

Prologue

Stardate 64333.4

May 2387 – Earth Calendar

Deep Inside Romulan Space

The Romulan civilian mining ship *Narada* orbited serenely around a planetoid in the Hobus system. Core samples had indicated the planetoid was rich in the rare element decalithium with trace amounts of iridium and deuterium, and Captain Nero and his crew were looking forward to the bonuses this latest haul would earn them.

Unfortunately, fate was not kind to the *Narada* crew that morning. Just after the main mining boom had been lowered to the planetoid's surface but before any actual mining had begun, the crew started noting strange indications from the star Hobus itself.

"The star's radiation is fluctuating wildly," announced the vessel's female science officer. "Like it's coming apart."

It took only a moment for Nero to realize the true gravity of the situation. He immediately ordered the drilling stopped and for his drill platform and crew to be retrieved. However, it already seemed too late.

"What's happening?" Ayel, Nero's second in command asked as he looked at the sensor indications.

"Massive solar flare! Gravimetric readings are off the scale!" the science officer reported.

Knowing it would take too long to retract the drilling platform, Nero ordered his crew beamed back aboard the *Narada*.

"I can't lock onto them! Too much interference!" the science officer reported.

"How long do we have?" Nero asked.

"Less than three minutes!"

Nero carefully considered his options. Finally he ordered the *Narada*'s evacuation shuttle to launch, perform a short-range warp directly next to the drill platform where it would beam Thrai and his fellow miners aboard, then quickly return to the *Narada* so the mining vessel could warp out of the system.

"What about the drill?" Ayel asked once Thrai and his crew had been retrieved. "We can't warp without retracting it!"

"We have no choice!" Nero responded before ordering his ship into warp speed toward Romulus the moment the evac shuttle docked. With a sickening squeal, the extended mining platform was torn right off the ship as the *Narada* entered faster-than-light speed, mere seconds before the flare from Hobus struck and pulverized the planetoid the mining vessel had been orbiting an instant before.

* * * *

Days later, Ambassador Spock addressed the Romulan Senate. It had been five years since – following a transformation of Romulan society; one in which curiosity, tolerance, and diplomacy ceased to be forbidden words in the Empire – Spock had become a legal resident of Romulus and was allowed to openly pursue his goal of closer diplomatic relations between Vulcan and Romulus. But his address to the Senate this day did not concern peace overtures or promises of cooperation. Instead, he advised the Praetor and Senators about the dangers posed by the events occurring in the nearby Hobus system.

"The Hobus system is one of the oldest in the galaxy," the half-Vulcan ambassador explained as a holographic projection of the system hovered above the floor of the darkened senate chamber. "But its star is dying, and it will soon go supernova. A supernova unlike any the galaxy has ever seen."

The hologram changed to show what had recently happened in the Hobus system.

"Just days ago," Spock continued, "the star had a violent eruption that obliterated the nearest planet in the system. The star converted the planet's mass into energy, increasing its own power. More eruptions have occurred since then, and the effects are being felt beyond the Hobus system, increasing in intensity. I believe that once the star goes supernova, it will threaten to devour not only the nearby systems, but the entire Romulan Empire."

Spock's pronouncement was met with disbelief and scorn. It appeared that reform had not reached all corners of the Empire. One senator even declared the scenario impossible and others labeled Spock a liar. And when the Vulcan ambassador offered a solution to the problem – the creation of an artificial black hole to devour the supernova before it was even created, using a small amount of a substance called 'Red Matter' which could be created by processing a rare isotope of decalithium, the senators objected even further when they learned the technology required to process decalithium into Red Matter was located on Vulcan, suspecting Spock's story was merely a ruse in order for the Vulcans to obtain quantities of the rare and valuable raw material.

Nero, who was present at the Senate's session on behalf of the mining guild, attempted to make the Senators see the truth in what Ambassador Spock was saying, explaining that he, his ship and crew were in the Hobus system when the eruptions had begun, and that what Spock was saying was not far-fetched; that if the Senate did nothing, Romulus likely was doomed. The mining captain was likewise dismissed, his opinion considered hasty and drastic like Spock's before the session was officially closed.

That evening, Nero talked about the situation with his wife, Mandana – pregnant with the couple's first son. Inside, he knew the Senate would not do anything to save the Empire, and time was quickly running out.

"I need to do something," Nero told his wife. "Even if it means disobeying the Senate."

"I know how loyal you are to the Empire. But you have a loyalty to yourself as well," Mandana said, understanding what it was Nero felt he had to do. "You must do what your heart knows to be right. And if you do, you will never fail."

Seeing little other choice, and in spite of the appearance that what he was about to do might be seen as treason against the Empire, Nero contacted Spock and proposed mining decalithium in the Kimben system near the Federation border and offering it to Spock to be processed into Red Matter so he might carry out his plan whether the Senate approved or not.

"Doing so would be a direct violation of the Senate's order. If you are caught, you would be sentenced to life on a prison planet," Spock pointed out. "You would never see your family again."

"But if I do nothing I lose them all the same," Nero replied. He then looked directly at the aged ambassador's face as he explained, "This is not a decision I make lightly. After my wife, there is nothing I love more than the Empire. And I will do anything to save it."

Spock accepted Nero's offer, and in the weeks that followed the *Narada* was repaired and provisioned, and Nero and his crew welcomed Ambassador Spock aboard. The *Narada* traveled to the Kimben system, along the edge of the Neutral Zone, and started to mine for decalithium. They had barely begun when the mining vessel found itself under attack by three other ships. The vessels were both alien and familiar to the Romulan crew.

"Remans! What are they doing out here?" Nero exclaimed before trying to raise his shields, too late to prevent a Reman boarding party from beaming into his bridge. It appeared the Remans had the upper hand and both the *Narada* and her cargo would be captured by them until their own vessels quickly came under attack by an even more powerful vessel.

"That's a Federation ship!" Nero exclaimed as he watched a Sovereign-class starship attacking the Reman warships with phasers.

"Not just any ship," Spock commented. "And not just any captain. An old friend."

As the Remans tried to muster their defenses, a voice sounded through the speakers on all four vessels.

"Attention Reman ships! This is Captain Data of the *USS Enterprise*. You will cease hostilities at once!"

The Remans tried to resist, but the battle was short as the *Enterprise* quickly disabled the three Reman vessels and captured the boarding party aboard the *Narada* by locking onto and simply beaming away their charged energy weapons. After the seizure of the Reman ships, more decalithium illegally mined from the Kimben system was discovered in the Reman holds and confiscated. With enough decalithium now in hand between what the *Narada* had mined and the contraband load of the isotope discovered aboard the Reman ships to implement Spock's plan, the crew of the *Enterprise* offered what help they could to repair the *Narada*'s battle damage and Captain Data offered to allow Spock and Nero to travel to Vulcan aboard his starship as they escorted the mining vessel through Federation space. As a gesture of good will, during the voyage to Vulcan, Nero was offered full access to the *Enterprise*, including most of the unclassified library computer database. Unbeknownst to the *Enterprise* crew, the

Romulan mining ship commander recorded much of the information he had accessed with the intent to save it in the *Narada*'s library computer and eventually share the information with the Senate.

* * * *

Meanwhile, in the stellar cartography laboratory of the Imperial Science Council on Romulus, the Praetor and members of the Ruling Council were being made aware of the full extent of the danger their Empire faced.

"It's worse than we thought," one of the Romulan scientists explained. "The Hobus star is growing in mass and is increasingly unstable."

"I can't believe that senile Vulcan was right," the Praetor remarked, looking at the projection of the ever more unstable star on the stellar cartography screen.

"That senile Vulcan was still smart enough to leave Romulus well in advance of the threat," one of the senators observed before beginning to discuss what steps they should take to avert the approaching tragedy, including the proposal of an armed invasion of Vulcan itself to capture the technology Spock had spoken of that could be used to create Red Matter, which in turn could create an artificial singularity to collapse the impending supernova.

"War with Vulcan... even if we stop the nova, the costs to the Empire will be great..." another senator said.

"Greater than the cost of doing nothing?" the Praetor asked before proposing putting the vote before the Senate and ordering the emergency evacuation protocol of Romulus to be implemented.

* * * *

It took several days for the *Enterprise* and the *Narada* to reach orbit of Vulcan, and both vessels were greeted with cool hostility, mainly directed at the one person aboard the *Enterprise* most Vulcans now considered a defector – Spock – and it was only the intervention of the Federation Ambassador to Vulcan, Jean-Luc Picard, that permission for Data, Spock, and Nero to beam down to the Capitol city was obtained. Unfortunately, after a lengthy discussion, the Vulcan science council was unwilling to help the Romulans. Even if Spock's plan worked, they feared that turning knowledge of their most secret experiments with Red Matter manipulation over to a militaristic culture such as the Romulans could be abused. The science council turned Spock and Nero down, prompting an outburst of anger from the Romulan miner. After leaving the council chamber, Spock pleaded with Nero, asking that he leave the *Narada*'s cargo of decalithium with himself and Picard in the hopes they could convince the Vulcan Science Council to change its mind. Nero reluctantly agreed before returning to his ship with the intent to warp back to Romulus as quickly as possible to save his wife and unborn son before it was too late, parting with the warning, "You can keep the decalithium. Do your best. But I warn you, Spock... If Romulus dies, I will hold YOUR people responsible." The *Narada* soon departed orbit, heading as quickly as possible back toward the Neutral Zone. However, it was already too late. Within days, as the *Narada* neared Romulus, Hobus went supernova. Due to the star's interaction with the decalithium in the planets orbiting it, the supernova caused a subspace shockwave exactly like Spock had feared, expanding faster than light. A normal supernova would not have been a danger beyond its own system, but this decalithium-enhanced shockwave had the potential to spread throughout the galaxy and beyond – swallowing stars, planets, and whatever else remained in its path – making the shockwave even stronger still as it expanded.

The *Narada* arrived at the edge of the Eison system, the star around which Romulus and Remus orbited, just as the shockwave engulfed the white star. Moments later, to Nero's utter disbelief, the twin planets were pulverized, his wife and unborn son among the millions killed instantly. There was little else for the *Narada* to do except warp away to safety.

* * * *

Something inside Nero had snapped. Hours after Romulus' destruction, a trio of Federation medical frigates arrived in the devastated former star system, sent to help evacuate Romulus but arriving too late. Driven insane with grief, Nero was convinced the Starfleet ships had arrived too late on purpose with the intent on claiming Romulan space for the Federation. Nero plotted his revenge, informing the Federation ships he had injured refugees aboard the *Narada* that needed medical assistance and requested permission to beam them aboard the hospital ships. But instead of refugees, Nero had mining charges beamed over – three to each ship – set to detonate milliseconds after materializing. Within moments, all three hospital ships were destroyed.

Not long after attacking the Federation relief ships, the *Narada* encountered a Senate shuttle carrying the Praetor and four surviving members of the Ruling Council. Under the pretense of rescuing them, the *Narada* beamed the five members of the Senate aboard.

“Captain, it pains me to say that your fears were justified,” the Romulan Praetor said to Nero in the *Narada*'s transporter room. “Together we face the darkest time in our history. But thankfully the Empire will endure. The entire ruling council escaped in time, ensuring the survival of our civilization.”

“Our civilization?” Nero countered in shock and disbelief. “Our civilization is DEAD, Praetor. But it didn't die today. It died when the Senate, when you and your politicians, ignored my warnings and waited to evacuate the planet.” In his rage, Nero grabbed the Debrune Teral'n, an ancient weapon brought from Vulcan at the time the Romulans split off from their cousins and a symbol of the founding of the Empire, and turned it on the Praetor himself, piercing him directly through the heart. The other members of the Ruling Council were in such shock they offered no resistance. Nero and his crew interrogated the surviving members of the Senate, intent on learning just how they planned on rebuilding the Empire. Then, their usefulness expired, he disposed of them as well.

A short time later, the crew of the *Narada* took part in an ancient Romulan tradition. When a loved one died, a Romulan would paint their grief upon their skin with elaborate designs, ancient symbols of love and loss. According to the tradition, the paint would fade in time, and with it the period of mourning. Life would go on. But the *Narada* crew's pain was not simply for a single loved one. They tattooed the symbols permanently, so that they would never fade.

Then, using the knowledge gained from the Ruling Council before their deaths, the *Narada* discovered The Vault - a secret Romulan military facility deep in the heart of Romulan space known only to the High Command. The Vault was tasked with providing the Ruling Council with a safe haven in the event of a catastrophe. There, the *Narada* was refit with weapons systems reverse-engineered from captured Borg technology, making the ship capable of superior warp, cloaking, and sensor capabilities while also incorporating self-repairing nanotechnology. The ship would become capable of exacting revenge against those Nero felt most responsible for the destruction of Romulus and the death of his family; the Federation in general and the Vulcans in particular.

* * * *

Meanwhile on Vulcan, Spock and Picard had finally convinced the Science Council to allow them to process the decalithium Nero had left with them into Red Matter. Around the same time, engineer Geordie LaForge delivered the *Jellyfish*, a small research starship he helped design and build in conjunction with the Daystrom Institute. Through the use of a special shielding evolved from designs he had developed during his assignment to the *USS Enterprise-D*, the small vessel was capable of moving through extremely dangerous environments, such as the interior of a star, making it the perfect vessel to pass through the boundaries of the Hobus shockwave. Under the supervision of both Spock and LaForge, the *Jellyfish* was modified in order to carry the Red Matter compound and programmed to allow Ambassador Spock to pilot the craft.

At the same time, the Klingons had been informed about the disappearance of the Federation humanitarian mission, the loss of several other Starfleet vessels sent to investigate what had happened to the medical frigates, and the recent discovery of the remains of the Romulan Ruling Council drifting lifelessly in deep space, and deployed a strike group of more than twenty Birds-of-Prey under the command of General Worf – on temporary loan from Starfleet serving with the Imperial Klingon Defense Force – to intercept and stop the *Narada* and as a prelude to

their proposed invasion of Romulan space. Using their advanced Borg and nanotechnology – including the ability to fire weapons while still under cloak – the *Narada* quickly destroyed most of the Klingon strike group. Then, when Nero demanded the Klingon general’s surrender, Worf made it appear he was willing to transport himself aboard the *Narada* via shuttlecraft – a ruse that allowed a squad of Klingon shock troops to board the modified mining ship and almost manage to capture the vessel until the Borg-enhanced automated mechanisms impaled Worf through the back.

