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16

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For J.B.
after fifteen years,
the genuine article

Prologue

Enterprise, dormant for nearly a week now, was waking up.

Captain James Kirk had stayed aboard, while the crew took leave on Starbase 12: Dr. McCoy had given him a stern lecture on the perils of overwork, and Engineer Scott a milder talk on the pleasures Kirk would be missing. Even Spock had gone station side; something to do with new materials for the ship's library computer.

But Kirk was all right. In fact, he felt wonderful. He had given himself a walking inspection tour of his ship, quite alone, at whatever pace he felt like at the moment. It was not work. It had been sheer play.

Now the crew was returning, making *Enterprise* ready for voyage, and that too was satisfactory. Kirk walked the corridors, giving salutes and greetings, feeling almost light-headed, as if he were presenting a new creation.

Yeoman Janice Rand came up the corridor toward Kirk, still in a civilian tunic and loose trousers, travelling bag slung over her shoulder. Her hair was in a new, non-regulation style, upswept, quite striking and attractive; Kirk could not remember having seen the style before—

And then he knew he had seen it, once only: on Specialist Mara, the consort of the Klingon Captain Kang.

Kirk gave a clumsy gesture somewhere between a salute and a wave; Rand smiled and waved back.

She's still off duty, Kirk thought, she has the right to wear her hair any way she pleases—but why on earth ... ? It surely hadn't been that long since the Organian Peace: Kirk wondered if it could *ever* be that long.

He shook his head and walked on. A little farther down the corridor, he heard a crewman use a few words in a foreign language. Kirk did not know the meaning, but knew from the harsh, consonantal sound that the language must be Klingonese. He also knew that only a half-dozen of the ship's complement spoke Klingonese, and this was not one of them.

Kirk went up a level to Sickbay. Inside, Dr. McCoy was unpacking a carrier marked MEDICAL SUPPLIES. Kirk's medical training was sufficient to identify Romulan ale, Saurian brandy in the trademark bottle, and a complete set of components for Argelian nine-layer cocktails.

"Expecting an epidemic, Bones?"

McCoy looked up. His expression was odd: slightly distant, slightly sour. "I hope to Lucius Beebe there is—" He stopped short, shook his head.

"Who?" Kirk said.

"Nothing. Something my granddaddy used to say when he got dry." McCoy reverently held up a bottle of Jack Daniel's Black Label. "Bar's still open, if you want, Jim."

Something in the way McCoy made the offer made Kirk hesitate. Bones was always playing the curmudgeon, but when he was really disgruntled he was not pleasant company. "Later, Bones. Too much to do, just now." Kirk smiled. "Promises to keep, and miles to go ..."

"Uh-huh." McCoy put the bottle down, looking a little forlorn.

"Bones," Kirk said quietly, "what's wrong?"

"Hm? *Oh*. 'Course, you don't know." He reached down into the carrier, clinking bottles and cans, and brought out a book "Here you go. Read all about it."

Kirk took the book. It was a bookstore edition, in hard covers, not a computer offprint. *The Final Reflection*, the cover said, above a lurid painting showing a Klingon battle cruiser. He turned it over, scanned the blurbs. "This is the one the Starfleet memos were about, isn't it? The novel about the Klingons."

"Novel, yeah," McCoy said. "About the Klingons." His voice was just slightly less tense. "You might like it ... there's some good space-battle stuff."

I'll get a print—"

"*Take it*," McCoy said, and at once his voice cleared, as if there had never been anything wrong at all. "I'd better get my office in order. I'm about to get four hundred cases of station leave."

"All right, Bones. Hold that drink for me."

"Sure, Jim."

Kirk went on down the corridor, looking at the book, half conscious that others were saluting him or dodging out of his way. He tried to remember the texts of the Starfleet memos, about the novel: their substance seemed to have been the routine disclaimers about any book not Fully Approved by the Public Information Office, maybe a little more strongly worded than usual.

Space battles, Bones had said. According to the cover copy, the story was set not long after first contact with the Klingons, just before Kirk himself had been born; back before dilithium, when the best shipwrights in Starfleet thought Warp 4.8 was the absolute limit. Before phasers. Before *Enterprise* had gone on the drawing boards. That should be interesting, Kirk thought, even if those days seemed as far away as Captain Hornblower's sails and cannon.

