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The Captain Ryan Chronicles Volume 5

Cloak of Deceit

**The third short story covering the Adventures of Starfleet
Captain Ezekiel Ryan and the Crew of the Starship *Proxima***



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**The following events take place after the novel “Requiem”
and the Klingon Civil War, but before the Dominion War.**

Chapter 1

“That is the signal.”

“Is that all there is?”

“Affirmative.” Lt. Cmdr Staavm, Chief Science Officer of the *U.S.S. Proxima*, had to agree. It was not much.

And First Officer, Commander Francis Winchester, hated mysteries. Especially this kind. A signal, a digital ‘burp’ really. As yet, totally undecipherable. The main computer had been chewing on it for an hour and nothing. They were no closer to finding out what it was than when they had begun.

The Vulcan science officer believed it was a distress call, though for the life of him, Winchester had no idea why. Distress calls needed to contain something in the way of information to make them effective. This had no audio or video content. It didn’t even seem to contain data of any kind.

While he did not agree with the Vulcan’s analysis, he did agree that it had now passed into the realm of that which needed to be investigated. “OK, do we know where it’s coming from?”

Staavm changed displays, pointing to a representation of space in their vicinity. “We have a direction.” An indicator showed it on the screen. “Without additional bearings, we are unable to triangulate at this time.”

“Then let’s see if anyone else has heard it.” Winchester got an affirmative nod from Tholon, the Andorian Tactical Officer. “Until then, Mr. Purton, new heading, bearing 337, mark 8. Engage at Warp 1 for now.”

“Aye” replied the Caitian helmsman.

“And let’s get the captain involved. Bridge to Captain Ryan.”

“What do you have?”

The voice had been right in his ear, causing Winchester to flinch. It was the most frustrating thing about serving with Ezekiel Ryan: trying to figure out how he did that.

“We have an unidentified signal, of currently unknown origin. Staavm thinks it may be a distress signal. I have requested confirmation of it from other Federation assets in the area, and begun tracking along its bearing.”

Ryan studied the readouts on Staavm’s console. “That’s all there is? Just a repetitious digital packet?”

“That is all we have detected so far” confirmed Staavm.

Pondering the mystery, Ryan turned toward the main viewer. “Tactical.” A map was displayed showing pertinent information. “We are awfully close to the Neutral Zone.”

“Thinking Romulans?”

“Always a possibility. Either way, we need to check it out. Send off a report to Starbase 160, let them know we are checking this signal out.”

“No responses from any of the surrounding Federation ships or outposts. No one else is hearing it.” Tholon’s curiosity was now peaked.

“Must not be terribly strong” suggested Winchester.

“Or it’s very tightly focused and we happen to be in the right place at the right time.”

Ryan looked at the readouts again. They contained so little information. “Then again, I’ve never been a big fan of coincidences. Let’s track this thing down.”

Proxima coasted along at it’s leisurely pace for less than an hour before Staavm noted the bearing of the signal was changing rapidly. They were getting close. But Ryan did not order the ship out of warp until it seemed they had passed the source. Ordering a dead stop to simplify the direction-finding process for Staavm, he waited for her analysis.

“Second bearing established” stated the Vulcan. She directed this information onto the tactical display as well. The two plots now gave them a loose triangulation on the source. It

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indicated a point not far from a known star system. "It appears to be coming from the Orealius System."

And very close to the neutral zone, noted the captain. But it was still too early to be pointing fingers. "What is in the Orealius System, Commander?"

"Orealius is a Class G star, surrounded by only three planets. The second is a gas giant with six moons, at least one of which is marginally Class M during some of its 'year'. Last survey of the system was two years ago, by the *U.S.S. Potempkin*. They found no signs of advanced life, mostly vegetation."

"It could be a downed vessel" stated the XO.

"Possibly. That could explain the unique signal. Something jerry-rigged in desperation. Better something than nothing. Any other ideas?" asked the Captain.

"Pirates or illegals would not be calling attention to themselves that way" offered Tholon.

"And if it is something Romulan, it would have to be something civilian or the Star Navy would be all over it already, I would think" said Winchester.

"Even if it were covert, it's inside Federation space. They couldn't acknowledge it and chance confrontation. They may send a 'clean-up' crew however, try to eliminate the evidence." Ryan was leaning toward Staavm's explanation, though, with them this close to the neutral zone, he was still concerned. It could be nothing, a civilian ship that went down and is desperately seeking rescue, or the Romulans could be casting a lure. Seemed like an out-of-the way place to go fishing, though. "Let's go see what's out there in that system at least. Number One, take us to the Orealius System."

Commander Sela strode onto the bridge of her Romulan Warbird, deep in contemplation over the information contained in the datapad in her hand.

The level at which incompetence flourished in the Empire never ceased to amuse her. Placing a listening station on a Federation moon, and placing it under civilian control! It was ridiculous, doomed to failure from the beginning. What were the Praetor and the Senate thinking?

Which lead her to ask another question: Was it really a civilian operation or was it a Tal'Shiar operation. The secretive Romulan security service was certainly not above covering its tracks any way it could. Turning to her second in command, she asked for a report.

"Sensors have found the site. Initial readings indicate a complete destruction of the facility."

"Any life form readings?"

"Negative."

"Then let us get this out of the way. Prepare to send engineering and security crews to the moon's surface. There is to be nothing left for the Federation to find."

"That may be difficult, Sir." When Sela glanced toward her executive officer, he was staring at the main monitor. He looked very concerned.

Swiveling to face the screen as she took her command chair, Sela understood his visage. Still decelerating from warp speed was a Federation starship. And not just any starship. She had dealt with this one before. It was *Proxima*. Captain Ryan's ship.

"Are we still cloaked?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Then belay that last order. Rig for silent running. Do nothing that may get us discovered." This would be for nothing if *Proxima* discovered them. Theoretically, the facility on the surface could be dismissed as a rogue civilian operation, as long as they were not discovered. Though she seriously doubted if the Federation would believe that, considering some of the equipment that was down there.

She had tangled with Captain Ryan before, and would have preferred not to in this instance. She was in enemy territory with no real hope of assistance. Suddenly, her mission to "clean up the mess" seemed very unimportant.

But if she didn't, the Federation would discover the listening station and their ambassadors would be at it for months. She had to obliterate that station and all traces of it.

And the difficulty level on this mission had just been raised, a hundred fold.

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“Standard orbit. Full sensor sweeps” ordered Ryan.

The ‘moon’, diametrically larger than Earth, looked tranquil from orbit, a lush green belt surrounding its equator. The poles were largely water covered, or so it looked.

“I have detected the source of the signal” noted Staavm. “There appears to have been some form of facility constructed on the surface. And it seems to have been attacked.”

“Life signs?”

“None.”

“Any idea what it was?”

Staavm scanned her sensor readings again. “Unable to tell, Sir. It has been virtually destroyed. I am receiving no power readings either.”

The mystery continued, it seemed.

“There are, however, signs of advanced technology” added the science officer.

“Such as?”

“Duranium, advanced ferritic and aluminum alloys, and various metals and minerals not present in the rest of the planets crust. Clearly, they were building materials, brought here by whoever manufactured that facility.”

“But no energy signatures?”

“None.”

“Alright, we’re going down there. Staavm, you’re with me. We’ll need engineering and medical personnel and a security team. Mr. Winchester, you have the bridge.”

Ryan arrived at the transporter room to find Dr Pulaski and his Chief of Engineering, with two security guards, waiting to go along. “Mr. Robinson, abandoning your post?”

“Come-on boss. I get off this rattletrap so seldom.”

Turning to Staavm, Ryan asked in amazement “Did I just hear MY Chief Engineer call MY ship a ‘rattletrap’?”

“I believe those were his words.”

“Hm. If I were Captain Bligh, I would throw you in the brig in chains. Guess I’m getting soft in my old age. Join the party. Doctor, my goodness, it’s been how long?”

“Almost a month since you even showed your face in sickbay, and less than a week till the deadline for your physical. If I didn’t know better, I’d wager you were avoiding me.”

“Avoiding a caring, sensitive lady like you? Non-sense, Doctor. It’s your medical scanners that scare the pants off of me.” Ryan made a general announcement, “Sidearms for everyone, set to stun for now. We have no idea who or what is down there.”

Handing the Doctor a phaser he retrieved from a locker, Ryan directed her onto the transporter then stepped to the last position left. As he nodded for the transporter chief to energize, he heard the Doctor proclaim “Then you’ll be glad to know I brought some portable scanners with me....”

“...incase we get stranded down here. Then I’ll still be able to complete your physical on time” she finished as they materialized on the moon. With a bemused grin, the Doctor slowly turned her attention to her medical tricorder, searching for life forms more advanced than the vegetation surrounding them.

Doing his best to grin back, Ryan slowly turned to Scott Robinson. “Remind me again why I have to have a doctor onboard?”

“Starfleet regulations.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot.” He hadn’t, but sometimes he wanted to. Dr. Katherine Pulaski was an incredibly skilled doctor, far and above most in Starfleet service, and seemed to take perverse pleasure in pointing out Ryan’s weaknesses to him. It could be downright annoying.

Staavm lead them to a low building some 200 meters away. It was half submerged, with openings in the sides near ground level. It reminded Ryan of the concrete bunkers he had seen in still pictures from Earth’s history. World War II to be exact.

Quickly, they found an entrance and moved down into the structure. It was completely dark, except for the sunlight from the windows. And it showed every sign of having been completely ransacked. Equipment and furniture was tossed in all directions, some of it smashed. A few looked as if they had been placed there as barricades, but apparently had little effect on the attackers.

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Oddest of all though, in Ryan's mind, was no bodies. Yet, anyway.

There were signs of a small arms exchange though. Staavm examined one burn mark on one wall while Robinson examined another on the opposite side of the room. "These are disruptor blasts, Type 3, based on the residual radiation signature."

"Klingon, Romulan or Breen, most likely. Or a captured weapon."

"And this is a phaser. Bloody powerful one too," reported the engineer.

"Federation design?"

"No. Phase modulation is wrong. Definitely not Starfleet, but then there are dozens of companies and worlds that manufacture man portable phasers, all of them varying in some way."

"Still no life signs?"

The Doctor shook her head no. "Not that I can detect."

"What ever happened here, we appear to have missed it. Alright, let's stay in teams of two. Staavm with Mr. Crenshaw, Robinson with Mr. Bontz, and the Doctor with me. Stay in touch at 15 minute intervals and stay alert. It is quite possible our tricorders can't pick up anyone for a reason."

Each team started off in a different direction. Ryan pulled out his Watts lamp and started deeper into the structure, with the Doctor close behind. Everywhere they went, the equipment they encountered looked Romulan, but that wasn't conclusive. It may have simply been purchased and used as an expedient to whoever did build this. Romulan equipment was certainly available on the black market, even inside the Federation.

Moving into what appeared to be a control room, Ryan noted more extensive damage to the equipment. Like someone had deliberately tried to prevent it from being used in some way. Viewscreens were smashed, along with control panels. No one was simply going to walk in here and call up the data from the computer. They were going to have to work for it. Which brought another question to mind: was the computer memory intact? And if it was, could it be accessed?

"Captain." The Doctor was shining her light on a body, clearly Vulcanoid from the pointed ears and green blood, but the clothes looked Romulan.

Ryan rolled the corpse over and discovered what appeared to be a Romulan male, perhaps middle aged, who was, indeed wearing civilian looking Romulan clothes. The clothes had green Romulan blood spattered in various places and, if Ryan was correct, the head and face seemed badly disfigured. But how?

"Civilian Romulans? Here?" remarked Pulaski.

"That would be the logical conclusion. But why? Are they truly civilian or working for someone."

"So then the Romulans are involved."

"But how? They would appear to be the victims, but is that truly the case? Could still go either way." Ryan was noting one other thing: for a civilian operation, they seemed well manned and armed. "We may be able to assume that this accounts for the Type 3 disruptor burns, but what about the phasers?" Ryan looked the corpse up and down, trying to decipher what had killed it. "He doesn't appear to have been phasered. Can you tell the true cause of death?"

The Doctor was looking around, as if concerned over being in this situation. Frankly, the Captain couldn't blame her. Romulans were bad enough, but they had been fighting someone, and who was the instigator was still to be determined.

"Kate." He chose to use the familiar name that almost no one on the crew used, hoping to rouse her out of this.

"What?"

"Cause of death?"

"Oh. Yes." Pulaski redirected her tricorder and took out the diagnostic scanner. "It definitely wasn't a phaser. In fact, it appears that the side of his head was just plain old caved in. A powerful blow against something flat." She looked at the wall he was resting against. "Possibly even this bulkhead."

"The bulkhead could do it, but what around here has the strength to deliver that kind of a blow? Romulan craniums aren't exactly thin, nor are they particularly weak as individuals. But this poor fellow looks like he was manhandled."

"Interesting."

"What?"

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"This." Pulaski pointed to some tear marks in the Romulan's clothes. They were quite deep, down into the flesh even. "These weren't enough to kill him, but would have disabled him to some extent. Possibly enough of an advantage to allow his skull to be crushed."

"They look like claw marks. Really big claw marks." Now Ryan was looking around as well. Were they dealing with a really big, predatory animal? "Can you make out any tissue or such from the attacker in the wounds?"

"Nothing I can identify at the moment. Maybe with the scanners and computers on the *Proxima*.

Standing up, Ryan looked around as he thought out loud. "Place like this would have to possess a security system, intrusion detection scanners and the such." He examined the dark controls around him. "This place is so badly smashed, I doubt we could access it anyway. I just hope the core memory is intact. Maybe Staavm can get something out of it." Ryan reached for his commbadge but was cut short.

"Robinson to Ryan."

"Ryan here. What do you have?"

"Trouble."

Ryan and the Doctor made their way to the engineering area and found the Chief Engineer frowning at a pedestal in the middle of a circular room. "What is it?"

"The mounting...for a Romulan cloaking device."

Ryan's eyebrows went up. "So...where's the cloak?"

Robinson shrugged.

