

Captain's log, stardate 58329.5:

The USS Dauntless has been invited to participate in the ceremony honoring the 35th anniversary of the Khitomer Massacre. It should be quite a celebration, especially if the rumors hold true that for the first time ever, representatives of the Romulan Star Empire have been invited to attend.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

The Federation starship *Dauntless* entered standard orbit in the crowded skies over Khitomer. It was here on this planet that in 2293 the seeds of what would become the Khitomer Accords were planted. It was here in 2372 that the alliance between the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets was renewed. Most importantly, it was here that in 2346 the greatest massacre in Klingon history occurred, the commemoration of the event the reason the Federation starship was now in attendance.

"This is amazing!" Commander (Carrie) K'danz said as she stood gazing at the main viewscreen, where hundreds of ships orbiting the planet could be seen. "I've never seen so many Klingon ships in one place before! Bre'el, Vor'cha, K'tinga, K'vort, even a couple of Neg'Varh's."

Captain Peter J. Koester stood up from the command chair and walked near his first officer.

"We're not the only Federation starships in attendance either," the captain said, pointing at a couple of ships in lower orbit. "There are the *Enterprise* and the *Intrepid*."

"Captain," announced Major Sean Elliott McIntyre, the Marine chief of security. "We're receiving a request to share our orbit with two incoming Romulan vessels, sir."

"Romulans?" K'danz asked, shocked, drawing the attention of many of the crew.

"I guess the rumors WERE true," Koester explained. "I heard through the grapevine that the Romulan government sent a communiqué to Chancellor Martok, informing him of their desire to present a formal apology for the attack on Khitomer to the Klingon Empire. The new Praetor seems to be making great reaches toward peace with the Star Empire's former adversaries."

As they spoke, two Romulan Warbirds entered orbit close to the *Dauntless*. One was a large D'Deridex-class Warbird which dwarfed even the Sovereign-class starship. The other was one of the smaller, more powerful new Warbirds.

"Carrie, am I wrong or is that the...?"

"Captain, we're being hailed by the Warbird *Vedrex*," announced Lt Cdr Phillip Winters.

Koester smiled as he exchanged a look with K'danz.

"Your fiancée is going to start getting jealous if you keep running into old girlfriends like this," K'danz said.

"Michele's got nothing to worry about," the captain said before ordering, "On screen."

The viewer blinked to the image of a female Romulan commander, who smiled as she saw the captain.

"Peter! I wasn't expecting to see you here!"

"Actually, T'Lees, I was about to say the same thing to you. Are the rumors I've heard really true? Are you part of the official party?"

"If the rumors you refer to are about an official apology, then you've heard correctly. Myself, Commander Sendek and Admiral Tarossa, who was a Centurion aboard one of the vessels involved in the attack, will present the apology signed by the Praetor himself at the official ceremony tomorrow."

Koester marveled at the Romulan commander's calm.

"All I can say is I'm glad I'm not in your shoes, T'Lees."

"Why? Is there something wrong with my footwear?" T'Lees asked, confused.

"Nevermind," the captain said. "Just to make you aware, though, the Klingons have requested no transporters be used to travel to the surface. It would complicate security precautions, since Chancellor Martok and Emperor Kahless will both be in attendance. The Klingons prefer the invited guests use shuttlecraft. Will you be attending tonight's reception?"

T'Lees wrinkled her nose at the question, saying, "Ugh... Klingon cuisine. I really don't know how you humans can stomach that sh..." When Koester cleared his throat as a subtle warning, T'Lees changed what she was about to say. "Well, I suppose it would be rude to snub our gracious hosts. Yes, I will be there."

"Wonderful. Try and save a dance for me," Koester joked. "See you tonight. *Dauntless*, out."

As the viewer returned to the scene of endless stars above and uncountable ships orbiting the planet below, K'danz looked at her captain with an expression of mild annoyance.

"Michele's got nothing to worry about, huh?"
"It would just be one dance," Koester replied sheepishly.

Space, the Final Frontier...
These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

"A Matter of Honor" By PJK

That evening, Captain Koester fastened the collar of his dress uniform, glanced in the mirror to assure himself his pips were on straight, and headed toward the door of his quarters.

"All set, Daddy," called out a voice just before the doors slid open. The captain turned to see his daughter Gem emerging from her bedroom across the room, dressed in her Fleet Space Cadet uniform complete with Klingon sash displaying the emblems of the House of Koloth.

"And what are you all dressed up for?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Same as you. For the reception," Gem answered.

An amused look crossed the captain's face as he placed his hands on his daughter's shoulders and said, "I'm sorry, Sweetie, but tonight's event is for adults only. But you're welcome to attend the main observance ceremony tomorrow."

Utter disappointment covered Gem's face.

