

Epiphany Trek

LOGS: USS QUESTING



THE WORD OF THE BUILDERS

GARRY STAHL

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CB5 *Questing*, an Ane heavy frigate under Starfleet command was cruising the Klingon border. Relations with the Klingons had been quiet as of late. To Captain Taraban, that meant trouble brewing. Klingons are never quiet for long. However, he certainly didn't wish to be the means of starting the trouble.

A belly full of quantum torpedoes did help the matter. The new weapons fit the old tubes, and had proven effective against the Borg whenever used. He didn't expect to meet with Borg this far spinward, but you don't like to take chances. All things considered, this should be a quiet cruise.

****Captain, we are receiving a distress call.****

Visions of a quiet cruise evaporated like puddles in a Vulcan noon. ****Let us have it Fiealan.****

Static burst across the channel. Didn't anyone send a nice clean distress message any more? Klingon clattered into the space of the bridge. **"/This is C...in Kv'echen o...nto's Pride, we ar...nder heavy attack b...own foes. Ass...quested. Re...at, thre...ips are attack...quest assis...ride can...and much long...pinward of Sher...ystem, as...tace request.../"**

****Gesilan, ETA to location? ****

****5 minutes 20 seconds at warp 9.5.****

****Engage, Sound red alert, all hands to battle station, arm all weapons.****

Silent alarms sounded through the ship as Ane, others, and bios alike took their stations, and weapons were armed for the fight.

Fiealan reported, ****Shields at full, all turrets loaded are armed, all queues loaded and hot, phasers are full power, engineering reports full power.****

****Tactical to my view.****

****Sherman's System in 10 seconds.****

****Impulse power, now.****

The *Questing* dropped into a familiar scene, the three hyenas harried the buffalo, ahem, that is three smaller ships attacked a much larger one. The large ship was a Klingon bulk freighter. As ships go they were slightly smaller than space stations. The smaller ships, well small is a relative term. Each ship was nearly the size of the *Questing* herself. This new ship on the scene was quickly noticed, as two of the attacking cruisers peeled off the slow freighter to deal with the new threat.

****Orion Acquisitor class heavy cruisers, stolen IFF signals, as you might suspect.**** Reported Fiealan.

****Tactical to computer, engage at will.****

The two ships didn't wait for a request to join the party, the fired as soon as the range closed. Phaser hits dug into the *Questing's* shields.

****Phaser hit to the front shields, shields at 97% and holding, no damage.**** reported engineering.

Questing spat torpedoes at the two cruisers. With a ripple two turrets dumped a four torpedo barrage on each of the Orion cruisers. Three more times

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during the pass the Orions scored hits on the Ane ship.

Front shields to 96%, minor damage to the port fire control, switching to secondary.

The torpedoes burst against the Orions, both ships shuddered under the impact. *Questing* knifed between them as they closed, licking each with phasers as they passed. For a moment each was in the other's cross fire as *Questing* fired the stern turrets as well. Once again the Orions were rent with torpedo impacts. No stern phasers replied to the torpedoes. The two Orion ships looked worse for the wear. Both were showing visible damage from the encounter.

A sudden blast from the direction of the freighter got everyone's attention. The third Orion blew to flinters. The numerous smaller guns on the big Klingon ship having taken their deadly toll. The two other ships broke off their turns to re-engage and limped off under reduced warp power.

**Should I pursue Captain?*

Closure would be pleasing, however, query the Klingon Captain first, he may need assistance.

Hail Open Captain.

**This is Federation ship *Questing* to "*Pride*", do you require assistance?*

"/*Questing*, this is *Quinto's Pride*, we are stable, get the sons of cowards!/"

**We are free to pursue Fiealan. Which target looks more likely?*

Tactical designation two, or the 'so called' 'Diligence' is leaking air and their warp bubble looks unstable, TD one, AKA 'Felicity', is moving at warp 5 and is headed for Rigel.

**Take out 'Felicity' first, 'Diligence' is going nowhere fast. Fiealan, were either one of those ship cherry when we started the battle?*

No sir, both were well chewed on.

Typical Klingon merchant, scream for the warriors while beating the mugger to death.

Gesilan took the *Questing* to pursuit mode at warp 7. The gap closed quickly. Taraban examined the enlarging stern of the damaged Orion.

Fiealan, universal messages of peace and friendship. Tell him that if he doesn't surrender now, he'll be cooked, then flash frozen.

We are getting a reply Captain.

Put it on.

"This is Captain Malak Tawus of the Hospital ship *Felicity*, why did you attack? We were defending ourselves from that Klingon pirate."

Captain Taraban didn't even flick an ear, or close the channel. **Fiealan, two torpedoes, knock the lying bastard from warp.**

The Captain of the Orion ship had a moment of total shock before the torpedoes rocked him to the deck. *Questing* came out of warp right behind the Orion, and right on top of her.

Gesilan reported, **His shields are down Captain. We are within 10

kilometers**

Marines away, take the bastard, all boarding parties away.

Forty minutes later the robot troops were clearing out the few pockets of resistance on the Orion ship. Malak Tawus, his lip bleeding, was standing before Taraban in the *Questing's* lounge.

Captain, how credulous did you take me to be? A "hospital ship" that just happens to look, and is armed, just like an Acquisitor Heavy Cruiser? Really, if you insist on lying, I insist you do a better job. In any case, you can tell it to the judge.

The Orion started to open his mouth, Taraban beat him to it.

Captain Tawus, do you want my justice, or Federation justice? Open your mouth now, and the trial will be over in five minutes.

Tawus shut his mouth.

Good, take him to the brig.

By the time *Questing* had the *Felicity* mopped up, and had rejoined the *Quinto's Pride* the Klingon had the *Diligence* in tow.

**Captain Kv'echen, do you require assistance?*

"/No, we have sustained some wounds, but are able and fit enough. Our medical and engineering crews are doing well what needs to be done./"

Captain, unless you wish to accompany me to Starbase 24, I will require log data, a statements from you and your crew, and any prisoners you have taken.

"/Prisoners? We will handle the pirates in our own way./" The Klingon thumped his chest.

Captain, I will remind you that the attack took place in Federation space. Therefore under Federation jurisdiction.

"/When a Klingon ship is attacked, Klingon ways are followed./"

Taraban sighed. **Captain Kv'echen, you know that I will have to report this, and the bureaucrats will learn of it. This will cause much distasteful datawork and the questioning of permits, licenses, and other things that bureaucrats love, and no one else does. I know well that your honor is mighty, and you have indeed been wronged. You have protested for Honor's sake, but I must insist, for both our sakes.**

The big Klingon smiled. "/Very well long horned one. I have protested for Honor's sake. I to wish nothing to do with the pushers of datawork. I will come over with such of my crew as need to make statements, and the prisoners./"

Taraban cut the channel. **Fiealan, see to our guests.**

Yes Captain.

Taraban sighed with relief. Klingon civilians were much more reasonable over practical matters. A member of the warrior caste could have argued that matter for days, if they bothered to take any prisoners. Heck, he had dealt with

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warriors that would have argued the matter for days, had a fight or two over it, then informed you there were no prisoners.

The matter was quickly settled at Starbase 24. The two damaged Orion ships taken in custody as well as the crews. Kv'echen demanded, and was granted prize money for the Orion he took. Interesting holdover from the old days. Taraban didn't know Klingons still practiced the "prize rules". It was something to keep in mind.

The *Questing's* crew took leave on the starbase. Starbase 24 was one of the older and more built up of the starbases. The space port looked like a collection of space junk. Some modules of the main station were over 150 years of age, and dated from the treaty of the first Klingon War. The dirtside facilities would rival many a planetary capital in size. Since the formal and more or less permanent end of hostilities with the Klingons they had been regulars at Starbase 24.

At the moment Taraban, and several members of his crew were enjoying a display of Klingon dance, and avoiding Klingon food and drink. The proprietor was a reasonable Klingon, and with payment of a cover charge he had no problem with seating the three Ane to "just watch". He even offered to get them salads and fruit juice, at a slight premium. So Taraban, Letilan a torpedo specialist and his current flame, and Gailan from medical were eating good greens and enjoying the floor show.

The three women dancing in almost clothing were worth the look. By Klingon standards they were knock dead gorgeous. By general humanoid standards they were good looking. By Taraban's standards they were intoxicating. The emotions ran strong in their dance, and the dark one was trying to impress someone in the room with her feral femininity and lustful desire. Well. It was working, for at least one male in the room.

Taraban decided to scan the room and find the object of her desire, and distract himself. A few moments later he found him. A table with five Klingons seated at it. A older man, and four younger ones, each declining in age, the youngest barely old enough to enjoy the show. A family of men out on the town. That might be the reason for the outing. The boy looked barely passed the Klingon equivalent of the "teens", so this well might be is first "adult" outing. From the rapt look on his face he was enjoying every minute of it.

The object of the woman's desire was the second son, if he had the relationships right. He was flushed with drink, and knew well what she wanted, and looked ready to comply. That could mean trouble. Taraban warned the

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girls of the impending problem. A quick exit would be called for if, make that when, a fight broke out. Taraban called the waitress over to pay the bill. It never hurt to see to your host.

Sure enough, the waitress had just returned the credit PADD, when the second son lurched to his feet. Drunk as a skunk if the smell was right. He looked around the room for a suitable challenge. Perhaps because of comments made by his brother he was looking at the Ane. He staggered over to their table.

"Is good Klingon food not fit for alien bellies!/" He spat.

Taraban looked him over, stood up. **Klingon food is fit for Klingons, but a pain in the belly for ungulates.**

"/Koog./" It was the older man speaking, tired reason in his voice. "/There is no honor in it. Come, have more blood wine./"

The second son, Koog was turning back toward his own table when his older brother chimed in.

"/Yes, no honor in challenging herbivores./" His tone was condescending.

The older man gave him a sharp look. "/Mind your tongue or lose it./" He whispered. Only an Ane's sharp hearing could have picked it up from the Ane table.

Taraban sighed, the older brother had hit the right cord, Koog turned back to the Ane's table.

"/I will challenge where I will, and find honor in it!/" He could barely stand. "Get up beast (he was up) your diet offends my honor!"

By this point the music had stopped, and the dancers were watching with interest, and more than a little blood lust. If sexual energy was not to be released in lust, it would be spent in blood.

Taraban privately warned the girls. **Alright, I'll try and turn this on the instigator, support me.**

They too stood. By this point everyone in the room, some 30 Klingons and a smattering of other races, was standing and fingering melee weapons. An outright brawl would be bloody and destructive.

Taraban spoke to the older brother. **Ga'fer, does the older sibling allow the younger to lead?*

"/Why should I challenge herbivores?/" His tone was droll.

**My ears are sharp, it was you that objected to my diet, and said as much to your brother. What kind of honor states a complaint, and allows another to answer it?*

Taraban could feel Ga'fer's envy and jealousy of Koog, but not the reason. He took a guess and pushed a little harder. **Perhaps you are less than competent as a warrior. Would that be reason to be set aside in favor of your brother?*

For a beat, Koog's face dropped in surprise, as did the older man's. Ga'fer burst in anger and leaped screaming at the Ane knife in hand. Conveniently no Ane was present when he landed. Cat quick Ga'fer was back on his feet, and

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looking around. The Ane were on the other side of the room, his father between him and them. He charged, right into the old man's Bat'leth.

"/STOP! You fool./"

Ga'fer came up short, the point inches from his nose.

The old man continued. "/He is playing with your mind. You have dragged my shame before everyone. Your temper, and your inability to properly use it is the reason you are set aside. We are in Federation territory you fool. Think for once in your life./" The old man was livid, one wrong move by Ga'fer, and he would have three sons.

Ga'fer took a deep breath, looked nervously around, shot a murderous look at the collected Ane, sheathed his knife and left the bar.

The old man turned to Taraban. "/Why?/"

**Why Elder?*

"/Why did you draw him out?/"

You would rather I do his bidding and humiliate Koog for him? I do not play other's honor games. Those who try and use me, will find their use turned back upon them.

The Old Klingon nodded.

Taraban continued. **However, the evening belonged to your youngest if I am not mistaken.**

He grunted.

Then let me rekindle the celebration. Host! blood wine and Gag for the House of K'grat. Let the music and dancing continue.

The rest of the evening passed without incident. The Ane celebrated the young man's new manhood with his family. Taraban and the girls teleported back to the ship. No point in looking for trouble.

Taraban didn't hear anything more about the bar almost brawl. However he put out a ship wide alert about Ga'fer. The Klingon might not be able to tell Ane apart. Something told Taraban he would be spoiling for a fight, any fight.

