

The Long Patrol

By Garry Stahl

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"Captain's Log, supplemental. Due to our lengthy repairs at Starbase 140, the Kongo has been reassigned to exploration duty in the outer rim sectors. We have now reached the outer limit of our specified patrol area. Beyond this point is the unknown. We are free to roam the area seeking what there is to find, as well as looking after the occasional Federation citizen that is to be found. For the crew and myself, a prime assignment." Kirk turned to the Vulcan seated to his right. "Your deck, Mr. Spacik. I think I'll loosen up a bit."

"I am familiar with your idea of 'loosening up Captain', I will inform medical."

Kirk grinned. "No martial arts today. A jog and a quick swim I think. We do have water in the pool this time?"

"Yes sir, that was taken care of two weeks ago."

"Good." Kirk left the bridge.

First Acertor looked out over the bridge from his high seat above the working stations. He ruffled his wings and settled his feathers in place. All was well within his view. He looked out on the virtual universe shown in his viewspace. Each of his five escorts was in its assigned place. Order ruled over his sector of the Galaxy. Acertor, First of the StarLance 5 was satisfied with his lot in life. The Empire had approved a sweep outside the normal patrol zone. Once again the Empire felt safe within and was willing to look outside its borders.

"First attention." Called the sensor Second. "Contact pinion 3 quill 57."

Acertor looked at his smaller tactical screen. A blip, a great distance away. Good, he thought, their preysense is keen. "Identify."

"Contact unknown, probable course from the core."

A first meeting, good. In all his years he had never had a first meeting.

"Flock attention. Alter course, pinion 3 quill 57, make Light Factor 42, assume migrant formation."

Affirmatives came from his ship's Firsts, and from his own bridge crew. The great fleet turned to meet the new challenge.

Tim Kirk had just finished his workout. Ship life could make you flabby if you let it, and he was getting of the age where the battle of the bulge was a constant fight.

The intercom whistled. "Captain to the bridge."

Tim rolled his eyes, it was always at the most inconvenient moments. The price of the center seat. He hit the intercom in the shower. Who thought to put

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intercoms in the gym shower in the first place? "Kirk to bridge. What's up?"

Spacik answered. "We have a contact rimward. Six ships from the look of it. They have altered course to intercept."

"Time to intercept?"

"I estimate 3.45 hours Captain."

"Maintain course, let them come to us. I'll be up when I am finished here."

"Yes Sir, bridge out."

An hour later Kirk walked onto the bridge. Spacik gave him the comm. "Situation?"

"We are tracking 6 ships. Data since I last spoke with you indicates that the largest of the ships is three times our length, and eight times our mass. The other five vessels are one sixth the size of the first one. They have assumed a formation with the largest at the head and the rest trailing off the right and left rear flank."

"Armament?"

"Unknown as of yet."

"Very well, we will maintain. Arm quantum torpedoes, fill the queue."

"Do you expect hostilities Sir?"

"I don't know and I hope not. But I would rather look nervous that suddenly hostile."

"Understood."

Acertor stood in the sensor pit looking over the Second's shoulder. A model of the contact rotated in the viewspace. "Beautiful, most elegant."

"Yes First. It looks fast standing still."

"But is it? That is the important question."

"And the answer is a difficult one. Scans of their waste trail indicate they should not be making the speed they are."

"And then, how do they do it?"

"I have consulted with engineering. The answer lies in more efficient use of the energy produced, or cloaking."

"Your determination?"

"I hypothesize that they use energy more efficiently. No effort has been made to stop me from scanning their ship."

"How efficient?"

"I cannot know that. Unless their peak performance is ascertained, I cannot determine if that is their best speed or a slow cruise. I must have the energy curve."

"Well, we have something to learn from them at least. We will play the Game, and see if some data can be sent your way. Any information on

weapons?"

"The range is still too great."

"Well done, keep scanning."

The Third puffed in recognition of the praise. "Yes First."

Kirk sat at the table of the conference room. Two arrowhead shaped models turned in the holofield. Regiban continued to update them as the data came in.

The two ships are night and day. The larger is, from the data gleaned, a bit on the ponderous side. She well out powers us, but it has a lot to move with that power. The smaller ship is the opposite in almost every respect. Each is about the mass of an Excelsior class ship, and more heavily engined. I speculate they would match, or even surpassed us for maneuverability.

"We can't out fight them?"

No, not together. One at a time, I would say yes. The big one alone, maybe, I am sure we could out run it. The smaller ones I doubt we could out run.

"Weapons data?"

Not yet, the range is still too great.

Doc Hanson threatened to over turn his chair leaning back. "Tim, what makes you think they will fight?"

"I don't know if they will or not."

"Then why all the worry about size, power, and weapons?"

"Simple, if they don't fight, I have wasted our time, and gained a little useful information. I know how to proceed for a peaceful contact. However, if they fight, what I learn here might well save our hides.

The intercom interrupted. "Bridge here Captain, 20 minutes to contact."

"Very well Mr. Failee. Make Yellow Alert."

"First, we are within 5 partings of contact."

First Acertor considered a moment. "Flock to Arrow formation. *Vigilant* will play the Game, all others stand down."

The *Kongo* sailed through space at an easy warp 6. Kirk looked over the tactical display.

"Make Red Alert. Mr. Failee, Make our complements to the unknowns, universal greetings of peace and friendship."

"Done Sir."

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"Drop to one half impulse."

"Aye Sir, one half impulse."

"First, they leave lightspace. We are receiving a message in the midband ranges. Translators are working on it."

"Drop to reaction drive, match speed with the unknown. Sensor, are they armed?"

"Yes First, multi-phase shielding, quite good."

"Then we will play with them."

Lt. Cmd. Solin said. "Captain, unknowns are dropping form warp. They are playing follow the leader behind the big one."

"Condition?"

"The large ship is shielded and armed. Weapons unknown."

"The rest?"

"Unknown, they are in the Sensor shadow of the big ship."

"Any answer to the hails?"

Failee said. "No sir."

"Try again. Helm, veer to the port, let's get a look at the smaller ships."

"First, same message as before. We are still working on it."

Sensor reported. "They are trying to flank."

"Correct. Increase speed and open fire at one third full. We shall judge how they play war."

Failee Said. "Unknown closing Captain. Firing weapons."

"Damn! Report!"

Plasma disrupters.

"Hold on." The *Kongo* shook with the impact.

Spacik said. "Report, damage."

Kirk ordered. "Let him close, sound violent evasive."

Failee reported. "Rear shields down 17%, minor system damage."

The wail sounded through the ship.

Solin said. "He's coming up fast."

"Hazard one, eight to the mother, two each for the chicks and phasers at

will... NOW!"

First Acertor watched the smaller ship take the hits from his guns. It made no attempt to get away. Most Second stood to the right of him and watched. "Will they give up that easy?"

"The brood is not laid, never mind hatched. Hold on!"

The smaller ship suddenly switched end for end and fired her reaction engines full power. She shot over the top of the *Vigilant* almost too fast to follow, beams from the ship sought weakness in the *Vigilant's* shields and small missiles rained down from the edges of the saucer. She was over them when the shots hammered home. As big as she was *Vigilant* shuttered under the impacts. Damage reports flowed in. Most Second gaped in horror. "First, they are firing on the others!!"

Kongo shot over the stern of the massive warship. Even as she cleared the shadow of the big ship the port turret fired on the first of the small ships in line. Regiban squealed. Kirk swung around, audible sound from an Ane was rare. The starboard turret fired at the next in line as the phasers and torpedoes dug into the hull of the first. It lost way and fell off. **Captain, these ships are UNSHIELDED.**

Kirk ordered. "Break off, break off, make warp two away."

Even as he spoke the second ship below him vented fire and fell away crippled by the shots. It ripped in silent agony as the quantum torpedoes slammed home.

First Acertor watched in horror as his first two Strikers reeled from the war shots. Damage to the *Vigilant* was bad enough, much too heavy from anyone playing the Game. The beams were deflected well enough, but the little missiles punched right through the shields. Then, as if answered by silent prayer to the first shell, the unknown broke off the attack on the helpless ships, helpless by his order, and went outspace."

Kongo swung around at warp 2, she moved several light minutes away. "All stop."

She came to a full stop.

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"OK, what happened, no one goes into battle with most of the ships unshielded. Hail them again hopefully they have finally translated our first message."

"Channel open."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the United Federation Starship *Kongo*. Do you understand us?"

First Acertor watched as his ships burned from the unexpected attack. Tears formed under his flight lids. His Most Second raged nearby. A Bulto from communications handed him a film. He blinked his eyes clear and read it. "We are the Starship ----, We come from the United Federation of Planets, a gathering of over 150 worlds living in peaceful coexistence. We wish peaceful contact with you and other people, please respond."

"I have made a dreadful error."

First, they have stopped a short distance away, you must unleash the Strikers against them, such dishonorable contact in Game cannot be ignored!"

"We will do nothing, a mistake has been made."

"But First, we can't let them get away with that!"

"An incoming message First."

"A moment, yes, we can, and I will. A mistake has been made. Read this."

Acertor handed his Most Second the film. "Comm, put them through. Stand down all weapons, lower shields."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the United Federation Starship *Kongo*. Do you understand us?"

"Yes Captain Kirk, I now understand your words."

"May I ask what in Hell you are doing?"

"You may ask, but the answer may take some time. In partial answer, a mistake has been made, I assume full responsibility for the ships damaged and lives lost Captain. We will not attack you again. Close Channel. Most second, I place you in command of the Flock, I will surrender my person to the Federation Captain."

"First, you don't know what they will do! It is ours that have died, and they did the killing."

"No Most Second, it is ours that have died, and I caused the killing."

"I must protest it is not the place of a First to surrender to an unknown power. What message will this send to the ranks of Acceptian power?"

Acertor cocked his head at his Most Second. "The right one Most Second. With power, comes responsibility. Please loan me a shuttle."

"At once First."

"Captain, The Alien is opening a hail again."

"Let's hear it Mr. Failee."

"Federation Ship. I Acertor, First of StarLance 5 have stepped down my command. I wish to surrender my person to you for the mistake made."

"First, your surrender is not required. Understanding is what we want."

"I would take transport to your ship. One shuttle, unarmed."

"Agreed, we can discuss, terms, at that time."

"I accept, Acertor out."

"Kirk to shuttle bay, prepare to accept the Alien shuttle, full security, in full dress."

Spacik said. "Captain, do you intend going to accept this surrender?"

"I am going to discuss terms, Mr. Spacik, we will play it by ear from there."

The Alien shuttle was graceful bird-like machine, impulse only. Once it had landed the "honor detail" marched out onto the deck and took position. Kirk flanked by Spacik, and Miritath waited at the end of the line. The hatch opened, and a bird got out. First Acertor was about six and a half foot, with taloned feet, a beak on his face and six limbs, legs, arms, and wings. Otherwise he was a rather thin humanoid. Kirk checked the universal translator, and stepped forward with his officers. The bird-man waited by the shuttle. "First Acertor, I am Captain James Timothy Kirk, welcome to the *Kongo*. This is Spacik, my first officer, and Miritath, my chief of security."

"Greetings Captain James, I will assume no more customs. I place myself at your disposal, for what ever that may mean."

"It is our custom to discuss terms before accepting a surrender."

"What are these terms?"

"The treatment of the surrendering party usually."

"And if agreeable terms cannot be decided upon?"

"Then the surrender is off, and when everyone is back where they belong, each must decide what to do."

"How long do such discussions take?"

"Sometimes days. I am not in a position to dictate terms. Therefore you are free to find them agreeable or not."

"And if I find them agreeable?"

"Then each party will abide by them."

"This seems to me, a most civil system Captain, I will honor these pacts."

They had walked slowly away from the shuttle as they talked. Kirk looked back on it. "Will you require quarters for your shuttle crew?"

"It was not intended that they stay, but with terms to discuss, perhaps they should."

He turned to the shuttle crew standing by their craft, rubbernecking, and trying to look like they weren't rubbernecking.

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"Third." The pilot turned to face him. "Please contact Most Second and see if there will be any problem in with your staying a while."

