

Epiphany Trek

LOGS: USS QUESTING



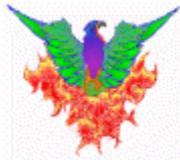
A ROMULAN WAY

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Garry Stahl

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He sat in the command pit of the starship. The universe spread out before him in all its glory. His ship bored a hole through space slipping between the fabric of here and now to travel faster than light itself. His Icon was all his life expressed in a single thought, changing with experience, but always the same. Humans called him Captain Taraban. He was the commander of the heavy frigate *Questing*. He is Ane, a telepathic, Handicapped race that most resembled the antelopes of Earth's African savanna. Resembled only for definite differences, few of them apparent, made it obvious they were not of Earth origin. Ane had been a member of the Federation from the beginning although little known outside certain circles.

The *Questing* was patrolling the Romulan Neutral Zone. Long experience had taught the Romulans to choose Starfleet vessels for test confrontations. "Ane Diplomacy" was not known for the subtle approach which Romulans preferred. Likewise the Ane frigates were tough and hard hitting, and the Ane more likely to shoot. Ane might be herbivores, but they had no problem with preemptive strikes on carnivores.

Captain Taraban did not expect trouble. He closed his eyes to intensify the link with the ship's sensors. Space about the ship was calm, in the back of his mind he could hear the ship's business, everything normal. He searched the space about the ship. The usual buoys that warned of the Neutral Zone were in place and functioning. Tending them was not his task. In the distance he saw a Romulan freighter, cruising the edge of the Neutral Zone. He knew their business, to seek a place to cross over, unnoticed by either their own Imperial Star Service, or Starfleet. He saw no reason to send word of them to the Romulans. If they can't catch their own border crashers, he wasn't going to help them. Besides, trade broke down barriers of prejudice and fear. Let them trade, to this he turned a blind eye.

****Captain?*** This was the word of the ship herself. ****I have an object, bearing x270 mark 60.**** Fiealan's more direct connection with the sensors was telling.

****Bring it to our attention please.****

Taraban felt the minds of his other two bridge mates link closer with himself and the ship.

Three days in the life pod had not been easy on Terkos or his companion. He had no idea where he was, or when help would arrive, even if it would. And if help did arrive, which was worse? The Imperial Star Service would execute him as a traitor to keep itself safe, and Starfleet of the Federation would arrest him as a spy. He knew of the horrors that would mean. If he did not love life so dear, he would blow the hatch and get it over with. Instead, he checked on his companion yet again. She had not awakened in the three days of their journey,

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he didn't even know who she was. They had both been personnel on the station, that he knew, and he had carried her bleeding body into the life pod and blown them free. The medic pack said she was stable, but as of yet, she had not woken.

The proximity sensor was beeping. Well, at last he would know which side would have the honor of his death.

The *Questing* dropped from warp, Fiealan briefed the Captain as she did so.

Object is a Romulan life pod. It is of a type usually found on stations and their larger ships.

Taraban mused over this.

I didn't think Romulans would have life pods, their fascination with honorable death and all. Snickered Gesilan at the helm.

Well Gesilan, he replied, **I guess they are to avoid a dis-honorable death. After all, you wouldn't want to waste dying in a mechanical failure. You have to save it for something really important, like an enemy caused mechanical failure.** Those in contact register mild amusement. Ane in general didn't take much to the Romulan idea of dying just because you lost. **In any case, there are life forms present, and they didn't want to die, or they would not be in a life pod. Fiealan, beam them aboard, and have a security and medical detachment to the transporter room.**

I have a lock Captain, no weapons, one is injured.

Understood, bring them in.

Terkos looked around. Gods of His Ancestors, what had he fallen into? He was surrounded by apparitions from the mind of a madman. A transporter room full of robots and animals. Terkos had never seen non-Romulans in the flesh. He had seen holoshows of non-Romulans. All such races were inferior in some aspect. He had seen the training holos for recognition of other races, this race, if it was a race, was not covered in his training. One spoke, or he thought so.

**Welcome aboard Terkos, your companion will be aided, do you wish to accompany her to sickbay?*

"How do you know my name?" He found this alarming.

Your name is part of your Icon Terkos, it is obvious. Your companion must go to sick bay, with or without you.

"I am coming."

Terkos was even more confused, he was speaking Romulan, yet he was understood. That voice didn't sound like he thought a translator should, but it spoke perfect Romulan. Terkos didn't know that going to their sickbay was good, but it was better to stick with the only other Romulan on this mad ship.

"Where am I."

The strange procession was moving down wide corridors, with more of the animals in them, and a few of the androids. Other races seem to be present as

well, he though he saw a Human.

You are on the Federation starship *Questing*.