But then, Kirk had always liked Horatio Hornblower.

A name caught his eye: Dr. Emanuel Tagore. A political scientist, Kirk recalled. He had died about a year ago, aged 120 or so; Spock had mentioned it. Spock. . . .

Kirk got into the next turbolift.

Spock was already back in duty uniform, though he had not even unpacked. His small travelling case was on the bed, still sealed; against the wall of the cabin were two large carriers labeled COMPUTED DATA—KEEP FROM ALL RADIATION.

"Captain. I am sorry I have not reported to the Bridge. I was ..."

"Spock. . . . Welcome back."

"Thank you, Captain, though I have not been gone in any real sense." Spock looked down slightly, saw the book in Kirk's hand. "I see you have ... already obtained a copy of that work."

"Yes. Bones gave it to me."

The eyebrow went up like a flag. "Indeed. I find that ... well. Perhaps not surprising."

"I wanted to ask you about it."

"It is a work of fiction, Captain. That is, I believe, all that needs to be said."

It's some kind of strange new hangover, Kirk thought, one leave and my whole crew goes crazy. "I was going to ask about Emanuel Tagore. Did you know him?"

"He was an acquaintance of my father's. When I was a student at the Makropyrios, we had ... discussions, though I was never enrolled in his classes."

That said more than perhaps Spock had intended; there were over two million students at the Federation's finest university, too many for anyone to casually "have discussions" outside the classroom.

Kirk said, "So then you did know him."

"I believe that was what I said, Captain."

Kirk almost shook his head. "Analysis, Spock," he said, trying to sound as if he were joking. "Enhancement, please."

"Yes, Captain, I did know Dr. Emanuel Tagore. I admired him, as did my father the Ambassador, although in many ways Dr. Tagore was a most illogical man. But I knew him as a Human, not a character in a novel."

"I haven't read the book yet."

"Yes, I had just realized there was not time for you to have done so. Is that all you require from me at this time, Captain?" The tone was no cooler than any Vulcan might use. But this was not just any Vulcan.

"Yes, Spock," Kirk said, too puzzled to be really hurt. "See you on the Bridge." He looked at Spock,

vaguely hoping the Science officer would recover as Dr. McCoy had.

But Spock did not. "Of course, Captain." Kirk went out.

The corridor was empty, silent except for the distant chiming of an annunciator. Kirk looked at the book again, at the Klingon ship. *The Final Reflection*. Reflection of what? he thought. He could remember times when he had seen himself reflected in books ... in Mark Twain, in the Hornblower stories. Sometimes the image was startling. But they were, after all only stories.

Which was, sort of, what Spock had said.

Kirk went to his own quarters, changed from fatigues into duty uniform, put the book on the bedside table.

First *Enterprise*, he thought. Then McCoy's drink. Then we'll see what it has to say.

Researcher's Note

"Be a storyteller, an embellisher, a liar; they'll call you that and worse anyway. It hardly matters. The Tao which can be perceived is not the true Tao."

—Dr. Emanuel Tagore, to the author

It has been sixty-five years since USS *Sentry* met IKV *Devisor* in the UFP's first known contact with the Klingon Empire. The final events of the story which follows took place some forty years ago. Some time back we celebrated 'ten years of *Pax Organia* (of which more in a moment). There are many who are convinced that "the Klingon Phase of Federation history is over." I first heard that phrase used in a lecture at the Makropyrios. No one even smiled.

So perhaps I may be excused a certain puzzlement at the curtains of silence that descended during the research for this work. UFP "Klingon authorities" were unavailable for extended periods, coinciding with my calls and visits. Official records of the "Dissolution Babel" are incomplete, containing little more than the "we kissed and made up" account found in children's books. Important persons have died or dropped from sight—neither rare events, but highly concentrated in this area. While my life was not threatened, my researcher's credentials and my computer's memory cores were. Only one person was willing to speak freely, and that one both warned me that his memory was fallible and gave me the advice quoted above. He was too modest about his memory. But his counsels were always wise.