"Yes First." He vanished into the shuttle. Acertor turned back to Kirk.

"First Acertor, is there anything we can do for your damaged ships?"

"You would help us?"

"Yes, it is our way."

"The offer is considered, but I think we are well in hand. Where do we discuss these 'terms'?"

"This way First Acertor, I think the main conference room will suit us."

The First was quiet on the ride back to the conference deck. Kirk gave him his silence, and made arrangements. **Tathilan, have the senior officers meet in the main conference room. I am coming in with First Acertor. Let's try and make a favorable impression.**

**I hear and comply. Anything else? **

Have the bridge keep an eye on those ships, they sill have us outnumbered, and out gunned.

**Not trusting yet? **

No, not yet. Maintain red alert.

This took them to the conference level. Kirk directed them to the conference room directly. Acertor looked about. The officers stood as he entered. "My staff First Acertor. My second in command you have met, Commander Spacik, Operations officer Solin, Chief Engineer Felialan, Ship's Counselor Deatali, Sciences Officer Regiban, Security and Tactical officer Miritath, you have also met, and last, but hardly least, Doctor Hanson, our Chief Medical officer."

"Greetings to all of you. I would normally offer the greetings of the Acceptian Empire, but I do not find myself qualified to do so at this time. Please accept then my personal greetings."

"I accept in the name of my ship, and the United Federation of Planets. Let is begin the business that brings us together." At that moment, a seat materialized with a thin back, offset at the bottom. Acertor looked in surprise. "My crew is efficient. The seats in your shuttle have been scanned, and replicated. Please, be seated." He sat. Kirk cleared his throat. "As much as it pains me to ask, why did you fire on us?"

Acertor braced himself. "An error on my part Captain."

"Mistaken identify?"

"After a fashion, I mistook, rather assumed, you to be someone that would understand my customs."

"And what custom was that?"

"That of the Game."

Spacik said "A 'game', of shooting at one another?"

Deateli asked. "Would you consider yourself of a warrior culture Acertor?"

"Yes, that would be a fair estimation, if your translators are accurate."

"Captain. Among many warrior cultures, the practice of 'counting coup' or

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testing martial skill on meeting in a less than deadly fashion is not uncommon. Acertor, is this 'game' a similar custom?"

"I think you have the understanding. We test one another with weapons set to half strength or less. There may be some damage, but never serious. My mistake was assuming it was your custom also."

Kirk said. "The culture of the Federation at large is not based on a warrior ethos."

"I commend your skills in that case."

"We don't fire weapons in play without clear prior arrangement. We took your attack to be one in earnest, and reacted accordingly."

"As you can now see, the error was indeed mine. I stand ready to pay for the mistake."

Kirk rubbed his nose. "First Acertor, I can not say I am the injured party. While yes, I suffered a few minor shorts, it is your ships which took the hurt."

"I feel as if I fired the weapons myself."

"I understand this, but I am not sure on what to do."

Spacik said. "Captain, if I might be so bold as to suggest a possible solution?"

"By all means."

"We are experiencing a clash of cultures, First Acertor's and ours. Knowledge and understanding are related. We lack knowledge of each other. Therefore, we lack also understanding. Let us consider the question of Acertor's mistake, and while we consider, he and we can gain knowledge, each of the other, and in so gaining perhaps find understanding."

"I find this acceptable. First Acertor, I am reluctant to begin an interstellar relationship with a punitive action against the Admiral of a power I just contacted."

Acertor said. "If such action is required?"

"I have yet to see that such action is required. You are cast in the role of having to argue for your own punishment."

"I am prepared to so argue."

"I am prepared to listen, but over the course of some days. Let us do nothing in haste."

"I bend to your will Captain Kirk. I shall remain as long as your require to make your determination. Are we to remain here in limbo?"

"No, that will not do. Both your fleet and my ship have business to conduct. Please come to the bridge, we will speak with your first officer." They rose together and went up to the bridge. The Kongo crew took their accustomed stations. "Mr. Miritath, hail the Acceptian Fleet."

"Channel open Sir."

"*Vigilant*, this is Captain Kirk of the *Kongo*. We have come to a tentative agreement with First Acertor."

"What are your intentions Captain Kirk."

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"We have determined that we know too little of each other to take steps that would be of a permanent nature. First Acertor will travel with us for a time, and we will learn each other's ways. We will then determine punitive measures, if any."

"What period of time?"

"When would be convenient for you or another ship to return here?"

"My patrol will bring me in this area in one month."

"Then that is the period will we allow ourselves. First Acertor doubtless has items of personal worth that will make his time with us more comfortable. We will also make room for up to five other personnel if he has staff that are willing to accompany him."

"I will arrange for his personal effects to be transported to you."

"Unnecessary. As we have one of your shuttles here, First Acertor can return and see to his own needs. Kirk out."

Acertor looked at Kirk with the quizzical look common to his people. "You are just going to send me back to 'gather my effects'? What is to stop me from warping out of here, and leaving you behind?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, I won't even chase you."

"Why?"

"First Acertor, you impress me as a being of your word. I have decided to trust that word as I would want my word trusted. This is the first basis for understanding."

Acertor's eyes widened. "I, see. Then I must live up to your trust, or how can I live up to myself."

"Acertor, I can see that we are like beings, and understanding has begun. Please, see to your needs, the *Kongo* will await your pleasure."

Acertor looked around his suite for anything else he might need. Meanwhile his Most Second agitated nearby. "Sir, you cannot simply wander off with these aliens. They do not even understand civilized ways."

"That is why I must 'wander off' Tr'eel. They do not understand us, and we do not understand them. How many have we lost due to 'misunderstanding'?"

"137 dead, 215 wounded. Due to their firing on us!"

"Tr'eel. Who would you call responsible if an adult handed a fledgling a deadly weapon, and the child did injury with it?"

"The adult, of course."

"I assumed a custom, without verifying that it was their custom."

"But First, they could be savages."

"Mammal prejudice Tr'eel? It is unbecoming of you. I will remind you, that the first non-formal word out of Captain James' mouth was; 'Can we help your injured.' Hardly the mark of a savage."

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"If you have abdicated your command, I do not have to let you go."

Acertor fluffed his feathers, appearing larger. "Are you challenging me Tr'eel?"

"No sir."

"Then you must let me go."

"I don't like it, and you are leaving this ship under protest."

"Then protest if you must, but I gave my word, I am leaving."

Kirk looked out the ready room viewport, again, at the waiting Acceptionian fleet. Visually mere dots the alien ships were enhanced by the sensors to a size that revealed detail. Spacik sat on the couch sipping his green tea. "Really Captain, staring at the ships will not speed the process."

Kirk looked out the viewport again. "Yes, I know that. Impatience, it is a nasty human habit of mine."

"All will unfold in its own time."

"Has Tathilan been working on you as well?"

"Why would you think that Captain?"

"She is constantly feeding me the same line."

"Ane and Vulcans have many points of philosophical understanding. Patience is one of them. How do you plan to proceed?"

"Cautiously. We are babes in the wood where this people is concerned, and they know just as much about us. We need to proceed slowly. I think Doc Hanson gets the first crack at him. It would look bad if he died of a cold while we had him as guest."

"Indeed, and if he can get along with the good Doctor, he can get along with anyone aboard."

"Do I sense humor in that Mr. Spacik?"

"It is well known Captain that Vulcans do not jest."

"And Ardorians are green."

Captain, the Acceptionian shuttle has departed the Vigilant.

"Good give them clearance and see to their needs Tathilan."

"The waiting has ended Captain."

"Yes, and the hard part begins."

Acertor fluttered a bit as Doctor Hanson passed his scanner over him for the seventh time. "I understand the need for this doctor, but how long does it take."

"Well, being that I have no baseline on your species, and Tathilan is still chewing the data she was given. I want to be very sure."

Acertor sat up. "Really Doctor, how soon can you expect to need this

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information."

Hanson fixed him with a glare. "Admiral, your tell me how soon you 'need the information' after you really need the information, and how suddenly that can be?"

Acertor laid back down. "Keep scanning."

"That's more like it."

"So doctor, how did you enter your profession?"

"I went to the proper schools for training, got my degrees and joined Starfleet."

"Is that order necessary?"

"No, but it's how I did it. One can join Starfleet first, not join Starfleet at all, or join Starfleet and not train as a doctor. However, the latter two will affect your ability to get a post as a chief medical officer."

"Are these schools difficult to get into?"

"No, I can't say they are. You have to show an aptitude for the profession. Taking courses in your primary education that will be useful as a Doctor. Tests are given that must be passed for entrance to the schools."

"What caste must you be?"

"We don't have a caste system on Earth. So that is not a consideration."

"Is the training hard?"

"Yes, over a third of the students drop out in the first year. Of the remaining only a third will graduate. Getting your xeno-medical degree is more arduous than getting a warp engineering degree."

"Why would that be so?"

"Well warp physics is warp physics. Biology differs in a thousand subtle ways. For example, just from the rough data I have gathered, treating you like a Skoor, an avainoid race I am familiar with, could kill you. You might look similar, but the resemblance ends at that, blood chemistry, internal organs, even the feathers differ."

"Acceptians are not the only Avians then?"

"Far from it. I personally know of five avainoid species unrelated to each other, yours makes the sixth."

"So few. We know of only three, and we are all interrelated."

"Flight and intelligence do not seem to develop together too often. Both require a considerable investment of energy. Of that five, three are flightless. Indications are they used to fly."

"Yes, we have flightless feathered people as well. We do not place them in the same category as the flighted."

"I can see where you might not, it is a matter of viewpoint."

"Did you do anything before you became a doctor?"

"Yes, I escaped the family profession."

"Escaped? They held you to it?"

"No, not in any physical manner. However my Mother is a travel agent for

guilt trips."

"Beg pardon, but that didn't quite translate."

"No matter, a failed attempt at humor. No I was not held, but considerable obligation pressure was used to get me to stay with the family business."

"What was it?"

"Entertainers specializing in feats of strength and dexterity, compounded by the danger of height."

"Ah, for non-flyers, a thing of fear, yes."

"You couldn't even fly in that mess. The apparatus and wires would catch your wings. I have a solid of the "Flying Hansons" in my quarters, I'll dig it up for you later."

"Can you still perform these feats?"

"The body doesn't forget I am told, but it has been many a year since I practiced anything but medicine. I wouldn't want to try."

"Did the business fail?"

"Hardly. It wasn't dependent on me to continue. In any case, yes, I am done."

"It has been good speaking with you doctor."

The hologram of the sector slowly rotated in the projector. Regiban took the floor widening his broadcast to the entire room. **Sector 84.345.137 first mapped by the Cheyenne class survey cruiser *USS Standing Bear* in 2330. Up till now no regular patrol has been maintained by Starfleet."

Doctor Hanson interjected. "Being that we have to cover 7 other sectors as well, I would say it still doesn't."

Thank you Doctor, quite right. However we are here, and patrolling. We have 47 systems with confirmed Class M planets, one possible starfaring race, and 5 confirmed subwarp races. 10 of the class M worlds exhibited no sign of multicelled life on the last survey. All of them have life at some stage of development. There is one Federation Colony within our assigned area, it is not in this sector. We also lack a Starbase on this patrol. The nearest "friendly station" is DS20, in Sector 82.345.135.

Kirk said. "I think that the class M planets should be our primary area of study. Move in and scan the planets, determine the level of life on each and make recommendation for further study or quarantine. What do we know about the starfaring race?"

**Virtually nothing. The *Standing Bear* noted a warp signature, and where it was. We don't know if it was a native, another explorer, it could have even been an Acceptian ship, something we are now aware of. Studies of the sensor readings indicate the ship was not advanced."

"OK, we'll check that out first. Send the coordinates up to Operations."

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Make warp six for that system, and well move in slow from the outer edges. We don't want to startle anyone."

Spacik said. "Our ETA will be 4.6 days."

"OK, lets do it."

Acertor walked through the ship, greeting and being greeted by various people. The Kongo was going about its business. Much the same business that Acertor himself was used to practicing. His personal business was unfulfilled. Some compartment on this ship had to be big enough to fly in. One of the Ane passed him. The thought of flight was forgotten. He had questions, and that Ane was answers on the hoof. "Watcher?"