Soon after the defeat of the Klingon strike group, the *Enterprise* again confronted the *Narada*, now an immense and powerful hybrid vessel, and Nero offered to beam Worf – still alive, though barely – aboard the Federation starship for treatment, but his intent was less than merciful. Captain Data and his crew knew Nero’s plan was to attack the moment the *Enterprise* lowered her shields, but decided they could not pass up the opportunity to not only save Worf’s life but also disable the *Narada* as well, as the Romulan vessel would likewise be unshielded during the brief moment of transport.

As soon as both vessels lowered their shields, Worf was beamed aboard the *Enterprise* and both spaceships simultaneously attacked. The *Enterprise* sustained severe damage to almost every deck, including the disabling of its warp drive, before shields were finally restored, while the *Narada* received minimal damage.

“I have to give you credit, gentlemen. The *Enterprise* is tougher than I thought,” Nero gloated to Data and Picard over the bridge viewscreen. “I’d love to stay and finish our little game, but I’m late for a rendezvous with Spock.” As the *Narada* started to turn away from the *Enterprise*, heading toward where the core of the supernova existed in what remained of the Hobus system, Nero could not resist one last taunt. “If you can make your repairs fast enough, feel free to come and join us.” And with a thunderclap, the *Narada* disappeared into warp speed.

“Damage to engineering has been contained,” Data commented to Picard as both watched the *Narada* fade in the distance. “We will have warp capability restored in minutes.”

“I pray that’s enough time,” Picard remarked.

* * * *

In the Hobus system, the *Jellyfish* launched its payload.

“In my discussions with Ambassador Picard I overestimated my chances for survival. It will be impossible to escape the pull of the singularity I hope to create. This broadcast may never be received, but in the event that it is, please deliver it to the Science Academy on Vulcan that it may be included in the archives. The Red Matter containment and delivery systems worked perfectly. All I can do is watch... and wait...”

Spock had launched the small probe containing a minute amount of Red Matter into the Hobus remnant. The small probe entered the supernova, quickly disappearing from sensors. Then, as the Red Matter device began to react with the heat, gravity, and pressure of the Hobus Supernova, Spock’s eyes widened momentarily in amazement.

“Yes... The singularity grows according to our calculations.”

Spock’s thoughts were interrupted by weapons fire striking the shields of the *Jellyfish*. It was not entirely unexpected.

“But in these final moments, I have an uninvited visitor.”

The *Narada* emerged from cloak almost directly between the *Jellyfish* and the growing singularity. Nero immediately confronted Spock over subspace.

“You’ve done it, haven’t you? You saved your people. And all it cost was the death of mine!”

“Captain!” Ayel called out. “The singularity is warping space around us!”

Forgetting Spock and his anger at the Vulcan for the moment, Nero turned his attention back to the survival of his own ship once again. He could not achieve his vengeance if both he and the *Narada* were dead. “Full power to the engines!” he ordered.

“It’s no use!” Ayel exclaimed as the *Narada* was drawn into the maw of the growing artificial singularity. “It’s pulling us in!”

“Spock!” Nero bellowed as his ship vanished into what appeared to be a lightning storm in space. “I will have my vengeance!! I will have...!”

Spock watched impassively from the cockpit of the *Jellyfish* as the *Narada* disappeared with finality into the black hole.

“It is done,” he said to himself with a small sense of satisfaction. “The Hobus star is no longer a threat to the galaxy.” However, the *Jellyfish*, like the *Narada* before it, was caught in the inexorable grip of the black hole Spock had helped create. When the *Enterprise* finally arrived on the scene, dropping out of warp just outside of the singularity’s intense zone of gravity, but there was little Data or Picard could do aside from watch the inevitable. The *Jellyfish* slowly disappeared over the event horizon.

“But I am trapped by the singularity now,” Spock said, continuing his report in the hopes somehow someone - perhaps the crew of the *Enterprise* - might hear. “To my friends who might hear this message, do not grieve. It is only logical. The needs of the many outw...” And with a final plunge, the *Jellyfish* crossed the event horizon and disappeared forever.

“Is there any sign of the *Jellyfish*?” Picard asked as the bridge crew of the *Enterprise* watched the black hole collapse in upon and seal itself.

“There is no possibility of escape from the singularity,” Data opined. “We are too late.”

“No. Spock knew,” Picard replied, absolutely sure in his assessment. “He knew this would happen. He knew he wouldn’t escape.” Picard looked at Data with his piercing eyes and said, “He sacrificed himself to save us all.”

* * * *

Present Day

Stardate 66926.8 – December 2389

Starbase 719

The Typhon Sector

It had been ten days since the *USS Besiege* had returned to the starbase, the damaged *USS Corsair* in tow, and the renegade Klingon prisoners transferred to the brig aboard the station, and Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, commander of the Federation outpost and coordinator for the Typhon Sector, was still trying to figure out how to handle the entire situation.

Gathered in the admiral’s office on the upper level of Ops were Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson, the stations executive officer and the commander of the *Corsair* when several dozen Klingons hijacked the Defiant-class vessel on a mission of revenge against another Federation starship commander; Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, the admiral’s strategic operations officer for the sector and Pearson’s husband and first officer aboard the *Corsair*; and Lt Commander Marie Quinteros, the admiral’s flag aide. The four officers were discussing the request for extradition Raiajh had received that morning from the new acting governor of the Klingon colony on Kos’Karii as they awaited a fifth person invited to the meeting.

“Officially, the Second Khitomer Accords do not stipulate any kind of extradition agreement,” Raiajh was saying after reviewing the document on her desktop monitor screen. “We don’t have to turn Kelvop and his cohorts over to the new governor of Kos’Karii.”

“If we don’t, they’re simply going to serve time in a Federation penal colony, get released in a few years – supposedly rehabilitated – and be right back out there plotting who knows what again?” Harkonnen remarked. “I don’t think I like that idea too much. As brutal as Klingons can be, I sometimes find myself in agreement with their so-called justice system.”

“I don’t like the idea of letting them get away with murder either,” Pearson said, her face as subtly angry as Raiajh had ever seen it. “After what they did to Lieutenant Kymble and Ensigns Thoran, Breton, and Hewett? Not to mention Governor Vagh and his entire family! I say give ‘em back to the Klingons as quickly as possible and wash your hands of the whole mess, Val.”

“It’s not quite so simple,” Raiajh remarked. “Some issues have come to my attention since the Klingon mercenaries were captured that...”

Raiajh was interrupted by the door chime sounding. She reached over and touched the control on her desk that opened the door with a swish, admitting the station’s chief medical officer and Raiajh’s husband, Dr. Sylvan Xaran.

“I’ve had no luck,” Xaran said as he put a padd on the admiral’s desk and then joined the others in one of the seats around the low coffee table. “I tried interviewing the Klingon Rodek, but he refuses to speak to me other than some not-so-veiled threats, and none of the computer records I have been able to access provide any answers. Only that the first mention of Rodek in any records is his assignment to the *IKV Gorkon* near the end of 2372 and his subsequent dismissal from the service about eighteen months ago. No explanation for where he was assigned or located prior to his assignment to the *Gorkon*, nor why his DNA would match the records of the first officer of the *Enterprise*.”

“I thought Commander Worf had a brother?” Quintero said. “Could this somehow be him?”

“Not likely,” Xaran said. “According to all available records, Worf’s brother, Kurn, was exiled from the Empire in dishonor after the high counsel seized all the titles, lands, and holdings of the House of Mogh because Worf refused to join then-Chancellor Gowron in the Empire’s invasion of Cardassian space. Kurn, according to the records I have found, committed ritual suicide several weeks after Rodek’s records say he was assigned to the *Gorkon*.”

“Is it possible Worf has another brother he isn’t even aware of?” suggested Pearson. “Maybe his father had a roaming eye?”

“I suppose it’s possible, but it’s not a subject I would risk asking the Commander, or any other Klingons that may know his family, about,” Raiajh said. “And after careful consideration, and a review of the known facts, I have come to a decision. I will allow the extradition of our Klingon prisoners, including Rodek, back to Kos’Karii to face justice there – on the condition that, should they somehow miraculously survive their sentence, they be returned to Federation incarceration and trial afterward.”

“You know they’ll never live long enough to ever see the inside of a Federation court, Val,” Xaran remarked to his wife.

“As the ancient song says, ‘Que sera, sera.’” When Raiajh noticed the confused look on both Quintero and Harkonnen’s faces, she translated, “Whatever will be, will be.” She then picked up one of the padds from the coffee table in front of her and pressed her thumb to the screen, electronically signing her approval on the request for extradition of Kelvop, Rodek, Vixares, and the other Klingons.

* * * *

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the Fifth Fleet flagship *USS Dauntless*, was cleaning off the dining table in his quarters following dinner with several members of his crew; Ship’s Counselor Tanzania Gera, Chief of the Boat Pono Kyman, Lieutenants (Junior Grade) William Hyland III and Joella Faggio, and Ensign Cassie Koester, who – in spite of her name – was not actually related to the captain but an alien being who looked like a human woman in her mid-twenties, but was in reality centuries old. Koester enjoyed hosting informal dinners – which allowed him the opportunity to gauge the crew’s feelings and morale in an unofficial setting. This particular dinner also included the additional highlight of Lieutenants Hyland and Faggio officially announcing their engagement and asking the captain if he would officiate their wedding the following June, a request he gladly accepted.

“You sure you don’t need any help, Skipper?” Chief Kyman asked from his seat on the nearby couch, a pint glass of warm and almost-black Irish stout in one hand as he stroked the captain’s ‘dog’ Nanook, who was curled up on the couch beside him, with the other. The El’Aurian was the only remaining guest in the captain’s quarters.

“Thanks, COB, but I’ve got this,” Koester said as he placed the last several dishes, which once held the Koester family’s famous spaghetti with sausage meat sauce, into the replicator. After the dirty dishes

dematerialized, the captain started to request an after dinner drink of his own until he was interrupted by the sound of a boson whistle from his desk. He walked over to the desk and touched the intercom control.

“This is the Captain.”

“Cap’n, you have a subspace communiqué comin’ in from New Romulus,” said the voice of Commander Alasdair Wallace, the starship’s second officer.

Koester exchanged a look with Chief Kyman before asking, a touch of concern in his voice, “Commander T’Lees?”

“Aye, Ah believe so,” the Scotsman replied.

“Route it here to my quarters, Commander.”

As Koester moved around his desk and sat down in the chair behind it, a monitor screen rose out of the surface. A moment later it lit up, briefly flashing the emblem of the United Federation of Planets before changing to the image of a Romulan woman with long, straight black hair extending well past her shoulders, bright emerald-green eyes, and the tips of her pointed ears just visible through her hair. She appeared to be smiling, which immediately put Koester more at ease.

“Good evening, T’Lees. I was worried something was wrong when I heard from you so unexpectedly,” Koester said to the Romulan warbird commander, a woman he had known during his early years at Starfleet Academy when she led him to believe she was Vulcan.

“Quite the opposite, in fact, Peter,” T’Lees replied. “Things are progressing easier than originally anticipated in the formation of our new government. Your help in providing a copy of the Federation Constitution to use as a guide was exceedingly helpful to us. We are trying to institute a new series of checks and balances into our government model to prevent the kind of total collapse we experienced after the Hobus Supernova, and as part of those reforms, we will be appointing a judicial branch to our government, something the Romulan Empire has never had before.”

“Sounds great. I’m glad we could help you. The Federation system of government has worked well for us, with admittedly a few hiccups along the way, for over two hundred years. I hope it provides the kind of security your people have been looking for as well after the events of the past few years.”

“You may be able to see how it will work for yourself,” T’Lees said. “We’ve already held regional elections to elect representatives to the new Senate. Those Senators will be sworn in later this month, at which point a provisional Praetor will be elected from among the Senate representatives. I would like you and your crew to be my official guests for the swearing-in ceremony that will officially usher in the new Romulan Empire.”

“I thought you told me your new government was using the model of the representative republic?” Koester asked.

“The name is a holdover from the traditionalists,” T’Lees explained. “Too many of those involved in the formation of the new government and the writing of our own constitution expressed reservations with the title ‘Romulan Republic,’ so we compromised and will continue to use the term ‘Empire.’”

“Either way, as long as you have a government capable of meeting your people’s basic needs while protecting them from those that would do them harm...”

“Like T’K’Lon and his fellow warlords?” T’Lees suggested.

“While we’re on the subject, how is T’K’Lon taking the news? I know he had the intention of sitting on a throne of his own at some point.”

“The warlords have been very quiet the last few months, ever since the incident at Beta Reticuli III. I figure things will come to a head once we declare the new government established. Either they’ll join us or they won’t.”

“I hope they won’t be too much of a problem,” Koester said. “It would be better for everyone involved if they simply surrendered their ambitions and joined with you in establishing your new government. When is your new era scheduled to be ushered in?”

“Three weeks your time,” T’Lees replied. “Admirals Fil and Raiajh and their staffs are likewise being invited, through official diplomatic channels of course, for all the help they have provided the Romulan people –

especially all the refugees – since the supernova event. Likewise, I understand the Federation flagship with Admiral Janeway and the Federation Ambassador to Vulcan are also being invited.”

“Really?” Koester said, his eyebrows raising in surprise. “It will be nice to see Kate and Jean-Luc again. I haven’t seen the Ambassador since before I ‘died’ several years ago.” Koester made several entries into a calendar schedule in a padd on his desk, then said, “Barring any unforeseen emergencies, the *Dauntless* will be at New Romulus for the ceremony.”

“Good. I look forward to seeing you in person again, Peter.”

“Me too, T’Lees. Wild Borg couldn’t keep me away.”

“Until then... New Romulus, out.”

As the screen lowered back into the desktop, Koester could not help but smile. He looked at the COB again as he said, “This is exciting news. Official Federation representatives to witness the establishment of a new Romulan government.”

“It’s not a day I would have thought I would see in my long lifespan,” Kyman admitted. “Just seems a tad unusual that Commander T’Lees would invite you personally instead of it coming through regular diplomatic channels like Admirals Raijah and Fil.”

“T’Lees and I still share a... close relationship, COB,” Koester said.

“Close wasn’t the first word that crossed your mind, was it, Skipper?” the El’Aurian said, a knowing look on his bearded face.

“A discussion for another time, COB,” the captain stated with a definite undertone to his voice. He then pressed the intercom once again.

“Bridge, this is the Captain.”

