



I.K.S. Gorkon: A Good Day to Die: Book One (Star Trek: The Next Generation 1)

By Keith R. A. DeCandido

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Newly inducted into the prestigious Order of the *Bat'leth*, Captain Klag, son of M'Raq, leads the crew of the *Gorkon* into the unexplored Kavrot Sector to find new planets on which to plant the Klingon flag. There, they discover the Children of San-Tarah, a species with a warrior culture that rivals -- and perhaps exceeds -- the Klingons' own, living on a planet that would be a great addition to the Empire. Klag could call in General Talak's fleet to bring the world under the Klingons' heel -- but the San-Tarah offer Klag a challenge he cannot refuse. The *Gorkon* crew and the San-Tarah will engage in several martial contests. If the Klingons lose, they will go and never trouble the planet again -- but if they are victorious, the San-Tarah will cede themselves to the Empire, and Klag will have singlehandedly conquered an entire world!

The first tale in a glorious adventure that will be remembered in song and story throughout the Empire!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Keith R.A. DeCandido was born and raised in New York City to a family of librarians. He has written over two dozen novels, as well as short stories, nonfiction, eBooks, and comic books, most of them in various media universes, among them *Star Trek*, *World of Warcraft*, *Starcraft*, *Marvel Comics*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Serenity*, *Resident Evil*, *Gene Roddenberry's Andromeda*, *Farscape*, *Xena*, and *Doctor Who*. His original novel *Dragon Precinct* was published in 2004, and he's also edited several anthologies, among them the award-nominated *Imaginings* and two *Star Trek* anthologies. Keith is also a musician, having played percussion for the bands the Don't Quit Your Day Job Players, the Boogie Knights, and the Randy Bandits, as well as several solo acts. In what he laughingly calls his spare time, Keith follows the New York Yankees and practices *kenshikai* karate. He still lives in New York City with his girlfriend and two insane cats.

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Chapter One

The faces of the greatest warriors of the past ten centuries stared down at Klag, son of M'Raq.

Throughout the Hall of Warriors on Ty'Gokor, a huge, windowless, high-ceilinged room carved out of the very rock of the planet's greatest mountain, statues of the strongest *Habnagh* rendered some of the finest heroes of the Klingon Empire. They loomed over the warriors assembled for the induction ceremonies for the Order of the *Bat'lath*.

Captain Klag stood by a barrel of bloodwine. He found the libation to be barely drinkable, but then Klag had always had a more discerning palate than most when it came to alcohol. In order to accommodate the hundreds of warriors present for the induction ceremony -- who would be spending the entire night in celebration -- the High Council had ordered the bloodwine in bulk. An Empire still recovering from the economic ravages of a prolonged war was not going to acquire an especially lofty vintage for the occasion.

Still, they could at least have provided something less watery, Klag thought as he refilled his mug by scooping it into the barrel.

Next to him, Klag's second officer and doctor did likewise. Lieutenant Toq and Dr. B'Oraq had come down with Klag from the *I.K.S. Gorkon* to cheer their captain as he was given one of the Empire's highest honors.

Around him, warriors shouted, sang, wrestled, laughed, ate, and drank. The sounds of celebration echoed off the high ceilings of the Hall, reverberating off the walls and the statues themselves, so much so that Klag could not determine the origin of this shout of triumph or that cry of pain that reached his ears.

Klag looked up at a statue far across the room from where they stood.

Toq followed his gaze. "Who is that, Captain?"

Shaking his head, Klag thought, *Youth*. "That is Ch'gran."

To Klag's relief, Toq recognized the name. "The lost colony."

"Yes." Klag gulped down some bloodwine. "Captain Ch'gran led the first fleet that attempted to colonize another world after the Hur'q pillaged Qo'noS. For many turns, the finest engineers constructed spacecraft, using whatever meager resources the Hur'q had left us. Many called them fools. Many called them wasteful. But Captain Ch'gran knew that we would never regain our honor, never be able to avenge ourselves on the Hur'q, if we did not conquer space. Soon, seven mighty vessels had been built, and Ch'gran led them out into the vastness of the black sky -- only to be lost forever."

