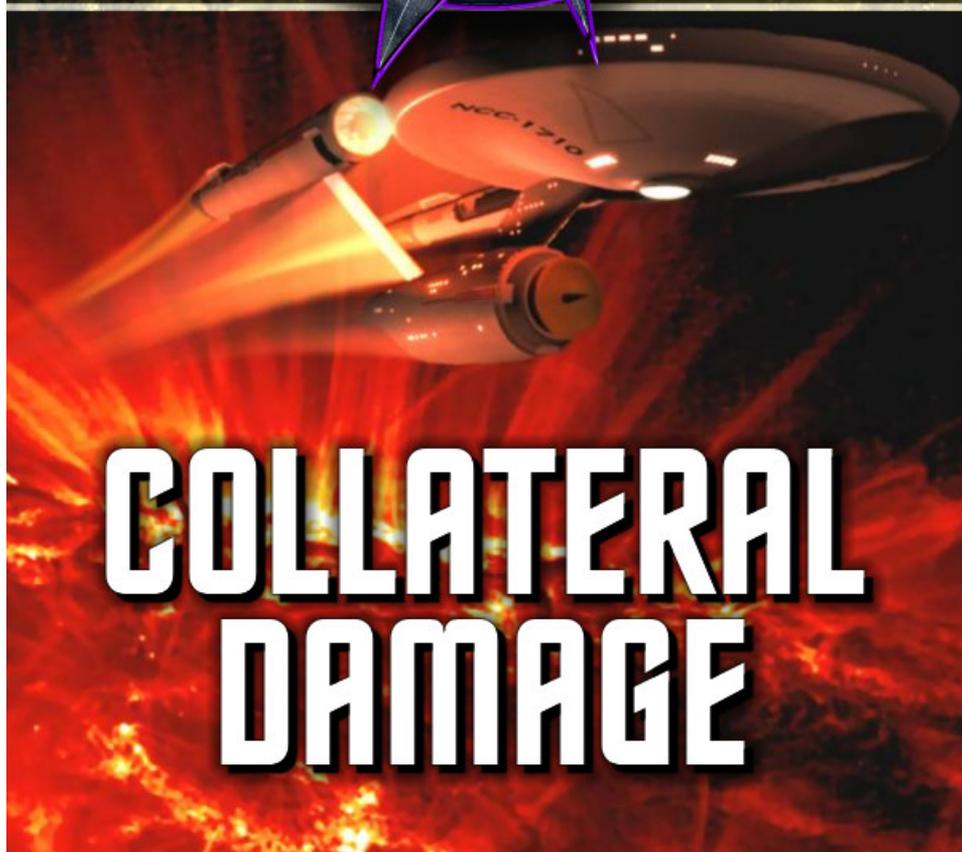


Epiphany Trek

The LaSaille Chronicles



COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Garry Stahl

Collateral Damage

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Collateral Damage

"*Captain to the Bridge, Captain to the bridge!*" Squawked the intercom.

Captain LaSaille stalked passed the squalling children. He dodged around the bleating goats. The Kongo shuddered yet again setting off a renewed round of child squalling and goat bleating. He slammed the button on the nearby comm panel. "LaSaille to bridge. Mr. Meyers, how is our progress?"

"We are pulling away sir, slowly. Are you coming up?"

"On my way."

Minutes latter LaSaille stepped out onto the bridge of the *Kongo*. The view screen showed the aft view. A red giant star and it's black hole companion. Space around the pair flared angry with the hot radiation of dying matter. "Mr. Meyers, report." Said LaSaille as he slid into the center seat.

"We are pulling away at full impulse power, we don't dare go to warp this deep in the gravity well."

"The question is, are we going to beat the *SS Timberline*?"

Lt. Cmd. Ghurn shook his shaggy head. "No sir, tidal forces will tear it apart before we clear the area."

Aye, Sir, and the radiation will not be doin' us any favors at all." Added McCaffrey.

LaSaille turned to Lt. Liquard. "Plot a course. Take us in and give me a gravity whip around that black hole."

"Aye aye sir." Replied Liquard.

"Sir!" Cried McCaffrey, "We'll be passin' through the accretion disk twice. That's one hell of a load on the deflectors."

"It's that or a hell of a gamma burst when those antimatter pods tear apart."

McCaffrey sighed. "Aye, that it be. Rigging for extreme loads sir."

"Captain, course plotted, and locked. Ideal execution in 20 seconds."

"Noted. Mr. Collad, sound collision. On Mr. Liquard's mark. Full shields."

The shrill warbling alarm sounded throughout the ship. Lt. Collad counted down. "4. 3, 2, 1 Mark."

The Kongo rolled onto her back and shot toward the black hole at an oblique angle. She shuddered as they passed through the thick accretion disk. Alarms screamed from the engineering station. McCaffrey's hands flew over the board has he shouted commands to the engineering deck below. The *Kongo* gave a long low moan accompanied by a series of cracks and pops as the stresses increased. She plowed through the accretion disk again with a shriek and a shudder. More alarms peeled. Liquard shouted over the din. "Slingshot successful, we are free to warp."

LaSaille slammed a fist into his chair. "Floor it."

Lt. Collad shoved the warp throttles to the stops. The *Kongo* shuddered and streaked away as the accretion disk was suddenly ripped apart by a massive antimatter explosion. The computer broke in over the cacophony of alarms

"[Deflector failure, overspeed, deflector failure, overspeed.]"

LaSaille nodded to the slim helmsman. "Warp factor one." The ship slowed. LaSaille addressed the bridge at large. "Get your damage reports in, let's see what we have left. And someone get that goat out of here."

"Naaaaaaaaa!"

Now hear this. Now hear this. All sections report damage and casualties. All sections report damage and casualties to your section leader. That is all.

LaSaille tapped his stylus against the briefing room table. McCaffrey continued to read the lengthy list of repairs they required. "The main deflector is out Captain, and I have grave doubts we will be seeing the repair of it outside of a spacedock. In our brief moments at high warp speed with too little deflector we took most of the paint off the forward hull, a minor matter, and we took out most of the forward sensors, not a minor matter. I also have a long list of other stress related repairs. We are sound, but hurt."

LaSaille grimaced. "What kind of speed can you give me?"

"Warp 3, and that would be pushing it."

"Can you rig the shielding to act as a deflector?"

"Aye, that I can. It will take a few days to get the harmonics right, and it will be wasteful of the ship's power."

"What about sensors? I don't like the idea of flying blind."

"Aye, I can rob Peter for the paying of Paul. I'll remove elements from the stern and lateral sensor arrays. That will get us sufficient frontal sensors for navigation."

"It will have to do. Meanwhile, Mr. Collard, get us moving at warp 3 for Starbase 22. We will make what speed we can."

"Aye aye, sir."

Jerry turned to his Chief Medical Officer. "Doctor. How fares the ship's company?"

"The crew is fine. The colonists, not so fine. I have a sickbay full of radiation burns, and coolant poisoning from when that heap of parts they called a ship turned on them. I also have breaks and contusions from the shaking we took. I hope we won't lose anyone else, but in a few cases I think it's still too close to be certain."

"I trust you will do your best. Anyone else?"

"Yes Sir." Said Lt. Tate. "We have the corridors brim full of people and animals. It is making it difficult for the crew to move."

Jerry scratched his chin. "Yes, I noticed that. Get people assigned to the duplicate quarters in the secondary hull as quickly as possible. Can we confine the animals to the hanger bay?"

"I don't see why not."

Collateral Damage

McCaffrey jumped in. "I be seeing why not. Ye can't have goats rubbing all over the shuttlecraft."

"What about a cargo bay?"

"We would be needing an empty one, when we haven't one."

"Then the hanger bay it is. Stow the shuttles in the maintenance deck or cover them Mr. McCaffrey. We can't have goats wandering the ship. They seem to be better than the colonists at working the turbolifts."

"Aye sir, thy will be done."

Mr. Steel, as soon as the subpace radio is back in working condition inform Starbase 23 we have the company of the SS *Timberline* aboard and reasonably safe. Bury our condition report as deep as you can bury it."

Lt. Steel looked up from his notes. "Are we worried about someone?"

"We are way too close to both Orion and Klingon bases to be open with any reports of weakness. And the *Timberline's* distress call might bring vultures."

Ghurn shook his head. "Now that sir I doubt. The signature of that detonation will register all over subpace. Anyone with a shred of sense will know the target didn't make it."

"That is assuming pirates have any sense Mr. Ghurn." Replied Lt. Tate.

"Being that they are pirates, one can reasonably argue they might not have any."

"In either case." Said LaSaille. "Let's not make a lot of noise ourselves. The sooner, and quieter, we get to Starbase 23 the better."

Now hear this. Will Aleilan please come to the hanger deck and give us a hand with the goats. That is all.

"Captain!" Came the shout from behind him. "Captain I need to speak with you."

LaSaille sighed. He looked at Ian McCaffrey mere inches from his nose in the Jeffries tube they were stuffed into. "I'm being bellowed for. Carry on." LaSaille wormed his way past his chief engineer and plopped out of the Jeffries tube in the guts of the deflector systems. He found himself face to face with Goodman Pollard...again. Jerry held up a hand as Pollard opened his mouth. "Mr. Pollard continuing to request a change in plans will not bring that change about. Pester me enough and you will spend the rest of the trip in the brig."

"But, sir. We are so close to Standish, would it be so great an effort to drop us off?"