Thus what follows is a novelist's reconstruction of events, rather than a history, let alone an exposé. (It would be embarrassing to admit the size of the fee I lost from *Insider Illustrated* for not rewriting to their specifications. Sample specification: **More details on Klingon torture please.**) My defenses are fictional license and absence of malice; perhaps if the Van Diemen Papers were not under DOUBLET REGAL classification (two steps higher than the Nova Weapons research files) my tale would be different.

I note in passing that I do not intend to disappear from public view in the immediate future.

An old Italian proverb runs *traduttore, traditore*: the translator is a traitor. And it is nowhere more true than when translating between races from different stars; still, I have tried to speak as little treason as possible. For clarity's sake, certain *klingonaase* technical terms have been translated as their Federation Standard equivalents: thus *warp drive*, *transporter*, *disruptor*, instead of the more literal *anticurve rider*, *particle displacer*, *vibratory destructor* (most literally: the "shake-it-till-it-falls-apart-tool"). After usual practice, directly equivalent ranks and titles such as "Captain" or "Lieutenant" are given as such, while specifically Klingon titles are translated directly (Specialist,

Force Leader) or by convention (Thought Admiral, Examiner.)

The translation of *kuve* as *servitor* may raise eyebrows, especially among my Vulcan readers, but it is a growing belief among experts on the *Komerex Klingon* (or at least it was) that the usual translation as "slave" is not only inaccurate but inflammatory, much as the phrases "Centaurian lover" and "filthy Ghibelline" of Earth's past.

Anticipating another Vulcan response: I am not a geneticist, and I have documentation that the practice of *tharavul* still exists.

This book would not have been possible without the interest (and frequent forbearance) of two persons. Dr. Emanuel Tagore's notes were indispensable, but no more so than Dr. Tagore himself; the brief time I could spend with him was an education in culture and language, and not only Klingon culture and language. And it was Mimi Panitch, my editor, who first decided that the Federation was ready for this story, and then stayed on Earth while I bummed the warp routes to track it down.

Finally, the work is about more than what (may have) happened four decades ago, in the last Babel Conference to be held on Earth's surface. Inevitably I come back to Dr. Tagore: "The Organian Peace is a peace of the biggest guns: it neither requires nor creates any understanding among the parties. In the absence of that understanding, the most that can be said about the Organian Treaty is that it works

"For the present."

Those were his last words to me before his death last year.

I still wonder what he had seen, that we have not.

—JMF/SD 8303.2

Tempt not the stars, young man; thou canst not play
With the severity of fate. . . . In thy aspect I note
A consequence of danger.

—from *The Broken Heart*

PART ONE

The Clouded Levels

If there are gods, they do not help, and justice belongs to the strong: but know that all things done before the naked stars are remembered.

—Klingon proverb

Chapter 1

Tactics

The children of the Empire were arming for the Game.

Vrenn was a Lancer. He tested the adhesion of his thick-soled boots, adjusted a strap and found them excellent. He flexed his shoulders within their padding—the armor was slightly stiff with newness; he would have to allow for that.

Vrenn's Lance still hung on its charge rack. He leaned into the wall cabinet, read full charge on the indicator, and carefully lifted the weapon out. The Lance was a cylinder of metal and crystal, as thick as his palm was wide. He rested its blank metal, Null end on the floor, and the glass Active tip just reached his shoulder. Then he hefted it, spun it, ran his fingers over the controls in the checkout sequence, watching flashes and listening to answering clicks. The crystal tip glowed blue with neutral charge.

It was a fine Lance, absolutely new like his armor. Vrenn had never before had anything that was new. He wondered what would happen to these things, after they had won the game ... if there would be prizes to the victors. He took a deep breath of the prep room's air, which was warm and deliciously moist; he lifted his Lance to shoulder-ready and turned around.

Across the room, Dezhe and Rokis were helping each other into Flier rigs, shiny metal harnesses and glossy boots with spurs. Rokis tightened her left hand inside the control gauntlet, and rose very rapidly, almost banging her green helmet on the dim ceiling. Dezhe snorted, grabbed one of Rokis's spurs and pretended to pull her back down.

"*G'daya* new stuff." That was Ragga, who was struggling his immense bulk into the even greater bulk of a Blockader's studded hide armor. "Not a *g'dayt* crease in it, can't *khest'n* move." He did a few squats-and-stretches, looked a little more satisfied, but not much.