“Go ahead, Cap’n,” Wallace’s voice quickly replied.

“Commander, plot a course back to *Home Plate*. We have passengers to pick up.”

“Aye, sair,” Wallace replied.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“The Fall and Rise of the Romulan Empire” By PJK

Prologue adapted from **Star Trek: Countdown**

Written by Mike Johnson and Tim Jones,
based on a story by Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman.

Deep Space in Sector Typhon-C
Near the Edge of the Typhon Expanse

The transport ship carrying the Klingon prisoners back to Kos’Karii was traveling at low warp. It was already more than ten days since the transport vessel had departed *Starbase 719*, and the navigator calculated it would be at least another ten days before the ship reached orbit of the Klingon colony world.

Down in the cargo hold, which had been modified into holding cells, each cell containing two of the Klingon prisoners, Kelvop and his hired mercenaries spent most of the voyage either laying on the metal bunks, pacing the lengths of their cells, or – in the case of several of the younger Klingons – picking fights with their cell mates over who was most responsible for their capture and incarceration.

The door to the transport vessel's cramped bridge opened and one of the senior crewmen – a Caitian with a lion-like mane surrounding his face – walked in on bare padded feet.

"How is our cargo?" the transport's captain asked, looking over his shoulder from the helm console.

"Quiet forrrr the moment, which I'm not surrrre I like any morrrre than when they'rrre causing a rrrruckus," the Caitian replied. "The furr along my spine is brrristling. When Klingons arrre quiet it's because they'rrre planning something."

"Colonel McIntyre himself inspected the new cells before we loaded the prisoners and departed 719," the captain remarked. "There's no way they can escape without outside help, and no one aboard this ship is going to help a bunch of hired killers. You need to relax. This run is easy money for us. And we might even be able to pull a return cargo as well. I've had feelers out, and my contacts tell me a shipment of live ga'gh needs to get back to the starbase before stardate..."

The captain's comment was interrupted by an indication on the helm panel.

"Prrroximity alarrm, Captain!" the Caitian remarked, pointing a furred finger at the light flashing on the console.

"I see that, but what's causing...?"

A second alarm sounded in the bridge, and on the viewscreen a shape started taking on solid form almost directly in front of the transport.

"Captain! Vessel de-cloaking dirrrectly ahead!"

The transport captain's fingers moved rapidly across his helm console as he shut down his vessel's warp drive.

"Open communications to them. Find out who they are and what they want?" he ordered just before weapons fire struck the transport, destroying the small ship's warp drive and severely damaging the impulse engines.

"Captain, they've tarrgeted prrrropulsion and communications," the Caitian reported. "Subspace antenna arrray has been knocked out!"

"Who are they? And why are they attacking us? We haven't done anything to provoke this!"

A third indicator, this one on the security panel on the side of the bridge, started flashing.

"We're being boarded!" the captain exclaimed. "The prisoners!"

The captain rushed off the bridge, grabbing a fifty year old phaser pistol on his way out, and headed directly toward the cargo bay. Meanwhile, the Caitian crewman looked at the vessel that had attacked them on the viewscreen. It looked both familiar and unfamiliar, a design he had never seen previously. While his first impression had been that the vessel was Klingon in origin, he now noticed some distinctly Romulan design elements and technology that was part of the vessel.

After nearly a minute, the vessel slowly turned away from the transport, as if making a casual maneuver. Seconds later it disappeared under cloak once again. The Caitian started to grow nervous, wondering what fate his captain had met, when the door opened and the human walked back in.

"What happened, Captain?"

"Soldiers! They beamed into the cargo bay. I couldn't tell who or what they were, they were wearing space suits of some kind."

"Did they rrrrelease the prrrrisonerrrs? Have the prrrrisonerrrs all escaped?"

"Only one."

"What do you mean, Captain?"

"They released only one of the prisoners. The one called Rodek. They beamed back to wherever they had come from with him and left all the rest behind, still locked in their cells."

"Why would they do that?" the Caitian asked.

"I don't know, but it's the least of our problems right now," the captain explained. "I checked engineering before coming back up here. We're completely on battery power right now. Our engines have been rendered useless, and we have no way to repair them ourselves."

“But... Captain,” the Caitian said. “With ourrrr subspace antenna arrrrrray destrrrroyed, we can’t signal for help!”

“I know that!” the captain said irritably. “And the batteries will only last a few hours.”

“Maybe someone will find us! Maybe someone will come along and rescue us before...!”

“And maybe the replicator in my quarters can make us a gold-pressed latinum lifeboat! Don’t you get it?” He looked at the cat-like being and growled, “We’re dead!”

“But...”

The captain glared once more at his crewman, then walked off the bridge, returning to his small quarters to await the inevitable. And all his Caitian crewman could think was, “Why?”

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 66973.3:

After making a quick stop at Home Plate to pick up Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh and her staff – including Dr. Sylvan Xaran, Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, and Lt Commander Marie Quintero – the Dauntless is now in orbit of the planet originally designated Belak III - now called New Romulus - deep in Romulan space, where we join the Federation flagship USS Enterprise and more warbirds than I have ever seen in one place in my entire life outside of an Academy bridge simulator.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Fleet Captain Koester, his first officer Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo, Captain Data of the *USS Enterprise*, and his own first officer Commander Worf were seated in the office Commander T’Lees was making use of in the building across the government plaza from the new Senate building on the surface of New Romulus, watching a subspace message that the provisional government had received two days before the Federation starships had arrived.

“I have assurances the citizens of the Empire will not accept this illegitimate government, nor stand by and allow it to dominate their lives and livelihoods,” said the arrogant Romulan man on the screen, looking as if he were reading a speech from a teleprompter in front of the video input. “Neither I nor Lord Tomalok, Lord V’Reel, or any of the other surviving leaders of the Empire will simply stand by and allow Talik’s false government to claim sovereignty. Your ceremony, during which you plan to swear-in a mockery of the original Imperial Senate, candidates you claim were elected by the people, will not occur if I have any say in the matter.”

T’K’Lon appeared like he was speaking directly to Talik, a former senator years before the destruction of Romulus and the Imperial government, who stood at the forefront of the formation of the new government.

“Your only hope of avoiding painful death for your treason is to abide by the people’s wishes and proclaim me Emperor. Only I have the will and ability to lead our people through the darkness that has fallen upon us; first because of the uncaring and callous Federation, then by the actions of their brutal allies among the Klingons. If I do not hear back from you acquiescing to our demands, rest assured, you will be hearing from me.”

The transmission ended and the screen went dark. T’Lees looked up at her guests expectantly.

“I have to say one thing about T’K’Lon,” Koester started to remark. “He’s still a pompous ass.”

“On that fact we can agree,” T’Lees stated.

“Is what he said true?” Arbelo asked. “That the Romulan citizens have expressed their desire for T’K’Lon to be their political leader instead of the provisional government?”

“Are you kidding, Commander?” T’Lees asked. “The planets that lived under T’K’Lon’s control during the Klingon occupation couldn’t wait to be rid of him! His whole rant is nothing more than propaganda. Our senatorial election was valid, at least so far as the areas of Romulan space under the control of the provisional government go.”

“Are his threats viable?” Captain Data asked. The resurrected android, whose own neural net engrams had over-written the original software of the android B-4 in the weeks after being transferred – ironically during a previous mission to the seat of Romulan government – effectively giving him a second lease on life, looked at T’Lees with his golden eyes.

“I wouldn’t put anything past T’K’Lon,” T’Lees replied. “If he has any chance of de-railing our new government, he will try.” The Romulan woman then looked at Koester and said, “Admittedly, it was part of what prompted us to invite both of your starships here for the ceremony.”

“What do you mean?” Worf asked, sounding his typically irritable self.

“Talik and I hoped that, by having both the *Enterprise* and *Dauntless* in orbit over New Romulus, it would be physical proof of the new relationship we hope to foster between the Federation and the Romulan people.”

“You’re hoping two Starfleet Sovereign-class starships in orbit will be enough of a threat to T’K’Lon that he won’t dare show his face here, aren’t you?” Koester asked. Reluctantly, T’Lees nodded in agreement.

Looking at his counterpart, Koester said, “I don’t know about you, Captain Data, but the *Dauntless* will certainly defend itself if faced with attack. And if that defense happens to protect the new Romulan Capitol as well...”

“While the *Enterprise* cannot take sides in what appears to be an internal Romulan matter, I would not leave my starship vulnerable either,” the android captain replied.

* * * *

Later that evening, the Romulans hosted an official welcoming reception, to which all the important diplomatic guests were invited. All the new Senators-elect, including Talik, mingled with the newly appointed Federation Ambassador to New Romulus – Ambassador Derek Struminski, the senior staff of the *Enterprise*, Rear Admiral Kathryn Janeway and Federation Ambassador to Vulcan Jean-Luc Picard – both of whom had been transported to New Romulus aboard the *Enterprise*, the senior staff of the *Dauntless*, Vice Admiral Penji Fil, Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, and members of their staffs – including Quintero, Harkonnen, and Xaran. To one side, Fleet Captain Koester was conversing with Commander T’Lees and Senator Talik.

“Senator,” Koester said. “Is your new government not opening any diplomatic relations with the Klingon Empire? I noticed there is no Klingon ambassador here tonight.”

“Quite the contrary, Fleet Captain,” Talik replied. “The Chancellor quickly assigned an ambassador to New Romulus as soon as we opened an official line of communication with the High Council. Unfortunately, the ship Ambassador Kental is being transported by was delayed by the route they had to take to get to New Romulus, trying to avoid the territory still firmly in the hands of the warlords. But I have been assured he will arrive before the ceremony tomorrow morning.”

Koester’s conversation was interrupted by a bell like sound coming from across the reception hall. Koester, Talik and T’Lees all turned to see a bald human man stepping up onto the raised stairs across the way.

“If I may, I would like to propose a toast,” Ambassador Picard said, tapping a spoon against the square-shaped wine glass he was holding. Once everyone had quieted and taken hold of glasses of their own, Picard continued, “I only wish Ambassador Spock of Vulcan were here today to witness this event; the coming together of the Federation and Romulan people, something he worked tirelessly in pursuit of for the last fifteen years of his life. I truly believe that, without his hard work, honor, and supreme sacrifice, none of us would be here where we are today.” Picard then paused momentarily before raising his glass in front of those gathered and said, “To Ambassador Spock.”

The toast was repeated by everyone present before their glasses were tipped back and the contents drunk. Fleet Captain Koester then started looking around, hoping he might come across a syntheholc beverage he could imbibe for the evening to counter the strong Romulan wine.

“Come with me. I know where some of the really good stuff is being kept,” T’Lees said, threading her arm through the crook of Koester’s elbow and leading him across the room. Talik smiled as he watched his protégé walk away arm in arm with the human Starfleet officer.

Koester allowed himself to be led out of the reception hall to a small supply closet outside in the service corridor. The Romulan woman stepped inside, reappearing a moment later with four bottles of sapphire-blue liquid – two in each hand. She handed two of the bottles to Koester, then told him to follow her down the hall and through a set of doors leading outside, where a large balcony overlooked the outskirts of the city and the picturesque valley beyond. There the pair sat down and admired the view as they drank the ale and conversed in privacy, mainly about their son, P'Tor, and how the reorganization of the Romulan government was affecting both P'Tor and T'Lees. Twice during the conversation, T'Lees returned to the supply closet, making a game out of sneaking back inside and returning each time with another chilled bottle of ale. By their fourth bottle, both were feeling quite uninhibited.

"It'sh a really good thing I don't need to drive home tonight," Koester joked as he fumbled to put the last empty bottle down next to its three companions.

"Are you sober enough to beam back to your ship?" T'Lees inquired, her question prompting a spontaneous giggle. "If not you can stay here with me."

"You, dear lady," Koester said, pointing a finger at the Romulan woman, "are drunk! Drunker than I am. And I would not want to be accused of taking advantage of an impaired warbird commander!"

"I don't think so," T'Lees countered with a smile. "I can hold my ale. You're the one spoiled by synthehol."

"I wouldn't shay spoilt. Shynthehol serves it's purposesh..ses...," Koester said before putting a comforting arm around T'Lee's shoulders.

"It'sh a vile substance invented by the Ferengi to aid in cheating their victims...," T'Lees remarked.

"Customers!"

"Whatever."

"Why ish the balcony swaying? Should I be consnerned?"

"Shhhh..."

The pair sat in silence for several minutes, Koester admiring the view and trying not to fall out of the chair as T'Lees apparently tried to snuggle closer to the Starfleet officer.

"You picked a nice world to be your new Capitol," Koester said several minutes later, more quietly than before, as he looked down on the wooded valley before them. "Reminds me of some areas I've visited in Norway on Earth."

"I never got to visit Norway when I was on Earth," T'Lees commented wistfully.

"That's because you were spending all your time with me in San Francisco," Koester remarked. "Probably drove your superiors crazy. Not that I minded at the time."

"What about now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where do you think our relationship would have gone if our governments had not been enemies at the time?"

"You mean if I knew you were a Romulan back then and not an aide at the Vulcan Embassy?" T'Lees nodded. "I... I don't know. It seemed to be working at the time. But again, I thought you were just a very unusual Vulcan at the time. Given the realities..."

Koester felt T'Lees snuggle closer against his shoulder. Then, to his surprise, one of her hands moved up to his chin and turned his face in her direction. Before he could resist, she kissed him softly on the lips, and he found himself returning the kiss. Both tasted strongly of Romulan ale.

"I know it seems strange, after everything that has happened between us," T'Lees said when she finally broke the kiss, her expression seemingly embarrassed. "Especially when you consider everything I hid from you when we first met. But against my self control and better judgment, I fell in love with you back then. And I find, even nearly thirty Earth years later, I still love you."

Koester was silent for several seconds, as if trying to think how best to say what was going through his head. Finally he admitted, "I still have very deep feelings for you as well, T'Lees. However, I am married." He held up his left hand, where a gold ring encircled the third finger. "Even if our governments were the closest of

allies, I do have obligations. I took a vow. And I must live by that vow even though the person to whom they apply may be hundreds of light years away right now.”

“I know,” T’Lees said, sounding disappointed.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t remain friends, does it?” he asked. Koester felt T’Lees snuggle up against his shoulder again as she shook her head.

“If friendship is the best I can hope for, it will have to do,” T’Lees said, pausing several seconds before adding, “For now.”