"I'll say it again, Standish is that way." He pointed to the stern. "It would add six weeks to a trip in an already damaged ship in potentially hostile space. As I have no plans to add six weeks to the trip, for our safety and yours, we are going to Starbase 23, that way." He pointed toward the bow. "Now, if you will excuse me, I am going to continue consulting with my chief engineer about getting more speed without peeling the skin off the ship."

"But Captain."

"But Captain nothing."

"How are we going to get to Standish?"

"When we get to Starbase 23, you can consult with Starfleet Colony Support Command. I have no doubt they will help you get to Standish, in a much better ship. By the way, was that heap insured?"

"Sir, the *SS Timberline* was the best ship we could get."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"Ahum... no."

A brief smile flickered across Jerry's face. "Pity that. Now, the quicker we get to Starbase 23, the quicker you can get another ship for Standish."

"*ARGH! JesusMary&Joseph!*" Came from up in the Jeffries tube.

Jerry turned to it at once. "Ian, are you all right?"

"No, I'm not." Came the pain-edged reply. The smell of burned flesh wafted down the tube.

Jerry shoved Pollard out of the way and punched the intercom behind him. Now hear this. Medical to the deflector maintenance bay, STAT! Medical to the deflector maintenance bay STAT." Jerry promptly ignored Pollard and shimmied back up the tube. "Ian? What happened?"

"Stay back. I shorted the dynamic flux control with my hand."

"Are you caught on anything?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll get back down and pull you out. Watch your hand."

Once Jerry had his feet on the deck he carefully pulled Ian back out by the feet. He caught him as he slid out and lowered him to the floor. The trauma team arrived as he did so. Doctor Kesaries scanned the twisted claw that was left of Ian McCaffrey's right hand. With a quick decision he snapped the tricorder closed. "Let's get you to Sickbay Mr. McCaffrey. Gentleman, if you will. Kesaries, LaSaille, and the two orderlies helped McCaffrey onto the stretcher. The two orderlies quickly floated him out and towards sickbay. Dr. Kesaries followed.

Jerry turned on Pollard. "Mr. Pollard, this is a restricted area. I suggest you remove yourself, before I have you removed."

Jerry got down to medical as quickly as he could after securing the deflector bay. Two of Ian's engineers continued the work on the deflectors.

Ian McCaffrey was resting on the bed with the glazed distant look of those under sedation. Dr. Bollad was encasing his hand in a vat of sickly green goo. Jerry waited until she finished. "Denise, how is he?"

Ballard started slightly. "It looks worse than it is. Current sticks to the outer surface, so his skin got flash fried. I'll need to keep him immobile for 48 hours to give the regeneration starter a chance to put skin back on his hand. After that he can move around, but he'll be down for a week."

"What about mobility?"

Collateral Damage

"No problem. A few exercises to keep the hand from stifling up and he will have 100% mobility and use in three weeks."

Jerry nodded and walked over to Ian's bedside. "Ian, are you with me?"

McCaffrey slowly tuned toward his Captain's voice. "No...not really...."

"Rest then."

"Right...rest...."

LaSaille rejoined Ballard. "I will be so glad to get this bunch off the ship."

"You seem less than enchanted by the entire group."

"More to the point I am not the least impressed with the so called leadership. The average colonist is fine, if at the moment scared and confused. But I want to find the bastard that let them sail on that deathtrap. Denise, it damn near cost all of us our lives."

"Don't let it get between you and your job Jerry."

LaSaille nodded. "I'll keep that in mind. Meanwhile that deflector still needs work."

Now hear this, security to section 7 deck 20. Security to section 7 deck 20. That is all.

Lt. Tate slipped into the crew lounge. About fifty people jammed in and about the tables. Everyone looked as if they didn't have enough air. She spotted a couple of friends attempting to get some breakfast. She made her way over to their table. "Morning."

Lt. Steel rolled his eyes. "Such as it is."

Tate pouted back. "We're cheerful today."

"It's just that you can't walk down the corridor without bumping into someone."

"It is crowded, but that's the price we pay for doing our job."

Ensign Fark rolled his eyes. "We did so good a job we are being punished for it."

Tate shot him a look. "Don't let the Captain hear you say that, or you will regret it."

"Well that is what it feels like. You know the old saw. 'No good deed goes unpunished'."

"How would you feel if we had failed?"

Fark spread his hands. "Considering the situation, not much at all. I hear death is peaceful in these parts."

Tate nodded. "Given that I would much rather put up with success."

Kyle dug into his eggs. "It is stressful oh great and mighty morale officer." He made a face and poked at the yellow mass. "These eggs have never been within a light year of a chicken."

Vivian looked at them. "Food usually isn't that off. Mind?"

Kyle shoved the suspect plate to her. She took a small taste. "That isn't right. Better report that. Something else for our over-worked engineer to worry about."

Fark sighed. "As it is I'm spending all my free time chasing down the little problems that little trip caused."

Kyle patted his shoulder. "You're not the only one. Everyone that can has turned engineer. That black hole really wracked the old girl."

Fark rose from the table. "Consider the eggs reported. I'll get on it. With this many people aboard bad food could be the breaking point."

Now hear this. Ensign Skon to the biology lab. Ensign Skon to the biology lab. That is all.

Commander Meyers walked into the bustling engineering department. Something vital to the Kongo's health was spread out on the main decking. McCaffrey and his engineers were ripping into it. Ian noticed who had entered the main bay and walked over. "Morning Mr. Meyers."

"Barely. I thought you had turned in for the night."

"Aye, I thought I had too, but I had an idea as to why the main protein fabricator was acting up, and I figured I'd look into it before breakfast."

Candice looked at the haggard engineer. "Ian, your office please."

The engineer nodded and lead the way. As soon as the door closed McCaffrey started in. "Now Candice, I know what you'll be sayin' 'Ian, you're working too hard, Ian take it easy'. Now who's to be getting the girl back in shape if I be sittin' on me hands?"

Meyers let him wind down. "How about the 'best engineering team in the fleet'? Ian, I know you feel bad for being down a week. These things happen. But we need you fresh and thinking. Your ability to calibrate a nanospanner on the other hand is not unique. You have trained your engineers well."

"And I have more engineering experience than the rest combined. I'm needed out there."

"Ian, how much actual work have you done on the protein fabricator since you came back down here?"

"Well, young Fark here, he has a good head. Seems he came up with my suggestion about the time I did. Proud of him I am."

"In other words, you have done nothing but fuss and get in the way."

McCaffrey deflated. "Now Candice, you know I'm not gettin' in the way. Tis a mean thing to say."

"Ian, I don't need to tell you the situation. You are useless to the ship exhausted. We need you, but we need you rested."

"How can a man be thinking to sleep at a time like this?"

"Then see Doctor Ballard for a sleep aid. Ian, that's an order. I don't want

Collateral Damage

you in engineering short of the Captain's call for at least six hours."

"Aye." With that McCaffrey left the office and headed out of Engineering.

Meyers went back out into the main bay. "Mr. Fark, how comes the work?"

Fark spoke without looking up. "We should have it done in an hour, sir.

Back in place well before breakfast rush."

"Good work Mr. Fark."

"Thank you." Fark's hand felt around for another tool. "You sent Papa Irish to bed sir?"

"Yes I did."

Fark emerged from the machine's guts. "Thanks, he needs it."

LaSaille fairly bounced onto the bridge. Meyers was finishing her shift report from the center seat. "Captain on the Bridge." Said Mr. Steel.

Meyers turned to look. "Morning Captain. You look ready to wrestle tigers."

"Or at least today's minor crises. How goes the USS Ragamuffin?"

"By spitwads and bailing wire she holds together one more shift sir."

Jerry sighed. "Not much longer."

"We got the long range hail form Starbase 23 two hours ago. We are cleared to enter the spacedock on arrival."

"It can't be to soon. I relieve you."

"I stand relieved. How was the food this morning sir."

"Passable, which explains my mood. I suspect my mood will not last however as the passengers must be briefed."

"Not something you can delegate?"

"On no, it is something I have delegated, but..."

The Intercom whistled. The voice of Lt. Tate said. "Captain LaSaille, Goodman Pollard has a few questions sir."

LaSaille punched the intercom. "Mr. Tate, you can tell Pollard to kiss a goat, but that would be cruel to the goat. I am too busy seeing to the needs of the ship to speak with him right now...or later...or ever if I have any say on the matter."

"Understood sir."

"...As I was saying. Doubtless Pollard will have some question that only the highest authority can deal with, in his mind."

"Well, it's nearly over. I'll give Vivian a hand below."

"Thank you."

"Sir." Said Steel. "Starbase 23 has approach instructions."

"To the helm Mr. Steel, let's bring her home."

The *Kongo* was a sorry sight pulling into the Starbase 23 space dock. What was left of her proud paint was peeling in patches. The deflector dish had a hole

battered through it. She looked relieved, if a ship could do that, as she touched dock and made fast. Jerry had himself transported to the Admiral's antechamber. No point in fighting with the goats at dock side. Nogura looked at him as he entered. "You have returned the *Kongo* in an interesting condition Captain."

"It was an interesting circumstance."

Nogura steeped his hands. "Pray tell?"

"I got a lot closer to a black hole than I ever want to be again. The accretion disk damaged our deflectors, sensors, and scrubbed the paint off."

"And your reason for being that close to a black hole?"

"We had just rescued the company of the liner SS *Timberline*. She was going in, and we couldn't pull her free. We barely got us free before she blew. That also explains the condition of the paint, the deflectors, et all. I have the full report here." He placed the data solid on the desk."