"Not quite forever," B'Oraq said with a smile as Klag drank some more bloodwine. "Didn't they at last find the colony remains on Raknal V?"

"Yes," Klag said, "but that is a different story." He raised his mug. "To Ch'gran!"

Not only Toq and B'Oraq but several others who had gathered nearby repeated the toast. "To Ch'gran!"

Then they all gulped their bloodwine. Several warriors head-butted Toq, who returned the gesture eagerly. One did likewise with Klag.

"You tell the story of Ch'gran well," the warrior, who sported a commander's insignia, said after pouring some bloodwine in the general direction of his face -- some of it even making it into his mouth, but most of it running through his brown beard.

"You honor me, Commander -- ?"

"Grakal, son of Kerr. You are Klag, son of M'Raq, are you not?"

"Yes."

"The hero of Marcan V!" Grakal turned to his companion, standing unsteadily behind him. "I told you it was him!"

"It cannot be," the other Klingon said. "Klag lost his arm at Marcan V."

"It is true, my right arm was taken from me at Marcan." He scooped up some more bloodwine. Grakal and the others looked at him with faces ranging from expectant to confused to so inebriated as not to care -- but they obviously expected another story.

Who am I to deny them? "I served aboard the *Pagh* under Captain Kargan."

One of the drunker warriors raised his mug. "To Captain Kargan!"

"To Captain Kargan!" many of the others repeated, and drank their bloodwine.

Klag pointedly did neither, but continued his story. "The *Pagh* was one of twelve that faced six Breen and Jem'Hadar vessels on that great day at Marcan. The battle was glorious -- many warriors died that day in battle, but they took the despicable Breen and the honorless Jem'Hadar with them."

Several members of Klag's audience -- which had already doubled in size -- cheered at that. Warriors were always up for a good story, drunken warriors even more so, and this was a story Klag had yet to tire of telling.

"When the battle had ended, only two ships remained: the *Pagh* and one of the Jem'Hadar ships. But we were both severely damaged. The fifth planet had breathable air, so Kargan ordered us to land. The Jem'Hadar did

the same."

"So the fight was to continue on the ground?"

B'Oraq asked with a smile.

Klag shot her a look. She, of course, knew this story, but she spoke as one who enjoyed hearing it again. "Yes. Our stabilizers had been damaged, so when we entered the atmosphere, we were thrown across the ship like riders on a bucking mount. By the time I regained my senses, I was on the deck, my right side pinned by the tattered remains of the command chair. I couldn't feel my right arm, but I could see it sticking out from the other side of the debris. With a mighty shove, I rolled the twisted piece of metal off me with my left hand -- and then I stood to get a damage report." Klag took a long gulp of bloodwine. "My right arm remained on the deck."

"That is no way to lose an arm," Grakal said.

"No, it was not. I was furious -- an anger that increased a thousandfold when I saw that I was the only one who lived through the crash. Our fine crew did not deserve to die such a death after having survived the Jem'Hadar!"

The warriors grunted and shouted in acknowledgment of this injustice.

Klag left out the great glee that he experienced upon seeing the corpse of Captain Kargan. A member of the influential House of K'Tal, and as great a fool as ever lived, Kargan had kept Klag under his heel for a decade. Too inept to inspire warriors to go into battle, but too well connected to be removed from duty by any honorable means, Kargan kept Klag as his first officer in order to cover his own inadequacies, blocking all opportunities for Klag to be promoted, and using Klag's greater skills to further his own lacking honor.

However, Klag saw no reason to pollute the story with Kargan. This was *his* moment of glory. "It was therefore left to me to finish what we had begun. After all, if I survived, some of the enemy might have as well -- and that meant the battle was not yet over."

"The battle is never over as long as one of the enemy yet lives." The words were originally spoken by Kahless, now quoted by a woman who stood next to Grakal.