Taraban, I am receiving a visual message.

Coming. He teleported to the bridge, and settled into the command pit. **Lets see it.**

The channel opened to show a tentacled mess, or what might be taken for a mess. It was a sphere two feet across with sixteen tentacle arms around the circumference in two rows. Each arm ended in a further eight fingers each with four eyes. Taraban sat there in shock. The message continued, telepathically.

**Felicitation to all friends. We find ourselves in great need. Our peace has been breached, and we are now helpless to stop the breakers of it. We beseech you, come to our aid all friends that have the means. We are at the place of three suns, in the 25th arm of the wheel, the 243 circumference. Once

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again, our peace has been breached, come if you can.**

Taraban lay in his pit for a few moments gathering his wits. This was the last source he expected for a distress message. Never mind the source was, months away. **Fiealan, call the crew into quarters. We must together go to the All.**

Takal the Vulcan spacial physicist, I'leesa, Getin, A'fal, and Versal the Deltan quad serving various functions around the *Questing* sat together in the lounge. The rest of the crew, 70 Ane, were sequestered in their sleeping quarters. It was unusual behavior, and it invited comment.

Takal looked in the direction of the Ane door. "It is not logical behavior for Ane to seek privacy."

"I do not think logic will reveal the answers." Said Getin. "The auras of those that passed by me were closed, and concerned."

Soft A'fal thought rather than spoke. **A great concern, yet one they will not reveal to us I think. They are greatly agitated, or were. That has passed and I cannot read them anymore. I feel they are everyone in the All. An Ane matter.**

Versal flexed his lithe body in the beanbag. "I tell you, anything that worries that bunch should worry us. They are about the most unconcerned people I have ever met. Did I tell you about the time I nearly got killed in the company of an Ane?"

Takal replied, droll dripped from her tone. "No, you haven't."

"It was, five years back. I was serving as I am now on an older Unity class ship. We got blindsided by a rouge Qzin ship. The battle was short and sweet. The Qzin was space vapor and the *Inquisitive* was space junk. Gazaban, the Ane in question was trapped, one leg crushed beneath some machinery, and I was stuck in the same compartment. The compartment in question was small and leaking.

Gazaban told me that help was on the way. Others were still functioning. However, it was unknown how long rescue would take. We had a good chance of asphyxiation, that is if blood loss didn't take him first. He was that calm about it. 'I may die of blood loss before we run out of air. Is it desirable that I do so quickly? It could improve your chances of survival.' Just that calm. I sensed the slightest hint of regret. Yet, I sensed something deeper I couldn't really read."

"So, what happened."

"It took five hours to get us free. He was bled white, but survived. Last I saw him he was regrowing the leg. He expected it to take several years. I got out with a few abrasions and a story."

"Interesting, but what is the connection?" Asked I'leesa.

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"He was not worried about dying, but what ever this is, it has the lot of them agitated."

Takal raised a eyebrow. "A matter of degree? I have seen that Ane are not overly concerned by their own imminent death, but might be greatly concerned by the pain of others. Yet we have no clue what it is this time."

"I see little future in speculating." Vesal got up for some tea. "We will learn soon enough. Ane are good friends and lovers. We will not be left in the dark."

Meanwhile in the sleeping room of the *Questing* the Ane gathered. With much touching and greetings they lay down among each other. Each withdrew into themselves for the Cleansing.

Taraban brought forth his shock, and examined it with awe, such shock he had never experienced, it was a wonder. He let it pass to be remembered later. He reviewed the pleasures of the night before, he shivered of the sensual lust of it, and this he let pass. He examined the emotions of the bar incident, and let them slip. At last he faced the unknown of the message. This he placed aside with difficulty. At last he was ready, as were the others. As one they joined in ecstasy of the moment, elevated their Icons, raised their Aspects, and addressed themselves to the All.

Said *Questings* to the All. **We have received a message of distress from the Builders.**

Said the All to the *Questings*. **Well we know of it for we have each seen it also.**

Said the Distant Ones to the Federation Ones. **You are much closer, and your ships faster. Can you reach them in time?*

Said the Federation Ones to the Distant Ones. **Questionable, as the degree of need was not stated.**

Said the All to the All. **In time or not we have geas to go. What we cannot prevent, we must avenge.**

Said the All to the All. **Such were the Words given, such was the Promise made. We have the means, so we must do.**

Said the Few to the All. **Who shall go?"

Said the Many to the All. **One alone should not, but many should go as can.**

Said the All to the All. **This is good, then shall one of each that can go, go?*

Said the All to the All. **This is good, we shall then meet in the place of three suns, in the 25th arm of the wheel, the 243 circumference.**

Said the All to the All. **Then we shall meet, and it shall be good.

Said the *Glades* to the All. **We are within rage of the *Questing*, we will join them.

Said the *Searchers* to the All. **We also are close by, and will join with

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Questing.**

Said the All to the Three Ships. **Well and good, together go. Call forth Taraban.**

Said Taraban to the All. **I am here, and do listen.**

Said the All to Taraban. **Go you with Us to the Admiral of Starbase 24 and tell them that We take back these three ships. CB5 *Questing*, CB3 *Searcher*, CX12 *Glade*. For the All has need of them to keep Its Word. Say also with Us to the Klingon Ambassador that We have need to pass through his lands, and will cause them no other trouble if they trouble us not.**

Said Taraban to the All. **So shall We say these words, and such also as are needed. Thus shall We go before them.**

And the *Questings* lowered their Icons, and took again their Aspects. Taraban however remained within the All, and took himself before the Admiral of the station.

"What is going on in there?" Getin paced. He was young enough to be impatient. "They have been two hours and even Fiealan doesn't answer."

Takal sat with her usual Vulcan patience. "When they come out, we will know."

A'fal, said. "It is unusual for all of them to be involved in the All this long. I must admit to a certain curiosity."

Getin stopped pacing, and came to a decision. "Well, standing around and speculating will not get an answer. I'll knock and ask."

Getin suited actions to words and trotted from the lounge. He came to a near stop in front of the door to the Ane's sleeping room to hit the call button when he remembered it didn't have a call button. About the time that revelation filtered down he realized the door was open because of his proximity. He also remembered it didn't have a lock. As his momentum was propelling him in a buff grey female by the name of Dfalan was coming out.

Of course there is no lock silly, there never has been.

"Ah, yea, right. Hey beautiful, what is going on?" Getin could see that the other Ane where rising, stretching and moving about.

**We have a mission to a far place. Want to come?*

"Where you go I'll follow. But what is the mission?"

There will be a general briefing when the Captain gets back. He went to talk to the Admiral.

"You're *What?*!"

We are removing the *Questing*, the *Searcher*, and the *Glade* from under fleet command. Our thoughts were plain enough Admiral.

"I heard you, I do not however understand it, and what is with the `royal

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we' all of a sudden? Taraban you can't do this."

What is to understand Admiral Greyson? We are not myself alone. We are the All speaking. If you examine the fleet agreement under section 1, chapter 3 paragraph 7 you will see that We the All can call again to ourselves any ships we man not engaged in emergency duty. This describes the *Questing*, the *Searcher*, and the *Glade*.

"Can I at least ask what it is all about?"

You may. It is about fulfilling a debt owned Admiral Greyson.

"What debt is that?"

An agreement made with the Builders.

"The `Builders', who in Hell's name is that?"

The builders of the El Nanth rosette Admiral.

"Shit. But, that is...."

Three quarters of a million years old, that is correct.

"What could anyone like that, what ever they are like, need from anyone else?"

We do not know Admiral, that is what we must find out.

The intercom chimed. "Admiral, Ambassador K'rrak to see `the Ane All'?"

Wonderful thought Greyson, **his makes the day complete. An interview with 'Old Prickly' himself.**

You're welcome. Replied All/Taraban, causing the Admiral to start, and give the Ane a dirty look.

"Send the Ambassador in Jean." He scowled at Taraban. "Your doing I suppose."

We did ask the Ambassador to attend.

Ambassador K'rrak stalked into the Admiral's office. He was dressed in the finest of armor and furs, well worn and comfortable. A blaster, much larger than it needed to be graced his belt along with several knives. He took in the assembled and struck his best arrogant stance (he had quite a few). "There is meaning to this summons? I find it is most inconvenient."

All/Taraban replied. **It was We that called you Ambassador.**

"We? I see only one." K'rrak sneered. He stalked up to the Ane and looked him eye to eye. In that moment he "faced" the All in a stare down. He opened his mouth, closed it, and found a chair. His hand shook slightly as he gripped the chair arm. "What is it you want?"

We have need to send three ships through Klingon space. We have called you here to inform you of this.

"And if `we' do not want three ships in Klingon space? What will you do then?" Some of his former arrogance had already recovered.

We will send the three ships.

K'rrak turned on the lessor target, Greyson. "What do you have to do with this?"

"Me, nothing. He sprung this on me as well. Where do you think the three

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ships are coming from?"

K'rtrak tuned back on All/Taraban. "What of these three ships? Why must they pass through Klingon space?"

We have received a distress call, it originates on the other side of Klingon space. Therefore, to reach it, we must pass through Klingon space.

"You will go whether we agree or not?"

Our honor demands we answer this. Klingons, better than any other understand the needs of Honor.

K'rtrak snorted. "You are a flatterer. Appeal to my sense of Honor. What benefit to my Honor is in letting you pass?"

**That it will not be harmed. Should we go, and you have not signaled ahead your approval?*

"Yes, that would hurt me, but subject you to attack."

We do not fear attack.

"Brave fools perhaps. You would be better with escorts."

**Can your escorts cruise at warp 9.5?*

K'rtrak's eyes widened. His shot a look at Greyson, who simply spread his hands. K'rtrak tuned back to All/Taraban.

"So, you will go, and your ships are too fast to pursue or escort. Have you any other surprises for the Klingon Empire?"

There is nothing surprising about this, your government has access to the technical readouts on our ships. What is not accessed from lack of desire, is not our fault.

"If they have been accessed, I know nothing of it. I wish to see this wonder ship of yours. Give me this and I will consider my blessing."

***Searcher* is a day out yet, so there is time. Your request is a reasonable one.**

Admiral Greyson broke in. "I on the other hand still have a few questions. Just what am I to do for patrol cruisers while you gallivant across space?"

Our apologies Admiral, but We have no easy answers for you.

"And, there is the matter of Starfleet officers serving aboard your ships."

If you cannot release them for 'extended duty', they will be put off here. We will remind you that we are going into space the Federation has not explored.

It was Greyson's turn to surprise. "Not exactly. We have a ship out there. We will see it in about 3 years or so."

K'rtrak's eyebrows were crawling up his ridges, even All/Taraban looked surprised.

K'rtrak spoke first. "Indeed Admiral Greyson, how did you get a ship on the other side of Klingon space without our knowledge?"

"Good question, I have no good answers." Greyson held up his hands to stop the counter-reply. "No secrecy Ambassador K'rtrak. I only learned of this myself two days ago. We don't know how they got where they are. From the

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brief I got *they* don't know how they got where they are. But there they are 1000 light-years away, give or take, in a crusty old tub of a Constellation class starship. I was going to inform you at our monthly meeting. As they will be three years getting home, if they get home. With the time-scale we are discussing there was hardly an emergency in informing you."

K'rtrak sat back. Grunted in surprise. "Any speculation?" His attitude had changed to one of curiosity.

"Some, nothing I have concrete information on. Some subspace anomaly in the area of what used to be Deep Space 5."

**Used to be?*

"Use to be, it's gone, they were investigating it when they vanished."

K'rtrak grunted again. "Qu'paha to them then. I will inform the far frontier to keep an eye out."

What is the ship Admiral? If we detect their IFF we can detour and hail them. Bring them home even. With the three ships we have we can handle their crew.

"USS *Harrier*. Captain Jay Hailey commanding."

Isn't he part of the `class of 359'?

K'rtrak raised an eyebrow. "Class of 359?"

Greyson rubbed his nose. "Rash of promotions after the debacle of Wolf 359. Some wag called the resulting Captains the `Class of 359', it stuck."

K'rtrak had an endless repertory of grunts, he used another. "Some `wags' should be shot. It was no battle to name anything after."

Your tone implies more than normal regret.

"I lost two sons that day. A son and a grandson." The big Klingon deflated slightly. "My house was lessened by the blow."

Do not let any lessen your Honor K'rtrak. I was there, I fired on the Borg with everything the *Questing* could give, and they survived to do more damage.

"You, Taraban?"

Yes, myself, not one of ourselves. The *Questing* recovered survivors.

"How much did you hit them with?"

