconfident.*

He heard rather than saw the struggle end. When they dragged Martok to his feet, Sirella hung limp by her arms between two of the guards. Two others lay in the water. One was against the wall holding his broken jaw and slurring curses. The second was flat on his back, bubbles bursting the surface near his head and a thin stream of blood welling up around a knife in his chest. As Martok watched, the bubbles stopped coming and the two who were holding Sirella both glanced at her appreciatively. *As I thought. Gothmara may be able to control their minds, but she cannot completely cloud their judgment.*

Consciousness dimmed and flared as they dragged Martok up the many flights of stairs. Rounding a bend, he tried to yank his arms free from their grasp—it wouldn't do to let them have the last blow—but his struggle barely registered. He only fully awakened when they reached the outer security door and the crowd caught sight of them. A deep-throated roar went up and for a moment, Martok thought that this might be the[253] turning point. His people would return to their senses, but then he looked up and



realized, no, this was not the sound of approbation, but of a mob hungry for blood. The sun stood at midmorning and already he could see that the stands around the pit were overflowing—twenty, maybe thirty thousand people squeezed into a space that might precariously have held five. The structure swayed back and forth as the crowd stood, everyone jostling for better positions to see either Sirella or Martok emerge from the palace. Pushing and shoving against the barriers, they roared when the prisoners appeared.

Martok decided that he would look into the eyes of as many of the spectators—his “people”—as he could. *They expect us to be slaughtered like animals, but we will show them how true warriors die.* A phalanx of guards surrounded them and, every man armed with a painstick, shoved through the horde. Martok tried to study individual faces, tried to read what he saw there, but all he could see was teeth bared with anger, eyes filled with hatred. Small children who had crawled between adults’ legs popped up out of nowhere and threw sharp stones at Martok’s head. Men and women alike spat on them both.

Such rage! Martok wondered. *But at what, truly? At the losses we endured during the Dominion War? At the alliance with the Federation and the Romulans? At the erosion of our power?* He wondered at his own thoughts at such a time, but he could not stop his mind from tracing the route it was now following. He saw that everything that had happened over the past several days, the past months and years, had brought him to this moment and to the verge of this insight. *Could this fury be something older and deeper? Is this wrath for me or is it more truly for themselves? Is this the face of a people that has come to despise itself?*

And then they reached the lip of the pit. Martok’s mind emptied. Staring down, he saw the *cha’ta’rok* and its circle of black-robed attendants. The tips of the four poles swayed in the slight breeze that always swept in from the Ka’Toth plains, and as Martok and Sirella were brought forth, as if it had been rehearsed, four of the attendants began to crank four winches that pulled the binding cords toward the slab erected in the center. A narrow path led down through the stands, and as they were half carried, half dragged to the center, the former chancellor and his lady were pelted with moldy bread, rotten fruit, lumps of desiccated meat, and what could only be pieces of stone torn up from the plaza outside.

Martok tensed the muscles in his arms and legs again and felt his strength returning. *She must have drugged me,* he decided. *And I am beginning to come out of it.* He couldn’t be certain of this, but chose to accept it as truth. Otherwise, he would not be able to bear the shame of the darker thoughts that had haunted him.

Morjod and his mother waited for them on the platform. Gothmara gave Sirella the merest glance, then turned her gaze on him and asked, “Have you told her?”

“Told her what?”

“Told her how you took advantage of my youth, abused me, tossed me aside? How you treated my poor father and then left me with child?”

Martok narrowed his eye, then gathered whatever moisture he had in his mouth and hocked a pitiful ball of spit at her feet. Around them, the mob snarled its disapproval. “All I remember is escaping the clutches of a madwoman. And as for your father ...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Morjod stepped forward and backhanded Martok’s face. The throng cheered as the spikes on his glove rent Martok’s left cheek. The blow almost made him pass out, but Martok gathered his anger, held on to the light, and focused his rage at his bastard son. Grinning, he gathered together the blood in his mouth and deposited it on the front of the boy’s tunic. “You can’t be

any son of mine,” Martok said, “if that’s the best you can do.” Around him on the stage, several of the guards and attendants gave each other surprised looks: *Son?*

Morjod wound up for another blow, but Gothmara stepped between them before he could deliver it. “Enough,” she said. “This is unseemly. You will comport yourself like a chancellor.”

“Don’t you mean like an emperor?” Martok asked, speaking loudly enough that all could hear.

Leaning in close enough to whisper in his ear, Gothmara said, “One step at a time.” She indicated the crowd. “How much longer do you think it will be before they beg for him to ascend the throne?”

“Don’t deceive yourself, witch. Look into their eyes. They are not cheering you any more than they are condemning us. There are older forces at work here.”

Gothmara did not like being defied—she never had, as Martok recalled—but she would not turn sour before the crowd. “Really, *Chancellor?*” she asked. “I had no idea you were such an historian. An interest you acquired from your Starfleet associates, I’d wager. Then please feel free to expound on your theories while you struggle with the *cha’ta’rok*. The crowd will no doubt hang on your every word.” She turned back to Morjod, and this seemed to be a prearranged sign. Morjod stepped forward and pointed at Sirella.

“Her first,” he said. “So he may watch.” As the guards lifted the still dazed Sirella to her feet, Martok tried to leap forward and block the path to the slab, but the attendants anticipated this action. One of them carried a painstick in the folds of his robe and he touched it to Martok’s lower back. He fell onto his knees and, whether by design or accident he did not know, Martok knew it must look to the crowd as if he was throwing himself at Morjod’s feet for mercy. The mob roared its approval.

Time suspended while he watched them strapping the bonds around Sirella’s arms and legs. Either the device was more complicated than it looked or, more likely, they had been instructed to take their time and draw out the tension. Whatever the reason, by the time they finished Martok could feel his legs once more, and, more important, Sirella appeared to have regained her senses. Knowing that if he tried to stand the attendants would drag him farther away, Martok chose to remain on his knees, though the cost to his pride was almost incalculable. Worse would have been the sting of shame if he did not attempt to save his wife, though he still did not know how this could be accomplished. Martok had no choice but to trust their future to fate.

Sirella knew that she faced a most humiliating execution, but part of her did not care, because for the first time in almost three days she was lying down. The relief was almost enough to make death acceptable. She had not endured such agony for a long, long time—the pain in her knees and hips was almost unbearable—and Sirella was deeply shamed that she had become so soft in her later years. Still, she had borne up as well as she could and fulfilled her responsibilities. Even now, at the very last, she knew what she must do, the duty that all Klingons had drilled into them practically from birth: She must die well. She had always fulfilled her obligations and this was the last, the final one.