"Yes." Klag smiled at the woman. He drank down the rest of his bloodwine, then refilled his mug. "In fact, ten Jem'Hadar and one Vorta still lived amidst the wreckage of their ship. Armed with a *mek'leth*, I went to greet them."

"Only one warrior, with only one arm, against ten Jem'Hadar?" one warrior said, skeptically.

"Do you doubt me?" Klag asked. In fact, it had been only seven Jem'Hadar, but ten was a rounder figure....

Before the warrior could answer, one of his comrades slammed him in the stomach. "Let him speak, fool!"

Pointedly looking at each member of his audience save the skeptic -- now doubled over in pain -- Klag said, "The Jem'Hadar may have been bred for combat, but the heart of a warrior cannot be grown in a Vorta laboratory. Within minutes, I stood amongst the corpses of my enemies, my *mek'leth* stained with their blood and the Jem'Hadar's white drug. I was triumphant! Our victory paved the way for our forces to penetrate the Allicar Sector."

Grakal nodded. "Allicar was a great victory."

Toq, who had listened eagerly to Klag's story even though he probably knew it by heart, said, "To Klag! Single-handed defeater of the Jem'Hadar!"

By this time, over a dozen were gathered around to hear Klag's tale. They all cried, "To Klag!," gulped their bloodwine, and head-butted each other, laughing.

The woman who quoted Kahless spoke then. "How is it that you come to have two good arms once more, Captain? Have you one of those mechanical contrivances the Federation uses? Are you Borg now?"

Tossing his mug to the floor in disgust, Klag said, "I would never put a machine on my body and call it my limb!" He held up his new arm. "This once served as the good right arm of my father, M'Raq, son of K'Ton. He was one of the finest warriors in the Empire. My physician, Dr. B'Oraq," he said, indicating B'Oraq with his hand, "performed the procedure. Father and son have been reunited as one to forge a new path of honor!"

Several cheered at that. Klag took the moment of the cheer to grab a fresh mug from the pile next to the barrel.

"You should wear your scars proudly," one warrior said over the cheers, "not hide them behind false limbs."

Grakal asked, "Were you not listening? Do you truly think that he hides his glory? And why should he not give himself a new arm? One who survives battle should live to fight another day, not be handicapped by ancient customs."

"Do you find honor and duty an ancient custom as well?" the other warrior asked. He pointed at the statue of Kull, a contemporary of Kahless; the statue represented a warrior who was bereft of his left hand. "When Kull lost his hand in battle against Kinaan the Foul, did he have a sorcerer graft another's hand onto him?"

"No," Grakal said, "and Kull didn't use a disruptor to kill Kinaan, either. Mainly because they didn't exist."

B'Oraq looked sharply at the skeptical warrior. "Should we abandon transporters because Kahless did not have one? Should ships that go at warp speed be scrapped because Kahless could not travel faster than light?"

"Bah!" The warrior walked up to the barrel and scooped up some bloodwine, then stomped off in search, no doubt, of a story more to his liking.

Meanwhile, the woman turned to Klag. She wore a captain's insignia. "It is an honor to meet you, Klag. I am B'Edra -- I command the *Taj*."

Klag held up his mug. "You won the day at Orrias."

"The *Taj* was one of many vessels that won that day." B'Edra did, however, return the toast. Both she and Klag drank heartily, as did B'Oraq, still standing next to Klag.

"Are you to be honored come the morning, Captain?" Klag asked.

"No. I am here at the insistence of my first officer. He was inducted several years ago, and he always returns for the new inductions if his duty permits. We were on undesignated maneuvers in a nearby system, and so I acceded to his request to participate." She smiled. "In truth, your presence is part of why I agreed, Captain."

This surprised Klag. "Why is that?"

"Your victory at Narendra III. Another warrior might have simply fought against the vessels that were enthralled by Malkus. But you gave them a chance to retain their honor and not die with their eyes blinded. I respect that."

