

The doors to the Sector Coordinator's office opened and Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh stepped out, walking around the upper deck of Ops to the nearest of the two open lifts and riding down to the lower level.

"Val, we just received a communiqué from General Ke'reth and the *Proud Vengeance*," said Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson, Raiajh's executive officer, referring to the Klingon warship on special assignment to the Federation Fifth Fleet.

"It's nice to know the *Vengeance* is back in case we have need of them," Raiajh remarked as she walked over to the master systems display in the center of Ops where Pearson stood. "I've been wondering when – and sometimes even if – Ke'reth and his crew were ever going to come back from Klingon space. They've been going back more and more often of late, and were gone for almost two months this time. I wonder what's been happening in the Empire lately? The rumors I've been hearing over subspace have conflicted a great deal."

"You're probably going to find out," Pearson commented. "The General has requested a meeting with both you and Konstantin as soon as *Vengeance* arrives back at the station."

"Very well. Tell the General we'll meet with him in my office at 1600 hours," Raiajh said after checking the chronometer display on the master systems display. "Then tell Konstantin I'll be expecting him as well."

"Aye," Pearson replied. "I'll inform him."

Several hours later Raiajh, her sector strategic operations officer Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, and her flag aide Lt Commander Marie Quintero were waiting in Raiajh's office, mainly swapping tales of their respective children, when the door chime sounded.

"Come," Raiajh said, standing up from the couch under the large window looking out into the depths of space and stepping toward the door. The doors parted and a large and burley Klingon officer pushing a heavy keg attached to an antigrav unit stepped through. His cape was covered with numerous awards and medals, as was the sash crossing his barrel-like chest. The Klingon paused a few steps into the office, clasping his right hand into a fist and thumping it against his chest in a traditional Klingon salute, which Raiajh returned.

"Welcome back, General," the admiral said to Ke'reth. "I don't know what business kept you in Klingon space for so long, but I hope it was productive."

"What has been occurring on Qo'noS is what I am here to talk about," Ke'reth replied. "But first, I just wanted to give you a small souvenir of my travels, Admiral. A rare vintage from the vineyards of my cousin, Meklor. The finest Blood Wine he has produced in nearly a decade!" He winked at Raiajh as he added, "I thought perhaps you may be interested in adding it to your private cellar." The Klingon pushed the keg, about half the size of a normal barrel of Klingon Blood Wine, forward. Raiajh examined the label attached to the keg, written entirely in Klingonese of course, then thanked Ke'reth for his gracious gift before asking Quintero to make sure it was placed with the rest of her liquor collection down in the Lodge after the meeting.

Offering Ke'reth a seat in front of her desk, Raiajh moved around to her own chair and sat down, asking, "So what HAS been occurring on Qo'noS, Ke'reth?"

"The High Council has come to the conclusion that our occupation of Romulan space following the destruction of the Romulan government was a mistake."

"It only took them two years to figure that out?" Harkonnen remarked with a sarcastic grin. Ke'reth glared at the Russian man briefly before returning his attention to Raiajh.

"Several on the High Council, including Chancellor Martok, believed the Romulans would welcome our aid and guidance in their time of need," Ke'reth explained. "We did not anticipate the animosity the average Romulan citizen would have toward the Empire's presence. Likewise, Martok did not anticipate the continued influence the Duras faction still held on several members of the High Council and their supporters. They took advantage of our interaction with the Romulans to re-affirm old ties in the hopes of destroying the Empire's alliance with the Federation and deposing Martok. If our occupation continued much longer, it would have led directly to a new Klingon civil war, one that the Empire would likely not have survived."

"Does this mean the Empire is withdrawing its forces from Romulan space?" Raiajh asked.

"Our... diplomats..." Ke'reth pronounced the word as if it were a vile epithet. "...have spent the last several months negotiating with the representatives of a new provisional government. We have agreed to let the

Romulans re-establish self-rule and begun withdrawing our forces from what is traditionally considered Romulan space.”

“That’s wonderful!” Harkonnen exclaimed, clapping his hands once in elation. He then glanced over at the keg Ke’reth had brought with him and said, “Admiral, are you sure you want to send your souvenir down to the Lodge? I think this news calls for a toast!”

Raiajh looked over at the keg as well. While there were numerous other types of liquor she preferred over the taste of Blood Wine, she had to agree with her SOO’s sentiments. With a nod, she said, “Marie, would you please prepare several glasses.” She then asked Ke’reth to open the keg. Moments later they were each hoisting a glass filled with the almost purple-black liquid.

“To the end of the Klingon occupation of Romulan space and the restoration of Romulan self-rule!” Harkonnen said aloud, prompting Ke’reth to look at the human man with an annoyed expression.

“To peaceful co-existence between the Federation, Klingon Empire, and Romulans,” Raiajh quickly added, trying to ease tensions.

“To peace!” Quintero reiterated.

“To peace,” both Ke’reth and Harkonnen agreed before slamming back their drinks.

\* \* \* \*

Half an hour later, Ke’reth had returned to the *Proud Vengeance* – his footing not quite as steady as when he had arrived – and Raiajh, Harkonnen, and Quintero had been joined by Captain Pearson, sitting in the admiral’s office and finishing off the last of the keg of wine and talking about what had just occurred.

“Does this mean all the Romulan residents of the station and on the colony in sector 50113 will be leaving to return to the Star Empire?” Pearson asked with a slightly worried tone in her voice.

“I don’t think we’re going to be seeing any great exodus to return to Romulan space, Cathryn,” Raiajh said. “Not anytime soon, and certainly nothing like the flood of refugees we saw coming here two years ago. And I have other concerns.”

“Like what?” Quintero asked.

“It’s not going to be easy for the Romulans to establish a new central government. Not like Ke’reth made it sound. Too many fractures have developed in Romulan politics in the last two years. Too many factions; Warlords on one side and Loyalists on the other and the general population caught in between. And how will those who remained behind to try and restore the Senate deal with those like T’Lees and her crew who fled in order to survive?” Raiajh took another sip from her glass before adding, “This is not going to resolve itself easily. I just hope the Federation and Starfleet don’t get dragged into the vortex this power vacuum is going to produce. I can’t help but wonder, even considering my qualms concerning the Klingon invasion, if a Klingon withdrawal would cause more harm than good at the present time?”