Winchester had decided to take the center seat. As the person left in charge on the bridge, it was his right, but he had never fully felt comfortable doing it. Technically, it was not his, but that stopped no one else in employing it at the appropriate times. He would just have to get used to it.

He was about to get comfortable, listening in on the open communications channel to the away team when a sudden squeal of interference came across. Virtually leaping out of the command chair, the XO turned to the tactical officer, who was silencing the noise before it incapacitated everyone.

Tholon then checked his controls and saw the problem. "We're being jammed!"

"By whom?"

"Romulan Warbird decloaking!"

"Red Alert! Shields up! Get me some weapons." Winchester hated it when the Captain's suspicions proved true, especially when it left him in a situation like this: nose to nose with a Daridex Class Warbird.

"Their shields are up and weapons ready" reported Tholon.

"But they haven't fired. Why?" Winchester knew there had to be a reason.

"The Romulan is hailing us." Tholon was taken completely aback by this change in events.

Winchester waited a second. They had now given away a lot of information, including the presence of a base in Federation territory and the passage of Romulan ships into Federation space. Why did they not appear to be trying to cover it up? "Put it on screen."

Commander Sela's face appeared quickly. She seemed both relieved and perplexed that she was not facing Ryan. "Where is your captain?"

Winchester was not inclined to tell her. "That depends. Why are you in Federation space?"

"We picked up a distress signal, believed it could be Romulan in origin and came to investigate. I assume you will claim no responsibility to whatever happened here?" It would be impossible to claim that what was on the surface was not at least Romulan made, but maybe she could plead ignorance of its existence.

"We are still trying to discover what did happen here, unless you would like to shed some light on that subject." Toss the lure and see what you reel in, thought Winchester. Couldn't hurt to try.

"I certainly can't tell you what I don't know. You have investigation teams on the surface, I believe?"

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“Yes. Is there a reason you are not allowing us to communicate with them?”

“I was more interested in you not calling in half of Starfleet for help. I do not want a confrontation here.” That wasn’t a lie either. She had been pleased to see that Ryan was not on his bridge, which meant he was probably on the surface. If she could keep him and his ship separated, this may not go as badly as she feared it might.

“Actually, that’s good to hear. After all, this could only end badly for the Romulan Empire.” Winchester needed to keep the pressure on her. Make her as defensive as possible. He remembered what Ryan had told him about this wiley Romulan-human half-breed.

“Don’t toy with me, Commander...Winchester, I believe it is. No, that would not be wise. I have the superior position, superior ship, and no patience for being played with. Retrieve your personnel from the surface and leave. We will complete the investigation here. This is clearly a Romulan issue.”

“Thanks for confirming that, but it is inside Federation space. You have no right to be here without invitation. I assume you can’t produce evidence of such an invitation from the Federation?”

Sela needed leverage. This human was not going to back down from simple posturing. She had not really expected him to, being a Starfleet officer, but it had been worth a try. Rumors had abounded about this officer being timid, but it appeared they were wrong. Perhaps that was why he had been assigned to *Proxima*. If so, the plan seemed to have worked. Perhaps, a different tact... “Commander, this bullying will get us nowhere. Clearly, neither side knows what has happened. I suggest we combine our resources.”

That was not the Sela that Winchester knew. She knew her position was weak. What was she trying to gain, and how? “An interesting concept. I would not have expected that from you, Commander.” Now how would he forge ahead without tipping his own hat or endangering the away team? “You realize of course that I can’t do something like that without contact with at least my captain?”

Sela deliberated. Contact with Ryan may not be that bad, since she did have him at a distinct disadvantage. He was stranded on the planet’s surface and he was not getting back up unless the *Proxima* lowered her shields. And that was not going to happen unless she stood down, which was not going to happen. This human had been rumored as timid, but trustworthy. The timid part had been wrong, but what about the other. Then again, if she refused, he could stonewall her indefinitely, including waiting till another Starfleet vessel came along. She needed to be out of here. “Alright, on your word that you will not try to contact Starfleet. This is between me and your captain.”

“I can live with that for now.” And Winchester could, for now.

“Very well.” Sela nodded to her tactical officer. “Your communications channels should be open now.”

“Thank You. *Proxima* to Captain Ryan?” There was no response. The XO looked at his tactical officer.

“Still jammed.”

Winchester was annoyed, but not surprised. “I thought...”

Proximity alarms went off all over the ship. On the viewscreen, Sela showed the surprise of what was happening.

“Another ship decloaking!” shouted Tholon. “They’re firing on the Romulans.”

Winchester turned toward the viewscreen to see Sela shouting orders to her crew. They appeared to have been taken completely by surprise. “View ahead.”

Appearing to come over their left shoulder, a large, blocky looking ship angled into the scene, firing repeatedly at the Warbird. Winchester knew that at the extremely close range, even the Warbird’s shields wouldn’t hold for long

And they didn’t. With a flash, the shields collapsed. Now each blast was tearing into hull material. Winchester was reasonably sure that the Warbird’s starboard disruptor array had been hit.

“Get us out of here! Back us out.” Winchester’s first inclination was to save the *Proxima* and let the combatants duke it out. “Do we have transporter locks?”

“Yes.”

“Then beam up the away team, while we can.”

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Ryan felt the transporter grip him, then release him in the *Proxima's* transporter room. "Something's up. Stations."

Everyone headed for their battle stations. Ryan launched himself off the transporter platform into a full run for the nearest turbolift, wondering how many Romulans there were. When he got to the bridge, he had a sizeable shock.

A single Warbird was ahead of them, being pummeled by a smaller, but obviously powerful, opponent that he didn't recognize. The Romulan was trying to fire back, but it was obvious that its shots packed little punch.

"I don't know who to root for" reported Winchester. "We were in a bad spot with the Romulan till this guy showed up. But we have no idea who it is."

"How the hell did he get the drop on a Warbird?"

"A cloak."

Ryan looked first at Winchester, then back at the screen. "Mr. Robinsons' missing cloak."

"Pardon?"

"Later. Status?"

"We're unharmed, at red alert. All systems ready."

"Torpedoes?"

Tholon checked his board again. "Full load. 32 in forward tubes, 8 aft."

"Mr. Purton, take us back in there, full impulse.. Modify your approach so we can get a shot at the intruder without the Romulan being in our field of fire."

"Aye, Sir."

Winchester was a little surprised. "We're going to help the Romulans?"

Ryan shrugged as he took the center seat. "Seems like the civilized thing to do." He watched as the Caitian helmsman lined them up as requested. "Forward torpedoes, 8 piece spread, Fire!"

All but one hit, the last exploding from a proximity setting. At first there seemed to be no effect, then the opponent began to turn on them.

"Evasive pattern PI-3, dorsal phasers, lock and fire. Standby on aft tubes."

Purton brought them under the intruder and then back toward the direction of the Romulan, always trying to keep the field of fire open. As Tholon was targeting the aft torpedoes, the other ship vanished.

"Target torpedoes on last known position and fire" ordered Ryan.

Tholon fired 4 torpedoes, but none exploded. The opponent was already gone.

"Full scans. If you pick up on an amoeba, blast it. Bring us around and back to the Romulan."

The Warbird was obviously having control problems. It spun on its Z axis slowly, as it had earlier, trying to bring a functional weapon to bear on the opponent, but showed no signs of stopping now. It was possible they had lost helm control and could do nothing about it. The hull was badly scored and breeched in several areas. The port warp nacelle was damaged, perhaps badly. At least two disruptor installations had been knocked out. What else was difficult to tell visually.

"Hail them."

Tholon reported no response.

"Systems maybe down. Keep trying." Ryan was on his feet again, walking as he thought again.

"Should we try to send help?" asked Winchester. He had already told security, engineering and medical to prepare away teams and be ready to assist.

"Not yet. Not without warning them we're coming. After what they've absorbed, they'll take any beam in as a boarding party. They would probably shoot first and ask questions later." He couldn't really blame them if they did.

"I may be getting a response" interrupted Tholon.

"On screen." Ryan turned to the very blurry and fuzzy picture that appeared on the screen. A Romulan officer was looking back over her shoulder, apparently shouting orders at a subordinate. She did not appear to know she was being watched. Then suddenly her voice came through too.

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"Are they even receiving us? Why can't I hear anything?" Clean up that picture! I can't see who I'm dealing ..."

"Sela. It's been, what, 2 years. So good to see you again, but, we have to quit meeting like this. Both our fleets are going to start passing rumors."

Cut off in mid sentence, Sela realized who she was dealing with. "Captain Ryan. What have you and your Federation done?"

"To...?"

"That was obviously a new weapon the Federation has developed. Was this all a little charade to test it on one of our ships."

"You tell me. After all, it was a Romulan outpost in Federation territory that sent the distress signal. Sounds more like a Romulan trap to me. So tell me, did you guys lure the *Proxima* here for target practice, and, if so, what happened? Your man's a pretty lousy shot."

Well, the secret was out. The good captain did know it was a Romulan outpost. This was going to be a very big problem. "The Romulan Empire does not have to stoop to such..."

A control console behind Sela exploded, drawing her attention away from Ryan. It was close enough that she felt the heat. And when she turned to look, Ryan caught site of the deep red-brown on the back of her uniform.

"Sela. You're injured. You need medical attention. Where are your doctors?"

Seeming to be in a mild state of shock, Sela was slow to respond. "Our medical bay was hit. We have no contact with them."

"Captain?" Staavm had discovered something far more important. "The Romulan ship continues to spin out of control. If it is not stopped, its orbit will destabilize and it will begin to fall toward the planet."

"How long?"

"Perhaps five minutes before it becomes irretrievable."

Ryan turned back toward the viewscreen. "Sela, your ship is going to fall into the planet if you don't get it under control."

Sela seemed stunned. "We have no helm control, no power in the impulse engines."

"When will you?"

"Unknown. It looks like you win, Captain."

"Not today, and not this way."

"I do not want your help, Captain. I am a Romulan!" Sela was looking pale and shocky, much like he had seen Staavm when she had been seriously wounded and had lost blood. It was not a good sign.

"Sela, where is your second-in-command?" Ryan hoped that the XO would be alright and able to take over because Sela didn't look like she was going to be upright much longer.

"He's...I can't...focus." Sela collapsed, half caught by a second officer, but still going all the way down.

Ryan watched, hoping someone would come back to him. In the mean time, he caught a glance at Winchester at his station, apparently working out a way to achieve something. He was probably talking to Robinson about using the tractor beam to stabilize the Warbird.

"Captain, we have no way of stabilizing ourselves."

Ryan turned back to see a tall Romulan male. The rank insignia would have been right for someone in an XO's position. "We're working on that. How is your commander?"

"She has lost too much blood, I fear, but I don't know enough about her physiology."

"She's half-human. Let me beam her over. Our Doctor may be able to do something if you have no medical personnel available."

"I cannot accept help from the Federation."

Ryan was afraid of that. He had to get around this. "I know Romulans consider it correct to die rather than cooperate with the Federation, but I think we both have far bigger problems, ones that your Praetor would want you to solve for his empire."

"The only mutual problem the Romulans and Federation have is each other."

"And one stolen Romulan cloaking device."

Chapter 2

Robinson fell into stride with Ryan right after the Captain stepped off the turbolift. "The Romulan ship has been stabilized but they still refuse engineering help."

"Don't worry about it. You can lead a horse to water..."

"Understood."

"At least they finally took our offer of medical help." Ahead, Ryan saw two Romulans, one on a stretcher, the other being helped along by a Starfleet security officer, on their way to sickbay. "Keep your damage control teams at the ready. Who knows when something may go wrong and they decide to change their mind."

"Will do."

They arrived at sickbay themselves and Ryan was surprised to see how many Romulans they had beamed over already. Sela's crew had taken a fair number of casualties. Few deaths so far though, thankfully. Most interesting to him was their commander though.

Sela was on the operating table in the main sickbay with Dr. Pulaski working diligently on her. She saw the Captain and Chief Engineer coming.

"This woman has some of the most unique blood chemistry I have ever witnessed. The good news is that I have managed to stop the bleeding, so she's not losing any more. But I need to find some way to replenish what she's lost."

"I would hope the Romulans would have taken that into consideration. Maybe they have something that can help?" offered Robinson.

"Unfortunately, your counterpart on the Warbird appears to have been one of the fatalities, Doctor" replied Ryan

"And I am a bit busy at the moment. Can Staavm try to find out what she can? Any information would be useful. I'm working from scratch here."

"I'll get her on it right away. Anything else you can use?"

"I could use spare crew quarters as recovery rooms. We're filling up around here pretty fast."

"I'll get that. Anything else I can do?" asked Robinson.

"Make sure I don't lose power. Other than that, it's just going to take time to deal with it."

"Alright. I'll work on getting quarters on this deck and the one below ready to receive patients. Security and all." Robinson turned and was gone.

"Any idea who did this?"

"Not yet. Keep me posted, I'm on my way to meet with her second-in-command. Her prognosis, Doctor?"

"She should live, but how long to recover will be dependant on how fast we can find a solution to the blood loss problem."

"Keep me posted." Ryan left sickbay and alerted Staavm to the Doctor's need, then proceeded to the No. 2 Conference Room where he was to meet the Romulan Sub-commander.

"Sub-Commander Nuval, acting commanding officer of the Warbird *Drendor*."

"Captain Ezekiel Ryan, Federation Starship *Proxima*."

"Captain, I believe you said there was a stolen cloaking device at work here?"

"I think that to be the case."

"Based on...?"

"We examined the outpost down on the surface. We were able to determine that there had been a cloaking device there, but it was now gone."

"What proof do I have that you yourself have not stolen it?"

"Well, none, yet. But why would we still be here if we had?" Ryan allowed the Sub-commander to digest that reasoning. "Fact of the matter is, something happened down there. What I still don't know. We were interrupted in our investigation."

"What is the condition of the outpost?"

At least they were no longer denying it. That was progress. "Wrecked, for all practical purposes. And there were no apparent survivors. Or, at least, none that we had found before we were pulled off the surface. Computer access was impossible with the condition of the equipment

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that was down there, but we had not yet determined the condition of the memory core. We had hopes that it might contain information on what happened.”