Full turrets plus full queues, we let them have it all, over 300 torpedoes in all. The Borg shrugged it off.

K'rtrak sat for a moment, his hands between his knees, his head bowed reliving the news that his sons were dead with no victory to their Honor. "Then there was no dishonor in losing?"

It was no battle that could have been won, even with twice the ships.

K'rtrak rose to his feet and approached Taraban. He held his hands out, puzzled for a moment at the lack of shoulders in the usual humanoid place and settled on the sides of the Ane's neck. "You have eased somewhat the grief in my heart, and made me once again proud of my sons. House Kathris is in your debt."

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Then ease our way. We have no wish to run from, or battle with, Klingons.

"It shall be done."

Admiral Greyson however was not mollified. "Taraban, the Orions have been very active as of late. I cannot afford to have two frigates vanish from the fleet in such short order."

We will not leave you unprotected Admiral. As we speak three of the older Unity class frigates are being activated. They will be here as quickly as possible.

"What are we talking, weeks, months?"

Days.

"How can you get a ship out of mothballs in days?"

**You cannot. These vessels have never been truly mothballed. They are kept at semi-operational level at the El Nanth space dock. After the Borg attack upgrading was begun at once. The three ships in question are among ten that are fleet ready. They lack only crews. Under the emergency conditions We face, crews will be found, and you will have three smaller ships to replace the *Questing*, *Glade* and *Searcher*.

"OK, you have ships, but where do trained crews come from?"

We have a large number of retired ship crews available Admiral, they will serve under the circumstances.

"I don't like it. Slap-dash crews on old tubs do not two modern heavy frigates, and a heavy cruiser replace."

They are however, all We can offer you right now.

"I just have one question. How do you manage tricks that Starfleet would get the budget ax for even trying?"

Admiral Greyson, people pay us for our computers, for our foodstuffs, for use of our stations, for many things we have done and are doing. We do not need any of that credit for basic living. Good grass, a sunny patch and company are all an Ane requires, or really wants. All that which other worlds spend to clothe, feed, and shelter, we spend on toys, like starships.

Greyson shook his head. K'rrak had a laugh in his eye, that he was doing a Klingonly job of keeping down.

Greyson spoke at last. "Fine, abandon me to the Orions. I'll take your three ships as I can see I am not getting any better. Now if you will excuse me, I have to figure out how to juggle even less to do more."

All/Taraban and K'rrak left Greyson to his problems.

All/Taraban spoke. **Ambassador, come by later, 'I' will show you my ship.**

"Is this one of your 'toys'?"

In a manner yes. We have had thousands of years without space flight Ambassador. We enjoy it when the technology is available.

All/Taraban left K'rrak striding down the corridor shaking his head, and

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returned to the ship.

Later in the sleeping room, Taraban, lowered his Icon, and took again his Aspect. For the hours before Ambassador K'rtrak was to arrive, he slept.

Two hours later the CX12 *Glade* pulled into Starbase 24. The *Glade* was one of the latest class of Exploratory/multi-use cruisers designed by the Ane and the latest example of the class. The Planet class ship had a main hull like a drooping ovoid with engineering in the front half of the ship. Nacelles are mounted on the ends of a wing that extended from the bow section. Torpedo turrets were mounted on the top and the bottom. Phaser arrays at various spots completed the armament.

What made the class unique was the mission hull. It was docked to the rest of the ship in a manner much like the two parts of the Galaxy class ships. This mission hull was twice the size of the rest of the ship. It could be changed out with great ease. Different modules existed for a variety of missions, from deep space survey to colony seeding. It could even function as a bulk freighter or a passenger liner should the need arise. As a warship the Planet class cruisers wallowed like the whales they were. With the mission hull attached they looked very much like whales with warp drives added on. Minus the mission hull they could hold their own as a frigate. Planet class ships possessed about the fire power of a Galaxy class ship with slightly better speed, and slightly worse maneuverability. Fully equipped with general exploration and science hull as the *Glade* was, the crew was 300 Ane and other species. The Planet class, more than the frigates carried a crew of various races.

Fiealan exchanged pleasantries with Delalan. A rundown of the mission was not necessary. The 50 non-Ane crew of the *Glade* were engaged in endless discussion over whether to ask for transfers or to accompany the "rescue mission" into unknown space. Thus far the majority were favoring taking the trip. The handful of civilian scientists were all but frothing at the mouth to go.

Ambassador K'rtrak viewed the bean bag with slight apprehension. At last deciding that a graceful decent was nigh unto impossible, he flopped back into the unusual furniture.

"/A most impressive ship Captain. It makes me wonder. If you can design and man such impressive warships. Why have you not set out to conquer?/"

We don't have a bump on our brain for that is the best answer I can give you.

K'rtrak looked amazed. "/You have no desire for the glory of battle, but

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build ships that are a pure expression of that desire. I confess, I lust for this ship. Why do you then make them?/"

Because other people do. Aggressive people, that do seek what they call glory, and that do seek to conquer and hold. If a peaceful people is to remain peaceful they must learn war better than the warrior, and periodically teach them the folly of making war on the peaceful.

K'rtrak, blinked a time or two, then threw back his head and roared with laughter. "/You!/" K'rtrak was pointing his finger. "/You are the most dangerous people I have yet to see. I honor you oh non-warrior./" K'rtrak bowed from his seated position, deciding wisely that getting up was not worth the effort. "/From what I have seen you teach this 'folly' well./"

A lesson not well taught is not well learned. We prefer to teach it as little as possible.

"/It would be a great honor to share your journey./"

So, come. We have ship enough to support you.

The offer rendered K'rtrak speechless for a moment. "/You are serious in this?/"

**I would not make the offer if I was not. We are going places that no one from your people has even gone. Would you like to come?*

"/Yes, I would, the chance is one to not be passed up. The only question is how to arrange it. Duty you understand./"

**As we are passing through Klingon space, would it not be best that a high ranking Klingon accompany us?*

K'rtrak once again tossed back his head and roared with laughter. "/You are wise Captain. Yes, that is the very thing. To no one else could I trust this duty. I will go./"

One thing I must require. You will have to leave your normal body guard behind.

K'rtrak's eyebrows went up. "/It is too dangerous for Klingon warriors?/"

Exactly. The ego and attitude of the average Klingon warrior would get then into a series of 'incidents' with my crew until the point they found themselves breathing vacuum. I would not want these deaths weighing on my conscience. Ane do not tolerate the self important well.

K'rtrak frowned. "/I must consider this. If I lack a bodyguard in Klingon space questions will be asked. Questions I cannot afford to have asked. As interesting as your mission is, I have to live here afterward./"

I can give you until 24 hours after the *Searcher* docks. We are giving Starfleet that long to decide about non-Ane Starfleet personnel on all three ships. Then we sail, with or without a good many people.

"/You shall have my answer. I shall work this out./" He paused. "/If I can find bodyguards that you think are suitable?/"

Then we will discuss it.

"/Well enough./" K'rtrak levered himself back to his feet. "/Until then

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Captain Taraban./" K'rrak made his way from the *Questing*.

Starbase 24 was a hive of stirred bees. The Starfleet personnel from the Ane ships were busy recording messages, getting supplies, if possible, of favored consumables that didn't replicate well or still debating whether they should even go on what looked like a wild goose chase across the heart of Klingon space.

27 hours after the *Glade* made port the *Searcher* arrived also. Her all Ane crew had no problems to add to the buzzing base, but the time limit was now set. Stay or leave, in 24 hours the "Builder's Squadron" departed.

Gar'th and J'mon sweated under the scrutiny of the elder female Ane. Kalan was giving them everything she had in terms of psychological stress, and with a telepath that took new meaning. The two massive Klingon warriors looked like schoolboys caught in the girl's restroom. The diminutive Ane glared at them, paced around them. They stood sweat dripping in the dry heat, wordless, unmoving. Their eyes followed her every move. At last she broke away from them and joined Taraban and K'rrak at the other end of the lounge. The two Klingons deflated slightly, but remained at attention.

They'll do K'rrak. I gave them close to my worse, and the kids here are not my equal. They'll do, or I will know why.

"I do not understand these 'tests', I will have to take your word on it."

Taraban spoke. **You can be assured on her word K'rrak. Kalan is the best in the business. I was fortunate to get her as the ship caterer.**

"Caterer? I do not understand this. Is not a 'caterer' a preparer of food?/"

The concept does not translate into words well. While maintenance of the foodstuffs is part of the Caterer's duties, so is every other aspect of the crew's needs, physical and spiritual. That is the reason you usually find older females in the position. Experienced mothers are best at it.

K'rrak turned to look Kalan in the eyes. "Yes, you do remind me of my Mother, and a frightening thought THAT is." He roared at his own joke.

The two Ane got the impression of a loving tyrant soundly spanking a young boy with the broad side of a bat'leth, and they to "laughed" in their own fashion.

K'rrak got back to brass tacks. "/Since my body guard is deemed 'suitable', I will be going with you. There is the matter of foodstuffs. You can eat greens, I and my men would starve on it./"

Kalan took the ball. **Bring me the replicator programs for the food you prefer. We can install them in the replicators we have. I have cleared a ton each for you and each of your body guards for fresh foods and other gear. Pick wisely, we may be gone as long as a year, or even more. I am arranging a few

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tons more on the *Glade*.**

"/Yes Mother./" He said it with a gleam in his eye. He turned back to Taraban. "/This does concern me. If I gaged your ship right, you are not a deep space craft./"

Observant of you. No, we have an on station duration of 14 months of comfortable supply. *Glade* is the saving grace of the mission. Without it we wouldn't even try. If one ship was going, it would be the *Glade*. *Glade* has five years supplies. With the three ships that gives us a duration, in the comfortable range of 36 months total. If we cannot complete the mission in that time, we had best give it up.

K'rrak turned back to the two Klingons still standing at attention. He shouted across to them. "/Gar'th, J'mon, come!/"

The two warriors trotted over to the Ambassador.

"/I have convinced the good Captain and his officer that you are worthy enough to accompany me on this most important mission./" K'rrak growled at them as if he was not sure they were worthy enough. "/There are two things you will keep always in mind. First, this is not a Klingon ship, and Ane ways are not Klingon ways. You are in another's house, act thusly. Second, that Captain Taraban is in command here, I am not. He is the master of the ship, his word is as Kahless himself./"

The two snapped back to attention, and said as one. "/We have heard and obey./"

"/Good! We have an understanding. Now, we have less than 14 hours until we leave. Make yourselves ready. Dismissed./"

The two bodyguards saluted K'rrak, then Taraban, and departed to the surface.

Taraban commented. **They learn quickly.**

"/They had better. Those are my grandsons. And I am proud of them./"

Ga'fer sulked around the depot. Later in the night of his public disgrace he returned to the low port to find his Father's ship locked against him. His key no longer worked. Without place, without honor and all of it taken by a herbivore that he hadn't even touched! Suicide was out of the question. He didn't think his brothers would give him the satisfaction of a quick death. Somehow, some way he had to kill that, thing, and with its hide across his shoulders, return with his honor intact. For the last several days he had wracked his brain for a means of getting that cowardly creature to fight him.

Two of the humans were coming. Ga'fer ducked further behind the crates. They were dockworkers, talking and making much noise. Security never spoke on patrol.

"Jim, that can't be right."

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"Look, I have the work order right in my PADD. Two crates of gagh for loading on the CB5 *Questing*."

"But gagh? The four legged critters are herbivores. What would they want with gagh?"

"For all I know they want pets. However, the work order says, 'two crates of gagh to be loaded,' so we load them."

"Next thing you hear of they will be running rescue missions to save cattle on primitive worlds."

"Dale me boy, 'ours is not to question why,' we just shift the freight. Speaking of which here they are. Lets get the lifters and shift them to the transporter platform."

The two humans were on the other side of the very crate Ga'fer was crouched behind. Once he heard them leave Ga'fer shifted and looked for the labels on the crate. Yes, "Live Gagh". Revenge could be his.

He quickly opened the crate and crawled in among the worms. He gasped softly with the cold. He forgot, Gagh is shipped refrigerated to slow its metabolism and remove the need for feeding it. No problem, he wouldn't be in the crate long enough to get that cold.

Soon Jim and Dale returned with the antigrav lifters. Each took one of the two large crates and placed it on the transporter. Ga'fer felt the tingles of the transporter, soon, soon he would have that creature's severed head in his hands, and the powerful battlecruiser at his command. Once he proved his superiority over the Captain, the crew would be his to command.

Fiealan received shipment of the Klingon supplies. The sensor reading on that gagh was a bit on the funny side. She decided to investigate it as she worked. Once in static storage, it wasn't going anywhere. A bio closed the slightly open loading hatch.