"Why have you not arrested me? If you where on your side of the Neutral Zone, then I am in violation."

Life pods are not ships Terkos, they do not steer themselves. As of yet, being shipwrecked, is not a crime, at least with us.

So they did not know, that was good. He may escape with is life yet. Moments took them to the ship's sick bay. Most of the equipment seems built for this animal like species, but at least one of the couches was for humanoids. His unknown companion was placed on this couch and examined. He watched in silence. Finally one of the creatures spoke.

**She is suffering severe cranial trauma, and is currently in a stable coma. She will require nutritional aid, and extensive healing, however, she is not beyond reach. I will move her to the healing suite immediately. Casalan, will you see to her needs?*

Of course.

It was from one of the creatures. The robots moved the Romulan woman from the table, and took her into the next room. She was laid out on a large sunken bed and this "Casalan" got in next to her.

"What is happening, what are you doing?"

She requires the services of a healer. Casalan will begin to heal the damage to her brain, it will take several days.

"You are not going to treat her?"

This is treatment. We prefer to avoid drugs and invasive measures when at all possible. She is stable, Casalan will take care of her. You should be examined as well.

Terkos allowed himself to be led back to the medical table. A moment later the healer spoke again.

You are well, in spite of your ordeal. Karlban will take you to your quarters. The Captain will want words with you later.

"Thank you I look forward to speaking with him."

Her look was odd, but he didn't understand the body language. The big quadruped led him out of the medical suite and into a turbolift.

Yavalan the Healer looked after the Romulan. She didn't understand the custom of social lying. It was plain the Captain was the last person he wanted to see.

The turbolift carried the two with out seeming command or direction to another deck. Terkos thought it was higher in the ship. After walking down a short corridor he was led into an impossibly large room.

"Where is this?"

**VIP humanoid suite. Is it not big enough?*

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"It is huge. I thought we were going to the brig?"

No, I was told to see you to guest quarters. The replicator is over there, the bedroom beyond that door, and sanitary and hygiene facilities are the other side of that. The food processors will produce your preferences. We are not up on Romulan foods, but you can doubtless find something to your taste. Now if you will excuse me, I have other duties.

"Of course...what is your rank?"

We do not use a ranking system, my name is Karlban.

"Thank you Karlban."

Terkos looked after the retreating creature. He found his wits and faced the food replicator. He had not eaten decent food in three days. Pod rations were nutritious, but bland. Pods did not have power to spare for replication.

"Menu." He hoped it understood Romulan.

May I make a suggestion?

"Who is that?"

Fiealan, the ship's computer.

"Make your suggestion." Damn good AI, he thought.

Beefsteak prime rib medium rare, seasoned with trillium.

"Why this selection?"

The beef is compatible with your preference for meat and with your biochemistry, trillium is an Earth plant that Vulcans are fond of, it should also be to a Romulan's taste.

"Very well, give me your suggestion."

Terkos carried the resulting tray to his table. It smelled good. He dug in and found it a genuinely good meal. The meat was, well, replicated, but other than that good. Afterwards he felt much better.

Terkos looked out the large window in his cabin. The ship was still at sub-light, the stars had not moved. His door chimed for attention.

"Yes?"

One of the creatures entered. **The Captain will have a word with you.**

"Yes. That can not be avoided any longer can it?" He knew this time had to come, now he would have to die like a Romulan.

Terkos sat before the Captain of this vessel, the creature was beyond strange. A four legged being with hooves on all four limbs, a bushy short tail and a mane down his neck. His pelt was fur all over, an attractive (he had to admit) deep brown covered the top with white underneath. A black stripe ran down his side and the mane was also black. His head had a long muzzle with a black, wet looking nose, a black stripe on each side under the eyes. Large mobile ears, and long curved horns. The eyes were most striking, a deep blue, that covered the entire eye, with no white showing. Terkos sat stiffly, and related his story, he knew it has better be good.

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"I am Terkos, a crewman on the freighter 'Blood of Valtalar'..."

You are lying.

"Begging the Captain's pardon, but I have hardly begun."

Then begin with the truth.

"The truth you wish to hear, or the truth as I know it to be?" Terkos managed a defiant tone, he was nervous, this Captain had to be guessing.

The truth as it is will do. Taraban decided to end the charade.

Terkos, Ane is the species I am. Ane are telepaths, every sentient on this ship is a telepath. Not the weak telepaths that Romulans train as truth seekers. But the kind of telepaths that need no physical contact to have mental contact. I do not speak Romulan, or any other language. You hear Romulan because you speak Romulan. You can no more lie to me, than you can lie to yourself.