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“The Dawn’s Early Light” By PJK

*Captain's log, stardate 66677.4:*

*Starship Dauntless has just finished the bio-survey of the fifth planet of the Rone star system. We are now en route to make a port visit to a Morain space station in Sector 50104. We expect to arrive in ten days at current speed.*

*Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.*

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the Sovereign-class starship *USS Dauntless*, sat in the command chair on his bridge, reviewing a personnel report his yeoman had handed him.

"Let's move Ensign Stuart to exobotony," he said, making a note in the padd he was looking at. "That way Lieutenant Wendel can resume his primary assignment in exobiology. Now just bring this to Commander Wallace for his approval and everything is set." He thumbed the report after entering the changes, then smiled as he handed the padd back to his female yeoman.

"Captain," said Lt Commander Tom Riker from his position at ops. "We're receiving a subspace transmission from the *UFNS Vedrex*."

Reacting with surprise at the mention of the former Romulan warbird's name, Koester glanced to his left and noticed Chief Pono Kyman, the starship's Chief of the Boat, looking at him with an expression that bordered on disapproval.

"Don't give me that look, COB. My relationship with Commander T'Lees is strictly platonic friendship at this point."

"I didn't say a word, Skipper," the bearded El-Aurian man sitting at mission ops objected.

"You didn't have to," Koester remarked before saying, "On screen, Mister Riker."

The main viewscreen changed from the image of stars streaking past at warp speed to that of a female Romulan the same age as Koester, which made her appear younger than the 45 year old human man by more than ten years. Her ear tips pointed through the long straight black hair that draped over her shoulders, and her emerald-green eyes appeared to smile on their own as she saw the *Dauntless*' commander through the screen.

"Hi, T'Lees. What can I do for you?" Koester asked.

"I called to speak with Vice Admiral Fil," T'Lees said, referring to the senior officer of the Federation Fifth Fleet. "But I wanted to speak to you before I did. I had to let you know personally that the *Vedrex* will be leaving the Fifth Fleet AOR very soon."

"Leaving?" Koester asked, concern growing inside. "Why?"

"I received a communiqué informing me that the Loyalists in the Star Empire have finally formed a provisional government. I'm going home to help in the negotiations toward forming a new Imperial Senate."

Koester had mixed feelings about the news T'Lees had just announced. Part of him was happy that the Romulan officer would finally – after two long years – be able to return home and help in establishing a new government to replace the one destroyed by the annihilation of Romulus. Another part had grown used to the idea of T'Lees' ship – having been re-flagged as a Federation research vessel in support of Starfleet – being a part of the Fifth Fleet and working alongside his long-ago lover and their biological son, the half-Romulan P'Tor, in spite of the tensions her presence often produced in Koester's present wife, Michelle Petersen, when both the *Dauntless* and *Vedrex* were in port at *Starbase 719* at the same time.

"Congratulations," Koester finally managed to say. "I wish you and your crew all the best in your endeavor."

T'Lees' eyes took on a look of sadness, and Koester started wondering if perhaps he should have taken this transmission in the privacy of his ready room? The Romulan woman then said, "I don't know how long it will take to establish and stabilize a new government..."

"History has proven such an undertaking can be time consuming and stressful," Koester agreed.

"I just wanted to say, once things settle down, that I will extend an invitation to you and your crew to visit our new capital," T'Lees finally concluded.

“The crew of the *Dauntless* and I would be honored by such an invitation. Good luck, T’Lees.”

“Thank you, Peter. Now may I speak with Admiral Fil?”

“Of course. Commander Riker, please transfer T’Lees’ transmission to the Admiral’s office.”

“Aye, sir,” Riker replied. “Transferring now.”

Down in the office aboard the *Dauntless* used exclusively by the Fifth Fleet commander and Federation ambassador-at-large, Vice Admiral Penji Fil was sitting on his couch, reviewing the fleet’s disposition and upcoming schedule on the screen of a padd in his lap.

“Bridge to Admiral Fil,” called the intercom. Fil glanced over at his desk for a moment before putting the padd down on the cushion next to him and getting up, moving over to the front of his desk and pressing the intercom control.

“Go ahead bridge.”

“Admiral,” said Riker’s voice. “Commander T’Lees of the *UFNS Vedrex* is on subspace for you.”

“Very well,” Fil replied. “Pipe her message down here.” He then moved around the desk, sitting down and activating his monitor which rose up out of the surface of the desk. The image of T’Lees appeared on the screen. “This is Admiral Fil. Go ahead, Commander.”

“Admiral, I have received word that my presence and my vessel are needed back home. I would like to submit an official withdrawal of the *Vedrex* from the operating authority of the Federation Fifth Fleet.”

“I knew this day would come eventually, Commander,” Fil said. “I have to admit, I’m sorry to see you go. The *Vedrex* has been a very helpful to the fleet in the last couple of years. Our war against the Kairn might well have gone against us without you, but you’ve been a big help in the exploration of the AOR as well.”

Fil grabbed a new padd from a rack on his desk, quickly typing several items into the screen.

“My aide will be processing the official paperwork, but I’m transmitting a preliminary separation from Fleet duty order to you now. As of stardate 66678 the *Vedrex* will no longer be designated a Federation Starfleet support vessel, so you will no longer be able to use the designation UFNS officially.”

“I think we can live with that distinction, Admiral,” T’Lees remarked wryly. “If all goes as planned, the *Vedrex* should be an Imperial Romulan Warbird again soon.”

“I’m also including a commendation for you and your entire crew,” Fil added. “Not sure if it will carry much weight with your new command structure, assuming you even have one at this point, but you deserve something. I only wish I could offer more.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” T’Lees said, genuinely touched. “Your continued support is more than we could ask for. I will inform you and the rest of the Fifth Fleet of our status as soon as I know for sure where we stand. Depending on the diplomatic and political ramifications, I may be able to contact you directly or I may have to route communications through Starfleet Command.”

“I understand,” Fil assured. “Good luck with your new mission, Commander. I wish you and your crew my best.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” T’Lees looked sad once again, almost on the verge of tears as she finally said, “*Vedrex*, out.”

\* \* \* \*

A little more than two weeks later, the *Vedrex* was back in what T’Lees could only think of as home space. With the destruction of the Romulan home system by the Hobus supernova two years earlier, one of the first priorities was the designation of a new capital for the renewed Romulan Star Empire. After much consideration, the Belak system – specifically the planet Belak III, one of the earliest conquests of the Vulcan off-shoots that had become the modern Romulans – was chosen as the location of the new capital city, and the *Vedrex* was quickly closing on her destination.

“Approaching orbit of Belak III,” said Sub-Commander P’Tor, T’Lees’ half-Romulan son and the *Vedrex*’s first officer. “There are at least twelve other Warbirds of three distinct classes already in orbit.”

