

# THE COMING STORM

## PROLOGUE

Silently, the Klingon cruiser slipped into the Neutral Zone. The *Invader* was one of the oldest ships in the fleet and had seen a number of captains and crews, but none were more ambitious than Captain Gor. He had personally devised this plot against the Romulans and had taken it to his fleet commander, the brother of his father. What was spoken in his uncle's chambers would never be heard, and none questioned the actions of a fleet commander or his family.

And so, on the bridge of the battle-worn cruiser, which had been in service since the Klingons were at war with the Federation, Captain Gor waited. He had brought the old starship to the furthest regions of the Klingon Empire, and the Neutral Zone, without any explanation to his crew. This, among Klingons, was not unusual in itself, except for the fact of entering such a dangerous area without a ship of recent design or latest technologies. Many of the systems aboard this vessel, not having been updated, were slow. And in a combat situation seconds were critical, and every Klingon warrior on the *Invader* knew that.

Captain Gor watched and listened carefully, for under such conditions, the chance for mutiny, or betrayal, was high. But he would not have to wait much longer.

"Full stop," ordered the captain, "and run silent."  
The weapons officer looked up from his console, surprised.

"Take the weapons off-line?" he queried.

Captain Gor leaped out of his chair and towards the weapons officer, fist clenched. "Is that not part of the procedure?!" he bellowed. The weapons officer immediately complied.

Commander Kalekh, second-in-command of the *Invader* and Captain Gor's elder by more than a decade, spoke up. "He was

merely expressing a valid point, Captain. Taking the weapons off-line in the Romulan Neutral Zone is not a wise tactical maneuver."

Captain Gor whirled to face his First Officer, fire in his eyes. "But running silent is!" he barked, nearly foaming at the mouth. "And if you doubt my ability to lead, or question my authority, then draw your blade and we will see who commands."

Commander Kalekh merely regarded the youth coolly, showing no signs of backing down, but giving no indications of disloyalty. Captain Gor knew that if a mutiny were to occur, however, he would find his First Officer at the source.

"Helm?" asked the captain, requesting a status report.

"Now reading full stop. Systems off-line...now." The helmsman touched a button on his console and the lights dimmed. The comforting hum of the warp engines was all but gone as the entire ship powered down to minimal systems operations and nearly disappeared against the starry backdrop of space.

"Now," said the captain, sitting down and reclaiming his throne, "we will wait and see. Continue scanning, but at short range only. Inform me of the first Romulan vessel to enter the Neutral Zone."

If a ship was detected, Kalekh considered, and at close range, there would not be a spare moment in bringing the weapons back on-line. The commander turned to find that he was being stared at by his captain, as if Gor could read his thoughts.

"I'm leaving the bridge," informed the captain, "You are in charge, Commander," he said ominously, almost daring Kalekh to betray him.

After a nod from Kalekh, Captain Gor rose from his chair and marched out of the room. All eyes were upon Kalekh, and he knew this, even as he stared calmly at the viewscreen, hands clasped behind his back. Kalekh was a veteran of many battles against the Romulans and other alien foes, but he also respected the Klingon way, as well as the chain of command. He had turned down many opportunities to become captain for his own personal reasons.

He now turned down another.

"Continue scanning," he said at length, "but at long range."

"Aye, sir," replied the helmsman, almost relieved.

Almost.

"Commander Kronek," cried the Romulan science officer, "I have a very faint sensor reading emanating from within the Neutral Zone."

The Romulan commander leaned forward in his chair and raised a dark, pointed eyebrow. "Really?" he said, in nearly a whisper. "And tell me, how many ships do we have patrolling this sector of the Neutral Zone?"

The science officer considered the question for a few moments before nearly blurting out the answer. "None!"