“My people need access to that memory core, Captain. That is Romulan property.”

“That was placed, apparently deliberately on Federation soil. But I don’t see that as the point just now.” Ryan was getting irritated with this fellow. “What is important is the presence of a very heavily armed ship that is apparently now equipped with a stolen Romulan cloaking device. I am very worried what that ship’s intentions and purpose are. And judging from the damage it did to a Daridex-Class Warbird, I would think that your government would be at least equally concerned. Let’s face the facts. They had a choice of targets lined up in their sights and they chose to ignore the Federation ship and attack you instead. Tells me a little about their feelings for the Romulan Empire.”

Nuval knew Ryan was right. It was too obvious. “Am I to take it that you are proposing that we join forces to hunt this criminal down?”

“If it protects the lives and property of the Federation, I’ll do it.”

But, as a sub-commander in the Romulan Star Navy, Nuval could not just up and start cooperating with a Federation starship. He needed authorization. His commander had the authority, but she was in no condition to authorize anything just now. That left him one option: He needed to contact the Romulan high command. “I will need to get authorization.”

“I suspected you would.” Ryan tapped his communicator and summoned a security guard. The guard from outside entered. “Mr. Fredette, I believe?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I would like you to take Sub-commander Nuval here to the diplomatic quarters and provide him with a secure place from which he can contact his government. Stay with him, except in the communications room. I think you have a good idea of the precautions you will need to take. If you feel you need back-up, please obtain it. I want no incidents.”

“Aye, Sir.” Fredette summoned a second guard, requesting that they be met on Deck 03, where the diplomatic quarters were. Then he gestured for Nuval to come with him.

An hour later, Nuval exited the quarters and requested an immediate meeting with Ryan. Returning to the conference room, Ryan got exactly what he had expected.

“I have been authorized to work cooperatively with you in the recovery of the cloaking device, on one condition. Once the device is recovered, there is to be no examination of it by Federation personnel. It is a closely guarded secret of the Romulan Empire and I am instructed to destroy it before allowing any of its secrets to be divulged to the Federation.”

“If it will end this situation and keep you all happy, I’ll blow it up personally.”

“Then you agree?”

“Yes. Now, may we get on with this. Every hour we spend on diplomacy is more time for them to escape.”

“Agreed. I feel we should continue your investigation of the outpost. I can have engineering and computer specialists prepared to beam down in minutes.”

“Get them ready. We leave from the transporter room in ten minutes.”

On the surface, Ryan, accompanied by Staavm, two security guards, Nuval, and two other Romulans began the decent into the outpost. One of the Romulans, a fairly young looking female, seemed a bit disturbed by the bodies they occasionally discovered. Ryan was surprised by Nuval’s decision to bring what appeared to be such a green specialist.

“I understand your concern, Captain, however, Gelisil is something of a...prodigy...when it comes to computers. If anyone can get information out of that memory core, she can. And the other, Konre, is one of our most skilled engineers when it comes to cloaking technology. He may be able to give us some insight on how this happened, and why.”

“Here is where we believed the cloak was installed” stated Staavm. They had made it back down to the room that Robinson had first discovered.

Konre stepped forward, shining a light around the room. “You are exactly correct. There was a cloaking device here, and it is now gone.” He moved over to the mounting base and examined it closer. “Whoever did this, they were very meticulous about removing the device.

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Every connection appears to have been deliberately disconnected by appropriate methodology, as if professional engineers had been doing it.”

“That had been our conclusion, just from a cursory look earlier” responded Ryan. “What about the memory core?”

The engineer again looked around the room. “If it is like most facilities I have seen, the computer will be close by, so it can easily service the cloaking device.” His light fell on a door with a particular symbol. “There.”

“Yes.” Gelisil had seen it too and was heading for it, with Staavm close behind.

“You two get on that core. The rest of us should have a further look around, see what else we can find. Sub-commander, if you and Ensign Smythe would like to proceed that way, Chief Bornel and I will go this way” ordered Ryan.

Nuval looked down the corridor that Ryan had indicated and began cautiously, obviously expecting to find something, but no idea what. Ryan turned and led the way down the other corridor. A few dozen meters down, they came upon what appeared to be another control room. Like its predecessor, it was completely smashed, perhaps worse. Whole control consoles had been toppled and thrown around the room. To Ryan, it looked as if low yield explosive charges, special demolition type units, may have been responsible.

“I think you’re right, Captain. I’m getting trace remains of explosives even in the air” reported Bornel.

“I thought that’s what I smelled.” Ryan looked around the room, wondering if it was even worth digging. Then again, you never know till you try, so he picked up a ceiling panel and tossed it aside. He continued to clear loose debris till he uncovered a body. It was Romulan again, and this one appeared to have been killed with a phaser.

Bornel was doing the same on the other side of the room, between taking quick scans of the area to make sure nothing was trying to approach them. Some people called Bolians “fraidycats” or paranoid, but he was not taking chances. Not with the way this place had been ransacked. He hated when Ensign Morrison told stories about ‘ghost towns’ in America’s Old West, and this place reminded him of the 24th century equivalent.

While glancing at the last scans results, he reached blindly for another piece of debris, grasped it, and realized that it did not feel like technology. Turning to see what it was, he was aghast at the monstrous visage staring back at him. Trying to backpedal and draw his phaser at the same time, he nearly tripped over more debris. But upon righting himself, he realized that it was not coming after him.

“Captain? I think you should see this.”

Ryan crossed the room to join the Bolean, staring at this new revelation.

“That’s not Romulan.”

Ryan stared longer at the green skinned creature on the floor. “Gorn.”

Chapter 3

"Doctor?" Nurse Stanley pointed to Sela on the next biobed, trying to raise herself.

"Lie down, Commander, and that is an order." Katherine Pulaski rushed to the Romulan's side, not wanting her fine surgical work to go to waste. As gently yet authoritatively as possible, she pushed Sela back down onto the biobed. Sela tried to resist, but weakness made it impossible.

"Where am I?"

"You're in the sickbay of the *Proxima*. You were critically hurt and cut off from your medical personnel, so you were beamed over here."

"Who authorized that?"

"Your Executive Officer. He felt that, with everything else going on, having you alive might be a good idea. You should thank him, Commander, or you would be dead."

"Why am I still so weak?"

"Simple. You lost a lot of blood, we have begun to replenish it." Pulaski started to turn away, but Sela grabbed at her arm.

"Will I live?"

"Yes" Pulaski came closer. "Now that we have more of your blood to help replenish it"

"Where are my doctors?"

"You were correct, Commander. Your sickbay was hit, badly. I'm afraid you lost all your doctors and surgeons. Roughly two-thirds of your medical staff was lost, more were wounded. It took hours to get to the blood supply they had stored on your ship for you."

"What about the rest of my crew?"

At that moment, Sub-commander Nuval entered the sickbay and came their way.

"I think you should ask your XO."

Nuval was relieved to see Sela conscience at all. "Commander, I am relieved to see you awake."

"What is going on? Report."

"The *Drendor* is largely adrift, but salvageable. Her warp drive will not operate again without the help of a proper repair facility, but we hope to have impulse power in about four hours. After that, we await the arrival of a tow ship."

"Casualties?"

Nuval sighed heavily. "466 dead or wounded, that we know of. There are still small parts of the ship cutoff, so that number may rise."

Sela digested that information. Not terribly far from half her crew. Who ever had done this had achieved complete surprise, and she vowed never to let that happen again. "I assume that I passed out, but I would not have allowed a commander of mine to be taken aboard a Federation ship for medical treatment."

"Captain Ryan informed me that the cloaking device hiding the facility below us was stolen."

That definitely changed things. "Have you confirmed that?"

"Yes. Konre and myself went down there and Konre confirmed that there had been a cloaking device there, and that it had been removed in a very deliberate manner. It seemed that the thieves have a purpose for it."

"What about the security systems? Did they capture any evidence on who may have taken it?"

"Yes. Gelisil was able to successfully access the core memory. Though the records were damaged, it was clear. Commander, the listening post was the victim of an attack by the Gorn."

Despite her weakened state, the mention of the Gorn raised her level of attention. The Romulans and the Gorn had been at odds with each other for some time. Though bitter enemies when engaged, it was not like the Gorn to seek out conflict. Yet they had come into Federation space, attacked a Romulan facility, and apparently stolen the cloaking device. It was a bold

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move by them, one worthy of a Romulan. "Have you contacted Command and informed them of the situation?"

"I have, and they instructed me to work with Captain Ryan in tracking down the cloaking device and retrieving it, or destroying it, at all costs."

"I'm not surprised. The Command would not want anyone getting their hands on one of those." Sela wondered what could be the connection. What would the Gorn want with a cloaking device? Useful to some extent, they didn't have the ability to reproduce them and, hence, equip an entire fleet, did they? If so, Romulan Intelligence was slipping. "What does Captain Ryan plan to do about it?"

"He was not specific. At the moment, personnel from both ships are on the surface, making detailed inspections, looking for any clue that may prove useful. Captain Ryan himself has decided to 'consult the Federation's expert' on the subject.

"Ezekiel. It's been a long time. How is the Romulan Neutral Zone?" Picard settled into his ready room chair, unknowing what was about to be brought up.

"It just got hot."

That got Picard's attention. "I had not heard anything through the reports from Starfleet Command. What's happening?"

Ryan filled the *Enterprise's* Captain in on the events of the last few hours. "I am completely lacking in knowledge about the Gorn. Does this sound at all like something the Gorn would try?"

"In general, no. The Gorn government, while not completely popular with it's people, is making a concerted effort to maintain the peace. They know they cannot afford a sustained conflict with anyone at the moment. They are, instead, focusing on scientific development."

"You said they are not popular with all their people? I assume that means there are those in opposition who would like to change things."

"Oh, indeed. There are many factions, some based in particular clans, others crossing clan lines, that want the Gorn Alliance to go on the offensive. Most feel, to one extent or another, that the Gorn have a destiny in ruling more than they currently do and believe they should capture more resources rather than finding ways to make better use of what they already have, or relying on trade to obtain what they need."

"Take a look at this." Ryan worked the controls to send pictures of the dead Gorn that had been found at the outpost to Picard. "I am wondering, that looks somewhat like a uniform, but I don't know."

"Not the uniform of the Gorn Navy. I've seen that. This is too brightly colored, though it is tailored after the regular uniform."

"Could it be a special unit?"

"I don't believe so. But many of the clans maintain small fleets of their own. Usually only a couple of ships, but some have more. What is that symbol?"

Picard zoomed in on the buckle of the Gorn's belt. It had a logo that he didn't recognize.

"No idea. For all I know, it could be badge of rank, ship's logo..."

"Clan logo."

Ryan shrugged. "Why not. You tell me."

"I can't, at the moment."

"Either way, I think this needs to be brought to the attention of the Gorn government. Do we even have diplomatic relations with them?"

"Technically, no." Picard sighed deeply. "At the moment, it looks like we will have to make some. Send me all the information you have and I will see what I can do."

"I'll have it passed to you immediately. In the mean time, we'll sit tight till we hear from you. Ryan out."

Picard leaned back in his ready room chair, pondering the situation. An attack by Gorn, on Romulans, in Federation space. Could this possibly end well for any of them?

"Picard to Riker, please report to my ready room"

Caught in the middle of a drink with Deanna Troi, Riker glanced at his companion suspiciously. Deanna had just told Riker that the Captain had taken a call from Captain Ezekiel

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Ryan in his ready room. Though neither had ever met Ryan, they new his reputation, and a secretive call from him did not bode well. Something was up.

"Acknowledged. On my way."

Riker arrived at the Captain's Ready Room and was quickly admitted. Picard was standing next to the window, gazing out at the passing stars. "Trouble?"

"Plenty. It seems that the Gorn have attacked a Romulan outpost and stolen a cloaking device."

"The Gorn? Wonderful."

"And that is not all. The Romulan outpost was built secretly on a Federation moon."

"This is about to get complicated. Are the ambassadors involved yet?"

The Federation Ambassador to Romulus has been notified, along with his Romulan counterpart, but with no open diplomatic ties to the Gorn, there is a quandary about how to proceed."

"And a loose cloaking device. Needless to say, the Romulans will want that back."

"So badly, in fact, that they have authorized their vessel on the seen to work cooperatively with ours to retrieve it." Picard turned toward his XO with uplifted eyebrows, the surprise being obvious, along with the impression that he did not expect that to last long.

"That's unprecedented, though I can understand their point of view. That's a valuable piece of equipment. In the wrong hands..."

"In the wrong hands, it could re-arrange the power distribution in this sector of space. The question that concerns me is: who are the 'wrong hands'."

"Are they sure it was the Gorn?"

"They found a dead Gorn at the base, then, a ship attacked the Romulan Warbird that came to the base's rescue. Apparently, whoever it was, they knew how to make the cloak work, as they used it to get the drop on the Warbird. The Romulan vessel would have been destroyed if the *Proxima* had not intervened."

"Then they have the cloak operational. I wouldn't have thought the Gorn would have that kind of technical expertise."

Picard glanced at Riker briefly. "Don't underestimate the Gorn, Will. They are a very intelligent, advanced species, if a bit xenophobic. But they are not backward, or fools."

"So what's the next step?"

"I have been the Federation representative to the Gorn on two previous occasions, so I will use that to try and get an audience with the head of the Gorn government. Though they are not prone to negotiation, I hope I can persuade them that they would be standing against the Romulans and the Federation, and that it would be a bad situation for them."

"I take it we are headed for the Gorn homeworld?"

"Or at least to their border. Set course, Number One, maximum warp."

"Aye, Sir." With that, Riker left the ready room, wondering what they were getting themselves into this time.

Ryan stood in Cargo Bay 6 and looked over the bodies of the Romulans that had been recovered from the base. They showed signs of various kinds of trauma, everything from phaser burns to crushed bones to some looking like they had been mauled by large predators, which, in a sense, they had. Twenty-six recovered so far, but there might be more. The search was continuing.

Nuval entered and came to the Captain's side. "Our tow ship has arrived. We'll be able to transfer these casualties within the hour."