* * * *

The day of the ceremony, Fleet Captain Koester and several senior members of the *Dauntless* crew and guests – First Officer Setton Arbelo, Counselor Tanzia Gera, Vice Admiral Penji Fil and a couple of his own diplomatic staff members, Vice Admiral Val’ri Raijah, Dr. Sylvan Xaran, Commander Konstantin Harkonnen, and Lt Commander Marie Quintero – beamed down to the surface of New Romulus, materializing at the designated place in the wide plaza outside the new Senate building where the swearing in of the new Senators would occur before everyone moved inside to witness their first official act, the election of the first Praetor of the new Romulan Empire.

“Good morning,” T’Lees said unusually loudly to Koester as she walked over and greeted his crew with a smile. The Fleet Captain had to put a hand to the side of his head for a moment, his eyes squeezed tight in the bright sunlight, as if fighting off a sudden wave of nausea.

“The only reason it’s anywhere approaching good is because Doctor Kelley has the potions available to counteract most of the symptoms of a severe hangover,” he said rather quietly.

“I told you that you couldn’t hold your ale,” T’Lees remarked, now smirking. She then looked at Arbelo and said, “You need to keep a better eye on your Captain so he doesn’t go sneaking off and causing mischief on alien planets.”

“He told me he was keeping up diplomatic relations,” Arbelo replied with a knowing smile.

“Keep it up and I’m going to have both of you scrubbing out torpedo tubes with a toothbrush,” Koester grumbled.

“Threatening a foreign warship commander like that on her own sovereign soil will get you nowhere, Captain,” T’Lees replied.

“Excuse me, Commander,” Counselor Gera said after looking around the plaza and noting there were not as many people present for the ceremony as she would have expected. “Where is everyone? I thought the ceremony was supposed to begin in about ten minutes?”

“Yes, about that,” T’Lees said, looking slightly embarrassed. “The ceremony has been delayed approximately one of your hours.”

“Why is that, Commander?” Arbelo asked.

“We received word a short time ago that Ambassador Kental was delayed longer than he anticipated and his ship won’t arrive in orbit for about another half hour or so. I’m sorry your ship wasn’t notified. The *Enterprise* was told, but I’m afraid the Senate aides neglected to notify the *Dauntless*.” A mischievous look crossed her face as she added, “I guess they assumed the *Enterprise* would pass on the word.”

“That’s alright. I wanted a chance to look around your new Capitol city in the daylight anyway,” Arbelo said, his head swiveling around to take in the sights. “How often does a Starfleet officer get to be a tourist in the Romulan Capitol?”

“Tegra isn’t exactly a new city, Commander Arbelo,” T’Lees said as she began pointing out several locations of interest within view. “It was one of the first communities established on the planet when Belak III was first colonized by the Romulan Star Empire nearly five hundred of your years ago. Only a handful of new buildings have been built since Hobus to house and support the new government. The Senate is one of them.”

T’Lees led the *Dauntless* crew around the plaza edge like a tour guide, explaining that Tegra had once served as regional Capitol for the sector and how many of the older government buildings had been re-purposed for

use by the Provisional Government while giving short history lessons on some of the older structures. She promised to show the interior of the new Senate building – described as one of the most elaborately decorated buildings on the entire planet – after the conclusion of the day’s events, since security was extremely tight at the moment and no one was being allowed inside the new building prior to the start of the upcoming ceremony.

After a time, T’Lees was informed of the arrival of the Klingon courier vessel *Koraga* in orbit. She excused herself to return to the area of the plaza near the Senate steps where the *Dauntless* crew had first beamed down, where she would likewise greet Ambassador Kental. Moments later the Klingon ambassador and his five member staff materialized on the plaza. The Romulan commander formally greeted the ambassador on behalf of the Provisional Government, then started to lead the Klingons back toward where Koester and his crew waited to introduce them.

The first indication anything was wrong was the low rumble that originated from inside the Senate building. Both Kental and T’Lees turned to look just as a huge blast engulfed a majority of the building. Rock, permacrete, glass, and shards of steel flew in all directions.

“T’Lees!” Koester shouted as part of the Senate façade collapsed down the stairs and a cloud of dust and debris engulfed the Romulan woman and several of the Klingons. Koester rushed across the plaza as sirens started sounding around the plaza. Romulan soldiers and security personnel rushed out of various buildings and, in the confusion, turned their weapons on anyone not in a Romulan uniform, including Fleet Captain Koester, who skidded to a halt when several rifles were aimed in his direction.

“Commander T’Lees needs help!” the captain pleaded.

“We don’t know if you’re responsible for this!” one of the soldiers exclaimed. “We don’t know if you mean us further harm!”

“Please...!” Koester said as the cloud of dust started to settle.

“My God!” Arbelo muttered to himself as the extent of the damage started to become visible. The dome that once covered the Senate chamber had collapsed into the building, dragging most of the structure down with it. The entire new Senate building was nothing more than rubble.

Koester started hearing coughing coming from the dust and rubble nearby. He looked squarely at the Romulan soldier holding the disruptor rifle on him and said, “Shoot me if you have to, but I’m going to help!” He then moved forward deliberately, finding the new Klingon ambassador, Kental, digging one of his aides out from the rubble. Koester lent the Klingon a hand, removing several large pieces of rubble off the injured Klingon as several more Romulans – some of them emergency first responders – arrived on the scene. Familiar sounding coughing from a few meters away drew the Fleet Captain to where T’Lees was laying on the ground, completely covered by a fine powdered dust, part of a statue from the building façade laying across her hips.

“How badly are you hurt?” Koester asked.

“I... I think I’m okay. Just... stuck,” T’Lees replied, coughing another lungful of dust out of her mouth.

“Hold on, T’Lees. I’m here.”

Koester gripped the statue remains in his hands, the fine dust making the marble-like stone slippery. He brushed his hands on his once-immaculate dress uniform jacket and then tried lifting the stone again, moving it just enough for the Romulan woman to crawl out from under. Koester then knelt down and placed T’Lees’ arm over his shoulder and helped the woman to her feet, half supporting-half carrying her to where medical personnel were starting to set up an emergency triage unit with the help of Dr. Xaran and Counselor Gera.

“What happened?” T’Lees asked as Koester helped her walk. “The last thing I can remember, I turned around when I heard a loud noise from behind me.”

“It looked like the Senate building was destroyed by a bomb,” Koester replied. “The whole building is gone.”

T’Lees paused, turning to look at the devastation that was only now becoming visible, tears forming in her eyes. “Who? Who could have done this?” she demanded to know.

“I don’t know. Yet,” Koester said, the memory of T’K’Lon’s broadcast the previous day replaying through his head. “Though I have a suspect in mind.”

* * * *

That evening, Koester – still dressed in his torn and dirt-encrusted dress uniform after spending much of the day helping to dig survivors out of the rubble of the Senate building – was in the provisional government office building across the plaza from the destruction, meeting with Captain Data of the *Enterprise*, Romulan Commander T’Lees – who, with the exception of a high-tech splint helping to heal her injured leg, had survived the bomb blast relatively unscathed – Senator Talik, and several other Romulan provisional government officials.

“Current casualty lists indicate thirty-three injured – more than a dozen of them severely – and six still missing,” one of the Senators-elect read from a padd. “By some miracle, no one we have found so far has been killed. Given the level of destruction, it could have been much worse.”

“Do we know what caused this catastrophe?” Talik asked.

“Preliminary indications are that a bomb was planted in the level directly beneath the senate chamber,” T’Lees responded. “We can’t say by whom for certain, but this definitely wasn’t an accident.”

“All my starship’s resources are available to you to aid in investigating this cowardly attack,” Koester said to the Romulans.

“As are the resources of the *Enterprise*,” Data agreed.

“No doubt you suspect the same guilty party behind this attack as I do,” Talik said to the two Starfleet captains. “In order for me to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, I hope you would consider acting as independent investigators into this incident?”

“However I can help,” Koester agreed.

“I am at your service, sir,” Data added.

“Our government thanks you both,” Talik replied. “Perhaps with both of you leading this investigation, Ambassador Kental will finally be assured it was not a Romulan plot to assassinate him and his staff immediately upon their arrival. He seemed quite certain in his convictions following the tragic events of this morning.”

“As you said, Senator, I have my suspicions about exactly who is responsible, but I want the evidence to point us in that direction before I make accusations,” Koester said. “As for Ambassador Kental, perhaps we should all be thanking him.”

“Thanking him? For what?” T’Lees asked.

“For being late.”

When Koester’s response elicited little more than confused looks among the Romulans, Data said, “I believe what Fleet Captain Koester is alluding to is, if not for the Ambassador’s tardiness, we all would have been inside the Senate building for the election of your new Praetor at the time the bomb detonated. Whoever managed to plant the bomb inside the Senate building, positioning it precisely where it would destroy the supports holding up the Senate chamber dome, intended to kill off every member of your government, much as Nero did following the Hobus tragedy, which allowed the warlords to consolidate their power before your Provisional Government could be formed, and would likely have killed numerous members of the Federation and Klingon delegations as collateral damage. Two Federation starships would have been left isolated in Romulan space with the majorities of both their command crews either killed or severely injured.”

“T’K’Lon could have simply claimed control and there wouldn’t have been anyone in a position to stop him,” Koester commented.

“This despicable act must not go un-avenged,” Talik said with a sneer. “Captain Data, Fleet Captain Koester, whatever crew members you assign to investigate this incident will be granted full access to the site of the bombing and given whatever resources you need to conduct an independent, impartial investigation and report back to me when you are complete.”

“Senator Talik, would it be okay if we used Commander T’Lees as our liaison with your provisional government?” Koester asked. He noticed a look pass between Talik and T’Lees, as if a mental conversation quickly passed between the two.

“Whatever you need to get the job done, Fleet Captain Koester,” the senator finally said.

* * * *

Investigators from both Federation starships, under the watchful eye of Romulan military security, searched the remains of the Senate building – collecting evidence for analysis, recording holographic images of the scene and comparing them to blueprints of the building provided by T’Lees, and cataloguing the locations where victims had been found in the rubble. It was late the next morning when the first preliminary report was made to Talik and the other representatives of the provisional government.

“The bomb was composed of the material ultritium-283, an explosive invented by the Romulans approximately seventy five years ago,” reported Captain Data. “It is an extremely powerful chemical explosive, virtually undetectable by conventional sensors – which is probably why it was not discovered prior to the detonation – and is frequently employed in covert operations. It was placed precisely on one of the Senate building’s two major load-bearing structures. Once that column was destroyed, there was no possibility the rest of the building would not collapse in upon itself. Whoever planted the bomb knew precisely where to place it.” Data then changed the image on the viewscreen mounted on the wall, changing the cutaway blueprint of the Senate building with what appeared to be no more than twisted plastic and metal. “The remains of a timing device were found in the vicinity of the blast’s epicenter, a standard microwave pulse ignition device, also of Romulan manufacture – specifically the planet Chaltok IV according to Commander T’Lees. The timer was of a variety that counted down in Romulan time units equivalent to no more than 57 minutes standard time.”

“Which means the bomb had to have been placed no more than an hour prior to detonation,” Fleet Captain Koester remarked.

“The timing device was manufactured on Chaltok IV you say?” Talik asked as he examined an image of what remained of the bomb’s timer on the screen. Data nodded. “The Chaltok system is located well within the territory still controlled by the warlords. Tomolak specifically, if I am not mistaken.”

“That’s what we thought,” Koester agreed. “I’m afraid our fears are confirmed, Senator Talik. The bomb was made from Romulan materials obtained in Romulan space controlled by T’K’Lon and his lieutenants. It is my investigative team’s preliminary opinion – and I must agree based on the evidence I have seen – that T’K’Lon is responsible for this attack on your provisional government.”

“My investigative team likewise agrees,” Data added.

“I’m afraid the evidence is incontrovertible,” Talik said with a sigh. “The question remains; do we retaliate against T’K’Lon and the other warlords? If so – how? – without making life for the civilian population under his control worse?”

“Senator, I fear that attacking T’K’Lon and his forces at this point would simply play into his hands,” Koester said. “It would be a drain on your new government’s resources and he would be able to use it as further propaganda against you – from what T’Lees has told me, and my own experience with him, T’K’Lon isn’t above using civilians as living shields, any deaths of which he can blame directly on your provisional government – particularly if he can hold your forces off or perhaps even defeat you.”

“What do you suggest, Fleet Captain?” Talik asked, the elder Romulan’s eyes looking piercingly at Koester.

“Continue with your current plans. Swear in your new government, elect your new Praetor, then – and only then – publicly announce the findings of our investigation. Let T’K’Lon go on the defensive for attacking New Romulus. Name the victims of this attack. Put faces on this tragedy. Let your entire Empire see T’K’Lon for what he truly is; an evil, self-centered, narcissist with no concern for anyone else and a thirst for total power.”

“I’m not sure how effective that strategy will be, Fleet Captain,” Talik remarked. “But I am willing to try what you suggest, if for no other reason than I believe the Empire needs a centralized government in control as soon as possible in order to survive.”

* * * *

In the VIP quarters aboard the *Dauntless* she was sharing with her husband, Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh answered a hail from the bridge.

"Admiral," said the voice of Setton To'Lock Arbelo. "You have a recorded subspace communiqué coming in from *Starbase 719*."

Raiajh looked at her husband and remarked telepathically, '*I wonder if Mother and Father have finally had too much together time with the children?*' She then turned her attention back to the intercom and verbally said, "Thank you, Monster. Send it down to the VIP quarters."

"On its way, Val," Arbelo responded. A moment later the bulkhead monitor activated and flashed the emblem of Starfleet Command before changing to the image of Captain Cathryn E. Pearson.

"Val," Pearson's image said. "I just received word from the Klingon colony on Kos'Karii that the transport vessel that was carrying Kelvop and his associates never arrived at its destination. No outposts or vessels anywhere close to their flight plan have received any distress calls, so we're not sure what has happened, but we fear the worst. If the base receives any more news on this situation, I'll be sure to forward it along as soon as possible. *Home Plate*, out."

The screen flashed the Starfleet Command emblem once more before going black. Raiajh turned back to her husband once again, a look of concern on her normally placid face.

"What could have happened?" Xaran asked as he moved over closer to his wife.

"There are several possibilities that come to mind. None of them good," Raiajh remarked. "I'm afraid that the Klingon prisoners somehow escaped their cells and managed to take control of the transport ship. If that's the case, they could be anywhere by now."