Nogura picked it up and inserted it. He paged through the report as he spoke. "You have that company with you now?"

"When I left the *Kongo* they were debarking in general disorder."

"Disorder..."

"LaSaille sighed deeply. "Sir, disorder is not their general condition it is their only condition."

Nogura frowned at an entry in the report. "You saved the livestock?"

"The goats are at least as intelligent as the colonists sir. I couldn't leave them behind."

"You risked the ship for...goats?"

"No, it wouldn't have mattered. The people and livestock were thoroughly mixed together. I had to match locks and physically dock with the *Timberline*. Space was too noisy to risk transporters. We would have wasted time sorting the livestock from the colonists. They had a lot more livestock than we saved. I wasn't going after the cattle in the hold."

"I see. And what does the *Kongo* need?"

"My Chief Engineer is of the opinion that our main deflector is ruined, I concur. It should be totally replaced. We lost a majority of the forward sensors, most of the paint and the ship needs a general cleaning, emergency supplies restocked, and much standard crew equipment replaced in the secondary hull."

"How many did the *Timberline* carry Captain? Your security could not regulate the ship?"

"No, we rescued 360 persons from the *Timberline*. They nearly equalled the crew. I pulled security back to protect the ship's working areas, and let the quarters eat the abuse."

"Indeed. The *Kongo* is required on station in these troubled times Captain, I shall see the repairs are expedited."

"Thank you sir."

Nogura steeped his hands "One last question Captain. Do you ever sweat?"

Collateral Damage

"Not where it can be seen to happen Admiral. I do have one more recommendation, and a request."

"That is?"

"I recommend the master of the *Timberline* be arrested, and charged with reckless endangerment of life. The *Timberline* was dangerously overcrowded and under maintained. The evidence is in his own logs and that of the *Kongo's*."

"I will pass that on to the Advocate General. What is your request?"

"I want as much leave time as can be managed for my crew. They have spent the last three weeks in an overcrowded can under high stress conditions. Even if that leave is only on station, it will mean something."

"And what about yourself?"

"Me? I planned to see that the dockyard does right by my ship."

"I find your request a reasonable one. However, starship captains are not indestructible, as much as they might feel they are. You are to take leave as well."

"Is that an order sir?"

"Yes, yes it is. Your report and recommendations are accepted pending my further review. Dismissed."

Both Aleilan and Meyers were waiting when he came out.

"Well", he said. "Quite the reception committee."

Meyers stared at him. "You faced down Admiral Nogura with a damaged ship, and you don't look relieved or nervous."

"Candy, Admiral Nogura is a man. His captain-eating reputation aside, he is just a man."

"Are we back to that wisdom of the ages thing."

Jerry cocked an eyebrow. "Back in the 20th century there was a writer named Heinlein. I was fond of his work, I still am. He said and I quote. 'It is amazing how much the wisdom of the ages resembles just being too tired.' This is often true."

Myers scowled at him. "You're avoiding the question again."

LaSaille shrugged. "What can an admiral do to me that I haven't seen worse?"

"That's what I thought. It's that wisdom of the ages thing. Or are you just too tired?"

Jerry gave her a long weary look. "Today, yes, I am too damn tired, as are we all. Let's kick the rest of the colony off the ship and take a long nap."

Now hear this, now hear this. All crew check your terminals for leave rotation. All crew check your terminals for leave rotation, that is all.

Aleilan looked at Jerry as he packed. **What are we doing?**

Resting, Admiral's orders.

**Yes, what kind of resting?*

**The kind where you don't have to lift a finger if you don't want to. The Enlinder Mountain Resort dirtside.*

**Sounds lazy.*

Jerry closed the bag. **That is the general idea.**

**How long do we have?*

**A week, and I plan to be totally lazy for every second of it, and take no more responsibility than is necessary to acquire my next meal. I also plan to do a lot of Aleilan cuddling.*

**I could go for that. Pity we don't have more Ane around here.*

**If you're enough anchor call in a few friends. The more the merrier.*

**That would be nice.*

**And a crate of Ooms would improve my mood as well.*

**As soon as we get settled in I'll see what can be arranged.*

**Then we better get down to the transporter room before it's shut down, or we'll have to walk.*

The clang of the repair tender docking on the other side rang through the hull. Ian McCaffrey nodded to himself in approval. For once the spacedock was working to his exacting standards. He caught Eng. Fark with a bag slung over his shoulder. "Leavein' me are you then?"

"Yes Sir. Captain's orders. It's the first time I have had a mandatory leave. When are you going down sir."

Ian sighed. "Next week after the Captain gets back. The man is unreasonable, I canna be at the repairin' o' a ship from a beach house!"

"I see that didn't hold water this time sir."

"I'm tellin' him, I had all the rest I can take in sickbay."

"Well enjoy your leave, if you can. Me, I am finding a place where the only people I see have food for me, and nothing reconstituted, or that I have to fix before breakfast."

"Good on ye then. I'll see you in a week."

The *Kongo's* Captain examined the result of her recent refit from an inspection pod. "It's different Ian."

"Tis what was in stock. Standard equipment on new construction."

"Why so radical?"

"It wasn't the dish alone as ye well know. The old systems couldn't interface with the new dish. Not, mind ye, that the old system was in any shape to keep. Well, tween the bridge deck and the deflector dish they'll be sure to know it be

Collateral Damage

us that's coming to be sure."

"As long as it works as advertised I'll take it."

"As soon as the paint crews get finished we can roll her out."

"Good, lets get back and scare up the crew."

"Warp six and holding Captain." The *Kongo* cruised smoothly, everyone on edge for the least shudder or vibration. A few more moments passed.

LaSaille let out his breath. "Good, maintain speed until we reach out assigned patrol area. We will then assume a standard patrol rotation at warp factor four."

"Red Alert, Captain to the bridge." The claxon and voice had Jerry on his feet from the sound sleep in seconds. Pants on as his feet hit the floor, shirt grabbed and stuffed on in the turbolift. The bridge hummed as he came off the trubolift. Jean Collad had the conn. "Situation?" He said as he came up to the center seat.

"Klingon vessel on our side of the DMZ sir."

He nodded. "Take the helm Jean." He looked at the tactical plot. "They seem to be drifting."

The Ensign at navigation, Merk was is name, confirmed. "Yes sir."

"And that doesn't look to be a war dragon. On screen, maximum magnification."

The screen swam into focus. The big boxy vessel certainly looked Klingon in design, but more a more practical application seemed to have over ridden the desire to be fast and deadly.

Lt. Durss reported from sciences. "They have armed weapons sir, weak shields."

"What weapons?"

"Class two disruptors."

"Class two? War dragons carry class six." Jerry scratched his beard. "Hail them. Let's see what is going on."

"Hailing frequencies open Captain."

"/I am Captain LaSaille of the Federation Starship *Kongo*. Unknown Klingon ship, what is your situation?/"

The screen shifted to the bridge of the Klingon, an older Klingon man spoke. "/I am Captain Kurn! We are armed and prepared to defend ourselves! Keep your distance Human./"

"/You are aware of your location?/"

"/Our location does not matter. We are heroes, we have honor./"

"/Your location is of some concern Captain Kurn. You are on the wrong side of the DMZ./"

"/Human deceit! Do not close with us, you will feel the sting of our disrupters./"

Jerry nodded for Ensign Falk to cut the channel. "Odd, do you think he knows what he is facing? That ship is easy pickings for the *Kongo*."

"Captain, his sensors are working, he has to know." Reported Durss. "However, the tighter the situation he feels himself in, the louder a Klingon blusters."

"I can't discount that, he is shouting very loud. Mr. Collad, stand down our weapons./"

"Shields sir?"

"Leave them up, in case he is feeling stupid today. Mr. Durss, get me full readings on that ship."

"Aye aye sir." Durss bent to the scanner.

The door call to the ready room buzzed.

"Come". Said Jerry.

The door opened and Aleilan came in with his boots in her mouth. He smiled and hugged her. **Thanks Sweetie.** He stamped his feet into the boots.

Can't have your running around the ship bare foot.

I suppose hooves have one advantage.

You're troubled.

Jerry wrapped his arms around her sinuous neck and pulled her close.

Yes. Klingons.

**Does the thought of Klingons trouble you that much?*

**I haven't given Klingons much thought since the Four Years War. I can't say the thoughts I have spared them have been charitable. Can a people be all bad? Are Klingons truly evil?*

**By whose standard?*

**What do we know of Klingons?*

Little. One of our number was briefly in the court of Kathless. Yes, they are violent, but they build strong families. Klingons indulge and romanticize the strong emotions that Humans seek more control over.

We have made a place for ourselves among Andorians, and the Vulcans. We treat equally with Tellerites and with Kentauri. We can find love with creatures as strange as the Ane. He ran his fingers through her mane.

**Cannot we Humans also seek rapprochement with Klingons?*

Only you Humans can answer that question Jerry.

I think it is about time we Humans try. Right here, right now, seems a good place to start.

The Intercom whistled. "Durss here Captain, I have something to report."

Jerry touched the reply. "I'll be right out." He smooched her on the nose.

Better get back downstairs Sweetie. Business.

Collateral Damage

Right, Captain stuff.

Serious Captain stuff. Jerry came out of the day room and went over to sciences. Aleilan crossed the bridge and out the turbolift. "Report Mr. Durss."