Klag nodded his appreciation. A ninety-thousand-year-old tyrant named Malkus had had his consciousness implanted in an artifact that had been buried on Narendra III. Its accidental unearthing enabled Malkus to telepathically control all who dwelt on the planet as well as the seven ships in orbit. With the aid of a Federation starship, the *Gorkon* was able to stop Malkus. Klag had made sure that they fought only defensively: enough to keep the upper hand, but without dishonoring the warriors who were, after all, only victims, by forcing them to die when not even in their right minds.

B'Edra then turned to the physician. "You are also to be commended, Doctor. Klag's courage is already well documented, but yours is no less so."

B'Oraq tugged on the auburn braid that hung down over her right shoulder, secured by a pin with the emblem of her House. "You flatter me, Captain. I merely do what I can in service of the Empire."

"Not at all. Fools like that *petaQ*," she indicated the warrior who had stomped off, now engaged in -- and losing -- a wrestling match, "are legion. You challenge the fundamentals of what makes us Klingon -- what makes us warriors." She looked around and raised her mug. Grakal and Toq were laughing over some shared joke, but they noticed her gesture and did likewise, as did a few others. "To B'Oraq! May she guide the way to a glorious future, where our warriors can continue to fight in this life in order to improve their honor and increase their glory in the next!"

Smiling, B'Oraq raised her mug in appreciation while the others cried, "To B'Oraq!"

"Oh yes, let us praise the butcher!" yelled a familiar voice from behind Klag.

What in the name of Kahless is he doing here? Klag thought, not even bothering to turn around. "Why are you here, Dorrek?"

Captain Dorrek of the *I.K.S. K'mpec*, the *Gorkon*'s sister ship, stepped up to the barrel. "Let us praise the one who allowed her captain to soil the memory of a great warrior by stitching his remains onto the shoulder of an unworthy fool." He scooped his mug into the bloodwine barrel, then threw the mug against the wall. It clattered to the floor, bloodwine flying in all directions. "You dare much to bring this creature into a hall of warriors. I should think they shall have to fumigate the statues to remove the stench of her chamber of horrors from this noble place!"

B'Oraq tensed, her hand going to the *d'k tahg* on her belt.

Klag looked down upon Dorrek, who stood a full head shorter than Klag. "She has as much right to be here as you do. After all, she is a member of my crew."

"Yes. How fitting that a vulture who consumes the carrion of the dead serves with one such as you. You'd both be more suited to a Kreel ship."

Now Toq stepped forward, unsheathing his *d'k tahg*. "I will not hear such words spoken of my captain!"

"Stand down, Toq," Klag said. "Any challenge will be mine to make -- and I will not take up arms against my brother here."

Both Toq and B'Oraq shot him a look.

Ignoring the look, Klag turned back to his younger sibling. "Again I ask you, Dorrek, why are you here? Surely, you have not come to wish your older brother well on his induction into the Order."

Dorrek looked up at Klag with his small, beady eyes, a direct contrast to Klag's wide ones. Dorrek had inherited his mother's crest, where Klag had gotten M'Raq's. The only obvious family resemblance between the two was in the sharply upturned eyebrows. "Believe me, brother, I would not have set foot on this planet knowing it had been sullied by your bootprints were I not ordered to. All the Chancellor-class captains have been summoned here to meet with Chancellor Martok and General Talak following the ceremony."

Klag had not known this -- but his induction made his presence on Ty'Gokor a given, so such orders would not need to be cut for him. Instead, he simply sneered at Dorrek. "You accuse *me* of soiling this world, yet you stood by and allowed Father to wither away and die like some old woman! You supported his honorless path."

"He was our father. It was our duty to obey him. But that was never good enough for you, was it, Klag?"

"Ironic, is it not," Klag said with a smile, "that you hide behind filial piety when it suits your purpose, yet you make no such concession to me now, even though I am the older brother?"

Dorrek let out a growl. "Our father *earned* the right to be obeyed!"