Ryan seemed to pay him little attention at first. "Looks like a lot of civilian clothing. I would have suspected uniforms."

Nuval seemed to sense that Ryan was fishing. "I wouldn't know. I an only a lowly sub-commander, not privy to the reasonings behind what I am asked to do. I, simply, am a good Romulan and do what I am told."

"Glad to hear it. Top notch citizen." Ryan hoped the sarcasm wasn't too obvious. "Have you and Sela selected the members of your crew who will accompany us?"

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“Yes, we have. Myself, the Commander, and several security and engineering specialists. Twelve in all. I have a list.” The Romulan handed Ryan a datapad, though Ryan had no idea why. It wasn’t like he could read Romulan.

“Only a dozen. Well, we should have no problem putting you all up on the VIP deck. I’ll have Mr. Tholon make the arrangements.”

“The Commander would like to speak with you, as soon as possible.”

“I suspected that was coming” mumbled Ryan.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Nothing. I’ll be down to sickbay in a few minutes.”

“Very well.” Nuval turned to leave, hoping the Captain would not ignore the Commander’s demands. If he did, it would not go well for either of them.

Soon after, Nuval arrived in sickbay himself, with another Romulan officer in tow.

Sela looked up from reading a report on her ship to see the smiling eyes of an old friend. “Parendal! What are you doing here?” Her mind raced ahead. “You’re commanding the tow ship?”

The short, stocky officer came forward to Sela’s bedside, gave a surreptitious look around at the other Romulans in the sickbay, then waved his hand as if to dismiss them and gave Sela a fatherly hug. “Ooooooh, it’s been too long. What, seven years since the Penagrath?”

“At least that.” Sela was pleased to see this man. Not only had he been a family friend of her father, but he had mentored her in her early days as an officer. She had been his security chief for two years on the Penagrath, an older vessel similar to what the Federation termed as a ‘destroyer’. But, eventually, she had left for bigger and better postings. She had heard, several years later, that he had been injured in an explosion. An accident that she never did hear the cause of, had left him scarred and with certain mild problems in the use of his legs and right arm. As far as the Star Navy was concerned, he was washed up, but her father’s family had stepped in, urging the navy to reconsider, in view of Parendal’s long and distinguished career serving the Empire. Parendal, never one to lust for glory or rank or position, had always gained happiness by simply serving his people to the best of his abilities and had jumped at any chance to serve. So, he had taken command of a seemingly endless succession of fleet auxiliary ships. Freighters, repair ships, cargo carriers, even a troop ship at one time. Anywhere that he was needed and they were willing to send him. And apparently, now it was a tow tug. But, considering the alternative, retirement, Sela couldn’t blame him. At least he was still serving the Empire by doing what he had always shown he could do well, commanding starships. “How are you doing, old friend?”

“Well,” Parendal patted his slightly enlarged midsection. “I’m afraid I’m not what I used to be, but I’m alive, reasonably fit for duty, and wondering what my little niece has gotten herself into?”

Sela had to smile at that. Though technically unrelated, she had always referred to him as ‘Uncle Par’. Secretly, of course. “I have to wonder myself. It seems the Gorn have taken the offensive.”

“But why? They know our strength. They cannot hope to defeat us. I do not think the lizards are so foolish. And why these recent orders?”

“What orders?”

“They just came in before I beamed over here. We have been ordered NOT to evacuate any of the dead or wounded, at all. We are not to touch them. The empire is sending a medical ship!”

“Why?”

“They won’t say, and that is my question.” Parendal looked around the sickbay at the dozen or so of the more critical cases convalescing or undergoing continued treatment or therapy. “From what I see, your wounded are being well cared for. My medical staff are not imbeciles. And we have the capacity. It would be tight, but it could be done for the short run to the Travor IV facility.

“And the Empire has so few medical ships in service” added Nuval. “I was under the impression that three of the five I am aware of were engaged in fighting that outbreak of Trinelli Fever in the Barak System.”

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"True" responded Parendal. "So how do they have one to spare to send all the way out here? Just to recover the crew of a Warbird?"

He was right. It was out of character. When push came to shove, the Empire, and in particular, the Star Navy, were not known for their 'humanitarianism'. If medical ships were unavailable, normally the crew would have just been out of luck, or have to accept whatever help could be sent. This was not right.

"But, it is not ours to judge the high command. I've come to tow your ship home and that I shall."

"How long till you can get underway?"

Parendal looked at her disapprovingly. "You don't even know the condition of your own ship?"

"I know it's a wreck, without warp capacity. What about the impulse drive?"

"The impulse drive has failed as well" Nuval had not informed her of that. It was next on the agenda, after bringing Parendal to see her.

"From the scans we made on the way in, that ship has a number of grave structural weaknesses in the upper wing assembly. If we don't reinforce it, she'll come apart in transit. I'm estimating 18 to 24 hours. It's the best we can do."

"That will be fine. I am more concerned with my other mission."

"Which is?"

"Working with these humans to locate...something stolen from the Empire." She had almost let it slip, but her mission was to remain a secret. The Star Navy wanted no word of their lost cloaking device getting out.

"Then I wish you luck. And I must be getting back to my ship and keep my people progressing on your ship's preparations. Until we meet again, Jolantru."

Parendal left, being escorted back to the transporter room by Nuval

Ryan arrived in sickbay and was immediately challenged by Sela. "Why have we not left orbit?"

"Because I have not ordered it." Ryan stopped a few feet away, crossing his arms and doing his best to look smug, which wasn't that difficult. And seeing Sela, out of uniform in a Federation medical gown was, to say the least, amusing. Not unpleasant, but amusing. It just did not look right on her.

"We need to be pursuing the thieves. We know who did this. Why have we not moved to stop them?"

Ryan pondered the question a moment, as well as how to respond. He was not prepared to let his thoughts completely out into public. Searching the sickbay, he noticed Dr. Pulaski's office. "Doctor, is she ambulatory yet?"

Pulaski looked up from examining a broken arm she had fused the day before. "Provided she ACCEPTS assistance. Otherwise, she will be sedated."

"I am a Romulan Commander. You have no authority over me."

"On this ship, as long as she is your doctor, she has full authority over you that even I cannot countermand." Ryan could understand her feelings, but it was the 'Federation Way', to take a turn on a common Romulan phrase. "So, you have a choice. You can accept help getting to the doctor's office, or you can remain on the sidelines as an observer." He knew that would get her attention. She was the type that could not stand being an observer.

Sela was furious, but Ryan had to give her credit. It was only apparent in her eyes. So he silently moved closer and extended an elbow ever so slightly. Sela looked around at the members of her own crew surrounding her. She did not want this, to look weak and dependant on a human in front of her crew. In the Star Navy, it could be seen as a sign that she was turning, becoming soft on the enemies of the Empire.

But not doing so meant they could sedate her and keep her here, against her will, and prevent her from having any part in what was to follow. Her duty was to the Empire first.

Gathering as much dignity as she could, she grasped the back of Ryan's arm, trying not to make it obvious. She slid her legs over the side of the biobed and slid off the side. When her feet hit the floor, a wave of pain moved through her back and she inadvertently grasped Ryan's arm with her other hand. Ryan didn't move, and she was thankful that he was not appearing to

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coddle her. But as she straightened, she realized that all was not as healed as she had hoped. Pains of varying degrees were making themselves heard. She kept her face turned toward Ryan as she bit them back. The captain simply stood still, letting her make the decision that she was ready.

And then all premise of dignity fell away as Sela realized that her medical gown was not as all encompassing as she had thought. In fact, she felt distinctly 'chilled' in certain areas. She looked up at Ryan with the closest thing to terror that he had ever seen in a Romulan's eyes.

A nurse noted the situation and quickly grabbed a blanket, throwing it around the Romulan commander. Sela was secretly grateful, as the room was a little cool for her taste anyway. She was used to Romulan environmental controls.

Having regained her composure, she turned enough to make it known that she was ready and they began the short journey to the doctor's office. Once inside, Ryan ordered the clear panels to go opaque to give them some privacy. Once they had done so, he led Sela to the doctor's chair and let her get herself into it.

"Still having a lot of pain?"

"No. I feel fine."

"Liar. I don't know about Romulan crews, but it is usually a booster to the morale of Starfleet crews to see an injured commanding officer get up and get around. Shows them that all is not lost."

"Perhaps it is the same for most of them, but there are opportunists who would see my accepting your help as the action of a traitor."

"Then remind them that Command has ordered you to do something and this is the best way for you to accomplish it, for the Empire."

"You are sounding Vulcan."

"It is logical."

Sela appraised Ryan for a second. "Why are we not pursuing the thieves?"

"Because I don't think they've left." Ryan rested on the corner of the desk.

"You believe they are still here, under cloak? Why would they stay here? They have won a great prize. Why not return to the Gorn homeworld immediately?"

"If they had not completed their mission."

Sela was surprised. What else could they accomplish here? "Please explain." She needed to know more.

"Let's assume that they were sent here to obtain the cloak. Then why stay at all? Simply grab it and run. Find a safe hiding place and then start trying to make it work. But they didn't. They stayed and made it work, right here, like they had a purpose for it, right here."

"They planned on ambushing the rescue ship. The *Drendor*. Such a bold move for the Gorn."

"They can be aggressive when they want to be. The Federation can attest to that."

"Do you believe they wish to insight a war with the Empire? Surely they cannot believe they can win."

"I don't believe they think they can. Think about it. A Romulan outpost set up in Federation territory, something to anger the Federation to begin with, is destroyed, and then the rescue operation is also destroyed. Logically, the Romulans will believe that the Federation discovered it and destroyed the outpost, then ambushed the rescue. Now you have the two biggest kids on the block fighting mad at each other. And with our attention turned on each other, who would gain the upper hand, locally, any way?"

"You think they are trying to insight the Federation and the Empire into a war?"

"It would take some of the pressure off of them. It might make it possible for them to grab certain planets or systems and fortify them before either power could react."

It was plausible. Sela had to admit it, but it just seemed like a lot of cloak and dagger for the Gorn. The Gorn were not above surprise attacks when they felt threatened, but she had never heard of the Gorn deliberately opening a conflict, especially with a complex scheme like this. Gorn tended to be more straight-forward. What Ryan was proposing was an extensively planned, detailed strategy. She, personally, didn't feel the Gorn were up to it, but things could change. "Supposing that you are right, you feel they are still here, waiting for an opportunity to destroy the *Drendor* and maybe the other rescue ships? Then why have they not done so?"

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“*Proxima*.”

Sela had known Ryan could be egotistical, but this was hard for her to believe. “Captain, the *Drendor* was nearly destroyed engaging that ship. One of the largest and finest ships in the Star Navy. You really think this conglomeration of parts you call a starship has them quaking in their boots?”

“This ‘conglomeration of parts’ has already taken down two of your precious Warbirds. Add to that the fact that you were taken completely by surprise, something that will not happen again, since we now know they exist and may be out there. Plus, they broke off when *Proxima* decided to engage them.”

“Think you scared them to death?”

“I think they know that they are vulnerable, especially during decloaking and cloaking, and did not want to press their luck. As you said, they have won a great prize. Though they need to complete the mission, they are not willing to jeopardize their prize. The attack on the *Drendor* was very brave on their part, but they have tipped their hat, as we say on earth. We now know they exist. The odds, while still not even, are better than they were.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Unless I hear otherwise from Picard, I intend to make sure that your rescue ships make it back to the Neutral Zone in one piece. I would recommend that you have a ship from the Star Navy meet us to take up the escort at the border.”

“Where does Picard come into this?”

“Jean-Luc is the only currently serving member of Starfleet who has experience with the Gorn. He negotiated two treaties with them. I contacted him to try and open diplomatic channels with the Gorn.”

Chapter 4

Picard stood on *Enterprise's* bridge, staring into the void of space, wondering if he was being ignored or just not being heard.

They had been sitting here for four hours and so far, had heard no response from the Gorn government. He had sent them messages, detailing what had gone on at Orelius, and requesting an audience with the Council to discuss what the situation was. But, then again, the Gorn could, at times, be very slow and deliberate about their responses. It simply might be a matter of patience.

Six hours later, Jean-Luc's patience was almost gone. "I've half a mind to go find them."

Riker knew the feeling. He could only go over next week's duty schedule so many times. But he also knew how the Gorn were. You fit their schedule, not the other way around. "I would think they would be in a hurry to clear themselves, unless..."

"Exactly my thought, Number One. And if that is the case, we are out here in the middle of nowhere and rather exposed." Picard hated that feeling.

"Captain." Worf was finally receiving something, but not what he had expected."

"Yes, Mr. Worf?" Picard had to restrain himself from jumping up, but couldn't refuse himself the chance to stand and turn toward his tactical officer.

"I believe we have received a reply."

"Put it on screen."

"I cannot. It is nothing but some numbers, but I believe it is a set of coordinates."

"Mr. Data?"

"Confirmed, Sir. They are coordinates in an area of Gorn held space with no habitable planets within 3 light-years. It is an area once known as the Baleus Expanse, but now commonly known as the Gorn Expanse."

"I guess they want us to go there?" Riker was feeling very leery about this. For some reason, it smelled like a trap. "That's fairly deep in Gorn space. We'll be without any kind of backup, incase this is a trap."

"Yes. They'll have us right where they want us." Picard pondered it for a moment. "Set course for those coordinates, maximum warp."

"Sir?"

"We can't call for support, as it may be taken that it is we who are making the aggressive move. And the Gorn admire strength and bravery. The fact that we would come alone will, no doubt, make some subtle points with them."

"I recommend going to at least yellow alert however, Sir."

"Very well. Make it so."

"Course set and locked in." responded Wesley Crusher.

Picard seated himself and gave the order "Engage".

"Full sensor sweep." Picard was again up and watching the viewscreen intently. The area of space around them was hazy, like a nebula that had scattered, or, perhaps had not drawn itself together quite yet.

"I am detecting five vessels, all of similar configuration" said Worf. "One of them is approaching us."

"Hail them."

Worf tried. "No response."