Ga'fer heard the click of the cargo container's latch. NO! He was locked in. The cold intensified, his mind was getting fuzzy, his actions slower. He struggled to get free of the worms. Ancestors no, he could not die this way! Smothered in gagh! His dishonor would be complete. He felt control of his body slipping from him, gods, no, no... ..in his last fleeing moments of consciousness he thought. "Father always said I was a fool who never thought first. I guess, he was right."

Questing checked the settings on the stasis fields. The life signs were in perfect suspension. She smiled to herself. The system has never been tested on a sentient life form. Ga'fer would be lucky, or not as the case may, be if he survived.

Admiral Greyson looked out his office window at the formation of Ane ships leaving the station under minimal impulse. The two best, two only, heavy

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frigates in the sector, and the equivalent of a Galaxy class starship, gone. In their place a trio of promised old tubs that were still three days out. What havoc could the Orions wreck in three days? He feared the outcome.

Taraban shifted in the command pit. He was in link with the other two ships. Captain Halan of the *Glade*, and Captain Yralban of the *Searcher*. Together with the computer officers, Fiealan of the *Questing*, Delalan of the *Glade*, and Elathlan of the *Searcher* they formed a tight telepathic network. No tech communication, subspace or otherwise would be required. Reports to the All would be made in the usual fashion. Taraban, possessing the longest tenure in the 'pit', was made commander of the flotilla.

The Klingon border was rapidly approaching. Taraban passed the word down the line.

****All ships Yellow alert.****

Confirmation was quickly received. The buoys of the border were passed and gone.

****All ships to warp factor 9, long cruise mode. On the mark, report when ready.****

****Searcher ready.****

****Glade ready.****

****Questing ready.****

****Mark.****

The three ships stretched the space around them even further. Settling in for the long journey.

Klingon is a good language for cursing. It was a fact the K'rrak was well aware of, but at the moment he was too involved in practicing that art to derive satisfaction from the possibilities. "/You son of a Romulan, I am not asking your 'permission'./" The Ambassador was livid and flushed. "/I am on important business and I am passing through this space./"

Two parsecs away the Commander of Forward Base 14 cursed with equal agitation into the screen.

"/I do not read Klingon cruisers Ambassador. Those are Federation warships./"

"/I will travel as I please Commander. If I feel that Federation ships are superior for my needs, then so be it. This is a diplomatic mission, it does not require your interference or aid./"

"/If you mission is 'diplomatic', then escorts are required, Ambassador, as well you should know./"

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"I am all the escort that is required. Do you doubt my ability to handle the matter, commander? In any case, your escorts cannot keep pace with us."

"Reduce your speed I am sending escorts to join you."

"Commander, we have already passed the limits of your command while we spoke."

K'rarak cut the channel on the fury of the Commander and sat back chucking. "Lard ass."

A view of an Ane he had not yet seen popped up on his display. **Was the encounter satisfying?*

"Who are you, and what do you know of this?" K'rarak was defensive.

I am Fiealan, the ship you're riding in Ambassador. I can hardly help but notice someone using my subspace communications systems.

K'rarak leaned in for a closer look at the screen. "The ship? How can someone be the ship?"

**It takes much study and time to become a ship. So, how long have you wanted to stick it to him?*

"Ho, ho 'ship'. Very long indeed. He will be a long time living down an encounter he missed because he was kept talking too long."

**So Klingons are not all fight?*

"Define 'fight'. That was every bit as serious as facing off with Bat'leth on the sand of honor. A fight does not have to be physical to injure a foe."

Federation people are of the opinion that Klingons are all fight, and no reason.

"Ha, we fight yes, but if we did nothing but fight, we would be a brief mark on the record of failed races."

Fiealan added quietly. **It is lack of knowledge that fosters many an unnecessary fight.**

"What knowledge did you seek?"

We seek all knowledge Ambassador. What Ane do is remember. It is our belief that as long as you are remembered, you never truly die. Tell me about House Kathris, and it shall live forever.

"How do you wish it told?"

Flickering at first, then firmly visible before him an image of the ancient Klingon court appeared. The nobles of a by-gone era, and in the center the Bloody Throne, and upon it, the first Kahless the Unforgettable.

Tell me as you would tell him.

K'rarak stood to marvel at the image. "I looks so real."

In times past, an Ane was given as tribute to Kahless himself. She made good account of herself, and He allowed that she should live. However, since that time we have had no record of the Klingon court. These, are her memories.

The big Klingon stood before the legendary founder. He took a deep breath strode before the image, thrust out his chest. "I am K'RRAK of the House of

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KARTHRIIS! Hear me and know my might and the might of my house and lineage! This very day I have defeated with words alone a dog that would call himself the commander of a starbase...

...and in the 9th year of the Rule of Kahless the Unforgettable, my Ancestor Karthris slew the killers of his Father, and his Father's Brothers. This he did in his 12th year, and with his own hands. So did Kahless grant him lineage and house, and so it has remained to this day!/"

It was many hours later. K'rtrak sat heavily as the image faded. He was tired, but happy. Such an opportunity came not even once in most lifetimes. His food preference and blood wine sparkled into existence on the table beside him. "It was good. I may never be called before the Emperor to make such a declaration./" He sat back with his plate of food and drink. "/I regret that no pictures of Karthris remain./"

I may have one.

"/Truly?/"

I am thinking. Yes. Look at the wall.

Slowly as before an image constructed itself. The point of view was from the side of the Throne itself. A party of some kind was in progress. Fiealan spoke again. **There, third from the left, I remember that Klingon being named Kathris. This is the 24th year of the Rule of Kahless. He is the only Klingon in the court with that name.**

"/Amazing. This is the real memory? I am seeing it as it was seen?/"

Yes, such is our way and our function.

K'rtrak was animated again in spite of his fatigue. "/Can you save this in a data solid?/"

Yes, as ship's computer I can do that. I'll make you a holocube. It will take a few hours to manufacture it.

"/I have good reason to have come already./"

I have one more request K'rtrak.

"/And what would that be?/"

Tell me about your Mother.

"/My mother? Why?/"

Without Klingon mothers, there would be no Klingon warriors. Yet, their story is so seldom told when tales of blood and honor are brought around the fire. This too must be remembered.

K'rtrak stroked his beard a moment, and chewed in silence.

"/You are very wise you rememberers. Yes, Mothers are our foundation as much as Fathers, so it is remembered in the Woman's Song, they too must be remembered. My Mother died five years ago, she was very old.../" So he continued for several more hours in the Klingon manner of telling the tale from end to beginning.

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Fiealan Cleansed herself, and elevated her Icon, raised her Aspect, and addressed the All. Said Fiealan to the All. **This is the tale of the House Kathris of the Klingons as told to me by K'rrak of the House Kathris. Also told is the Tale of Genna the Mother of K'rrak. Let these things be cherished and remembered forever.**

As so it was that the All did cherish and celebrate the memories, and the Tale of the House Kathris of the Klingons as told by K'rrak of the House Kathris, and the Tale of Genna the Mother of K'rrak were placed among the chronicles of the multitudes of the peoples. They were cherished also with the Tale of Kahless, remembered by Shelan so that the Tale of the Klingons would continue for as long as time existed.

J'mon circled left around Yargaban. They had been sparing for 15 minutes now, and J'mon had yet to win a throw. Yes, the creature had four legs, yes it out weighted him two to one, but he was a *Klingon*, that counted for something. He would throw this creature yet. So they circled. Gar'th, urged his brother on.

"/Come on you son of a Orion, show them what a Klingon can do./"

"/You, wait./" J'mon gasped between moves. "/You're next you Cardassian dog./"

J'mon feinted to the side, Yargaban didn't budge. Damn that. He lunged, Yargaban stepped aside. J'mon lashed out with a hand and grabbed a horn. With J'mon off balance it was easy to pull him off his feet. However, this time J'mon didn't let go, but dug in and hung on. His weight pulled Yargaban's head down, his feet shifted for a better balance. J'mon pulled, balling his mass tighter and getting an arm under him for purchase. Yargaban staggered and lost his front legs. Not enough, J'mon wanted him all the way down. He swept at the near hind leg with his own and Yargaban went down with a meaty thud. Damn, right on his leg.

Gar'th took in the sight of the two of them sprawled all over the mat and roared with laughter.

Yargaban looked at him. **Well, you have me, and I have you. Shall we call it a draw?***

J'mon lay a moment with his leg pinned. If he let go of the horn the Ane would be all over him.

"/Fair enough Yargaban. A draw./"

His brother howled as he hauled himself to his feet.

"/So, let us see how well you fair oh 'mighty warrior'./"

"/It will be hard to do worse./"

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"/We shall see./"

Gar'th stepped up to the mat. His brother's opponent was winded and resting.

"/So, which of you wants a tussle with a REAL Klingon?/"

The little female that stepped daintily on the mat brought out more gales of laughter.

"/You little one?/"

Me, take it or leave it. And the name is Galan, not 'little one'.

"/Never let it be said a Klingon refused a challenge./"

Gar'th settled into a fighters crouch. A feral grin on his face. He motioned her forward. She leaped, he grabbed, nothing. Then the pile driver slammed him in the rear. Gar'th sprawled face first into the mat, his eyes bugged with surprise. This time J'mon was the one laughing. Gar'th rolled to his feet.

"/I don't know how you did that, but you are not doing it again./"

She pinned her ears back. This time he charged, trying his brother's horn move. He grabbed, nothing. Once again the pile driver kick to the butt. Once again Gar'th sprawled out on the mat. He got up a little slower this time. His brother's cackling in his ears.

**Have you learned respect yet Klingon?*

"/Respect? Why do you think I do not respect you?/"

He staggered to his feet. This time he caught her move. She vanished Gar'th whirred around to catch the pile driver kick right in the groin.

Even the mighty Klingon warrior has his limits, his eyes rolled back and he curled into a ball before he even hit the mat. J'mon was not laughing. He rushed to his fallen brother's side.

Galan stood with a shocked look, ears straight out.

I didn't mean to kick him in the nuts.

Medical to the gym. Fiealan broke in.

A'fal and Casalan shortly rushed in, A'fal quickly ran her medical scanner over the fallen Klingon.

Fiealan, take us to the surgical bay.

The two healers and the Klingon vanished in a transporter sparkle.

Several hours later Gar'th woke to find his Grandfather, his bother and Galan looking down on him. "/Wa' happened./"

Galan took as serious a tone as she could manage. **Never, call me 'little one'.**

Over the next several days the two became inseparable. Gar'th told her every tale he had, twice, and Galan explained as best she could what Ane were. Rumor even had it they were physically intimate. Gar'th bristled at the suggestion. Galan said nothing. Sparring continued, and each learned much of the other's style of fighting. The expected grudge match never materialized.

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The three ships continued through Klingon space, cruising at warp 9. Station commanders cursed. Several ships gave chase or attempted intercepts. K'rrak repeated his "diplomatic mission" excuse more than once. Near the far borders of the empire they passed within a light-year of a large mobilized battle fleet. They were sniffed at, a scout or two feinted in their direction, but the Admiral of that fleet was after bigger prey.

K'rrak came out of his quarters seeking Taraban. He found him on the bridge. K'rrak looked around the small chamber. The shock still bios, the helm/operations station and the pit. He squatted down by the pit.

"/You do not go long on pomp do you?/"

**How do you mean?*

"/A Klingon builds his bridge to project his power. A throne for a chair, the trappings of the warrior. This is to impress both his fellows and his foes./"

No, I can't say pomp is important to Ane.

K'rrak took a second brief look around.

"/Where is your tactical viewscreen?/"

It's a holoprojector, part telepathic in nature. You have to be in the pit to really see it.

"/Ah, I see. We must talk./"

**Would you prefer more comfortable arrangements?*

 Taraban noting K'rrak's posture.

"/Yes, how about my rooms?/"

Suits.

Taraban followed the Klingon to his suite of rooms. K'rrak had obviously been making use of the replicators to render a long term stay more comfortable, or he brought a good deal with him.

"I brought it with me. Your computer was most helpful."

Have you taken to reading minds K'rrak

"/Ha. The concern of a Commander for his ship's resources is universal. I need not read minds for that./"

You needed to talk.

"/Yes. The battle fleet we passed, could you fight it?/"

**Fight yes. Win, only if luck was with us, and the commander very stupid. I can guarantee however it would be a victory he would rue. Are we going to have to fight it?*

"/Not outward bound at least. The commander is an old foe. He will not give us an easy way back./"

**All Klingons are not then so united?*

"/Against a common foe to Klingons all, deadly enemies will fight side by side. But like the ancient Greeks of the Humans, when no general threat looms,

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we squabble among each other./"

And there is no foe strong enough to bind the two of you now.