"What am I supposed to do tonight then?" she whined.

"Sgt O'Laughlin will check in on you later. Use the time to catch up on your reading."

"Can I use the holodeck?" Gem asked hopefully.

The captain sighed, then said, "You can use a holosuite, and only if you have an adult with you. And you better be in bed by 2100 hours! Big day tomorrow."

Koester then finally pulled himself away from his daughter. As he entered the corridor he almost literally bumped into Commander K'danz and Lt Dar, both likewise in dress uniform, who had just emerged from their own quarters. After exchanging pleasantries, the three officers entered the nearest turbolift and headed for the main shuttlebay.

Outside the doors to the shuttlebay they met up with the forth member of their entourage, Counselor Tanzia Gera. The joined-Trill wore a royal-purple gown that accentuated her fire-red hair. The captain stuck out the crook of his left arm, inviting the counselor to place her hand through so he may escort her onto the shuttlecraft.

"Which shuttle are we utilizing tonight, Skipper?" K'danz asked as they all passed through the doors. Koester glanced back at his First Officer with a strange look.

"That is a silly question, Exec," he said as he lead them all toward shuttlecraft 01, the *Khitomer*.

"This is so exciting!" remarked Counselor Gera. "I've never been to a Klingon diplomatic function before!"

"And likely won't be again," the half-Klingon Dar remarked. "Klingon diplomatic function is almost an oxymoron."

As the four officers stepped up the rear hatch into the shuttle, the two Starfleet Academy cadets who had been pre-fighting and would be piloting the shuttle down to the surface, Midshipmen 2nd class William Hyland III and Joella Faggio, stopped what they were doing and stood respectfully.

"Shuttlecraft is ready for launch, Captain," Hyland reported.

"Very well. Mister Faggio, contact flight deck control and request permission to depart."

"Aye, sir," Faggio replied as she and Hyland took the seats at the forward end of the shuttle. Within moments the shuttlecraft *Khitomer* was buttoned up and en route to the surface of the planet Khitomer.

* * * *

Klingon receptions are far from the typical social gathering. Instead of waiters carrying trays of drinks, barrels of Blood Wine were positioned strategically around the room, each with a number of large goblets around

them. Rather than a normal buffet table, a table covered with Klingon food, two-thirds of it still raw, half of that still alive and attempting escape, offered several culinary challenges. In the place of dancing, the main area of the dimly lit hall was full of warriors butting heads, arm wrestling and thrashing about with d'ktahgs and mek'laths.

On the whole, a not entirely safe place to be.

"Don't you just love the nuances of a Klingon gathering?" Dar asked wryly.

Looking around the room, the *Dauntless* crew noticed all the beings mingling in the crowd. While most were Klingon, there were a few humans and Vulcans mixed in, not to mention representatives of races conquered by the Klingon Empire over centuries past, some of whom had gained independence in recent decades, like the Kriosians. All of the non-Klingon races appeared to be gathering around the edges of the hall, away from the general Klingon horseplay.

The four Starfleet officers and two cadets made their way carefully through the crowd to the raised platform at the far end, where Chancellor Martok, Emperor Kahless and Federation ambassador to Qo'noS Worf stood, and offered their greetings and respects. As they then turned to mingle with the crowd where they could, Koester heard a loud voice bellow his name.

"Captain Peter, my brother!" said one large and burly Klingon as he pushed his way through the crowd. Koester recognized him immediately as Captain Kargoth of the *IKS qul'maS*. As the Klingon captain approached, he grasped Koester's forearm, the Klingon equivalent of the human handshake. "Where is my adopted sister, the little warrior?" Kargoth asked, looking around.

"You mean Gem? She's still aboard my ship," Koester explained. "She'll be attending the memorial ceremony tomorrow." Koester then introduced his crew as Kargoth thrust a chalice of Blood Wine into his hand and smashed his own mug into it for a toast. Koester barely avoided spilling the dark red liquid all over his bone-white dress jacket.

"Okay, everyone," the captain finally said to K'danz, Dar, Gera and the two cadets as Kargoth moved on to happily butt heads with another Klingon captain he knew. "Mingle, but be careful."

As his crew scattered, the captain made his way through the crowd to where two other men in all-white dress uniform jackets stood.

"Bill, Jean-Luc, good evening," Koester said. Captain William Howard of the starship *Intrepid* and Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the *Enterprise* both turned and smiled as Koester approached.

"Peter! Welcome back to the club," Picard said, shaking Koester's hand. "How does it feel to be back in the center seat?"

"You were right of course, Jean-Luc. It's where I belong." Koester then turned to Captain Howard and asked, "And what brings the *Intrepid* to Khitomer?"