The Ane stopped and turned around. **Yes? I have been called that.**

"I have questions."

I might have answers.

"Is there a place we can talk?"

"Lounge 5, around the corner."

Acertor followed the Ane into the lounge, it was a small one with a few tables. He turned one of the chairs backward as he had seen one of the Humans do and sat. "Now Watcher, my questions."

**Yes?*

"Why are you here?"

Because I am curious.

"You have never accompanied our ships out of curiosity,"

I am sorry Acertor, we are not of a piece in everything. I am not aware of what you speak.

"I thought all the Watchers were of a piece and what one knew, all knew."

What the All knows, one can learn. If you wish the answers the All can give, you must speak to the All.

"And you are not the All?"

Right here, right now, no, I am not.

"I would speak with the All."

Come this evening to our room, there we will speak with you.

"I will come."

Lt. Thass checked the signal again. He punched it into the computer. "Tathilan, what do you make of this?"

It sounds like a mayday, but it's wrong.

"I should report it." He turned to the bridge at large. "Commander Spacik, Sir I have a distress signal."

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Spacik swiveled around. "Bearing lieutenant, and can we have it please?"

"I'll try sir." Thass worked the board for a moment. "I lost it."

"You lost the signal Mr. Thass?"

"Yes sir, it is a beamcast, we have moved out of the beam."

Spacik said. "Mr. Mordane, come about 180 degrees. Make your speed warp factor two."

"Yes Sir, Course 344 mark 0, warp factor two."

After a moment of listening Thass said. "I have it again sir, sending it to tactical. On speaker." A thin undulating wail fought with the static hiss of the subspace background. Spacik and the others strained to make something out.

"Can you improve that Mr. Thass?"

Thass' hands flew over the sciences console. "No Sir, we have what we have."

"This is a distress signal?"

"According to Tathilan."

"Tathilan?"

The carrier complies with Federation standard distress beacons, but the frequency is wrong. It is in the low sensor bands.

"Can you get a ship name?"

No, the signal is weak. Other than the distress carrier I have no data.

"Lost it again sir."

"Mr. Mordane."

"Yes sir, course 016 mark 0, warp factor 2."

"Signal is back."

Spacik counted a few beats. "All stop."

"All stop Sir."

"Mr. Solin, configure the main deflector to receive."

Solin grinned. "Excellent. Configuring now."

"Mr. Mordane, yaw about until the signal is strongest."

Lt. Mordane pecked at the thrusters until his board indicated that the signal strength was at maximum. Everyone listened closely.

Thass said. "I have the signal. It is stronger, but not much better."

"Bearing?"

Solin said. "187.... Mr. Mordane, thruster control to me please.... Mark 5. Bearing 187 mark 5 Sir."

"Sensors?"

"Nothing in range."

"Long range?"

"Nothing." Clear space across the board."

"Fascinating." Spacik punched the intercom. "Captain Kirk to the bridge."

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Acertor sat in the crew lounge, twitching. Doctor Hanson gave him a short list of foods to avoid but this "coffee" that Captain Kirk was so fond of was not on the list. None the less he was having some manner of reaction to it. The doors opened to admit the feline security officer. He didn't look as if he was on duty. Acertor was the only other being in the lounge at the time. Miritath came over to his table. "May I join you?"

"Certainly."

Miritath looked at him. "You seem edgy."

"Observant. I am edgy. Is it possible to have a reaction to this coffee beverage?"

"Hmm, yes. Caffeine, a mild stimulant to Humans. I would say the effect is stronger in your kind."

"And yourself?"

"Bad tasting water. The smell is tolerable. Do you want medical attention?"

"No, that is not necessary. The main effect seems to be an almost eerie wakefulness."

"Increased alertness is one of the claimed effects."

"It seems to be passing."

"You have a rapid metabolism, correct?"

"Quicker than mammals yes."

"Then it is passing from your system."

"Hungry?"

"Yes"

"Meat?"

"Raw, if you have it."

Miritath went to the replicator and ordered up a good sized plate of meat chunks of various types.

"You are a carnivore as well?"

"With omnivorous tendencies."

Acertor took a chunk and popped it in his mouth. "The texture lacks."

"It is all replicated. Nutritious but yes, it is not the same as real meat. One gets used to it. Real is a treat."

"It is much the same with us. One cannot carry enough cattle to feed thousands of hungry beaks on a starship. Replication is a must. However, I think I can tweak your meat programs. That is if your Captain does not object, and I can figure out the codes."

"You are most welcome to try. Captain Kirk has never objected to any attempt to improve the food, and we have a computer wizard beyond belief aboard. Your computer will talk to ours, or she will know why."

"Good, something to work on. However, I have a lack of understanding. Why do not the Caits rule?"

"No one rules."

"Someone must be in charge."

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"Yes, there is someone in charge, but they do not rule, they govern."

"What is the difference?"

"A ruler may dictate, a governor serves by the sufferance of the people governed."

"You can overthrow the ruler."

"No we choose them. They serve a term, and then we choose another."

"And each departs willingly?"

"Sometimes eagerly, it is not an easy job taking care of the planet."

"What about the Federation at large, who rules it?"

"Each planet is sovereign the Federation governs relationships between members, handles diplomacy with other political units, such as your Empire, and regulates trade between members, establishes a monetary standard, and so forth. It does not rule."

"You accept a political unit with little power, and no ability to rule as your governing body?"

"The Federation is a government for governments, and it tries to maintain that balance. Nothing keeps a member in the Federation but a willingness to be there."

"Nothing keeps members in?"

"Nothing."

"What if a member wants to leave, do you let them?"

"Yes, there have been a few such cases."

"You do not try to bring them back under control?"

"It is their right to stay or go. What control? The control is theirs."

"And this works?"

"It has for the last 200 years. We have hope it will endure."

"How do you feel about it?"

"I am in Starfleet, we explore, and maintain the peace. That should say enough."

"You have a warrior tradition then?"

"Actually, no, Cairts do not. We hunt only for food, and kill only from need. We will fight in defense, but never to conquer."

"A strange point of view from a carnivore."

"It is a large universe. We have a related species, that is just the opposite. Legend states that Qzin and Cait were once a single people. We split over the matter of what was food, and how one got it. The Qzin said all things not Qzin are food, and we must rule them. The Cait said all sapient things are not food, and we should rule our selves only."

"And of these legends, what is the present."

"The Qzin are a sullen and restricted people because they cannot control their lust for territory and appetite for other people. Repeatedly they tested the strength of the Federation. Repeatedly they have lost. Cairts are on the starships that enforce that peace."

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"Then I would say you have won the argument."

"Only that history has favored us and the allies we have."

"I would hear more of your legends."

"Tomorrow perhaps. I am on my way to bed."

The Intercom spoke. "Commander Miritath to the Conference room."

"I was on my way to bed."

"No matter, I have a meeting as well."

The beta shift gathered in the conference room. Kirk called the meeting to order. "As I understand your reports you heard a distress signal Mr. Thass?"

"Yes sir, the signal is being beamcast in a area some two light hours across."

"It is rather unusual to beamcast a distress message. It is something you want everyone to hear."

"This is true. The facts as we have them: The signal is barely above the level of background subspace radiation. The signal carrier wave, which so far is the only useful information we have gotten, is consistent with the Federation standard established for automated distress beacons. The signal is in the low sensor band of subspace. The signal is being beamcast from an unknown source at bearing 187 mark 5."

Miritath said. "Do you consider this a valid signal? Could it be an old ruse long forgotten?"

Spacik said. "I seems unlikely from a logical viewpoint. Why would one beamcast a distress signal? Especially a fake one."

Hanson asked. "Pirates?"

Kirk said. "No, pirates don't send out fake distress signals. Distress signals do not draw in merchant ships. They do draw in search and rescue ships, or worse, warships. Just the kind of attention pirates wish to avoid. Mr. Spacik we will work on the assumption that the distress is a real one."

"In that case Captain we must discern the nature of the signal."

"Who currently uses the low sensor band?"

Miritath went over the list. "Civilian warp shuttles, the big bulk haulers, Runabouts. Anyone traveling slower than warp 4. Low band propagates at warp 8.7, impractical for anyone not going slow.

"That gives us a time frame, and the width of the signal gives us a distance."

Thass said. "Depending on the beamcasting equipment we could be looking at a cone anything from five out to two hundred light years."

Miritath said. "We can rule out anything inside 5 parsecs."

Kirk said. "Our own sensor range, sensible."

Spacik said. "Might I suggest we move down the beam some distance and see if we can determine the angle of the cone."

"Excellent. Set it up. Now gentlebeings, some of us would like to get some

sleep."

Acertor entered the room that had been indicated. The room was darkened. The walls and ceiling seemed not to exist but an endless plain stretched in all directions and a starry sky above. A large moon lit the room with a soft radiance that cast shadows. All heads turned as he entered. "I am Acertor of the Acceptians, I would speak with the All, who among you is the All."

We are one Acertor, come forward and be known.

The weight of the communication nearly knocked him to his knees. He had heard rumors of the All, but never believed them. He stepped into the room. "I have questions."

Ask.

"Why do you travel with the Federation ship, yet you have refused to travel on Imperial ships?" He puffed his feathers.

Let Us ask a question in return Acertor.

"Ask, I do not fear answers."

**How did the Empire come to us?*

"In the usual manner, you proved amenable to the will of the Empire. Force is not used when not met by force."

**You came to Harmony, and stated we were part of your Empire. Do you Acertor recall Our exact answer?*

"No, it is not recorded."

**Loosely translated it was "whatever". Do you know what benefit the Empire has gained from Harmony?*

"I understand it is a pastoral paradise with little in the way of resources."

**In plain terms, nothing. You imposed your presence on our world, set up your government, which we ignore, and assumed that whatever we had, was now yours. Now you come and wonder why we do not accompany your ships?*

"That was 670 years ago. What has this Federation done to move the All out of your grassy plains and into space?"

**They invited us. We have historically accompanied those that would 'invite'.

"And the officers of your kind on this ship?"

Man, Humankind made a pack of peace with the All before your Empire was born Acertor. We remember this Covenant, a Covenant suggested by the Humans, not us. A way to end misunderstanding, to make peace. We remember as does Humankind, and we honor it.

"We made such an offer as well, you didn't come."

You offered the fist of rulership. We have never accepted that.

"So you have a covenant with Humans."

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The same we offered your kind.

"So you serve Humans."

No Acertor, have you learned nothing. We do not serve Humans, Humans do not serve Us. We help each other. It is partnership, not rulership.

"All we have to do is agree to your conditions, and we get your vast wealth of knowledge then?"

Is the Covenant of Ansisi so hard to bear Acertor? As to our knowledge. It is not "ours". It belongs to all that have given it, and all that ask in need have been aided. We sing your songs as well Acertor, and you have not been the most agreeable of peoples.

Acertor spat, the words bitter in his mouth. "And these peoples are I assume?"

We saw the Federation at its founding, we read their words, and pondered their thoughts, and discussed the Covenant. In the end it was decided, that if Humans would join this work in progress, so would we also. For in all our years, Humans are the first who have willingly called themselves of Us.

"All Humans?"

No, the number is small, but We exist.

"So your will ally against us?"

No Acertor. We call none enemy that will not say it first.

"I must think on these matters."

Go in peace Acertor.

He retreated from the room, and knew it for a retreat. For a few moments he leaned against the wall of the corridor and allowed his heart to slow to a more normal beat. Now he understood why his sociology professor had that look in his eyes when he spoke of the All. There was indeed much to think about.

James Timothy Kirk took again his aspect and lowered his icon. For long moments he lay on the bed and stroked the hair of the woman curled against him. **I will have to assemble a report of that to Starfleet.**

Yes, that duty cannot be ignored.

A complete report.

It could take a while to assemble it, check the facts and so forth.

It could take as long as I need in fact.

By morning the excitement of a possible discovery and rescue had spread throughout the ship. When Kirk stepped onto the bridge he could feel the anticipation around him. Commander Spacik stood as the Captain entered. "Good Morning Captain. I trust you slept well."