"/In essence. We may have to fight our way back in./"

First we must get back to fight our way in. I am holding a Captain's meeting in two hours. We will meet physically so as to facilitate your attending. We also will give you a chance to look the *Glade* over.

"/We will meet there?/"

Yes, you have two hours to decide how impressive to look.

In the end K'rtrak showed up without bodyguards, or weapons, other than a single knife. He also left the armor in his stateroom.

The meeting took place in main conference room of the *Glade*. It was suited to multi-species meetings. It had a large, round table with a holoprojector in the center. Taraban brought the meeting to order.

We are now passed the Klingon border, and into unknown space. What knowledge can we dredge up about the area.

Captain Halan took over in the role of sciences chief.

The last reported contact from this sector was the Rishians.

Yralban yawned. **That is real old news.**

Halan said. **However, it can be dangerous news depending on how much of their technology is left in the area. We will be passing near their main sphere of influence.**

"Who are these 'Rishians', and what is their danger?" K'rtrak leaned back in his chair.

Halan replied. **The Rishians are an advanced race we last had contact with some 95,000 years ago. Their technology is as far above ours as we are above stone knives and bone spears. I could give you a brief catalog of Rishian technology that we are aware of, but no understanding of it.**

"/Too dangerous to explain?/"

No. Said Halan. **You have to understand something to explain it. Our one encounter with the Rishians was a total disaster. We never understood them and I know they made no effort to understand us. Like I said, I can recite stories, but no hard facts. They... they did us a great deal of damage.**

Taraban spoke again. **Our best bet is avoid all star systems and keep the sensors on maximum. No encounters are good encounters.**

Yralban spoke again. **The question is, will the Rishian allow us to not make contact.**

A very good question. We will get the answer soon enough.

Rishian space passed without incident. No contact, or even attempted contact was made.

Taraban sat down in the pit. The ship was under Fiealan's control alone, and only the impassive bios remained on the bridge. They were six weeks into

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unknown space. The Rishian sphere was behind them, and months yet to get where they were going.

Captain, we have two ships on sensors.

**What are we dealing with?*

I don't think they have scanned us yet.

OK, order a detour around them. I want to avoid contact if at all possible.

Yes, sir.

Captain Toff of the Zantree alliance ship Galffin looked at the quizzical expression on his sensor officer's face.

"Do you have a contact?"

"I, thought I did. I had a reading on three ships, but it's gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone. They were right on the edge of sensor range, and they're gone."

"Could it be Kliges'chee." The sensor officer made adjustments, and enhancements to the brief contact record. The blobs formed into more shapely blobs. One could be seen as larger than the other two.

"Three contacts, I do not think they are Kliges'chee."

"On what do you base your conclusions?"

"Sir, for one thing they are moving from the Taboo zone into Kliges'chee space. For the second I have a velocity reading."

"And?"

"If they are Kliges'chee, we are finished. They are moving in excess of Warp 8."

"Let us hope they are not Kliges'chee, and wish them much trouble on the Kliges'chee."

"Yes sir."

Two months out of Klingon space the Flotilla hit the first trouble. Delalan reported to all Captains.

I have multiple contacts ahead. Readings indicate weapons are being fired.

Halan replied. **We certainly want to avoid that.**

Agreed. Answered Taraban. **Plot a course to avoid the battle.**

All three Helms replied and the flotilla shifted course.

Elathlan came back. **Additional units on long range scanners.**

Can we shift to avoid them.

Fiealan broke in. **This will take us further off course.**

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Better a longer trip than a battle.

Delalan reported again. **Additional units approaching the battle. It is getting to be a real hornet's nest in there.**

All stop.

Delalan reported once again. **I have two units approaching from astern. We are getting a hail.**

Taraban sighed. **All ships red alert.**

Feet pounded though the flotilla as the three ships came to battle readiness.

Full impulse right angles to the battle. Open the hail.

The Alien starship commander was, what could best be described as a "tentacled mess." A blob with tentacles and an even dozen eyes, if that is what they were. The atmosphere was a smoky haze. Shields prevented a better scan.

"Who are you and why are you here?"

Well, thought Taraban, he is direct.

We are the Ane, we seek to pass through this space.

"Who do you side with?"

We are unaware of the sides, and do not wish to take any, we are on an errand, and wish only to pass through this space.

"You are in Kliges'chee space, and we are at war. You must choose your side."

This is going to be difficult without some facts on the matter.

"What is your decision?"

That I shall not be hasty. I will not declare a 'side', until I know what the sides are, and what they stand for.

"We are the proper Kliges'chee, we offer you a military alliance."

Insufficient data. A decision cannot be made on 'proper Kliges'chee' alone.

"If you are not allied with the proper Kliges'chee, you are against them."

Taraban broadcast for the crews alone. **I am beginning to like the other side already. All ships tactic 'stooge', maximum warp, we met one parsec the other side of that battle. Now!**

All three Ane ships peeled off seemingly at each other. They jumped to warp speed before the other ship could react. K'rarak watched from the recovery control room of the *Questing*. He keyed the intercom.

"Why didn't you fight Taraban? You could easily defeat that thing."

Taraban looked at the Klingon. **I don't like to start fights I don't need. This guy 'negotiates' like a bad B-film villain.**

Questing, *Glade*, and *Searcher* took separate routes at maximum warp around the battle, dodging ships that came at them, and in general throwing everyone's tactics off. Taraban simply hoped that whoever was in the right, if there was a "right" would benefit from the confusion.

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Taraban shifted in the command pit. He was in link with the other two ships. Captain Halan of the *Glade*, and Captain Yralban of the *Searcher*. The three ships floated in the void. It had taken three days to get around the battle, and from the sensor readings it was still raging, although at a reduced level. Currently all three ships were combing sub-space for communication, there was remarkably little.

Halan spoke. ****I have been watching the tactics used. First, their ships do not seem designed for the battle they are fighting. Second, they move the way we would.****

Yralban asked. ****How so.****

****No commands on subspace, but they move as if controlled by a single mind.****

Delalan broke in. ****Correction Captain. One side operates in that fashion, the other side does not. They also look to be getting their pants whipped because of it.****

Taraban said. ****Two different races, one telepathic, one not?*****

Delalan replied. ****That is a possible answer.****

Fiealan jumped in. ****However, all the ships are of a type. I count three classes of vessel total, and all three types on each side.****

Elathlan joined the conversation for the first time. ****Yea, and a frozen methane atmosphere on all of them. We ain't gonna find much in common with them.****

Halan said. ****No, not in a physical sense.****

Taraban took over. ****However, the investigation is secondary to our primary goal of getting where we need to be. We will continue to analyze the scans we have and see what comes of it. We might have this to face on the way back.****

The three ships formed up and proceeded at warp 9.

Several times over the next few weeks the Flotilla dodged Kliges'chee ships and fleets. Space was swarming with the vessels. Too many ships to be an accident. Glalaban, Sciences Chief from the *Glade* had the probability of a mass mind at work currently at 67.5474%. Ships were being placed in their path. A situation was being created were they would either have to fight, or stop. So far they had dodged every attempt to stop them, and they had refused to be dragged into a fight.

The break came in the morning of the 20th day in Kliges'chee space.

Fiealan said to Taraban.

****Captain, we have a hail.****

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Again. No we are not allying ourselves with the proper Kliges'chee.

"Good!" Said the voice on the other end.

Good? This is different.

The "face" on the screen was the same as the others he had seen, but the attitude was a 180 degrees different Taraban called the other Captains onto the link.

"I am a representative of the Free Kliges'chee. We wish peaceful contact with other races. Will you talk with us?"

Talk is all I have time for right now, but yes, we will talk while in range.

"You have had contact with the 'proper Kliges'chee'?"

Brief, but yes.

"They are a mass mind bent on control of all resources in space."

**I'll take that at face value right now, how do you differ?*

"The free Kliges'chee are not part of the mass mind. We possess free will, and we are willing to fight for it."

**Admirable. So how are you doing?*

"Honestly, not real good. Because they have a mass mind, they fight better."

You are a telepathic race.

"Yes."

As are we. It is possible to link minds, and retain yourself. Experiment with this. It is how we work. The All together, but each ourselves, with our own will.

"Can you tell us more?"

Open yourself to me.

Taraban felt the mind of the Kliges'chee, a carnivore, a very cold carnivore. It was also very frightened of losing its free will. He eased its mind, and linked with Yargaban who was with the All today. The Ane assured themselves that this being spoke truth, and quickly taught the means of creating their own telepathic network.

**Thank you, thank you very much, with this we can take advantage of our ability to link, and not lose ourselves in the process. Can you stop and stay for a while?*

That is not possible at this time, we have urgent business. In any case, we live in a gaseous oxygen atmosphere. I don't think you would like it much.

Nor you ours.

Our minds have touched, we can keep contact that way.

**You have helped us, can we help you?*

Tell us of the Kliges'chee.

And so the Tale of the Kliges'chee, both the proper and the Free was added, in the broadest of terms, to the chronicles of the multitudes of the peoples.

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In the space about a planet the fleets approached. The life-forms within were identical in every respect. The ships built by the same hands. Their minds were without a single point in common. On one side the proper Kliges'chee, willed to act by a handful of minds went forth. The Status Quo their sacred cause, the others an abomination to every thought of the Comptrollers. On the other, the Free Kliges'chee fought, and willingly died to remain each his own person. Never to surrender their will, never to let another be them for them.

This time it was different, this time with the united imagination of thousands of minds, vs. the experience of a few, the battle did not turn quickly in favor of the proper Kliges'chee. This time the Free Kliges'chee could maneuver with the confidence of the mass mind, and fight like the free willed beings they were. This time, the slaughter was massive, but the victor was not the proper Kliges'chee.

The night had passed it zenith, the road was still dark, but in the distance, a glimmer of the dawn could be seen. A new era would begin, and a future race would mark this day as its beginning.

Into the night sped the messengers of the dawn. Beings with a mission of their own. A purpose unfathomed by the Kliges'chee.

The small fleet had been in space for 7 months. The worlds of the Kliges'chee were far behind them. Before them was the place of three suns, in the 25th arm of the wheel, the 243 circumference. And the problem was obvious.

The three suns orbited about a single point in space. In that point was a space station. A space station 14,000 kilometers in diameter. Around the suns orbited ships of an unknown design. The sleek dart-like vessels were each a fourth the size of the Manta class ships, and had a similar power curve. So far they had located and identified 75 of these vessels. They prowled like hungry lions around a trapped buffalo. They made passes, firing weapons at the station to little effect, but still they prowled. The Ane flotilla remained a small and dark spot in the Oort cloud, and took sensor scans.

Taraban looked at the options, and called a meeting with the Captains. ****We have 75 hostile warships. Too many to fight, and running is not an option.****

Halan said. ****The Builders are not pacifists, they would have fought back, and that station could easily drive the wolves from the door.****

Yralban added. ****Interesting wolves. Gunboats by the power curve. Either they have a tender somewhere, or they are a hardy bunch that doesn't**

mind cramped discomfort.**

Size is a factor as well. Tataban replied. **Sentient does not require great size. Those could be very large ships.**

K'rtrak sat back and listened. Today he wore the full regalia of a warrior. His bodyguards fully armed behind him. "You will fight then?"

Taraban answered. **Unless they are willing to let us pass, yes. We will fight. However, I don't intend to announce ourselves until we are on the way in. No point in long drawn out negotiations that allow them time to gather for us.**

K'rtrak grunted his assent.

Halan said. **We need to contact the Builders. Again, they could fight back, that fleet is nothing compared to what the station could do. The question remains, are any of the Builders left.**

Taraban mused. **Good point. Pacifists they are not. However, they did have odd ideas about AIs.**

K'rtrak spoke. "Odd ideas'? How do you mean?"

They would allow a created intelligence to defend, or fight another created intelligence, but they could only defend against attacks by biological life-forms. The fact that the attacking fleet still remains tells me it is a good possibility there are no biological Builders on the station.

"Then what is the point in coming?"

Intelligence is intelligence. We are here to render assistance, and we will. How far are The Heptite?*

Delalan took the question. **Their last report put them a month out.**

The Heptite have ships that are the equivalent of ours 80 years ago. OK we will take the plunge. Contact the station on telepathic bands, inform it we are coming in. Standard formation, we go in welcome or not.

The next hour was spent battening down everything that might move. Batteries were topped off, Ship integrity fields reinforced and all pressure zones locked down. Taraban waited as the reports came in. Soon everything was in readiness.