"How? By allowing himself to be captured? By letting the Romulans prevent him from dying with honor? By refusing to reclaim that honor when he escaped from the prison camp? When, exactly, did he earn that right, Dorrek?"

Stepping forward, Dorrek started to speak, then stopped. "I will not do this now, Klag. Not here. This is a time of celebration, and I will honor those -- *most* of those -- who are to be inducted tomorrow. But know this -- there is blood between us, and it will not end until one of us is in *Gre'thor*."

With that, Dorrek turned his back on Klag and disappeared into the ever-growing crowd of warriors.

Klag looked around for the first time since Dorrek's arrival. Grakal, B'Edra, and the others had disappeared into the crowd as well. Only B'Oraq and Toq remained by Klag's side.

Cursing, Klag scooped up some more bloodwine and drank it all in one gulp.

"Captain -- " B'Oraq started.

"Be *silent!* We will not speak of this. We will drink and we will tell stories and we will sing songs of glory and battle and honor!"

Both officers exchanged a quick glance, then refilled their mugs.

Klag knew that both of them had questions, and he also knew that he had their support.

But right now, he wanted more than anything else to get excessively drunk.

Hours later, dawn rose on Ty'Gokor. At least, Klag assumed it did. The Hall of Warriors was enclosed, with no view of the outside world. All one could see in this place was history: that of the past, represented by the statues that gazed down upon all who entered, and that of the future, in the form of those who would be inducted into the Order.

Klag didn't feel nearly drunk enough.

B'Oraq, too, seemed maddeningly sober. Klag hadn't seen Toq in close to an hour, though he had looked very close to falling over then. The youth had last been seen standing with Grakal under the statue of *Dahar* Master Kor. Grakal had been telling Toq the story of the Battle of Klach D'Kel Brakt for the fifth time.

Klag had not seen hide nor hair of B'Edra -- which disappointed him -- nor Dorrek -- which was a relief -- all night. He wondered if the *Taj*'s captain had thought his treatment of his father to be distasteful.

He also wondered why he cared so much. Far too much of his life of late had been dictated by the whims of others. Kargan's influence kept him away from command for years. Kargan's death and Klag's own heroism at Marcan V had given him a command, but then only on others' terms. He had had no say in his crew.

But they had come together, won many campaigns, from the rebellion on taD to the defeat of Malkus at Narendra III, and it was all Klag's doing. *I have done this -- I have at last brought honor to our House, after Father threw it away and after Kargan kept me from fulfilling it properly. Now, at last, I am to be inducted into the Order of the Bat'leth! And no one will take that from me!*

"Take what from you, Captain?" B'Oraq asked.

"Hm?" Klag hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. "Nothing, nothing." He took a sip of his bloodwine, but the mug was empty. Looking down, he saw that the barrel too was empty. "*QI'yaH*," he cursed.

"Have you seen Toq?" she asked.

"Not since -- " He cut himself off as he looked around. His eyes fell on the statue of Kor. Sculpted shortly after Kor's heroic death on the *I.K.S. Ning'tao*, it showed Kor as a younger man, leaning forward, each arm outstretched with a disruptor in each hand.

It looked almost the same as it did the last time Klag saw it, with one major alteration: Toq, who was now draped over the *Dahar* Master's arms, sleeping peacefully.

B'Oraq followed Klag's gaze, and then both captain and doctor burst into raucous laughter, Klag throwing his head back and bellowing his amusement to the ceiling.

It was the first real belly laugh Klag had indulged in since Dorrek had shown his hideous face, and it felt good.

"I'm reminded," B'Oraq said, "of a human saying I picked up at Starfleet Medical Academy. 'Youth is wasted on the young.' "

"Humans have almost as many sayings as we do."

"Yes, but ours are much more colorful. And most of theirs are from the great playwright Shakespeare, in any case."

Klag shook his head. "I always found Shakespeare to be overrated."

B'Oraq tugged on her braid. "You can't really appreciate him until you read him in the original English."