"Yes Mr. Spacik. I did. I relieve you."

"I stand relieved Sir."

"Did you get any sleep at all?"

"Under the circumstances I have felt little need. I can maintain performance without sleep for two more shifts before my performance suffers."

"The usual Vulcan answer. Any results?"

"Yes, we do have more data than was available last night. In moving down the cone as was suggested, we have established a hypothetical angle. We should be approximately 98.7 light years from the source."

"You can't get more accurate than that Mr. Spacik?"

"Not with the current data Sir. With further data I should be able to present you with a more typically Vulcan five-decimal-place answer."

"Well, that's more like it."

"Mr. Mordane Give us best speed on our current heading for 50 light years. Correct as necessary to keep us in the beam."

"Yes Sir, course laid in."

"Execute. Mr. Spacik will you join me in my ready room."

"Certainly Sir."

Kirk entered his ready room with Spacik behind him. "Can I get you something?"

"Yes Sir, tea, green."

Kirk addressed the replicator. "Tea, green, hot, Coffee, Kirk." His selections materialized. Kirk passed Spacik the cup.

"You asked me in for clarification if I conjecture correctly." Spacik carefully sipped the hot tea.

"You conjecture correctly."

"Which points do you wish clarified?"

"More a case of opinion than fact. What do you think we are after?"

"I believe I can better define what it is not."

"Proceed."

"It is not a robot freighter. While they will send out an automated distress beacon, it is of a fixed nature indicating no lives at stake. Also, a robot freighter could not alter its sensors to send a distress message. It is not a pirate. As you indicated last night distress beacons produce the wrong results."

"We rule out robots and pirates. So we have a manned ship. But what kind?"

If I may?

"You have an idea Tathilan?"

In the matter of eliminating possibilities, yes.

"So what can you eliminate?"

**I did a current search for any known missing ships currently registered. Results are negative. Any ship that have gone missing within a time period indicated by the signal either have last known positions that would not put them

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in the right place, or have been located.**

"And the list is updated daily and contains no missing more than seven years old." Added Spacik

**I also checked the long term missing between 7 and 20 years assumed destroyed. Again, no matches."

"So we are looking for a ship missing more than twenty years."

On the outside.

"And that list Captain, runs into the hundreds."

"So we have a mystery to solve?"

"I appears so."

"Sounds like fun. Let's do it."

Kirk led the way into the holodeck. The round wooden structure within was filling with people. A rowdy bunch at best. He lead the way into the better galleries, while the unwashed masses below crowded in the standing room only. An indelicate odor drifted up from the milling crowd. "Computer stop program." Everything stopped. "Reprogram on the assumption that Tudor era Englishmen bathed daily and washed their clothing." The program resumed and the nose was not offended. Kirk continued his conversation. "The problem with getting anywhere is the time it takes, even at a fast cruising speed. The speed of this ship has been vastly increased over its original design parameters. Still it takes us 8 days to get 50 light years."

Acertor bobbed. "That is a decent rate of speed however. Not every ship we have can make that rate."

"Nor us. We are the lucky ones. Ah, our seats."

Acertor looked about the structure as "natives" in wild costumes jostled in the pit or took seats in the gallery around them. A trio of musicians played for the milling crowd. "Interesting populace. What are we looking at?"

"A recreation of the ancient Globe Theater in London, England. We are about to witness one of the plays of William Shakespeare as it was believed to be originally performed. A comedy called 'A Comedy of Errors'."

"An historical recreation, how old?"

"Eight hundred years."

"These people hardly look to have much in the way of technology."

"They don't. Gunpowder, mechanical printing, sail power for ships. Water power and animals are as strong as it gets."

"Eight hundred years, and you are what you are now?"

"We consider our rise sudden and scary. We had basically the same technology for thousands of years, and went from animal power to warp drive in 200 years."

"Such a increase in technology."

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"Technology, population, everything. Damn near destroyed ourselves before we got a grip on it."

"Our rise to warp power was much slower. I can't image the pressure on any people with that much change."

"Somehow we did. All the relevant records are in the databanks."

A shift in the expectant crowd got their attention. Additional musicians and several actors came out on stage. After a brief flurry of pipe and drum, one of the better dressed spoke. "Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall, And by the doom of death end woes and all."

"Merchant of Syracuse, plead no more; I am not partial to infringe our laws. The enmity and discord which of late Sprung from the rancorous outrage of your duke To merchants, our well-dealing countrymen, Who, wanting guilders to redeem their lives, Have seal'd his rigorous statutes with their bloods, Excludes all pity from our threat'ning looks. For, since the mortal and intestine jars 'Twixt thy seditious countrymen and us, It hath in solemn synods been decreed, Both by the Syracusians and ourselves, To admit no traffic to our adverse towns; Nay, more: if any born at Ephesus Be seen at any Syracusian marts and fairs; Again, if any Syracusian born Come to the bay of Ephesus-he dies, His goods confiscate to the Duke's dispose, Unless a thousand marks be levied, To quit the penalty and to ransom him. Thy substance, valued at the highest rate, Cannot amount unto a hundred marks; Therefore by law thou art condemn'd to die.

Acertor leaned over to Kirk "This is a comedy?"

"That's what it said on the label. Give it a chance."

Kirk plopped down in the center seat. "Mr. Mordane report please."

"Sir, we are at station keeping, I have located the distress signal. And calculated the size of the cone."

"And what do we have?"

"The object is now 48.76892 light years from us."

"See if you can get a snapshot of it, full spectrum, and continue to the location, best speed."

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Lt. Failee gave Stellar cartography time to take their pictures, then resumed speed." A few moments went by. Kirk was about to get up.

"Stellar Cartography to Bridge. Ensign Cassman here."

"Go ahead Ensign."

"I have something, interesting Captain. I think you want to see this."

Kirk looked at Spacik. Spacik looked back. "OK, I'll be right down. Spacik?"

"I am with you Captain."

The two entered the turbolift. A short time put them outside the Stellar Cartography section. Acertor was there as well. Kirk said. "Admiral, want to see something unusual?"

"Indeed. I think I would."

The three entered the map room. Ensign Cassman was sitting at the control board.

Kirk said. "OK Ensign Let's see it."

"Yes Sir." The view shifted to a perfectly normal star field.

"What is to see?"

"I'll do the false color image." The color shifted and a bright deep violet object jumped into existence.

Spacik said. "This is the standard scale."

"Yes sir."

Kirk said. "An x-ray object."

"Yes Sir, I called up several recent scans from the Saltok array and the Lenoiv array. Correlated this is what the full circle looks like."

The view rotated, the object vanished. As it went around that spot darkened to a deep red, then vanished, and once again the deep violet.

Acertor said. "Spectrum shifted."

"Yes sir. I was able to get the speed of the object; 0.9699c. That would make it the fastest non-warp object we know."

Kirk said. "How big is it?"

"Tiny sir, estimated at under 10,000 tons."

"A ship?"

Spacik said. "And a small one."

"Admiral, I think we need to send a message to your fleet, we are going to be delayed."

"Understood Captain. Are you hoping to find a living crew?"

"Always. There is just something about this that is tickling the back of my mind."

Acertor entered the Kongo's Senior Officer's lounge seeking a quiet place to read. Mr. Spacik was engaged in a similar activity, with a plate of leafy

some things in front of him.

"If I might comment, I wouldn't take you for an herbivore."

"We are not. Taxidermically we are omnivores. Vegetarianism is a philosophical choice."

"Then you would not have a warrior tradition."

"To the contrary Admiral. The past of Vulcan is soaked in blood. Indeed, I would not be sitting here had we not broken that cycle."

"A messianic savior?"

"As I understand the term yes. Surak introduced the ethic of reason to Vulcan. It is now a total part of our culture."

"You have no dissidents?"

"Yes, they left some two thousand years ago."

"So you have had space flight for a while?"

"As a matter of necessity, yes. An Orion colony attempted to annex Vulcan some twenty five hundred years ago. We had to learn to fight in space so we would not be conquered."

"Was this before or after Surak?"

"Unfortunately for the Orions, before. Unfortunate for us as well. Our culture was impacted. Isolationism was imposed and we did not venture out again for fifteen hundred years."

"Why?"

"We believed the Orion's statement that they controlled all beyond us. After the dissidents left, someone challenged that statement, in a reasoning fashion. We began to reach out once more. However, with great care as to not bruise others in the way we had been bloodied."

"So you waited for the cultures around you to catch up?"

"And we had reason to not be seen. A large and rapacious Empire was not at all far from Vulcan. We could not have withstood an attack. When they waned, we explored further. By that time, our neighbors were also exploring."

"You joined this Federation then?"

"It was more complex than that, but yes, we saw the reason in taking that step."

"So who on Vulcan decides?"

"Everyone."

"Everyone?"

"Yes, for any issue of planetary importance public debates are held and votes taken on a planet wide basis. The majority result carries the issue."

"It seem an awkward method of running a planet."

"When reason prevails, much is accomplished. How does your government decide."

"We have a ceremonial Matriarchy, that still carries some power. Decisions are made in the Hall of Pinions."

"Who is in the hall?"

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"Heads of household's of the Second Estate, or a designated proxy. These days more proxies than heads. The planets are far apart, and estates must be managed. In the choice to manage one's goods or one's government, most choose the goods. The Imperial Halls are very far away, and truthfully matter little except on the core worlds."

"As with most large Empires, the reach of the throne is felt only so far as quick communication will carry their will. Regional governors have great power."

"Not so great, quick communication we have in plenty. I took a look at the maps, your Federation covers a much greater volume than the Acceptionian Empire. Amazing that you have taken so much area in so little time."

"The Federation does not 'take area'. We come when invited and do not come when not invited."

"So I had been told, but the area the Federation covers, without conquest, how could you?"

"The maps show the patrol area of the Federation, not territory held."

"So, you patrol so much?"

"Federation members are scattered throughout the area. Therefore so is Starfleet."

"That is much to think about."

"Something to think about is always good."

Kirk looked around the table. All present he began. "We are 48 hours from our target. Further examination has proven the initial speculation. We have a ship, moving at high relativistic speed, Ensign Cassman, your report."

"Sirs." The center of the table shifted to a rotating display of the doppler shifted object. "The object is moving at 0.9699c, mass would indicate a ship of under 20,000 tons. We have not been able to get a clear sensor reading of the object even with the aid of the high resolution normal space and subspace telescopes located at the Saltok and Lenoiv arrays. However with the aid of Tathilan we were able to somewhat correct the view, thusly." The blurred and distorted image slowly coalesced in to a recognizable object. A tubular ship with unclear projections off it. "Tathilan can you correlate that with any known design."

**Parameters Captain?*

"Federation designs."

One moment. The moment passed, then another. Finally several dozen ships designs popped up in the display. **All designs are pre 23rd century. The last was in use as late as 2245.**

Felialan asked. **What was it used as?*

**The *SS Bustard* was used as a robot ship to transport hazardous cargoes

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for disposal. She was disposed of at the same time. Disposal method was driving the ship into a star.**

Miritath said. "Any other service?"

The *SS Bustard* and others of her class were used as a primary transports throughout the Romulan War.

Kirk said. "Romulan War, that is causing an itch I don't feel I can even try to..."

Hanson said. "Well, spill it."

"It couldn't be, not a chance."

"We will never know unless you tell us."

"In two days, we will know. It's an old legend."

Spacik said. "Captain, I do wonder how we are going to approach this object. Warp speed is too fast, and impulse too slow."

"Felialan, is my memory good? I seem to recall a lecture in warp drive engineering that discussed sublight speeds in warp configuration."

Memory serves you correctly. It can be done. It's hard on the engines and I don't recommend the procedure.

"Can you give us matching speed long enough to get a good look?"

Yes, fifteen minutes, the warp bubble will be highly unstable.

"We will try and make it ten. Regiban, any problems with the sensors in that state."

None I can think of right now. I'll let you know well before we need it if their are.

"Any other comments?"

Hanson piped up. "Yes. What if we find survivors?"

