



Star Trek: The Next Generation: Klingon Empire: A Burning House: "Star Trek": Klingon Empire

By Keith R. A. DeCandido

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They have been the Federation's staunchest allies, and its fiercest adversaries. Cunning, ruthless, driven by an instinct for violence and defined by a complex code of honor, they must push ever outward in order to survive, defying the icy ravages of space with the fire of their hearts. They are the Klingons, and if you think you already know all there is to learn about them...think again.

From its highest echelons of power to the shocking depths of its lowest castes, from its savagely aggressive military to its humble farmers, from political machinations of galactic import to personal demons and family strife, the Klingon Empire is revealed as never before when the captain and crew of the *I.K.S. Gorkon* finally return to their homeworld of Qo'noS in a sweeping tale of intrigue, love, betrayal, and honor.

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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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One

I.K.S. Gorkon

Interstellar space

The *bat'leth* sliced through the air, heading straight for Captain Klag's neck.

Without even thinking, Klag turned his left wrist, flipping his own *bat'leth* upward, cradling the blade's curved handle in the crook of his left arm. The center of the other blade collided with the end of Klag's with a metallic clang that echoed off the walls.

Then Klag brought his own blade down, taking his adversary's *bat'leth* with it, and slammed his foe's jaw with his right palm heel. Pain glowed in Klag's right hand from the impact of bare hand on bone, but it sent his opponent reeling. His heart pounding faster against his ribs, Klag whipped his *bat'leth* up and over his head, intending to strike his foe's forehead crest.

The other *bat'leth* came up, blocking the strike, then pressed forward, sending Klag stumbling back a few steps. In fact, it should have sent him only one step back, but Klag took a few extra to get his bearings. Klag knew his foe well and therefore was acutely aware how difficult victory would be.

The two warriors circled each other, staring face-to-face only a body's length apart. Klag held his *bat'leth* at an angle, his left hand gripping it tightly at chest level; his right hand, still sore from the blow to his foe's hard jaw, cupping the curved blade around his hip. His opponent swirled his blade around in a crisscross pattern. It was a common maneuver, one ostensibly intended to protect against any frontal attack; in practice Klag always thought it was at best merely a clever distraction, and he never bothered with it.

Again, his foe swung at his left side. Again, Klag blocked the strike with ease, but this time he was unable to entangle the other blade, and his foe tried to swing the downward part up toward Klag's chest. Klag was able to deflect with the upper part. That locked their blades, giving his foe an opportunity to kick up toward Klag's groin.

Klag instinctively blocked the kick with his left hand, which worked as far as it went, but when he tightened his grip on the weapon with his right hand, that hand twinged. Wincing, Klag almost dropped the *bat'leth* as his fingers loosened of their own accord, but he forced himself to hang on.

That gave his foe an opportunity to try another kick, this to Klag's right side, which Klag was unable to block.

But he didn't need to. Stumbling to the left with the blow from his foe's steel boot, and ignoring the pain that shot through his ribs from the impact, Klag let loose with a short punch to his foe's exposed right side, then swung up with the *bat'leth*, striking his foe's shoulder.

Klag cursed himself. Klingon armor was strong in general, and on the shoulders it was particularly thick, to protect the neck. He might as well have struck the air for all the good a shoulder strike would do.

A fist came at Klag's face, and he ducked his head so his forehead crest would take the brunt of the blow. Their blades were still entangled, so Klag brought his knee up into his foe's groin. That area was well armored as well, of course, but Klag's main interest was in putting some distance between them, and most warriors would back off instinctively after receiving such a blow, regardless of its actual damage.

Again, the pair faced off. This time, Klag's foe didn't bother with the crisscross motion, simply keeping his *bat'leth* ready in front of him.

Then he came at Klag from the right, swinging the *bat'leth* in a very tight arc, leaving him very little time to parry.

In one fluid motion, he swung the *bat'leth* up to block the strike and bring his foe's *bat'leth* down.

His foe smiled. "Well done, Captain!"

Klag returned the smile.

Then he punched his foe in the face.

As he fell to the floor, Klag threw his head back and laughed. "Do not assume the battle is over just because the mission is accomplished, Kohn."

Bekk Kohn laughed with his captain. "You are correct, of course, sir."

Kohn's swing to Klag's right had been the moment of truth for the captain. During the Dominion War, Klag lost his right arm at Marcan V while serving as first officer aboard the *I.K.S. Pagh*, which was destroyed on that planet. The only survivor of the *Pagh's* crew, Klag slew one Vorta and half a dozen Jem'Hadar literally single-handedly. He was rewarded with a promotion and the captaincy of the *I.K.S. Gorkon*, one of the Chancellor-class vessels that were the cutting edge of the Klingon Defense Force.