"We're part of tomorrow's re-enactment," the commanding officer of the lead Intrepid-class starship explained. "Remember, it was the Excelsior-class starship *Intrepid* that was the first ship to respond to the distress call of the massacre, and the crew of that ship that found the only two survivors in the rubble." He gestured toward Worf up on the platform and added, "The ambassador was one of them." Howard sipped some more of his Blood Wine, making a sour face as he swallowed, before continuing.

"I understand the reason the Federation flagship was invited," Howard said, gesturing toward Picard with his cup, "but why the *Dauntless* too?"

Koester shrugged his shoulders as he said, "Near as I can figure, it's our shuttlecraft." When Howard gave Koester a puzzled look, he explained further, "All the *Dauntless'* shuttlecraft are named for famous massacres. Shuttlecraft One is the *Khitomer*. That and we've got a boatload of cadets, and I think the Academy Commandant thought it would help their cultural studies by taking part in the ceremonies."

Suddenly Koester sensed a change in the room. It was something he felt more than saw. The ambient noise level in the hall had dropped considerably and the captain noticed the majority of the faces in the room turn toward the main entry doors.

Without even looking, Koester knew.

The Romulans had arrived.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," Koester apologized as he shook their hands once more and started toward the newly arrived party standing near the door. Commander T'Lees smiled a small, barely visible smile of relief as she saw Koester approach.

"Ever get the paranoid feeling like you're being watched?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood as Koester offered his greetings to the Romulan contingent and was introduced to Sub-Commander Tavian, Centurian Churooth and Sub-Commander Xo, T'Lee's second in command. Koester greeted each one formally, unsure of to what extent his past relationship with T'Lees was known and/or tolerated by her crew, before offering to escort them to meet the Chancellor and Emperor.

The captain could here much whispering, not all of it friendly, as the small group passed through the crowd which parted like the Red Sea before Moses.

"Your Highness, Chancellor, Ambassador, may I present to you Commander T'Lees of the Romulan Imperial Navy and her command staff," Koester announced formally.

Martok's single eye seemed to glare at the new arrivals while he greeted them cordially, saying, "I have fought against Romulans and side-by-side with Romulans. I much prefer the latter. Welcome to Khitomer. I hope your current visit is much more enjoyable than your last one.... for everyone."

Worf looked over at the chancellor as Martok made the remark, but Koester could not tell if the ambassador approved of the barely disguised insult or not. However, Kahless' greeting seemed friendlier, perhaps because the clone of the original Kahless the Unforgettable had not even existed at the time of the Khitomer Massacre and the Empire's relations with the Romulans, while far from warm, were almost always diplomatic for the entire time he had sat on the throne.

Having made their greetings, Koester quickly lead the Romulan delegation away from the platform and toward a barrel of Blood Wine, handing a full mug to each of them.

"You don't actually expect us to drink this swill, do you, Captain?" Sub-Commander Xo asked with disgust.

Koester leaned close to the Romulan officer and said, "If you don't want to insult your hosts you will. Especially during a toast."

All four Romulans looked at each other uncertainly before accepting the mugs and working up the nerve to taste the wine. However, before any of them had brought their cups to their lips, a howl filled the hall. Koester looked around trying to find where it was coming from, and at the edge of his vision noticed a phaser being fired in his direction.

"Get down!" he shouted, knocking into T'Lees and Xo and pushing all four Romulans to the floor as the beam passed over their heads by mere centimeters, cutting through the crowd around them. Seconds later, as the shouting and screams of indignation started to subside, the captain heard the familiar hum of a transporter fading and he could see the last blue-white sparkle vanish.

"We need a doctor, fast!" Koester heard the familiar voice of his First Officer shout. With a quick glance to make sure T'Lees and her contingent were unharmed, the captain stood and made his way toward the raised platform, stepping around a number of dead Klingon bodies along the way.

At the platform K'danz was wrapping a makeshift bandage around the wound on Worf's left upper arm. Both were seated on the edge of the platform while Martok and Kahless looked on.

"Is everyone alright?" Koester asked as Picard and Howard also joined them at the platform.

"Fortunately, yes, Captain," Martok replied. "Though we wouldn't be if it hadn't been for Worf. That phaser beam was aimed directly at the Emperor!"

"I managed to push Emperor Kahless out of the way," the Ambassador told both his former Commanding Officer and the gathered crowd in general. "However, my reflexes must be slipping. I failed to get myself completely out of the way in time."

Martok looked around the room, still in chaos from the attack, and bellowed, "How could this have happened here? Who did this?"

"It's a Romulan plot!" someone in the crowd shouted. "The Romulans have tried to assassinate the Emperor!" Immediately a group of irate Klingon warriors surrounded T'Lees and her crew, the cries for the spilling of green blood filling the hall.