"Keep trying. And raise shields. We don't want to look too weak in their eyes." Picard knew he would have to play this one strongly. The Gorn would acknowledge and respect that.

For several minutes, they watched the Gorn vessel approach, without seeming to be in any hurry. It made no moves, approaching in a battle ready condition.

"Perhaps we should be going to red alert, Sir" offered Riker.

"What about them? Are their weapons armed?"

"Yes, Sir" replied Data. "Fully charged, if our scans are reading them correctly."

"Then do the same. Take us to red alert, Number One."

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The Gorn's approach continued, slowly and methodically. They were either being very weary or relatively uninterested. Picard tended to feel it was the former. Though the limited contact the Federation had with the Gorn included two treaties, it had been otherwise unfriendly.

"I believe I have a response" commented Worf. "A very short one."

"What was it?"

"I am not positive, but it may be a set of transporter coordinates."

"Data?"

The android glanced quickly at the response. "I believe Lt. Worf is correct. Those coordinates would appear to be deep inside the Gorn vessel."

"Their way of saying 'come on over'?" Riker didn't like their bluntness.

"I would say that is the case." Picard was not surprised. The Gorn had been very secretive in their previous meetings.

"I assume, then, that we are going?"

"Oh yes. It is doubtful we could get one of them to come here. Better to accommodate them in this small way." Picard turned to his ready room to retrieve the information he would need.

Riker didn't like it, but the Captain needed to go on this away mission, if for no other reason than his experience. But, that didn't mean Riker couldn't protect his captain. "Mr. Worf, assemble a security team in transporter room 3, well armed."

"Belay that." Picard knew he could not take anyone else. It would be seen as a sign of weakness. "I will go alone, Number One."

"Sir..."

"Alone but armed. I won't be defenseless." Then he entered his ready room. As the door slid shut behind him, he muttered "At least not completely." The first item he retrieved was his phaser 2, checking to make sure it was fully charged. Then he stuffed his phaser 1 into his uniform as well, trying to make sure it was not totally hidden. Next were the data P.A.D.D.s with the evidence on them.

Exiting his ready room, he moved up the ramp to the turbolift. "Transfer those coordinates to transporter room 3. If you don't hear from me in eight hours, assume the worst and contact Starfleet Command. You have the bridge, Number One."

Then the turbolift doors closed and Riker was left glancing back and forth between the doors and Deanna Troi. "That was a little quick."

"He seems quite confident though." Actually, she felt that he was quite concerned about how to handle this, but she was not about to tell the first officer that at the moment.

In his ready room, Ryan waited for some news from Picard. Anything would be preferable to waiting, which he had never done well.

"Bridge to captain."

"Yes Mr. Tholon?" He had left the Andorian at the conn about an hour previous.

"Ship approaching, and it is not answering hails."

Tensing, Ryan wondered who this could be. "On my way."

Stepping onto the bridge, Ryan observed the approaching vessel. It was old, very old, and clearly of Romulan design.

Winchester emerged from the turbolift and noticed the strange vessel. "Is that the medical ship?"

"Don't know yet. Does it look like any Romulan medical ship you've ever seen?"

"Not a bit. Shall we go to red alert?"

Ryan weighed the possibilities and decided that he preferred to err on the side of caution. "Yes. Red alert." Promptly turning to claim the center seat, Ryan decided that the old clause about the best defense being a good offense was very appropo. He was feeling very offensive at the moment. "Mr. Purton, intercept course, full impulse."

"Shields are at maximum, phasers and torpedoes on line." Tholon was still trying to make contact at the same time. "Still no response."

"Time to intercept?"

"Four minutes" responded the helmsman.

"Full sensor sweep. Anything else out here?"

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Winchester had taken the science station till Staavm arrived. "Nothing but us, *Drendor*, the tow ship, and the Orealius system out to approximately 1 parsec." A touch on his shoulder told him that the science officer had arrived. He vacated the seat to the expert.

Staavm rechecked the sensors. "Confirmed. No other vessels apparent within 1.2 parsec."

"What about that ship?"

"Their shields are up. I am detecting disruptor banks of minimal power capacity. They would be little threat to us."

"Life signs?"

"Approximately 100, all Romulan."

Ryan was concerned. This was a risky situation. With them not responding, he had to consider them a threat until he knew otherwise. But Staavm's sensors weren't showing much of a threat. "Have Sub-commander Nuval report to the bridge."

"Aye, Sir." Winchester had returned to his station and summoned the Romulan officer.

Ryan twisted to direct his order to the science officer. "What else can you tell me about that thing?"

Staavm, intent on her computer search, was surprised by what she found. "It appears to be a converted "Graffler" Class cargo ship, from the late 23rd century. It has been modified in several ways, apparently to help it keep up with technology. Warp engines are about 15% over original specifications, the impulse drive registers a 10 % increase in power. Extensive internal rearrangement, based on the known schematics from a captured vessel from almost seventy years ago."

"But nothing dangerous?"

"Not that I can confirm, though there are two areas my sensors are not penetrating."

"Hailing frequencies."

Tholon cleared the communications. "Open."

"This is Captain Ezekiel Ryan of the Federation Starship *Proxima*, calling the crew of the unknown ship. Identify yourselves and state your purpose here."

"1 minute to intercept" added Purton, quietly.

"Unidentified ship. You have entered Federation space. If you do not identify yourself, we will consider you hostile and open fire."

"I have a signal" noted Tholon.

"On screen." Ryan was eager to see who this was. As the display switched, he was looking at the face of an elderly Romulan woman.

"Captain, do not fire. We have been sent by the Praetor to assist the wounded of the *Drendor*."

"And you are?"

"Doctor Varsel. I am the captain of this ship."

"You're not Star Navy?"

"No. We were the closest ship with the available facilities. We are a civilian vessel."

Nuval stepped off the turbolift and came to the Captain's side. "May I be of assistance?"

"In a moment." Ryan made sure Nuval's attention was on the screen "Doctor, stop energizers and prepare to be boarded. *Proxima* out."

"If you deem it..." but the Doctor was cut off in mid phrase.

"Captain," interjected Nuval. "I must protest. These people are here to assist us. Subjecting them to a boarding operation is a serious breach of protocol."

"And considering what has been going on around here, justified. And that ship," Ryan pointed to the viewscreen, "ever seen anything like it?"

Nuval studied the scene. "Not since an engineering class at our naval academy. Quite old. And no threat to a ship such a *Proxima*."

"Fine. Join us?"

"Willingly."

"Good. Lieutenant, I want sciences with us. Have three security teams meet us in Transporter Room 3"

"Only three?" asked Tholon.

"That's correct. You have the conn, Number One."

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Entering the turbolift and ordering it to their destination, Ryan turned toward the Romulan officer and leaned against the side of the turbolift car. Nuval eyed him suspiciously.

"You're boarding it only to follow established Starfleet regulations. You have another purpose."

"Staavm's sensors couldn't penetrate two areas on that ship. Most unusual for a cargo ship, converted or not."

"Intriguing. You plan to search those areas specifically to determine if they are a threat."

"I intend to try to get a closer look, if they will let us. If not, maybe we can get Staavm close enough with a tricorder to decipher what is going on."

Nuval nodded. "As you said, Captain. Considering recent 'surprises', it does seem like a reasonable decision."

Arriving at the transporter room, they entered to find the expected security teams, and extra sidearms for the Captain and Lieutenant. Motioning for the security teams to transport over first, Ryan held them at the last moment. "I don't expect resistance, but just in case, phasers to stun and at the ready." They set their weapons and took up ready stances. "Energize."

After they dematerialized, Ryan waited for the signal to either beam them back or that all was secure. They signaled the later, so Ryan, Staavm and Nuval ascended to the transporter pad. "Energize."

Arriving on the bridge of the 'medical' ship, Ryan looked around quickly. His security personnel had effectively taken the bridge, though it looked as if there had been no resistance. Exactly as he would have expected if these Romulans were telling the truth.

The older Romulan woman they had seen on the viewscreen approached cautiously, obviously taken aback by what were, by her standards, a very militaristic response to their arrival. "Captain Ryan, I presume?"

"Doctor Varsel. Despite the circumstances, it is always a pleasure to meet someone in the healing profession." Ryan could try diplomacy, when he wanted to.

"Captain, is this really necessary?"

"Ordinarily, I would say no, but considering the events of the last few days, I'm afraid I will have to ask you to indulge me. Call it paranoid, but I'm not fond of surprises."

"And you agree with this," Varsel squinted slightly, appearing to have trouble seeing Nuval's badge of rank. "Sub-commander?"

"I must concur with Captain Ryan. Were I in his position, I would definitely be searching your ship, or any other that passed by. I understand it is an inconvenience, but if you will simply indulge for a brief time, I'm sure the good captain and his officers will endeavor to make this as quick and painless as possible." Nuval sounded far more diplomatic than Ryan ever could, and the Captain had to give the Romulan officer points for his smoothness.

Varsel acquiesced. "Very well. But may I ask that your officers put away their sidearms? We are a medical ship and I can assure you that they will receive no interference from my personnel."

"Fair enough." With a nod, Ryan signaled that they should do as the Doctor requested. "Lieutenant, take two security officers and begin your sweep. Report back here when you're done."

Varsel had turned her attention to Nuval. "And you must be from the *Drendor's* crew?"

"Sub-commander Nuval, first officer."

"We were told that the situation was serious?"

"Nearly half of our crew are dead, and about two-thirds of the remainder have injuries of one form or another."

"And your medical staff?"

"Mostly among the dead. We took the most serious damage in Engineering and Sickbay."

"I see. Then you have been forced to rely on the Federation doctors."

"And skilled surgeons they are. My crew has been well cared for." Nuval made sure that Ryan had heard that statement.

"I'm sure they are." And Varsel made sure Ryan heard the suspicion in her voice as well.

Ryan simply smiled. He didn't feel right about this. Something was up and it was annoying him that he couldn't put a finger on it. And either way, he knew that there was no

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purpose in engaging in the small talk that Nuval and this Doctor had fallen into. There were other issues to be dealt with.

Soon, Staavm returned and announced that she had found nothing. But the look in her eyes told Ryan that her statement was not completely true. Privacy was now needed and the best place for that was back on *Proxima*. Thus, he said his goodbyes and assured Doctor Varsel that she would soon be cleared to begin her work.

Back on *Proxima*, Ryan lead Staavm and Nuval to his ready room and sat down. "What did you find?"

The Vulcan seemed mildly upset. "Nothing, as I said."

Ryan was used to Staavm's baiting style, and this time, played along. "Meaning you uncovered nothing you did not already know?"

"Correct. I was as unable to scan those compartments from close range as from long range. I still have no further idea what is in them. Oddly enough, I could find no access to them either."

"At all?"

"None."

Nuval was not perplexed. "It could it be some form of experimental equipment that requires shielding to protect the crew?"

"Theoretically possible. However, even such dangerous equipment would, logically, have to be accessed for maintenance and checking periodically. Surely they would not want to cut through a bulkhead to conduct routine maintenance."

"That would seem a bit eccentric. And I know of no such systems on a Warbird, though I could have Konre consult on the subject."

"Not yet" responded Ryan. Let's give them a little rope and see if they hang themselves."

"Pardon?"

"An old earth colloquialism, Sub-commander" interjected Staavm. "We will observe, and see if their true nature emerges."

"Ah." Nuval nodded. He knew the tactic well.

Picard materialized on the Gorn ship in typical Gorn fashion, with his back to the transporter operator. He turned slowly, not wanting to cause alarm.

Before him were two armed soldiers, perhaps the Gorn equivalent of Marines, standing at attention, or what appeared to be so, with weapons at the ready. Next to them was what he believed to be an officer, as he was wearing the uniform that Picard recognized.

The officer stepped forward and motioned to the soldiers, who came around and took up positions behind Picard.

"You will follow me, Human." The officer moved off, leading the way to somewhere. Picard followed, with the armed soldiers behind him. Shortly, they arrived at a large room. Picard realized it was a smaller, less grand version of the council chambers on the Gorn homeworld. And seated near the head of the table were two Gorn, one of which he recognized as Leader Keeyah.

"Leader Keeyah. It is an honor to stand before you, once again."

"We will dispense with the formalities, Captain. I speak with the authority of the Alliance Council. You have made charges against us that are grave in nature. We wish to resolve this, quickly.

"As do I. It is in the best interest of all parties."

"You indicated evidence. Please submit this evidence for examination."

"This is the information I have received from the Federation commander on the scene. It is, at this time, somewhat circumstantial, as no survivors were found to recount the actual events. However, given the Gorn history over the past few decades, of preferring to deal with the Federation at the negotiating table, I found it disconcerting." Picard waited politely for the Leader and her advisor to examine the datapads he had just handed them. They seemed entirely unimpressed at first, but then he began to notice a change. For the normally somewhat lethargic

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Gorn, they were becoming rather excited, each pointing to things on the P.A.D.D. they were personally holding to bring it to the attention of the other.

After several minutes, Keeyah seemed to come to a decision about something. "Captain Picard. This is obviously a Gorn issue. We will deal with it."

"With all due respect to the Leader of the Gorn Alliance, Romulans died in this action. The Empire already wants their say in what is happening. And the incident occurred on Federation soil. This is no longer a Gorn issue, but an interstellar one. One that could have significant repercussions in this part of the galaxy."

"We prefer to deal with our own issues in our own ways."

"And from an internal standpoint, the Federation truly accepts and acknowledges your sovereignty in this matter, but I believe that the issue of concern should not be a matter of pointing fingers. We have greater worries, like what any Gorn might want with a Romulan cloaking device. A device they have already used to nearly destroy one Romulan ship. We need to discover what their intention is and what can be done to deal with any sinister intentions they might have."

Keeyah studied Picard for a moment. Obviously, the Federation captain had no intention of backing down. "Captain Picard. I will consult with my colleague. Leave us."

Picard felt like he was being dismissed, but then again, he had not seen Keeyah make decisions without careful consideration. This might be a step in the right direction, no matter how it seemed. "Very well. I will await your call on the *Enterprise*."

"You only need to step outside, Captain. This will not take long."