"The Klingon ship is suffering a critical failure of his warp drive Captain. It looks like it also took out their navigation sensors and their high gain subspace coil. I would also conclude that this is a freighter."

"So he is stranded, blind and can't even call for help."

"That defines it sir."

Jerry nodded. "Good, pack that up for Starfleet command. I'll sign off on when you're done. Meanwhile I'll see what I have to do to contact the Klingons to get a tug."

"Mr. Falk, hail the Klingon ship please."

"Hailing frequencies open Captain."

"/Captain Kurn, Captain LaSaille. We have analyzed the condition of your ship./"

"/Do not underestimate the ferocity of our attack Captain LaSaille./"

"/That is not in question Captain Kurn. What is in question is what frequency would you use to report distress? I would summon aid to tow you home./"

Kurn snarled. "/I will not give the Federation Klingon secrets!/" He cut the channel.

Jerry sighed. "Some people make it as hard as possible. Mr. Durss have your report on my desk for alpha shift. Mr. Collad, you have the con. Keep the current situation and inform me if anything changes. I'm getting some more sleep."

Now hear this. Ensign Mallory to nutritional fabrication. Ensign Mallory to nutritional fabrication. That is all.

Captain LaSaille was looking over the morning reports without his morning tea. The Klingon ship was still hanging out at 20,000 kilometers. Lt. Durss' report was on his desk. He gave it a quick read and marked it for transmission to Starfleet Command. He looked to his yeoman.

"Janice, I'm leaving the rest to you. Let's see what our pet Klingon is up to." With that he headed to the bridge.

Things were quiet as he entered. Yellow alert was still flashing. Meyers had the con. "Situation Mr. Meyers?"

"The Klingon ship has been trying to get under way via impulse drive. They have been less than successful. We have maintained a 20,000 kilometer separation." She surrendered the center seat to him.

Jerry did a quick check on the math. "At full impulse it will take them four weeks to get into the DMZ and four years to cross it. Let's see if they are willing

to talk this morning."

"Hail open sir."

"/Captain Kurn, Captain LaSaille here./"

"/What do you want?/" Snarled the Klingon Captain.

"/I want to help you./"

"/Then Die./"

"/I am not willing to go that far. Look, I know you're a freighter. I know your warp drives and high gain subspace coils are not working. I have a Heavy Cruiser under my hands. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead. You are not dead./"

"/Make your point Human./"

"/Let me call for some help. A Klingon tug to get you home./"

"/Why should I give you our distress frequencies? Why should I give you two Klingon ships to destroy?/"

"/If that is how you feel about it. How long do I have to not attack you to convince you?/"

"/Federation Starfleet is NOT to be trusted./"

LaSaille sighed. "/I suppose that is in the Klingon freight Captain's handbook./"

The Klingon looked shocked. "/I have nothing to say to you!/" He cut the channel.

Meyers looked at her Captain. "I think you holed him with that one."

"I hit a little close to a secret truth?"

"I would say so."

"Pity, it isn't making the situation easier."

Commodore Marteen Milos was going over the morning reports from Starfleet command. Even a lowly colony defense force might be called on to aid Starfleet so close to the boarder. One had to keep up with the strategic situation. He stopped and looked again at the words on the screen. "*USS Kongo* Reports a Klingon vessel over the DMZ near Yany." It required a few moments for Commodore Milos to read the rest of the message. *Klingons*. Yany had suffered deeply under a needlessly cruel occupation during the four years war. Vision faded. All he could see was the twisted remains of his daughter and the tortured body of his wife begging, *begging* the Klingon to kill her. The vision faded to a buzz in his head and a ringing in his ears. Klingons are why the Yany colony had two old Baton Rouge class cruisers. A Klingon over the border meant it was time to use them.

Collateral Damage

Now hear this. The sociology department hoedown has been postponed. Please check your terminals for the rescheduled date. The sociology department hoedown has been postponed. Please check your terminals for the rescheduled date. That is all.

Jerry pattered around the day room. For once there wasn't an endless stream of data that required him to look at it and sign off on something. Sitting here waiting for the Klingons to decide they didn't want to sit here forever gave him plenty of time to catch up. Finally he buzzed the bridge. "Mr. Steel, hail the Klingon ship, but pipe it in here."

"Yes sir."

After a moment the now familiar face of Captain Kurn appeared on his screen. "/You again./" His expression changed when he saw the different conditions. "/Where are you?/"

Well, question is movement. "/I am in my ready room Captain./" The phrase was hard to frame in Klingon.

"/A room, that is ready? What is this nonsense?/"

"/No nonsense. I have a small office directly off the bridge were I can do work, and be close to my command./"

"/What is this to me?/"

"/You asked./"

"/No doubt you want to spread more of your Federation peace and plenty on me and my loyal crew./" Sneered Kurn.

"/I want to get your back on your side of the DMZ with a minimum amount of hostility./"

"/I do not fear hostility./"

Yes, that was it, finally a direct lie. "/Yes, yes you do./"

Kurn was working himself into a rage. "/I am not afraid of you!!/" He was all but spitting on the pickup.

"/Fine, it is accepted that you do not fear me. I don't fear you either. No fear is going on here. But you want a fight about as much as I do, maybe a little less./"

"/I will fight with honor Human./"

"/I don't doubt that either. But you don't want to face this ship. Fine. I don't want to shoot you. Why is that concept so hard to grasp? Look you don't want me having your frequencies fine. If I shove a subspace coil out of an airlock in your direction, will you pick it up and use it?/"

"/Why are you trying so hard to be helpful Human?/"

"/Because that is Human nature. Because space is no partisan. It kills without mercy and without care as to race or ideology./"

"/I must think on this./"

"/Good, think. I'll be here./"

Commodore Milos settled into the command chair of the *YDS Manhattan*.
"Commander Gil. It is good to see you."

"And you sir. I understand we have an assignment?"

"There is a Klingon ship over the DMZ Commander."

Gil darkened. "Klingons..."

"I see that you understand."

Gil straightened up, "Yes Sir, I understand perfectly."

Milo caressed the old leather of the chair arm. "Ensign Mark, contact the *Sadlin*. We are moving out, Warp 5."

Now hear this. All beta shift medical personnel, meeting in conference room 6 at 0200 hours. All beta shift medical personnel, meeting in conference room 6 at 0200 hours. That is all.

Candy settled onto the pillow shrewn floor. "I'm a little nervous about this tonight."

Vivian broke out the pedicure kit and started working on her nails. "Why, secrets you don't want to reveal?"

"No, that Klingon ship is still there. We are going to look silly as all Hell rushing up to the bridge in our nighties."

"Jean looked up from the magazine she was flipping through. "Uniforms by the door ladies. That's what they are for. Besides, the only thing that would get all of us is a red alert."

"And we could be looking at that at any time." Replied Candy."

Jean shrugged. "Same as any other night. If I have to fight Klingons I might as well do it in my bathrobe."

Vivian laughed. "Any fight with that old crate is going to be short and sweet, and not for the Klingons."

"And if they decide to 'rescue' her with a couple of war dragons?" Said Candy.

"We would get at least a little warning."

Janice snorted. "I am not worrying about that tonight. I want to know what that hunk of man that is the Captain sees in an antelope?" She got pillows tossed at her.

Candy looked grim. "Seriously, I have had more than a casual brush with Klingons, I don't want another."

Jean looked concerned. "What happened? I've heard rumors, but, nothing solid."

"I don't really like to talk about it. But, fair warning is only fair. They had started to torture me, started, when the Captain, then a Lieutenant, bust into the room and shot the Klingon holding the pain stick. After that was a blur, and we

Collateral Damage

spent the next two years hiding in the woods of Anaxar."

"Pain stick?" Janice was wide eyed.

Candy continued. "I had a chance to examine one later. They cause pain by induction. The nerves fire, but no physical damage is done. The end result is you can be kept in agony for hours, with no direct physical after effects. I've read reports of people going mad. I got only a mild taste and I don't want another.

The Intercom whistled. "Bridge to Captain LaSaille."

LaSaille put down the book he was reading and touched the comm.

"LaSaille here, go ahead."

"Sir, we have a message from a Commodore Milos of the Yany Defense Force."

"Pipe it down."

"Aye aye sir." The Lieutenant's face was replaced by that of an older man in a tan Yany Defense Forces uniform. The style of jumpsuit and jacket suited him.

"To, commander *USS Kongo*. Yany defense force ships are speeding to your assistance. The Yany Defense Forces are ready and able to aid Starfleet in repelling the Klingon invaders. Commodore Milos out."

Jerry scratched his beard. "Computer."

"[Working.]"

"Display the current assets of the Yany Defense Forces."

"[Program accepted.]"

The information came up on his screen. 24 cutters, 2 Baton Rouge class cruisers. Jerry tapped the table. The cutters were to be expected, but cruisers? "Computer."

"[Working.]"

"Display the recent history of the Yany Colony."

"[Define search parameter, 'recent'.]"

"From the Four Years war forward."

"[Program accepted.]"

Jerry read the screen. This could get ugly.

LaSaille came out of the turbolift. Ensign Mowark was on the Con. He surrendered the con at once and went to the sciences station. "Ensign, give me a long range sensor report in the direction of the Yany colony."

"Aye aye sir. We have two ships approaching the *YDS Manhattan*, and the *YDS Sadlin*. Baton Rouge class ships sir. Old cruisers."

"Thank you. Hail me the Klingon ship, I'll be in my ready room."

Jerry looked into the face of Captain Kurn yet again.