Their conversation was interrupted by cheers that heralded the arrival of General Talak, Chancellor Martok's chief of staff. This meant that Martok himself could not be far behind.

However, another entered behind Talak: a Klingon, but not dressed in a Defense Force uniform. Rather, he wore a brown tunic, matching pants, and a black leather floor-length coat that bore the insignia of both the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire on the chest.

"Captain, isn't that Ambassador Worf?" B'Oraq said.

Klag did not answer directly, but instead cried out, "Worf!"

The ambassador looked up and around the room at the sound of his name. Upon spying Klag and B'Oraq, he changed direction and went to greet them.

"What brings the Federation ambassador to our hallowed hall?" Klag asked when Worf was in conversational earshot.

Worf was far too taciturn to ever truly smile -- a lifetime living among fragile humans had, Klag knew, taught the ambassador to restrain his Klingon passion -- but he did smirk with pride as he answered. "The same as you, Captain. Chancellor Martok has added my name to the honor roll."

Klag nodded his approval. Worf had been involved in both Klag's mission to taD and his recent victory on Narendra III, and he had been a hero to the Empire in more ways than one. "The chancellor is wise. Though some may see this as a political move on his part."

"The irony is not lost on me," Worf said dryly.

"What irony?" B'Oraq asked.

"Twice," Klag said, enjoying the chance to tell another story, "the ambassador was cast out of the Empire. The first was when he accepted discommendation in order to keep the Empire from civil war. He did so to protect the secrets of the traitorous House of Duras. The second was when he opposed the Klingon invasion of Cardassia -- an invasion masterminded by the changeling who impersonated Martok."

"In both cases," Worf said, "the reasons for my exile were political. This time, however, it is truly only honor being served."

"Come," Klag said, "let us find a barrel with bloodwine left and drink to your worthy induction."

Worf nodded. "I'd like that -- but only if we drink to yours, as well, Klag."

Klag laughed. "It will be done!"

Within the hour, Klag had drunk six more mugs of bloodwine. The air felt stale, reeking with the musk of the assorted drunken Klingons, tinged with the overwhelming smell of the bloodwine, which now seemed to permeate every molecule that made up the hall.

Yet he felt more sober than ever. Klag, Worf, and B'Oraq exchanged more stories, with some other warriors coming and going -- including Grakal, who had some disparaging remarks to make about Toq's constitution. Worf told of his capture by the Breen during the war, and his escape, aided by the Cardassian hero Damar. Klag told of the *Pagh's* campaigns against the Cardassians, including a well-fought battle at Quinor. Grakal finally told a story of his own, about taking Chin'toka -- he had served as a lieutenant on the Azrak during that glorious battle.

"I remember Chin'toka well," Worf said somberly. "It was the site of one of our greatest victories, and one of our greatest defeats. We lost the *Defiant* there when -- "

A bone-jarring pounding started then. It turned out to be the drums that loudly heralded the entrance of the chancellor. Martok was covered neck to toe in the heavy medal-covered cassock that signified his most high office. Behind him, a bearer held an ornate *bat'lath*. Klag saw that, rather than carry the weapon that had been the symbol of the Order for decades, Martok had instead brought with him the Sword of Kahless. Retrieved by Martok and Worf shortly after the end of the war, possession of the legendary sword, forged by the divine one himself, had cemented Martok's power as head of the High Council.

"Mar-tok! Mar-tok! Mar-tok!"

The cheer started with one warrior, then grew to fifty by the third repetition of the name. Klag had mixed opinions of the Empire's newest leader, but he knew that the one-eyed warrior was a distinct improvement on his predecessor, the ever-political Gowron. Martok was a commoner from the Ketha Lowlands who worked his way up the ranks to become a great war hero. In truth, he embodied the best of the Empire, so it was only fitting that he occupy its highest position. His road there had been hard-fought, but in the end, he had more than earned it.

"Mar-tok! Mar-tok! Mar-tok!"