As they bound her arms and legs to the device, her head throbbing where they had struck her, she found herself reflecting that it might be nice to finally be freed from her responsibilities. She regretted that she would be leaving behind her son Drex, but was pleased that she would soon see her daughters in *Sto-Vo-Kor* and that they would be united in a way they had never been in this existence. On the material plane, Sirella had always been obliged to play the role of the stern authoritarian, especially since her

husband had been away from home so often. She would savor the chance to allow her children to see her in a different light: not the domineering mother, but the comrade-in-arms, the role she had daydreamed that she might someday play. To “play”: now, there was a word Sirella had not thought of or used in many years. Had she ever played, either with her children or when she was a child herself? She must have once, but could not recall when.

And what had they played? Smiling, she felt a strap tighten around her left ankle. Ah, of course: they had played at war, and what was the greatest pleasure of that game but a glorious death scene? She looked over at her husband, who was on his knees, then looked into his eye and saw that, ah, he was planning something. He had not surrendered yet. Then why had she? Sirella did not understand. The woman, Gothmara—while they had held her, she had whispered something in Sirella’s ear, but what had it been? She could not recall now.

Sirella craned her neck up and looked about her, tried to see if she could find Gothmara. Perhaps if she saw her face, the words would come back. But, no: Gothmara had disappeared behind Morjod and a phalanx of robed soldiers or ministers, she knew not which. Faces in the crowd bobbed and shifted, mouths opened and shut, but all Sirella heard was a murmuring roar, like the wind moving over fields of grain.

The unexpected appearance of a small, motorized cleaning vehicle drew her attention. Perched at the top of the aisle she and Martok had been carried down, it was one of the tiny, one-man units usually employed to clean streets or parade grounds after a public display. Being an early riser and a frequenter of the public markets, Sirella had seen them on many occasions, usually piloted by retired old campaigners or those unfit to do any other work. But this one—what was he doing here at such an hour? Even the crowd on either side of the aisle was distracted from the spectacle on the platform. Some were even throwing their rotten food and other refuse down at the driver, who did not let it bother him as he was wearing a heavy robe and a mantle.

Garbage bounced off the driver’s head onto the path, then disappeared up into the vehicle’s snout. Whatever the front vacuum missed was squashed flat under the treads and then swept up by the rear vacuum. It was all perfectly familiar except for the fact that it was so utterly out of place. Sirella grew annoyed. Though her neck muscles were beginning to ache as much as her hips and knees, she could not tear her gaze away from the sight. *This is not the last thing I want to think about before I die*, she thought, *I must prepare myself*. Despite this, she could not lie back down and compose herself for the coming ordeal, and suddenly she understood why: the vehicle accelerated.

“Husband,” she called as loudly as she could. “You should stand up.” She dragged her gaze away from the vehicle and locked eyes with Martok. He could not see the aisle or the vehicle from where he knelt and did not understand what was about to happen. She spared a quick moment to glance up at Morjod, and she saw that he had not yet perceived what was about to happen, though he seemed to comprehend that something was amiss. Sirella sensed Gothmara attempting to push her way through a ring of guards and attendants, so she too perceived a snarl in her plans. Unfortunately, her husband had not shaken off his lethargy. She needed to shock him.

“Martok” she shouted. “*Stand up!*”

Startled by the use of his name, her husband finally stood and immediately saw what she had been watching. Around them, some of the guards began to shift in response to Sirella’s shouted entreaties. Morjod put his hand to his sidearm. Martok balled his fists. One of the attendants, the one who had been assigned to her right leg, became confused and decided to strip off the bindings and start again. Sirella watched him examine the buckle and tongue arrangement that was supposed to be locked around her

calf, then saw the rising understanding as the sound of the cleaning vehicle's engine revving broke through the crowd noise. She glanced back at the aisle, and where she thought the vehicle should be, it[260]was not. Instead, it flew over the platform, a bolt of bright orange flame flaring from its rear.

And suddenly there was a robed figure lying on top of her. She thought it must be one of the guards, but Sirella realized it was too small and light to be a Klingon. The figure's hood fell away from his absurdly large ears.

A Ferengi.

Straddling her chest, he grinned a toothy grin at her and pulled a small knife from a wrist sheath. "Have you out in half a sec," he said, and then someone stabbed him in the chest.

Pharh. It was Pharh. Pharh was seated on his wife's chest and Morjod was stepping forward, his *mek'leth* held low, poised for an underhand stab. One of the attendants struggled with a leg binding; another stood staring at the street sweeper that had just dropped out of the sky onto the attendant who had been working on Sirella's right arm. The fourth attendant had vanished. Had Pharh struck him with the street sweeper? The possibility seemed like luck against all imagining, but Martok didn't know what else to make of the situation.

Morjod stabbed Pharh in the chest and Pharh's small knife flew up into the air. Time suddenly slowed down, elongated, and Martok felt like he had endless amounts of time to step around one of his guards and into the path of the tumbling blade. He extended his hand as if he and Pharh were jugglers who had rehearsed the move a thousand times, and the hilt of the blade fell into his open palm. Dipping his right knee and pivoting to his left, Martok sensed rather than saw a blade pass behind[261]him. He locked his wrists, tightened his grip on the blade, and continued his spin. The guard who had attacked him from the rear tripped over Martok's extended leg so that he fell into the attendant. Effortlessly, Martok reached back and cut the cord around Sirella's left arm.

The attendant who had been struggling with the binding came up behind Martok, but had made the mistake of not dropping the belt and straps. Martok simply yanked the belt out of the man's hands, whipped it around his neck, and kicked him backward off the platform. The cord tightened as the man struggled and the trigger mechanism released. The bent pole sprung upward, its passage knocking two other guards off into the crowd. The attendant who had been dangling at the edge of the stage was gone, and despite the noise from the fight and the crowd, Martok was vaguely aware of a whip-crack sound.

Martok turned back toward Sirella, who still had one leg and one arm tied to the poles of the *cha'ta'rok*. If Morjod or anyone else released the trigger, she would die just as surely as if she were bound by all four. Surprisingly, he saw that Pharh had not simply flopped onto the platform, but seemed to be gripping the edges of the slab with all of his strength while kicking out with both legs. Morjod, who was standing nearby, seemed more baffled than concerned, while Gothmara, who stood beside two guards, appeared greatly amused.