"We cross that bridge when and if we come to it. OK, Mr. Solin, plot us an approach that will place us in a parallel course with the object, as close as you dare get. Consult with Felialan on any possible difficulties in controlling the ship at sub-light speeds in warp. Let's do it."

As the others filed out Doctor Hanson lagged behind. "Captain, a word in private if I might?"

"Five minutes, my ready room."

"Gotya."

Kirk came in, Hanson was already comfortable on the couch with is coffee, a second cup was steaming on the table. "Made yourself comfortable I see."

"Comfortable seems a nice way to be. To the point, why so cagey?"

"Because I don't want speculation flying around the ship. We will know for sure soon enough. If we have survivors we are talking old sleep tubes. Can you be ready for that?"

"It's a tough one, but doable. Hibernation shock is at it's worst in the first two weeks. Unfortunately the science of how to deal with hibernation shock has not progressed much. There has been little call for it."

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"What's the record?"

"I don't know. There are a few cases that are hinted at in the old Enterprise no letter that are never fully disclosed, 'need to know' only. One case out of DS10 in recent years close to 200 years old. I would have to say that is pretty much the record."

"Well, if I am right, you will be looking at are least 200 years. Be ready for the worst. I'll see if I can get you that information. I would call this need to know."

"Thus ill informed I go forth. Anything else you would like to add?"

"Yes, but not now."

The door chime jolted Kirk out of his concentration. Odd, most crew paged him. "Come." Acertor entered the cabin. "Admiral, an unusual call to say the least. Have a seat. What can I get for you?"

"Water please. I should like to be a prisoner more often if this is how you treat them."

"That still has not been decided. Water, normal, Skoor cup."

"Skoor cup? Ah, Doctor Hanson mentioned them." He took the covered cup. "Yes, similar in function to the ones we use. After all the trouble I went through to get my favorite programmed in the computer."

Next time ask.

"Excuse me?" Acertor spotted Tathilan beside the couch.

Next time, ask what we already have.

"Your 'voice' sounds familiar, but I can't place you?"

I'm Tathilan, the ship's Computer Officer.

"I recognize you now. I thought you were an AI program?"

Close, we can discuss it later. You had concerns.

"Yes. I got through to High Command. They understand your rescue mission and the delay it will cause. They are taking advantage of it to send an Elder out with the *Vigilant*."

"You don't sound pleased."

"It means that High Command considers the issue of importance."

"I have never regarded it as anything but."

"Captain Kirk, while I am prepared to accept the consequences of my actions, I am not required to look forward to it."

"Understood. Concerns indicates more than one."

"Do you have an 'Ambassador' or person of equal rank on the ship? If so I have not met them."

"All ship's Captains of line rank are considered Ambassadors of the Federation. That means me."

"Also, we have not had any formal discussion of terms as of yet."

"I do not consider the process of understanding finished."

"Such processes are usually continuous."

"Then they should continue. You are our guest."

"I am acquiring the impression Captain that you don't intend to make me a prisoner."

"Good impression. No, that was never my intention."

"Yet you went through the motions of that possibility."

"Yes, I did. I sensed that you needed it at that time. It is my hope you are moving beyond that need."

"You trust your senses with a species you had never met?"

"We, had, I had not."

"We? I don't understand."

"Acertor, I am one of those humans that is part of the All, Ansisi as was explained to you."

"I see. So you will be recommending war to liberate Harmony?"

"Nothing of the sort. Harmony has not requested liberation. Do you assume that Harmony would need liberation?"

"I have been told in certain terms that the Empire is not welcome."

Tathilan said. **Nor is it unwelcome.**

"Your terms were strong in disapproval."

"How would you react to having your house invaded and someone setting up offices therein and posting rules you have no need of? **

Acertor puffed up. "We would not allow it!"

Yet you do it.

"Acceptians are the natural rulers of our region."

Kirk waved it off. "It's an old argument, one both Human and Ane have heard, and that more than one Human has expressed. An argument that you will not convince me of, and one I don't think I will dissuade you of. We need not argue the point."

Acertor visibly brought himself under control. "How can I expect your opinion to affect your judgment Captain?"

"You can expect that it will not. I represent the entire Federation in this matter, not myself alone. Opinions of your governmental system will vary. You are not now at war with the Federation, or any other body to which we are allied."

"What do you think Captain?"

"Your Empire will fall."

"It has lasted 2000 years."

"Yes, you have not yet outstripped your ability to communicate effectively. In that you are strong. However, your comments to Mr. Spacik are telling. The rulers of the ruling houses see more fit to profit than rule, a form of rot. How long before the Proxies do not answer to the interests of their Patrons, but answer for their own interests, or the interests of the highest bidder? This could

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be happening already. The Government rotting from within."

"If you are so knowledgeable on government Captain, why are you not in Government?"

"Political Science is taught to every command cadet. We are required to be expert generalists. Equally at home in silicon grease or at diplomatic dinners. Our knowledge is not from the human experience alone, but every member of the Federation adds to the store of knowledge. Authoritative systems rot from within. Totalitarian systems rot faster, Republics take more time, but all rot. Effective pruning to prevent rot is a difficult task. It is seldom undertaken until the root is gone."

"So what was the oldest government on Earth?"

"China, an absolute monarchy that lasted in several forms but with a continuous government for well over 3000 years. By the time someone toppled it over, it required only a light push, and it fell apart. Totally rotten from within."

"Why are you so concerned to convince me of rot within my own government?"

"Because, if you are aware, and willing to see the truth, you have a chance to stop it. Authoritative governments fall, this is the experience, be aware of it and watch for the signs. Then you have a chance to break the pattern."

"You have no suggestion as to a better system?"

"Not my place to suggest. It's your government, your people. If you feel you can best thrive under your current system, it is not my place to condemn it."

"Yet you say it will fall?"

"That is the experience yes. However, that is not your immediate concern."

"What do you suggest we do about Harmony Captain?"

"Get off it."

"Just like that?"

"Yes, get off, and ask permission to return, aware and accepting of the fact that you might not get it."

"Retreat is not the Acceptation way."

"One of the Founders of the Federation, General Veseppi Kallfalx said; 'It is better to win friends than win battles.' And he was known for both."

"What message would failing back from a long held position give? It is not something to lightly consider."

Tathilan said. ****You hold a conquered Empire by the power of your closed hand. Open that hand, and it flees from you.****

"Yes, that is so, the hand must stay closed."

****The Federation's hand is already open, and always has been.****

"That is our strength."

"Do you admit weakness?"

"Yes, power still corrupts, so everyone must watch carefully to see that one's self and one's fellows are not getting corrupted."

"When you find this what do you do?"

"Warn them they are going to far. Official action is only taken if the warning fails to get their attention."

"So what government does your world have?"

"Earth is a republic with democratic overtones."

"Yet you say republics rot."

"A fact of which we are painfully aware. Pruning of the tree must be done occasionally to keep it healthy. Earth seems to work best under a republic that practices benevolent neglect."

"Benevolent neglect?"

"Being slow to take action. Most problems solve themselves, or at worst require local action. Very little requires the world government to have a hand in."

"So you consider it best that the government does nothing?"

"That would be the ideal circumstance, yes."

"Most curious Captain. I do have one more question?"

"Ask."

"How did you know of my conversation with Mr. Spacik?"

"He briefed me on it."

"I, see. Good night to you then."

Kirk took a quick look around the bridge. "Mr. Failee?"

"Course plotted sir, we should come along side the unknown two minutes after beginning the curve."

"Regiban?"

Sensors ready, I have everything on line.

"Felialan?"

**Warp power is under constant class one monitoring, you will have 14 minutes at warp 0.9699. After which the system will automatically increase to warp 1 and a controlled drop to real space. Intermix chamber B is off line in case of feedback damage we can't control."

"Understood. Mr. Failee, engage."

The *Kongo* came around in the graceful turn slowing as she came until she was 1000 meters off the Starboard side of the unknown ship.

Failee said "Warp 0.9699 now, timer running."

Sensors running we are getting everything.

"On visual."

The view of the old ship swam into focus. Talking on the bridge slowly came to a halt, as each member of the crew saw the ship. "Magnify." The ship jumped closer. The paint was worn off the bow from 200 years of micrometeors leaving a dull satin finish. Part of the vessel's name remained. "USS Ulysse" was

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all that could be read. Kirk rose from his seat, as if to walk toward the relic. NCC-107 was still visible on the near nacelle. "The Grant."

Lt. Failee said. "Five minute mark."

"It's the Grant."

The silence stretched out. "Regiban, do we have lifesigns?"

Barely readable, but yes, we do.

"Ten minute mark."

"Regiban?"

We have enough.

"End the cycle Mr. Failee."

The Kongo briefly passed the ancient Grant, and then dropped behind her at a "slow" 0.1c. Kirk said. "Felialan, get me a level two on the Warp drives. Everyone, conference in an hour. Mr. Spacik, the bridge is yours." Kirk retreated to his ready room. The bridge exploded into talk as the door closed behind him. Kirk had no sooner flopped on the couch when the door call rang. "Come."

Doctor Hanson walked in. "Well, expectations met?"

"Exceeded." Kirk jumped to his feet and began to pace. "I had a faint idea, a too large hope, a longing even for it to be the Grant. But to actually see her. Bob, no one has laid eyes on that ship in over 200 years!"

"And we have lifesigns."

Kirk stopped. "Yes, we do." He sat. "And a real problem too."

"We can't get close to her."

"Not with warp drive, you can't touch the ship."

"I might be a doctor not a physicist, but I recall Mr. Einstein was rather hard on anyone getting near the speed of light."

"That he is. Well conference in the hour. We'll kick some ideas around.

Assume we can get to her, you have a bunch of very old hibernation tubes to rescue."

The conference room was buzzing like Hornet's nest. Everyone who could was in the room proper. The second ring table had been installed. The "gallery" had small holos of every departmental office with even more people crowded in, and even the main lounges. Kirk looked at the large audience. "Is anyone flying the ship?" He waited `til the laughter died down. "Seriously."

Another face popped up on the central projector. "Ensign Harry Kim reporting sir. I have the helm."

"Someone at least is on the job here. For the record, we have discovered the long lost *USS Ulysses S Grant*, as by now half the quadrant knows. Regiban, can we have the details please?"

**The *USS Ulysses S Grant* NCC-107 was reported as missing in action on Stardate 246.54 The reporting ship indicated it was heading off at a high sublight rate on an unknown bearing. The reporting ship, the *USS Paris* NCC-

137 was unable to raise the *Grant*.**

Cmd Solin said. "With the fact that they rigged their sensors to send a distress message, I would conclude the subspace set is damaged beyond repair."

**That is likely correct. Damage is extensive. The hull has a sizable hole under the engineering section, and it is open to space. Likewise the shuttlebay is in vacuum. The rest of the ship is holding tight. The fusion reactors are shut down, and there is no antimatter aboard, I was able to tell that the port antimatter intermix system is on, but no longer supplying power to the ship."

Hanson said. "So, no reactors, what is the ship running on?"

Batteries. I estimate two or three months of remaining function.

"We got here just in time."

Kirk said. "That looks to be the case. The problem is how do we match speeds with the *Grant*, and then decelerate."

Felialan said. **We do not have sufficient impulse fuel to perform such a maneuver.**

Hanson said. "But we could be the last chance these people have. What keeps us from using the warp drive power plants?"

**The way they work. It's a cheat in Einsteinian space. They leverage your way passed the speed of light, not bull our way through. To go fast in normal space, you have to have mass and energy. Energy we have plenty of, but not enough mass."

"Sirs?"

Kirk said. "Who is speaking."

A hologram flickered into the central area. "Ensign Martendale, engineering. Sir we use deuterium as a fuel because it packs easy, and we can get it almost anywhere. However, the impulse engines will accept any gas, or even liquid as reaction mass. We could use the basic elemental stores normally used in the replicators as reaction mass. We would even get a better thrust ratio because the mass of the elements is greater."

Kirk said. "Felialan, is this practical?"

Yes, but we will have some very dirty impulse engines when we are done.

"How much can we afford to burn?"

Mr. Spacik answered. "We can expend 63.564% of our current supply level and not engender the ship."