"Really?" repeated Commander Kronek. "Then I suppose it is our duty to investigate this... intrusion, is it not?" The Romulan commander was merely guessing -- or was it hoping? -- that this was another brash Klingon attempt at espionage. As usual, it would not succeed. "Continue your sensor sweeps until you have a definitive reading. Navigator, set a course for the Neutral Zone and begin cloaking procedures."

"Aye, commander," replied both officers, with what enthusiasm the Romulan psyche let show through.

Commander Kalekh pondered their presence here. The only conclusion he had come to was that it was not an authorized mission. The Klingon Empire had no plans for a major offensive against the Romulans, as the fleet was still being consolidated by the new Klingon High Council. And it was certainly not a mission of espionage, for only scout ships with specially modified, high powered sensors could accomplish such a task. Regardless of the motivation, however, it was clear that Captain Gor would have to be removed from command. Rogue Klingons did not sit well with

the High Council and the Empire had lost enough face in its recent civil war.

A light suddenly began to blink on the tactical station's console. The weapons officer reported. "Sir! Now detecting a ship at maximum range!"

Commander Kalekh looked up and opened his mouth to give an order, but the weapons officer cut him off. "No...the signal is now gone." He met his commander's gaze. "It must have been a malfunction. These sensors are--"

"No!" barked Kalekh, "There is nothing wrong with your instruments. They detected a Romulan vessel which has engaged its cloaking device and is no doubt en route to engage *us!*" He paused long enough to decide upon the next course of action and its implications.

"Bring the weapons back on-line," growled Kalekh. He knew that this would create a definite signature on the sensors of the approaching ship. He also knew that it no longer mattered. Kalekh whirled and depressed a button on the captain's chair.

"Captain Gor, your presence is..." he paused, searching for the appropriate word, "required on the bridge." Kalekh did not wait for a response, as Klingons had none. He knew that the captain was at least half way to the bridge by now.

The Romulan science officer almost managed a smile. "Commander Kronek, we now have a positive lock-on to the ship. It is a Klingon D-7 cruiser. Reading weapons and life support on-line, but no other systems as yet."

Kronek achieved a wicked grin, as if to make up for his emotionless subordinates. "Good," he began, "It will give us a much desired opportunity to test our new weapon prototype."

Anticipation on the Romulan ship was becoming almost tangible. Kronek decided to heighten it one more notch, by speaking aloud what was already known to him. "How long until we reach the Neutral Zone?" he asked, to no one in particular.

The navigator responded. "Twenty-three seconds, sir."

"And how long does it take for a ship of that age to power up its engines and get underway?" he persisted, already knowing the answer.

"Approximately one minute, sir."

Captain Gor stormed onto the bridge, his steel-tipped boots clanging loudly upon the hard metallic floor of the Klingon ship. "Report!" he yelled, reclaiming his large, central chair.

Kalekh spoke up, knowing full well that any other officer to convey the information to the captain would probably be executed. "A Romulan ship was detected before cloaking and is presumed on an intercept course. Weapons have been brought back on-line. I suggest all other systems be brought on-line as well."

Captain Gor held his rage in check long enough to ask one confirming question. "Time to intercept?"

"Fifteen seconds," informed the helmsman.

"Traitors!" exploded Gor. "I *ordered* you to scan at short range only and you defied me! Our position has now been compromised! The mission must be aborted! Bring all systems back on-line and set course for the Empire!" Gor spun in his chair and pointed accusingly at Kalekh. "And you..." Words were replaced by a death-dealing stare. Kalekh merely accepted this, coolly.

"Captain!" cried the weapons officer, excitedly, "Romulan Warbird de-cloaking off the starboard bow!"

A variety of reactions occurred on the bridge at that moment. The lesser officers merely stared wide-eyed at the phenomenon on the viewscreen. Kalekh closed his eyes and sighed. It was then that he fully realized that he had followed a fool to his death. A Romulan Warbird outclassed the Klingon D-7 tenfold. Captain Gor

merely did what every Klingon did at least once in his life -- he prepared to die fighting.