"/So, you trouble me further Captain LaSaille. What this time, an offer for fine dining?/"

"/We have a complication you should be aware of./"

"/A, complication, you say. What would this complication be?/"

"/Yany Defense Force ships. Two old Starfleet cruisers./"

"/And why should I fear them when you are so peaceful?/"

"/Yany might not be as forgiving, Captain Kurn. These are not Starfleet ships. I do not have direct command over them./"

"/A rival house within the Federation?/" Kurn looked a little worried.

"/If that helps you understand the situation, yes. They might not follow my orders, and the Klingon forces were not kind to them during the occupation./"

"/What do you suggest?/"

"/Let me call for that tug./"

"/I cannot give you the codes and frequencies. From you they would not be believed, and I would suffer for releasing them./"

"/I can understand that. I'll transport over a subspace coil./"

"/would it fit? Could we even use it?/"

"/Look, I'll come over with a tricorder and take readings of your subspace mount, my engineer can fabricate an adaptor if necessary, and you can mount the coil. With my word on the matter Starfleet command will allow a rescue ship to cross the DMZ and get you./"

Jerry watched the Captain struggle within himself. "/You will come alone?/"

"/Yes./"

"/Unarmed?/"

"/I would not so insult you./"

Kurn nodded. "/You may come Captain LaSaille./"

LaSaille was belting on the phaser while his second in command fumed.

"I don't like this, I don't like it at all."

"Sir."

"I don't like it, SIR."

"Mr. Meyers, do you have a better idea?"

"Yes, walk away."

"That's an idea, I don't think it's a better one. Kurn is at least willing to listen to me."

"Are you sure he doesn't just want you over there to kill you easier?"

"Yes, in this case I am sure. Meyers, he is hiding something, he is afraid of a ship to ship fight, and not for himself." LaSaille mounted the transporter pad.

"I think we can do some good here. Energize."

The Klingon ship was hot and dank, that was the first thing he noticed. The smell was the second. Different people, different customs. He schooled himself to endure. Captain Kurn was waiting for him. His hand fluttered near one of those little bat knives some Klingons favored. A second younger man likewise twitched beside him. "/The sooner we do what I'm here to do, the more comfortable you will be./"

"/Come./" Said Kurn.

LaSaille followed him out of the transporter room. The younger man

Collateral Damage

dropped in behind them. The ship's main passage was much the same, close, metallic, and dark. They walked for a little. Something small moved out of the shadows in front of LaSaille. LaSaille came up short. Kurn spun around. There before LaSaille stood a miniature version of the younger man. His little face screwed up into a scowl. He held one of the big wing knives like a sword.

"/Karff!/" The name burst from the younger man.

Kurn grabbed the child's weapon arm. "/You were told to stay in quarters./"

The child struggled with the much stronger adult. "/I will not allow humans to walk the decks of my ship./"

The younger man came around Jerry, and took charge of the little warrior. "/If you survive to have a ship you can make those decisions./" He took the knife from him and stuck it in his own belt.

Jerry relaxed. Kurn watched him warily. "/R'tan, deal with our young warrior./"

"/Yes Father./" He left with the child, deaf to the young protests.

Kurn looked into LaSaille eyes. LaSaille looked back. At long last LaSaille spoke. "/I understand now./"

"/And what will you do with this understanding?/"

LaSaille hefted the tricorder. "/What I came to do, get you a working high gain subspace coil./"

The reading didn't take more than half an hour. LaSaille at last packed up his tricorder. The two Klingons watched as he did so. Kurn spoke. "/Captain LaSaille, you have all you need?/"

"/I hope so. My Chief Engineer will inform me if that isn't the case. If so, I'll call you./"

Kurn hesitated a moment. "/Captain, would you drink with me and my sons?/"

LaSaille straightened up. "/I would be honored to drink with you Captain Kurn./"

Kurn lead them back into the family quarters, a wardroom or dining hall, bare, utilitarian. Several Klingons of various ages and genders were present. One a Klingon woman of formidable presence. "/Captain LaSaille, my Son R'tan you have met, my younger Son Kantos, and Torma, she who is my Wife." He turned to face her. Torma, leave us and take the children. I must have words with this Human, it is a matter for Captains./" Said Kurn

The woman looked her husband right in the eye. "/Always it is a matter for Warriors, or a matter for Captains. Women are treated like delicate things that must not be troubled by male affairs./"

Jerry bowed slightly, without a smile. "/Madam, you have us. For indeed why should a woman be bored with mere male matters? I do not doubt that you have better things to do that listen to a couple of old men posture and brag./"

Torma looked LaSaille up and down. He maintained a purely credulous expression. "/No doubt this one talks birds from the trees./" She followed the

rest of her family out with a flouce.

LaSaille went straight from the transporter room to Engineering with his data. Ian McCaffrey looked it over. "Aye, I can adapt a subspace coil to this mount, I might even be able to tune it. I question Captain that giving a Klingon ship, no matter how innocent, one of our high gain coils. Is that a good idea?"

"What do you suggest Ian? I can't leave them helpless in space?"

"Might I be suggesting that we make them a Klingon subspace coil."

"Can you do that?"

"Aye sir, I have plans for just that in the data base, mind you they date from the late war."

"How well would the plans match what they have?"

"Freighter, ten year old design, it most likely will fit without a hitch."

"Do it, just make sure everything lines up. How fast can you make it?"

"Half a day, there about."

"Good, the quicker the better."

"Aye sir, that I will."

Jerry was working out the difficult logistic of signing off a bit of equipment to the Klingons when the Intercom called. "Bridge Captain, you wanted an update on the Yany Defense forces."

"Yes."

"They are still coming sir."

"Thank you. Have Mr. Steel contact Commodore Milos, I want to talk with him."

Jerry sat for a few, at last the screen lit up with the Yany Defense Forces Crest, it was quickly replaced by Commodore Milos. "Captain LaSaille of the *Kongo* Commodore. I have good news for you."

"Indeed Captain. And what news would that be?"

"Our little lost Klingon is no threat. It's just a family freighter."

The Commodore looked troubled. "Just a freighter? Captain, no Klingon threat can be described as 'just'."

"He is however, no threat."

"It is a Klingon, Captain. That is threat enough."

"Commodore, I don't seem to be getting through to you. There is nothing here to fight. You can resume your regular patrols."

"I will be the judge of that Captain. Milos out." The channel cut.

Jerry punched the Intercom. "Kyle, get him back."

Several minutes passed. Lt. Steel reappeared in the screen. "They are refusing contact sir."

"Damn. Get me Starfleet Command."

Jerry found himself too distracted for normal work so he tried to read a

Collateral Damage

book while waiting for Starfleet Command. When the intercom did churp he nearly jumped out of his chair. "LaSaille here."

"Starfleet Command in two minutes sir. Admiral Nogura on the line."

"Thank you Kyle."

The Starfleet Command crest came up on his monitor. After a moment it was replaced by the impassive face of Admiral Nogura. "Captain LaSaille, this is an unusual call for you."

"I have unusual circumstances Admiral. I currently have two Baton Rouge class ships bearing down on me to destroy one helpless freighter."

"Have you verified these facts Captain?"

"Yes sir. I got a call from one Commodore Milos of the Yany Defense Force to inform me that I was about to get some 'help' for my Klingon problem. I have been on the Klingon ship. It's a family freighter."

"You have been on the ship?"

"Yes sir. My engineer is fabricating a high gain subspace coil for them right now."

Nogura sat back in his chair, and remained silent for a moment. He spoke slowly. "You are helping Klingons?"

"No sir. I am helping a family. They just happen to be Klingons."

"What do you expect from me Captain?"

"Admiral, if you can talk this Commodore Milos out of his tree it would be a great help. He is not listening to me."

"I will do what I can Captain LaSaille."

"And sir, if the Klingons call to verify rescue please let them send a tug, and an escort if they insist. *Kongo* will remain on station unless need requires we go elsewhere."

"Understood Captain LaSaille. We will do all we can from here."

"Thank you sir."

"Nogura out."

The comm whistled. "LaSaille here."

"Captain, Meyers here. We have a...complication."

"I'll be out." LaSaille came out of the day room. "Situation?"

Meyers surrendered the center seat. "We have another Klingon sniffing around the DMZ, a D6 war dragon."

"It was only a matter of time. Mr. Steel hail them."

"Aye aye sir. Hailing frequencies open."

"/USS *Kongo* to unknown war dragon. State your intentions./"

The speaker hissed and popped. "/This is Commander Kang of the *Vengeance Blade*. You are Captain...LaSaille./"

"/So far correct Commander Kang./"

"/The question I have is what is one of our freighters doing under your lee? And, why isn't she answering my hails?/"

"/That is a valid question Command Kang. I hereby grant the *Vengeance Blade* parol as per the Treaty of Anaxar to come over and find out for yourself./"

"/You are too accommodating Captain LaSaille. Why should I trust you?/"

"/That you must decide for yourself Commander. I have been in communication with your freighter. It has suffered a critical system failure that took out their high gain subspace coil. No doubt they can hear you just fine, but they can't respond./"

Kang sneered. "/I suppose their warp drives are damaged well?/"

"/Why else would they be on this side of the DMZ Commander. You have your invitation. Come give your countrymen aid and succor./"

"/Kang out./"

Ghurn looked up from his scope. "They are incoming warp six."

"Four days then. We might as well throw a party for everyone."

Commodore Milos called the meeting of his senior officers together. "We have further complications. Long range sensors report that a second Klingon ship is crossing the DMZ."