Terkos sat as if phaser stunned. He had heard of such creatures, and the horrors they could inflict. "I shall say nothing."

Save the bravado. Your companion will tell us everything. Casalan must enter her mind to heal it, and she will learn all there is to know. It will be better however, if you tell the plain truth.

Terkos did not even realize he had moved. He leapt across the space and grabbed the Ane by the throat. He fumbled for a killing grip. He didn't know the anatomy, and the wind pipe felt wrong. He had to kill this thing, find a weapon and kill the woman before all was lost.

Captain Taraban was taken aback by the attack. There was no warning in the man's mind. The Romulan struggled for a grip over unfamiliar ground. Taraban was not so disadvantaged. He stood, put his 180 kilos into it, and threw the Romulan against the far wall. Terkos took the blow on his back, and rolled to his feet for another lunge. The Ane was fully aware now, and stood with horns forward, balanced on his hind legs. He looked for an opening in the Ane's defenses, this fight he had to win.

"Throat no" the thoughts flicked through his mind, "Eyes, behind the eyes is the brain, use the horns as leverage." He lunged forward, to late he realized he had betrayed himself. Captain Taraban switched ends so fast Terkos didn't see him move. Terkos took both hind feet in the belly, his heart skipped a beat from the force. He was slammed back against the wall. Darkness threatened to over come him, he fought it back, his lungs screaming for the air the blow denied him. He struggled to his feet, he had to win.

STOP!

The mental command echoed through his being. Terkos felt his strength leave him.

"Now, you... will have to kill me," he gasped in ragged phrases. "Your honor cannot... withstand... such an assault... by so lowly a person... as a station janitor."

Captain Taraban sat and looked the Romulan over.

**You have little concept of what constitutes my honor Terkos. I am not a

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Romulan, and I am not compelled to behave in Romulan ways. Until you, and all the other Romulans, get that through your heads, the universe will be a very unfriendly place. What you have accomplished is getting your quarters moved from our spacious guest cabin, to the brig. I do not fear for myself or the crew, I fear for you. In the brig your actions can be controlled, and you will not attempt your own life.**

Two hefty biomech security guards entered the room.

"What are those things?" Terkos felt the taste of fear in his mouth.

They are computer peripherals, and what we use as hands. Taraban spoke to the androids. **Take him to the brig, and see he does not harm himself.**

The *Questing* continued to scan the area for the rest of the day. Extensive time was spent on deep scans into Romulan territory. This usually brought a Romulan bird of prey sniffing around, but not this time. The scans drove the merchant off. Taraban shrugged, he would doubtless try again.

Well, we have found what we can, much or little. Taraban broadcast to the crew at large. **Staff meeting in five.**

She floated in darkness, memory returned in small sips. The reavers, their cubic ship without grace or art. Pieces of the station breaking off, the cloak didn't even deter them, weapons fire ineffective... screams, running... darkness... darkness engulfed her... a man, darkness... the darkness invited her... beckoned her... to go... down into the darkness... to... go...

Light flooded her, a bright beacon in her world, the darkness fled. A figure, unknown, but mother-like in its aspect, smiled on her.

Alveta, you are wounded, I have come to heal, to restore you to health.

**Where am I?*

You are on a Federation Starship, I am Casalan, an Ane healer.

No, I must not be here, must die.

Death is unnecessary, military secrets are not worth dying for.

I know too much, I cannot live.

What you know is of no consequence, I am here to heal.

I can not reveal what I know.

Conjecture is enough. You were near enough to the Federation side to allow a life pod to drift over the border.

**Life pod, how did I get into a life pod?*

One of the other personal, you can thank him or not once you are well. Now sleep, and heal.

The voice brooked no argument, she drifted into dreamless sleep.

Captain Taraban entered the lounge. It was a large open space, the largest in the ship next to sleeping quarters. Ane had no concept, or need, for personal privacy. Holo panels in the walls played views of endless vistas, the compartment looked like a roofed pavilion on a semi-arid savanna. The rest of the staff had already gathered for the briefing. A couple had salads in front of them, the rest laid around chewing their cud. Captain Taraban called the meeting to order.

**Fiealan, recorder on. Mission briefing; 'Romulan life pod'. Present, Taraban; Ship's Captain, Yavalan; Healer, Gesilan; Helm, Riesilan; Sciences, Kosoban; Engineering, Fiealan; Ship's Computer and acting Caterer.