"My son," Gothmara said, raising her voice to be heard over the crowd noise. "Here is the chance to defeat the former chancellor's *sarmies* with one mighty blow."

Morjod, finally understanding that there was no real[262]threat, stepped between the flailing legs and grabbed Pharh by the collar of his cloak.

A guard brought the flat of his *bat'leth* down on Martok's wrist and the small knife fell on the platform. Suddenly, Martok felt absurd. The battle fever had come on him, and for a moment he had believed he might still win the day and reclaim his kingdom. *A most ridiculous dream!*

Pharh dangled from Morjod's grip and spun slowly. *Themek'leth* still protruded from his chest, but his chest was, Martok saw, protected by a very respectable piece of light armor. Morjod saw this too, and struggled to pry his blade free with one hand, while squeezing the Ferengi's neck with the other.

To his credit, Pharh did not, as Martok had expected, begin to whine or scream (a Ferengi's physiological response to any threat, he knew). Rather, he reached up under his cloak and tapped on a small piece of metal on his shoulder. "Now would be a good time," he gasped. "Really."

"We apologize," came a gruff voice, distorted by interference, but it would be familiar to Martok even if molten lava had just closed over his head. "*We were delayed. Defenses above the First City were better than we had anticipated.*"

"That's too bad," Pharh said, choking in Morjod's grip. "And I can't say how sorry I am to hear that."

"I said," the voice said, "*that we were delayed. I did not say that we had not made it.*"

Overhead, the morning sky rippled and shimmered; then a deafening roar filled the air. Thruster engines pulsed and washed over the crowd, forcing them away from the platform and scurrying up the edges of the pit.[263] Around him and beside him, disrupter beams whined as a dozen—no, two dozen—figures shimmered into existence.

Morjod's eyes widened as Martok's guards were torn away and thrown to the floor. Martok turned and saw his brother standing there, one arm bound in a sling, his *bat'leth* held in the other. "Chancellor," Worf said. "We have come."

## 17

"HELP ME FREESirella!" Martok said as he stepped over his fallen guards and took the *bat'leth* from Worf's hand. Worf pointed at two of his men, but before they could step forward, two ether men burst between them: Drex and Darok ran to Sirella and held on to the ropes while Martok hacked through the bonds around his wife's arm and leg. As his wife struggled into a sitting position, Martok shouted at his son to be heard over the bird-of-prey's impulse engines.

"Protect her!" was all he said.

Drex snarled, nodding his consent.

Martok scanned the platform for Morjod and saw that he was still struggling with the Ferengi. Morjod had finally freed his *mek'leth* and swung it at the Ferengi's neck, yet Pharh was able to squirm out of the way. *The little alien leads a charmed life*, Martok decided, then felt a surge of hope. *If he can stay alive, all of us can stay alive.* He ran toward Morjod with every intention of[265] slashing the whelp's spine with the point of his blade—there was a time and a place for honorable combat, but Morjod had not earned it—when he heard Gothmara shout, "Drop that fool." Pharh fell almost at Martok's feet and he had to jump out of the way to avoid stumbling over the Ferengi. As he regained his balance, Martok felt the hair on the back of his neck and arms stand on end, and the nasal passages around his eye sockets vibrated.

Worf growled and drew his disrupter. “Subsonics,” he called, and his warriors drew in around Martok and Sirella. Morjod’s forces must have known what was about to happen and pulled together into a tight knot around him and his mother, though to Martok’s trained eye it was not to protect, but for protection. Martok thought his vision was playing tricks with him, but then he saw the others in his squad point at the thin, vertical lines appearing in midair all around them. The lines thickened, then grew wider until they sketched the shapes of doorways in midair. Recognizing the characteristic blue shift of an object emerging from subspace, Martok understood why the guardsmen had not seen the Hur’q since yesterday. Morjod had indeed penned his pets, but in cages he could make appear at will whenever he needed them.

Stepping out into real space, ten furious Hur’q simultaneously threw back their heads and screamed their rage.

Two of Worf’s militia broke ranks and ran forward. One even managed to raise his disrupter before the Hur’q snapped his head off with a casual backhand flick. The other warrior was unceremoniously crushed under a monstrous foot. Beside Worf, a cloaked figure [266] called out, “Worf! Contact the ship, we must ...” But Martok never heard the rest of the speech.

More through sheer reflex than any plan, he managed to raise his *bat’leth* and deflect the beast’s attack when it swung its claw at his head. Nevertheless, the shock of the attack knocked Martok off his feet. Only the fact that the Hur’q seemed to have trouble reaching that low to the ground saved him from being crippled by the back-swing. As it was, Martok was almost crushed when it readjusted its footing and brought its giant splayed claw down beside his head. Before it could see him, Martok thrust the point of his blade into the flesh above its heel and slashed with all its strength. The beast screamed and its knee buckled as its tendon parted from bone. Thick magenta blood spurting out of the wound and nearly choked Martok with the foul smell. *Even their blood is a weapon*, he realized as he gagged and retched. *Gothmara is a demon given flesh! What possessed her to bring these creatures back to life?* But, in truth, Martok understood precisely why she had done it: to prove that she could, that there was nothing she could not accomplish. These monsters were the dark beasts that hid under the cot of every Klingon child. She had brought them out of the shadows and despite anything any mother had ever said they were more terrible in the light of day.

Blinded, Martok rolled in the direction he thought was out of its path and prayed he wasn’t tumbling under another’s tread. He collided with something heavy and stout and, after a brief moment of panic, realized it was one of the four posts. Keeping the pole to his back as he pulled himself up, Martok wiped the gore from his eye and tried to make sense of the scene [267] around him. Though bent at the waists, the Hur’q still towered above them all, front arms dangling low, claws slashing at anyone unlucky or unwary enough to come near. Two picked up weapons from fallen warriors and studied them carefully. One took a practice swing with *abat’leth* and appeared to be delighted with the result. Another tapped the firing mechanism on a disrupter rifle and roared in appreciation when a Klingon warrior disappeared in a haze of superheated molecules. Fortunately, the shot seemed to have emptied the weapon’s power pack, because when it tapped the trigger again, nothing happened. In frustration, the beast threw the rifle at the nearest target—one of Morjod’s attendants—and the man’s head cracked open as if it were an egg.