Captain Mercer shuddered. "Sir, do you think this is a raid on Yany?"

"I don't know Captain. This Captain LaSaille is of the opinion that Klingons are of no threat."

"He is doubtless a new Captain sir."

"You are correct as usual Mercer. He has been in command slightly over a year."

Commander Gil grouched "These Starfleet types, they think their big new ships can handle anything."

"Go easy Commander. Without Starfleet we wouldn't have the ships we have. This LaSaille might be young and inexperienced, but if he is Starfleet grade he is worthy."

"Captain, McCaffrey here. I have the coil you asked for."

"Good, take it to Transporter room two. I'll give our Klingon friend a call."

Jerry came out of his day room.

"Captain on the bridge."

"As you were. Mr. Steel, hail our friends please."

"Aye aye sir. Hailing now. Channel open."

The Face of Kurn appeared in the view screen. "/Captain LaSaille. What do you want?/"

Collateral Damage

"I have a subspace coil in my transporter room Captain Kurn. It is ready to install. I also have assurance from my Command that a tug and escort will be allowed to cross the DMZ and pick you up."

"/Good. What about the Yany?/"

"/That situation is still unresolved. *Kongo* will remain on station as long as possible./"

"/Kurn out./"

Lt. Steel shook his head. "Short on thank yous, aren't they?"

"Each people to their own Mr. Steel. When is the last time you had a warm thank you from a Vulcan?"

"Point taken sir."

"Transporter two to bridge."

LaSaille hit the intercom button. "Go ahead Transporter two."

"We have the coil transported sir. It was received in good order."

Good work chief. LaSaille out. Well, now we wait."

Now hear this, now hear this. Engineering Team to sump station two, engineering team to sump station two. That is all.

"I don't know how to say it, but helping Klingons feels weird." Ensign Tommos Mark stabbed his meatloaf again.

Lt. Kyle Steel wagged his fork. "Ve are properly out here to help anyone that needs help. Be that endangered goats or drifting Klingons."

"I'm not arguing that point sir, it just feels weird. We have been fighting Klingons for 15 years."

Lt. Vivian Tate joined the group. "I, for one, would welcome the change."

Tommos stirred his mashed potatoes. "These don't look right."

"Then report it with the rest of the food problems. That back hole warped more than the deflectors." Said Vivian.

"We might be eating the deflectors if we can't solve the food problems." Mused Kyle.

Vivian replied. "It hasn't gotten that bad yet."

Tommos nibbled at the mass on the end of his fork. "Tastes all right. Looks funny through."

"It's your stomach." Said Kyle.

Tommos dropped the fork onto his plate. "Back to the Klingon thing. What is the Captain trying to prove here?"

Kyle pushed back from the table. "Off hand I would say that the message is the Federation is not hostile as a first response."

Tommos poked at the suspect potatoes further. "Wasn't the Captain in the Four Years War? I heard somewhere it spent half of it on Anaxar."

Vivian gave Tommos a stern look. "I wouldn't bring that up in front of him

Tommos. Our good Captain is not proud of his actions in war."

"Didn't he get a medal for it?"

"Our Captain has a row of medals as long as your arm Tommos, including the Medal of Honor. You will not hear him talk about it."

Tommos ignored the potatoes again. "Damn... Where did you find this out?"

"One, he was in full dress when he took command of the *Kongo*. Two, it's in the database. Look up his service record. Just don't ask him."

"Will he bite my head off?"

"No. I asked him. 'I don't talk about it Mr. Tate.' is all the answer he gave, or I deserve. Captain LaSaille is an old warrior, and like most old warriors he doesn't discuss war."

"Bridge to the Captain, Starfleet Command on channel two."

LaSaille flipped the monitor over to the required channel and pulled it around to face him. Admiral Nogura appeared. "Admiral, LaSaille here."

"I do not have good news for you Captain."

"OK, let's hear it."

"I have been contacted by Klingon High command. They have received a distress message. I verified it and told them they can send a tug and an escort. Klingon High Command verified they have a ship on the way."

"Yes sir, the *Vengeance Blade*. She is a day out. Are they sending a tug?"

"Yes, that is a week out."

"That's not bad news sir."

"I have also spoken with Commodore Milos. He will not back down without orders from Yany."

"And... There is an 'and' in there."

"And Yany Defense Command says they will, and I quote 'investigate the alleged incident!'"

LaSaille deflated. "No, that is not good news."

"Captain, I will not require you to defend the Klingon vessel. That would be unreasonable, and perhaps an undue risk to your ship and crew."

"I'll take that into account sir."

"Admiral Nogura out." The screen went dark.

The crew of the *Kongo* watched the *Vengeance Blade* close with the damaged freighter. Lt. Steel at last perked up at his station. "Commander Kang on channel sir."

"Put him through." LaSaille turned to face the viewscreen. "/Greetings Commander Kang./"

Collateral Damage

Kang almost smiled. "I am surprised to find things as you reported them Captain LaSaille."

"They are not that simple Commander. I have two Yany Defense Force ships inbound, and looking for a fight."

"I would welcome a fight."

"I however would not. It would also break the conditions of your parol if you recall."

"So these ships are not obeying your commands? Is Starfleet no so thoroughly in command?"

"Does the Chancellor have the unwavering loyalty of every house? We are not of a piece anymore than Klingons."

"I have the right to defend myself Captain LaSaille."

"I do not dispute that. If you are fired on you have the right to defend yourself and get back across the DMZ. I suggest your take the freighter in tow and get while the getting is good."

"An imminently reasonable suggestion, from your viewpoint Captain, but not possible. A War Dragon does not have the capacity to tow so large a vessel."

"Then I suggest you evacuate and leave, soon. Two Baton Rouge class cruisers vs. one War Dragon is not an even match."

"I will consider your words Captain LaSaille. Kang out."

Commodore Milos looked at the tactical plot. "A second Klingon ship." He looked his XO. "The plot thickens."

"Yes sir, and it crossed the DMZ in full view of the *Kongo*." Answered Commander Gil."

Milos sighed "I have to wonder what kind of Captain this LaSaille is to allow the Klingons access."

"A young one that did not fight in the war sir?"

"A logical conclusion, but is it the correct one? We cannot assume."

Gil shot his Commodore a look. "He will have a service record sir. We can access that."

Milos nodded. "Yes, yes he will, and excellent idea. Do that see what our good Captain LaSaille's past is made of."

Candice Meyers stared at the overhead.

"You're not sleeping."

Guy's voice shot though her like an electric shock. "No, I'm not." She tried to calm herself.

Guy rolled to face her. "Does the situation worry you that much?"

She did likewise. "Yes, it does. We are between the devil and the deep blue sea here Guy. A colony force bent on destroying Klingons and Klingons, being Klingons. Our Captain is playing a dangerous position."

"Do you trust him."

"I trust him. It's the rest of the parties I don't trust. Our good Captain is still only in command of one ship. I am starting to wonder if one ship will be enough."

Tired feet slogged and squished into the stinking mud that laid a loose claim to being a road. Corporal LaSaille hitched the strap on his pack to a less chafing position and tried to keep his rifle under his poncho. The damn M-16 would jam on anything, water was pure hell. Up ahead two half naked kids shivered beside the road. They stared at the soldiers with large, hurt eyes. "Hills" Clinton dropped out of line and dug some rations out of his pack.

Lieutenant Bartlett charged up to Private Clinton and snatched the carton of k-rations from his hand. "Fucking hillbilly, what the fucking hell are you doing?"

"These kids is hungry Lieutenant. I's a gonna fed them. We has plenty."

"You are doing nothing of the fuicking sort. Keep marching."

Private Clinton gave the lieutenant a wounded look and did as he was told. He looked back at the kids beside the trail. "Ain't no cause to not give Christian charity Lieutenant."

"They're fucking gooks. They are never going to be anything fucking more than fucking gooks. Good for fucking nothing gooks."

"They's kid, jess like any..."

"Those are my orders Soldier, the food stays in your fucking pack."

"Yes sir."

You didn't say anything? That's unlike you.

Jerry turned over to meet her big brown eyes. ***I was eighteen, fresh out of boot camp. Hardly the man I am now. Yes, I felt bad about it. But I wasn't enough of myself to say anything. I followed the orders I was given.***

***What happened?**

***To them?**

Yes.

The kids? I'll never know. Billy Clinton? He went home minus a leg. I never heard from him again. Lieutenant Bartlett? He kept the United States in one piece through the Eugenics war, as President. Something cleaned up his mouth and his attitude. I wasn't there to see it.

***What has this brought you to?**

I'm going to keep those Klingon kids from becoming another number.

Collateral Damage

"Hail open Captain."

"/Captain Kurn, LaSaille here./"

"/What do you want?" Kurn looked at the background behind LaSaille.

"You are in your room of readiness again./"

"/Yes, what I must say I must say Captain to Captain./"

"/I am listening./"

"The Yany force is two hours out. My command could not back them down. Words have failed./"

"/What will you do?/" despair painted the big Klingon's features."