OK we all agree that a Romulan life pod in Federation space is unlikely as it comes. Those pods do not drift fast, and don't have much of a drive. Kosoban, your observations? **

**The pod had to have been ejected within half a light day of this location. Its speed was very low, and other than a high yield, low fueled impulse unit to kick it free of the wreck, and a possible core explosion, it has no real propulsion. **

Riesilan added. **The problem with that is there is no debris to account for a wreck, we have a little junk inside the Neutral Zone, but not nearly enough to account for a ship of any size. **

Taraban continued. **Yavalan? **

**Casalan has found the patient to be highly concerned with the dishonor of revealing any of her actions. To the Romulan mind, this is understandable. In the interests of preserving her life, we have not pressed the matter. However, we have several vivid memories that would not break the patient confidence to reveal. Our patient's name is Alveta, she is, or rather was a sensor officer on a Romulan station with the rank of subaltern. Neither the name of the station or her exact mission is public. Her station was approached by a cubic ship, she called 'the reavers', the station was destroyed. That is the last of her 'public' memories. **

Taraban said. **That is enough to conclude that the Romulans had an intelligence station within the Neutral Zone itself. A clear violation of treaty. What about the destruction of the station? **

Resilan said. **The cubic ship, and the lack of debris are both in accord with the actions of a race called 'The Borg', the *Enterprise D* encountered this race on stardate 42761.2. The ion trails indicate a ship traveling at low warp passed through this space at the time the station was destroyed. Deep scans into Romulan space do not detect this ship, and the trail is more decayed in Romulan space than in Federation space. Evidence suggests that the 'Borg' ship has entered Federation space. **

**Probable course? **

**Its current course will carry it through Sector 001. **

The lounge doors opened and two biomech security entered with Terkos.

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****Ah**** said Taraban, ****Our guest as joined us. Terkos, we have determined that your station was within half a lightday of the Federation border. A clear violation of the Treaty of Algeron.****

Terkos stiffened, they had that much already.

"I know nothing of this."

Captain Taraban lowered his ears. ****Terkos, we have established that you understood where the station was located. Be frank with me, and I have within my power to be lenient with you. Starfleet has not been informed that we picked you up as of yet. That information can be, forgotten.****

"You would return me to my own people?"

****I do not consider that course of action wise. I will not send you back to die.****

Terkos sat for a moment. "Then what will become of us?"

Taraban could read the fear and confusion that clouded the Romulan's thoughts.

****That has yet to be decided. Much will depend on what your yourself decide. I can add that Vulcan is welcomeing.****

Terkos sat. The Ane waited. At last he spoke.

"I am a system maintenance specialist in the Praetor's Service. I was assigned to the station five months ago to perform my accustomed duties. I am aware the station was in violation of the treaty because of over heard conversations. I know nothing of the mission or exact location of the station." "I am further unaware of what..."

****Captain,**** Fiealan interrupted. ****I am receiving a general alert from Starfleet Command.****

The mood in the room went quiet, there had not been a general alert in Starfleet since the "whale probe" incident nearly 100 years ago.

****Let's have it, Fiealan.****

"This is Admiral J. P. Hanson Starfleet Command. Attention all ships; a Borg vessel of hostile intent is approaching Earth. All vessels within three day's range of Wolf 359 proceed to that system in order to intercept the Borg. This is a general alert, the Federation has been invaded by a powerful hostile force, all ships within three days converge at Wolf 359."

****Questing, what is our ETA at warp 9.7?*****

****3.2 standard days captain.****

A silence that could be cut hung over the room, not an Ane moved, or even twitched.

****Very well, make for Wolf 359, best speed, plus a little.****

The room emptied in an order shorter than short. Terkos could not recall anyone even moving, the doors didn't open, just a sudden gust of air. He sat there in the lounge, forgotten, no one came to return him to his cell, no one did anything. He could get a knife and kill himself if he wanted. As he sat, and waited, a knot in his stomach got heavier and tighter.

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The thought slowly dawned on him; no one had left the room, by normal means. They were there, then gone. Captain Taraban had switched ends without moving. Nothing, natural, moved that fast. Terkos sat there a long time, fear of the great unknown welled up from the depths and threatened to consume his sanity. Aliens. He knew, he at last understood to his core that these were aliens beyond his imaginings, and they where near neighbors.

The universe suddenly felt its size, and Romulans where a tiny speck of sand on the seashore, and he was a tiny speck on the speck. In the lounge, the shift changed, the "sky" darkened, and stars, not his stars, "rose" in the night. A moon, larger than a moon had a right to be shone down defiant on the ersatz plains. In the dark, Terkos wept.

The next morning found him still in the lounge. This time it was full. It seems the entire ship's company of Ane was chowing down. Yavalan the Healer came over to him.

Terkos, you should eat. We can't have you wasting away.

"I thought I was a prisoner."

**This is not so, Taraban has indicated that your attack was a mistake. It has been forgiven. I recommend a mild stimulant as well. You do not seem to have slept well either. Oh, one more thing, Fiealan?*

Yes, Yavalan. The computer answered

Terkos is to have no sucrose until after the battle, Healer's orders.