"Bring all weapons to bear and f--"

"Sir! They are hailing us!" spouted the helmsman.

Captain Gor immediately assumed it to be a trick, but quick consideration of his tactical position caused him to re-think his options. Either way he would not be caught off guard. He gestured behind him. "Put it on audio only."

The officer did so and the Romulan commander's voice came in crystal clear. "Klingon cruiser: you have entered and are in violation of the Romulan Neutral Zone. You will withdraw immediately or be destroyed." The message ended abruptly and Kalekh nearly winced. He was not ready to die for a madman's glory.

Captain Gor began issuing orders. "Helm! Bring us about and move away under impulse power. Tactical! Retain lock-on and prepare to fire all weapons on my command." The timing would be critical. He would blast them with everything simultaneously and then jump into high warp speed and escape unscathed.

At least, that was the plan.

The Klingon ship slowly eased away from the menacing Romulan Warbird, the latter, and its crew, primed for battle. The Klingons, equally prepared, eagerly awaited their captain's order.

Captain Gor took in a large breath and roared his command. "Fire!"

A colorful barrage of deadly phaser and disruptor fire lit up that sector of space, followed by a volley of photon torpedoes. All scored direct hits upon the Romulan vessel. The Warbird rocked and pitched, a slave to the energies of destruction, as each weapon found its target.

"Engage warp drive, sir?" the navigator asked, almost rhetorically.

"Sensor readings on the Romulan ship," Gor demanded, ignoring the navigator's question.

The weapons officer scanned his readout for a moment, then reported. "They have lost their Number Five shield and their main phaser bank has been destroyed!" He paused momentarily as new information became available. "Also reading a large energy build-up. Undoubtedly, their plasma torpedoes!"

"Recharge all weapons!" shouted Captain Gor. "Helmsman! Bring us around to point blank range! Full impulse power!"

The *Invader*, making a high energy turn, turned to face the imposing Romulan ship and sped, headlong, on a collision course to meet her.

"Point blank range, Captain," informed the navigator.

"Weapons?" inquired Gor.

"Not fully charged!" cried the weapons officer.

Gor turned the face the viewscreen and the rapidly approaching ship. Neither he, nor Kalekh, missed the brightly glowing sphere beneath the bow of the Romulan vessel. It was the glow of the amassing energy, the harbinger of their death, within the other ships torpedo tubes.

"Warbird firing plasma torpedo, now!" shouted the weapons officer.

All aboard the Klingon ship watched as the swirling ball of plasma was expelled from its tube and raced towards their vessel, filling the viewscreen within seconds.

The impact was enormous, and all standing were thrown across the bridge, while those sitting were flung from their chairs.

Outside, the mass of swirling death expanded and enveloped the entire ship. It then imploded, simultaneously crushing all of the *Invader's* shields and rupturing most of its hull. The ship came to a dead stop, only meters from the damaged Romulan Warbird.

On the bridge of the Klingon ship, Captain Gor climbed back into his chair as the other officers also scrambled to their feet and took their stations. Gor, examining the viewscreen ahead of him, and neither hearing nor feeling any further damage being done to his ship, deduced that the Romulans must have also been heavily damaged. The close-up view of the Romulan ship that he had at the

moment, showed him the scars from his phaser and torpedo hits and a gaping hole where their main phaser bank had been. In fact, he could almost see inside the Warbird through their own viewports. He decided to afford himself a luxury seldom gained during battle: "Damage report."

There was no answer.

Captain Gor did not bother with a second request. He merely turned around to find what he had expected. A large duranium girder had fallen and crushed the weapons officer's skull, plastering him to his blood-stained console.

Kalekh didn't wait for the order. He stepped up to the Tactical station, grabbed the fresh corpse by his armored uniform and pulled, letting him fall to the floor. Kalekh wiped as much of the purple blood as he could from the console and began relaying the requested information to his captain.