“I guess we’ll make a baker’s dozen once we arrive?” T’Lees said from her position in the command chair, prompting a look of puzzlement on her adult son’s face.

“A baker’s what?” he asked.

“A baker’s dozen. It’s a human expression. Thirteen of any given object.” No sign of comprehension appeared on P’Tor’s face, so in exasperation she asked, “Didn’t you ever shop in any of the Romulan bakeries aboard *Starbase 719* when we were there?”

“I tried to avoid those establishments whenever we visited the station,” P’Tor remarked, his nose wrinkled in an expression of disgust. “The food they prepared had too many flavors. It tasted too... human... for my palate.” He then looked at his mother with another curious expression when his statement appeared to make her laugh. “What is funny about what I said?”

“Nothing, really. It’s just that during one of our mutual visits to *719*, your father complained to me he preferred to avoid the bakeries on the station precisely because he thought the food tasted too Romulan for his liking. Said everything was just too bland.”

“Sometimes there is just no accounting for taste, Mother,” P’Tor remarked pointedly.

“Entering standard orbit, Commander,” the *Vedrex*’s helmsman reported, interrupting the mother/son banter.

“Very well. Contact Talik on the surface,” the commander said to her communications officer. “Inform him of our arrival and that I will be beaming down to the surface shortly.” T’Lees then got out of her chair, telling her son, “The ship is yours for the moment. Watch your back. I’m still not entirely sure who to trust and who not to trust around here.”

“Understandable. But would it not have made more sense to remain in the Fifth Fleet AOR until such matters were settled instead of rushing back here as we have done?”

“We can’t simply sit back and let others do our work for us, P’Tor,” T’Lees explained. “We’re going to face enough resentment having spent the last two years with the Federation Starfleet. If we waited for everyone else to do the work and then came home when everything was safe and normal, they would have every right to exile us permanently if not straight out execute us for treason.” T’Lees then started moving toward the turbolift, quickly adding, “The ship is yours, Sub-Commander.”

“Aye, Commander,” P’Tor replied, taking his mother’s position in the center seat.

\* \* \* \*

T’Lees materialized in the foyer of the building that would be acting as the site of negotiations to establish a new governing document for the Romulan Star Empire, analogous to Independence Hall in Philadelphia on Earth. She was dressed for the first time in two years in the uniform of the Imperial Navy and carried with her several documents contained on padds – of both Romulan and Federation design – including the original Imperial Charter that established the Romulan Star Empire centuries before and a copy of the Constitution of the United Federation of Planets, from which the commander hoped several ideas could be adapted in the establishment of a new Romulan government.

“T’Lees! What a pleasure to see you again! Jolan tru,” called out a Romulan man wearing the drab civilian clothes customary in Romulan society as he approached the commander.

“Jolan tru, Talik. I’m glad my ship and I could be here,” T’Lees said as she greeted her old friend, a former Senator who had first sponsored her to the Military Academy in her youth, then authorized her first mission as a spy in the Vulcan Embassy on Earth and her return to Romulus when her cover was nearly exposed several years later. “I would not be here at all if T’K’Lon had had his way.”

The mention of the most powerful of the independent Romulan warlords made Talik scowl.

“Please, mention not his name here. He has been nothing but trouble since word of our provisional government started to spread across the Empire.”

"I'm not surprised, considering you've chosen to establish a new capital within what he considers his territory," T'Lees said as she fell into step beside Talik and the two started strolling down the hall toward the room where the negotiations would be held.

"You would think that, yes," the elder former Senator said. "Fortunately for us Loyalists, he and his fellow warlords bit off more than they could chew when the Klingons withdrew back to the Neutral Zone border. T'K'Lon tried to move in immediately after the Klingon governors abandoned the Kaleb and Hyralan sectors, and while he made great strides at first – particularly among those that had lived under the iron grip of the Klingons for two years – those of us who lived under T'K'Lon's own tight grip in the home sectors were more than happy to throw off our yoke of oppression and instigate in-fighting between T'K'Lon and the other warlords. They still control nearly half the Empire, like they did before the Klingon withdrawal, but it is now the half closer to Klingon space, which has left us relatively free to do our work here." The pair finally reached the room where the negotiations would take place. A long table dominated the center of the room, surrounded by dozens of chairs representing major star systems of the Romulan Star Empire from the vicinity of Garadius all the way to Lambda Hydrae, with system or sector names on place cards at each seat. "We finally have the opportunity we have sought for the past two years. A chance to re-establish ourselves! To re-establish order! Now, did you bring the documents I asked for?"

"Yes, I did," T'Lees replied, handing the padds to Talik. "Every Warbird carries a copy of the Imperial Charter in their main computer memory. However, I don't see how you're going to convince the system representatives to use the Federation Constitution as a basis for a new governing document. Many are simply going to want to go right back to our original Charter."

"Our government collapsed following the destruction of Romulus because our system of government was too centralized, depending too greatly on the control of the Praetor and the Senate. As we have seen, remove those elements and the rest of the system collapses like a house of cards; most of the military started looking out only for its own best interests instead of the interests of the citizens of the Empire, the Tal Shiar began a covert attempt to consolidate power with themselves in control – which allowed for the ascendancy of the warlords, common services suffered across the Empire, millions died needlessly, millions of others fled the Empire, and it simply opened the door to the Klingons to stroll right across the Neutral Zone and attempt a takeover of their own – their revenge for the civil war Proconsul Neral and Commander Sela had a hand in starting. The Federation, however, is made up of hundreds of more dissimilar cultures than any found in our Empire and has managed to thrive in the face of all adversity for more than two centuries. The Federation government may be the largest bureaucracy the universe has ever known, but the destruction of a single world – even an entire system – will not cause the Federation government to collapse as ours did. Starfleet, unlike our Imperial Navy, will not simply cease to exist were Earth to be destroyed like Romulus was. We need some of that flexibility and redundancy in our system of government if we are to survive as a culture," Talik remarked. "And we need someone who has lived under that system for a period of time to be able to better explain it to those among the council who are ignorant of how it all works. That is where you come in. Not only have you and your crew worked with Starfleet the last two years, but you lived on Earth – admittedly under cover – for several years in the past. The benefit of your experiences will be incalculable."

"I'm happy I can help," T'Lees said.

"You can help more by taking a seat at the table and offering your input officially." Talik pulled out one of the nearby chairs from the table, then gestured toward the name card in front of the seat, which read, 'Devron Sector Representative.'

