

A Grand Gesture

By John Borda

K'hellenbeck waited in the darkened, candlelit room. Around him he could hear the murmurings of others around him, some human, some Bajoran, many unmistakably Klingon. His nerves were nothing to do with the presence of a traditional enemy in the room in such numbers. Still he waited, as did the others. To think that of all possible outcomes to the multiple tragedies that had preceded it, this should result.

The flickering candles took him back to the time he had kept what was left of his crew alive, lifesigns hidden by huddling around a faltering cloaking device and barely able to breathe the fumes of his stricken ship, after he had dared to challenge a Romulan convoy supplying the Duras family during the Klingon civil war. After the convoy escorts had gone, he managed to get these few into a lifepod, and back to Romulus.

No longer trusted by the Senate, but not openly condemned (the Senate did not want to admit it's involvement with the Duras), he was given backwater postings, lower than either his ability or his family status should normally permit. During this time he developed his ability to evade both assassins and the usual political traps that were laid to give the Senate an excuse to execute someone on whom their disfavour had fallen, without admitting the real reason.

Then this new Federation/Klingon venture, a Starbase close to all their respective spaces, opened for business. Embassies of all races were invited, and the Senate saw an ideal opportunity. A posting of apparent prestige, but actual exile, where a Klingon's blade would likely do their dirty work, unbidden, unpaid. There was no honourable way to refuse such a posting, and with family pressure that it was better to die in high office than low, he went.

For the first week he barely ventured from his office and it's adjoining quarters. With no staff to assist, he automated the routine services, and saw few visitors, most of them Federation species wishing to initiate trade with the Romulan Empire who were not on the automatic "turn down" list. Then he took to taking small risks, venturing out with a cloak covering his face. He learned to avoid the bars favoured by Klingons, and to disappear quickly at the new sounds of danger.

The Starbase's Science Officer, Cdr. Borda, rigged a site-to-site transporter for him, so he could get back to safety quickly. After some reprogramming, K'hellenbeck decided he could safely allow Klingons to request trade or passage permits in person. After the first such had to be beamed back aboard the starbase from a quick trip to hard vacuum, it was tweaked by the Science Officer once again to deliver them to the brig, if not Klingon, and the beauty parlour if they were! This appealed to K'hellenbeck's sense of humour, and he kept the modification.

However, this could not keep him entirely out of harm's way, but those few encounters usually left a Klingon or two in sickbay- K'hellenbeck was well trained in hand-to-hand combat. This bought him a measure of respect among the Klingons who were permanently stationed on the starbase, and the bulk of the attacks ceased.

Then came the Dominion War, and the Romulans and Klingons found themselves uneasy allies against a common foe. This is when he started working with b'Sel, the Klingon Chief of Staff. They spent a long time planning joint deployments of Klingon and Romulan fleets together, just not within firing range of each other!

As they worked together, he came to respect her judgement and tactical ability, to the point that he would order a Romulan fleet to follow her suggestion, though he noticed that she sometimes did likewise with Klingon deployments. But their most devastating plans were combinations of both suggestions, and he found that they complimented each other tactically.

The turning point came the first time they managed to snatch a meal at the same time, they had taken a jug of water between them, he had poured for both of them, as he would have done a fellow Romulan, and she had almost put her glass to her lips when she paused. As she did so, he remembered the Klingon adage about not drinking with an enemy. Their eyes met- an unspoken challenge hung in the air: are you my enemy? The brief hesitation seemed to last an eternity... and then she drained her glass and laughed! K'hellenbeck did likewise, and from that moment a friendship was born.

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They celebrated the victory over the Dominion together, and also the destruction of a Borg cube that they personally fought together.

Then disaster struck Romulus, as the entire Senate was murdered with a bioweapon, and a dictator took over and tried to start a Federation war with a single supership. Federation assistance eliminated the usurper, but a huge power vacuum was left on Romulus, with every noble family trying to reposition themselves to advantage. Unlike previous power vacuums, this one was public knowledge, and many Klingon houses scented a quick victory over an old enemy, forgetting the recent alliance.