The Vulcan-Deltan woman pressed the intercom control once again, saying, "Bridge, this is Admiral Raiajh."

"Go ahead, Admiral," Arbelo's voice replied.

"Monster, I need you to transmit a priority-1 communiqué to *Home Plate*. Have Captain Pearson issue an all-points bulletin to all vessels operating in the Fifth Fleet AOR as follows; Be on the look-out for the transport vessel *Osiris*. Any sightings of the ship should be reported to *Starbase 719* or the nearest Starfleet asset as quickly as possible. Do not attempt to stop or board the vessel, as the occupants are dangerous and quite likely armed. Have her include a description and image of the vessel in question. And do it right away. This is important."

"As we speak, Val. Bridge, out."

As the intercom circuit was deactivated, Raiajh looked at her husband once again.

'First the bombing of the Romulan Senate, now this. What else could go so very wrong this week?'

* * * *

Following the preliminary report to the provisional government representatives, T'Lees asked Koester to accompany her to the office she was using in the provisional government office building.

"What is it you want to show me?" Koester asked, both intrigued and nervous. "Not more Romulan ale I hope?"

"I'm on duty today. There will be no drinking," T'Lees scolded before offering her visitor a seat and handing him a Romulan padd.

"What's this?" Koester asked as he activated the device.

"I thought you might like to see the finished product of our handiwork, since you played a large part in helping to write this."

Koester looked at the document the padd was displaying, written in Romulan script. He squinted his eyes slightly and turned the padd several degrees in each direction.

"I hate to admit this," he said. "While I can more or less hold my own in a verbal conversation in Romulan, I'm afraid I never learned to read the language."

T'Lees moved back around the desk and sat on the edge close to Koester, taking back the padd to read from it.

“This is our new Constitution,” T’Lees explained. “A lot of it was based on the founding documents of the Romulan Star Empire first written over a thousand years ago. Some parts, especially in regards to the powers of the central government, are based in large part on your Federation Constitution.” She then started pointing out some of the provisions that had been written into the document; How it called for the formation of a legislative Senate elected by the citizens of the Empire, that the Senate would at first elect a new Praetor from among the Senate body until public elections could be organized within one New Romulus year, the powers specifically accorded the new Praetor – similar to the powers enjoyed by the Federation President, and elected by the citizens of the Empire instead of the intrigue and cronyism of the original Senate – to form a true executive branch of government, and that the Praetor would nominate citizens knowledgeable in the law to form a new Romulan Superior Court, the first judiciary branch ever included as part of the Romulan government, to be confirmed by the Senate and to provide checks and balances to the other government branches.

“I predict our new system of government will be working as planned within a year or two... assuming no more direct attacks on the Senate.”

“And what position will you hold in the new government?” Koester asked.

“I’m only here to help organize everything. As I’m sure you’re aware, civilians seem to lack all organizational skills.”

“I’ve noticed,” Koester said with a smile.

“Once the new government is sworn in, my part in the organization is done. I return to my warbird and continue my career as an officer in the Imperial Navy – admittedly one with several close acquaintances within the civilian government – at least for the time being.”

“Let’s hope one thing this new Constitution of yours provides is some stability – more than you had when a new Praetor would be appointed every time a different political faction gained more power in the Senate every few years, with all the conflict and confusion that normally go along with such regime change.”

“Following your model of an executive elected by the citizens – a single six year term for us as opposed to the four year term cycle you use – should help in that regard,” T’Lees said. “I’m looking forward to some stability after the uncertainty of the last few years.”

“Any idea who the frontrunner for the office of Praetor is at this point?” Koester asked.

“If the rumors I hear hold true, it will likely be Talik,” T’Lees said, unable to hold back a smile.

“Talik? I never pictured the Senator being the type to crave that level of power.”

“Isn’t that precisely the kind of person we would want holding that office?” T’Lees asked. “At least at first?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Koester agreed.

* * * *

That afternoon, Vice Admiral Raiajh contacted Data aboard the *Enterprise*, requesting a tour of the flagship of the Federation and specifying that the tour be conducted by the starship’s first officer. Data obliged the request, and at 1600 hours Raiajh beamed aboard the *Enterprise*, greeted in the transporter room by Commander Worf.

“Welcome aboard, Admiral,” the Klingon officer greeted Raiajh. “I hope you will not mind, but your tour of the ship will have to be somewhat brief today, as I have much work to do in preparation for the Romulan’s next attempt to swear in their new government. Is there anything specific you would like to see aboard the *Enterprise*?”

“Actually, Commander, there is,” Raiajh replied as Worf led the Vulcan-Deltan woman out into the corridor. “Could you please show me torpedo maintenance on deck twenty?”

Worf looked at the admiral with a confused expression, wondering why she would wish to inspect such a little-used area of the ship. He then straightened his shoulders and said, “Of course. Please follow me.”

As they walked to the tubolift, Raiajh noticed how stiffly Worf moved, no doubt the result of the injuries incurred by Nero that almost killed the Klingon officer. A short time later, both officers entered the torpedo maintenance room. As she had hoped, the space was completely deserted.

“Here we are, Admiral,” Worf said. “Is there anything in particular the Admiral wanted to inspect in here?” He noticed with irritation a slight layer of dust on one of the nearby control consoles.

“Actually, Commander, I was just hoping I could speak with you in privacy for a few minutes,” Raiajh replied.

“Speak with me?” Worf repeated uncertainly.

“Yes, Commander. Regarding a recent incident that occurred aboard the *USS Corsair*. I understand you have a brother that also survived the Khitomer massacre?”

“I had a brother named Kurn, yes, but he was very young at the time my family and I went to Khitomer, so he was left with friends of my parents on Qo’noS with the expectation we would return home within a few weeks.”

“Had a brother?” Raiajh repeated, a look of concern on her Vulcan-like face.

“Unfortunately, yes. He died right around the time the Klingon Empire invaded Cardassian space in 2372.”

Raiajh, normally very perceptive, was able to pick up on Worf’s mannerisms as he talked – his clipped speech and facial expressions mixing both annoyance and grief – and was able to tell that the Klingon was not telling her everything he knew.

“What does my brother, who died seventeen years ago, have to do with an incident that occurred recently aboard the *Corsair*, Admiral?” Worf finally asked.

“Is there any possibility you may have other blood relatives? Perhaps even ones you may not be aware of?”

“Well, I was not aware that Kurn existed for over twenty years, so I suppose it may be possible, though highly unlikely. Again I ask, why are you asking me these questions?” His growing annoyance was very evident in Worf’s tone.

“Last month, the *USS Corsair* was hijacked by a group of hired Klingon mercenaries,” Raiajh explained. “After their capture, our medical officer determined that the DNA pattern of one of the mercenary leaders, a Klingon named Rodek, matched your medical records.” Raiajh had been carefully watching Worf for any reaction as she told him what had occurred. Though he tried his best to conceal it, Worf reacted with shock to the mention of Rodek’s name. “Do you know who Rodek is? Are you aware he may be a relative of yours?”

“This... Rodek... He was actively involved in the hijacking of the *Corsair*, not simply – as they say – in the wrong place at the wrong time?” Worf asked neutrally.

“Based on the testimony of the crew following the incident, Rodek was number three in the hierarchy of the mercenaries, and in fact personally committed the cold-blooded murder of Lieutenant Kymbly,” Raiajh explained.

“I find this... difficult to believe...,” Worf said, seeming to catch himself a moment later and adding, “That this Rodek could be in any way related to me. I will make inquiries through connections I maintain within the Empire and see if I can determine exactly which family is responsible for the birth of this t’gla you have described. But tell me; you mention the mercenaries were captured. What is their disposition?”

“They were being extradited back to Kos’Karii to face charges in the murder of Governor Vagh and his family, amongst others.”

“Such charges would likely result in a death penalty!” Worf exclaimed.

“True, if it were not for the fact that somehow the mercenaries managed to escape their captivity aboard the civilian transport that was taking them back and hijacked that ship as well,” Raiajh explained.

“Do we know where they have gone?”

“No, Commander. There have been no reports of the transport being seen since it left *Starbase 719*. That was why I was hoping, if you knew who Rodek was, you might know where he and his comrades might have fled to.”

“As I said, I will make inquiries. If I learn anything that might be of any help, I will inform you, Admiral.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

* * * *

Two days after the bombing of the Romulan Senate building, the rescheduled ceremony was begun – this time on the wide open plaza in front of the rubble that remained of the Senate building.

As the invited guests from the *USS Enterprise*, *USS Dauntless*, and Klingon Embassy watched from seats set up along each side, several dozen Romulan Senators-elect – each one representing a populated planet or sector of Romulan space roughly equal in population – lined up near the center of the plaza, raising their right hands as they affirmed the oath of office to which they had been elected by the people of the free worlds of the former Romulan Star Empire as read by Commander T’Lees.

Once the Senate was sworn into office, T’Lees was replaced at the podium by the new Speaker of the Senate – one of the Senators elected to the position by a procedural vote held prior to the bombing several days earlier – who called the session to order and quickly read the agenda of business for the day. The first order of business was the election of a Praetor pro tempore from among the Senators to lead the executive branch of government until a regular popular election could be organized. The speaker opened the floor to nominations. Within seconds, Talik had been nominated and seconded. The Speaker paused before asking for any further nominations. When no other nominations were forthcoming, the Speaker officially cast the only vote to elect Senator Talik as the new Praetor of the restored Romulan Empire. Talik, the news not entirely unexpected, thanked his colleagues for the opportunity they had granted to him to guide the new Empire forward before recusing himself from the Senate gathering and taking a seat along the side of the plaza near the Federation guests and T’Lees.

“Our next order of business,” the Romulan Speaker stated. “The recognition of the charter establishing an Imperial Army and an Imperial Navy for the purpose of the protection of the Empire from all enemies, foreign and domestic.” The Speaker looked to his left and said, “T’Lees?”

Once again, T’Lees approached the podium and activated the padd she was carrying. She then began to read the charter of the new Romulan Imperial military; what it would consist of in the beginning, what its responsibilities would be, how much of the annual budget it would be allotted, and to whom the officers would report in the civilian government. One of the things Fleet Captain Koester took note of as he listened to T’Lees read was that the new charter did not allow for the creation or maintenance of a new Tal’Shiar – which had in many respects functioned as a paramilitary organization prior to the destruction of Romulus – and wondered how long that would remain true considering Romulan history and politics.

As T’Lees finished, the Speaker returned to the podium and called for a vote on the establishment of the Romulan military. As expected, the vote was passed unanimously. T’Lees turned to return to her seat for the remainder of the ceremony when the Speaker called her name.

“T’Lees, your participation in the restoration of the Romulan government has been invaluable. It is my understanding that, with the restoration of the Senate and the appointment of the Praetor, your wishes are to return to the Imperial fleet. Would you consider the Senate’s appointment as Admiral of the Imperial Navy?”

A shock ran down T’Lees’ spine as a hollow formed in the pit of her stomach. For a moment, she began to imagine what she could do as Fleet Admiral – how she would be able to influence the Imperial Navy for generations to come. She looked toward Talik, who smiled at her proudly. Then she started to realize that the offer did not feel right. She glanced toward the side of the plaza, at the face of Fleet Captain Koester, who looked shocked and a little afraid, and remembered some of the conversations they had shared in darkened lounges aboard *Starbase 719* with bottles of ale. With great strength of will, she looked back at the new Speaker of the Senate.

“Mister Speaker, I am honored by your request. However, I am but a warbird commander. It is what I have aspired to be. With all due respect, I wish to return to my first, best calling.”

“Are you sure, T’Lees?” the Speaker asked. “Opportunities like this do not occur every day.”

“I’m positive,” T’Lees replied with certainty.

“Very well,” the Speaker said with a nod. “In that case, please raise your right hand and repeat after me. I, state your name...”

“I, T’Lees...”

“...Having been appointed an officer in the Imperial Romulan Navy at the rank of Commander...”

T’Lees repeated the statement, a smile starting to spread on her lips.

“...Do solemnly swear...”

Again T'Lees repeated the declaration.

"...That I will support and defend the Constitution of the Romulan Empire against all enemies; foreign and domestic..."

"...That I will support and defend the Constitution of the Romulan Empire against ALL enemies, foreign and DOMESTIC..." T'Lees made a point of emphasizing the word all and the final word of the sentence, the images of carnage occurring in the very building in front of her at that moment playing through her memory and silently vowing her own revenge. She then repeated the remainder of her new oath in front of the Senate and all the witnesses present.

"...That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter."

The Speaker moved around the podium, handing T'Lees the padd from which he had read as he likewise offered her a handshake. "Congratulations, COMMANDER T'Lees. On behalf of the Romulan Senate, I appoint you the commanding officer of the Imperial Romulan Flagship *Vedrex*."

T'Lees' smile returned, and as the gathered witnesses applauded, she looked to the side as best she could – without turning her head too much – to see Fleet Captain Koester applauding more enthusiastically than those around him, a look of pride on his face that the Romulan woman found herself appreciating more than all the applause combined.

After what seemed like several minutes, T'Lees returned to her seat, reading through the orders on the padd she had been handed officially reinstating her command of the *Vedrex* as Praetor Talik approached the podium.

"Mister Speaker," Talik said, handing the senator the padd he had been carrying. "I submit to the Senate – for their review – the names of those citizens I know to be well versed in the laws of the former Romulan Star Empire, upon which our new laws will be based, whom I wish to nominate to the positions of Justice on the Imperial Superior Court."

"Praetor Talik, on behalf of the Imperial Senate, I accept your nominations for the appointments of Justice to the new Imperial Superior Court," the Speaker responded, accepting the padd.

One of the Senators in the plaza immediately stood up and said, "I make a motion that the list of nominees be tabled until the next official meeting of the Senate, as this occasion and this time are not conducive to the deliberations required of such an important issue."

"I second the motion," one of the female senators called out immediately after.

As both senators sat back down, the Speaker addressed the Senate and said, "I have a motion and a second to table the nominations to the Superior Court until the next official session of the Senate. Any discussion?" There was none. "All in favor?" Every senator in the plaza raised their hand and said, "Aye." "Any opposed?" There was no opposition. "This matter is tabled until the next official session of the Imperial Senate. Any other business to be brought to the attention of the Senate during this session?"

"If I may, Mister Speaker?" Praetor Talik asked. "I would ask that Fleet Captain Peter Koester of the Federation Starfleet, who is acting as head of the independent investigation into the bombing of the Senate building, come forward to make a preliminary report to the Senate while it remains in session?" There were no objections from any of the senators present, and in fact several had been hoping just such a report would be made that day.