"I'm not a politician or a bureaucrat. I'm nothing more than a warbird commander," T'Lees protested.

"You spent the last two years living among and working with people we considered our enemies for most of my lifetime. You spent several years working directly with their government on Earth decades ago," the ex-Senator stated. "You know we cannot survive without their cooperation. Who better than you to convince the other representatives that our future lies in conjunction with those same former enemies?"

T'Lees looked at the chair Talik had pulled out for her, her expression almost one of terror.

"I would hate to leave the *Vedrex* and my crew," she remarked.

"I'm sure arrangements can be made. After all, once the new government is in place, we're still going to need experienced warship commanders in charge of our Navy."

T'Lees continued to stare at the seat of the chair for nearly half a minute more, Talik watching her patiently, neither Romulan uttering a single word. Finally, T'Lees turned around and slowly sat down in the chair.

"The honor is to serve, to serve the people of the Romulan Empire," T'Lees said as she sat down in the chair.

"Your service honors us," Talik replied with a gentle nod.

\* \* \* \*

"Yeah, the *Belle* is still in orbit of the new Persephone colony," the image of Captain K'danz said through the monitor screen on Fleet Captain Koester's ready room desk. "Not sure if you heard, but we had some unpleasantness aboard my ship recently, and I'm still clearing up a few last details before we can resume our mission."

"Unpleasantness?" Koester asked.

"It's a long story I'll tell you over the next Captain's Table," K'danz replied vaguely. "What about you? Anything happening aboard the *Big D*?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Koester replied. "Not sure if word has reached you yet, but T'Lees and the *Vedrex* have withdrawn from the Fleet."

"No, I hadn't heard," the other captain remarked. "What happened?"

"I don't know all the details yet," Koester answered, "except that the Klingons have pulled back to the original border and the Romulans are now trying to organize a new central government and T'Lees was asked to come back to help. I have to say, in some ways I envy her."

"How so?" K'danz asked. "I can't imagine creating a brand new government will be easy."

"I'm sure it won't be. But what lasting endeavor is? And being there, helping in the crafting of a new governing document, the seating of a new senate...! Think about it. It would be like standing next to Jonathan Archer when the Articles of the Federation were written or George Washington at the drafting of the American Constitution. To know you're witnessing history as it is being made. This could bring about a shift in the politics of the entire Beta Quadrant, Carrie! The galaxy will never be the same!"

"Haven't you witnessed enough history, been a part of the writing of that history already?" K'danz asked with a slightly amused expression.

"I'm just another nameless starship captain who did his job when called upon, Carrie," Koester replied. "Like hundreds of other starship commanders, my name will never be highlighted in the history texts like Archer, Kirk, or Picard. But T'Lees will, from now on, be known as one of the founders of the new Romulan system of government."

"Assuming the new government survives," K'danz pointed out, assuming the role of Devil's advocate. "There are still seven or eight self-proclaimed warlords in Romulan space last I heard. Any one of them would see themselves as the new Praetor and be willing to stab even their closest friend in the back to make it happen. Fledgling governments have a notoriously short life-span over the course of history. It's going to take more than just T'Lees and her warbird to nurture it and help it to survive."

"I have to believe it has a better chance with T'Lees on its side than without," Koester remarked.

"You're just biased," K'danz replied with a grin.

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The arguing had continued for nearly fifteen minutes. Back and forth, delegates made claims and counter-claims, proposals and counter-proposals, threats and compromises. On more than one occasion, one or two delegates would simple get out of their chairs and storm out of the room, concessions left behind quickly being claimed by other factions or being discarded entirely. Finally, a rapping noise from the end of the long table attracted everyone's attention. It took another minute or so for all the representatives to stop talking – in some cases shouting – and look toward where the noise was coming from as Talik banged his gavel on the table top.

“It has been a long day,” the elder former-Senator remarked. “But I feel we are getting close to a workable compromise on this particular issue. Perhaps if we were to take a break for ten minutes or so to clear our heads, we can come back and work out the final details on the new Senate elections?”

There was a general murmur of agreement from the gathered delegates, and several of the representatives immediately got up to rush either back to their offices or to one of the nearby bathroom facilities.

“T’Lees, a moment,” Talik said as the warbird commander started to get up as well. She paused as the elder Romulan approached, a padd in hand. “One of my aides passed this on to me during the last... debate... between T’Auethn and Keras.” He handed the padd to T’Lees. “Apparently word of our efforts here has reached the Alpha Pictoris sector and they believe we are truly serious. The Warlords have expressed an interest in taking part in our negotiations to form a new government.”

T’Lees activated the padd and started to read it, her expression quickly changing to one of amused disbelief.

“They want permanent seats in the new Senate that would never be up for election, appointed for life by the warlords instead? And they demand a minimum of three-quarters of the representation in the Senate?? These aren’t negotiations, Talik, they’re an attempt to hold the Empire hostage!”

“The provisional government knows we can never accede to these demands,” Talik agreed. “However, we cannot ignore or simply dismiss them out of hand either. Were we to try and keep T’K’Lon and his fellow warlords out of the new government, we would simply be inviting a civil war of our own to begin. One, I fear, worse than what the Klingons experienced. And you must understand, were that to occur, it would drag in all the other major powers in the quadrant in one way or another.”

“What can we do? Certainly not agree to these outrageous demands!”

“Even T’K’Lon knows how outrageous his demands are in reality. He has proposed meeting with a member of the new provisional government face to face to exchange concessions.”

“Where has he proposed meeting?” T’Lees asked.

“In orbit of the third planet of the Beta Reticuli star system,” Talik explained.

“I guess that’s about as close to neutral ground as we’re going to get in the foreseeable future,” T’Lees agreed. “I would like to be the one to meet with T’K’Lon. We have a history that goes back a number of years.”

“I was hoping you would say that,” Talik said with a smile. “You and the *Vedrex* are authorized to negotiate on behalf of the provisional government. Just watch your back. T’K’Lon can be tricky. He did not get into the position he currently holds simply by having a pleasant personality.”

“There are many ways to describe T’K’Lon’s personality, but pleasant is not one of them,” T’Lees remarked. “I will depart with the *Vedrex* first thing in the morning.”

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Several hours later, T’Lees beamed back aboard her warbird and headed to the bridge. There she found her son and first officer, P’Tor, overseeing the skeleton crew required to simply maintain orbit.

“Prepare for departure,” the commander said as soon as she entered the bridge.

“What is our destination?” P’Tor asked.