The Hur’q appeared to be confused about the precise nature of “us” and “them” except in two cases: Morjod and Gothmara. Both had a pair of beasts standing beside them, one of each pair armed with either a disrupter or a blade, and the two groups on opposite sides of the platform were slowly inching closer together.

The only plan that made sense was for Worf to have told the bird-of-prey to beam them all out when Sirella and Martok were freed, but they were all too widely scattered now. Martok studied the scenario and knew what he should do: regroup his troops and prepare for an orderly withdrawal. He must save his wife and son and prepare for the day when he could strike back at the mad woman and his bastard.

Martok knew what he should do, but then he saw a Klingon warrior—he did not know if he was one of Worf's or one of Morjod's—stray too close to a Hur'q, and the creature casually reached down and picked the [268]warrior up by his arm. Wearing an expression that might have passed for curiosity, the Hur'q flicked its wrist and watched as the warrior's arm popped out of its socket and then fell to the ground. The man looked at the monster, then looked at where his arm had been, and before shock and pain could disable him, he ran at the beast screaming his defiance. Entertained by this sight, Morjod began to laugh lustily, as if he were watching a comedy someone had staged for his amusement, then laughed even harder when the monster kicked the warrior out into the stands. *He's like a child, Martok thought, who has never been disciplined. He glories in torture and cruelty, but understands nothing of the horror of battle. In truth, he is not only my son, but the son of every Klingon warrior who has not taught his child true honor.*

The scene passed and Martok felt a white-hot fury boil up inside him, raised his *bat'leth*, and bellowed, "*MORJOD!*"

Eyes were on him. All around the platform, they saw Martok move, legs churning, hair flying wildly, mouth agape and foaming. Time oozed to a halt and as he ran, Martok saw a trio of warriors to his left hack at a fallen Hur'q; saw Worf trying to order men into groups; saw the hooded stranger wheel and spin through a crowd of three warriors, disarming each of them without injuring any; saw the creature he had hamstringed wander in small circles screaming, but otherwise unmolested; saw charred splinters fly into the air when a disruptor misfired; and saw, oh delicious vision, a look of *fear* creep into Morjod's eyes as he approached.

It must end here. Martok knew that. If it did not, the conflict would absorb cities, planets, systems, and *still* [269]not end. One of them must die. And then time resumed its paces and his boots struck the platform, one, two, three, and Martok launched himself at his bastard son.

A berserker's rage had swallowed Martok. Cursing, Worf shoved a man into line and wondered what was keeping the transporter technician from energizing. *Children! They are all children!*

He thought this and cursed them for their lack of discipline, then was shocked when he realized he was thinking of Klingons as something "other." Worf had known the battle madness more than once in his life and understood its siren call, but for him it had been something *hepermitted* to happen, when he knew he had the luxury of time and a significant advantage over his foe. But this—now—was insanity.

Martok didn't get any closer than three meters to Morjod before the Hur'q shifted its massive leg and blocked Martok's charge. Martok saw the block coming and managed to shift his grip on the *bat'leth* so that he was using it as a spear, but the damage to the beast was inconsequential. The Hur'q were too powerful.

One of Morjod's guards raced at Worf, who blocked his attack and slashed the attacker's chest open with a stroke. *Too much analysis*, Worf thought. *Pay attention!*

Howling, the beast swung at Martok's head, but he sidestepped out of range and tried to find a path

through the fence of gigantic legs. Worf raised his disruptor and fired at the head of the creature Martok had just stabbed. While not at the highest setting (Klingon disruptors were notoriously fickle at that level—Worf fervently wished for a phaser rifle or an isomagnetic cannon), the shot should have at least seared the flesh off its skull.[270] Amazingly, the Hur'q only staggered back, stunned, but unharmed. Seeing his break, Martok rolled forward with the speed and dexterity of a warrior half his age and came up onto his feet less than three meters from his quarry.

An enemy warrior kicked Worf's knee, then pressed the muzzle of a disrupter against the side of his skull. *Distracted again*, Worf thought, cursing himself, then quickly cycled through the half-dozen methods he knew for killing his attacker before he could press the trigger. Surprisingly, he didn't need any of them. The warrior's weapon—still held in his hand—flipped up end-over-end. Shimmering brightly, *abat'leth* sang and ripped through his attacker's throat. Worf expected to look up and see one of his men standing above him, but instead he saw Sirella's scowling face. "Be more careful," she scolded.

Worf rose, simultaneously checking the charge on his disrupter and looking for the next foe. "My apologies, Lady Sirella. I was preoccupied with attempting to save Martok."

"Martok doesn't need saving," she muttered. "He needs sense. One of us must beat some into him."

Worf nodded and signaled to Drex and Darok to shield him. Both acknowledged his signal and formed up around him. Worf tapped his combadge: "Alexander."

"Father."

"Lock on and beam us out."

"I can't take everyone in one sweep," he said. "*There are too many of you* for this ship's transporter. And I only have signals for the landing party. Sirella and Martok..."

"I will see to them," Worf said. "Begin transport in one minute."

[271] "Yes, Father...Damn!"

"What?"

"A squadron of fighters is approaching our airspace."

"How close?"

"Two minutes."

"Then that should be enough."

Surprisingly, Worf heard no hesitation or uncertainty in Alexander's voice. "*More than enough*," he said. "Qapla', Father."

"Qapla', my son."

Worf raised his disrupter and shot a guard. He would need to drag Martok away from Morjod, and that would not be a simple thing.



The staggering beast changed direction and almost crushed Morjod. *That would be too easy*, Martok thought. Despite its agony, when Martok tried to close with it, the Hur'q dropped its massive head and snapped its jaws so close to Martok that he could smell the spoiled bits of its last meal that still hung between its teeth. Dodging back, Martok swung the blade and bit deep into the monster's great eye. It reared back, roared, and shook its head, but Martok did not stop to see what other damage he might do. Morjod was within reach. All Martok had to do was slip between the creature's legs as it struggled for balance, but the Hur'q must have sensed him and snapped its legs together. Agonizing pain shot up Martok's left side as his leg was ground between the monster's.

He fell forward, almost at Morjod's feet, but before he could either raise his weapon to defend or plan a retreat, Martok felt a blade pierce his right shoulder. Eyes blazing, Morjod withdrew *themek'leth* and shouted, "Is it a good day to die, *Father?*"

[272] Martok knew he could not possibly block the next blow, but he could arrange it so that he would not die alone. His father had taught him this trick, a simple spin of the *bat'leth* and when Morjod fell on him he would be unable to prevent impaling himself on Martok's blade.