Fleet Captain Koester, not expecting to be called to make such a report at the present time, looked at his fellow officers around him. Commander Arbelo prompted him to move toward the podium, whispering he could at least sum up the report he had given Talik and the other government representatives the previous day. Slightly nervous to suddenly find himself addressing the entire government of a foreign empire – especially since his remarks were going to be broadcast live over subspace to every planet in the sector and beyond – he made his way down to the plaza, pausing as he felt an arm grasp the sleeve of his dress uniform. He looked down to find T'Lees holding his arm and passing yet another Romulan padd to him.

"Everything you need is on there based on your preliminary report yesterday," she said with a reassuring smile.

Feeling slightly more composed, Koester returned the smile, then made his way to the podium, greeting first Praetor Talik and then the Speaker of the Senate. He then turned and addressed the Senate.

“Senators, over the course of the last 48 hours, teams from both the *USS Enterprise* and the *USS Dauntless* – at the request of provisional government officials – began investigating the bombing of the new Senate building that resulted in the total destruction of the building and the injury – in several cases extremely serious – of thirty eight individuals. It was only by the grace of some divine miracle that no one was killed in the blast. What we have determined thus far will have serious repercussions for this newly formed Romulan central government.”

Koester then listed the facts as they were known; the type of bomb and timing device that was used, their origin and manufacture, where the bomb was placed, and why it caused the level of damage that it did.

“Short of a signed confession, we can only speculate at this time what person or persons are responsible for this heinous attack on your government,” Koester said in conclusion. “All evidence at this time, especially in light of the threats received by the provisional government in the days leading to this ceremony and the bombing of the Senate building, points towards this act being perpetrated by – or at the behest of – the former Imperial military officers that now refer to themselves as warlords, primarily Commander T’K’Lon. While we have not yet discovered any direct evidence indicating T’K’Lon and his associates, the evidence we do have provides a strong circumstantial case against the warlords and we have not uncovered any evidence that would point at any other suspects at this point. This concludes our investigative team’s preliminary report to the Romulan Senate.”

There was a strange silence in the Plaza, the only sound that of the gentle breeze blowing through and the birds flying overhead. Koester was thanked for his presentation by the Speaker of the Senate and he quickly returned to his seat, giving T’Lees back her padd as he passed. Meanwhile, Praetor Talik stepped back behind the podium and addressed the Senate.

“I believe the evidence is clear. Commander T’K’Lon has been attempting to undermine the provisional government since it formed shortly after the Hobus Tragedy. There is no doubt in my mind that his methods have now turned exceedingly violent and that he and his fellow so-called warlords – actually traitors to the Empire – are responsible for the heinous act that resulted in the injury of dozens of citizens.

“As Praetor of the newly established Romulan Imperial Government, I declare T’K’Lon and his ilk to be terrorists, with whom my government will not negotiate. They can either surrender themselves to lawful authorities and face justice, or they can remain hunted fugitives. The choice is theirs alone. Either way, the entirety of Romulan space will once again be under the authority of the Imperial Central Government.”

And there it was, Fleet Captain Koester thought to himself. The gauntlet had been thrown by Praetor Talik. The entire Empire now knew that T’K’Lon was responsible for the attack on the Senate. Now the Romulan warlord would see exactly how many of his ‘subjects’ truly supported him. The next few days would be interesting ones. It was too bad that the *Dauntless* would be departing New Romulus before any of the real fireworks began.

* * * *

Following the formal ceremony, the Federation and Klingon guests had returned to their ships, and Praetor Talik, his aides, and Comander T’Lees returned to the office building the provisional government had been using, since what were supposed to be the new official government offices had been destroyed when the Senate building was imploded.

“All things considered, I think the ceremony went well,” Talik remarked as he entered his office.

“I agree, to a point, Sen... Praetor,” T’Lees said, quickly correcting herself as she spoke. “I knew you planned to let the Empire know about the evidence we had uncovered, but your statement regarding T’K’Lon...!”

“What about it?” Talik asked as he sat down behind his desk.

“You all but declared war on the warlords. How can you be sure it’s not going to blow up in our face? That they won’t use your accusation as an excuse to attack us openly? Are we strong enough yet to defend against such an attack?” T’Lees asked. “You have a good number of warbird crews who, like the *Vedrex*, are loyal to the new government, but I still believe we are outnumbered by the fleet controlled by T’K’Lon and his comrades. If civil war were to erupt, I can’t be certain our side would prevail.”

“I do not think T’K’Lon will openly attack. It would make him appear to be the aggressor,” Talik replied. “Image is everything to men like T’K’Lon. My purpose was simply to put the facts in the public eye, make the citizens aware that T’K’Lon is far from the benevolent leader he is purporting himself to be.” Talik then looked at his Chief of Staff and asked, “Now, is there anything more on the agenda for today?”

The aide consulted his padd and said, “Nothing specific scheduled. You have a dinner appointment with several candidates for the position of Education Minister this evening, but that was scheduled for when the swearing in of the government was supposed to happen two days ago. I can contact the candidates and re-schedule if you desire.”

“Please,” Talik said. “The last thing I need after a long day such as this is to have dinner with half a dozen potential ministers who want to talk about nothing but school and education all night long. Anything else?”

“Yes, Praetor. Shortly after the ceremony, I was contacted by one of the Federation starships. The Federation Ambassador to Vulcan would like to host a congratulatory reception aboard the *USS Enterprise* one evening before our Federation guests depart our space. All Imperial government officials and the Klingon diplomatic delegation are invited to attend as well.”

Talik looked at T’Lees and said, “It will be nice once we can put all these receptions and parties behind us and get down to the actual business of running an Empire.”

“The pomp and ceremony comes with the office,” T’Lees chided. “I think you should agree. Such an event – especially one hosted by the Federation ambassador to Vulcan – would only promote ties between us and our Vulcan cousins.”

Talik smiled a knowing smile as he said, “I think you just want another opportunity to get drunk with Fleet Captain Koester.”

“As much as the thought of another morning hung-over appeals to me, the Federation rarely serves real alcohol at their formal events,” T’Lees replied.

“The Fleet Captain, and even Admiral Raijah, have been known to hide away a few bottles of good ale. We can always hope.” At the warbird commander’s annoyed look, Talik turned to his Chief of Staff and said, “Very well. Contact Ambassador Picard aboard the *Enterprise* and tell him we would be happy to attend his reception the night after tomorrow. Then contact the *Koraga* and inform Ambassador Kental of the Federation’s invitation.”

“Very good, Praetor,” the aide replied before leaving the office to make the arrangements. Once he was gone, Talik looked at T’Lees again.

“Now, it looks like you and Fleet Captain Koester have gotten quite close since he’s been here,” the newly elected Praetor remarked. “Tell me how your relationship with the Federation has...”

Talik was interrupted as another aide burst into the office, not even knocking or announcing himself before coming in.

“Praetor! There is a message coming in over subspace from Alpha Pictorus!” he exclaimed.

“T’K’Lon?” Talik asked. The aide nodded.

Talik reached over and activated his wall monitor. The screen displayed the image of the Imperial Romulan Seal, a slightly modified version of the Great Bird-of-Prey the Romulans had been using as an emblem for decades, before blinking to the unmistakable image of Lord T’K’Lon. His ornate clothing, if anything, seemed even more ostentatious than when Talik and T’Lees had last seen him.

“I want to make absolutely clear that the lies the illegitimate government on Belak III have been attempting to pass off on you, the citizens of the Romulan Star Empire, are just that... LIES!” T’K’Lon stated, pounding his arm on the table in front of him to emphasize his point. “Neither I nor my fellow warlords, the true rulers of the Empire since the Hobus Tragedy destroyed our homeworld, had any involvement - active or passive - with the alleged incident that took place on Belak III several days ago. It is my belief that Talik and his co-conspirators are the ones responsible for the destruction of their building and the injury to dozens of loyal Romulan citizens in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of my government and that they should be held responsible for their crimes.”

T’K’Lon’s expression took on one of utter contempt as he added, “Since I am positive Talik will use this alleged act of terrorism as an excuse to attack and eliminate me and my fellow warlords, I have ordered all warbirds

loyal to me to position themselves in key sectors of space in order to protect ourselves and our fledgling government.”

T’Lees looked at Talik and silently mouthed the words, ‘Fledgling government?’ Talik looked back, mild confusion on the elder Romulan’s face, and shrugged.

“I also promise this: While I am NOT responsible for the supposed terrorist attack on Belak III, unless Talik’s illegitimate government steps aside and recognizes my rule of the Empire, my forces WILL attack them on their own turf sooner than they think possible. Long live the Empire!”

The screen immediately went black. T’Lees again looked at the newly elected Praetor, her stomach starting to knot with dread.

* * * *

Over the course of the next day, subspace monitoring posts confirmed dozens of warbirds under the command of officers loyal to T’K’Lon and the warlords had positioned themselves directly along the line separating the half of the Empire controlled by the warlords and the half under the control of the government on New Romulus, effectively blockading the so-called southern half of the Empire and trapping numerous worlds behind what was quickly dubbed the Duranium Curtain.

Meanwhile, aboard the *Enterprise*, Commander Worf had just gotten off watch and entered his quarters. He was pulling his baldric over his head when he noticed the computer monitor was indicating he had a message waiting for him.

“Computer, play back message,” the Klingon first officer ordered.

The monitor screen blinked to the image of an elder Klingon man. From the bare steel walls and display of weapons behind him, it was evident the message was being transmitted from a world within the Klingon Empire if not the homeworld, Qo’noS, itself.

“Worf,” Noggra, an old friend and ally of the House of Mogh, said. “I must admit, I was very surprised by the information you sent me. Until I received your message, I was sure Rodek had been killed during the occupation of Romulan space. What I have been able to piece together from my sources is that Rodek was serving aboard the *IKV Gorkon* when Imperial Intelligence took notice of him for some reason. I thought at first perhaps I had not been careful enough when I brought Rodek into my House and that the Intelligence Service had determined who he really was, but several months later he returned to the *Gorkon* without explanation. Then, shortly after the *Gorkon* took part in the invasion and occupation of Romulan territory, Rodek was dismissed from the Imperial Klingon Defense Force. No one can give me an exact reason why, not even my connections on the High Counsel, but rumor has it he committed an act of such overt dishonor that the captain of the *Gorkon* had no other choice than to discharge him and remove him from his vessel immediately. The last I was able to determine, Rodek was still in Romulan space somewhere in the Onias sector. I tried to make further inquiries into his whereabouts, but all went unanswered. I had hoped Rodek would eventually find his way home to Qo’noS. Until I received your communiqué, I had no idea he had made his way to Kos’Karii instead.” Noggra sighed and then took a deep breath, a sad look in his eyes as he added, “I wish I could offer you more information. If you manage to find Rodek face to face, try and convince him to return to Qo’noS. I am... concerned for his well being. Noggra, out.”

As the monitor turned blank, Worf could not help but let his emotions get the better of him. “Impossible!” he said. “My brother is not without honor! Dismissed from the IKDF for a dishonorable act?” Worf found himself having trouble believing what his own ears had just been told. “There is something more to this situation we are not being told, Noggra. But what?”

* * * *

Stardate 66985.5

The time was 1900 hours aboard the *Enterprise*, and Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester and his senior staff; Commander Setton To'Lock Arbelo, Commander Alasdair Wallace, Counselor Tanzia Gera, Commander Jeffrey Bloom, Lt Commander Thomas Riker, Major April Mendez, and Master Chief Petty Officer Pono Kyman beamed aboard along with Admirals Fil and Raiajh, Dr. Xaran, Captain Harkonnen, Lt Commander Quintero, and Lieutenants William Hyland III and Joella Faggio and Ensign Cassie Koester. They were greeted in the transporter room by one of the *Enterprise's* young ensigns, who escorted the guests to Ambassador Picard's reception in 10-Forward.

On the bridge, Captain Data was still sitting in the command chair, growing concerned.

"Wow!" the young officer manning the helm commented. "The skies are sure getting crowded. I don't think I've ever seen so many Romulan ships all in one place before."

"Considering the threat received by the new Praetor yesterday, it is not altogether surprising that the Romulans would choose to heavily protect their new homeworld, Ensign," Data remarked as Worf arrived to relieve him of the bridge and allow the captain to attend Ambassador Picard's reception. "I do have my concerns, considering how many of these ships arrived within the last day and not being fully confident of the loyalties of each vessel's crew."

"Do you suspect T'K'Lon will try something while the *Enterprise* and *Dauntless* are still in orbit?" Worf asked.

"It is not what happens while we are here that concerns me, Commander," Data replied. "It is what will occur once we are gone." He gestured at the main viewer, where dozens of warbirds and smaller vessels could be seen in orbit. "With no objective witnesses remaining once we and the *Dauntless* depart tomorrow, half of these vessels could prove themselves loyal to the warlords and release a rain of ruin on Tegra before the loyal military could start to react."

"Unfortunately for Praetor Talik, that is an internal Romulan matter we can do little about," Worf replied before adding, "I am ready to relieve you, Captain."

"Are you certain you do not wish to attend the reception, Mister Worf?" Data asked. "I could have another officer take the conn..."

"No!" Worf said, perhaps a bit more forcefully than intended. "I mean, no, thank you, sir. I prefer to... avoid such pleasantries whenever possible."

"I understand," Data said before heading to the nearest turbolift. "I hope you experience a quiet watch."

Worf said nothing as he assumed his place in the center seat and Data disappeared inside the turbolift. The Klingon gazed at the viewer for a few moments in silence, until he noticed the orbit of one warbird – an old D'derridex-class vessel – was at such an angle that it would intercept that of the *Enterprise* eventually.

"Mister Daniels," he said to the chief of security standing behind the tactical console. "Keep an eye on that warbird just off our port bow. Let me know if and when its orbit will come within 25 kilometers of us."

"Aye, Commander," Daniels replied.

* * * *

A few minutes later, the carved wood doors of 10-Forward opened and Captain Data entered, looking around the lounge. The room was crowded with Starfleet personnel, Romulan government officials, and several Klingon diplomats. To one side he noticed Rear Admiral Janeway talking with Ambassador Struminski, the new Federation Ambassador to New Romulus. Across the room he saw Fleet Captain Koester, Vice Admiral Raiajh, and several others having an animated conversation with Ambassador Jean-Luc Picard. Elsewhere one of the new Romulan Senators was attempting to engage Klingon Ambassador Kental in conversation, and it looked like the Ambassador was a hair's-breadth away from backhanding the Romulan across the face for whatever it was he was saying.