At the advice of his ship's doctor, B'Oraq, Klag had a new right arm grafted on. B'Oraq, who studied to be a physician in the Federation and was on a one-woman crusade to improve the state of Klingon medicine, had wanted him to get a prosthetic, but Klag would not attach a machine to his body and call it his arm. Instead, he instructed her to transplant the limb of his father, M'Raq, who died like an old woman in his bed. Klag hoped to restore his father's honor by wearing his good right arm into battle.

But first he had to be accomplished with it. This had been a great stride in that direction.

More laughter came from the two figures standing against the wall of the workout chamber. Klag turned and saw B'Oraq along with the leader of Kohn's squad, Morr. "Your opinion, Doctor?" Klag asked.

B'Oraq tugged on the auburn braid -- bound at its base with a clasp in the shape of the emblem of her House -- that sat on her right shoulder. "Your reaction time has improved tremendously, Captain, and you've adjusted to the differing lengths of the arms. A few more months and you might approach your old levels of *bat'leth* fighting."

That was not what Klag wanted to hear. He felt as good as ever and resented the implication that he wasn't as good as he was before Marcan V. But he repressed that reaction quickly. In the months he had commanded this vessel, he had learned the hard way to respect B'Oraq's opinions, mostly by virtue of her never being wrong.

It had been the doctor's suggestion that Klag spar with Kohn rather than Morr. The leader of First Squad, the elite of the *Gorkon*'s massive complement of troops, Morr also served as Klag's bodyguard and was one of the most accomplished *bat'leth* fighters on the ship. Klag and Morr had also been sparring regularly since B'Oraq performed the graft of M'Raq's arm onto Klag, and B'Oraq was concerned that they were getting too used to each other. Morr concurred, so he assigned Kohn to this duty, with explicit instructions to continue fighting for a significant time before attacking Klag's right to see how he reacted.

Klag was about to tell Morr and Kohn to report back to their duty stations -- Klag himself intended to return to his cabin, so he would not require Morr's services -- when he felt the organs in his body shift upward ever so slightly, and his boots were no longer planted firmly on the deck.

With a snarl, he touched the control on his arm to contact his chief engineer. "Klag to Kurak."

"I know, we've lost gravity. We're working on it. I did warn you this would happen."

"Yes, Commander, you did. What I wish to know now is how soon it will be fixed."

"Two seconds. I suggest you brace yourself."

By the time Kurak finished that sentence, gravity had reasserted itself. Klag bent his knees as he came back to the deck, as did Kohn and Morr. B'Oraq was less agile and fell on her face, barely bracing herself with her hands.

Struggling to her feet, B'Oraq brushed herself off and said, "Well, that was embarrassing."

Klag grinned. "I suggest you report to yourself, Doctor. And Kurak? How much more of this must we endure?"

"I told you before, Captain, the damage to the Gorkon is far too extensive for field repairs to be anything but temporary. Until we arrive at Praxis, these malfunctions will continue."

"Very well, Commander. Out." Klag snarled again. The *Gorkon* had been at the forefront of a very brief campaign against the Elabrej Hegemony, an upstart power that had attacked one of the *Gorkon*'s brother ships, the *I.K.S. Kravokh*, with no provocation and taken its captain and surviving crew prisoner and not permitted them to die. The Klingons' retaliation was swift and devastating, and now there was no Elabrej Hegemony but simply a broken world on which the empire might or might not plant its flag.

That decision was for General Goluk to make. He had remained behind to deal with that, while the surviving Chancellor-class vessels were to report back to the homeworld, with the exception of the Kesh, which

remained with Goluk at Elabrej.

The *Gorkon* would have had to have done so in any case, for the ship suffered considerable damage at the Elabrej's hands, necessitating a crash landing on one of their moons. Kurak estimated that it would take at least two weeks in a shipyard for the mighty vessel to be fully repaired, and Kurak was not known for being inaccurate in such judgments.

After dismissing Morr and Kohn, Klag left the workout room, heading to his own cabin. B'Oraq followed, saying, "During your leave, I want you to continue the drills -- with Morr, with Kohn, or with someone. And keep doing the exercises I prescribed."

Klag shot her a look as they walked down the *Gorkon's* corridors. "I assumed, Doctor, that you would be present for my exercises even during my leave."

Tugging on her braid again, B'Oraq smiled. "I was under the impression that leave meant I was at liberty." The smile dropped. "Besides, I won't have the time. My presence has been requested by the Klingon Physicians Enclave to speak at their conference."

Frowning, Klag said, "I'm unfamiliar with that organization."

"That is not surprising," B'Oraq said with some small degree of bitterness. "Few know of the KPE outside the medical profession, and few in it care enough one way or the other. In fact, this is their first conference, and they're ...

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