Logged Healer.

Now if you will excuse me. she said while slurping up yet another leaf, **I have a sickbay to batten down. Make sure you eat.**

Terkos looked after the retreating Healer. He found his wits and got some food.

"Computer."

Yes, Terkos.

"What mild stimulant do you have compatible with my physiology?"

"We carry coffee for human passengers. It is also compatible for Vulcaniods.

"Very well, coffee."

After his meal he noticed one of the Ane looking at him. The look in her eyes seem to indicate a bubbly humor. He decided to get friendly. His jailers had not returned for him.

"Can I help you?"

No, can I help you? We will engage in battle in two days, and you know nothing of this ship.

"Who are these Borg?"

Likely the very ship that destroyed your station. The ion trail points the way.

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"Then you wish my help in this fight?"

Materially, there is little you can do, but yes, your support is desired. What I am to do is teach you enough over the next two days that you don't hurt yourself, or the ship.

"I am not going back to the brig?"

Captain Taraban tells me that if I can extract an oath that you will not harm yourself or the ship's company, you are not going back to the brig.

Terkos raised his hand in the traditional Romulan fashion of oath making. "You have such an oath."

I Alcialan, accept your oath in the name of the ship. Come, you have much to learn.

Two days later his head was whirring. While he had no delusions of running this ship, he now knew where all the emergency equipment was stored, and the use of 80% of it. He had seen almost every part of the ship except the bridge and engineering. A cup of coffee mocha steamed in his hand. It had a smooth, and slightly bitter taste he found he liked. He had been informed that it was usually sweet, but the sweetening factor was an intoxicant to Romulans. He found he liked it without the sugar. He bent back to the firefighting diagrams.

"Terkos to the bridge." Announced the intercom.

"Computer! Which way to the bridge."

Enter the nearest turbolift, you will arrive.

Terkos emerged on a scene of quiet purpose. The ship's bridge was tiny. He expected much larger from the size of the rest of the ship. Two of the Ane lay in elaborate couches at the front. Strange devices covered most of their heads. A third, the Captain, lounged in a padded pit behind them. There was no view screen. Six stations to the side and behind the Captain were occupied by the 'biomechs', each was strapped in place. As he entered the Captain turned his head to him.

Terkos, get in here with me.

"Sir?"

We are minutes from Wolf 369, there is no place for an additional couch. As the sole Romulan functioning I wish you to observe. Now, soldier, IN.

Terkos found himself in the pit with the Captain, he felt an intruder and out of place. He felt something press down on him lightly.

"What?" Jumped into his thoughts.

Retaining field. It keeps both of us in here. Shortly I will not have a great deal of time for questions. Provided we live through this, I'll answer all you have. Relax and the tactical view will come into focus.

"Why are you doing this? I thought I was your enemy?"

**A mistaken impression at best. This is the safest place on the ship. It is also the place where you can see the most. If you are to die here, I would have

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you know why. We also face the thing that destroyed your station. You deserve to see it, to face it.**

"I did not think you understood The Warrior's Way?"

Yes, we understand. Because we understand does not mean we agree with it. Enough questions for now, the battle approaches.

Terkos sat back against the creature, and the stars did come into focus. He was floating among the stars, or rather traveling at high warp through the stars. Around him the ship came to full alert.

All stations to red alert, all hands to battle stations. The Captain's calm voice belayed the enormity of the fight ahead.

Reports flowed in faster than he could keep track of them, it seemed that in seconds the entire ship's company had reported. No blaring klaxons, no audible alarms at all.

Ship is fit for battle sir. Reported by the computer.

Arm all photon torpedo turrets, ready and arm a full queue. Power to 180%, all phasers charged and ready.

Wolf 359, 90 seconds and counting.

At Wolf 359 -.2 seconds drop to warp 2 for tactical evaluation, full magnification on tactical display.

Aye warp two at wolf -.2.

All photon torpedo tubes armed and hot, all queues armed and hot.

Engineering reports power 180%

Shields to full power.

Shields at full power.

They waited, the stars flowed passed, and they waited as the seconds counted down. The ship slowed suddenly, and the situation around Wolf 359 snapped into view. The scene was one of surreal horror. Ships burned and tumbled through space, what few still functioned threw all they had against the cubic beast like spit wads at a battleship. The Borg batted them aside like flies.

Battle order one. Warp two, Commence, at wolf 0 seconds.

Captain Taraban tensed in his pit. It was far worse than he had dared fear. If all those ships could not damage that thing, what could he do?

Wolf in 5 seconds." Announced the helm.