Data started moving toward the small group surrounding Ambassador Picard when the lounge doors opened again and a crew member announced, “Ladies and gentlebeings, Praetor Talik and his staff.”

Data’s golden eyes turned to look as Talik, several aides, and a trio of military officers – including Commander T’Lees – entered the room, prompting applause from the Romulan senators first, which soon spread to almost everyone in the lounge except the Klingons. Talik immediately made his way toward Picard to thank him for hosting the reception and all the assistance the Federation provided during the bombing investigation. T’Lees followed the Praetor, since it allowed her to join Fleet Captain Koester without appearing as if that were her sole purpose for being there.

“Again, Ambassador Picard, my thanks for attending our ceremony and the help your Starfleet has provided in the difficult days that followed,” Talik was saying to the bald-headed human man. “And for hosting this function, the first official reception of the new Imperial government.” Picard smiled warmly in return.

“It was my pleasure, Praetor Talik,” the ambassador replied. “It is not often we have the opportunity to promote such close relations with the Romulan government. I was hoping perhaps we could use this opportunity to open a dialogue that will lead to more open borders between our territories, leading perhaps to open trade and cooperation?”

“Are you suggesting the liquidation of the Neutral Zone, Ambassador?” Talik asked with a smile.

“That could be the eventual goal,” Picard confirmed.

“A border between the Federation and Romulan Empire without a Neutral Zone. I would never have thought that possible in my lifetime,” Talik mused. “The prospect seems almost frightening.”

“It would open up a great many worlds and vital resources that have been cut off for over two centuries to both our cultures,” Picard pointed out.

As Picard and the Praetor continued to converse, Fleet Captain Koester moved over to stand next to Commander T’Lees. “Can I buy you a drink?” he asked casually. “I think the Ambassador arranged for Romulan Ale to be served tonight.”

“You really think that would be a good idea, Peter?” T’Lees asked with a smile as the pair moved off away from the crowd.

“No, which is why I’m sticking to synthahol tonight,” Koester said, holding up his glass.

T’Lees smiled again and said, “In honor of the occasion, I’ll have what you’re having.”

Koester nodded and led T’Lees over toward the nearby bar.

* * * *

“Commander,” said Daniels from the tactical post.

“Yes, Mister Daniels?” Worf replied.

“That warbird you asked me to keep an eye on has just crossed inside the 25 kilometer line,” the tactical officer reported.

“Very well. Inform the orbital traffic control in Tegra that we are increasing our orbital altitude by one hundred kilometers in order to avoid a potential collision,” Worf ordered. Then, as Daniels acknowledged and contacted the Romulan orbital traffic control, the Klingon ordered, “Helm, increase altitude Z-plus 100 kilometers.”

“Increasing orbital altitude, Z-plus 100 kilometers,” the helmsman acknowledged. Within second the surface of New Romulus fell further away.

“That should keep us out of that warbird’s path,” Worf remarked with a satisfied smirk before he noticed the Romulan vessel in question also start to maneuver.

“Commander, that warbird is also increasing altitude,” Daniels reported.

“So I see,” Worf said with a subtle growl.

* * * *

“Bridge to Captain Data.”

Data excused himself from his conversation with the new Federation ambassador to the Romulan Empire and stepped away closer to the forward windows before tapping his combadge. “This is Data,” he responded.

“Captain,” said the voice of Commander Worf. “I believe we have a situation. I maneuvered the ship to avoid a conflicting orbit with one of the Romulan warbirds, but now that warbird is maneuvering to intercept us once again. I have already initiated yellow alert.”

“Understood,” Data responded. “I’m on my way back to the bridge.”

Data deactivated his combadge and started moving toward the lounge door, which was noticed by both Fleet Captain Koester and Commander T’Lees.

“Something wrong, Captain?” Koester asked.

“It may be nothing,” Data replied. “On the other hand, we may be about to come under attack. Mister Worf has informed me a warbird sharing our orbit has maneuvered to intercept us.”

Koester glanced at T’Lees, then at all the guests gathered in the lounge.

“We have half the new Romulan government in this room, most of them the highest government officials,” he remarked. “If that warbird is loyal to T’K’Lon instead of the new government, they could wipe out most of the opposition in one act and cause chaos throughout the Romulan Empire once again!”

“We need to get Praetor Talik and his staff off this ship,” T’Lees suggested.

“The *Enterprise* is at yellow alert and shields have been raised,” Data informed. “It appears the Praetor and his staff will be here for the duration, one way or the other.”

“Request permission for Commander T’Lees and I to accompany you to the bridge, Captain,” Koester asked.

“Granted,” Data said with a nod before all three officers exited the lounge to the notice of both Picard and Talik.

Moments later the trio arrived on the bridge, Data assuming the center seat while Worf moved to the chair to the right and Koester and T’Lees stood behind the captain’s chair. “Status?” Data asked.

“The Romulan vessel has made no overtly hostile moves other than changing course to intercept us,” Worf reported. “Mister Daniels has not detected them arming weapons or raising shields. Our own shields are raised, but weapons systems remain at stand-by.”

“Very well. Ops, hail the Romulan vessel and inquire what their intentions are,” the captain ordered.

“No response, Captain,” the lieutenant at ops reported a few moments later.

“I do not like the looks of this,” Worf remarked.

“Neither do I,” Data agreed. He then looked back over his shoulder and asked, “Fleet Captain, do you have any suggestions?”

“Perhaps if Commander T’Lees were to hail the ship they might respond?” Koester suggested, looking at his Romulan companion.

“I suppose it would be worth a shot,” T’Lees agreed.

“A feasible idea,” Data remarked. “Open hailing frequencies once again.”

As the transmitter chimed, Data nodded toward the Romulan woman.

“This is Commander T’Lees of the Imperial Flagship *Vedrex*, currently aboard the Federation ship *Enterprise*. Respond on this channel immediately.”

It appeared at first that T’Lees’ hail would also be ignored. Then a male voice, sounding angry, finally sounded through the bridge speakers, saying, “Traitors to the Empire will receive their due justice! The representatives of the illegitimate government will be destroyed, along with their allied Federation interlopers, and Lord T’K’Lon will finally bring the entire empire together under his rule!”

“Oh hell,” Koester remarked.

“Warbird has just armed torpedoes and disruptors!” Daniels called out.

“Sound red alert. Arm all weapons systems,” Data ordered just as the first disruptor beam struck the *Enterprise*’s shields. The ship shook violently as the alert klaxon sounded throughout the ship.

“Minor power drain on the forward shields,” Daniels reported. “No damage.”

“Return fire!” Worf ordered.

The *Enterprise* fired phasers and launched a barrage of photon torpedoes, but they all detonated harmlessly against the Romulan vessel’s shields.

“Romulan ship has their shields set to double front,” Daniels reported after assessing his sensor readings. “They’re vulnerable to the rear with no shields protecting the aft half of their ship!”

“Is there any way we can maneuver around them and take advantage of that, Data?” Koester asked.

“I do not believe we could maneuver quickly enough to place the unprotected area of their ship within our firing arc without them maneuvering to counter,” Data replied.

“Where’s the *Dauntless*?” Koester inquired.

“Thanks mainly to our maneuver trying to avoid that warbird, the *Dauntless* is too far away to respond quickly,” Daniels replied.

“Commander T’Lees,” Data said, looking at the Romulan woman. “Is there any chance other ships of your fleet will render aid?”

“Without direct orders from the Admiralty or Praetor Talik himself, given the situation of a Romulan ship attacking a Federation ship, most warbird commanders I know would either sit back and observe to ascertain what is happening or, if they step in, will do so on the side of the warbird.”

As if in confirmation of T’Lees assessment, the few Romulan ships in lower orbit visible on the main viewscreen were already maneuvering to avoid the battle. As the *Enterprise* shuddered again, one of the turbolifts opened and Picard, Talik, and the Praetor’s Chief of Staff emerged.

“What’s going on?” Talik demanded to know.

“It appears one of the warbirds loyal to T’K’Lon managed to integrate itself into the fleet orbiting New Romulus prior to the ceremonies,” Koester explained. “He intends to destroy this ship and all the new government officials aboard it.”

“What is our status?” Picard asked, stepping down next to Worf’s seat.

“We’re holding our own for the moment, Ambassador,” Data replied. “We can always withdraw, assuming no other Romulan vessels join the battle against us and assuming the commander of that ship does not get in a lucky shot.”

The warbird fired its disruptors again. This time, as they struck the *Enterprise*’s shields the ship shook more violently than before – almost knocking Koester, T’Lees, and Talik to the deck – and the bridge lighting dimmed momentarily as sparks flew from one of the consoles behind Daniels.

“Warbird has increased its weapon strength, and they happened to catch us just as the shields were recycling. Shield 4 is down by 50%.”

“There was your lucky shot, Captain Data,” Talik remarked.

“...And here comes your reinforcements!” Koester exclaimed, pointing at the viewscreen where a second ship was decloaking, its bow aimed directly at the *Enterprise*.

“Is that...? Is that a Romulan ship?” Picard asked, his hands gripping the back of Worf’s chair.

The vessel that had just become visible looked like a mixture of both Romulan and Klingon technology, part of the hull resembling the Romulan Mogai-class like T’Lees’ *IRW Vedrex* with broad wings and tapered warp nacelles, while the bow section resembled a Vor’cha-class Klingon battlecruiser.

“The new vessel is arming weapons!” Daniels reported.

“Lock phasers on the new ship and fire, before their shields can fully raise!” Worf ordered.

“Second vessel is firing! It’s... Wait!” Daniels shouted.

On the viewscreen, the new ship fired its disruptors, but instead of aiming at the *Enterprise*, they struck the unprotected aft end of the D’erridex-class warbird. Almost immediately one of the Romulan ship’s warp nacelles went dark and explosions erupted along the lower hull of the ship.

“It appears the newcomer is on our side, Captain Data,” Picard remarked as he watched the new ship launch a second volley against T’K’Lon’s loyal vessel. The warbird tried to react, beginning to maneuver to bring its weapons to bear on the new ship, but this only left its vulnerable end open to attack by the *Enterprise*.

“Fire at will,” Data ordered.

Several phaser beams and torpedoes struck the warbird, causing the forward shields to collapse under the onslaught of the second ship's weapons fire. Huge sections of the warbird started to explode, the narrow neck area snapping apart and the bow section falling planetward.

"Helm, move us away, quickly!" Data ordered. Within seconds both the *Enterprise* and the unidentified vessel activated full impulse and maneuvered away from the remaining section of the warbird, managing to escape the blast radius just as the hull first exploded, then collapsed in on itself as its artificial singularity power source absorbed the debris and itself collapsed into nothingness.

"Well, that was exciting," Koester remarked. "Is everyone okay?"

As everyone on the bridge acknowledged there were no real injuries, Data requested, "Damage report?"

"Minor damage to the starboard warp nacelle pylon," the officer at the engineering station reported. "Shield generators can use an overhaul, but that can wait until we're back home."

The port turbolift opened once again, and Admirals Fil and Raiajh, Captain Harkonnen, and Dr. Xaran stepped out on the bridge, lining the aft deck in front of the master situations monitor.

"Are we done shaking the ship around?" Raiajh asked, looking around. "What's going on?"

"One of the warbird commanders loyal to Commander T'K'Lon managed to infiltrate the fleet in orbit of New Romulus and tried to destroy the *Enterprise* with most of the new Romulan government aboard," Koester explained. "We received some unexpected help when things started to look bad." He pointed at the unidentified ship on the viewscreen.

"Whose ship is that?" Harkonnen asked.

"We do not yet know, Commander," Data replied before ordering, "Open hailing frequencies. I want to speak to the commander of that other vessel and find out who they are and where they came from."

"We're receiving a reply to our hail," the ops officer reported.

"On screen," Data ordered as he stood up. A moment later the viewscreen image blinked to the interior of the other ship. From the design of the consoles and the haze that permeated the air, it was painfully obvious the vessel was of Klingon origin. The image of the Klingon male sitting in the commander's seat caused Worf to stand up and stare.

"Rodek?!" he asked as if not believing his eyes.

"Yes, Worf. It's me," Rodek replied.

Worf's expression was a mixture of confusion and outrage as he asked, "How...? Why...?"

"Relax, Brother. I will explain everything."

Raiajh looked at Worf when Rodek called him 'Brother,' noting the Klingon first officer did not object.

"Captain Data, to explain why I did what I have done, I must tell you I am an operative of Imperial Intelligence," Rodek said. "As for how...? That will take much more explanation. A few of your years ago, I agreed to become an operative for Imperial Intelligence. Somehow they learned of my past..." He looked right through the viewscreen at Worf. "Yes, I can now remember parts of my original life before I became Rodek. Enough to know I am a Son of Mogh and your brother, Worf. When the Intelligence branch determined that a side effect of my memory wipe was the ability for them to partition my sub-conscious, allowing me the ability to act as a deep-cover operative, they offered me the opportunity to restore my honor and serve the Empire again."

Raiajh stepped forward, addressing the Klingon on the viewscreen as she demanded to know, "And what interest did Klingon Imperial Intelligence have in the capture of the *USS Corsair* and the murder of several members of her crew?"

"None, Admiral," Rodek admitted. "After being removed from the *IKV Gorkon* the first time, I was covertly trained to be an agent of the Chancellor and placed in deep cover back among the *Gorkon* crew until I was needed. My true mission was buried in my sub-conscious mind so deeply that even I had no idea what my true purpose was; to covertly guide the newly forming Romulan government in the direction of allying with the Empire. When the warlords took over several sectors of Romulan space, my handlers were accidentally killed during riots on Vendor II as Imperial forces withdrew back toward Klingon space. Unintentionally I was left adrift and without purpose and without honor among my people and by chance fell in with criminal elements, first the Orion Syndicate in the Neutral Zone and later, after eventually leaving Romulan space, and finding my way to Kos'Karii. There I

got caught up in the revenge plot of Kelvop and Vixares.” He looked at Raiajh and Harkonnen through the viewscreen and, looking as remorseful as any Klingon could, said, “I offer my apologies for my role in the hijacking of the *Corsair* and the deaths of members of its crew. If you wish, when this mission is complete, I will return with you to *Starbase 719* and face punishment.”