The Hur'q saved Martok, though in truth it was probably obeying its conditioning even as it was dying. A massive bony knee crashed to the ground beside Martok's head, giving Morjod a warning that the other must be right behind. He spun back around and leaped aside just as the second knee fell on the spot where he had been standing. First tottering back and forth for the space of three heartbeats, the monster tumbled forward, its enormous head splintering the stone where it fell. Martok gasped as its body fell across his left knee just below where the first injury had been. For a moment—a brief, brief moment—he considered relaxing his grip on the *bat'leth* and closing his eye. *Who would ever know? Even in Sto-Vo-Kor, how would they know?* And then, laughing, he remembered: His father would be there. Old Urthog would know all. "*Hold up your weapon, boy. Raise it or die. The battle is not over until you are dead. ...*" Had Urthog ever really said such a thing? Would he? It troubled Martok that he could not remember for certain.

Morjod should have been standing over him by now. Martok was once again holding his *bat'leth* in position so that if his son attacked him, he would be able to slip it past the boy's guard. So they would both die. ... They could continue their battle in the next world and bring down the gates of the eternal. ...

A hooded warrior suddenly stepped into his field of vision and slapped something against Martok's chest.

[273] "Lock on him and energize!" the figure cried in a familiar voice.

No ...

The world shimmered and the fog lifted. Martok lay on the floor of a transporter bay, but only for a moment. There, behind the transporter controls, stood Worf's son, Alexander, but he did not wear his usual expression of anxious perplexity. "Get him out of there! Go! The last pair is coming!" Drex and Darok stepped forward, grabbed Martok's arms, and dragged him out, neither paying any attention to his shattered leg or any other injuries. The room was sheathed in battle lighting and a Klaxon screamed. Martok tried to twist around to see who was coming, but the pain was too intense.

The transporter whined and two Klingons appeared: Sirella, bloody but unbent, and the short, broad

hooded figure Martok had seen with Worf. Stepping from the bay, the hooded one shouted, "Order the bridge to depart!"

"Father! Now! Engines to full!" Worf must have been on the bridge.

The hooded one stood over Martok and said, "Chancellor? Can you hear me?"

Martok tried to say, "Don't call me chancellor," but the words would not form. The world was going hazy, and he felt himself being pressed into the deck. Worf must have put everything into the impulse engines, and the antigravs and the inertial compensators were not coping well.

Sirella was kneeling over him. "Husband," she cried, appearing uncharacteristically concerned. "Hear my voice! Answer me!"

Martok tried to lift his hand to touch her face, but he couldn't. His hand, he realized, was still locked around[274]the *bat'leth* and he could not unclench it. Shifting his gaze to the hooded man, he attempted to ask, "Who?" and was distressed to discover that he could not accomplish even this simple chore.

The stranger sensed Martok's desire and obligingly reached up and pulled back his hood, but Martok's vision was beginning to fade. Martok whispered, "Father?"

He felt strong hands lift him carefully onto a stretcher, and a spasm of pain from his crushed leg almost sent him into unconsciousness, but he held on long enough for the other Klingon to bend down over him. "No, Martok," he said. "Though I would be proud to call you my son."

When Martok saw whom he spoke to, anger rose up in him and gave him strength. "Kahless?" he asked, some of the fire back in his voice.

"Yes, Martok."

"Where in the Seven Hells have you been?" They were moving now, the lighted panels in the ceiling sliding past. Kahless strode along beside the stretcher. *They must be taking me to sickbay.*

"I've been trying to save your empire."

"Not my empire," Martok hissed, pain taking his breath as they jostled his leg. "Yours."

Kahless shook his head. "No, Martok. It never was. Not really. I was just keeping watch over it until the right one came along."

"Not me."

"Oh, it's you," Kahless said, his voice full of good humor. He was enjoying this entirely too much. "You don't have a choice in the matter. It is your fate."

"Mad," Martok gasped. "You're mad." They were in sickbay now and someone was shooting him full of[275]drugs. The pain in his leg faded, as did his leg, soon followed by everything else.

As his vision dimmed, Martok heard Kahless say to himself, as if the idea had just occurred to him, "Quite likely. Yes, that is probably true." And then Martok neither heard nor saw anything for quite some time.

Back in the center of the pit, everyone had fled except Morjod, Gothmara, the eight surviving Hur'q, a handful of guards, and one of the attendants. The bodies of more than twenty Klingon warriors were scattered around the platform and into the first row of bleachers. Gothmara could not help but notice that most of them were Morjod's men. Sirella and Martok's rescuers had fought well. She had not expected them to be able to do that in the face of the Hur'q and would have to factor this into future encounters. And they had killed *two* of her creatures. Another surprise. She had thought her pets to be practically invulnerable, yet Martok and the others had found ways to cripple and kill them. She shook her head in admiring wonder: the man astonished her.

And Morjod? Morjod, of course, raged like a child. "He's getting *away!*" he wailed, pointing at the spot in the sky where the bird-of-prey had disappeared almost five minutes ago. The squadron of fighters had pursued them, but they did not have a prayer of closing before the ship reached orbit and could switch from thrusters to impulse power. After that, it was no more than a few moments before it could jump to warp. *I should have been prepared for this*, she thought. *I knew someone would attempt a rescue, but I hadn't considered that they would have a ship.* She should have been ready<sup>[276]</sup> with interceptors in near-planetary orbit, but she had been more concerned with keeping up the appearance that all was stable in the empire. Under normal circumstances, there would be no reason to have cruisers so close to Qo'noS. *Where did they get a bird-of-prey?* Gothmara wondered. She had made certain that every small craft had been secured. Whoever had led them must have had the ship hidden away for weeks, even months. Someone had planned ahead for exactly this eventuality. Who could have known?

"Mother!" Morjod cried. Gothmara rolled her eyes with impatience, but was careful not to let her son see it. It wouldn't do to let him know how much he irritated her sometimes. *Men!* she thought. *They're all children!* Then she glanced up at the spot in the sky where Martok had disappeared. *Well, some more than others. ...*

"Calm yourself, my son," she said, employing her Voice. Morjod responded instantaneously, the lines of stress around his eyes disappearing. "He will not get far and even if he does, what of it? Who will aid him?"

"The Federation ... !"

"... Would not dare to offer Martok assistance. They will not involve themselves in a dispute unless it specifically affects their interests, even if they *did* have any resources to spare, which they do not."

"But we took one of their embassies," Morjod said much too loudly.