Small raids took place at the border, each bolder than the previous one. The Romulan fleet was depleted from both the Dominion War, and the diversion of resources to build the usurper's supership, and, lacking leadership, resistance was haphazard.

It was at this time that K'hellenbeck met with b'Sel. There was a grave air about him; he had spent the whole day contacting family leaders on Romulus. He was struggling for words- the direct approach was not something a Romulan finds easy. Finally he said: "I am practically the only one untainted by either the usurper, or the current power struggles."

b'Sel waited, knowing there was more.

"They want me to take the squadron of ships based here back home and to take command of the whole fleet."

"That's excellent-" b'Sel cut herself off. K'hellenbeck had not come with good news.

"They say that I know how Klingons think..." he paused, "... and how to teach them a lesson."

There it was, as blunt as a Romulan could be. It was to be war.

***** TO BE CONTINUED *****

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During the following days, b'Sel saw little of K'hellenbeck. The Romulan Embassy could no longer take communications from Klingons, though she could still get through if she went via a Federation officer. Commodore Jat was keen to broker some kind of peace, any kind of peace, but if Klingons and Romulans have a trait in common, it is stubbornness. Ke'reth, her Ambassador, also found his dealing with Romulans, and K'hellenbeck in particular, in demand on Qu'onos.

Then the results of a single point of leadership were dramatically driven home- the latest raid, comprising 23 ships, simply never returned. Ke'reth was recalled to Qu'onos, to lead a fleet against Romulus.

b'Sel found herself torn- her two friends were about to take fleets of ships against each other. She knew both would do their duty to their respective Empires, but how to divert this course forced on them both, which neither wanted?

As she took the turbolift back to her quarters after another frustrating day, suddenly it stopped. A figure shimmered in front of her, K'hellenbeck materialised- he still had his site-to-site transporter. He said nothing, just held out two glasses of bloodwine, and offered her one. Once again, the challenge was wordlessly put- are you my enemy?

She saw her hand take the glass, still not quite sure what she was doing, and they drank together.

"So how do we end this?" he spoke at last. "I must leave tomorrow, and if we have nothing, then our respective fleets will decimate each other. Yours may be stronger, but our major planets have sufficient defence capability to stop even them, should you break through. All you will achieve is the destruction of our fleet, and some mindless ravaging of our minor planets. We can outwait your sieges, and rebuild again, but there will be enough damage done that we must avenge it. The cycle of war will return, and neither of our races can prosper if all our energies are directed to fighting each other."

"Ke'reth will only stop the attack if defeat is obvious- he cannot do anything else without losing face before the Council. But you would have to be much stronger than you are to allow him to do that."

"If I could deploy every ship in the fleet to the border, that might work, but some are in the Gamma Quadrant, some are too far away, many are damaged from the war. Even then, that might not be enough to appear decidedly superior, which is what you say is needed."

"Hold on- you said "appear"- you only need to *look* superior!"

"Yes- but how?"

"BORDA!" they both shouted in unison.

"This could work, if you can keep our secret." said K'hellenbeck.

Once again, the challenge rose between them, and they looked into each others eyes- but this time something else was there, deeper than the trust, deeper than the friendship...

They embraced, a gesture that surprised them both. After a minute, they loosened their grip, neither letting go entirely.

"We must drink together again." he said.

"Let it be soon."

Then he was gone, and the turbolift continued on its way. And nothing was the same...

Commodore Jat was awakened in the small hours with a surprise request from the Romulan Ambassador.

Commander Borda was no less surprised, a little later, to find himself seconded to the Romulan Fleet, effective immediately, departure within the hour. He had little time to ponder the significance when K'hellenbeck himself parked him in front of a team of Romulan engineers aboard his flagship, and set them to work on a plan so outrageous, he wished he'd thought of it himself.