“What about all your fellow mercenaries?” Harkonnen asked harshly. “Where did they go when you escaped from the transport taking you back to Kos’Karii? Are they as willing to accept punishment as you claim to be?”

“The mercenaries I was with have not escaped, Commander,” Rodek replied. “Only I, with the help of this vessel and its crew – all members of the Imperial Intelligence branch – escaped from the transport. I was then activated by the Intelligence branch, my memories and knowledge of my mission restored, and came here to help prevent Lord T’K’Lon from assuming the total power he desires. The rest were left behind to meet whatever fate Kahless has dealt to them.”

Raiajh and Harkonnen still looked outraged at the events that had occurred aboard the *Corsair*, until Praetor Talik moved up between the two Starfleet officers.

“Admiral Raiajh, Captain Harkonnen – I realize the events that resulted in the deaths of your crew members seem heinous, but under the circumstances, Rodek appears to have been incapable of acting in an honorable manner through no fault of his own. That in addition to his actions here today, preventing the assassination of the majority of my new government – including myself – must make me implore you to reconsider arresting and prosecuting him for his crimes.”

Harkonnen’s attitude remained hostile, but Raiajh looked at the Romulan Praetor, her expression thoughtful. She then looked at Worf, who still looked confused and hurt by the events that had transpired and made a decision.

“Perhaps you are correct, Praetor. I will agree not to press charges against Rodek on the condition he not enter the territory of the Fifth Fleet AOR – including the Klingon colony on Kos’Karii – at least as long as I am Sector Coordinator and assigned to *Starbase 719*.”

Harkonnen looked unhappy with the admiral’s decision, but kept his opinion to himself.

“Rodek,” Talik said, addressing the Klingon on the viewscreen. “I thank you for your assistance here today, but given the circumstances, I request you and your ship leave the territory of the Romulan Empire.”

“Understood,” Rodek replied. “AvvI, out.”

The communication ended and the viewscreen blinked back to the image of the Klingon intel-branch ship. The *Enterprise* crew and the guests on the bridge watched as the ship maneuvered to leave orbit.

“Praetor, would you like me to have the *Vedrex* escort that ship to the edge of our territorial space?” T’Lees asked.

“No, Commander,” Talik replied. “I have a feeling we can trust this Rodek fellow to do as he has promised.”

As the Romulans, Koester, Harkonnen, and Raiajh moved toward the nearest turbolift, Ambassador Picard paused, his eyes looking closely at the *Enterprise*’s first officer.

“Are you okay, Mister Worf,” the former starship commander asked.

Worf seemed to awake from his own inner thoughts. He looked at Picard with a mixture of anger and relief as he said, “I am fine, Ambassador. It was just... I am still trying to work things out in my mind.”

“I noticed Rodek called you brother, and himself a Son of Mogh,” Picard commented. “I knew your brother Kurn, but I was unaware you had any other brothers.”

A brief flare of anger appeared in Worf’s eyes before he managed to overcome the emotion and said, “It is a long – and complicated – story, Ambassador. Perhaps for some other time?”

“Understood, Mister Worf,” Picard said as he too headed for the turbolift to return to 10-Forward, where undoubtedly the social gathering had already ended given the circumstances.

* * * *

Lord T’K’Lon read the report again. His operation to assassinate the new Romulan government, weeks in the planning, with the added bonus of the destruction of one or more of the loathed Federation Starfleet battlecruisers, had failed. Another warbird loyal to his cause – destroyed! Curling his right hand into a fist, he pounded it on top of his desk as he flung the padd across the room. It shattered as it hit the wall, breaking into myriad pieces that fell to the floor.

“Tomalak!” he called out.

A moment later the slightly older Romulan former commander – now fellow warlord – entered the room.

“You called for me, Lord T’K’Lon?” Tomalak said in his typically ingratiating manner.

“We must move up our timetable,” T’K’Lon stated. “We can wait no longer.”

A slight frown crossed Tomalak’s face as he said, “Our forces are almost in position, but we do not have the resources to invade and hold the sectors under the control of Talik and the new Senate.”

“Slight change in plans,” T’K’Lon said with an evil looking grin. “We will not be taking control of all the Empire. Not yet! First we must return to our roots! To the origins of our Empire.”

“And how do you propose we do that, my Lord?”

“The Empire is broken in two. Someday I will reunite it, but for now I will take what I can control. Contact our forces and tell them, effective immediately, form the line at their current position. Our border is sealed. Talik can start his new Empire! We shall return to the old one! From this day forward, no longer are we Romulans! We are the Rihanssu! And all that shall come before me shall kneel!”

A smile that mirrored T’K’Lon’s own spread on Tomalak’s lips.

“Consider it done... my Emperor,” he said.

* * * *

Aboard the *USS Dauntless*, en route back to *Starbase 719* to drop off Vice Admiral Raiajh and her staff before returning to their regular assignment of exploring the Fifth Fleet Area of Responsibility, Fleet Captain Peter Koester was sitting behind the desk in his ready room reviewing several department reports when the intercom whistled.

“Bridge to Captain,” said the voice of first officer Setton To’Lock Arbelo.

Koester activated the intercom and replied, “Go ahead, Exec.”

“Skipper, we’re receiving a transmission from Romulan space I think you’re going to want to see.”

“From Commander T’Lees or Praetor Talik?”

“No. It’s... You just need to see this, Captain.”

Koester hopeful expression turned serious as he said, “Send it in here, Commander.” A moment later the viewer screen rose up out of the desktop and the image of the Romulan emblem, somewhat different than Koester remembered it looking, appeared. Several seconds later, the emblem was replaced by the image of Lord T’K’Lon sitting on what appeared to be an elaborate throne. Koester’s hand clenched unconsciously as he recognized the Romulan man.

“Due to rising tensions in the area of space formerly known as the Romulan Star Empire, I have been forced to – temporarily – concede control of the Empire as it was,” T’K’Lon announced.

“Maybe Commander T’K’Lon has finally come to his senses and is willing to work with Talik’s new government?” Koester remarked to himself hopefully. But his optimism quickly evaporated when he heard the Romulan’s next sentence.

“Effective immediately. I – Emperor T’K’Lon the First – declare the border of the Rihanssu Star Empire sealed. All diplomatic contact with entities external to the Empire is here-by ceased. Any intrusion into the Neutral Zone will be considered an act of war, and retaliation will be swift. The Klingon Empire, the United Federation of Planets, and the opposition government calling itself the Romulan Empire are declared enemies of the state. I – as Emperor of the Rihanssu Star Empire and Head of State – refuse to acknowledge any legitimacy of the so-called Romulan Empire, and proclaim that all Rihanssu citizens will one day be under my benevolent protection.”

“Oh no!” Koester muttered under his breath. Before his very eyes, the Romulan Empire was falling apart, literally split in two.

“Any attempt by Romulan forces to cross our border will be met with force. Do not test me, for you will be found lacking. Emperor T’K’Lon the First, end transmission.”

The screen momentarily changed to the image of the different Bird-of-Prey emblem momentarily before going blank. Koester stared at the black screen for several seconds, deep in thought, before finally activating his intercom again.

“Bridge, this is the Captain. Has Admiral Raijah been informed of this transmission yet?”

“Negative, Captain,” Arbelo quickly replied.

“Contact Admirals Fil and Raijah and tell them I need to see both of them immediately, Monster. Tell them we have trouble.”

* * * *

Epilogue

Aboard the *USS Enterprise*, still in orbit over New Romulus while Ambassador Picard helped Federation Ambassador to New Romulus Struminski establish his embassy, Commander Worf was sitting in 10-Forward sharing a drink with the ship’s counselor when his combadge chirped.

“Bridge to Commander Worf,” said the voice of the duty officer.

Worf tapped his combadge and responded, “Worf here.”

“Commander, Ambassador Kental is requesting permission to beam aboard. He says he needs to speak with you immediately.”

Worf, not expecting the new Klingon Ambassador to New Romulus would want to talk with him, exchanged a look with the counselor before saying, “Permission to beam aboard is granted, Lieutenant. I will meet the Ambassador in the transporter room.”

“Aye, sir,” the duty officer replied.

Worf excused himself and left his drink sitting on the small table as he made his way to the closest transporter room. As he entered the room, the transporter chief on duty indicated the Klingon ambassador was standing by to beam aboard.

“Energize,” Worf ordered. A moment later the transporter platform hummed to life and Kental materialized in one of the lit circles. The ambassador stepped down off the platform and immediately said, “Commander Worf, we must talk. Is there someplace we can speak... in private?” The Klingon glanced over at the transporter chief, who was trying his best to mind his own business inside the console booth.

“I know just such a place,” Worf said. “Follow me.”

Worf led the ambassador to a nearby holosuite and tapped a series of commands into the control panel. Seconds later the computer voice announced, “Program complete. Enter when ready.”

The door swished open and the two Klingons walked inside. The scenery appeared to resemble a jungle, with obstacles, platforms, monkey bars, and various other structures strewn about. On a frame to their right were several lethal looking hand weapons. A smile spread on Kental’s face.

“A good old-fashioned calisthenics program! I haven’t worked out in one of these in many rotations!”

“If you wish, I can start the program while we talk?” Worf suggested.

“Yes! Do so!” Kental replied.

The two Klingons chose their weapons, then Worf said, “Computer, start program.” Immediately, several fantastic creatures – including one with a skull for a face – appeared and attacked the pair.

“What is it you wished to discuss with me?” Worf asked as he deflected an attack and moved to the offensive against skull face.

“There are things about your brother you should know, Worf,” Kental replied. “The High Council thought it best to keep you in the dark, but you deserve to know the truth.”

Worf paused, turning to look at the Ambassador, and almost was hit over the head with a club by a bird-like creature while he was distracted. Ducking and turning, he thrust with his spiked glove and struck the creature in the abdomen, causing it to crumple to the ground in pain before fading out of existence.

“What truth?” Worf asked, returning half his attention to the ambassador.

“Imperial Intelligence learned you had your brother Kurn’s memory wiped shortly after he reported aboard the *IKV Gorkon* as Rodek. They decided his condition could prove useful in creating a deep cover spy. When he was removed from the crew of the *Gorkon*, he was taken to Intelligence Headquarters where, over the course of several months, they implanted a series of directives into his sub-conscious to be accomplished when and if he were ever activated.”

“I already know this much,” Worf said, fighting back against another new character. “Kurn... Rodek told us as much during our last encounter.”

“What he did not tell you is the important part,” Kental remarked, likewise parrying a blow and knocking his opponent to the ground with his bare left arm before kneeling down to strike and kill his enemy. The character faded from the program. “Imperial Intelligence arranged for him to be dismissed from the *Gorkon* while the ship was part of our invasion fleet into Romulan space after the High Command started to realize our occupation of the Romulans would not go as easy as originally planned. It was the Intelligence branch’s intent for Rodek to integrate himself into Romulan society without creating any suspicion he was working on behalf of the High Council, and what better way to do that than appear to be a dishonored Klingon warrior?”

“So my brother did nothing dishonorable to get himself dismissed from the service!” Worf exclaimed, relieved to hear his brother’s character was no longer in question. “But then the High Council simply abandoned him in Romulan space in the hopes he would one day prove useful to them?”

“No, they did not. It was all a cover story that even he was unaware of at the time. But before he could be activated, his handlers were killed and the Intelligence branch lost track of Rodek until they learned he had been captured by the crew of the Federation ship *Corsair* far outside Romulan space after an attempt to hijack the Starfleet ship. Part of his mission, the reason he was recovered from the transport and finally activated, was to help guide the events that would lead to the Romulans becoming our allies... or at least less of an enemy than they have been in the past.”

“By rescuing the Romulan Praetor?” Worf asked.

“No. By creating the conditions that would push the Romulans to attack T’K’Lon and his warlords. T’K’Lon is felt to be the greater threat to the Empire at this point. If pushed in the right direction, it was hoped the Romulans would eliminate that threat for us, and perhaps become so weak in the process themselves that they would never be capable of threatening the Empire on their own ever again.”

“Create the conditions...?” Worf started to say, before realization started to dawn on him. “Computer, freeze program!”

The holodeck complied with the order, one enemy creature caught in mid-air as it attempted to jump off one of the high platforms at Ambassador Kental. The ambassador, prepared for the attack, remained crouched in a defensive stance for several seconds before realizing the program was no longer running.

“Are you saying that T’K’Lon was not the one responsible for the bombing of the Romulan Senate building?” Worf demanded to know from the ambassador, his eyes alight with anger.

“The materials used to construct the bomb were obtained on Chaltok IV by allies we developed among the Romulans during our occupation of their space, a group that calls themselves the Faction,” Kental explained. “They also helped the Intelligence branch to design and build the *AvwI* using a combination of Klingon and Romulan technology to make it absolutely undetectable. The *AvwI* accompanied my transport ship, the *Koraga*, through Federation and Romulan space until we reached New Romulus. Rodek then used the ship, still cloaked, to enter the atmosphere and beam several operatives into the bowels of the building to plant the bomb.”

Worf suddenly looked crestfallen.

“So my brother does not commit a dishonorable act yet gets dismissed from Imperial service, only to commit a dishonorable act in service to the Empire!”

“That is something I believe the humans call irony, Worf,” Kental remarked with a slight grin.

“I find the use of such covert maneuvers to be highly questionable,” Worf remarked. “Even though no one was killed when the Senate building was destroyed, there were casualties! There could have been many killed needlessly! There is no honor in attacking an enemy while hidden. And there is no honor in provoking a potential ally into attacking a potential enemy against their will!”

“Be that as it may, Worf, it is our reality,” Kental remarked as he removed his gauntlet and flung it away before heading in the direction of the holosuite door. “Thank you for the workout. Computer, exit!”

As the door swished shut behind the Klingon ambassador, Worf merely stood in the middle of the holosuite, contemplating the direction in which events had turned over the last several days and how it was likely to affect the future, and wondering if he should share this information with his commander.

* * * *

Over the course of the ensuing weeks, the Neutral Zone boundary between Rihannsu space and the territory of both the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets was reaffirmed, even as negotiations began in the hopes of eventually dis-establishing the Neutral Zone separating the Federation and the Romulan Empire.

Meanwhile, though no new Neutral Zone was established between the Romulans and their Rihannsu brethren, a definite border was drawn between the two territories – the beginnings of what could be a long lasting Cold War between the now implacable foes.

The End