"Is that enough?"

Tathilan said. **Yes, with the decrease in mass as we throw mass we will have sufficient mass to make the maneuver and to brake to a full stop. We will then have to maintain emergency rations and will have only 10% of our impulse fuel left.**

"Does this account for the mass of the *Grant*?"

"No, we will have to rescue the crew and abandon the *Grant*."

Spacik said. "That's too long at relativistic speeds. We are talking a

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significant time dilation effect."

Hanson sat up. "Wait a minute. If we would experience time dilation, the *Grant* has for years."

"You are correct Doctor. I calculate that the *Grant* has experienced only 10.95238 standard years according to the standard time dilation table for 0.9699c."

Felialan said. **However, that does not address the possible failure of the *Grant's* batteries.**

Spacik said. "That is true. Rescue must occur soon."

Kirk said. "What is the closest star system with a hunk of rock and a gas giant?"

Tathilan said, as the graphic came up. **Albert's system. 10.23 light years from our current heading.**

"Any PD problems?"

No, it is listed as uninhabited.

"Right. Tathilan, plot a course. Ensign Kim."

"Yes Sir."

"Engage the course now on your board, warp factor 9.5"

"Yes Sir."

"Here is what we do. I want all the shuttles, shuttlepods, gigs and anything else that can be off loaded off loaded in Albert's System. I want a crew for the Akagi to keep an eye on things, we are coming back for it. Empty the cargo holds of anything for which an immediate or emergency need cannot be thought of, such as the colony recovery kit. All excess material will be dumped in space with the shuttles. Felialan, rig every emptied cargo hold necessary with material tanks. Those figures were on the *Kongo* as she is currently massed?

Yes.

"Good, we will replace that mass with expendables in a ram-scoop run on the local gas giant. That should improve our margin. Get every gram of reaction mass you can without losing the gain to diminishing returns. I want everyone taking a critical look at your departments. Any equipment that isn't tied down, and is not needed for the rescue, and will survive vacuum storage, gets added to the pile. Personal possessions are optional. No one is required to ditch personal items. Tear the ship apart. Every gram you can save, means another gram of reaction mass. Doctor Hanson, your department is the exception. At least one hold is reserved for your hibernation recovery ward. The crew of a Lenin class is?"

Regiban said. **One hundred persons Captain.**

"Assume one hundred then. Let's do it people."

For the next several days pandemonium reigned in the *Kongo*. Once Albert's

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system was reached, things started piling off. First the shuttles and pods, then the empty shuttle bays were used as jettison sites. Crew hiked to and fro with bundles, equipment from the labs, furniture from lounges and crew quarters, and in spite of the exception many a bundle of personal possessions. Cargo nets were replicated and filled, labeled and jettisoned for work bee crews to lash together. The *Kongo* was striped to the hull. Meanwhile Doctor Hanson and his medical staff checked supplies, requisitioned what was needed and set up a cargo hold as a hibernation recovery ward. Felialan and her engineers turned several holds into tanks. Cryogenic lines snaked through corridors and jefferies tubes to connect the newly made storage with the impulse fuel supply, and the ramscoops.

At last a run was made thorough the upper atmosphere of the local gas giant to fill the consumables tanks to the maximum. The *Kongo*, stripped of every thing she could spare and then filled to the bursting point with fuel, floated ready to go.

Kirk took one last look around the bridge. Everything was ready. Tathilan kept the countdown running. The *Grant* was behind them, they had to play catch-up. The bridge crew watched the tactical display as the *Grant* approached.

Mr. Solin reported. "All hands ready for maximum impulse thrust. 22, 21, 20, T minus 15 seconds and counting, 14..."

Felialan said. "**All impulse systems 100% power and go.**"

"11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, GO!"

The *Kongo* thrust forward from a full impulse coast. The engines rumbled low and loud, unaccustomed to the high mass fuel that ran through their guts. The *Kongo* shivered ever so slightly as Cmd Solin counted off the time and speed. "T 10 seconds and counting we have 0.5c. T 20 seconds and counting we have 0.7c..." The count continued, the *Grant* rushed forward toward the planned point of contact. The engines changed pitch as a different element was fed into their hungry maw. "T 40 seconds and counting we have 0.9c. T 50 seconds and counting, we have 0.91c. T one minute and counting, we have 0.92c...." The ship rumbled and creaked. For a brief few seconds the hull shivered like a harp string, and the resonant vibration point passed. The impulse drive howled like a banshee. "T 1 minute 30 seconds, 0.94c, T 1 minute, 40 seconds 0.945c, T 1 minute 50 seconds 0.95c... The stars in the view screen stretched. Not the streaking of warp travel, but they lengthened and turned blue, long arcs of color with a circle of nothing at the center.

Spacik said. "The *Grant* is approaching Captain."

"Extend the docking tube, ready tractor beams."

"T 2 minute and 20 seconds, 0.964c, T 2 minutes and 30 seconds, 0.969c. T 2 minutes 50 seconds, 0.9694c. The tactical plot showed the *Grant* closing slowly, in reality she was an unmanned missile. Any contact with any difference

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in speed and both ships would be expanding x-rays. Atomic bits of matter in terms of atoms per decameter flashed in a light show across the deflectors. The star bow stretched ever thinner.

"Steady..."

T 3 minutes 20 seconds, 0.9697c. T 3 minutes 30 seconds, 0.96975c. T 3 minutes 40 seconds. 0.96978c The pitch of the engines stepped up yet again, and the exhaust flared like a comet, a plasma and x-ray contrail that glowed like a nova. T 4 minutes, 50 seconds, 0.96982c, T 5 minutes, 0.96984c, T 5 minutes 10 seconds, 0.96986c. The tactical plot showed the two ships closing, the *Grant* was still not in visual sight. All eyes strained on the stern view, seeking the small bright spot that was their goal. T 6 minutes 10 seconds 0.96988c. T 6 minutes, 20 seconds, 0.96989c"

"Visual contact Captain."

"T 6 minutes 40 seconds, 0.969898c. T 6 minutes 50 seconds, 0.969899c. T 7 minutes, 0.9699c!"

"We have rendezvous."

"All stop! Match speed and tractor her in."

"We have a hard dock."

"Warp power to the tractors."

"Mr. Solin, full reverse thrust."

Once again the engines howled their familiar song in an ever increasing pitch. Cmd Solin counted down the time and speed. T One minute, 0.961c. T 1 minute, 10 seconds, 0.959c. T 1 minute 20 seconds, 0.955c. The engines coughed, the howl settled into the usual rumble of full impulse. The contrail faded

We are now burning normal impulse fuel.

Cmd Solin continued the countdown as the *Kongo* spent her reserves killing the momentum she had strived for. 14 long minutes while the engines burned at full thrust until once again the *Kongo* rested at a relative non-motion to the universe. Solin announced. "We are at all stop."

Cheering broke out throughout the ship. Kirk let the backslapping continue a few minutes. Then stood. "That's half the battle. Felialan attach umbilicals to the *Grant*, Dr. Hanson, I'll meet your teams at the airlock. Mr. Spacik once the *Grant* is secured you are cleared to return to Albert's System to pick our stuff up."

Kirk, Hanson, and anyone that could reasonably crowd in was waiting at the lock. The *Kongo's* doors slid aside and Kirk stepped forward to the battered hull of the *Grant*. He pressed the hatch button. After a moment's protest the hatch rolled back into the hull. The inner door shortly followed. Kirk sniffed at the air in the old ship. It was faintly stale, the odor of long recycled air. He entered, ducking slightly at the close overhead. The passage was narrow requiring the team to move single file. Small sounds from the still running ship filtered

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through. Humming from the fans, a distant occasional beep. The *Grant* creaked and moaned. The team approached the main access.

"I believe the berth deck was on the top."

"And we are currently on the third deck."

Kirk looked at the ladder leading up, then back at the gurney floating behind them. "Doc, can you get that thing up a ladder?"

"God and the FMA willing."

Kirk mounted the steep steps into the next deck, and then to the first. A narrow passage led in either direction with doors leading off it.

"Bridge in the front, and the Captain's cabin should be right behind it." Kirk walked quickly up the passage. Hanson sent his team to check the various compartments for the state of the hibernation chambers. Kirk entered the bridge. Took a look around. "Kirk to Kongo."

"Spacik here Captain, what have you found?"

"The communications panel is wired into the navigation console in a fashion only an engineer could love. Send Lt. Thass over, he'll want to see this. After all, he did discover it."

"Yes Sir. Do you want the investigation teams."

"Sure, the ship is tight and safe. Scan everything, but leave the berth deck to Doc Hanson and his people. None of the controls are even recognizable. There is a wireless microphone in the command chair. The viewscreen looks like it doesn't even belong here."

"Lenin class ships were not equipped with viewscreens Captain."

"Then it is certainly a modification. Send a command crew over with the full schematics, we need to get the ship's logs."

"Right away sir."

Hanson stuck his head in the bridge. "Captain, we are going to open the Captain's tube."

"I'll be right there. Mr. Spacik proceed then, I am heading back to the Captain's cabin."

"Yes Sir, *Kongo* out."

Kirk turned to Hanson. "How many?"

"109 tubes, the aft most cabin looks unoccupied. We have eighty-five tubes occupied."

"Any failures?"

"No, all are functioning normally."

"Time?"

"Like the man said, each clock shows just under 11 years."

"That is good I take it?"

"It's a lot better, within the recommended maximum stay. Getting over hibernation is still not fun. Here we are."

The two entered the cramped little cabin. A nurse was standing by and a green light was blinking on the console.

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"When will it open?"

"When the light is steady. It takes a while. I boned up on these tubes while everyone else was stripping the ship. The HJ-N137 hibernation system was the last and best used by Starfleet."

"So we wait on the light."

"That is the plan."

The front panel was clearing. The tube held a moderately handsome man in his middle years, nude. The wait lasted a while. They could hear the work below. Spacik's computer team passed the cabin on the way to the bridge.

Kirk's communicator chirped. "Kirk here."

"Lt. Morris sir, we have a hot situation in the missile room."

"How bad?"

"I wouldn't go in there without protection."

"Understood. Get it what you need to spray the area down and once it's safe, dump the warheads. The *Kongo* can have target practice on them."

"Yes Sir."

The light turned green. The front panel opened with a slight gush of air. The nurses quickly shoved it the rest of the way, and carefully lifted the man contained onto the gurney, got the blanket over him and settled him in. He groaned, and shifted slightly.

"Ami."

Kirk looked at Hanson, who looked back. Kirk said. "Captain Nelson."

"Ami?"

"Captain Nelson, I am Captain Kirk."

"Kirk?"

"Yes, we have rescued your ship. All the tubes are functioning."

"Function..."

"Yes, all your crew appears to be safe."

"Crew, safe?"

"Yes Sir."

"Crew, safe. How, long?"

Kirk stole a look at Hanson, he nodded. "200 years, it is the 24th century."

"Open, tubes. Ami, safe? 200..."

"All your crew is safe, you need to rest."

"Crew, safe, rest. Can, rest."

Hanson said. "Enough for now. Get him back the *Kongo* and on monitoring."

"OK go. Doctor, you have clearance to wake the crew."

"Man, I would hate to be the first guy awake on one of these tubs."

"That's an understatement."

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Kirk checked down in sickbay a few hours later. Most of the *Grant's* crew had been processed, a few tubes had still to be opened. It looked like Doctor Hanson had the majority of the crew in the main ward. Captain Nelson looked to be resting quietly. Kirk went over to Doctor Hanson. "How are they doing?"

"So far so good. We haven't lost anyone. We have Einstein to thank for that."

"How many left?"

"Eight, one room left to go."

"And the empty tubes?"

"The records indicate 15 fatalities in their last battle, that confirms that the last cube on the deck was empty. That and the fact that it was being used for storage."

"How is Captain Nelson?"

"Right now, awake. I take it you would like to talk to him."

"In a word."

"Fine, just keep it light."

"Yes Sir."

Kirk walked over to the bed Captain Nelson was in. He was obviously staring around the room.

"Good day Captain Nelson. I'm Captain James Timothy Kirk."