"/I will do all I can. What I cannot do is stop two ships from getting around me. I want you and you family to evacuate to the *Vengeance Blade*./"

"/It is my duty to defend what is mine./"

"/Then defend them smart Captain Kurn. Behind the war dragon's shields and weapons you stand a chance. A Baton Rouge class cruiser will reduce your vessel to scrap in minutes./"

"/It, it would be dishonorable to abandon my vessel./"

"/How much honor is a dead family worth?/"

Jerry watched the conflicting emotions play across Kurn's face. "/Captain, If I must fire on the ships of my allied house, I do not intend to lose what I defend./"

Kurn's eyes widened. "/Your honor is at stake here./"

"/Yes. In Starfleet it is dishonorable to fight and win, but lose what you defend./"

"Far be it for me to challenge the honor of a warrior. I will speak to Captain Kang at once./"

LaSaille came out onto the bridge. "Mr. Collad, close with the Yany patrol ships, warp factor six. Let us break up the rumble before it starts."

Burt Ghurn Worked his sensors. "Sir, the Yany ships are 15 minutes out."

"Sound red alert. All hands to battle stations."

The *Kongo* came to alert around them, section checking in.

"All sections report battle stations." Said Steel.

"Proximity alert" Reported Lt. Collard. The Yany have dropped to sublight at long range."

Captain LaSaille sat up a bit straighter. "Drop to sublight to match them. Mr. Steel, open hailing frequencies. Let's see if Commodore Milos is willing to talk."

Captain Kurn sat quietly in the wardroom of the *Vengeance Blade*. His sons twitched nearby and the women talked. Kantos his second son stood. "/How can Klingons sit by when there is to be battle?/"

"/Sit down. Be calm. One does what one can do, and does not fret what one

cannot do. Wisdom my son is knowing the difference./"

Commodore Milos sat forward in his command chair. "All ships to battle stations. Report."

The sensor officer carefully worked his board. "The *USS Kongo*, sir. The Kongo has weapons armed and shields up."

His comm officer reported. "We are being hailed by the *Kongo* sir."

Milos twisted his hands together. "Put them on."

The Bridge of the *Kongo* came into view, modern and efficient. Her Captain a heavy built, sandy haired man with a beard. "Commodore Milos, this is Captain LaSaille. Might I ask your business here?"

"I will not allow Klingon incursions into Federation space to go unpunished Captain. And neither should you."

"The Klingon ship is a damaged freighter Commodore. It's crew are not warriors."

"They are KLINGONS." Milos came to his feet. "No Klingon will be allowed to invade our space! I will destroy them all. The Klingons are subject to the terms of the Treaty of Anaxar. Crossing the DMZ is an act of WAR." Milos was shaking from rage.

"With all due respect Commodore, I helped draft the Treaty of Anaxar, I know what it says. The articles you are referring to apply to the warships of the Klingon Empire, and can be set aside under certain conditions. Incidentally those conditions are in effect by order of Admiral Nogura, Commander of the sector. Jerry slipped a glance at Burt. **Think loud Burt. What is the other ship doing?*

Ghurn grunted in surprise at the telepatric contact. **They - Are - Holding - Station - Sir.**

Thanks Burt. LaSaille kept his attention on the Yany commander.

"Once more Commodore. The Klingon civilians have been granted sanctuary until a tug can tow them back over the DMZ."

Commodore Milos sat firmly. "What of the war dragon we read, Captain?"

"The *Vengeance Blade* is on parol as per the treaty of Anaxar. She is here to aid the freighter."

"My duty is to see they pay for the intrusion."

"Once again, they are not intruding Commodore Milos. It is my duty at this time to protect them. I will do so even if that means keeping you here."

"You will force my hand."

"You act of your own will sir. I will remind you and your crews that firing on this ship in the pursuit of her lawful duties is a criminal act under the Federation codes."

Milos shook with rage. He spat his words. "You have no idea what they did

Collateral Damage

to me, no idea what they did to my family. They are monsters!"

"Sir. We of the Federation do not blame the group for the actions of a few." LaSaille pulled his shirt up revealing the map of scars over his chest and belly. "I got these at the hands of Klingons Commodore. My first officer was tortured by them. I grieve at your loss sir, but respectfully remind you that your loss was not unique. I can forgive."

"I cannot. Stand down Captain."

"No. If you try and go around me I will defend the innocents."

"I can split my forces."

"Then one of your ships must face a war dragon alone. As I recall the D-5 was a handful for a Baton Rouge class ship. This is a D-6. Commodore, violence will only beget violence. You are outgunned here."

Milos seethed. "That would not be the case if you were not siding with the *enemy*."

"You are assuming an enemy. Remember General Veseppi Kallfax. Making a friend of an old foe is a victory without blood. Have we not lost enough of our own blood to this fight?"

"Klingons do not belong this side of the DMZ!"

"Agreed, help me, peacefully, return them to their own side. I need you help, but I cannot deal with unthinking rage.*

Milos came up short. "What do you mean you need my help?"

LaSaille leaned into his point. "More Klingons are coming, a tug for the freighter, and most likely a second war dragon to escort the tug. That leaves me outgunned."

"I thought you liked Klingons Captain LaSaille." Sneered Milos

"Then you have misread me. I love peace. I want the Klingons peaceful, but I don't trust them, not now, not yet. I believe we can pull this off with no one getting shot today, if you will back me up. Our three ships out match any two ships the Klingons can muster."

"What about the 'freighter'?"

"Harmless. Its warp drive is out, and while it is armed a shuttlecraft with a slingshot could handle it."

"The tug?"

"Unknown factor. All the more reason I need your backup."

Milos dropped back into his chair. "I'll get back to you."

"Please be quick, the tug is only days away."

Milos looked around his small cabin. The pictures on the shelf looked out at him. Their smiles dated from an earlier time before innocence had been cruelly ripped away. His second, Commander Gil, stood respectfully to the side. Milos shook his head. "I don't understand Lary. What is this Captain LaSaille after?"

"I looked up his service record sir."

"And what did you learn about our good Captain LaSaille?"

"His record is impressive. He has many valor awards, including a Federation Medal of Honor. He also spent two years on Anaxar in the teeth of the war."

"Could the Klingons have turned him?"

"No sir. Records show he acted against the Klingons during his tenure on Anaxar. He escaped imprisonment after his ship was taken, freed his fellow officer, Commander Meyers, and conducted intelligence and insurgency against the Klingons, for two years."

"A hero."

"Several times over."

"He seems to have lost the edge that gave him his hero's honors."

"I wouldn't know sir. I only know what the facts record."

"And what further facts do you have?"

"In his most recent action he rescued the crew and passenger of a colony ship by taking his vessel through the accretion disk of a black hole, twice. Previous to that he spent two months saving a planet that was to be crushed by an asteroid."

"He is one that values life."

"I would say that is truth."

"I will speak with him then."

The Intercom chirped. LaSaille pressed the button. "LaSaille here."

"Lt. Steel sir. Commodore Milos would like to speak with you."

"Pipe him in Lieutenant."

The screen shifted to show the elder man. "Captain LaSaille. I will listen to what you have to say."

"Good, please move within transporter range. I'll be beaming over."

"Do you think that necessary?"

"Commodore. I wish to talk with you in person. I wish no misunderstanding between us."

"As you desire. We will approach the *Kongo*."

The YDF Lieutenant met LaSaille in the transporter room. "Captain, this way please." LaSaille followed him. He was lead to the *Manhattan's* briefing room. Commodore Milos was waiting for him. LaSaille put out his hand. "Commodore, it is good to meet you."

Milos shook it cautiously. "Captain. Let us get down to business."

Collateral Damage

"As you wish. The tactical situation is as I have described it."

"Then why not destroy them now?"

"Commodore, it is easy to be ready to fire a phaser. It is too easy to fire one. However, we cannot unfire a phaser. Once the first shot is taken, we are back to war. Do you really want that war?"

Milos' face darkened, his voice shook with emotion. "They must pay for the damage they have done."

"Have they not paid? Was winning the war not enough? We made the Klingons eat the peace we devised."

Milos clenched his fists. "Not for me. We didn't take it right into their homes."

LaSaille spoke softly. "And then what would we be? When you have taken their cities by force, burned down their women and children in the street, what would we be?"

Milos shook his fists before Jerry. "I cannot forgive what they did to my daughter, to my Wife."

Jerry looked directly into Milos' haunted eyes. "There comes a time when we must forgive ourselves."

Tears streamed down Milos' face. "You ask the *impossible*."

"I ask only this. Wait, wait until they fire the first shot. We are the United Federation of Planets. We are Starfleet. We do not fire the first shot. Can you give me that?"

"And when they do fire the First Shot?"

"If. If they fire, then we are justified in defending ourselves. Commodore, we are old men, we cannot shake the damage war has done to us. But if we wish to keep that damage from the next generation, we must practice peace even before hated foes. All I ask is that you wait."

Milos looked back into LaSaille's gentled gaze. A long minute passed. "I will wait until the first shot is fired."

"That is all I ask. Sir I need you."

"I will promise no more Captain. I will promise no more."

Jerry wearily flopped into the center seat. "Move us back to station keeping on the Klingons. The Yany ships will follow us at long range."

Meyers shot her Captain a look. "What is the other shoe?"

"Commodore Milos promised only to not shoot before the Klingons do. I can only hope he is a man of his word, and we can convince the Klingons that shooting is a bad idea."

"Red Alert, Captain to the bridge."

Jerry rolled over and hit the intercom. "What is the occasion Mr. Meyers?"

"Our guests are arriving sir. ETA 30 minutes."

"Understood, I'll be up."

Rats.

Jerry smooched her on the nose. **You'll be here when I get back. Duty calls.** He grabbed his shirt and pulled it on, stomped his feet into his boots. **We shall see what the Klingons have sent us.**

Klaxons sounded on the *YDS Manhattan*. Commodore Milos strode to the center of the bridge. "Report."