Go to warp 6 after we fire, commence evasion 'vineyard'.

Wolf in 2 seconds.

Even as the *Questing* approached the Borg ship it began to spit torpedoes. Ten times the four big eight tube turrets spat their packages of death. Even as it passed over the top of the cube it continued to fire, the turrets turning to bear. 320 torpedoes sped through the burning night to the foe.

Torpedoes away, that was half our stock Captain.

Well aware Gesilan.

The ship punched forward and lunged down to the right. It began a dizzying spiral of varying diameter designed to throw off the targeting of

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another ship.

****Torpedo impact, now****

The fires around Wolf 359 faded in jealousy as 320 points of antimatter died in a display of death. The Borg ship was tossed in the eddies of destruction, but still the ship remained. It reached out for the fleeing Ane, and touched it briefly. The *Questing* rocked and spun like a skipped stone as the Borg tractor wrenched them from warp.

****Warp drive? ****

****Yes sir.****

****Got us? ****

****No sir****

****Best speed, anywhere but at them.****

****Yes sir.****

The *Questing* flipped and streaked off at warp 9. Terkos felt he was about to lose breakfast as the ship's compensators struggled with the forces that wanted to pull the ship apart.

Half a light day out she slowed to impulse speed.

****Report damage? ****

****Core B at 50% power, rear shields at 30%, a few blown circuits, backups functioning, and my nerves gone.**** Came from Kosoban, the engineer.

****Crew? ****

****A few contusions time will heal when people got tossed around. No serious injuries.**** Reported Yavalan.

****The Borg? ****

****Regrettably, less than we would have liked. They are still moving under their own power, and still warp capable. We hurt them, but not much. The Borg are heading out system, course for sector 001.****

****Fiealan, you estimation on a second pass stopping them? ****

****Negative Captain, they have a remarkable ability to adapt to attack.**

Doubtless the torpedoes they were hit with earlier in the battle cut the effectiveness of ours. I question that a second attack would have any effect.** She continued in a quieter tone. ****That many torpedoes should have destroyed anything that size. It barely damaged them.****

****Are the Borg out of range? ****

****Yes sir.****

****Stand down to yellow alert, rig for rescue operations. We'll see how many we can save.****

Eight hours later the *Questing* was in the center of the disaster. Stripped shuttle craft and life pods trailed in her wake, the decks were crowded with stunned survivors. As fast as a pod or shuttle could be tractoried in, the survivors were removed and triaged. What supplies and fuel it had striped, and it was

tossed into the trail of jetsam. They had been at it eight hours, and had only begun.

Two cargo holds were filled with medical equipment replicated from stored patterns. What medical personal well enough to function, moved between the beds doing what they could. Walking wounded and physically unharmed survivors filled the lounge.

Terkos sat in the lounge once more. A cup of coffee mocha in his hands. His tunic was stained with the blood of a dozen different species. Biomechs worked relentlessly, Ane moved among the survivors. Offering a soothing thought to one, a shared grief to another. In the bean bag opposite him a dark skinned human with Lt. Commander pips clutched a younger version of himself. Both appeared to be in shock.

Terkos had always heard of the glory of battle, the honor of dying for the Praetor. No one ever told him about this. This Starfleet was made of brave warriors, not weak races as he had been led to believe. No one ever taught him about the aftermath of defeat.

Excuse me, one of the Ane called to him. **Captain Taraban wishes to see you.**

Terkos thanked him, and walked over to where the Captain was laying, a corner of the lounge.

"Sir?"

I have a few moments for those questions you doubtless have.

"Very well sir, what happens to all these warriors? Do they commit honorable suicide because of their defeat."

No, that is not our way. Some, will doubtless wish to die, but it will be for their own reasons, not one of cultural making. Some will leave the service, having taken all they can of death and dying. That is provided there are worlds to return to. The Captain's face looked very old, and tired. Some will pick up and continue. They will become stronger for a defeat. They will have more reason to live. Most, I would hope are of that kind.

"You also suffered a defeat. How do you feel about it?"

**Worried. We didn't stop the Borg, the Fleet didn't stop the Borg, what will stop the Borg?*

"You had weapons for a second pass."

Yes, and it would have been pointless, and given the Borg a second chance at us. Even with the maneuvers we did, they got a little piece of us. If we had died in a futile attempt, everyone would be dead or dying right now. Because I didn't, these people will live.

"Your ways, are very different."

May you come to understand them, even if you find you cannot accept them. Now, I will answer more questions later. I must rest, and I think you should also. With that Taraban got up and left the lounge.