Picard nodded and proceeded out of the room, fully expecting to be left standing for quite some time.

With the captain out of sight, Keeyah turned to her advisor and the one responsible for the actions of the Gorn Navy, Roxxx. "Is it possible that you're people have betrayed you?"

Rooxx growled in anger. "No one loyal to the Alliance would do this. But the other clans of the warrior caste are very temperamental."

"And as such, unreliable." Keeyah turned the one P.A.D.D. in her hand to show something to Roxxx. "Recognize this?"

"That would appear to be the symbol of the Red Claw."

"Yes. Have they not been particularly quiet at council of late?"

Rooxx thought about it, and, indeed, they had. The Red Claw was one of four clans that espoused a more aggressive route to progress. To use force to obtain what they needed rather than trade. Truth be told, there were times that Roxxx agreed with them, in the most basic sort of way. But Keeyah and the council had not only maintained peace, but prosperity in the Alliance for a dozen years. And during that time, the basic standard of living among the Gorn had actually risen. Not by leaps and bounds, like the Claw and it's supporters advocated, but it had improved. And that was good enough for Roxxx. Progress, even if slow, was still a positive thing, and, despite the Gorn's xenophobic tendencies, the Federation had already shown itself to be a trustworthy trading partner. There was not much trade, but from what he knew, it had been favorable for both sides thus far. "You are correct. They have not been as vocal of late. Do you think it is because they are planning something, perhaps an attack? That they simply are not trying to draw attention to themselves, at the moment?"

"Perhaps, though it is not like their leader." Keeyah stood and moved slowly around the room. "I have never understood their need to fight and kill. But I need to know. What is their strength? Do they have the ability to make such an extraordinary move?"

"I believe they may, but the truth is elusive. I have never been permitted to visit or inspect their base. They send their lot of soldiers and equipment and do not offer the support of their base."

"Do we know where this base is?"

"Yes. Drovenock."

"Then it is time we went to Drovenock. Let us see what they have amassed." Keeyah turned toward a guard at the door. "Bring the human in."

Picard was surprised. He had barely sat down and begun to get comfortable, and they were already summoning him. Was this a good sign or bad?

Reentering the chamber, Picard was led directly toward the standing Keeyah.

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"Picard. It has been decided that we will investigate this. Our fleet prepares to move to the base of the Red Claw Clan. I hope to see for myself what threat they may pose."

Picard had hoped for something similar. It was a good starting point. "The *Enterprise* stands ready to assist you."

Keeyah glanced briefly at Rooxx, then back to Picard. "Know this. It is a Gorn issue. We will not allow meddling in our affairs. Do not attempt to intervene."

"The Federation acknowledges your sovereignty on the matter."

"Then return to your ship. We leave immediately."

Picard stepped off the *Enterprises* transporter concerned about what Leader Keeyah might find. Certainly, he had no idea himself, so anything was possible.

"Success?" asked Riker.

"Of a sort. Ever play 'follow the leader', Number One."

"Not in years."

"You're about to."

Chapter 5

Sitting on her biobed in sickbay, Sela read again through a story that was fascinating her. The *Lord of The Rings*, by a human named J.R.R. Tolkien. A long tale about wizards and warlords, hobbits and elves, men and something called Orcs. She had no idea what these Orcs were, but they sounded terrible, perhaps even worse than Klingons. The Elves, though, seemed different, even a little familiar. Could they be long lost cousins to the Romulans and Vulcans?

Around her, the personnel from the medical ship had begun evacuating her crew. It would take some time to get them all moved to the *Vallenthrope*, as she had been told the medical ship was called. She had never heard of it, but there were probably hundreds of civilian ships out there that she had never heard of. But there were so few medical ships. It just seemed odd.

The process had only begun an hour before. They had begun by moving the ambulatory cases, the ones with the least special needs. It was giving time for Dr. Pulaski to prepare the more serious cases. Some were considered too unstable for the transporters and would have to be moved by shuttle, which was undoubtedly slower, but safer.

Glancing up from her reading, she noticed some Romulan orderlies moving a patient that had been loaded onto an anti-gravity gurney. They didn't seem real knowledgeable about what they were doing, especially when they ran the gurney into the side of her biobed, hard enough to make the reading P.A.D.D. drop out of her hand. "Fools! Watch what you are doing."

One of the orderlies quickly reached down and scooped up the P.A.D.D., handing it back to her. "My apologies, Commander. I will strive to be more careful."

For a brief moment, their eyes met and something in her memory told Sela that she should know this person. Somewhere, somehow, they had met before. And with it, the realization that he had known her rank. She was not in uniform or wearing any badges of rank. Even within the Star Navy, there would have been very few who would have recognized her rank when she was out of uniform, save her everyday acquaintances.

It was the kind of thing that made her very suspicious, and she considered stopping the individual. But as she was considering that, her executive officer arrived.

"Good news, Commander. The *Drendor's* preparations for towing are nearly complete. Parental believes he can have the remainder of the reinforcing completed within 4 hours."

"And the transfer of casualties?"

"Proceeding nicely. They, too, should be complete in about four hours."

Sela nodded. "Good. Maybe then we can pursue these terrorists." She dismissed Nuval and turned to look for the orderly, but he was nowhere to be found. The feeling of familiarity continued to nag her.

"Wow. Never would've imagined this many Romulans on board the *Proxima*." Winchester watched the Romulan medical personnel shuttling the more stable patients to the transporter room.

Staavm watched as the work progressed. She had come down to get a look at her cousins, the Romulans. The fabled offshoot of the Vulcan race, from the days of the Great Awakening. The ones who had rejected Surak's teachings and fled their home world to find their own way in the universe.

And they had certainly done that. There were even those who speculated that the Romulans had, in fact, surpassed the Vulcans in advancement. Of course, much of that was from races that had not yet learned to control their emotions, and was hence, a highly illogical conclusion. Still, she could not help feeling that, in some little way, the Vulcans were missing out on something.

But her observation skills were noticing that the Romulans were paying an awful lot of attention to their surroundings, almost like they were gathering information. And several seemed nervous about the presence of non-medical officers. Still, it could be explained as nervousness over being on a Federation ship for the first time. Understandable, as they were now "in the lion's mouth", from a Romulan point of view.

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"It is an unusual number, though we are in a very unusual situation. Was it not a human who stated that 'desperate times call for desperate measures.' I believe we could classify recent events as desperate times."

Winchester couldn't argue with that. "I'm going to check the cargo bay, make sure that clean up is proceeding." Then he left, leaving Staavm to ponder her surroundings.

Returning to the bridge some time later, Staavm checked on the most recent sensor sweeps. No other ships present. As was expected. The cloaked Gorn ship had done an amazingly good job of synchronizing the cloak to their systems. Too good, in Staavm's opinion. Cloaks were temperamental devices, requiring constant checks and balances to guarantee the cloak would completely mask the ship's signature. Even a slight variation could leave behind some telltale hint that a ship was present. And so far, she had found none. It baffled her to no end how they had been so thorough. These were individuals that should have only rudimentary knowledge of what they were working on, yet they seemed to have gotten it completely right on the first try. They were either very lucky, or they had help. Very skilled help.

And as a Vulcan, she generally didn't believe in luck. Which was why she took her most recent findings to the Captain's Ready Room?

"Still no indication of the Gorn vessel. I have used all means historically employed to locate cloaked ships, with no success."

"It sounds like it's time to get creative. Ryan was perplexed as well.

"Captain, considering the circumstances, have you considered the possibility that the Gorn are, in fact, receiving assistance from the Romulans in this endeavor? It would explain the alacrity they showed in being able to make the cloak operational."

Ryan sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Actually, the thought had crossed my mind. Which leads to the question: Does Sela know and is lying to us, or is she as much a victim as everyone else.?"

"At this point, it is impossible to tell. The circumstantial evidence could lean either way."

Ryan's communicator beeped. "Ryan here."

"The tow ship and medical ship have announced that they are ready to depart" reported Tholon.

"On my way."

Returning to the bridge, Ryan found Varsel and Parendal both on the viewscreen. And standing next to the turbolift were Nuval and Sela, still wrapped in medical gown and robe. Sela seemed to be preoccupied with remembering something but looked up at his arrival. "Captain, I need to speak to you."

"In a moment." Turning to the viewscreen, he went on. "Doctor, Commander, we will be escorting you to the Neutral Zone and stand watch there until ships of the Star Navy can take up your escort."

"Your efforts are appreciated, Captain. May we have smooth sailing on our Road to the Stars" responded Parendal.

Varsel was surprisingly silently.

"Nothing would make me happier, Commander. If you will lead the way? The *Vallenthrope* next. *Proxima* will cover your backs."

Parendal gave a saluting nod, then broke the connection. Varsel simply broke the connection and Ryan wondered if the doctor was simply a bit xenophobic or if there were other issues.

Watching long enough to see the tow ship begin to maneuver onto the desired course, Ryan turned to Sela. "You wanted something?"

"Privately, if you please, Captain. I do not wish to spread this till we have had a chance to consider it."

"My ready room or yours? Oops, yours is on the way to the dockyard." Ryan smiled and motioned her toward his 'office'. He was actually glad to see that she was getting around better. Still obviously stiff and sore, but up and trying. She was exactly what he had always considered her to be, a strong willed and determined individual. He couldn't help but think that if they weren't 'from different sides of a line on a map' he might have had some interest in her. And at the same time, that thought was soooo disturbing on so many different levels.

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"Captain! Ship decloaking!" shouted Tholon

Everyone turned toward the viewscreen as Winchester sounded red alert. The Gorn ship had decloaked inside the formation, between *Proxima* and the other ships and lined up to fire on the latter. In two incredibly quick bursts, both ships exploded, the concussion tearing apart the hulk of the crippled *Drendor*, and rocking the *Proxima* bad enough to send everyone reaching for a handhold. Sela was actually thrown from her feet, Nuval too busy trying to stand himself to help her. Tholon was thrown hard onto his station and Ryan was down on one knee to steady himself. Purton's lightning quick reflexes had made the felinoid helmsman the only one not partially shaken loose from his or her station.

With the other two ships destroyed, Ryan chose full retaliation. "Torpedoes, full spread, Fire! Phasers, general spread, all bearings, Fire!" Looking around, he spotted Sela on the floor. "Are you alright?"

"Parental..."

She appeared to be in a mild shock. Ryan turned to Nuval and told the Romulan executive officer to get Sela to his ready room, then turned back to the business at hand.

"No hits" responded Tholon

"Purton, get us moving. Evasive pattern Alpha. Damage report! Sensors?"

"As before, Captain. No trace of them on sensors" reported Staavm.

"What about the Vallenthrope, and the tow ship?"

"Completely destroyed. There is nothing left."

Ryan settled into his command chair, nursing the knee he had fallen onto. The knee cap felt like he may have broken it again. How many times was that? "Damage report?"

"So far, so good" replied Winchester. No physical damage to the ship, but sickbay is reporting a couple dozen injuries. Nothing major."

"Except our pride." Ryan stomped his one good foot in frustration. "I can't believe I let them get that close."

"Are you alright?"

"What?"

"Your knee." Winchester pointed at the limb that Ryan was still coddling.

"I'll live." Ryan stood and hobbled around, testing the knee. He couldn't tell if the knee cap was truly injured or just badly bruised. But it hurt, and was simply bolstering his resolve to nail whoever was responsible. "Still nothing?"

"Scanners show nothing." Tholon was frustrated as well. He wanted a crack at them too.

"I'll be in my ready room, if Picard ever gets back to us. Meanwhile, take us back to orbit that moon again. Let's see if we can get anything further out of the wreckage of that site."

Winchester acknowledged the order and Ryan went to see what Sela had wanted. He was hoping it had some bearing on what had just happened.

Nuval was standing in the middle of Ryan's ready room, observing his commander carefully. He was concerned. She had mentioned that she was concerned that there may be some Romulan involvement in this case, but for the moment, she was too shaken up. The death of her family friend and mentor, Parental, was hitting her hard.

Ryan entered to find Sela at one of the portals behind his desk. She was obviously upset. "What did you know?"

"I didn't know this would happen, if that is what you mean. I lost my ship and entire crew, in case you haven't noticed." More quietly, she noted "And Parental."

"The Commander of the tow ship. I take it you two knew each other."

"Well. He was an old family friend." She would say no more.

"I'm sorry." He felt like a fool, responsible for what had happened. After all, what had he just told Varsel and Parental: '*Proxima* will cover your backs.' A lot of good it had done, but whatever was out there was still out there, and still a threat. "You had something you wanted to tell me?"

"I recognized someone among the medical staff, a person I knew years ago. He had left the Star Navy because he had been accepted into the Tal'Shiar."

Ryan flopped into his chair. "How much control does your Praetor have over the Tal'Shiar?"

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“Total.”

“Theoretically? What about practically?”

Sela hesitated. “There has been some debate, in illegal circles, about that.”

Being more direct, Ryan had to ask. “And your opinion on that?”

Sela hesitated more. Ryan was putting her on the spot, especially with Nuval in the room. “I just don’t know.”

Ryan leaned back to think. There was a tie here, now the difficulty was to find it, yank the string, and watch the cloak of deception fall away. What would the Tal’Shiar gain by getting involved with the Gorn and Federation? The Tal’Shiar tended to operate with more autonomy than Sela was willing, or perhaps able, to admit. Like many ostensibly government ‘secret services’, they could make themselves into powerful forces of intrigue and deception, and could be downright fanatical about it.

His communicator beeped. It was Staavm. Sir, I think I have something you should see.”

At the science station, Ryan, Sela, Nuval and Winchester huddled around the Vulcan, who was replaying sensor data of the attack. “There. The Gorn’s first shot hit the tow ship, generating the first set of explosions. The second shot is then fired almost immediately, which I thought was odd, since they had almost no time to retarget. But, indeed, they did not need it. Watch carefully.”

They did, but only Winchester noticed the anomaly, a blip of light first appearing to speed toward the *Vallenthrope*, then appearing to pass it.