"We *did not*," Gothmara said, lashing him with the Voice. "A deranged employee killed some minor functionaries and we were asked to lend support while there were civil disturbances in the city. We will return the embassy to Federation control in a short while." Leaning closer to him, she said confidentially, "We could not<sup>[277]</sup> hope to indefinitely conceal what has happened here, but we needed time to consolidate our power. I believe we have done so now, my son."

Morjod looked less nervous, but obviously still needed some reassurance. "It would have been better if we had killed him," he said sulkily.

"Yes," Gothmara agreed. "It would have. But there will be other opportunities. Make this your next goal, my son, your gift to me. Find him, then bring him before me. Then, we'll kill him together." She

gestured at the *cha'ta'rok*, her son's plaything. He had seen a picture in a history text once and had always dreamed of building one of his own. "This thing was too gaudy by half."

Morjod bowed his head. "Yes, Mother. You're right, of course."

"Now please see to it that someone prepares my ship."

"You're leaving?" Morjod asked, the idea obviously producing mixed feelings. Her son enjoyed having free rein sometimes, though he disliked being separated from her for too long. She had made sure of that.

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"To Boreth," she said. "I have other projects to tend to."

## 18

*I AM DYING, Martok thought, his soul drifting into the slow-moving currents of time. Lazily, he passed stars and the spidery brilliance of nebulae; he relished the freedom to move around the stars like solar winds.*

He had anticipated that death would dredge his memories; that he would journey through familiar landscapes, as a spirit, confronting his enemies, rejoining fallen comrades, paying homage to those whom he still owed debts. And then he would arrive at the gates of Sto-Vo-Kor.

He had not expected his passage to be so peaceful.

In a valley of ice, he rejoined his body gazing up at a night sky so clear, so deep and velvety that he felt he could reach up and pluck a glittering star or the wan-faced moon. Stillness squeezed out sound, save the throb of his heart, and his puffs of breath made visible by the bone-cracking cold.

He turned around slowly, taking in the whole landscape; on all sides, he was surrounded by [279] *snow-sheathed hills and craggy cliff faces bearded with crystal icicles. He could see crevasses where the ice and snow had gaped open, allowing the bedrock far below to breathe. The remains of glaciers sat like monoliths, watchfully guarding the valley. Before him, a wide lake of blue-black waters blanketed by a low-lying white mist carpeted the valley floor. If he listened closely, he could hear the lifeless water shush and slap the icy shore. No living creature could exist in this hostile climate.*

He discovered his aloneness.

Dropping his gaze to his own form, he saw he wore a monk's simple, unadorned robes, and though he wore no gloves or head covering or furs to warm him, he did not shiver in the biting winds.

A silver glow on the opposite side of the lake caught his eye. Of their own volition, his feet began to move. He skirted the water's edge, leaping from floating ice to floating ice. As he grew closer, he saw a woman dressed in pieces of ancient armor and fluttering scraps of diaphanous cloth. In her right hand, high over her head, she held not a bat'leth, but a weapon Martok recognized as a *ch'tak*, an edged club that had not been used in thousands of years. In the woman's left hand, extended before her, she

*held an earthenware cup. Who is this? Martok wondered. He felt like he should know. But just as his vision faded, he knew.*

Kar-Tela, she who had been called the goddess of destiny before the Klingons slew all their gods, had appeared to him. Kar-Tela was the only one of the old gods who escaped that slaughter. And why? Because she was Kar-Tela and no warrior could defeat destiny. She held the club and the cup that might hold water or might hold poison. The penitent could accept the cup and take his [280] *chances or he could dash it from her hand. If this happened, then Kar-Tela would joyously offer battle, but, of course, no warrior can defeat destiny.*

Martok reached out, though whether to take the cup or strike it from her hand, he could not say.

And Kar-Tela smiled.

## 19

MARTOK AWOKE.

He was in a sickbay, though on which ship he could not say. The biobed hummed and coughed, and Martok's back and shoulders ached for want of padding. Perhaps he had spent too much time among humans on Deep Space 9, but there were times when he wondered about his people's insistence that all forms of comfort were an admission of weakness. Squinting against the bright lights, Martok struggled to sit up and discovered that his arms were bound with restraints.

Someone approached, and expecting either a doctor or a guard, Martok snapped, "Release me! Or am I prisoner?" The realization dawned that he must be much recovered, because he felt some of the old whip-crack in his voice again.

Small hands loosened the restraints, and Martok was surprised to discover how happy he was to hear a familiar high-pitched voice again. "Of course not," Pharh [182] said. "But you were being a little violent when they were dressing your wounds."

"Violent?" Martok asked as he rubbed his wrists.

"You kept trying to strangle the doctor. Something about her seemed to irritate you."

"I was dreaming." Martok pushed himself up into a sitting position. Someone had stripped off his dirty, blood-soaked cloak and the light armor he had stolen, but had not changed him out of the clothes he had been wearing for the past several days. Klingons have a high tolerance for unpleasant odors, but even they have their limits. *Shower, he thought. And soon. And these clothes into the disintegrator.* Trying to ignore the smell, he asked Pharh, "Did I hurt her?"

"No, not seriously. Her tests said there's something odd in your blood, so she was afraid to give you a heavy sedative or general anesthesia. The best alternative we had was to tie you down. You punched me, too, by the way."

"Then you were standing too close." Martok flexed his leg. It was stiff, but seemed functional. Flipping away the light cover, he studied the wound and saw that it had been treated with the usual Klingon rough battle first aid. There was an angry red scar up two-thirds of his leg that he would have until he died. He grunted in satisfaction. "Where is everyone?" he asked. "Where are Sirella and Worf?"

“Sleeping and eating, respectively,” Pharh said. “It’s the middle of the night here on this ship.”

“Then why are you still up? For that matter, why are you here at all?”

“Here in sickbay or here on this ship?”

“Let us begin with the first one.”

Pharh slumped down onto a low stool and said<sup>[283]</sup>sulkily, “I’m a Ferengi on a ship full of Klingons. You’re the only one here I know or even *understand*. The rest of them—well, most of them—insist on acting like *Klingons*. Where else would you expect me to stay?”

“*Most* of them?” Martok asked. He was expecting a comment about Worf, but Pharh surprised him.

“The old guy is okay,” Pharh explained. “The one who rescued me. By the way, you owe me for that Sporak now. I had to leave it in the middle of nowhere because of something you did to it.”

