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SOME NOTES ON ROMULANS



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Condensed from various SI (Starfleet Intelligence) analyses, accuracy unknown.

Two Romulans, goes an old Romulan proverb, *three conspiracies*. As Vulcan culture is rooted in logic, and Klingon in honor, the foundation of Romulan society is secrecy.

Their culture is an endless series of variations on themes of concealment, the covert, the hidden: masks, pseudonyms, conspiracies, layers of deception, cover stories.

Traditional Romulan compounds—Romulans live in kinship units—are built at the center of a kind of hedge maze whose outer perimeter is often contrived to look like a “natural” grove of trees, as if, within, there were no houses at all. Once you reach the house itself, you find a false “front entrance”; all Romulan houses are entered from the back. Even in big cities, modern housing megastructures have false front entrances, and are surrounded by some kind of token or symbolic maze, often a pattern in the paving stones. No visitor to a Romulan compound must ever arrive uninvited—it’s unheard of—and all visitors are asked to don a ceremonial blindfold (often of the finest materials) and are guided by their hosts into the compound, after being turned around the ritual three times. It is the height of rudeness to ask a Romulan for his address. It’s rude to ask a Romulan almost anything remotely personal.

A Romulan’s sense of privacy and secrecy is so powerful that a routine (to us) polite inquiry such as *What have you been up to today?* or *How are you?* is an indication of long acquaintance, deep connection. Even then, the answer is often a variation on *None of your*

business. The customary Romulan greeting translates as *I see nothing [improper]* to which the customary reply is *Nothing to see*.

Romulan government is conducted and organized like a vast espionage network; broken into countless independent cells, none of which is ever fully aware of the other's exact role or duties, each suspicious of all the others; only at the very highest levels is there anything like a sense of the complete picture, the overall plan. And the highest levels are notoriously subject to intrigue, plotting, coups and rivalries.

The highest Romulan art form is classical Romulan drama, a kind of elaborate theater of impersonation, in which actors wear intricately constructed layered masks; in the course of the dramas—which almost always deal with legendary acts of deception, treachery and conspiracy—the performers remove the layers, one by one, altering their voices and body movements accordingly. The mask worn by the tragic hero or heroine always has more layers than anyone else's, and the play ends with the “last unmasking,” revealing the “true nature” of the character in its naked pathos—but of course that layer is just another mask.

Legend holds that the basis of Romulans' fixation on deception and the hiding of secrets is the unusually high proportion of mimetic (camouflage-using) native animals and plants that the first settlers of Romulus found on arrival, snakes that look like flowering vines, flowers like lizards, mammals that alter their coloration according to patterns in light falling on them. Best known of these to outsiders, of course, is the so-called “warbird” after which Romulans have long patterned their military starships. The plumage of this raptor has unique optical properties that mimic the wavelength of ambient light, causing the birds to “disappear” against a clear blue sky, a phenomenon that is said to have inspired the most celebrated, and most Romulan, of all Romulan technologies: the cloaking device.

Of course, that could just be a classic Romulan “cover story.” Romulans are addicted to cover stories.

Another widely known, and widely feared, Romulan institution is the Tal Shiar, often referred to as the Romulan “secret police.” But there is no complete picture of who the Tal Shiar are, or what their function in society really is. First of all, when you're talking about Romulans, the “secret” part is redundant. All Romulan police are “secret police.” Informing, among Romulans, is considered not merely a virtue but an art form—it takes great skill to gather any kind of useful information about a Romulan, because they are so secretive, and anyone who can do it well enough to share it with police is considered particularly astute. And any police force that did not attempt to closely monitor the activities of citizens would be unworthy of respect among Romulans, who know exactly how much deviousness lurks in their own hearts. But there is ample evidence that the Tal Shiar are something more akin to an elite warrior corps, like the Green Berets or Death's Head SS, than an instrument of state terror and control. They may be both; they may be something more, besides. It's entirely possible, given the structure of Romulan government, that not even the Tal Shiar are completely aware of the full extent of their mission or purpose.

At birth, every Romulan is given four names: a name known only within the family; a “common” name employed in the Children’s Houses, for religious rituals, and for certain other traditional institutions; an “imperial name” with which the individual is identified by the state; and an “open name”, the name that the Romulan gives to outsiders. Romulans change their open names at will, often making use of three, four or five at a time, in different social contexts. Then there is the “true name,” used only at moments of deep intimacy.