“Good eyes, Commander. That is the anomaly. The Gorn second shot misses the *Vallenthrope*, and then...the *Vallenthrope* explodes anyway.”

Sela stared at the nearly stilled view of the *Vallenthrope* coming apart in slow motion, the explosions appearing to begin in two locations. “Are those locations...”

“They correspond to the locations of the two areas I was unable to scan on that ship. I believe these areas were shielded from scans to hide large chemical explosive charges, intended to destroy the vessel.”

“Why not initiate a warp core breach?” asked Ryan.

“That, if scanned as we were doing, would have left an obvious signature and would have opened the question about mechanical or systems failure on the *Vallenthrope* as a possible explanation for its loss. The chemical explosives would leave no significant radiation or similar signature, hence reducing the possibility that the vessel exploded on its own. It would point far more directly at the idea that she was attacked.”

“So they blew themselves up.” Winchester was incredulous. “For what?”

“Leave no witnesses” said Sela.

“Pardon.”

“Parental once told me that one of the chief principles taught to Tal’Shiar inductees was to leave no witnesses.”

“They had to destroy your crew and your ship, to make sure no testimonies got out.” Ryan looked toward the viewscreen. “I’ll bet they never figured on a Federation starship being involved.”

“And they have twelve more Romulan witnesses on this ship, not to mention all of your crew” added Sela.

“If the Tal’Shiar are typical, they’ll have to finish the job.” Ryan was already thinking tactically. That ship still had to be out there, hunting them now. “Question is: who is in command? Gorn or Tal’Shiar.”

A good question, and no one had an answer.

“We need to know. It could change every aspect of how you have to deal with the situation” stated Sela.

She was one hundred percent correct. He had never faced a Gorn, but from what he had been reading, they were a completely different animal. And not just because they looked like lizards. There had to be a way of telling.

Leaning against the edge of the science station, Ryan was looking for that thread that would unravel this scheme. “I read up on the Gorn in some information Picard sent. It indicates that the Gorn have a sort of ‘caste’ system, including a warrior caste. I have never heard of such

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a situation where members of that warrior caste didn't have a big ego." Ryan was contemplating something that he knew would make his crew a little nervous.

"Which can be an advantage or a handicap" commented Sela. She had a feeling she knew where he was headed.

"Are we still at red alert?"

"Yes" replied Winchester.

"Then Mr. Purton, all stop."

"Answering all stop. Aye."

Ryan straightened and headed for his command chair. "Have you ever 'goosed' a Gorn, Commander?"

"No" replied Sela and Winchester in unison. They looked at each other, realizing that they were, indeed, both commanders, but in the Romulan Star Navy, that made Sela a captain in all but verbage.

Ryan grinned slightly. "Lets see what happens. Stay sharp everyone. This could get rough." Making himself comfortable and taking a moment to plan his approach, Ryan finally asked for hailing frequencies.

"Hailing frequencies open" replied Tholon.

"Hailing the commander of the cloaked ship, this is Captain Ezekiel Ryan of the Federation Starship *Proxima*. Drop your cloak and we will discuss this." He toggled the communication off and waited. No response, but he had not expected one. "Captain, you appear to have a major disagreement with the Romulans. I too, am not real fond of them, but you are undertaking your campaign inside of Federation space. That means I have a disagreement with you as well. Decloak, and we will see if we can come to an agreement."

There continued to be only silence.

"If you want to kill Romulans, have a good time. You've managed to take down a Warbird, which is somewhat impressive, but what else have you achieved. Destroying a defenseless medical ship and an equally defenseless tow ship, burdened by a vessel in tow, no less. Now is that really honorable? How does that add your reputation as a great warrior. "

Ryan paused to let that one boil for a moment. "If you want to be known as a Romulan killer, you'll have to pick bigger targets. That Warbird was impressive, for a newcomer to the field. Take it from an experienced competitor, it is only a beginning. When you reach four Warbirds destroyed..."

That got Sela's attention, and Ryan made a note to tell her he was exaggerating.

"Well, at that point, give me a call. We can compare notes. Until then, you're in the amateur bracket. Of course, we could handle this like prize fighters. You kill the champion and get named champion yourself. But I'm afraid I'll give up that belt when you pry my cold, dead fingers from around it."

Tholon cringed. If this guy had been a Klingon, they'd be at each others throat already. Either this guy wasn't a member of the warrior caste, or he was one cool customer.

Sela and Nuval were grinning though. They were pretty sure they had the answer to their question.

Ryan wanted to be sure though. "So, how about it, Captain. Care for a shot at the title?"

They all waited several minutes, till Ryan gave the signal to cut the communications.

Glancing around the room, Ryan announced the verdict. "Well, I would say that the crew may have sharp teeth, but the commander has pointy ears."

Chapter 6

"So, What next?" inquired Winchester.

Ryan contemplated the situation from his command chair. "Let's proceed back to orbit of that moon. It can't hurt to investigate it more and maybe we can draw our friend out. He has to make a move sooner or later, and I'm sure he's wasting time right now. With something like that in his grasp, he has other things to attend to. Why else steal it?"

"Captain," interrupted Sela. "I can't believe these" as she motioned outwardly to indicate the other ship, "are operating alone. I have to wonder, who they are operating with?"

"It would appear that an element of the Gorn is working with them. Question is: who? And to what benefit?"

"I would say that the intent is to stage a coup in the Gorn Alliance."

"Place a ruling group or individual in control of the Alliance that will be sympathetic to Romulan causes, perhaps even a puppet government?"

"It would allow the Empire to outflank the existing Neutral Zone. Provide a means of getting ships and personnel into direct contact with the Federation border, something we have not had since the Treaty of Algeron. It would bypass the entire chain of Neutral Zone monitoring stations."

"If the Federation found out, there would be a confrontation, but if they did not, the Tal'Shiar would control an open conduit into the Federation. Either way, advantage Tal'Shiar." Ryan rubbed at his beard. "We need to call this in and inform Picard. I have no idea what he is up to, except contacting the Gorn government. I only hope his silence is not an indication that we are too late."

On course for Drovenock, trailing the Gorn group by nearly half a parsec, *Enterprise* continued at yellow alert. Picard did not expect to get involved in anything overly dangerous, but he did expect Keeyah to stir up a hornet's nest. The question was, what and how strong. Keeyah had only brought five ships. Picard could not help but think that they may be underestimating their opponent.

"Captain, I have an incoming communication" announced Worf. "It is from Captain Ryan."

"On screen." Picard was eager to see if Ryan had uncovered some new information, "Captain..."

"Picard, we now have reason to believe that there may be Romulan designs behind what is going on. Both the medical ship and the tow ship were destroyed in an attack that we have since analyzed and found to have been staged. In addition, we have a possible identification of a Tal'Shiar agent involved."

Picard pondered that. "What are their intentions? Have you been able to determine that?"

"Sela theorizes that they may be intent on a coup in the Gorn government, perhaps a military takeover that the Tal'Shiar can control."

"Leaving the Federation's flank open to infiltration. I need to get this information to the Gorn leadership. They are currently on our way to confront a military faction that may be at the heart of the situation. But if the Romulans are involved, they may be walking into a trap. I'd recommend that *Proxima* proceed to Drovenock to assist."

"We think the cloaked ship is still here, hunting us. I'd prefer to deal with it first."

"Keep us informed. Picard, out." The *Enterprise's* captain turned back toward his command chair, pondering the situation. Keeyah had already made up her mind to confront the Red Claw faction, but was that all she was about to confront? Could there, in fact, be a Romulan force already involved, perhaps even a fleet level deployment in support of the action? It was believed that the Tal'Shiar possessed their own fleets of ships, but how many and what kind?

"Shouldn't we raise the Gorn Leader, let her know what she may be getting into?" asked Riker.

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Picard glanced toward Worf. "Get me Leader Keeyah, quickly." Returning to his chair, Picard was growing concerned about what may be about to happen. Keeyah's force of five ships was not up to the challenge of fighting off a major action against them.

"No response, Captain" stated Worf

"I was afraid of that. They don't want us involved in what they see as a Gorn issue. I was warned not to get involved before we began this journey."

Riker couldn't see letting them ignore this warning. "What if we caught up, tried to make them stop and deal with us?"

"Too much of an opportunity for a misunderstanding, which, given the Gorns' xenophobic tendencies...no, it isn't worth trying. But I see no reason why we can't close the gap a bit. Mr. Crusher, take us to within ten thousand kilometers of the nearest Gorn ship and then hold station on them."

"Aye, Sir."

"Are we just going to follow them in?" asked Riker.

"If need be. Until then, we keep trying to get them to talk to us. Mr. Worf, keep trying to hail them. Maybe we can annoy them into answering."

Ryan had barely ended his transmission to Picard when another communication arrived. But this one was most unexpected, being only a disembodied voice.

"You sound like a gaming man, Captain. That's good. It means you're always up for a challenge."

It sounded typically Romulan to Ryan. Perhaps the cloaked ship's commander? "As we say on Earth, I was born ready."

"Good."

Immediately afterward, Tholon detected a ship decloaking on his panel. "They're firing!" *Proxima's* shields were already up, but the hit shook the ship roughly.

Grabbing his chair arm, Ryan ordered Tholon to return fire and for Purton to take evasive action. They responded quickly.

"They recloak. No hits scored. Our shields are down 20 percent" reported Tholon.

"With one shot?" exclaimed Winchester. "He's packing some big punch."

"That weapon appears to be based on Romulan plasma weapon designs. Powerful, but short ranged" stated Staavm.

"That's one for me, Captain Ryan," the unidentified voice chimed in. I'm surprised. For such a famous Romulan killer, I would have expected the first blow to be more difficult to land."

"I just wanted to give you a chance." Ryan was looking to the others to see if they had an answer to finding him. "Just trying to be sporting." Looking around the bridge, he could see concern etched on various faces. They had reason to be concerned. A cloak equipped opponent was always a difficult one.

Everyone seemed concerned, except Sela, who stared at the viewscreen with a look of wonderment. Astonishment even. Ryan watched her apprehensively.

"Do you know him?"

Sela seemed startled. "Put me on subspace."

Ryan nodded for Tholon to do so, which the Andorian rapidly acknowledged.

Sela hesitated. If she was right, it would mean she had been made a fool of.

"Parental?"

"Ah, my dear Sela. You can't imagine how it pains me to be in this situation. I hope you understand that it was dumb luck that sent your ship to Orealius."

"How could you do this? How many Romulans have died here? "How many more will die? The Federation already knows the Tal'Shiar are at the root of this. They won't stand idly by and let you take over the Gorn."

"Oh, they will. It's their law. They won't interfere in an internal matter of another government. It really is their weak point."

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Sela looked toward Ryan, who was out of his command chair and heading toward the tactical station. He motioned for her to keep Parendal talking. "Even if they don't fight initially, they won't stand by for this. You're on the brink of a galactic war. The Empire is ill prepared for a sustained fight. The Praetor won't allow it."

"The Praetor authorized it, my dear. Excuse me, for a moment."

Ryan and Sela looked at each other for a moment. What now?

They found out when the enemy decloaked and fired another plasma charge. Again the shields deflected it, but at a cost.

"Shields down 47%" reported Tholon.

Quietly, Ryan ordered Tholon to ready a full spread of torpedoes set with proximity fusing and set to go motionless after only a few kilometers. If he couldn't deal them a knock out blow, he would rattle their teeth a bit. Providing he could get them to decloak near one. Then he signaled Purton to bring them in a slow arc. They would sow the torpedoes like mines and see what happened.

"There. That's two for me, Captain."

"Just saving for a rainy day." Ryan signaled for the torpedoes to be launched. Parendal would see them, but would he realize the intent?

Sela returned to trying to draw Parendal out. "So, all these years, you were lying to me?"

"Well, I certainly couldn't tell you I had been recruited by the Tal'Shiar. And did you really believe that the Navy would be so kind as to let a crippled commanding officer like me continue in the service? If they had their way, I'd be rotting in my home under a mandatory retirement. Fortunately, the Praetor saw more in me than a broken body. He personally put me in charge of Tal'Shiar activities in and around Gorn space."

Sela was obviously upset. She had been fooled and not seen what should have been as plain as the nose on her face. And that was really galling her. She wanted revenge for it, and the chance to bring what had been done out in the open. To do that, she needed to survive.

Parendal's ship decloaked again and fired. The plasma charge sent *Proxima* reeling from the concussion.

"Shields down 75%".

Ryan's face made one thing clear to Sela. 'He's starting to tick me off.' He maneuvered to the science station, where Staavm was trying to isolate the transmission, in hopes of providing a firing solution.

"Captain, are you even trying? You are making this much too easy."

"That'll change" shouted Ryan. This fellow was doing a good job of playing him as well. Quite the gamester, it seemed. "Purton, take us out of here."

The Caitian wheeled the ship about and headed deeper into the Orealius system.

Parendal saw the move and had already noted the dormant torpedoes. He failed to see how someone with Ryan's reputation would not consider the tactic as too obvious. But if the good captain wanted him to play along... He ordered his helmsman to proceed to the other end of the system by a circuitous route, thereby avoiding the torpedoes.

Precisely as Ryan was hoping.

No attempt to communicate with Leader Keeyah was working, and Picard was beginning to fear for the Gorn Leader's safety. *Enterprise* could not interfere without the Leader's consent.

Ahead, sensors showed a base, and a well equipped one at that. Drovenock was bristling with both ships and defenses. At least forty ships of varying sizes. And what of the Romulans, if they were present, they were, no doubt, cloaked. How many? It was impossible to tell. It was certainly not Romulan style to do anything small, but even they had limitations.

As Keeyah's five ships came out of warp and headed at full impulse toward the base, the other ships began moving. It would not be total surprise, and they were obviously not going to be hospitable to their chosen leader. It appeared that a major fight was about to ensue, and Picard could not see it ending well for Keeyah's group.

Then, Picard's worst fears were realized. Three Romulan Warbirds decloaked in Keeyah's path and began firing. Two ships were hit immediately, but Keeyah's escaped, swinging hard to port before turning back in on a firing pass.