“The third planet of the Beta Reticuli system.” This prompted a raised eyebrow on P’Tor.

“Is that system not within the Warlord’s current sphere of influence?” the sub-commander asked.

“It is, but we’ve been invited.”

“And is not a set’leth invited to the slaughterhouse when it has matured?”

“I didn’t say I’m not going to watch my back,” T’Lees protested.

“Watch your front, particularly where T’K’Lon is concerned,” P’Tor advised. “The crew and I will watch your back for you.”

T’Lees smiled at her son as she took her seat in the command chair, then said, “Plot a course to the Beta Reticuli system. Prepare for warp speed.”

“Artificial singularity core is operating normally,” the engineer reported.

“All systems operational; including cloaking device and weapons systems,” added the tactical officer.

“Course entered into the helm,” the helmsman stated.

“Break orbit,” T’Lees ordered. And as the *Vedrex* moved away from Belak III, the commander looked at her first officer and commented, “It will take us two weeks to reach Beta Reticuli. We should be prepared for any contingency in the meantime.”

“I agree,” Sub-Commander P’Tor said with a nod.

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Fleet Captain Koester reclined in the chair in his ready room. He was really supposed to be reviewing engineering status reports from his chief engineer Commander Bloom, but was actually watching a holographic program of a Tellarite comedian and ventriloquist performing his stand-up routine projected a few centimeters over the top of his desk. It always amused the captain to watch the Tellarite literally argue with himself. He was laughing at the latest joke, the ventriloquist having a heated discussion with ‘W’L’Tar the cantankerous Klingon’ as the puppet insulted the unseen live audience when the intercom whistled and the voice of his first officer, Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo said, “Bridge to Captain Koester.”

“Computer, pause program,” Koester ordered, causing the fifteen centimeter tall Tellarite with his arm up the backside of a Klingon puppet to freeze in place right in the middle of a rude gesture to some unseen heckler in the live audience. He then touched the intercom and said, “Go ahead, Exec.”

“Skipper, there’s a subspace communication coming in for you from the *Vedrex*.”

Koester was genuinely surprised, not expecting to hear from T’Lees any time in the near future, and began wondering if something had gone wrong in the formation of the new Romulan government and if she was trying to contact him for help in getting back to the Fifth Fleet.

“Pipe it in here, Exec,” he said, quickly deactivating the hologram and activating his viewer monitor, which rose up out of the desk. A moment later Romulan Commander T’Lees’ face appeared on the monitor. “We have to stop meeting like this, T’Lees,” Koester joked. “Michelle is going to get suspicious.”

T’Lees rolled her eyes at Koester’s oft-repeated joke, then offered her greetings.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?” Koester asked.

“I had a spare moment, and I missed our periodic conversations,” T’Lees replied.

“Spare moment? I would think, being involved in the creation of a new government, you wouldn’t have any spare moments?”

“If I were still back on Belak III that would be true,” T’Lees remarked. “However, my ship and I are en route to the Beta Reticuli system at present.”

“What for?”

“The provisional government received a communiqué from T’K’Lon requesting a meeting to discuss the warlords places in our new government.”

“You mean *Lord* T’K’Lon is willing to work with you and the provisional government to establish the new Senate?” Koester asked, pronouncing the Romulan’s self-declared title with a healthy dose of sarcasm and surprised that, after two years of trying to subjugate Romulan space under their control, that the dozen or so warlords would so easily re-join the fold.

“Actually, their initial demands were so outrageous I’m sure T’K’Lon expected us to just turn him down outright, but Senator Talik believes we need to extend a hand to the warlords or the Empire will be torn apart by civil war.”

“An ironic name if ever there was one. I have never known any war to be civil,” Koester remarked.

“Exactly Talik’s point,” T’Lees agreed, her emerald-green eyes sparking in the light of her own ready room aboard the *Vedrex*. “That’s why I’m heading to Reticuli, in the hopes that we can talk T’K’Lon and the others into working with us rather than against us. Try and offer the first olive branch, to use an Earth idiom.”

“I’ll go climb down into the outboard and dig out a bottle of ale so I can raise it in toast to your success, T’Lees,” Koester said with a grin. “I wish you good luck.”

“Thanks. We’re going to need it.” T’Lees then smiled again and added, “It was nice talking with you again.”

“You too, T’Lees. Keep in touch.”

“I will. *Vedrex*, out.”

The image went blank, followed by the emblem of the Federation Fifth Fleet. Immediately, Koester’s smile faded and his expression turned thoughtful. Finally he pressed the intercom again.

“Bridge, this is the Captain.”

“What can I do for you, Skipper?” Commander Arbelo’s voice replied.

“Exec, I need a subspace channel to General Ke’reth aboard the *Proud Vengeance*. Route it to my ready room as soon as possible.”

\* \* \* \*

Several days later, the *Vedrex* entered the Beta Reticuli system.

“Not detecting any signs of other vessels in the system,” the science officer reported as the warbird maneuvered toward the third planet orbiting the yellow primary star in the binary system. He then glanced over at Commander T’Lees with a grin and said, “Maybe we’re early?”

“Just because we can’t see them doesn’t mean T’K’Lon or one of his cohorts aren’t here already,” T’Lees reminded. “Tactical, keep sensors tuned to fine. Look for any evidence of a cloaking field. And prepare to implement Code Sierra. Helm, standard orbit of planet three.”

“On approach to standard orbit of the third planet in the system,” the helmsman confirmed.

Hours later, the Mogai-class warbird had settled into orbit. Sub-Commander P’Tor emerged on the bridge, glancing at the greenish planet below on the screen, then approached his mother in the center seat.

“How long do we intend to remain here waiting?” he asked.

“It took us nearly two weeks to arrive here,” T’Lees reminded. “Let’s not be too anxious to depart just yet.” She then turned her attention to the science officer and asked, “What do sensors reveal about the planet below, Lieutenant?”

“Planet is class-L in accordance with the Federation planetary classification system,” the science officer reported, having gotten used to the use of Federation terminology during the prior two years. “Diameter is 12,000 kilometers. Atmosphere is mostly oxygen and argon with a high concentration of carbon dioxide. Land to sea ratio is six to one, with several small shallow seas high in sodium content mainly around the equatorial zone. No animal life forms that I can detect from orbit but most of the land mass is covered by a huge jungle or rain forest with temperate climates and deciduous plant life at the poles. Cloud cover is 78% with the majority concentrated around the equatorial regions and causing near-constant rain. Sounds like an excellent planet on which to develop a classic case of trench foot.”