Martok contemplated a retort, but decided the Ferengi might have a point. “Fine. I owe you for a Sporak. When I have the currency to pay for one, I will. Do you still have the ring?”

Pharh nodded.

“Good. Hang on to it. It may be the only thing of value on this entire ... What ship is this?”

“Nobody’s told me. I’m pretty invisible to most of these people.”

Martok slipped his legs to the side of the bed and waited to see how he would feel. Stiff joints, a slight headache. A knot in the pit of his gut—hunger, he realized. A good thing, he decided. And dry mouth. “Get me some water.”

“Please,” Pharh said.

“Please what?”

“ ‘Please, Pharh, get me some water.’ ”

Martok turned his head to look at the Ferengi and put as much energy as he dared spare into a medium-powered growl. “Please, Pharh,” he said icily. “Get me some water before I kill you.”

Pharh stood up and went to the replicator. “That’s more like it,” he said, and brought the water.

Martok drained the cup, wiped his mouth, and<sup>[284]</sup>continued questioning Pharh. “How did you become involved in the rescue attempt? And get me some more water.”

“Please.”

“Please,” Martok said, teeth clenched, and extended the empty tumbler.

Walking back to the replicator, Pharh said, “Well, first there was the instructional voice. It told me I had to come help you.”

“Do you often listen to voices? Where was this voice coming from?”

“I was under a pile of rocks at the time, so I’m not sure, and, no, I don’t often listen to voices. When I came out from under the rocks, *he* was waiting for me.”

“Kahless.” There was no question in Martok’s voice.

Pharh’s voice took on a dreamy tone. “Yes, Kahless. The old guy.”

“The emperor.”

“Someone else mentioned that. He doesn’t *tact* like an emperor.”

“Do I act like a chancellor?”

“Well, no, now that you mention it. There’s something wrong with Klingons. All the rest of them act like they run the quadrant, yet you two act like ...”

“Like what?”

“Like you’d rather be anywhere else but where you are. Maybe working at the landfill.”

“I can think of worse professions,” Martok said, setting the tumbler down. “Kahless found you in the wastes?”

“Under a pile of rocks, yes.”

“Incredible,” he said, then decided it was time to try to stand. He slipped down to the floor, then steadied himself. He felt off balance, but overall not too bad. “And then he convinced you to risk your life to save me?”

[285] “No, not really. The voices convinced me to try. Kahless just made me believe we could do it without killing ourselves.”

The doors to sickbay groaned open. *I’m on the Rotarran*, Martok decided. The door mechanism had been damaged during an attack and never adequately repaired. Martok heard two sets of footfalls. He didn’t need to look up to know to whom they belonged.

“How is he?” Kahless asked.

“Grouchy,” Pharh reported, “so I suspect he’s feeling better.”

Worf approached the biobed and checked the readouts. *On Starfleet ships*, Martok decided, not without a trace of bitterness, *everyone learns how to do that*. “He’s recovering, but he needs rest,” Worf announced.

Martok sighed. “Would anyone care to ask *me* how I’m feeling, or are you going to keep talking about me as if I’m not here?” He glanced from emperor to ambassador to Ferengi.

“How are you, my brother?” Worf asked.

“I am,” Martok announced, “most irritable. And confused. Where are Sirella and Drex? I wish to see them.”

“They will be here soon,” Kahless explained. “I bade them wait until we had spoken to you about your future.”

“My *future*?” Martok snapped, then barked out a clipped laugh. “I don’t believe *I have* much of a future unless you count running and hiding from Morjod, Gothmara, and the rest of the Klingon Empire. Or, wait,” he said, his tone growing more sarcastic with each moment. “Perhaps we should head for Federation space. They’ll take us in and I can spend the rest of my miserable existence as a political refugee. What’s the name of the current Federation president? Worf, look it [286] up so I can address him by name while I crawl up to his desk to kiss his ...”

Kahless turned toward the door, grabbing Worf by the arm as he went. “When you are quite through with your bout of self-pity,” he said. “Let us know. We’ll be in the mess hall.”

Martok pointed at Kahless’s back as if his finger were a disruptor. “You stopped me from killing that damned usurper.”

Looking back over his shoulder, his expression as cool as a Romulan senator’s, Kahless said, “You were about to die.”

“Then you denied me an honorable death.”

“No. I preserved an honorable life. And for that you now owe me a debt”

Martok studied the emperor’s face and felt the memory of a dream tickle his conscience, but he thrust the vision away from him only to have it replaced by the image of Kahless wheeling him down a corridor saying, *I’ve been busy trying to save your empire*. “My empire?” he muttered, then more loudly, “I owe you *nothing*.”

“But you owe the empire everything.”

Martok regarded him incredulously. “Everything?! *Everything*?! Look at me!” He stood straight and tore at the ragged clothes that hung from his body. “I have given the empire *everything*! I’ve given the empire two of my children, my House, my position, my damned and damnable *honor*. What else could the empire possibly want from me?”

“It wants you to give up your old ideas, my brother,” Worf said. “It wants you to forge the empire anew.”

Ignoring his aches, Martok spun to face Worf. “*You!*” he roared. “*SHUT YOUR DAMNABLE MOUTH!* This is [287] *your fault!* If you hadn’t convinced me to take on the mantle of chancellor, none of this would have happened!” He looked down at his rags and his voice went quiet and cold. “I didn’t want this. *I never* wanted it. All I ever wanted was to serve the empire as a soldier, to fight and die with honor. This is your burden, Worf. *You* carry it.”

“It was not Worf who sired Morjod,” Kahless said quietly.

The barb bit deep, and Martok’s only defense was cold fury. “You’re quite right, *Emperor*,” he said



bitterly. “It was I who set these events in motion with a single youthful indiscretion. It was wrong of me to attempt to thrust the blame on someone else and because of it, the Klingon Empire stands on the brink of destruction.”

“You misunderstand me, Martok,” Kahless said. “I didn’t say the blame was yours. This is beyond the single act of any one Klingon. The storm we face is one rooted in history, in destiny. It is a crisis that has been building for centuries and it would be both folly and an act of contemptible pride to claim responsibility. Now the clouds have burst and after generations of corruption and stagnation, the Klingon people hunger for something to believe in again.”

Martok stared at the emperor, struggling to put his feeling into words. Someone, he knew, had been trying to tell him something very much like this, but it was so difficult to accept. If he did embrace this vision—this lunacy—of Kahless’s he knew he would be giving up something that was unutterably precious to him, but he could not say what.