As rough hands grabbed T'Lees and her centurion, the two Sub-Commanders hit hidden comlinks on their uniforms and quickly faded in the green glow of a Romulan transporter beam before they too could be captured. Seconds later a voice was heard through Koester's combadge.

"*Dauntless* to Captain Koester," said Commander Kevin Fry. "The two Romulan ships here in orbit with us just cloaked!"

"Stand by, Mister Fry," the captain said before turning his attention to Martok. "Chancellor, please put a stop to this! That crowd will tear the Commander apart, and I know for a fact the phaser beam didn't come from them!"

It took a few moments for Martok and Kahless to calm the crowd enough to prevent the murder of T'Lees and Churooth, who were instead dragged bodily up to the chancellor's platform.

"Chancellor, there are six dead, another dozen wounded," one of the Klingon warriors reported once the Romulans had been brought forward. Meanwhile, Koester ordered K'danz to gather the *Dauntless* crew all together nearby while Picard told his own First Officer, Commander Martin Madsen, to do the same for the *Enterprise*'s delegation.

"Chancellor," Koester said, turning back to Martok. "We'll do whatever we can to help you find whoever is responsible for this travesty."

* * * *

A short time later a group that included Koester, Picard, Martok, Worf, K'danz, Madsen, Dar and Khitomer's Klingon security chief, Korbus, watched the security monitor recording of the reception. The vid pickup had focused mainly on the platform where Kahless and Martok had stood. Koester watched as the image showed himself presenting the Romulan delegation to the Chancellor, then leading them away.

A minute later an orange phaser beam appeared from off-screen and started tracking toward the right across the platform. Like Koester, it appeared Worf had noticed the beam out of the corner of his eye and immediately launched himself into Kahless and Martok, pushing them down out of the phaser's reach but not before it grazed his arm.

"Hmmm.... Interesting," Korbus commented as he watched the scene unfold.

Suddenly the view on the monitor swung right, eventually focusing in on the spot where the attempted assassin had been standing, but the only thing visible was the blue-white sparkle as a humanoid shape dematerialized in a transporter beam.

"It appears the security recording was not much help," Picard commented.

"On the contrary, Captain," said Korbus as he paused the recording. "It was very helpful. You were correct, Captain Koester. The assassin was most definitely not the Romulan pahtks."

Koester was relieved to hear Korbus agree with his initial protest until the Klingon security officer pressed his arm-mounted communicator and ordered, "Place the Starfleet crews under arrest for the attempted assassination of the Emperor and Chancellor. And make sure their ships don't break orbit. Korbus, out."

"What??" said all the Starfleet officers almost simultaneously. Koester and Picard especially could not believe what they had heard. Even Martok seemed surprised.

"On what basis do you make this accusation, Korbus?" the Chancellor asked.

Korbus replayed the security recording, pausing it shortly after the phaser had started firing. He pointed at the sensor readout running along the bottom of the screen.

"Notice here, Chancellor, that the size, shape and color of the beam, as well as its frequency, indicate it to be of Federation design." Korbus then forwarded the image to the few seconds the transporter effect was visible and paused it again.

"I see," remarked Picard grimly. "That is a Federation transporter."

"But you can't possibly believe that we...," Koester started to say before Martok cut him off.

"Of course we don't believe it was you or Captain Picard, but can you be certain it was not a member of your crew or the crews of the other Federation starships?" When Koester hesitated in answering, the Chancellor said, "I thought not."

"At least let us continue to help investigate," Koester asked. "If it is a member of one of our crews, which I still have serious doubts about, we want to know as badly as you do."

"Very well," Martok said gruffly. "But you all must remain here on the surface. And no others may beam down."

After exchanging glances, Picard and Koester agreed, then left to inform the remainder of their crews of the situation.

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With the emphasis of the investigation now on the Starfleet crews, T'Lees and her centurion had been set free and everyone but the Federation representatives allowed to return to their ships with the request, more like an order, to remain in orbit of Khitomer.

Unless the attempted assassins were caught quickly, it seemed like the memorial service and re-enactment would be cancelled.

Koester had gathered his crew, which because of the current situation he now classified an away team, and delegated the jobs as he briefed them on what he knew.

"Captain Picard, Captain Howard and I have already checked in with our ships, informing them what has transpired, and I have received assurances that none of the transporter systems aboard the *Dauntless* have been used since we entered orbit. So now all we have to do is figure out which, if any, of the other ships in orbit might be equipped with a Federation transporter system."

"Captain, what will happen to us if we can't prove we're not involved?" asked Cadet Faggio.

"Chancellor Martok is generally pretty level-headed. But if the hysteria of this goes too far, there's a possibility we could all wind up being executed."

The captain let the shock of his last statement pass, then continued.