"Fire control destroyed," he began, starting with the most pertinent facts, "as well as all shields. Crew casualties estimated at ninety percent. Warp engines destroyed. Impulse power minimal. Helm?" He looked up from his position, awaiting an answer.

After several futile attempts to move the ship, the frustrated helmsman replied. "No response."

Kalekh returned to his panel. "Critical Life Support failure in less than one hour." His gaze turned to Captain Gor.

The captain had not moved, nor spoken, during the entire discourse. When he finally did speak, he sounded not angry, but merely disappointed. "Send a distress call to any Klingon ships in the area."

Commander Kalekh readily complied, knowing, though, that it was unlikely, in the extreme, that there were any ships this far from the homeworld, other than their own.

Or what was left of it.

Kalekh let out a half-sigh, half-growl and stepped down to stand beside Captain Gor. He regarded the magnificent, though damaged, Romulan Warbird looming on the viewscreen. *So, he mused, the Romulans have a new weapon and we were the first*



*target to test it on.* If it had been used on anyone previously, The Klingon Empire would certainly have heard about it. Everyone knew that their standard plasma torpedoes packed quite a wallop, but this new 'enveloping' torpedo was devastating. Granted, the *Invader* was an old ship, but even their newer cruisers would be slightly mauled by a weapon of this type. He reasoned that this new armament must consume an enormous amount of energy. That would explain the Romulans' lack of phaser fire and comparatively weak shields.

Captain Gor was lost in his own contemplations. All he could do now was wait. He hoped that none of his remaining officers suggested priming the ship for self-destruction. That was the honorable, Klingon thing to do. But that was not his plan. If it did come up, he would not have a reason as to why this tactic should not be used. He would probably have to kill the individual and call it 'insolence' and 'treason'. So far, his plan was working. But for now, he would have to stall.

"They are helpless," said Commander Kronek, as if his bridge crew needed confirming on that fact. He got up from his chair and, clasping his hands behind his back, walked over to the Tactical station to survey the damage report personally. His ship had lost its Number Five shield and its main phaser bank, as well as sustaining minor damage to its forward hull.

Excellent. The shield could be recharged easily and the phasers were no longer necessary. Damage control would have the inner hull repaired before they even reached Romulus. All in all, the Warbird had taken a pelting from the Klingons and emerged relatively undamaged.

For the first time since the encounter had begun, Sub-commander Kitarak, one of the few female officers aboard the Romulan vessel, spoke up. "Sir, the Klingon ship is still our first priority. Since we are unable to destroy it at the moment, what is to be done?"

Kronek arched a dark eyebrow at his first officer. "And what would you *have* done Sub-commander?"

Kitarak opened her mouth to answer, but Kronek cut her off. "Certainly not a boarding party," Kronek explained, "for although their security forces have been cut to a minimum, we must not forget the rigid Klingon code of death before surrender. The Klingons would simply meet that threat with self-destruction, and both of our vessels would surely be destroyed." Kronek returned to his command chair, sat down, and continued without humility. "No, our next course of action will be to attach a tractor beam to their ship and tow our prize back to Romulus."

"But could they not still self-destruct?" asked Kitarak.

"The fact that they have not done this already," clarified Kronek, as if explaining to a child, "leads me to believe that they are either unwilling or unable to perform this function. But we shall keep our distance."

"Sir!" cried the science officer, "They are sending a distress call!"

"A distress call?" echoed Commander Kronek. He merely smirked. "Let them cry for help. They will be well within the Romulan Empire before their message is even received." He turned to face the Tactical station. "Prepare tractor beam for attachment to Klingon vessel and set course for Romulus."

The science officer was scanning his instruments with a furrowed brow. He spoke excitedly, without looking up. "Commander Kronek, sir! Long range scans show a vessel en route to our position at high warp. Estimated time to arrival is two-point-five minutes!"

"What!" exclaimed Kronek. "Impossible."