“Our time as explorers with the Federation fleet has influenced you, Mother,” said P’Tor, his tone both amused and warning.

“Yes, I’ll admit your father’s passion for exploration rubbed off on me over the course of the last couple of years, but I’m also checking for signs that T’K’Lon or one of the other warlords may have built some kind of base or staging ground here. They must have chosen Beta Reticuli as our meeting place for a reason.”

“Perhaps just for...?” P’Tor was starting to reply when he was interrupted by the tactical officer.

“Commander! D’deridex-class warbird de-cloaking directly ahead!”

T’Lees and P’Tor both looked at the main viewscreen, where a large green double-hulled warship was appearing.

“The former-*IRW Volantis*,” T’Lees said, recognizing the vessel. “Commander T’K’Lon’s ship.”

“We’re being hailed, Commander,” the tactical officer reported.

“On screen.”

The viewer changed from the image of the warbird to the ship’s interior, where several Romulan officers wearing uniforms similar to but different than the Imperial Navy uniform that T’Lees and her crew again wore were

seated at the various stations. The male Romulan in the command seat templed his fingers just below his chin as he addressed the *Vedrex's* commander.

"T'Lees. It is a pleasure to see you once again," said T'K'Lon.

"I wish I could say the same, T'K'Lon."

"LORD T'K'Lon," the male Romulan corrected, momentarily sounding angry.

"Whatever," T'Lees remarked. "You contacted the provisional government with an offer to negotiate for you and your fellow so-called warlords to return to the Imperial Navy. We're here to listen and speak on behalf of the provisional government. Start negotiating."

"Why so terse, T'Lees?" T'K'Lon asked. "After all, it has been a little over two cycles since last we encountered one another. Why not spend a little time catching up?"

"T'K'Lon..."

"LORD T'K'Lon!"

"...T'K'Lon, the last time we... 'encountered one another...' you were shooting at me and chasing me into the Typhon Sector. I have little interest in, as you say, catching up. Either make your initial offer to join the provisional government or the *Vedrex* will be on its way back home."

"I understand you and your crew spent the last twenty decicycles working with Starfleet at their space station in the Typhon Sector," T'K'Lon said. "You must have learned a lot about Starfleet tactics and procedures. Your knowledge could be very useful to me."

"Are you actually thinking about trying to draw Starfleet into a fight with you, T'K'Lon?" T'Lees asked in amazement. "If so, you're a bigger fool than even I believed. Don't you have enough trouble trying to maintain control of the systems you claim? Between the protests of the planetary populations within your sphere of influence and the constant fighting among your fellow so-called warlords, I would think the Federation would be the last thing on your mind."

T'K'Lon's lips formed a smile, though his eyes projected the anger he was actually feeling as he said, "While it is true that establishing my control over the Devoras, Chaltok, and Onias sectors has not been easy, and to this point I have had several small conflicts with Sestimus and Tomalak, there has been a recent event that has changed much of the dynamics in the quadrant. It has helped turn enemies into allies and fostered unity among the Warlords."

"And what event is that?" T'Lees asked.

"The formation of your weak and ineffectual provisional government," T'K'Lon replied, his smile now gone. "Several decicycles ago, we were all fighting amongst ourselves over resources and territory. That all changed as word of your new government reached us. Now we have a common enemy upon which to focus."

"I thought you contacted the provisional government with the intent to aid us in establishing a new Senate and restoring the Star Empire?" T'Lees asked with suspicion.

"Oh, come now, T'Lees. Would you or any representative of your 'provisional government' have come here if I stated I merely want *you* to join *me*? I made the offer to you once already. It is rare for me to extend my hand in friendship twice, and this will be my final offer. Join my fleet and you will be highly rewarded. Perhaps even become an Admiral."

"I had no interest in joining your cause before. Why in the galaxy would I choose to turn my back on the Imperial Navy and join you now?"

"Because I need your vessel and crew. As more of the Warlords ally themselves with me, and with them the warbirds loyal to them, I will finally be in a position to forge a new Star Empire. One in which I will sit on the Imperial throne as Emperor."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again, T'K'Lon. You're insane. I will never join you. I would sooner destroy my ship and kill my entire crew than join – either voluntarily or by force – with an illegitimate government under the control of nothing more than an pompous pirate lord."

"Is this your final answer?" T'K'Lon asked, looking bored – as if he had heard T'Lees' response many times before from other non-aligned warship commanders.

"Yes, T'K'Lon. The *Vedrex* will not join your fleet. I would see her blown out of space first."

“Very well. I am prepared to oblige your wishes.” T’K’Lon then nodded toward an off-screen member of his crew.

“Commander!” T’Lees’ tactical officer exclaimed. “Five more warbirds are de-cloaking, all in firing formation surrounding us!”

T’Lees, a grim look on her face, glanced at Sub-Commander P’Tor before saying, “Implement Code Sierra.”

\* \* \* \*

“Their shields are raised, Lord T’K’Lon,” the tactical officer aboard the *Volantis* reported. “T’Lees was not unprepared. She suspected we would have other warbirds on hand.”

“Of course she suspected,” T’K’Lon remarked. “T’Lees is no fool. She was trained by the Tal Shiar before becoming a regular fleet officer. If she were so stupid as to be caught completely unawares, I would have destroyed her and her ship before even making the offer to join my fleet.”

“What now?”

“Hers is but a single warbird against six. It is only a matter of time before her shields weaken and fail. As sad as I am to speak it, T’Lees will die today. Prepare all weapons systems and fire on my order!”

\* \* \* \*

“All six warbirds are arming torpedoes and disruptor banks,” the tactical officer aboard the *Vedrex* reported. “They all have their shields set to double front.”

“And our status?” T’Lees demanded to know.

“All shields are raised and weapons systems are energizing. It was a good thing you suspected deception on T’K’Lon’s part or we likely would have been destroyed before we even managed to raise our shields.”

“I may have had my suspicions, but I didn’t think he would be able to hide this many ships here without detection,” the commander commented. “We may be in over our heads here.”

“What do we do, Commander?” P’Tor asked.

T’Lees looked at her son, an expression of determination on her face.

“Fight them until we can’t,” she replied. “Tactical, target the *Volantis*. Maybe if – by some miracle – we can cut off the head, the rest of the serpent will die! Stand by to fire on my command.”

\* \* \* \*

On the *Volantis*’ viewscreen, the Mogai-class *Vedrex* and three of T’K’Lon’s own warbirds – two D’deridex and another Mogai – could be seen.