Red Alert. The call was a formality.

All ahead warp 6. We will wait for them to notice and hail us.

The wolves didn't wait. The three Ane ships were quickly spotted as they entered the system proper.

"This is Farceit control ship to unknown ships, go away, this space and all it contains are ours."

This is Captain Taraban of the Ane. We have received a distress call from this location. We are answering this hail. Do not interfere.

Taraban looked at the Farceit commander. First impressions confirmed a lot, the ship looked very utilitarian, and cramped. The race appeared as the common two arms, two legs and a head body form. The heads were large, and had big black eyes. In comparison the bodies looked under developed. The

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mouth was small. The bridge was dark, and the being looked to be squinting into its monitor. It repeated its first warning.

"Ane ships, we have claimed this space, beware and get lost!"

We have received a distress call, and will answer it.

"Then you will die!" The connection was cut.

Damn.

Fiealan reported. **All ships are closing on our location. Predict that 30% will be able to engage us before we reach the station.**

Too many, they have an intent to destroy, do not wait, repeat, do not wait until we are fired on to fire. Open fire when the ships are in range.

All ships have raised shields and are arming weapons.

The first flight of four ships closed with the Ane vessels. They set up for a high speed pass. Taraban didn't wait. **Maneuver 'stooge'. Take them.** The three ships again executed a dive seemingly at each other. The Farceit vessels hesitated in their headlong plunge, and fired weapons. Most missed, or hit glancing blows. All three ships were taken out of warp. The Ane ships targeted and fired as well. Two of the four Farceit ships blew up on the first hit, one looked crippled, and the fourth was shaken but not damaged. Taraban was surprised.

Analyze.

Delalan answered. **Limited shielding. They can set for specific frequencies, but the field is penetrated by anything else. Advantage us.**

Limited advantage, but we need any we can get. Continue at full impulse speed, ready phasers. Anyone that saw that will expect the same I hope.

The second flight was closing fast on a tangent. They fired far out. A plasma spread that rocked the fleet, with a slight drain on shields.

Elathlan reported. **Watch that one, similar to Romulan designs, it will hurt close up.**

The battle raged as the Farceit tried to guess which weapons the Ane would use, and the Ane plunged through the swarm ducking and weaving to avoid the heavy weapons. The Farceit were losing the guessing game. 50% of the hits that the Ane dealt out were serious to fatal. But Ane defenses were wearing down.

Glade was hit bad, and leaking air from the mission hull, *Searcher* had one phaser array out. *Questing* had a turret jammed and out of service. They still had a lot of space left to cover, and over half the 30% of Farceit ships to deal with.

Still they plunged, and fired, and drove through. *Searcher* took a bad hit. Hull panels rent and tore as air blew free. She suddenly got very free with her torpedoes. The turrets went in to rapid fire mode. The station was looming large. *Glade* took more hits, her speed was starting to suffer. *Questing* was taking her share. She was down to one core, and working that one for all it had.

More ships closed in. The remaining Farceit vessels had warped around the

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star system and were closing to take a bite from the wounded ships.

Suddenly, the Farceits veered off, one damaged ship drifted closed, and blew up on a barrier between the Ane and itself.

****Welcome friends, welcome to Three Suns Station. It has been a very long time. Please follow the navigation lights to dock at our repair facility. We apologize for any inconvenience you experienced in reaching our station.****

Taraban sighed with relief, any more inconvenience would have killed them all.

The three Ane ships lay at dock somewhere in the massive station. The Captain's met to discuss their current situation. Taraban read off the damage.

****Questing:** We have one intermix core out of operation, The port rear turret is jammed by hull damage. Numerous small to medium overloads and shorts. Most systems are operating on the secondaries or triaries. We have eleven casualties, all are light, no deaths.

Glade: *Glade* has suffered several hull breaches in the mission pod. Damage to the right warp induction fins, primary weapons control is dead, impulse systems are damaged and working at 76%. 52 Casualties, light to severe, 3 deaths.

Searcher: *Searcher* is the worst hit, and the biggest worry. The hull is seriously compromised in the port wing, one turret has been shot off. Phaser control is gone, the torpedo containment system is gone, as are all her quantum torpedoes. Most serious is that the primary computer core is blown. Elathlan herself is fine. 23 casualties, light to serious, 7 deaths. We are here, and crippled. If the station cannot repair us we will have to abandon the *Searcher* at the least. Comments?******

Halan looked worse for the wear. ****We currently have safe dock. As of yet the station has not contacted us as to our needs. Or its needs.****

Yralban spoke. ****We are waiting on that then. A physical search of this station would take longer than anyone here expects to live. I have a stable, if badly hurt ship.****

K'rtrak listened to the interplay and stoked his beard. "You do not think you can fight your way out?"

Taraban answered. ****No, *Questing* has no reserve power, *Glade* cannot make better than warp 3, and *Searcher* has no control computer. We are stuck until the ships can be repaired. *Questing* is the only one we can fix without a major dock yard, it will not hold all of us.****

Halan added. ****And since we docked 5 more ships have supplemented the 52 survivors of our run.****

Taraban spoke. ****OK, we make contact, get repairs, and then we will reason with the Farceits.****

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Elathlan lay in the ships sickbay. While physically she was fine, she was still suffering the link shock from when her main system was blown out. It felt weird to be sitting in the ship, but not feel the ship. Next to her Unaban was on the highest level of intervention. He had taken a full lung full of the phaser coolant. Radiation burns spotted his body, he didn't look at all well. She wanted to get up, and aid in the repair of the computer system. She wanted to get the suit back on. She could get the backup computer core running in five minutes flat. She wanted to lay here and shiver. So far, shiver was wining.

Fiealan reported to Captain Taraban. He was currently in the starboard engineering section inspecting the damage to the intermix core.

Captain, we have visitors on the dockside.

Well, its about time. Clear us to hard dock, and call Ambassador K'rarak and Lt. Takal to the docking chamber.

Yes sir.

Moments latter Taraban met the Klingon Ambassador, and the Vulcan physicist at the nose docking chamber.

K'rarak said. "Visitors? Your Builders?"

We shall soon see. Takal, if you would be so kind as to speak for the Federation.

Takal raised an eyebrow. "Do I have a few minutes Captain."

You do.

Takal went to the replicator in the EVA chamber and ordered. "Vulcan diplomatic dress, full formal." She looked back at K'rarak. "Ambassador rank."

The requested items sparkled in to existence. She quickly stripped her uniform and tossed it in the return chute, and dressed in the new garments with quick efficient movements.

"I believe I am now dressed for the part."

A low boom rang through the ship's hull as hard contact with the station was made. They could hear the seal being tested, and the docking collar fill with air.

We have a secure dock with the station sir. Reported Fiealan.

Very well, open the dock and show our guests in.

The creature walked cautiously into the *Questing*. Eight legs held up its body and three of the remaining eight limbs held out eyes.

**You are Captain Taraban?*

I am.

**Who is this one?*

 An arm moved to look directly at K'rarak.

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He is Ambassador K'rarak of House Kathris, a Klingon.

We know of the Klingons, but when last we saw them, they had yet to smelt metals. Welcome to our station Ambassador.

"Greetings from the Klingon Empire, and from myself."

**And this one?*

She is Takal, Ambassador from the United Federation of Planets, she is Vulcan.

**You have overcome your tendency to slaughter each other?*

Takal didn't miss a beat. "We have Builder. Vulcan has known peace now for 2000 standard years. I also bring you greetings from the worlds of the Federation, from Vulcan, and myself."

Taraban got down to the question. **Why have you not driven off the invading Farceits?*

As you might have surmised, none of the Builders are left. We alone remain. The First Protocols forbids us to harm a biological life form.

"You are a construct?"

Yes, I and the 10 billion like me on the station.

K'rarak said. "You don't look like a construct."

Our Makers emphasized making the duplicate to the parameters of the original.

Something twiggled in the back of Taraban's mind. He placed it on the burner and let it cook. Meanwhile the conversation had been winding to the Lounge. **What is your circumstance here.**

It is satisfying. There are three new starfaring races within easy reach of us. There is an elder race has withdrawn and the Farceits.

How do they differ.

They are a re-emergence. 840.56 rotations past, a wormhole opened in their system. It remained stable for 96.443 rotations, then collapsed. They sent 4764 ships through the wormhole. What happened beyond it we are unaware. They claimed exploration in a peaceable and friendly fashion. At that time they dealt with us with frequency. When the wormhole collapsed, it did so violently. The close proximity to the Farceit home world caused a total collapse of their power grid. and a resulting collapse of their technological civilization. 52,21 rotations past they once again demonstrated warp capacity. Their ships are more advanced than what logic would expect. They have also changed their attitude, from peaceful contact and exploration, to seize and hold.

**They have been giving the other races problems?*

Yes, they have carved an empire out of their less aggressive neighbors. Our Protocol prevents us from taking action. Indeed, we have become a refugee station.

And now they want you.

**Exactly. Three rotations past they declared that the Three Suns and all within it was theirs. Without the ability to engage them on the offense, we can

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only deny them the right to land. Which we have done.**

You want us to read them the riot act.

In essence.

**Why have you not engaged the refugees in this matter?*

We are reluctant to involve them with technology greater than what they themselves have developed. We know Ane. Ane do not develop technology, you adapt and implement.

That idea was about to boil. So Taraban let it. **What is your method of reproduction?*

The Builder perked up a bit. **Simulated zygote production, followed by sexual recombining of genotypes. This results in an embryonic stage followed by a post natal growth period resulting in a fully developed proto-Individual. Education in the post-natal period results in a fully formed member of society.**

**Where is the zygote production done?*

Up to 17,856.7 rotations past it was an external operation. From that rotation we have incorporated it within our bodies.

K'rtrak sat, up, he didn't know where this was leading, but he listened carefully. Takal held down a rising tide of excitement. The logic was inescapable.

Taraban continued. **What is the embryonic development environment?*

Within the body of one of the zygote providers. The choice is made at the time of genetic transfer. Either provider can be the host.

**All of the necessary parts of the being are produced within the embryonic development environment?*

Yes, development is complete and total.

In that case I would conclude that you are a biological race.

The Builder sat up, and opened all its multitude of fingers. It focused every eye on Taraban. **We, are?*

**Do you wish Confirmation?*

Yes, that would free us of all of the Protocols, we could then act as we see fit.

The All will consult on this matter, will you accept its judgment.

The Builder stood, as did Taraban. The Builder touched Taraban's face with the fingers of two arms.

As it was before so shall it be again. The Word of the Ane will be accepted as the Word of the Builders.

So as it was, so shall it be, the Ane will deliver the Word to the Builders.

**What is to be the exchange for the Word?*

Our ships are badly damaged, and in need of repair.

This would be done as you did come for us.

We have no world in this sector.

A nearby star is suitable, it has no planet currently suitable to life.

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A world to live on is agreeable. The matter will be discussed, and the Word will be given.

We will await the Word. With that the Builder once again touched Taraban, and left.

K'rtrak sat amazed. Takal was stunned. She spoke first.

"Captain, you mean they will *make* you a world for simply telling them they are a biological species?"

Almost. We will have to construct an argument they cannot tear apart.

K'rtrak spoke. "Why do they need more, have you not told them all they require?"

You must understand the AI protocols of the Builders. They are not allowed to make that decision for themselves.

"But a planet for a simple declaration."

Ambassador K'rtrak, Imagine yourself as a race bound by strict rules of behavior to other races. Rules that inhibit your free will, and put you at a disadvantage. Rules that by your very nature you cannot break.

"It would be intolerable."

**What would you give the holders of the key to your free will?*

The Klingon's face lit with understanding.

Yes, what we hold in the Word, is nothing less than the free will of a race. The time has come to give that Word.

Takal asked. "The 'time' Captain?"

No more until after I have consulted with the All.

Once again as before, the Ane gathered. The three ships emptied of all but the most injured. They gathered on the station under an artificial sky, and new made grass. Together they became reacquainted, physically and mentally. Together they lay down and withdrew for the Cleansing.

Cleansed they elevated their Icons, raised their Aspects, and became the All.

Said the Few to the All. **The Children of the Builders have asked the Question.**

Said the All to the Few. **Are they ready for the Word.**

Said the Few to the All. **The evidence is plain, they are ready for the Word.**

Said the All to the Few. **They use no machines to reproduce?*

Said the Few to the All. **They do not.**

Said the All to the Few. **All of their body is produced within the body?*

**

Said the Few to the All. **It is.**

Said the All to the Few. **Then the Word can be given. We shall

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construct the Word, so they will know, and cannot deny it.**

Said the Few to the All. **Who is to deliver the Word? **

Said Falan to the All. **This is my duty, I shall go, and deliver the Word.**

Said the All to Falan. **So it is the duty of the First Speaker. We will take you there.**

The All put forth the effort, and Falan was taken to the station. Then the All constructed the Word. And the Word was ready to take to the Children of the Builders.