"Cadets Hyland and Faggio, go back to the *Khitomer* and retrieve a couple of tricorders out of storage. K'danz and Dar, you interview witnesses. Try to find out if anyone might have seen anything that didn't get reported. Counselor, I want you to coordinate our information with the *Enterprise* and *Intrepid* away teams."

When everyone acknowledged their assignments and left, Koester dipped a mug into one of the nearby half-full barrels of Blood Wine and muttered, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

* * * *

"I've analyzed the sensor readings from the security recording and compared it to the residual energy traces on the slain bodies," Cadet Faggio told Captain Koester and Commander K'danz. "I've confirmed it was a Federation phaser that was used. However, I uncovered one important fact!"

"What is that, Cadet?" the captain inquired.

Faggio started to replay the recording and held the tricorder next to the monitor to display the simultaneous readout.

"As you can see, the phase maintains a steady frequency."

"Of course!" K'danz exclaimed, now excited. "All Federation phasers were designed with an automatic variable frequency modulator after the Battle of Wolf 359."

Faggio nodded and added, "The phaser used in this attack is at least fifteen years old."

"Captain!"

As K'danz and Faggio continued to analyze the security footage, Cadet Hyland approached Koester.

"What is it, Mister Hyland?"

"I think we have a problem, sir."

The cadet preceded the captain out of the building and over a field where numerous shuttlecraft and small transports were parked. He lead Koester directly to the *Khitomer* and inside the craft.

"Something was bothering me when Cadet Faggio and I came here to retrieve the tricorders earlier, sir. I couldn't put my finger on it then but it just suddenly occurred to me what it was."

Koester looked at the Academy cadet questioningly until Hyland pointed at a control near the ceiling. The captain's face went as white as his uniform jacket as he realized what Hyland was pointing out.

"I pre-flighted this shuttle and performed the shutdown after we landed," Hyland said. "And I know for a fact that system was shut down. I guess I subconsciously registered the hum of the system when I came back for the equipment earlier."

"Have you touched anything?" Koester asked, relieved when the cadet's answer was no. Tapping his combadge, he then called, "Koester to K'danz."

"K'danz here, Skipper."

"Exec, would you and Cadet Faggio report with a tricorder to the shuttlecraft *Khitomer*? And bring Korbus with you. I believe we've located the source of the transporter beam."

Moments later, the *Khitomer* was full of people. While K'danz, Faggio and Hyland scanned the ceiling-mounted transporter controls in an attempt to identify fingerprints or DNA traces, the captain was attempting to calm the Klingon security officer.

"You admit it was your shuttle's transporter that beamed the would-be assassin away, and yet you refuse to allow me to place any of your crew under arrest!" Korbus yelled, waving his arms around wildly.

"Korbus, I can't yet explain how my shuttlecraft was accessed, but I still insist none of my crew were involved!" Koester shouted back.

"Can you attest with 100% certainty the location of all of your crew as the assassination attempt occurred?" Korbus insisted.

"My First Officer and Chief Engineer are clearly visible near the Chancellor and Emperor on your security recording!" Koester replied. "And you know full well I was standing with the Romulan delegation. More than half the eyes in the room were staring at us before the shooting began."

"That still leaves three unaccounted for," Korbus reminded, throwing an angry glare at the two cadets nearby. Koester was starting to get frustrated.

"Perhaps we can trace the beam," he finally suggested. Tapping his combadge he said, "Koester to *Dauntless*."

“*Dauntless*, Commander Fry.”

“Commander, we’ve located the source of the assassin’s transporter beam. Unfortunately, it’s our own shuttlecraft. I want you to contact the *Enterprise*, the *Intrepid* and the *Vedrex*. Compare sensor readings at the time of the attack and see if you can triangulate where the assassin beamed to.”

“Right away, Captain. *Dauntless*, out.”

“What now?” Korbus asked impatiently. Koester turned toward his First Officer and asked the status of her scans.

“No trace of DNA or fingerprints,” she reported. “Whoever used our system was smart enough to clean up after themselves. Likewise, the transport records have been tampered with. We can’t determine what coordinates were entered. We did, however, find one interesting fact.”

“And that is?” Korbus asked with some bluster.

“While the transport coordinates were erased, the activity was not, which means no one remained here to alter the computer record. That record indicates one incoming beam-in and two beam-outs.”

“So there was an accomplice!” Korbus said with a smile.

“Correct,” said Faggio. “And since even your sensor records show no other transporter activity on the planet’s surface for the time of the attack until the Romulans beamed away from the hall, then the assassin and his accomplice had to beam to a vessel in orbit.”

“True enough, but which one?” Korbus demanded.

“*Dauntless* to Koester.”

“Hopefully we’re about to find that out,” the captain remarked. “This is Koester. Go ahead, Mister Fry.”