"Who said you could move anyway?" Gelly said. Ragga swiped at her; she danced out of the way without the slightest difficulty. "You'd better not move. You might fall down, and I don't think the rest of us together could get you up again."

Ragga showed his teeth and arched his arms, roared like a stormwalker. Gelly skittered away, laughing. Ragga was laughing too, a sound not much different from his roar.

Gelly sealed up the front of her uniform, a coverall of shiny green mesh, with gloves and boots of finely jointed metal on her slender hands and feet. She was the best Swift of their House: the House Proctors said she might be the best Swift of all the Houses.

Others said other things, about her slimness, her smooth forehead, the lightness of her bones and fles

Vrenn felt a little sorry for her: when they were younger, he had called her "Ugly, ugly!" with the others. But she couldn't help being ugly, and if it was true that some of her genes were Vulcan or Romulan—or even Human!—that was not her fault either. He did not think she was part-Human, though. Vrenn had killed a Human in the Year Games, when he was six, his first intelligent kill, and Humans were slow, not swift.

There had been the one who called Gelly *kuveleta*: servitor's half-child. Zharn had killed that one, and done it well. They had all killed, Zharn and Vrenn and Ragga many different races, but Zharn was the best.

But they were all the best, Vrenn thought. Their positions had not been randomly chosen, nor they themselves: of the three hundred residents of House Twenty-Four, they were the nine best at *klin zha kinta*, the game with live pieces.

Now Zharn was sitting against the wall of the prep room, in full Fencer's armor: smooth green plates and helmet, slender metal staff across his knees. He was humming "Undeclared," a favorite song of House *Gensa*. Segon, a lightly armored Vanguard, was near him, keeping time with his bootheel. A little farther away, Graade and Voloh, the other Vanguards, held hands and kept harmony.

Zharn began to sing aloud, and in a moment they were all singing.

And though the cold brittles the flesh,

The chain of duty cannot be broken,

For the chain is forged in the heart's own fire

Which cold cannot extinguish ...

The door opened. In the long corridor beyond, lit greenly by small lamps on the walls, was their Senior Proctor, old Khidri tai-Gensa. Khidri was nearly forty years old, very wrinkled; he had been a full Commander in the Navy until vacuum crippled his lungs. Next to him was a Naval officer, in black tunic and gold dress sash and Commander's insignia, with medals for ships taken.

Zharn was instantly on his feet. "Green Team, present!"

The players snapped to attention at once, wrists crossed in salute, weapons at ready-arms.

Khidri gave them a slight smile and one short nod. "This is a high day for the House *Gensa*," he said. "We are chosen to play at the command of Thought Admiral Kethas epetai-Khemara."

Vrenn felt his chest tighten, but he did not move. None of the Team did. A planner for the entire Navy, he thought, and knew then that he was right: they were the very best ... and others knew it.

Khidri said, "The Thought Admiral is of course a Grand Master of *klin zha* ... this day we must be worthy of a Grand Master's play." In the last was the smallest hint of a threat, or perhaps a warning. Next to Khidri, the Navy officer stood impassive and rather grim.

"Zharn Gensa, is your Green Team ready?"

"Armed and prepared, Proctor Khidri."

"Then bring them," Khidri said, and as he turned around Vrenn thought he saw the Proctor's smile widen. Then Vrenn looked at Zharn. The Fencer was nine, a year older than the rest of them, and seemed the pure image of leadership.

"House Twenty-Four Green Team," Zharn said, "onward to the victory!"

The *klin zha* players filed out of the room, marching in step down the green corridor, singing.

Yet if my line should die,

It dies with its teeth in the enemy's throat,

It dies with its name on the enemy's tongue.

For just as mere life is not victory,

Mere death is not defeat;

And in the next world I shall kill the foe a thousand times,

Laughing,

Undefeated.

The Arena Gallery was a long, low-ceilinged room, furnished with large soft cushions and small wooden tables with trays of succulents. Servitors, moving silently in clean tan gowns of restrictive cut, replaced the trays when they became empty or messy. Fog hung at the ceiling, humidifier mist mixed with the personal incenses some of the officers present carried. One long wall of the room was entirely of dark glass.

There were slightly more than a dozen of high ranks present, Naval and Marine, and two civilian administrators with a reputation at *klin zha*. Also in the room were a few of the officers' consorts—two for Admiral Kezhke, who was never moderate—and three Vulcans, all *tharavul*.