"Two Klingon vessels approach sir. *Kongo* has gone to Red Alert."

"Arm all weapons, move to medium range and inform the *Kongo* of our readiness."

Gil moved beside his commander. "Will we engage them?"

"Not until they fire first Commander." Milos' face twisted in rage. "Then we will give them no mercy."

"Captain on the bridge." Meyers slid out of the seat and moved to the XO station. "Situation?" LaSaille occupied the command chair.

"Two Klingon vessels. A D6 war dragon and I assume a tug. The YDF vessels have moved to medium weapons range."

"Yany vessels report red alert Captain." Reported. Lt. Steel

"Why do you assume Mr. Meyers?"

"The vessel does not match any profiles of Klingon warships, and one was requested."

"Let's not assume. Mr. Steel, open hailing frequencies."

"Hail open sir."

"/This is Captain LaSaille of the starship *Kongo*. Who am I speaking with?/"

The screen flickered to show the face of the Klingon captain. "I am Kor of the battlecruiser *Vindictive*. What have you done to our brother Klingons?/"

LaSaille's face hardened. "/Posture before the gossip mongers Kor. You know why you are here./"

Lt. Steel shot the Captain a meaningful look. "They are hailing the *Vengeance Blade* on a different frequency."

LaSaille nodded. "Expected. Monitor." He turned back to Kor. "/I expect you to aid your countrymen and get back across the border Captain Kor./"

"/If you expect such peaceful actions Captain LaSaille, why are you in battle readiness?/"

"/Because I respect you Captain Kor. I would not wish to appear soft before a Klingon Captain, that would be insulting./"

Collateral Damage

"/Understood. Kor out./"

Ghurn looked up from the sensors. "They have armed weapons Captain. The Yany are holding the range."

Keep an eye on all parties. Mr. Meyers, what do we know of this Kor?"

Meyers worked her terminal. "He is known for gregarious behavior, the better to slip the knife in your back."

"I thought as much. Thoroughly greasy."

Ghurn looked up again. "The tug is moving to take the tow."

LaSaille took a deep breath.

Ghurn reported again, this time not looking up. "*Vindictive* is coming around, she will pass between us and the Yany ships."

Minutes passed on the Bridge of the Manhattan. "The *Vindictive* is separating us from the *Kongo* Sir."

Milos tapped the arm of his seat. "Keep weapons locked on her. Maintain, we will not fire first."

LaSaille watched the tactical plot. "Steady as she goes. Pay them no mind."

"The tug has the tow underway. Both Dragons are forming up."

"Steady."

Lt. Steel reported. "Hail again Captain, it's Kor."

"Put him through."

Kor appeared once again on the screen. "/Captain LaSaille, am I to understand that a Federation starship defended and aided a Klingon freighter?"

"/Yes./"

"/How untypical of you Captain LaSaille./"

"/It is my duty to defend those in need of defense Captain Kor. I would not need to explain the concept of duty to a Klingon./"

"/We understand our duty well Captain LaSaille./"

"/Then I will attend you as you do your duty Captain./"

Kor looked to end the conversation, but then continued. "/Captain LaSaille, you speak excellent Klingon. This is unusual for the typical Starfleet officer. Where did you learn?/"

"/Anaxar, Captain Kor./"

"/Indeed./" A sour, saddened look stole across his features. "/Then I truly regret we cannot meet in glorious battle./"

LaSaille gave the Klingon Captain a thousand yard stare. "/Speak only for yourself Captain Kor. I have seen enough war./"

Kor studied the Human for a long moment. "/Then you have my sorrow

Captain, Kor out./"

"Warp drives building.... They're gone sir."

"Good. Keep an eye on them and make sure they are headed in the direction they are suppose to head." LaSaille turned to Meyers. "Take the con Candy. I'll be in my ready room."

LaSaille hosted Commodore Milos in the *Kongo's* main briefing room. Milos sat, hands steepled. "So we let them go. What harm will come for that?"

"The future is not ours to know. We kept harm from coming today."

"One day your Klingon friends will destroy you Captain, they will destroy you like the rabid dogs they are."

"If they are indeed my friends as you say, they will not destroy me. That isn't what friends do. I would hope we have impressed on at least some Klingons that we are not implacable foes."

Milos "But that is the impression I want them to have. We are implacable. We will not move."

"To threats, I agree. But I don't want to deal solely in the currency of threats. I want, the Klingons, the Romulans, and every foe the Federation has to see that the hand of friendship is open, and peaceful actions beget peaceful results."

"Captain, do you honestly believe that we can have peace with such creatures?"

"I dispute that the Klingons are 'such creatures'. They have yet to exceed the kind of inhumanity that we have shown towards our fellow Humans Commodore. We have learned to deal peaceably with each other. We will learn to deal peaceably with the Klingons."

"That will depend on whether the Klingons are capable of dealing peacefully."

"They did so today."

"But not without posturing and threats."

"It was less than overt violence. A step in the right direction."

"They were also outgunned. I have never called Klingons stupid Captain LaSaille."

"Then it remains to be seen."

Milos stood. LaSaille did likewise. They faced each other across the table. At last Milos spoke. "I will take my leave of you Captain. I will pray that you are right, that peace can be had. However, I will keep my weapons close to hand, for I am certain that it cannot be so."

"Go in peace Commodore Milos. Live in peace, if you can."

Collateral Damage

The *USS Kongo* pulled into Starbase 22 two weeks later. For once all the fatigue was on the crew. Her Captain rose from his seat. "Lock us down Commander. See to the needs of the ship. Station leave once the ship is seen to. I must report to Admiral Nogura.

As LaSaille came through the door Nogura motioned to a seat. "Captain LaSaille, please, be seated."

Jerry sat. The Admiral sat at his desk. Neither moved or spoke for several long minutes. Finally Nogura nodded. "Captain LaSaille, when I was a young man, I had a Sensi who equated stillness with the true path of enlightenment. I was sure that I would never achieve it."

"And you haven't."

Nogura looked at him sharply. "No, I never mastered that discipline. How did you know?"

"You are not still, and you expressed doubt. Those that doubt success, in personal endeavors, usually fail."

"You are still. Who was your Sensi?"

"Time."

"Time?"

"With enough time you can learn anything. With enough time, you can learn to be still. My I ask Admiral, where does this line of questioning lead?"

"You are more still than many Sensi I have known, yet your records do not give you time to learn these skills."

"My records are my records."

"Are they fact?"

"As far as I wish the universe at large to know. Everything they list, I have done."

"But your age."

Jerry smiled slightly. "In the culture of my youth, it was permissible for those, of an age, to lie about it."

"You are of an age?"

"In the culture of your youth, it was not polite to ask a difficult question directly, more so when it could involve a loss of face."

"You understand then."

"We are in Starfleet, and questions are asked, difficult or not. You are not a man afraid to ask them."

Nogura stared across his desk. He looked LaSaille right in the eyes. "How old are you?"

"Three hundred and fifteen years of age Admiral."

Nogura didn't alter his expression. "A most direct answer for a man that was dancing around that answer a minute ago."

"You were dancing around the question Admiral. I felt no need to be forthright."

"You are not Human?"

"To the best of my knowledge, I am Human."

"But you are not sure?"

"Unless my parents took secrets to their graves, I am sure."

Nogura leaned back in his chair. "I do not know what to do with you Captain."

"Why must something 'be done' Admiral? Has my service been questionable?"

"Why did you defend the Klingons?"

"It was the good thing to do."

"The good thing."

"Some would argue the right thing would be to be hard assed about the DMZ. I disagree, but some would so argue. The universe is a big place. Too big a place to hate every person with brow ridges and an attitude we don't really understand."

"So you saved a Klingon merchant from a lynch mob."

Jerry smiled softly. "You've been reading. Yes. I never consider saving a life a bad thing. If I can win one friend in the Klingon Empire, we have one more friend. But to use another old expression, I am preaching to the choir."

Nogura arched a brow. "That old expression I do not know."

"Converting the converted."

"Why do you consider me 'converted' Captain?"

"I might be old Admiral, but I am new to this starship thing. I considered it in my best interest to read those that came before, and were successful. Your logs have been among my reading."

"I don't recall defending Klingons."

"You did defend a Qzin pride ship."

"Yes, that was many years back."

"Under similar circumstances."

"Helpless females and children."

"Much the same circumstances."

Rear Admiral Nogura bowed slightly from his seat. "I am honored to be your example."

Captain LaSaille bowed likewise. "I am honored to be allowed a chance to follow it."

Collateral Damage -- Garry Stahl, January 2005

*My special thanks to **Jay Hailey**. I have been banging this tale off him since I started it shortly after I finished "Ships in the Night". He derailed this effort when it was a few paragraphs from finished. It killed my momentum and added*

Collateral Damage

at least two months to the writing of this story. The thing got an almost complete rewrite from the Klingons forward. However, I found a path neither of us had considered, and I think got a stronger story from it as a result.

Jerry LaSaille is rapidly becoming one of my most complex characters. He has been the subject of most of my short shorts. He has been showing me sides of him that I didn't know existed, and the shifts in his general demeanor depending on the age are revelations even to me.

I am certainly not done telling the Jerry Story, so look for more in the future.

Subtext 2011 -- *Continuing my task of cleaning up my work. Sadly I found more errors than I might have liked. Killed the bastards I did. I took this and The First Principle out of order because I had ideas for covers for them. Sometimes you just find the perfect picture.*