“Skipper, we’ve compared our sensor logs to both the *Enterprise* and the *Vedrex* and triangulated the endpoint of the beam to an orbital position, coordinates: 30 degrees 18.2 north, 110 degrees 22.3 west, altitude 150 kilometers, sir.”

“Excellent work, Mister Fry,” Koester said, smiling happily.

“Unfortunately, sir, there is no ship presently at those coordinates.” Koester’s face fell, his emotions made all the worse by Fry’s next statement. “Analysis of the plasma trail at those coordinates indicates the vessel broke orbit immediately after the attack, and based on the analysis of the plasma traces, the vessel was either a Federation designed shuttle or scout vessel.”

As Korbus glared angrily at the captain, Koester replied, “Thank you, Mister Fry,” and closed the comm circuit.

“Are you ready to admit it was your Federation behind this attack?” Korbus growled. “I’m going to bring this information to Chancellor Martok and act on it!”

Koester knew the longer he stalled, the more chance Korbus or some other hot-headed Klingon would take the matter of justice into their own hands. He was risking his own ship, or perhaps even Picard’s or Howard’s vessels being attacked, maybe even destroyed. It was possible the entire peace treaty between the Federation and Klingon Empire would be broken irretrievably. Not even Ambassador Worf’s influence could help that.

“Korbus, are your security vessels capable of tracking an impulse trail?” the captain finally asked.

“Of course,” Korbus replied.

“Then let’s use one of your ships so you’re sure there is no deceit or treachery and track the impulse trail to its source! And I promise you, if it turns out to have come from any of the Federation starships, I’ll be right there next to you demanding justice.”

Korbus mulled over the proposition for a moment, more interested in action than more pointless searching, but he finally had to admit to himself that the proposal made the most sense. Using his communicator he contacted one of the Klingon vessels in orbit. Moments later he said to Koester, “You may yet find our definitions of justice are quite different. The *QIghpej* has agreed to my request to conduct your search. But we will only take two of your Starfleet crew along to observe. You will be one of them, Captain.”

Koester looked at those gathered in the shuttlecraft with him and made a quick decision.

“Exec, gather everyone back together in the main hall and update Captains Picard and Howard. Tell them we should hopefully have at least narrowed down the suspects within the hour.”

“Aye, sir,” K’danz replied.

“Cadet Faggio,” Koester finally said. “You’re with me.”

A look of surprise covered the Betazoid cadet’s face, but she happily moved over beside the captain and Korbus. The Klingon security officer nodded, then pressed the communicator on his left arm again.

“*QIghpej, jol yi-CHOO!*”

Almost immediately the three disappeared in the red sparkle of the Klingon’s transporter.

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Aboard the Klingon Bird-of-Prey *QIghpej*, Koester and Faggio took positions out of the way of the crew near the bridge science station. As the vessel started maneuvering in orbit, the captain sat down at the station and tried to interface one of the monitors with the sensors tracking the impulse plasma trail.

"My Klingon is a little rusty," he said quietly to Faggio as he struggled with the controls.

"Allow me, sir," the cadet offered, leaning over the captain to press the buttons. As a schematic appeared on the monitor, Faggio smiled and explained, "I'm minoring in Klingon studies."

Koester watched from the corner of the bridge while the helmsman, whose console was just to the left of the Bird-of-Prey's main viewscreen, deftly maneuvered the small Klingon warship around and between various ships in orbit. After a while, the captain realized he did not like the direction the trail they followed was leading.

Almost directly ahead, orbiting serenely above the planet Khitomer, was the *USS Intrepid*. Identical in almost every way to the first starship *Dauntless* Koester commanded nine years earlier, he watched as the Intrepid-class vessel grew larger on the main viewer and for the first time entertained serious doubts about a Starfleet crew. Did Bill Howard really have so little control over his crew that they would attempt an assassination of the Klingon leadership? Or perhaps was Howard even a part of the plot? And to what end? Koester glanced over at Korbus across the bridge, who smiled back malevolently.

"Weapons officer, arm disruptor banks," the security officer ordered.

"Wait! You can't...!"

Koester's protest was cut off by the helmsman, who shouted something in guttural Klingonese before turning the nose of the *QIghpej* away from the planet and out of orbit.

"What's happening?" Koester asked, turning back toward the science station Cadet Faggio had taken over when the captain had leapt out of the seat to protest the imminent attack on the *Intrepid*.

"The impulse trail turned sharply and intercepted an ion trail before disappearing, sir. It appears our mystery shuttle docked with another larger, non-Federation vessel and left orbit."

"Helm, full impulse!" the *QIghpej*'s captain ordered. "Intercept!"

The Bird-of-Prey blasted out of orbit in pursuit of the new unknown ship. Meanwhile Koester walked over to where Korbus stood. The Klingon acknowledged the captain's presence with a grunt as he continued to stare at the viewer.