In this culture of deceit and concealment, trust is the ultimate bond, the equivalent to love in human culture. Romulan intimacy and erotics are centered around exchanges of truths, revealing of secrets, and the ultimate commitment of revealing your “inmost name” to the other. The term for the Romulan wedding ceremony roughly translates as “A Terror and a Name,” a profoundly secretive ceremony (no guests are invited), in which each of the three (yes) partners reveals their inmost name and deepest fear to the other two. Romulan “marriages” (the word translates as “trust bond”) are always threesomes (in any configuration of genders) because at every moment each partner in the marriage serves as Verificator to the other two (in Romulan the verb “to verify” is related to verbs meaning “to police” and “to monitor”), verifying the trust bond of the two others, who are known by a Romulan word that literally translates as “conspirators.” In practice the threesome may or may not cohabit/reproduce—there is great variability here. (One interesting feature of Romulan culture is that a society so stratified, hierarchical, and rule-oriented—there are reports that there may be as many as 114 castes—permits individual Romulans a considerable amount of flexibility and liberty in many social matters, such as sexual orientation, gender fluidity, etc.) There is no concept of adultery—Romulans may have many sexual partners outside of the “trust bond”; the great sin, in higher castes punishable by death, is the betrayal of a partner’s inmost name and/or secret Terror. Marrying outside your caste is also forbidden by custom and even marrying outside of your kinship network is frowned upon and socially unacceptable.

Each threesome forms part of a kinship network (of adults, Romulan children being raised communally by professionals in the Children’s Houses, where their parentage is kept secret from them until the “unclouding” ceremony at age 13). The kinship networks are known by a word that translates roughly as “a trust penumbra”—the shadow of trust cast by the bonded partners onto their nearest kin. In principle these interlinked penumbras may include as many as two hundred related individuals, but the Romulan penchant for plotting, subterfuge and deception, even in a family context, often leads to formal schisms that reduce the size of the unit—usually legally, sometimes fatally. Essentially, families may legally divorce each other.

It is this fundamental mistrust of outsiders—originally, anyone outside the trust penumbra—that has led to the Romulans’ depiction as “isolationist,” and to the long periods of silence and withdrawal from interstellar contact that have marked recent Romulan history.

Romulan religion was once a pantheistic form of spirit-and-nature worship, but the original belief system has long since been superseded and incorporated into the cult of the Imperial Family, each of whose seven members (Father-Emperor, Mother-Empress, Grandmother, Grandfather, Son, Daughter, and Demon Child) has a ritualistic seven names. The Imperial Family always has seven ritual members, regardless of how many actual biological members it may contain;

there is frequent competition (and, of course, plotting and conspiring) within Imperial families to acquire the ritual roles. Each of the Seven is believed to embody and watch over a different aspect of society, and they are worshipped as gods. Some claim, however, that this “emperor worship” religion is yet another Romulan cover story, intended to conceal the true Romulan religion. Or they say that it conceals the fact that Romulans have no religious beliefs at all, or that each Romulan is expected to find their own beliefs—or doubts—on their own.

Then, utterly apart from the Romulan mainstream, but every bit as traditional and ancient as the maze-enclosed compounds, complicated kinship networks, and Verficator-Conspirator marriage structure, there is the Order of Qowat Milat. As far as we know, this all-female order of warrior initiates dates from a period early in the history of Romulus. It may even predate the arrival on Romulus; some have argued that it grew out of the ancient monastic orders of Vulcan that predate Surak and the rise of his teachings on that planet.

The central tenet of Qowat Milat teaching is a kind of radical inversion of mainstream Romulan belief. Among Romulans, the true, innermost self, with its secret name, is something to be concealed behind masks, hedges, deceits and barriers. Revealing that private self is the ultimate intimacy, and an ecstatic act. Among the sisterhood of the Qowat Milat, however, that “innermost self” is held to be an illusion, or a delusion, the ultimate deception: there is no innermost self. There is always, as in the classical drama, one more mask under the mask. The Qowat Milat adept is taught to meditate on that infinity of masks, to contemplate the void at the heart of the so-called “self”, and to realize that, ultimately, there is nothing to hide. Qowat Milat nuns speak bluntly, declare their intentions openly, advertise their feelings. They do not suffer fools, never hold their tongues; they have, deliberately, no filter. They scorn guile, repudiate deception and avoid all alliances, even ones that might serve their needs (or save their lives), lest they fall inadvertently into conspiracy. They discard all names but a single open name that they choose by throwing of divinatory “name dice.” Their fidelity to any sworn oath is legendary.

Naturally this radical, even heretical behavior puts them very much at odds with the rest of Romulan society. They endured centuries of persecution, which is what led them, in time, to become such fearsome fighters. Scorning defense as a form of concealment, a Qowat Milat always prefers to attack—but never by ambush or sneak attack; they always declare their hostile intentions openly. Their skill, knowledge of weapons, immense physical strength, durability, and ferocity when not in contemplative mode are so considerable that they have gained great power and influence in Romulan society; power and influence which mainstream Romulans, of course, keep secret, deny, and minimize. It is whispered, however, that no one becomes Romulan praetor without the approval of the Qowat Milat, and furthermore that the Romulan Empress is always drawn from, or trained by, the Qowat Milat sisters. Fierce, brash, forthright, they wear their hearts on their sleeves, hold nothing back, and always call a spade a spade. In short, there could be no stronger ally than a Qowat Milat sister: unless, of course, your mission actually requires you to engage in subterfuge and deception.

And unless, of course—as some insist—the entire structure of Qowat Milat doctrine, belief and behavior is itself a giant act of deceit, concealing some deeper teaching, some hidden purpose known only to its adherents who may be, in the end, the most Romulan of all Romulans.