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A short distance down the corridor he entered the sleeping room. It was similar to the lounge except that there were no tables. The big bean bags were in evidence, clustered about the room. The walls and ceiling were holograms of a semi-arid savanna. Taraban noted he was the only one in here, an unusual circumstance. He lay down, tucking his feet under him. He began the rituals of Cleansing, to purge the mind of confusion. Within moments he had his center and could begin. Tears rolled down his cheeks for the pain he had felt that day, this he acknowledged, and he let it slip from him. The sorrow and grief shook through him, and he felt them, and let them go. The anger that such a species as the Borg could exist welled within him. It raged across his neurons, and in its time also passed. Concern for his people was next. It gave him trouble because the time for it was not passed. He became stern with himself, and put aside his concern, for it was yet to come. At last his high lobe was clear, and he could touch again the chorus of the All.

He elevated his Icon, raised his Aspect, and asked the All, ****How can we stop this thing? I have tried and I failed.****

The chorus of the All considered his question. He felt the debate shift about, and threw himself into it. Fifty billion minds surged like a sentient sea.

And the All replied to the Many. ****We have seen, the Borg are powerful in the tools of technology. They are simple in the mind.****

Said the Few to the All. ****The lion is powerful of claw and tooth, but simple of mind also, and we turn him aside with a thought.****

Said the All to the Few. ****Borg are not this simple, but link themselves with machines.****

Said the Many to the All. ****Are they as we are? ****

Said the All to the Many. ****No, they sacrifice Individually for efficiency.****

For a brief time, the All mourned the loss. The debate continued.

Said the Few to the All. ****If machines cannot stop them, and they are not animals, then we must attack with our strength, or die.****

Said the Many to the All. ****Can we abide this thing? To kill with the mind touch is abhorrent.****

Said the All to the Many. ****Is it not worse to die as a people? ****

Said the All to the All. ****It is worse to die as a people. Let first the technology fail, for we must face their eyes. Then we shall do as we must to survive, and mourn their passing.****

Taraban reveled in the touch of his fellows, and mourned for the thing that must be done. Then he sought with his Aspect for the One, and finding her, withdrew from the All, to speak.

****Mother, the battle went poorly. The Borg are coming.****

****Yes my son, this I know. We are not likely to be targets, it is machines they want.****

****Yet if we are to stop them, we must face them.****

I know this, there will be deaths.

I cannot be there.

I know this also, it is your place to live, and aid.

Then let the Humans succeed. I would see you, and shade your head as you sleep again.

Then let it be so my son. It is better if the Humans succeed.

Taraban lowered his Icon, and took again his Aspect. For a long time he remained still, others came, and joined with him. When they also had Cleansed themselves, They raised their Aspects with him. Together they rejoiced in life, in body and mind. Then they went forth again, to aid the broken of mind and body, and to find sanctuary from the Borg.

Terkos got a clean tunic to replace his dirty and blood stained uniform. A simple pullover supplied by the replicator. For a second night he fell asleep in the lounge. This time a human child curled against him. No parent could be found for her, and she cried herself to sleep in his arms. His dreams were disturbed, but his sleep was the sleep of exhaustion.

Fiealan pondered the questions that Tim Kirk had asked her about. Grief was heavy within her womb, she could feel the sense of loss, and closed herself tighter about the wounded creatures within her hull. Two hours ago she had found the last life signs. Still she swept the wreckage, but without sign. Reluctantly she left the graveyard behind. Earth was unsafe, she would go to El Nanth. Always go home when in doubt. She slipped from the graveyard with the life she had stolen from its grip.

Alveta knew nothing of the battle, or of the carnage around her. She fought only with the light, and sought the darkness. The Romulan Way, called, and she would not be denied. In the depth of the night, Casalan awoke, she felt the rebellion, and knew the fight was pointless. What is not wanted, will not be taken. She sighed, and gave wordless assent. The woman passed willingly into her rest, and a single tear marked her passing.

Morning found Terkos with a PADD in hand interviewing survivors. A strange profession for a Romulan late of the Praetor's service he thought. But as he had learned, tribulation makes comrades of the strangest people.

Name, rank, ship, that worked for the Starfleet personal. The civilians where a bit harder. Especially since most where children. The Ane worked with

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them. The girl that had slept against him last night still followed him around. He stuck with uniforms.

Elimination at last brought him to the two Klingons. They looked sullen, a "hang dog" look as the Ane put it.

"Name, rank, and ship?" Terkos chanted once more.

"You are not Vulcan!"

Klingons could say the most obvious things. "No, I am not."

"Then who are you."

"I am Terkos, a victim of the Borg, as you are also."

"And what will you do about this, Terkos?"