As the chancellor stepped up to the stage, all the warriors who still stood turned toward him, cheering and drinking. Klag found himself joining them, as did B'Oraq and Worf.

General Talak stood next to the chancellor and cried, "Long live Martok! Long live the Empire!"

A general cheer rose up at that, some shouting Martok's name, some shouting "*Qapla!*" and others just shouting. As they did so, two more Klingons wheeled a large board onto the stage. Attached to the board were about a dozen medals: the symbols of the honor that would be bestowed this day.

"Klingon warriors, I salute you!" Martok shouted over the din, his words serving to quiet that din somewhat. "At least, those of you still standing," he added with a laugh, as three unconscious warriors were carried out of the hall. Klag looked over at the statue of Kor to see that Toq had not been moved, nor had the boy budged on his own.

"This is a great day. A day when we honor those who have brought us glory, whose deeds will live on in song and story! And so, in this hallowed hall under the watchful gaze of our greatest heroes, you will receive the highest honor that can be given to a Klingon!"

More cheers went up at that, and Klag prepared himself to go forward.

But, though tradition stated that the chancellor's adjutant -- in this case, Talak -- would then read the honor roll, the general did not budge. Instead, Martok gazed out upon the crowd with his one eye and waited for the warriors to quiet down.

"Most of you," he finally said, "know the Order only as a great honor that we bestow. This night has been full of stories of our courage, our bravery, our honor, so I hope that you will allow me to tell one final tale. That of how the Order was founded."

Klag exchanged a glance with Worf. This was not a normal part of the ceremony. The ambassador simply nodded back at Klag. Obviously, Worf, a member of Martok's House, knew what was coming.

"The Order was formed over a millennium ago by Kahless's mate, Lukara, after his ascension. Kahless's divine wisdom was evident when coming from the lips of Kahless himself. Lukara was understandably concerned with whether or not her mate's words would live on after him. For conquest is only the beginning of the battle, not the end. As Kahless himself said, 'Power must not only be seized, but also held.'"

Interesting, Klag thought. He knew some of this history, but had never given it much thought. Most of the stories about Kahless focused on his life, not what happened after his ascent to *Sto-Vo-Kor*.

Martok now began to pace, speaking with the cadences and rhythms of a born storyteller, being sure to make eye contact with as many of the warriors in the room as he could. "And so Lukara formed the Order of the Bat'lath from among Kahless's most trusted followers." Walking over to the sword-bearer, Martok took the Sword of Kahless from him and held it aloft. "Named after the very sword that Kahless forged in the lava of the Kri'stak Volcano, the Order was tasked not only with spreading the great word of Kahless, but also enforcing his doctrine. If a House Head was acting dishonorably, members of the Order would be sent to put him on the right path. If a warrior went back on his word to an honorable foe, the Order would ensure that he kept that word."

"The Knights Templar," Worf whispered.

"A not inappropriate analogy," B'Oraq muttered in reply.

Klag gave them both odd looks, then remembered that they both studied at Starfleet Academy. *No doubt it is some similar Federation organization.*

Certainly, Klag knew, the Order had long since fallen away from that particular duty. Although receiving the medal that signified membership in the Order was a great honor, it had never, to the best of Klag's knowledge, come with any special responsibility. It was but an acknowledgment of great deeds.

The inebriated, exhausted, yet exuberant crowd started to voice its pleasure with cheers and cries of "Martok!"

Martok lowered the sword and continued. "Although no one has called upon the Order to serve their original function for many turns, that does not relieve any of you who are to be inducted today from your duty. You must be ever vigilant."

The crowd cheered its approval.

"You must live up to the ideals of Kahless!" Martok raised his voice to continue to be heard over the swelling noise of the crowd. "And, should the need arise, you must call upon the Order to aid you in restoring honor to any part of the Empire! We are but a few months removed from one of the greatest victories in history. The war against the Dominion was on a scale not seen in this galaxy for millennia, and we were the victors!"