"I offer my apologies, Captain," he said. "I believed too strongly all the evidence pointed at your Federation."

"No apologies necessary, Korbus. I was beginning to believe Starfleet was involved myself. How much of a head start do you think they have?"

"The attack occurred several hours ago, but I believe the attempted assassins probably needed time to rendezvous with their mothership. Anything moving too fast in orbit would have drawn our attention to them, so I predict we are probably no more than one hour behind."

"Whoever it is went through a lot of trouble to make it look like the Federation was involved. If they believe they got away and that you have gone after one of the Starfleet vessels, they might not even be moving very fast right now, still trying not to attract attention. They probably realize anyone detected rushing out of the Khitomer system is going to look suspect."

Korbus nodded in agreement just as a vessel was detected at extreme sensor range.

"Detecting a vessel, fifty-thousand kellicams and closing," the weapons officer reported.

"On viewer and magnify," Korbus ordered.

The image on the viewer shifted to a closer view of a ship far in the distance. It appeared to be a transport or freighter with ion engines blazing hot-blue on each side of the hull.

"That is a Valon vessel," Korbus said, sounding surprised.

"Valon?" Koester asked.

"A small world deep within the Empire, conquered two centuries ago. They have been struggling for independence ever since the Kriosians attained their own."

The situation was starting to make sense to Koester. While the death of Kahless would do nothing toward freeing the Valon from Klingon rule, the Emperor was a figurehead and the symbol of the Empire that had subjugated them. And by passing blame onto the Federation, it might prevent the sort of retaliation Klingons were infamous around the galaxy for.

"Disruptor banks armed," the weapons officer stated.

"Korbus, can't we simply stop that ship and search it for evidence? I don't want to make another mistake assuming the attackers are aboard this ship, even with all the evidence we have!"

Korbus seemed about to protest. Instead he ordered the captain to hail the Valon ship and looked at Koester with barely suppressed rage.

"Valon ship not responding to hails," the Klingon communications officer reported.

"Captain, they are powering up their warp drive!" the helmsman added.

"Enough of this!" Korbus shouted, moving over to the weapons console behind the captain's seat. Koester quickly jumped over to the science console and ordered Faggio to scan the Valon transport.

"BaH!" Korbus ordered, the Klingon word for 'fire weapons.' Instantly a pair of bright green disruptor bolts shot from the wingtip mounted cannons of the Bird-of-Prey, slamming into the Valon ship and destroying its warp drive. Drive plasma leaked from the engines like a trail of sparklers as the Valon lost power and began to drift.

"Again!" ordered Korbus.

Quickly another twin blast struck the Valon ship. Energy arced across the hull as pieces of the hull plating flew off into space.

"Oh, gods, they're trying to hail us now!" Faggio reported quietly to Koester, but it was too late. The Valon ship's systems collapsed. The magnetic containment around the warp core fell and the ship exploded in a huge fireball. Korbus smiled in self-satisfaction. Captain Koester, however, was anything but satisfied.

* * * *

Captain's log, stardate 58332.2:

The sensor readings Cadet Faggio managed to record indicated the presence of a Type-6 Starfleet shuttlecraft in the landing bay of the Valon ship just before it was destroyed. Now, however, we will never know who it was exactly that attempted to assassinate Emperor Kahless or why they attempted to shift the blame onto the Federation.

Ironically, it was planets such as Valon that Chancellor Martok planned to review the status of and, if warranted, place under a form of self government, a more magnanimous side of the Empire's new policies. Sadly, considering the circumstances, the Klingon governor of Valon has been... (ahem)... 'replaced' and a larger garrison will be stationed on the planet to battle and prevent further insurrection. This terrorist act accomplished exactly the opposite of what I believe the Valons, if that was truly who committed this act, intended.

We have now returned to Khitomer, where the memorial ceremony will take place as scheduled.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

The crew of the starships *Dauntless* and *Enterprise* lined the walls on each side of the great hall on Khitomer, while in typical Klingon fashion the Klingons re-enacted the attack that had occurred thirty five years earlier, singing songs praising all whose lives were lost that day.

Once again, the entire *Dauntless* command staff were dressed in their dress uniforms, each reflecting a dull amber-red in the light of the large firestands around the room. Standing with the command staff was Gem Koester in her full Fleet Space Cadet uniform and Klingon baldric sash as well as a number of the Academy cadets, including Hyland, Faggio, Mortati and Der Boghossian.

As the re-enactment reached its climax, with warriors all around the room 'dying' in droves, the prop walls of a building erected in the center of the hall collapsed. The singing quite suddenly stopped. The room quickly grew silent except for the crackling of the fires in their braziers. Then suddenly at the far end of the room, Emperor Kahless looked skyward and bellowed at the top of his lungs. He was quickly joined by Chancellor Martok and eventually every Klingon warrior in the hall, who screamed the Klingon death howl to warn Sto-Vo-Kor that four thousand honorable warriors would soon be at their gates. Even Lt Dar and Commander K'danz were caught up in the ritual, and as Gem noticed the two officers standing near her, she too offered her own warning to the dead.