"The spindles for first move, Thought Admiral?" General Margon sutai-Demma held out a pair of hexagonal rods, of polished white bone with numerals inlaid in gold on their faces. Margon gave them a small, rattling toss and caught them again. They showed double sixes. There was a mildly unpleasant look on Margon's face, but there usually was, and the scar at the side of his mouth only added to it.

Behind Margon, Force Leader Mabli vestai-Galann sat on a cushion, looking quite uncomfortable. One of Margon's *kuve* consorts was stroking Mabli's shoulders, which did not seem to relax him at all, though the female's claws were fully retracted. Mabli kept glancing at the other officers: every one outranked him. Worse, the administrators did as well. Mabli looked straight at his opponent.

Thought Admiral Kethas epetai-Khemara had deep wrinkles in his knobbed forehead, hair very white at his temples. He was fifty-two years old, an age at which Klingons of the Imperial Race should be dead by one means or another, yet his eyes were clear and sharp as naked stars. He smiled at Force

Leader Mabli, then faced General Margon. "I grant the option." Kethas reached casually to one side, picked a glass of black brandy from a servitor's tray.

Mabli said "I take ..." He broke off, looked around. Only the civilians looked especially disapproving. "... I *choose* first position."

Kethas nodded, drank. A side door opened with a whisper of air, and the Game Operator entered the Gallery.

The Operator was a Vulcan, *tharavul* like the others of his race present. He wore a green and gold gown of his homeworld's cut. In his hands was a flat black case; two chains and pendants hung around his neck. The upper pendant was the triangle-circle-gemstone of the IDIC; the lower was a large silver figure of a biped astride a quadruped—a piece of the Human game chess.

The players stood as the Operator entered. "Kethas," the Vulcan said, and gestured with spread fingers.

"Sudok. This is Mabli: he shall have Gold today, and chooses first position."

Sudok inclined his head to Mabli, but did not raise his hand. Then the Operator held the black case level, before the Gallery's glass wall. A metal pedestal rose from the floor to support it. Sudok opened the case. Illuminated controls shone within, flashing color from Sudok's jewelry. He touched a series of buttons; the officers and their consorts began moving toward the glass wall.

Beyond the panel, lights flared, revealing the Arena. It was fifty meters across and high, six-sided, long sides alternating with short; the walls sloped inward slightly, pierced with the windows of other viewing galleries, mostly dark now. This gallery was near the Arena ceiling, which was hung with a maze of lighting, camera, and projection equipment.

The floor was painted with a triangular emblem of three crooked arms, gold on black. Operator Sudok touched another button, and the floor split into three pieces, panels retracting outward.

"T'tain," General Maida said to the *tharavul* behind him, "what was the price for the last shipment of gladiators to Triskelion?"

"Two point six million in crystals and fissionables," the Vulcan said, in a flat tone.

"That's down, isn't it?" a Naval officer said.

"Twenty percent," T'tain said, and started to say more, but was cut off by a sharp gesture from Maida. The General's mouth twisted, and then he said, "The *gagny* brains that rule the place get bored very quickly. Give 'em new races, they say, or the price will drop to nothing. So when are you going to find us some new *kuve*?"

"We're in a *g'daya* box!" the Admiral snapped back. "Federation one way, Romulans another, Kinshaya one more—where are the *kuve* supposed to breed?"

"You Navy have the grand master strategists—"

"*Do it elsewhere*," General Margon said. His hand was on his dress weapon, apparently casually. The

was a long, silent moment; no one moved but Sudok, who continued to work his controls, looking straight out the Gallery window.

"It's done," Maida said finally, without having looked at Margon. Eyes turned back to the Arena.

The game grid was rising from below floor level: a three-sided pyramid of metal struts and transparent panels, a tetrahedral frame nine four-meter pyramids on each edge. Spectra flickered across its facets.

There was a metallic thump, more felt than heard, as the grid locked into place. Then doors opened at Arena floor level, and the Green and Gold pieces filed out: Fencer, Swift, Fliers, Lancer, Vanguard, and Blockader for each side. They executed sharp halts-and-turns and stood, looking upward toward the Gallery.