Terkos looked at the Klingons, for a moment. He realized they sought something to hang their honor on, some way to survive this defeat. He realized he could not hate them for it, but he would not be the vessel of their anger. He decided on the simple truth. "I do not yet know. I didn't not have a weapon in my hands when the Borg attacked my station. I did not know we were under attack until the alarms sounded and the place was exploding around me. Consider yourselves fortunate to at least have been at the controls of battle cruisers, no matter what your station. Was it not a Klingon that said 'It is no dishonor to fight, and lose, as long as you have fought your best?'"

"Yes, it is a Klingon thing to say." Spoke the larger of the two.

"Then consider yourselves fortunate to have fought. I need your name, rank, and ship for the survivor lists."

"Kantos, Junior engineer, Kathee's Pride." Said the smaller Klingon.

"Kagh, Gunner, Kathee's Pride. Did you fight at all, Romulan?"

"Yes! I sat at the Captain's side when he strafed that, thing, with enough torpedoes to blow a fleet to the Ancestors! We suffer no dishonor in losing. The only dishonor is in not having tried."

"Then we have shared a battle, will you drink with us?"

Terkos thought a moment. "Yes, I will drink with you, but first I must finish the duty I was given."

The two nodded, and Terkos went about his business. By the Praetor's toenails, he was going to drink with Klingons. Maybe Borg where good for something.

Casalan called him over. ****Terkos, a word with you?****

He nodded and followed her into the corridor, the girl followed him.

****Terkos, Subaltern Alveta died last night.****

His heart sank a little further. "What was the cause of death?"

****She did not possess a will to live. There was no physical cause, she just would not accept living as an option.****

"I, understand, it is The Romulan Way." He stood there a moment, and wondered if it really was. Then he went back to counting the fortunate.

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Terkos sat once again in the now familiar lounge. It has been only eight days, yet he felt he has always lived here. The girl, Dania McCormic, sat beside him and played with a doll that he had replicated for her. Everything of her childhood had vanished in the death of her father's ship. They sat in Earth orbit. The *Enterprise D* had destroyed the Borg in Earth orbit itself. The news had reached them days after the Battle at Wolf 359, and they had turned toward Earth. A few hundred Kilometers away, the *Enterprise*, hero of the hour, sat undergoing refit for battle damage.

Taraban entered the lounge. **Terkos, have you made you decision? **

"Yes Captain, I cannot go back. I have no wish to die having been snatched form the jaws of death. What am I to do?"

I have friends, in Vulcan places. I can arrange for your citizenship on Vulcan.

"Yet I am no Vulcan."

No, but after a few years on Vulcan even a medical scan will not know that.

"How is this?"

Vulcans and Romulans are the same people, only the trace elements in your body from the planet you live on can show a difference. You even possess the mental powers of the Vulcan, abate unpracticed and much diminished for it.

"I do not think I could devote my life to logic."

Not every Vulcan does. In any case, once the ink dries, you can continue to El Nanth with us. We have some refit to undergo ourselves.

"What about her." Terkos indicated young Dania.

She has no living relatives. Her father was the last she had.

"So we are but two waifs on the winds of space?" He managed a wry grin, in spite of everything, or because of it.

That would seem to be the case Terkos.

"Are Earth authorities eager to get her?"

No, they are not. She is one more headache, in a sea of headaches.

"It seems she has chosen me. Would it be possible to me to adopt her, once the 'ink is dry'?"

Yes, that is easy to arrange under El Nanth law.

"Then Captain, I will go with you."

A Romulan Way -- Garry Stahl, October 1997.

This story is the result of a request to know more about how the Ane think. I hope I have revealed a little about the inner workings of their minds, and some small part of their culture. I am still getting the method of fiction writing down

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pat. It is still rough in spots and I think it shows. The timing of this story is in conjunction with the ST/TNG episode The Best of Both Worlds. (I am of the opinion that TNG has some of the lamest episode names.) I don't recall it being mentioned how the survivors got rescued, so I invented a means.

For those that think 320 torpedoes in a pass is too many, I agree. I will also point out that an A-10 Warthog has only 20 seconds of ammunition if the pilot holds the trigger down. In other words, that was not normal procedure. Because you can, does not mean you do. I believe that if you are building a warship, you build a warship. The Manta class ships are warships. Built to dish it out by the spade full, and take it back as well. Ane multi-purpose ships and science ships might appear in later stories.

Subtext 2011: *An editing pass and a bit of light Lucasing on the passages that read as awkward to me. And as explanation:*

Ane Diplomacy *1: Explaining your position to you in language that is exactly correct, but makes you look like a heel if you still try to get your way. Used when someone is beating around the bush about what they really want, or tossing out red herrings to disguise their true intentions.*

2: A bull in the china shop tactless approach to negotiation.