As quickly as it started, the howl ended. Once again the hall was silent. Then suddenly a voice could be heard from every combadge in the room simultaneously.

"This is the Federation starship *Intrepid*. We are here to render assistance."

Immediately a number of transporter beams coalesced in the hall and Captain William Howard and his command staff materialized. They all began 'digging' through the rubble with their bare hands.

Soon, out of the rubble of the collapsed ‘building,’ a young Klingon boy and a woman emerged. They represented Worf and Kahlest, the only two survivors of the Khitomer Massacre. The two were presented to the Emperor and Chancellor by Captain Howard, who then took his place with his crew at attention along the wall.

Once again everything was silent.

All eyes turned toward the main doors of the hall.

At the doors, stiff as statues, stood three Romulans; Commander T’Lees of the Warbird *Vedrex*, Commander Sendek of the Warbird *Decius*, and standing between them, Admiral Tarossa.

Even from where he was standing, halfway down the large hall, Captain Koester could see the single drop of sweat dripping down the side of T’Lees face.

In perfect synch, the three Romulans marched across the hall, every eye in the room watching them in stony silence, the only noise the click of their boot heels on the stone floor and the continuing crackle of the fires, until they stood before the platform and kneeled before the Emperor. Admiral Tarossa held out a rolled parchment, which Kahless accepted, then stood and turned to face the entire hall. Removing a small padd from a pocket of his uniform, he activated it.

“The Praetor of the Romulan Star Empire wishes to offer his sincerest apologies to Emperor Kahless, Chancellor Martok and the entire Klingon Empire for the unwarranted attack upon the Khitomer Outpost which resulted in the honorable deaths of over four thousand citizens of the Klingon Empire. It is the Praetor’s hope that no similar occurrence ever happens again.”

The admiral shut off the padd, and as the two commanders stood shoulder to shoulder with him, the hall erupted in fist-waving shouts of, “Qapla! Qapla!” Even the Starfleet representatives applauded. For the first time in history, the three major former enemy governments who had eyed each other periodically over the centuries with distrust and deceit were now, if not truly allies, at least tolerant neighbors.

* * * *

“That was... um... interesting,” T’Lees said as the Romulan delegation said its goodbyes to the *Dauntless* crew. “It’s also a ceremony I think I would prefer to skip in the future. Especially the part where I get accused of being an assassin and arrested.”

“Maybe next time they’ll let you play the part of the *Intrepid*?” Captain Koester suggested jokingly. “Goodbye, T’Lees. Sorry we didn’t get that dance.”

“Another time,” the Romulan woman said, reaching over and embracing the Starfleet captain. Koester, mildly startled by the display of affection was even more surprised when he felt a small object get shoved into a fold of his dress jacket. T’Lees then offered her goodbyes to Commander K’danz and the rest of the *Dauntless* senior staff before contacting her Warbird.

“T’Lees to *Vedrex*. Awaiting beam-up.” Within seconds, the commander was gone.

As the beam faded, K’danz looked at Koester askance and asked, “What was that I noticed she slipped you? An invite to the Praetor’s Ball?”

“I’m not sure,” the captain said, looking at the recording chip he pulled out of his jacket with curiosity before looking around for his young daughter.

“Gem, time to go!” the captain called out. Off in the corner of the hall Gem was busy wrestling with the Klingon boy who had played the young Worf.

“Just a second, Daddy,” Gem called out, and with a quick grab of the boy’s arm and a twist of her legs, she sent him flipping over her shoulder and a good five meters through the air. The boy laid on his back on the stone floor silently for a moment, eyes staring at the ceiling, and Captain Koester was worried momentarily that a true fight was about to break out until the boy suddenly smiled and laughed loudly.

“You must teach me that move!” he said as he got back up on his feet. “Where did you learn it?”

“From my instructor, Gunny Sergeant O’Laughlin,” Gem answered. “He runs our cadet program.”

Saluting the boy with a traditional Klingon salute, hand clasped and right arm across her chest, which the Klingon boy returned with a shout of “Qapla”, Gem then ran back over to the *Dauntless* away team.

“That was fun, Daddy. Can we do it again next year?”

Koester looked at his first officer, rolled his eyes, and said, “When did my daughter get replaced with a Klingon child?” He then tapped his combadge and requested a beam-up before saying, “Next thing you know, she’ll want to have ridges added surgically.”

“Ooh! Can I?” Gem asked just as the transporter beamed them away.

The End