Kethas waved to the pieces. Mabli saluted his.

Sudok said, "If the players will take their positions." Another key pressed: at either end of the window-wall, small cubicles lit behind glass, one green, one gold. The glass panels slid aside. Within were enveloping, deeply cushioned chairs, like a ship captain's command chair, set before holo displays already showing miniatures of the huge Arena grid.

"A shame this one will be Clouded," Kethas said to Mabli. "I prefer to watch my pieces through my own eyes, don't you?"

Mabli looked puzzled, said nothing.

"Only a thought," Kethas said, and laughed. "A Thought." Then he held out his brandy glass to Mabli. The Force Leader accepted it, took a swallow. A servitor appeared to carry the glass away.

Kethas and Mabli spread their arms, snarled and embraced, heads tilted back, throats exposed. The fury between them seemed to radiate; there were grunts of approval from the others.

The players separated, went to their cubicles. The spectators took up comfortable viewing positions, servitors moving cushions and tables to suit. A small, white-fleshed *kuve* folded its body to pillow the head of Margon's consort; she scratched it with a talon and purred. Finally only the four Vulcans and the serving *kuve* remained standing.

Sudok said clearly, "Gold to position first. The clouds descend." At the Arena ceiling, holo projectors came glowing to life.

Vrenn saw the Thought Admiral's wave. He thought, dimly, that it was an odd gesture, not at all like the Marine player's sharp salute, but in a moment it was past, and he was thinking about the game, and the victory. He felt the weight of his Lance, its good balance, the fine fit of his armor.

Prizes, he thought. The House had all the taped episodes of *Battlecruiser Vengeance*, and Vrenn had watched every one of them, and they all ended with the same line. Humans, Romulans, Kinshaya, servitors who had somehow managed to enter space, all of them asked their conqueror who he was,

and the answer was always: "I am Captain Koth. Koth of the *Vengeance*. And this ship is my prize."

Not that Vrenn could ever have a ship—not ever a ship, not without a line-name or a line—but perhaps he could have the Lance. A prize of war, his entirely. And like Koth, he would use his prize—

The *klin zha* pyramid was glowing from within, clear panels turning opaque with holo images. Vrenn heard a slight escape of breath from Ragga, that said more than a mouthful of curses. The Clouded Game was hardest on a Blockader. It was not Vrenn's favorite, either. At least Gelly would be pleased and the Fliers.

And Zharn, perhaps; it was hard to tell. Zharn was always leader-hard and leader-calm. No form of *klin zha* was easy for the Fencer.

On the other side of the Arena floor, the Gold team was moving, filing into the game grid. Green Team had second placement, then, and second move. Vrenn did not know how much advantage there was to second position, when the opponent's set-up was partly hidden; he did not like the Clouded game even when he controlled all the pieces. One could not see the enemy's pieces, or the enemy.

The Naval officer with Proctor Khidri spoke quietly; Khidri gestured, and Green Team entered the grid.

"Green player chooses the left-hand point," Sudok announced. The Gold pieces had been placed as Mabli chose; now the Green pieces occupied another point on the Grid's lowest level, leaving the third point empty.

"I can't see them all," Margon's consort said, annoyed. Margon grunted at her, a threatening sound. Sudok said nothing, and moved a control; the Gallery glass darkened, and the grid cleared as the obscuring holos were polarized out. Hazy shimmers remained, indicating which panels were blocked to the players' view.

"Drownfish's teeth, look at that," one of the civilians said to the other. "Old Khemara's got a Lancer Advanced opening. What do you say to doubled stakes?" The other administrator looked doubtful, turned to his *tharavul*. "Sovin. Percentages of success for the Lancer Advanced?"

The Vulcan said at once, "Nine percent of such openings lead to victory. Adjusted for the three-dimensional game, Obscuration rules, four percent."

"Well ... let's say redoubled—wait. Sovin, adjust for Grand Master play."

"Data base is small, Manager Akten."

"Coarse data, then."

"Coarse data indicate twenty-two percent success. I cannot correlate for Grand Masters versus Master of Force Leader Mabli's rating."

"Double and that's all, then," Akten said, giving the *tharavul* a sidelong look. "Sometimes, Atro, you want to cut more out of their skulls than just their mind-snoop. . . ."

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