Ke'reth pondered, as the Klingon fleet approached the Romulan border. He knew his duty well, but was also under no illusions that his mission would not be in the Empire's best interests. Many in the High Council seemed to have forgotten that "revenge is a dish best served cold" in their rush to make war over the loss of a few ships.

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K'hellenbeck gave the order to deploy the fleet. They were almost within sensor range of the border, and the Klingons would be there soon. This was a huge gamble he was taking, but, he reasoned, the lives he was gambling with would be lost anyway if he did nothing. High stakes poker indeed. And it partly depended on an ally in the enemy camp, and the skill of a Federation officer. Good job the Senate will never get their hands on me if this fails, he thought.

In spartan quarters aboard the Romulan flagship, Cdr Borda waited. His work was done, and on the quality of his work hung peace in the quadrant. He knew he had done the best he could do, now his place was out of the way. Reaching under his collar, he removed a silver crucifix, held it facing him, and took the only further action he could. He fell to his knees and prayed.

“Approaching Romulan border, sir!” The call brought Ke'reth out of his reverie.

“Scan for cloaked ships.” His last chance to delay war.

“Romulan vessel decloaking, sir!” The tension level suddenly went up several notches. “They’re hailing us!”

“Put them through” he replied, puzzled.

“Q’uapla, Kereth!” came a familiar voice.

“Jolantru, K'hellenbeck! Come to surrender, have we?”

“Hardly, my friend. Just making sure you knew where the border was.” Came the reply, as if blissfully unaware that enough firepower to vaporise a small planet was trained on his ship.

“With one ship? My, we are brave today.”

“Hardly. But you have polaron scanners- you tell me how many ships I have.”

“Why not just tell me?” He made a gesture to the tactical officer, offscreen.

“You would believe your sensors better than my words, I think.”

Ke'reth looked down at the tactical monitor. Then looked again. It had to be a trick, he was outnumbered three to two!

“Quite a fleet you have there, K'hellenbeck.” He finally said. “Anyone would think you were about to start a war!”

“The same could be said for you, my friend!” came the reply. “Anyone I know? After all, we’re allies, we could always help!”

Ke'reth knew it had to be some kind of trick. He knew K'hellenbeck well enough to know that he could bluff his way out of Rurapente, and that Klingon intelligence only accounted for half the ships he saw on his screen. Some had been presumed missing in action, severely damaged, or deployed too far away to be able to get here in time. Some were just freighters with suspiciously high power readings, as if hastily fitted with weapons. But almost all could be identified as known vessels on his database. He looked round at his crew. They were no longer quite so eager to attack. K'hellenbeck was giving him the chance to withdraw honourably.

“Nothing of the sort, my friend!” he replied. “Some of our ships went missing near here, we are searching for them. Have you seen them?”

“I believe so. They ran into a training area during a live firing exercise. They were fortunate not to be destroyed, but their warp engines were all damaged. They should return in a few months, but I could have them towed back if you wish. You would have to order them to allow it, they seemed somewhat unwelcoming when we made them the offer.”

“Leave them be- it will serve them right for such shoddy navigation!” replied Ke'reth, glad the excuse for war could be laid to rest.

“Indeed. I will order jamming in this sector suspended briefly so you may communicate directly with them. I hope the peaceful resolution of this misunderstanding helps to improve our alliance.”

“Yes, though I can’t help feeling that we need some sort of “grand gesture” to drive the point home.”

“Perhaps. But what should it be?”

The sound of the room’s door opening brought K'hellenbeck out of his memories. The “grand gesture” was about to take place. He threw back the hood of his cloak, and turned. b'Sel was walking towards him, resplendent in scarlet. The room fell silent, as she stopped beside him, and he gazed into the eyes of his bride.

In the background, Cdr. Borda looked on with his new wife, Lt. Lena Fry, the Starbase’s counsellor. His experience in making one ship look like another, in this case a whole fleet of shuttles look like genuine Romulan warships, down to the polaron signature, had once again paid off. But this was one of those occasions when he was happy not to take the credit.