Kafilan, the Healer on the *Searcher*, looked over the readings of the two patients still in sickbay. One was physically fine, but still withdrawn into herself. A major concern since she was the ship.

Elathlan, how long will you remain like this.

Elathlan looked at her with empty eyes. **I can't go back.**

**Why? **

Never, I never want to be ripped from my body again.

The chances are extremely small that it could ever happen a second time.

That chance is there. I have died, and lived to tell of it.

You have lived.

I want the birth.

Think of what you are giving up. Of all of us, only the made can live forever.

I will not function as a computer again. I want the birth. She lay her head back down, and refused to talk further.

Kafilan shook her head. A wound to the mind can be a fatal as one to the body. But free will was paramount. If she would not take the reins of the ship, she could not be forced.

Kafilan went to her next patient. Unaban was suffering. The radiation that laced his body had poisoned it. Regeneration was not taking. He was on 100% life support. His lungs had totally failed, his liver was barely hanging on, and he was not responding to treatment.

**Unaban? **

I am dying.

Yes, there is little we can do but prolong your life. A week, perhaps two weeks.

I would have them as long as my mind is clear.

Then you will have them as pain free as we can make it.

**No treatment? **

**None, even the most invasive regenerations will not function with the

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dose of radiation you have taken.**

Then I must prepare myself to join the All.

I will keep trying, but I will not offer hope.

I understand.

She hated this job sometimes.

Falan came before the assembled Children of the Builders in the station's largest chamber. Silence greeted her coming. Not a sound from the assembled billions.

We the Ane made a promise to your parents. When the ancient Builders came to the Ane, they were a dying race. Fertility had passed them by, and science could not restore it. In exchange for the worlds we now call home, they asked of us the answer to a question. 'How can all we are survive as a race?' To this we answered, you must create new children of technology, and teach them to replace you. This they did, and in doing so, they laid a heavy burden on those children. That until they where fit to be called a race of people, they should live by the rules imposed by the parent. When the conditions of maturity had been met, they could take the mantle of the parent. To the Ane, the ancient Builders left the question of Decision. It was we who would determine Childhood's End. The time for the fulfilling of promises has come.

A soft rustle swept the entire assembled mass.

We have debated the evidence, and formulated the Word. And the Word is; You are as your parents dreamed you could be. You are like them in body and in mind. You are worthy this day of the mantle of responsibility. Wear it well.

A moment of silence swept the endless field. A billion beings stretched their limbs to the maximum. A billion voices raised a mighty shout that shook the station to the core, and rocked the frail creature that delivered the long awaited message. Minds raised up in ecstasy, the All joined with the Children of the Builders, now the Builders Themselves. A race was born anew.

This is Three Suns Station control to all Farceit warships. Cease all claims on Three Suns system immediately, or suffer the consequences.

80 ships circled the three suns, the commander took the hail.

"If we cannot have this system, none will benefit from it. Surrender at once."

Very well, we tried being nice.

Mile long warships rose from the surface of the station and pursued the offending vessels. The fight was short and sweet. One after another the ships

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were tracted in, and taken captive. Weapons glancing harmlessly off the sides of the massive ships. Later the commander of the Farceit fleet was hauled before the First of the Station. The riot act was read, "Aggression will be met with force", and he and his cohorts instructed to take the ultimatum home to their leaders.

The released Farceit ships could not clear the station to warp fast enough.

Once again the captains met. This time in the space provided for the Ane while the ships where under repair.

Yralban started things. **I have a real problem.**

Taraban asked. **And that problem is?*

Elathlan has quit. She refuses to reenter the ships systems.

**That is a real problem. Without a fully functioning computer *Searcher* is effectively disabled. How much fuel do you have? Can you get back in recovery mode?*

Questionable. The fuel consumption is much higher.

We might be able to put together enough antimatter to top you off.

Kafilan entered the meeting. **Captains, I may have a solution.**

Yralban perked his ears. **How so.**

Unaban is dying. Nothing we have available can save him, it's just a matter of time. Elathlan, as you know has requested a birth, it is her right. She will have to wait until we can return to facilities capable of performing that procedure. However, is there reason we cannot reverse the procedure? We cannot save Unaban's body, can we save his mind, and meet our needs as well?*

**Do we have the means?*

I investigated the possibility. Yes, technically it is possible.

Taraban interrupted. **However, is it ethically possible?*

Kafilan replied. **Who does it harm?*

They all thought over the matter. Halan at last answered for all of them.

I cannot see harm to anyone in this.

Yarlbán turned to Kafilan. **Offer Unaban the option. If he refuses, we will continue with our first plan. If necessary we will abandon the ship.**

A month after their arrival the repairs on the three vessels where still underway. The Builders have been more than generous. With the necessary plans in the Ane computer banks they had built replacement parts for everything required, including an intermix core for the *Questing*, and the replacement turret for the one lost on the *Searcher*.

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Unaban was in intense training for his new role in life. He was receiving a crash course in how to be a ship's computer from both Fiealan and Delalan. He was making good progress. He was a little disappointed that all the Aneform bios available were female. But he was at least alive to anticipate a body replacement.

The Heptite Ane had also arrived. After a proper greeting it was decided that a portion of both groups would seed the new planet promised by the Builders. 30 Ane from the Federation and 20 of the Heptite. More would be brought in when the place was prepared.

K'rtrak sat down with the Builder representative. He had elected to go with the full Klingon regalia. If one is representing their culture, one must be proud of it.

"I wish to invite a representative of the Builders to accompany me back to the Klingon court."

This is beneficial of you. We do not see benefit in sending representatives at this time. We have undergone a great change. Time is required for this change to be assimilated and integrated. Do however convey our desire for a peaceful co-existence to the Klingons.

"I cannot convince you to send an Ambassador?"

Not at this time. We need to deal with current issues in our own sector before we consider rejoining galactic society.

"Would you be willing to accept a Klingon delegation here at your station?"

A delegation of the Klingon people will be welcome as will any peaceful people that come to us.

"I K'rtrak of the House Kathris, speaking for Kahless the Unforgettable Emperor of the Klingons, and the High Council are satisfied with this kind invitation."

You are most welcome, and we wish you a speedy journey to return our words to the Emperor and his Council.

"Recorder off."

**You are not too disappointed I hope?*

"No, I didn't expect you to come, but the effort must be made. If the Federation's 'instant Ambassador' has not approached you on the same matter I would be most surprised."

She has, and with the same results. However, she is staying as the Federation Representative.

K'rtrak's eyebrows battled it out with his ridges. "Indeed? Most surprising. Without authority?"

Her connection with the Ane made instant contact with the Federation council possible. She has been approved as official Ambassador.

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K'rtrak stroked his beard. "I will have to consider the implications of this." He stood. "Good day to you then, I shall bear your words home in a more plebeian fashion."

"TARABAN!"

Taraban turned to the female whose ear he had been nibbling. **Mark my spot, I am being bellowed for.** He got up and trotted to where K'rtrak stood in the door looking impressive. **You bellowed oh Great One.**

"/I would have words with you./"

Well, come on in, you're blocking the door. Taraban suited actions to words and found a beanbag, and flopped into it.**

K'rtrak followed with one of his more impressive struts. "/Since when do you favor the Federation over the Klingons?/"

You mean in the matter of Takal.

"/That is exactly what I mean./"

One, since we are a charter member of the Federation. Two, since we have representatives on the Federation Council we can inform of what is going on here, and who can, in turn, inform us. Qo'noS on the other hand has no Ane on it. I would gladly have given you the same service, had it been possible.

"/Really?/" K'rtrak was clearly not convinced.

Really. I have given you free use of every other communication service my ship has, why would I stop at telepathic communication?*

"/Why would you?/"

I wouldn't.

"/Why haven't you?/"

Taraban cocked his head and lowered his ears in an Ane smile. **You didn't ask. Now if you would excuse me, I was in the middle of seducing a female.**

With that he went back and picked up where he left off.

K'rtrak stood there for a moment, and stalked out of the room.

"Fiealan?" K'rtrak was back in his rooms.

Yes Ambassador.

"/Can you get a message back to Klingon space./"

You mean a telepathic message. Subspace would get lost in the background.

"/Yes, telepathic./"

Within the Klingon sphere no. A number of locations on the Klingon-Federation border. I can get a message to the Klingon Ambassador on Earth fairly fast.

"/Can you transmit an encrypted message?/"

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I can. I can also give you a real-time link to him via the subspace repeater we have in Sol orbit

"/Better still, my codes are doubtless out of date. There are a few facts I can use to confirm my identify./"

**Do you wish to use your diplomatic codes?*

"/Yes, I will transmit them from my personal computer./"

"/Ambassador Quarn. A call from Ambassador K'rtrak on line six./"

"/K'rtrak! That fool that got himself lost in space a year ago on some fool's errand?/"

"/Yes sir, that K'rtrak of House Kathris./"

"/He's likely dead, tell the impostor to get lost./"

"/He said to remind you of the Ho'qutos, and the food replicator in Officer Country./"

Quarn paled visibly. "/Put him through./"

K'rtrak smiled through the screen, the connection was crystal clear. "/Quarn you old dog. Still in your cushy post on Earth I see. Gone to fat yet?/"

Quarn growled back. "/Not until I eat your heart you old fool. Where in the name of the Black Fleet ARE you? It had better be good or your House is burnt before the Council./"

"/I am all the way to Hell. 500 light years passed the far frontier. I have a diplomatic package for Qo'noS and the Council. I have opened diplomatic relations with a technically advanced race out here. The Federation already has an Ambassador in one Takal of Vulcan. However, I have last year's codes. I know they have changed. I will deliver my package in person./"

"/If your that far out, how are we talking in real time?/"

"/Ane telepathic-subspace link. Tell no secrets./"

"/So what can you say?/"

"/What the Federation knows. We have contacted the Builders of the El Nanth Rosette. I will return with further details to Qo'noS. K'rtrak out./"

Quarn sat a long moment and contemplated the concept. If, the old fool was in his right mind, his House and honor would surpass his own. However, K'rtrak was a long way off, and that was his advantage. Meanwhile K'rtrak confirmed the transmission of his packet with Fiealan from the Starbase 24 repeater, much closer to Qo'noS than Earth.

"/Either I will win great honor, or death from this. I have gambled all./"

**Is it worth it?*

"/Yes! This is the spice of life for the Klingon./"

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Repaired, rearmed and back in formation the Ane ships floated on the edge of the Three Suns. Three fruitful months had passed. Taraban gave the orders.

****All ahead warp 9, let's go home.****

"/What do you mean there is a problem with the gagh? I had two crates brought on board, I have finished one, and you said the other was perfectly stable./"

****It is.****

"/So what is the problem./"

****It doesn't contain gagh, and gagh alone.****

"/And what is in with the gagh?/"

****A Klingon, presumably by the name of Ga'fer.****

"/Indeed./" K'rrak was getting less amused. "/And how did my gagh come to contain a Klingon presumably named Ga'fer!?"

****Presumably he got in when the crate was ground side at Starbase 24.**

When beamed up the crate was open. A scan revealed that the gagh was fine, and an additional life form, one Klingon male, was contained.******

"/Why did you not remove him then?!/" K'rrak was livid.

****He obviously wanted to be in the crate, it didn't hurt the gagh, so I granted his wish.****

"/Your sense of humor eludes me. I want some gagh./"

****No problem, I'll see you get gagh. However, Ga'fer will have to be dealt with.****

"/Why would he be in the gagh?/"

****I suspect he was trying to sneak on the ship to kill Taraban.****

"/Must I play '20 questions'!?! Give me the whole story!!!" By this point K'rrak was pounding the table. If strangling a computer terminal would do any good, he was about to do that.

****In broad terms, Ga'fer tried to start a fight between his bother and Taraban, it backfired, and he ended up getting tossed out of his Father's ship. I imagine he thought he could waltz in, kill Taraban and take the ship.****

"/Indeed, well, let us see this 'hero'./"

****Cargo bay five Ambassador. He might be a vegetable.****

"/How so?/"

****The stasis fields were designed to keep vegetable matter fresh. They do work well on simple life forms, like gagh, and are now standard for transporting live biological samples, such as bacteria or organs. It has never been used on a higher life form.****

"/Then he has sealed he own fate. Get him out of my gagh! Gar'th, J'mon, come we have a fool to remove from the gagh./"

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Minutes later the assembled stood before the crate. The field was dropped and two bios opened the hatch. The stunned Ga'fer was hauled out. K'rrak looked and the pitiful mass on the deck.