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But this also meant it was no longer a 'Gorn issue'. Battlestations!" called Picard. "Mr. Crusher, attack pattern Picard 4. Phasers to maximum and standby on torpedoes." When he had received the acknowledgements of the orders, he set them in motion. "Engage!"

Enterprise twisted and maneuvered to a beam position on the lead Warbird, but it's commander must have seen them coming. He recloaked and Worf's torpedo salvo missed. The second Warbird was slower to react, and *Enterprise* managed to hit it with phasers, but not enough to prevent it from recloaking. The third recloaked and disappeared as well.

Picard was about to request that Keeyah be hailed again when Worf brought some new information to his attention.

"I am detecting dozens of ships coming out of warp."

"Romulan?"

"No" stated Worf. They are Gorn. They are approaching from the other side of Drovenock...and firing."

Another plasma charge hit *Proxima's* shields and they could not take any more.

"Shields are down" shouted Winchester as Ryan pulled himself up off the floor.

"That didn't work as planned" muttered Ryan. What next, he was not sure. This guy was cagy. Parendal had followed, as Ryan had expected, but not as quickly. Ryan had expected him to race to the other end of the system and try to block *Proxima's* escape, but he had slipped in behind Ryan instead and was ready to open up on them when Ryan slowed down. "What about the navigational deflectors?"

Winchester checked his panel. They're up, but what good...oh, you wouldn't?"

"Take us back across the system. We are looking for a gas giant. Mr. Staavm, I need an analysis of the gas giant's atmosphere and how close we can get."

"Working. Is there something in particular you would like?"

"Something explosive that we can ignite."

"There are occasional clouds of methane, some with concentrations large enough that we may be able to ignite them with a torpedo" offered Staavm.

"What about a plasma charge?"

"It would be possible."

"That'll work. Engineering?"

"Robinson here."

"How long can we stay in there before we thoroughly mess the ship up?"

"Not long. Ten minutes, tops."

"Captain!" shouted Sela.

"What?"

"I can get us help."

"From where?" Ryan couldn't fathom what she had in mind. "The Neutral Zone is 20 plus minutes even at maximum warp. Your side is farther. We can't stay tucked away that long."

Sela looked down for a moment, uncertain if what was about to be revealed might end her career. "It won't take them that long."

Ryan stared at her. He knew exactly what she had just admitted to. Romulan ships had been conducting incursions into Federation space all along. There may even be one close by right now.

"Captain, Parendal is no fool. He won't follow you close enough to the gas giant's atmosphere to allow you to ignite something and he won't follow you in because he knows his cloak would be compromised. He also knows you can't stay in there and time is on his side. He will stand off and wait for you to emerge."

"But when we do emerge, he'll take his time and line up his shot."

"Yes. And I know how he likes to do that. When he decloaks, I can have someone ready and able to respond faster than you can."

Ryan weighed the plan. It was, undoubtedly, the smart way to go. "Do it." Turning to Tholon, he ordered a secure channel with a narrow beam transmission to reduce the chances of Parendal listening in. Then he took Sela to his ready room after ordering Purton to continue evasive maneuvers.

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Sela's only worry now was that her compatriot was still on station, as ordered. She entered coordinates, then they agreed on password. Without it, he would assume it was someone else trying to smoke him out.

They waited through several tense seconds. Finally, "Commander, I await your orders."

"Vestor, do exactly as I tell you, quickly." Sela explained her plan and Vestor seemed completely comfortable with it. It made Ryan wonder if the Star Navy and the Tal'Shiar tangled on a regular basis.

As they signed off, another blast struck, sending up warnings all over the ship. Ryan and Sela raced back onto the bridge.

"Hull breaches on Deck 12, sections 17 through 23. Forcefields have closed."

"Warp drive is off line"

"Impulse drive?" asked Ryan. Without it, they would not be able to hold their own against the gas giant's gravity.

"Operational" responded Winchester. "Sections 17 to 23 are evacuated and sealed. We lost some though."

So now there was Federation dead. The diplomats would have a field day with this, but that was for a later time. "Take us into the atmosphere, Mr. Purton."

The Caitian whipped the big ship around and pointed it toward the gas giant's atmosphere. Helm control was apparently still good, a fact that eased Ryan's mind a bit.

On the cloaked ship, Parendal saw the maneuver. "Good effort, Captain, but you forget that I may still be able to track you." Pressing the button on his command chair that controlled the translator circuit, he ordered the Gorn science officer to scan the atmosphere. If *Proxima* did not go too deep, they may be able to track it as a change in the density of the atmosphere. After several seconds, the science officer acknowledged that he was tracking a moving shift in the atmosphere's density, but it was going deeper, becoming harder to detect as it went.

"Continue tracking. He has to weigh the benefit of hiding in there with how long his ship can withstand the stresses. The deeper he goes, the less time he can hide. But either way, he has to come out to vacuum sooner or later."

"How deep can we go before we are undetectable?" asked Ryan.

Staavm contemplated the question for a whole second, which seemed unusually long for the Vulcan, at least in Ryan's mind. "I would think not over five kilometers. However, the deeper we go, the more Mr. Robinson will become upset over the abuse to his engines."

"He'll get over it." When everyone glanced Ryan's direction, he added "Someday."

Following Sela's plan, the Captain ordered them to hold at 4.5 kilometers deep in the atmosphere. Even here, their own scanners were almost useless and they could not tell what was outside the atmosphere. Vaguely, Ryan wondered if Purton could tell how deep they were. Theoretically, inertial navigation systems should have taken over when they lost sight of the stars, and hence, their navigational fix. And there was now the slight gravitational and magnetic fields of the planet, though this 'soup' may have made them unreliable as well. Either way, visual sensors were useless, so if they ran into the planet, they may never know it till it was too late.

"4.5 kilometers, and holding" reported Purton.

"Now, we wait." And Ryan hated waiting.

What would become known as the 'Battle of Drovenock' lasted less than 20 minutes. When the Gorn battlefleet made its appearance, the Romulans chose to take their leave. Romulan 'advisors' disappeared from all over the facility, beamed to waiting vessels. As each took on their specified charges, the Romulan vessels moved away from the Gorn base, disappearing behind their cloaks and not heard from afterward.

On the *Enterprise*, Picard was deeply relieved to see Leader Keeyah's visage appear on the screen. "Leader Keeyah, it would seem that our reports of Romulan conspiracy were

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correct.” And, in an odd way, he was glad it had proven true. Hopefully, this would mean that the Gorn would trust the Federation, perhaps more so now than previously.

“The Gorn Alliance owes the Federation thanks for exposing this treachery. The Federation can be assured that the ones responsible will be duly punished.”

“Your continued friendship will be thanks enough. The Federation remains dedicated to good relations with your people. At this time, I must beg your forgiveness. I need to go to the assistance of the Federation ship that discovered the plot. They are still engaged with the cloaked ship.”

“Perhaps, there is a way to solve that problem.”

“Ten minutes, and the engines are suffering here!” Robinson saw weeks of clean up on the horizon if they didn’t get out of this atmosphere soon.

Ryan heard his call and looked toward Sela. The Romulan Commander seemed nervous, but drew up her usual bravado and nodded back.

“Alright, Mr. Purton, take us out.” Triggering the ship-wide intercom, he announced “Captain to all hands. We are about to emerge. They will likely be ready for us. Everyone stay focused.”

Gradually, the interference on the viewscreen cleared. They emerged, and Tholon began to scan. He found Parendal’s ship to starboard, having already decloaked and seemingly lined up to fire.

And directly behind it, Vestor’s Warbird decloaked. They opened fire and their first shots cascaded off the Gorn ship’s raised shields.

Proxima fired its phasers as well, and the two combatants pummeled the Gorn ship at close range till its shields failed.

“Cease fire.” Ryan hoped the Romulan, Vestor, followed suite, and he did. Moments later, Vestor was hailing them.

“They are crippled. Do we wish to take prisoners? I have boarding parties prepared.”

“So do we, but let’s hold a second.” Ryan was perplexed. “He had us. He was locked and loaded and the crosshairs lined up. Why didn’t he fire?”

Sela understood his point. Either Parendal was being extremely cagey, or extraordinarily stupid. “I don’t know. It makes no sense. Even with Vestor’s presence, he should have tried to finish us and even the odds again.”

Tholon interrupted with a surprise. “We are being hailed, by the Gorn in charge over there.”

“What happened to Parendal?” asked Sela.

“Let’s find out. On screen.”

A huge green reptilian gazed back at Ryan. “Federation Captain. We stand ready to surrender.”

Unsure what to make of the action, Ryan was having his doubts. “How are you speaking for the Romulan that was commanding you?”

“He no longer commands this vessel.” The Gorn stepped aside enough to allow them to see Parendal’s bloody corpse in the command chair.

“I see. Are there other Romulans on board?”

“No longer.”

He really had no idea how to read this Gorn, but on initial impressions, the officer seemed to be dealing with him in an honest and straightforward manner. Perhaps something had occurred to change their minds about working with the Romulans. “Very well, we’ll accept your surrender. Stand by for our terms.” With a slashing motion to Tholon, he had the connection severed.

Turning to Sela, he was unsure what to say. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Though she seemed somewhat distressed, she was holding it in well. “It’s alright, Captain. I’ve seen worse. But I must request that the remains of any Romulans in their possession must be turned over, for identification and internment on Romulus.”

“We’ll see to it. But can anyone tell me what the heck just happened?”

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CLOAK OF DECEIT

"I believe so." Staavm nodded toward the viewscreen. "This appears to be a repeating transmission, on a wide band signal from the Gorn Alliance."

A Gorn face was on the screen, obviously speaking in their language. The Universal Translator was quick to follow. "If you are loyal to the Red Claw, you will be hunted down. There will be no mercy for traitors. But if you are loyal to the Alliance, you will be welcomed back. The clan differences must be put aside if the Alliance is to move forward into a new era of peace through strength. These Outsiders would not have attempted their deceitful plan had there not already been divisions in our resolve. Those divisions must be eliminated, or the Alliance will find itself open to manipulation by others."

Pausing, the raspy Gorn breathing punctuated the silence. "I call on all Red Claw members to surrender to the nearest Alliance vessel or fortification. If you are outside our borders, the Federation has graciously offered to accept your surrender and grant you safe passage to our borders, where you will be met by representatives of the Alliance. These are the orders of your government and commanders. Follow them immediately, or you will be declared outlaws and hunted with no mercy. Your families will be disgraced. You will never again see your homeworlds. This transmission will repeat."

It did, starting the speech by Keeyah over again.

"Well, If that don't beat all." Ryan walked toward the viewscreen, now displaying a view of the surrendered Gorn cruiser. "Answered that question. And I guess that sums up our responsibilities here. Mr. Winchester, make preparations for receiving the Romulan casualties from that ship. Put me back on." When the Gorn reappeared, Ryan began. "Gorn Commander, you are now under Federation authority and protection. Please prepare to transfer any Romulan bodies in your possession to this vessel for disposition. Then stand down and relax. As soon as we have cleaned up a few loose strings, we'll escort you back to Gorn space."

"Understood. It will be done."

The Gorn's face disappeared and Ryan let out a loud sigh. "Well, that could have ended worse."

Epilogue

Picard settled into his ready room chair, sipping his customary Earl Grey tea and reading reports from the Federation ships that had accepted surrenders from the once Romulan-commanded Gorn vessels committing incursions into Federation space. There had been three, in fact, all equipped with cloaking devices. Apparently, the vessel that *Proxima* had encountered was simply the trigger for the whole series of events, all aimed at making the Federation believe that the Gorn had gone on the offensive, forcing the Gorn to resort to accepting Romulan aid, while at the same time, giving the Romulans the excuse for confronting the Federation as well. It would look like the Gorn and Romulans had a common enemy. Once they had their foot in the door, the *Tal'Shiar* intended to take over the Gorn Alliance, making it a puppet government.

Proxima's premature arrival had made a difference. That and the fact that Sela had been sent by the Star Navy to clean up the mess. Apparently, the architects of the plan had not expected that those two would be involved specifically.

Sela, having transferred to Vestor's Warbird, took responsibility for recovering the Romulan casualties. Then quietly went back to her side of the Neutral Zone. If her mood was any indication, there may be some coming shake-ups in the Romulan government. Clearly, she felt the *Tal'Shiar* were becoming far too powerful. Hopefully, she would work to curtail their future endeavors.

Ryan and the *Proxima* had escorted their Gorn 'captives' back to Drovenock, and were now back on their way to their patrol station. And soon, *Enterprise* would depart for Starbase 160 to transport equipment and personnel to a research station on Antiom IV. All was well in the universe again. Or, at least, their little corner of it.

"Bridge to Captain Picard."

Setting his tea aside, Picard acknowledged the hail. "Yes, Number One."

"Leader Keeyah is hailing. She wishes to speak to you."

"On my way." The Captain rose and proceeded onto the bridge where Leader Keeyah was already displayed. "Leader Keeyah."

"Captain, the Gorn Alliance wishes to formally thank the Federation for its assistance in this matter. If we had not received your warnings, we may not have been able to act in time to save the Alliance."

"The Federation graciously accepts the thanks of the Gorn Alliance and hopes that this will precipitate further trust and cooperation between our governments in the future."

"That remains to be seen. The Gorn people do not change easily. I can only hope that this will make them realize that we must change, or continue to be pawns in the galactic chess game."

"I have every confidence in your and the Council's leadership." Picard couldn't help himself now. His last encounter with Keeyah had resulted in a most unusual interaction. Were the possibilities still open? "Speaking of chess, does the Leader still play?"

"When I can find an opponent."

Perhaps the *Enterprise* didn't have to leave immediately. "It would be an honor and a challenge to play you, at your convenience."

Keeyah appeared to contemplate the possibilities. "I believe you lead the competition, three games to two?"

"This would be your chance to tie the score?"

"I would enjoy the opportunity, but my people need me at this time. Perhaps, in the future."

"I'll look forward to it." And Picard wasn't lying about that. He had taught the Gorn leader the earth board game at their last meeting and learned one very important thing: Never underestimate a Gorn.

One thing was for sure. The Romulans never would again.