“The *Vedrex* is preparing to fire,” T’K’Lon’s tactical officer reported.

“Not going down without a fight, eh, T’Lees?” the Romulan warlord said aloud to himself. “You deserve to die fighting instead of on your knees like so many others.”

Suddenly, an explosion filled the viewscreen, followed quickly by a second. As the viewer compensated and quickly cleared, the spreading debris of two of T’K’Lon’s warbirds became visible. One of the D’deridex and the Mogai-class vessels beyond the *Vedrex* had both been destroyed.

“How...?” T’K’Lon started to say in disbelief. “Has the *Vedrex* opened fire? How did they manage to penetrate the double forward shield configuration?”

“Negative, Lord T’K’Lon,” the tactical officer replied. “Unable to determine why those two ships exploded yet, but it was not due to the *Vedrex*.”

\* \* \* \*

Aboard the *Vedrex*, the warbird shuddered as debris struck the raised shields.

“Two of the enemy warbirds behind us have exploded,” T’Lees tactical officer reported with a grin. “Odds against us are now only four to one.”

“What cause those ships to explode?” P’Tor asked.

“Unknown.”

“Look!” suddenly shouted the helmsman, pointing at the viewscreen where two bright red photon torpedoes streaked past the *Vedrex* to strike the forward shields of the *Volantis*.

“Those were Federation torpedoes!” P’Tor said in amazement.

“There’s only one vessel I’m aware of that can fire torpedoes while under cloak,” T’Lees said, unable to hold back a grin but still concerned about what was happening. “But there’s no way the *Sarek* can be anywhere near the Beta Reticuli system!”

“Commander, I’m detecting two... no – wait! ...Three vessels emerging from cloak, starboard quarter, range one kilometer!”

“On screen!”

T’Lees no longer tried holding back her grin as she watched three large vessels, two of them Federation starships of the Galaxy and Sovereign-classes, the third an immense qaDwI-class Klingon carrier, appear on her starboard quarter. All three vessels immediately started to open fire on the warbirds surrounding the *Vedrex* with their conventional weaponry, their unexpected appearance causing confusion among the warlord’s small fleet.

“We’re being hailed, Commander,” the communications officer reported.

“Concentrate our fire on the two warbirds to port, then open the communications channel,” T’Lees ordered. A moment later Fleet Captain Koester’s smiling visage appeared on the *Vedrex*’s screen.

“I hope you don’t mind, T’Lees, but we figured we would help you to even the odds,” Koester said.

“How in the Praetor’s name did you, the *Sarek*, and the *Vengeance* get here in time?”

“We’ve actually been in the system here for the better part of a week. The *Dauntless* and *Sarek* had nothing better going on so we figured we’d catch a tow from General Ke’reth and his ship. *Sarek*’s been operating under her own cloaking device since we arrived here, but the *Dauntless* had to remain within the *Vengeance*’s field in order to remain undetected. I had a feeling T’K’Lon would try and deceive you. Fortunately he thought he had the upper hand against you and all his ships had only their forward shields raised and facing the *Vedrex*, or Jo Ann’s torpedoes wouldn’t have been quite so effective at first.”

“Commander, another one of T’K’Lon’s warbirds has been destroyed, and the *Volantis* and remaining two ships have each received varying degrees of damage,” the tactical officer reported. “T’K’Lon must realize he’s now outgunned and outnumbered. *Volantis* is breaking orbit and making an attempt to run,”

“Receiving a visual communication from the *Volantis*.”

The image of Koester on the *Vedrex*’s viewscreen moved to the left, and the image of T’K’Lon – green blood dripping from a gash to his forehead and running down his left cheek – filled the right half of the screen.

“This is not over, T’Lees. I will never stand by and allow an alliance between the Star Empire and the Federation.”

“Perhaps you need to be more open to future possibilities, Lord T’K’Lon,” Koester responded to the Romulan warlord.

“This will not be the last either of you has heard from me!” And without another word, T’K’Lon’s broadcast ended, the screen reverting to only the image of Fleet Captain Koester and his bridge.

“*Volantis* and remaining two warbirds are all withdrawing and cloaking,” the tactical officer reported. “*Hem bortaStaH* is pursuing, but I doubt he’ll be able to get off more than one or two more shots before T’K’Lon’s ships are out of range.”

“Well, T’Lees,” Koester said. “I guess now you know your answer about whether the warlords are really interested in helping to form your new government.”

“While I appreciate your help, and that of General Ke’reth and Captain Parker, I’m afraid this incident may have put us firmly on the path I mentioned when last we spoke. That of moving toward civil war within the Star Empire.”

“Perhaps T’K’Lon will have learned from this incident and not rock the boat as far as forming your government or provoking a war?” Koester suggested. Then he saw the look of skepticism on T’Lees’ face and added, “Yeah. You’re right. We’re talking about T’K’Lon here. You’re going to need all the help you can get. In the meantime, may we offer the *Vedrex* an escort back to Belak III?”

“The commander and crew of the *Vedrex* graciously accept your offer, Fleet Captain Koester,” T’Lees replied with a grin. Moments later, all four vessels turned toward the Belak system and broke orbit.

\* \* \* \*

*Captain’s log, stardate 66766.0:*

*USS Dauntless, USS Sarek, and IKV Proud Vengeance are in orbit of the planet Belak III – now being called New Romulus – where our command staffs have been invited to attend an official state reception hosted by the Romulan provisional government.*

*Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.*

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, Captain Jo Ann Parker, and General Ke’reth Epetai Makura were standing to one side of the same room where the representatives had normally been meeting for the negotiations that would lead to the formation of the new government, talking with Commander T’Lees and Sub-Commander P’Tor, each holding a glass of bright blue liquid. The large main table had been removed from the room for the occasion and several smaller tables covered with Romulan hors d’oeuvres and drinks had been placed around the center of the room. Around the room, various members of the Romulan delegation mingled with other command staff members of the two visiting Federation vessels, while it appeared Ke’reth’s crew were mainly gathered together in one corner near a door, growling at any Romulan foolish enough to attempt to make small talk or introduce themselves.

As the five senior officers chatted, Talik made his way to join them. He was only a few meters away when T’Lees noticed him approaching and invited him to join them, making formal introductions.

“Talik, this is Captain Jo Ann Parker of the Federation starship *Sarek*, General Ke’reth Epetai Makura of the *IKV Hem bortaStaH*, and Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester of the Federation starship *Dauntless*,” the commander said.