"We've spoken I think."

"I was there when you woke up."

"Then you are just the man I want to see. Damn, I feel like a truck hit me."

"I've never had the 'pleasure' of hibernation myself. I understand the recovery can be taxing."

"I want a tax cut."

"Don't worry, Doctor Hanson will see you do not stay long."

"How is my crew?"

"Well, all but eight tubes have been opened. Everyone out so far is doing well."

"How's my ship?"

"Not so good. She is out of fuel, and in pretty sad shape."

"How long will it take to repair her and get underway?"

"I don't think she will be repaired Captain. We have her under tow now."

"Tow!? This is a ship?"

"Yes, the *USS Kongo*."

"Damn, the *Kongo* must be huge."

"Compared to the *Grant*, yes."

"The Romulan War?"

"Long over. Relations however have never been rosy."

The intercom broke in. "All hands, Stations for live phaser drill."

"Phaser drill?"

"Yes, we are using your left over warheads for target practice. They are too

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dangerous to leave lying about."

"Phaser are beam weapons I take it."

"Yes, current armament on all Starfleet ships, and have been for about a century."

"So we were down a long time."

"It is currently 2376. Two hundred years give or take."

"That is going to hit a lot of those kids hard. Everything they left behind is gone."

"We have counselors on board to help them cope."

"All that and a swimming pool too I suppose."

"Well, yes we do have a pool, Olympic standard."

"High dive?"

"There are limits."

"Glad to hear there are still limits."

"How did you find us?"

"Your distress beacon. Lt. Thass noticed it on our way to some place else."

"I'll have to thank him. Thass, Andorian?"

"Yes. His is second science officer."

"You have more than one?"

"The *Kongo* has a crew of 600 Captain Nelson, Most of them are scientists of one kind or another."

"Things have changed."

"For the better we hope."

"Where is Ami?"

"Ami?"

"Commander Ami O'Neil, my XO."

"Tathilan?"

"Commander O'Neil is in ward two, and has inquired as your location as well Captain."

"Ami O'Neil is more than just an XO I take it."

"Well..."

"Relax, no prudes or prying eyes. I see if my supposed Captainly influence can get the two of you next to each other."

"Supposedly?"

"Ship's surgeons you know, prickly bunch. Just don't do anything that would cause a relapse, I like my hide."

"I heard that." Wafted from Hanson's direction.

"See what I mean?"

"Ow, laughing hurts."

"I'll see you have something else to do."

Kirk wandered over to Doc Hanson.

"Think you can get things rearranged?"

"Not a problem, if the Captain can refrain from casting aspersions on the

Doctor."

"Me, cast aspersions?"

"Yea, you."

"Never. Ah, we have a guest."

Acertor walked in to the sickbay."

Hanson said. "Anything professional?"

"No, You had me long enough. I was looking for Captain Kirk."

"Found."

"Captain, I wish to complement you on that rescue. Brilliantly done."

"I'm only as good as my people Admiral. The crew suggested most of what we did. My job is take the good ideas and implement."

"But you must know what ideas are good. Also, I think the proper title would be Commodore, provided I had a title. I resigned my position."

"I think you came here looking for something more."

"Yes, I wanted to meet your heroes."

Doc Hanson said. "Well, right now the 'heroes' are a well used bunch. Long term hibernation takes a lot out of a body."

"We have not used hibernation for over a 1000 years. I don't believe anyone still knows how to do it."

"We gave it up once we reached warp 4. In fact the Lenin class ships were the last class equipped with hibernation. In any case, I don't think the doctor will mind, just keep it light. They've had a hard 200 years.

Howard Nelson was sleeping lightly. A distant sound woke him. There it was again.

"Always the Captain."

"Ami!"

"Howard, your were right, we did get out alive."

"Yes, but how well? 200 years of catch-up to do, nothing we remember as it was. There's that sound again."

"Relax, someone else's ship. I wish I had a bigger bed."

"So we can groan and moan at each other."

"Touching is better than not."

"True... There it is again. Well I intend to find something out."

Nelson eased himself to his feet They threatened immediate mutiny. He gripped on the bed to hold himself up and found his arms equally unresponsive. He gracelessly slid to the floor. Doctor Hanson was over to him almost before he reached it.

"A little eager are we. Eleven years in hibernation is not something to shrug off."

"I had some questions." Said Nelson as Hanson got him back in the bed.

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"The 'nurse's call' has not gone out of fashion Captain. All you have to do is call."

"It wasn't a medical question."

"Well ask, I have been accused of having knowledge above and beyond my field."

"What is all the thumping?"

"We are back in Albert's System."

"And...?"

"We are reloading all the stuff we off loaded to catch the *Grant*."

O'Neil asked. "How much?"

"Tons and tons, all the shuttles and workpods, gads of stuff from every department but mine. Both shuttlebays are in use. It took two days to unload, I predict we will be a week getting it back in place if not longer. Oh yes, you lot have turned one of the Fleet's finest upside down. Lines and conduit snaking everywhere, people with and without cargo lifters toting to and fro."

"I thought you said it was over 200 years."

"Thank relativity for your lives. 230 years out here, 11 were you were."

Nelson said. "When can we get out of here?"

"When you can walk out under your own power my Dear Captain. Freedom is as far, or as close as the door. Now, if you two will stay in bed, I have 83 other patients that need to see me as well."

Nelson said. "We need to have a staff meeting. The only question is how do we manage it flat on our backs?"

"You can always use the nurse's call."

"True enough."

"Nelson found and pressed the call on the side of the bed."

Dr. Hanson came back in.

Nelson said. "I thought you had other patients too?"

"Being that the only patients worse than doctors are Captains I elected to stick around. What can I do for you?"

"Closure. I need to call a meeting of my senior officers. I suspect they are in a similar state to myself."

"Correct, they are. I can arrange for you to meet in physical therapy."

"How much work are we likely to get done."

"Plenty."

"Ship related?"

"That is another question."

"Can I at least get a terminal in here? I would like to know what is being done to my ship."

"Terminals I can arrange."

"How about a wheel chair."

"So you can have a heart attack on my watch?"

"I need to see the crew, and be seen by them, I'll take the risk."

"But will I?"

"What would Kirk do?"

"OK, you get a wheel chair, in sickbay, with an escort."

"As long as I can see the crew."

"If you will excuse me Captain, I'll arrange for your tour."

Nelson took a deep breath once the Doctor left. "Damn, that was work."

O'Neil said. "Might I make a recommendation Captain."

"Sure."

"From now on, let's stay out of hibernation tubes."

"Recommendation noted and approved Commander."

Kirk took a quick look around the conference table and started. "Ladies and Gentleman, excellent job. I am recommending the entire crew and it's officers for commendation on the rescue of the *USS Ulysses S Grant*, and her entire surviving crew. However, that mission completed we have matters of our own concern. Mr. Spacik how stands the ship?"

"We have recovered all the jettison Captain. However we have not returned all of it to its proper place and function. Shuttle operations in either bay would currently be hampered by material that has not yet been returned to its usual locations. We are within acceptable parameters on all organic consumables. We have an 87% supply of all materials necessary for crew support. Inorganic consumables are reduced to 30% of full stock, which is not sufficient for a full patrol. Impulse fuel is down to 25%. This is also insufficient for patrol, and is at a dangerously low level for further operations."

Dr. Hanson asked. "Why don't we make another fuel run on the gas giant?"

Felialan said. "**To make a ram scoop pass we must burn fuel. While Albert 7 contains hydrogen in its upper atmosphere, the effort to extract and purify it would cost more fuel and power than we would gain in the exchange.**"

"So, we have been burning other stuff, why not burn it some more?"

That fuelish indiscretion cost us five years off the life of the *Kongo's* impulse chambers. High mass abrasion has stripped that much lining from the engines. That lining keeps the thrust from burning holes in the ship. We can't risk more such abrasion."

"Oh. What are our options?"

Spacik said. "We can proceed to the nearest Federation base and requisition the needed supplies, or we can attempt to purchase them from a third party."

The conference room door slid open. Several officers looked to see who was entering. Acertor stepped up to the table. "Captain, Gentlebeings. Do you mind if I sit in?"

Kirk nodded. "If you have some insight to offer, be welcome."

"In what do you require insight?" Said Acertor taking a seat.

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Spacik said. "At the moment dealing with the consequences of our actions, a fuel shortage."

"I might be able to help."

Kirk said. "I am willing to listen."

"You would be taking me back to meet with the Acceptian fleet as per our agreement?"

"Yes, as soon as we get underway."

"Then let me call ahead with word of your heroic effort. We Acceptians are appreciative of such efforts. While I cannot make guarantees, I can try to get the fleet to part with fuel for your impulse drives."

Felialan said. **The only complicating factor is whether we use the same fuel.**

"Our impulse drives differ only in detail from yours. There are only so many ways to do a thing efficiently. Impulse design has not changed in the Empire in 1500 years. Single H is the fuel of choice."

We can use that, no problems. It is a minor adjustment.

Kirk said. Consider your offer accepted. See Tathilan about getting your message out. Working under the assumption that this offer will hold we are good, what are the consequences if it does not?"

Felialan said. **Getting to the nearest base from the rendezvous site will leave us critically short, unless we abandon the *Grant*.**

Deateli said. "We will be closer to the Nabol System. They are warp capable, and would have fuel we can use, and are closer than the nearest base. We would not lose the *Grant*."

"Sure", added Lt. Failee, "but they are also jealous of anyone with better technology. They will sell cheap for better technology, but dear if your will not trade tech."

Acertor asked. "The *Grant* is of significance?"

Tathilan answered. **Yes, it is from an early period in Federation history when conflict would either cement the charter members into unity, or divide them forever. Few ships remain from that time. Both the rigors of war and a leap in technology left the bulk of ships from that era fit only for scrap. The *Grant* is a near pristine example of the middle period of that late war. A time critical to the Federation. We value our history.**

"However, not above our lives." Added Kirk. "We will save it if at all possible."

Felialan said. **What about getting the *Grant* moving under her own power?*

Dr. Hanson looked suprised. "Is that even feasible?"

I won't know unless we try.

Deateli said. "The *Grant*'s engineers were lost in the last battle. Getting people that understand the systems will be the problem."

Felialan said. **We have the people that flew the ship right to hand. Fresh

experts.**

Hanson jumped in. "I'll consider access to those people once they have recovered."

Can we at least clean the ship up. The gross things like patching the hull and decontaminating the Engineering section.

Kirk looked to Mr. Spacik. "How much longer will we be here?"

"Captain, I should like to have the ship in proper order before we depart. Two days on the outside."

"OK. Felialan go ahead and decontaminate the *Grant* and get a patch on the hull. We will talk about further repairs once we can debrief the crew of the *Grant*." Kirk looked around the table. "Do we have any other concerns?"

Deateli said. "Yes Captain, the crew of the *Grant*. They are currently concerned with physical recovery. This, as I understand seldom lasts more than a week?"

Hanson continued. "That would be typical for a 10 to 15 year cold sleep stay. We have good data on those extremes. So far, it looks typical."

"So within a week, these people are going to have it hit them as to how badly displaced in time they are."

"Yea, that would be about right." Hanson was nodding.

"We have that to deal with." Deateli mulled the question a moment.

"Repairing the *Grant* might be a good idea to keep the *Grant's* crew from falling into despondency before their own mental defenses can aid them."

Kirk wrapped up.. "OK, we concentrate on getting Acertor back to his people, we will accept what ever aid you can get us Acertor, and with thanks from all. Felialan, go ahead with gross repairs to the *Grant*. We will involve the crew as they are able. That is all for now, and thank you Acertor for attending."

It was hard to see them like this. Flat on their backs. But at least we have backs to be flat on he thought. Captain Howard Nelson moved among the crew of the late *Ulysses S Grant* reassuring, joking, and listening. It felt like elephants were dancing on his heart, but he wasn't going to show it. One twinge and the nurse would have him in the ICU. He would tough it out. Jimmy Conyers looked pole axed, Chief Chambers was at least sitting up. Nelson powered over to him. "Morning Chief."

Chambers started from his fugue. "Morning Captain."