More cheers. Klag was not among them, but he did smile his approval. There were always those who would abandon the course of honor. Martok had had to deal with such creatures shortly after the end of the war. Klag was pleased to see that Martok had learned the lessons those battles had taught him and was preparing for potential future lapses.

"And so," Martok said, holding the sword back up, "let us go to glory!"

This time, Klag did join in the cheers. The sound echoed throughout the chamber, rising to a pitch so

deafening Klag feared his eardrums would burst.

Talak stepped forward, holding a padd. "Come forward, Hevna, daughter of Larra."

Klag saw a woman approach the stage, a mek'leth in one hand, even as Martok reached onto the board to remove one of the medals. Proudly, Hevna stood as Martok pinned the medal onto her uniform. "Glory to you and your House," he said.

Nodding, she turned and returned triumphantly to her place, where she was greeted enthusiastically.

"Come forward, Grakal, son of Kerr."

Grakal stumbled toward the stage, barely able to keep to his feet. *A pity Toq is not awake to see the tables turned*, Klag thought wryly.

"Glory to you," Martok said as he steadied the drunken warrior with one hand while pinning the medal with another, "and your House."

After nodding, Grakal turned around, and proceeded to pass out, falling down the stage stairs.

This provoked gales of laughter from many of those assembled, Martok most of all. "How fortunate for Grakal," the chancellor said, "that tradition states that one must remain conscious *until* receiving the medal."

Klag threw his head back and laughed at the chancellor's remark, as well as its victim, even as he, Worf, and B'Oraq moved to help remove the insensate commander from blocking the stairs.

Once they had done so, Talak said, "Come forward, Worf, son of Mogh."

Turning, Klag saw the ambassador turn and walk to the stage. The cheers that met his announcement were at the same volume as the cheers for the other warriors, but Klag noted that they came from fewer mouths. Many thought Worf to be a hero to the Empire. He slew the traitor Duras; he killed Chancellor Gowron in honorable combat and installed Martok as his successor; he was the one who first saw the clone of Kahless on his manufactured return to Boreth, and his actions led to the clone's rise to the position of emperor. Others thought less of him for those very deeds -- or they viewed him as an outsider because of his Federation citizenship. Some simply were unaware of Worf's role in those events, for others -- primarily Gowron -- had taken public credit for them.

However, Klag was sure to join in the cheers. Worf had overcome much, from the massacre of his family on Khitomer to Gowron's treachery, and he deserved the praise he received now. Klag had fought alongside him twice, and found him to be a true warrior and worthy of the honor Martok bestowed upon him.

Martok smiled as he placed the medal on Worf's heavy leather jacket. "Glory to you," he said, "and our House. This is a long time coming, my friend."

Worf simply nodded and turned around. Next to Klag, B'Oraq -- who had remained quiet for most of the ceremony -- cheered as loudly as she could for the ambassador.

Talak spoke now in a dull monotone. "Come forward, Klag, son of M'Raq."

Pride swelled within Klag's chest as he moved to the stage. He and Worf exchanged a nod as they passed each other.

From its sheath in his back, Klag pulled out the *mek'leth* with which he slew many Jem'Hadar and one Vorta on Marcan V. As he walked up the steps, he locked his eyes with Martok's one eye, and the chancellor looked back on him with the respect of a fellow warrior.

"Glory to you and your House." Martok placed the pin among the medals on Klag's floor-length cassock. It shone brightly.

Klag turned around to meet the cheers of the crowd. Again, B'Oraq gave her vocal approval, as did Worf. Klag saw, to his joy, B'Edra raising her mug in appreciation.

Then he turned to see Dorrek -- who had turned his back on the stage.

In truth, he thought, I expected no less.

When he rejoined Worf and B'Oraq, the latter handed Klag a mug of bloodwine. "Let us drink," the doctor said. "To Worf! To Klag! To the Order of the *Bat'leth*! To honor!"

They slammed their mugs together and drank heartily.

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