Koester noticed the elder Romulan glance at P’Tor as his own name was introduced, and wondered exactly how much of T’Lees’ past the elder man was aware of.

“It is a great pleasure to meet you and host this reception for you,” Talik said. “I want to personally thank you for saving T’Lees and her crew from insurmountable odds.”

“It’s an honor to meet you as well, Senator Talik,” Koester replied. “I’ve heard quite a bit of your storied career in government. Truthfully, I’m surprised you’re as involved in the formation of the new Senate as you are. I had heard you lost your interest in politics after leaving the Senate nearly twenty five years ago?”

“Desperate times, Fleet Captain,” Talik replied. “And even you must admit, what we are doing here is far beyond normal everyday politics.” Talik then leaned closer to Koester, his voice lowering slightly in volume. “Now I am curious. What made you decide to sneak three warships into what you would traditionally consider enemy territory?”

“Please do not consider what we did an invasion of your sovereign territory, Senator,” Koester answered, unexpectedly on the defensive. “I’ve known Commander T’Lees for several years now, have been working closely with her the last two years of the *Vedrex* crew’s exile. When she mentioned to me over subspace what she was doing – meeting with T’K’Lon – and specifically saying where the meeting was supposed to take place, I interpreted that as an unofficial request for assistance, since she had to know she was walking into a trap.”

Talik glanced at T’Lees, who shrugged noncommittally.

“I see,” the former senator finally said. “I’m pleased it worked out in the end. I just hope that your assistance hasn’t given T’K’Lon the idea that we have already allied ourselves with your Federation or the General’s Empire.”

“Are you saying you would not want to see such an alliance, Senator?” Koester asked, his future hopes slightly dented.

“Quite the contrary, Fleet Captain,” Talik replied. “After the events of the Dominion War, I knew in my heart that one day we Romulans and the Federation would be allies, and through that alliance would emerge a more cordial relationship with the Klingon Empire.” The former senator nodded in Ke’reth’s direction. “But openly displaying such alliances now will only provoke our enemies, something we cannot afford at this stage.”

“I understand,” Koester remarked.

“Well, once again, my personal thanks – to all of you – for the help you provided to T’Lees and our fledgling government,” the former senator said to all the guests around him. “Please, enjoy more ale and what I hope is stimulating conversation.” Talik then looked at T’Lees and said, “Commander, walk with me a moment?”

“Of course,” T’Lees said before excusing herself to the guests. The two Romulans walked away, out into the corridor outside the main doors.

Once he was confident they were alone, Talik said to T’Lees, “You were right. He is daring – willing to risk the wrath of his chain of command to do what he sees as right – but also seemingly easy to manipulate. Perhaps it is merely a by-product of your past relationship, but as you said, all you needed to do was lay the barest of trails and he came running to your rescue.”

“Peter... I mean, Fleet Captain Koester has a sense of chivalry that many in the Federation lack in this day and age,” T’Lees remarked.

“I believe you were correct. He is our best bet for opening the doors we need opened. He has contacts within Starfleet and the Federation government. We can make use of that.”

A look of concern crossed T’Lees’ face. “Are you sure we must take this path? His career in Starfleet...”

“At this point, under these circumstances, it is the only path still remaining to us. You had a close relationship with him in the past. Too close in the opinion of the Tal Shiar. I assume that relationship – in some form – still exists?”

“Not to the same degree it used to, obviously. He is now married and has another child of his own. And my revelation as a Romulan eight years ago instead of the Vulcan he believed me to be originally destroyed any chance we may have had of renewing our relationship as it had existed. But we remain... I think the best description is... close friends, given our circumstances.”

“Cultivate that friendship. We will need it sooner rather than later. Now go back and rejoin the gathering. And enjoy yourself. You earned it.”

“Will you not join us again as well?”

“I am becoming an old man. I need my rest,” Talik said in excuse. “I’ll see you when discussions resume again in the morning. Jolan tru, T’Lees.”

“Jolan tru, Talik.”

T’Lees watched the elder Romulan walk away toward the hallway leading to the living quarters, knowing his excuse was a poor one. At just over a century in age, Talik was barely middle-aged by Romulan standards. She briefly wondered where he was truly off to before turning back and re-entering the hall where the reception was taking place.

Several hours later, most of the guests had departed. Only a few lower-level bureaucrats remained to horde what was left of the food and drinks like hungry rats. Off to one side, looking out the window that overlooked what appeared destined to become the new capital city of the Romulan Star Empire, T’Lees and Koester were the only high ranking guests remaining.

“When do you think your new government will be ready to establish official diplomatic ties with the Federation?” Koester asked, downing the last of his ale in spite of already feeling woozy from the strong alcoholic beverage’s effect.

“It will be several months after its formation at the earliest before the new Senate can assume authority from the provisional government,” T’Lees said without looking at Koester.

“You look like something disturbing is on your mind,” the Federation captain remarked as he studied the Romulan woman’s profile. “Care to talk about it?”

“I’m just bothered by the battle in which we participated at Reticuli,” T’Lees replied, her emerald-green eyes never leaving the view outside the window. “I can’t help but feel it was only a prelude to a larger conflict that is going to tear the Romulan Star Empire asunder.” Koester then noticed a lone tear make its way down T’Lees’ right cheek. Without thinking, he instinctively placed his arm around the woman’s shoulders and pulled her closer, T’Lees leaning her head against the human man’s shoulder, smiling slightly.

\* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, at that same moment, approximately fifty-five light years away in the Alpha Pictoris system, Lord T’K’Lon sat down in the oversized wooden chair behind the desk in his office, several advisors sitting across from him. The Romulan Warlord had chosen not to medically treat the wound he had suffered at Beta Reticuli beyond the most basic of care, leaving a clearly visible scar across his left temple.

“The provisional government on Belak III is moving too fast, far faster than we gave them credit for three decicycles ago. First their attempt to re-create the Senate, now their reaching out to form alliances with the Federation and Klingon Empire. Put the word out to the other Warlords. We must crush this provisional government before the common citizen starts thinking of it as the Empire’s true government.” T’K’Lon looked at his advisors, his already foul mood growing worse. “A new Empire will rise from the ashes of the old one soon, but we must make sure the kindling has completely burned itself out first. In order for me to take my rightful place on the new throne, we must eliminate all opposition. Inform Sestimus, Tomalak, V’Reel, and Sirol that we must meet and plan our strategy. If we delay much longer, Talik will have all his pieces in place and nothing we do will stop him. I refuse to let that happen.”

*To Be Continued (at a later date)...*