The science officer re-checked his scanners for only a moment. "Readings confirmed, Commander. Point of origin locates the vessel just outside the Neutral Zone."

What was this? What wretched Klingon plot was unfolding before his eyes? Commander Kronek sneered and thought quickly.

"Engage the cloaking device and expand it to encompass the Klingon ship," he ordered.

"But, sir," offered Sub-commander Kitarak, "with the possibility of our having suffered collateral damage and the new prototype weapon design, expanding the cloak may present a strain on our systems."

Commander Kronek gave her a hateful look. "I have no intention of sacrificing myself nor this vessel! My orders will be carried out immediately!"

There was an audible transfer of power as the cloaking device took effect and both ships slowly faded and disappeared.

"Their signal has disappeared," reported the weapons officer of the Klingon Command Cruiser *Reaver*.

"Come to a full stop at last known coordinates," ordered Fleet Admiral Karg, in his rough, gravelly voice. He stood from his chair and rose to his full seven-foot-two-inches. He was humongous even for a Klingon, in bulk as well as height. His size befit his rank.

Slowly, he strode around the bridge, carefully considering the facts that he had obtained thus far. Karg was highly intelligent and wise beyond his fifty-eight years. There were even whispers that he would soon be on the Klingon High Council.

As he walked, the many medals and insignia upon his regally armored cloak jingled slightly, but he paid them no mind. The task at hand was far too important to allow for any distraction. He knew that the Romulans were cloaked. But where was the Klingon ship that had sent the distress call? Sensors had not indicated that any ships had left the area. And no explosions had been detected. The only remaining solution was that the Klingon vessel must also be cloaked. And it was no Bird of Prey. So, the only way that could be possible was if they were right on top of each other.

"Adjust sensors to detect and analyze spacial anomalies. Standard anti-cloak procedures." Karg had successfully dealt with

the Romulans many times and in many different scenarios. And since Klingons had been in possession of cloaking technology for many years, they were familiar with it and knew what to look for. The odds were almost equal.

"Admiral Karg," shouted the weapons officer, "sensors had detected several various readings, but a new reading has overcome them: that of an excessive energy build-up."

"What do you mean by 'excessive'?" questioned Karg.

But before he could answer, that sector of space lit up for the second time that day. The Romulan Warbird, all of its systems suffering from simultaneous overload, exploded in a furious matter/anti-matter reaction.

All aboard the *Reaver* shielded their eyes from the blinding spectacle. They never saw the second, chain reaction explosion of the *Invader* as the devastating blast took its toll on the helpless Klingon ship.

The *Reaver*, jolted by the close detonation, rocked and tumbled until the inertial dampeners set the ship right again. On the bridge, those who had fallen scrambled to regain their positions. None were injured, but all were primed for battle, adrenaline running through their purple veins.

The weapons officer examined his Tactical display. "The hidden vessel has been destroyed," he boomed victoriously, "all that remains is debris."

Admiral Karg grunted resignedly at this. He would have to assume that the Klingon vessel had been destroyed as well.

"Damage reports coming in now, Admiral." The weapons officer waited until all of the information had been assimilated, so that he could give a full report. "The Number Three shield was penetrated and we have received substantial damage to the starboard engines. Minor crew casualties and minor hull damage as well. We are still capable of Warp Five."

Admiral Karg grunted again. He was not surprised at the lack of general damage to his ship, being one of the more formidable ones in the fleet. What was of concern to him was the position he

was now in. Any ship within the neighboring sectors was now undoubtedly aware of the occurrence and would likely be on their way to investigate. He would have no time to search through the debris for any sort of clues to the event. He soon realized, however, that this incident put an entirely new perspective on his task. The opportunities were inviting. A few mental calculations and his mind was set.

"Helm," he began, "plot a course away from the Neutral Zone and engage at Warp Two."

"But Admiral, sir--" started the helmsman.

"You heard the order," growled Admiral Karg, "Warp *Two!*"

**To be continued...**