"GET UP!"

Ga'fer jerked, and slumped to the ground. K'rrak moved to motivate him with a foot.

K'rrak.

He stopped. "/What?/"

He tried. The brain sent the right messages, the body didn't respond.

"/No motor control?/"

That would look to be the case.

"/Take, this, to sickbay then, and see if he recovers. Meanwhile, I want my gagh washed and a suitable portion in a bowl in my quarters./"

Aye Aye Admiral.

"/Harumph!/"

"Get up!" The voice commanded, he did, why was he still on the floor, why was he alive? Two someones where placing him on a stretcher. He leaped from the pallet to kill them both, but nothing happened. They were carrying him into the medical section. They took his clothes, and his weapons. He was being laid on a life support table. He screamed, but no sound came out. Again and again he screamed until unconscious claimed him once again.

The Flotilla weaved and dodged through Kliges'chee space, crept quietly through Rishian space and at last approached the Klingon boarder. The reception committee was waiting. Taraban called K'rrak to the bridge.

**It seems we have a 'escort'.

"/Yes, we *will* have an escort according to the message I received.

However, by the markings, I would say that these are not it./"

**Trouble.

"/By the bucket full./"

**'We saw an enemy and defeated it, haven't seen the ships you are looking for' trouble?*

"/Likely. What are your chances of slipping around them?/"

Lousy. They are deployed with their fastest ships on the edges in a net formation. They know where we want to go, and can anticipate that.

"/So, what will you do?/"

I could throw you to the dogs.

"/Underhanded, but it might work./"

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I can challenge the commander.

"/He might not accept./"

I can run back the way I came.

"/Gets us no closer./"

Then I do the unexpected.

"/Which is?/"

Tell the universe. Fiealan, send the word, strengthen the connection with the All, we may have to abandon ship in mass. Send to all telepathic/subspace repeaters, Federation diplomatic channel, clear signal. Hail the Klingon flagship.

Hailing, they are blocking subspace communications.

No matter.

I have the Commander, Admiral Garkath, on line.

**I am Captain Taraban of the Ane Confederation Defense Force, why are you blocking my way Admiral?*

Admiral Garkath was a perfect example of Klingon pomp. His command throne was draped in rich and exotic skins, his person dripped in weapons and armor. "/You have aboard your ship one K'rarak of the honorless house of Kathris?!"

I have aboard one Ambassador K'rarak of House Kathris, who's lineage was established by Kahless himself, and who's honor is without question.

"/He is an honorless dog! Surrender him or be destroyed!!/"

Admiral, K'rarak is a guest in my house. To get him you will have to kill me.

"/I can arrange that. Before you is the most powerful fleet in Klingon, or any space./"

Before you are two ships built to fight four times their mass in the best warships, and win. As well as a Starship the equal of any of your warships. Know two things Admiral before you commit yourself to attack. One, yours is the first ship I will destroy even if I destroy no others. Second, that as we speak, all we say is broadcast to the Federation.

"/Why should I care for your boasts. Subspace communication is not possible beyond my fleet./"

Then you admit to jamming me.

"/There is not reason not to./"

Telepathy is not subspace Admiral. I am in contact with the All, the All will inform Qo'noS, and your dishonor will be known.

"/Impossible!/"

Can you risk that? Call Q'onoS, see if I lie. You are a dead man, by my ships, or by your council.

"/You will ALL die!/"

**No, my ships will evacuated first. And all my crews, guests included, will be on Starbase 24. You will fight automated ships, with no live hand at the

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helm. Your ship will die first, any damage done to the rest of your fleet is a bonus.**

"/You're bluffing./"

Evacuate non-essential personnel from the the *Glade*.

Garkath turned to his sensor officer. "Report."

"/The large ship is emptying before my eyes. There are only twenty five life signs./"

"/You will fight without honor?/"

The honor to be won or lost is yours Admiral Garkath. *Glade* alone can destroy your ship, she but has to be uncaring of her weapons expenditure, and ram your ship. However, I offer you a way of honor.

Garkath was stiff. He realized the trap that had been laid. He could not survive this encounter by an all out fight. "/What is your 'way'?/"

You will meet me on the sands of honor. I will come as my mother born me. Because you are only a Klingon, I shall allow you what weapons Klingon custom would allow in a matter of honor, the sword, the knife, or the bat'leth. Should you win, then you can take the matter up with my guests. Should I win, House Qon'tos, is mine.

The Ane's words burned in his ears. "/What of your ships?/"

They are not my ships to give. They are property of the Ane Confederation. Attack them, and We will hound you to the edge of the universe.

"/And if I refuse?/"

You can let us pass, or die like a dog in your hole.

The audience was equally divided between Klingon and Ane. K'rarak had elected to sit with the Ane. The sun beat down on the small amphitheater on a nearby Klingon world. The crews were separated by a contingent of the local civilian population. They didn't care about sides, they just wanted to see alien blood.

Garkath strode onto the sands. The Klingons roared and howled their approval at the hero until the sand shook from the sound. He was striped from the waist up and carried the bat'leth. The Ane sat silent.

Taraban stepped out onto the sands, his long mane braided back with ribbons. The Klingons spat and hissed. Then the Ane pined back their ears gave voice. The cry started low, a triple note trill that sent chills down the spine of every being within hearing. A cry that for two million years had driven the predator from the birthing, or the fallen. It wailed somewhere between fear and pain, reinforced by telepathic waves, until half the Klingons were holding their ears in pain. It swelled until the fierce will of the Ane could be seen in every blue eye, and it cut off like a knife. For a long beat silence filled the air. The

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fight began.

Garkath held the weapon low. He circled the Ane, and Taraban kept his front to him, wheeling slowly on his hind legs. Garkath lunged forward, feinting with the bat'leth, Taraban watched the blade warily. His teeth bared, ears pinned. For five minutes they circled each taking the measure of the other. The arena remained quiet. The Klingons watching the Ane, every time they began to cheer, the Ane would start that eerie cry. Back and forth the combatants danced, neither gaining blows or advantage.

"/Fight you damnable thing!/"

After you.

Circle and circle again. At last Garkath lunged, Taraban ducked, and kicked, metal rang as hoof met blade, neither came up bloodied. Garkath closed again, blade high, the Ane closed low, metal met flesh, a wound in the flank. The Klingons roared for the sight of blood. Teeth met iron muscle, and closed, Garkath roared and rolled away. Taraban stood, blood ran down his side and he spat blood, Klingon blood. Garkath tested the ripped arm. He would suffer that bite. Circle and circle again. Each wounded combatant tested the other's remaining strength. Circle and circle again. Garkath closed again, the Ane reared back, and the sharp chime of the bat'leth sounded again and again as hoof, horn, and blade struck and struck again. Taraban yelped, Garkath howled, they parted. Taraban had a clear wound clean across the throat, deep it bled freely. Garkath flung his hands skyward and howled for victory. The Klingons howled and watched for the Ane to fall. Taraban felt the vocal cords in his first pipe tighten closed to keep the blood out of his lungs. He staggered a little, and let his head drop. He expanded the remaining two pipes of his tracheae, they had to make up for the loss of the first. Garkath turned to face every part of the arena, arms lofted in victory. His back was to the failing Ane. Taraban leapt. Garkath caught the motion barely in time, he raised the weapon one handed shocked that Taraban had the strength to even move. Strong kicks batted the weapon from his hand. He lunged after it landing face down on the sand. Taraban jumped after him, landing square on his back. For a horror of eternity he pounded his feet into the Klingon's back, four hundred pound jack hammers, pistons of destruction. For an eternity of minutes the blood flew, marking the sand and the Ane's white belly. For a thousand seconds Garkath howled, then gurgled, then fell silent. Taraban stepped out of the dead Klingon's body. Pink blood covered his legs from hoof to hock, it splattered his white underside. His own red blood dripped to mix with his fallen foe's.

HOUSE QON'TOS IS HOUSE TARABAN!!!

The Ane let out with full cry and leapt to the field. The Klingons fled their own ground. K'rrak sat in the stands and stroked his beard. His grandsons sat stiffly beside him. What thoughts he thought he kept to himself.

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The Emperor's own fleet arrived two hours later to escort K'rrak and his packet to Qo'noS. The Ane Flotilla took the Imperial representative aboard and all made for Qo'noS at best speed.

Several weeks later the three ships orbited the Klingon home world. K'rrak had presented his lineage, and his report before Kahless the Second. Likewise Taraban of House Taraban was called to give his lineage. He recounted the fight and gave a very brief summary of the highlights of Ane history, highlights from the Klingon point of view. Even so it took him two hours after he said ****pardon if I must be very brief.**** Kahless was indefatigable.

Then Taraban pulled the surprise. ****The House of Kahless has spread throughout the Klingon Empire. Mighty is the House that is every house. Yet, it can claim no sons of its own. I am no Klingon, I have no wish to be a Klingon, yet by my actions I have been made the head of a House. How can I step aside without dishonoring the Warriors that have sworn to abide by my words?*****

Kahless was all but bouncing off the throne. **"/How so brave warrior. Who is mightier than the line founder?/"** He spread his hands indicating the impossibility of the problem. The council was grumbling.

****The founder of all lines is mightier than the line-founder oh Kahless. Will you accept the personal allegiance of House Taraban, and make it anew, the House Kahless?*****

"/I accept./" He bounced down from the Bloody Throne and cuffed Taraban up side the head. Taraban accepted the blow. **"/House Taraban is now House Kahless!/"** He roared, a laugh in his voice. **"/Who disputes this!?"** With the cameras running, they had little choice but agree.

K'rrak stood once more in the Lounge of the *Questing*.

"/Where do you go from here Taraban./"

****Home old friend. Indeed, I can call you friend, for we have fought, and cried and won together.****

"/We have done all these things. I can indeed call you friend. Where did you get the idea that a guest must be protected?/"

****From Humans. It was the custom in the Ancient times, that the Guest was King. To protect the guest a host must forsake wealth, life, even honor.****

"/A Human idea?/"

****One not always honored, but we thought it a good idea.****

"/Yes, so I swear it shall be in my house. Even Klingons can learn new

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things about honor. Good journey./"

For the last time K'rarak left the deck of the *Questing*.

Taraban looked out at the stars, and one faint and distant one that was home. ****It has been a long time. Fiealan, take us home.****

The Word of the Builders -- Garry Stahl, January 1998

The builders are an ancient race, older than the Ane. Until recent events the Ane have hidden knowledge of the Builders so that the technically created children they had made could grow into a real race.

The mark and specialty of the builders is Marco-structures. Planet sized space stations, Ring worlds, Terraforming, moving planets, and Dyson Spheres. But like any race they have their limits. Questions of deep philosophic and spiritual meaning are mostly lost on these magnificent engineers

When sheer age threatened the existence of the builders as a race, they approached a people then knew to be knowers, the Ane, and asked them for an answer to their problem. After searching what they knew, the Ane suggested a possible solution. The Builders made the El-Nanth rosette in exchange for the answer. They also asked the Ane to be the Watchers of their children, and to tell them when they were at last grown up. To protect the children the Ane have hidden the origins of the Rosette, until now.

None of the original race remains. The current Builders are constructs that over the last 500,000 years have slowly built themselves from machines into a true organic race. they are not likely to come out of their seclusion at any time soon. When they do matters in their immediate neighborhood will take first priority. Both the Federation of Planets, and the Klingon Empire have representatives on the Three Suns stations. This is not a highly desired post from either perspective.

April 2007 -- *Nine years since I wrote this. Nearly ten years since I wrote my first Trek story. My how the time flies. There are many things I have never been happy about with this story. The main one being the appearance of the Builders. My original description never satisfied. However, I don't rewrite. Leave the finished story finished and move on.*

Well it finally got to me. I wanted to do further things with the Builders and that description needed changing. Since I was going to "Lucas" the description, I might as well give the whole story a rework. I hope it has improved.

For the record, here is the Builder introduction as it first appeared: The channel opened to show a unicorn, or what at first could be taken for a unicorn. It had a goat like head, with a meter long horn. The neck ended in broad

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shoulders that had two pawed limbs. This tapered back to a trunk with a single large hind leg. A pair of arms with three delicate fingers shared the complex shoulder with the legs. Taraban sat there in shock. The message continued, telepathically.

January 2011 -- Word of the Builders is getting another editing pass so Richard Merk can make e-readers files. I think the typos breed between edits.