“This is what Worf recognized,” Kahless continued, watching Martok’s face, “when he forced Gowron to[288]accept me as a figurehead emperor. I was to rally the people, renew the Klingon soul, remind them of the ideals the true Kahless had lived and died for. It was a worthy challenge and I embraced it with all my heart.”

“But you failed,” Martok whispered, sad to say the words, but knowing they had to be said.

Kahless agreed without hesitation. “Yes,” he said. “I failed. Gowron, though blinded by his own ambition, was cunning. He accepted me publicly to stave off civil war, but thereafter he blocked my efforts at every turn. He saw me as a rival, just as he saw you, and I became powerless to reach the people. I grew frustrated, then enraged, and finally, I despaired.”

“What happened, then?” Pharh interjected. Martok had forgotten the Ferengi was in the room and was surprised to see that he was hanging on the emperor’s every word. *This is a tale to him*, Martok realized. *We’re like characters in a song.*

“Like you, young warrior,” Kahless said to Pharh, “in my darkest moment, I heard a call. I came to see the truth.”

“And that is?” Martok asked.

“That if our people have any hope to be led through this dark night, they need more man a warrior, more than a politician, more than a shaman. They need a symbol.” Kahless laid his hand on Martok’s shoulder. “They need you.”

Martok knocked the emperor’s hand away. “I’m not a symbol.” He shook his head. “I never was. I’m just a man.” And, with that, he pushed himself away from the biobed and lurched to the door. He did not know if his legs would hold him, but they did and he made it through the door and managed to stay on his feet long enough to hear the door creak shut behind him.

\* \* \*

[289]In sickbay, the emperor, the ambassador, and the Ferengi studied each other carefully. Finally, Pharh knew he could no longer stand the silence and asked, “Now what are we going to do? He says he’s just a man.” He shrugged, then looked from Kahless to Worf. “Personally, I would have to agree. I can’t recall the last time I saw someone who looked/ess like a symbol.”

Looking up at Worf, he thought for a moment that he had gone too far and had earned either a figurative or literal skewering, but, strangely, the big Klingon didn't seem to be paying any attention to Pharh. There was a light in Worf's eyes, a light like his mother used to get when she figured out a new way to "edit the company books for clarity." Inspiration—or madness (it was frequently difficult to tell them apart)—dawned in him and cast a wild glow over his face. "Perhaps," he said, "there is a way he can be both."

In her quarters on Deep Space 9, Ezri Dax attempted to sneak in a half an hour of rest before her next appointment. She was working another double shift that day and needed a few minutes of solitude to recharge. The war was over—for now, at least—but they were still dealing with the aftereffects. Ezri had seen more than a dozen patients today, most of them with fairly reasonable complaints, including mild cases of depression or battle fatigue. One or two of them had been serious, however, and she was worried about how badly scarred the Federation's psyche had been by the losses they had shared. She still felt more than a little raw about her own losses, though neither of them were the kind most of her friends and patients faced.

She missed Benjamin and was worried about the[290]effect his loss was having on Jake. It didn't make it any easier not knowing whether he was truly dead or merely ... misplaced in time. If that wasn't bad enough, on an entirely different level, she missed Worf. Ezri was happy for his opportunity. Whether he was willing to believe it himself or not, becoming the ambassador to the Klingon Empire was the position his entire career had been leading up to. Somewhere inside her, she felt Jadzia's glow of pride and, yes, amusement at the idea. It was difficult to deal with those sensations sometimes, especially since she did not always understand if they were her own displaced emotions or the symbiont's response to a situation. Still so much to learn. ...

Sleep was not coming on. *Too much coffee today*, she decided. Maybe she should wander down to sickbay and see what Julian was doing. Perhaps the two of them could slip off for a bite to eat or ...

"Lieutenant Dax?" the new duty officer called to her over her combadge. Lieutenant ... what was his name? Bowers?

She tapped the badge. "Here," she said resignedly. *So much for that idea. . . .*

"There's a communiqué for you coming over the secure line."

Ezri wasn't expecting any messages. Perhaps it was from the Symbiosis Commission. They had been trying to get her attention for the past several days. Or perhaps it was her mother. Neither possibility pleased her. "All right," she said. "Feed it to my workstation. I'll listen to it there."

"It's not a voice message, Lieutenant."

Not a voice message? "Where is it from?"

"Qo'noS."

[291] *Worf*, Ezri thought. *Speak the devil's name and he'll pay you a call*. Ezri scurried to her workstation. "Transfer it down here."

“Done.”

Must be a short message. And it was, too. One word of text, to be precise, which was terse even for Worf.

“NOW.”

CONTINUED IN

THE LEFT HAND OF DESTINY

BOOK TWO

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Best known for his portrayal of General Martok on the television series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, J. G. Hertzler was born into a family whose roots go back eight generations in the small Pennsylvania town of Port Royal. He was raised on various foreign and domestic U.S. Air Force bases, from El Paso to Casablanca—which may explain his lifelong philosophical confusion. J. G. was a college football linebacker and an antiwar protestor; he has canvassed for McGovern and strongly supported the men and women of our armed forces; he feels he has a gentle Amish soul inside a short-fused temper. In other words, Martok is close to his heart, and J. G. expects he always will be.

As an actor in the theatre, J. G. toured the rust belt with Roddy MacDowall in the 1996 National Tour of *Dial M for Murder*, held a shotgun on Holly Hunter in *By the Bog of Cats*, and had his severed head carried around by Irene Pappas in *The Bacchae*.

[294] In television, J. G. has worked in countless episodics, mostly villains roiling with inner torment. A student of screenwriting, he's had three scripts optioned with no cigar ... yet. Hope and rewriting spring eternal. *The Left Hand of Destiny* represents J. G.'s first foray into narrative fiction. It's been one helluva ride thus far, with a little help from his friends, old and new.

Jeffrey Lang is the author of *Star Trek: The Next Generation —Immortal Coil*, the short story “Dead Man's Hand” in the anthology *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine —The Lives of Dax*, and the coauthor (with David Weddle) of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine —Section 31: Abyss*. He is currently working on a couple other projects, including more *Trek* and the graphic novel *Sherwood*. Lang lives in Wynnewood, PA, with his wife, Katherine Fritz, his son, Andrew, and Buster, who, no doubt, wants to go out for a walk right now.

## About the e-Book

(AUGUST, 2003)—Scanned, proofed, and formatted by *Bibliophile* .