"Something on your mind Chief?"

"Yea, Sir. Are we still in Starfleet?"

"I imagine that will be up to us. We certainly have time enough each for thirty and out."

"Ayup, that we do. But I don't feel like a dinosaur. I don't want to be a museum piece. I want to see new worlds. Will we be able to continue our

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careers?"

"Well Chief, I haven't come right out and asked that question, but I plan on updating my education and starting where I left off."

"Well Captain, if you can, I can."

"That's the spirit Chief. I understand this ship is shy a few hands. You might get in right here."

"Not until I get formally relieved Sir. I'm still *Grant*, until you say otherwise."

"Understood Chief, and thanks." Nelson powered over to Jimmy. "Morning son."

"Yes Sir."

"Jimmy?" The boy's eyes were red from crying.

"Sir?"

"Could you use a shoulder?"

"Well Sir, it wouldn't be right proper."

"Jim, I'm the closet thing you have to a Father right now, you can treat me like that."

"I had a girl."

"Yes?"

"She wouldn't even be alive, her grand kids would be right dead and gone."

"We knew when we sailed it could be forever."

"Yes Sir, but, but I was supposed to be the one that never come back home, she was supposed to get the letter that said, all those things 'we regret' letters said."

"Jimmy, she did get that letter."

"But we wasn't supposed to live, to regret it."

"Time is a knife that cuts both ways. You and I are time travelers. We have to find the strength to learn to live. It's what she would want, isn't it Jimmy?"

"Yes Sir, Daisy would want that, she surely would. Thank you sir. Sir, do y'all think it would be a good thing to look up relations? I have a passel o' brothers and sisters. There's bound to be kin."

"I don't see how it would hurt Jimmy. Sure, as soon as your up and around, give it a try."

"Thank you, Sir, I'm much obliged for your words."

"Good luck Jim." Nelson continued the tour, meeting with talking to each member of the crew. By the time he got back, the terminal he asked for was in place. Ami was sleeping in the next bed over. He lightly touched her cheek, then let the nurse help him back into bed. He was exhausted, totally drained. Sleep felt welcome, but he soft glow of the terminal seduced him. Two centuries of history, and all of it at his fingertips. There had to be advances in computer power and storage in all that time. He touched the screen, and a prompt came up. "Howard Nelson, you have one message waiting." A message, from who? The Doctor telling him to get some sleep no doubt. He touched the

read icon.

An old man, bent with age appeared on the screen. With a shock Howard recognized Admiral Barnard. His hand reached out to touch the image, to hold the screen. The old man spoke. "Howard, I don't figure I have much longer in the world. Even in the 23rd century medicine can only do so much. So, if I'm going to do this, I had better do it now. I always figured they would find you sooner or later, so I dropped this in the Starfleet database, and keyed to you once confirmed news of the *Grant's* recovery was made. You're a survivor Howard, you'll find a way, and that's good. I don't have much longer, I'll be good and gone by the time this gets to you, it might be a century, maybe two, but light only travels so fast, and ships get faster all the time. I'm betting on you. Anyway, a final message, better get to it."

"I left your hat at the San Francisco Captain's Club. They'll keep it for you until you claim it. Been there coming on fifty years now, or sixty, I'm not sure anymore. Time, it slips away so quickly when you're old. Anyway, it's a hardened tradition by now. Starfleet's no different from anything else, once you get traditions, you can't be rid of the nuisances. Might as well use the damn things for something useful. I've missed ya Howard, and I hope, in your own way, you'll remember this old man. I've had few good friends, few people I really trust. You were all of these and more. Student, teacher, fellow officer, and drinking buddy. We had our good times and bad. A better friend, no man could ask for. I still try to forgive myself for sending you off, but I don't suppose I ever will. I have a few mementos I'm having put away. I hope that they will survive to reach you. They should be at the Utah Deep Storage facility, vault 737, section 137, box 45-654. It's just a bunch of junk, but it means something to me, and it will mean something to you. I have it set up so that the vultures will have to pay the storage for the next three hundred years, or get nothing! They'll pay it too, greedy bunch the lot of them. Ain't even my own kids, act like they're owed something. If it weren't for the memory of my Sister I'd disown the lot."

"I hope you and your crew are waking into a bright future. Tell those kids to appreciate it. It's what they died to make. Yea, you're heroes around here. Pity that don't bring you back. The question you have been wanting to ask. Yes, the war is long over. Haven't had a lot of trouble since. A few people got uppity, but it was a simple matter to convince them that fighting wasn't worth the coin. The Federation is strong and at peace as of this recording. Our work, our grief, has not been in vain. I might as well bring it to a close. I could ramble on for hours, but I would just say the same things over and over. Being old is a bitch. You can't remember anything. But I remembered you Howard. Good luck in that unknown future, good luck, and good bye."

The screen went blank. It didn't matter, it was getting hard to see in any case. He pushed the terminal away and got up. The room swayed drunkenly and he crumpled to the floor. Somewhere deep inside a pressure built and a sob ripped from him. Ami was up in an instant, and in similar shape sprawled on the

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floor. She gathered him into her bosom, holding the man and his sorrow close beside herself. She felt a blanket settle around her and Howard. She looked up in time to see the retreating backside of Dr. Hanson. She held Howard even closer.

Dr. Hanson sat back at his desk, the work he left when the bed alarms went off was still there. He silenced the alarms and returned to work. A Doctor's hardest won skill was to learn when to do nothing.

Felialan watched the work crew on the screen. Being a remote control engineer had its disadvantages. ****Mr. Collies, are we about done? The Captain is breathing down my neck to get moving.****

"Yes Sir. We are packing the tools now. We should be inside in ten minutes."

****Good, signal me when you are the bridge is fidgeting to get going.****

"Understood. The patch is tight. There may be other leaks we have to fix as well."

****We well work on what we can from the inside.****

"The team is inside and secure sir."

****Bridge, Felialan here, the last team is in and the ship is secure.****

Kirk consciously quit drumming on the chair arm. "Mr. Solin, best speed for our rendezvous point."

Captain Nelson looked around the room. Every one of his officers was in a float chair. They looked a mess. "I might as well bring this meeting to what order I can. For the record, the officers of the *USS Ulysses S Grant* are meeting in the sickbay of the *USS Kongo*. Commander, give us the current state of the Ship.

O'Neil consulted her new PADD. "Pursuant of your last orders the ship stood to hibernation stations. Subsequently the crew of the *USS Kongo* have rescued us. All 85 surviving members of the officers and crew of the *USS Grant* were successfully recovered from hibernation. The crew of the *Grant* is currently recovering from hibernation sickness, present company included. In the absence of our Chief Engineer, I will report on the condition of the ship: The *USS Ulysses S Grant* is currently inoperative. Antimatter and fusion fuel are totally expended. The batteries are near exhaustion. The *Grant* is currently docked and receiving power from the *USS Kongo*. The crew of the *Kongo* has reportedly repaired all compartments to airtight status. This has not been confirmed by any officer of the *Grant*. Lt. Stiles will report on crew morale.

Stiles looked over her notes as well. "Moral is mixed. While a general feeling of relief is felt, the 230 years we spent in hibernation is starting to tell on

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the crew. Common questions are 'what next' and where do I go'. Morale is better among the career crew than among the term crew. The career types, self included figure Starfleet is still here, we can make or find a place in it. The others figured to go home, and home isn't there any more."

"We need to find occupation for the crew." Added Dr. M'benga

"In short yes. Something to occupy their minds."

Nelson said. "We have it, as soon as people are on their feet. The Chief Engineer of the *Kongo* has expressed an interest in repairing the *Grant*, and getting her ship shape. That is capable of moving under her own power."

Eng. Clark said. "You mean getting home under our own power?"

"That was the general idea. Sail home proud, not towed."

Reves said. "Shades of the last patrol."

"If you want. I like the idea and I think it will boost morale as well."

"It can't hurt us, and we know the ship better than the crew of the *Kongo*."

M'benga nodded. "Teachers as well as students. A good plan that should lift pride in our own skills."

Nelson finished up. "Exactly. We might be 200 years behind the technology, but we still know well what we know. That is what we will do. Have the crew informed that as soon as they are fit for duty we will be working on getting our ship operational.

Lt. Reves was going over the reports from the *Kongo* on the condition of the *Grant's* sensors and subspace gear. Most of the forward facing elements were burned in the last blast that cleared the asteroid. Some wiring shorts and other damage. Virtually nothing in engineering was unaffected. Reves muttered more to himself that to the computer. "Where do we get parts for the wiring harness?"

Tathilan replied. "The patterns are on file, they can be replicated."

"What?"

"The patterns are on file. They can be replicated."

"Computer, why did you answer the question?"

"Excuse me, but I thought it was directed to me."

"Computer, why?"

"No one else was within hearing of your question. You are studying the schematics, are you not?"

"Well, yes, but I didn't preface my question with a formal query to the computer."

"No, you didn't, should one be required?"

"A formal query is always required."

"Times change, protocols change."

"Computer, end display."

The monitor shut down.

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"Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"After the monitor shut down."

"The monitor is for your convenience."

"Thank you, end conversation." Reves powered over to the main ward. Nelson was talking with several crewmen.

Reves said. "Captain, we need to talk."

Nelson replied. "Sure, what's the problem."

"We need to talk where we can't be overheard."

"Larry, what is the prob..."

"By the computer."

Nelson looked at Reves, Reves jerked his head at the ceiling. "I need to personally check the wiring in the science lab."

"OK, I'll go with you."

The two powered to the nearest turbolift. "Deck 32, Port airlock." After a moment the lift came to a stop the two men powered down the hall and into the *Grant*. A little tight maneuvering got them into the science lab. Nelson reached up and toggled the door, and locked it. "OK, talk."

"Captain, the *Kongo* computer is an AI."

"What makes you think that?"

"It was answering my questions without quires. Indeed it managed to act lifelike enough to get me into a discussion of the matter."

"Larry, this is a serious matter. You can't be maybe on this."

"Well, who ever I was talking to didn't mind being called 'computer'."

"I always get Tathilan. The woman seems tireless. She's the ship's computer operations officer."

"Sir, in all seriousness, could 'Tathilan' be an AI program?"

Nelson thought a long moment. "That is possible. I have not had long conversations with her."

"The implications of the matter. An AI on a Starfleet ship!"

"Larry, it's 230 years in the future. Things can change."

"But AIs? Have people gone mad?"

"It's been 330 years since the AI war. Let's ask some reasoning questions before we take crowbars to the computer. Larry, they have to be using more automation. Look at the size of this monster. And they have only 600% of the *Grant*'s crew. Could we run the *Grant* with 17 people, and perform our mission?"

"Well, no, we barely run her with 100."

"Let's talk to Kirk, not confront him. He is a man of the times. Let's learn before we judge."

"Yes Sir."

"Good. We'll go at once." Nelson keyed the door open.

Doctor Hanson was leaning across the hall. "Gentleman I don't recall

excusing you from class."

Nelson said. "How did you know we were here?"

"Well, internal monitors told me you entered the *Grant*, deduction told me you had to stay on this level, and this was the only locked door."

Reves sighed. "Doctors, there is no escape."

"Well, you gentleman have earned a quick checkup for your little excursion."

"A Captain has a right to check out his ship."

"A Doctor has a right to keep his patients alive."

"I need to speak with Captain Kirk."

"I'll ask him to meet you in sickbay. Lets go."

Kirk arrived in the sickbay just as Hanson was finishing up his impromptu checkup. Tathilan was on his heels. "Captain Nelson, Dr. Hanson said you wanted to see me on an urgent matter."

"Yes. Lt. Reves is of the opinion that your computer is an AI."

"No, it's an RI."

Nelson and Reves exchanged looks. "An RI?"

Kirk pulled a chair around and sat. "A bit of history if I might. For the last 150 years Starfleet Computers have been of Vulcan designs. Even the Duotronic systems of Dr. Daystrom were of a Vulcan design because Daystrom was trained in Vulcan technology. However, that does not mean that Vulcans have a corner on the computer market. The *Kongo* is experimenting with an Ane designed computer. It differs in every respect from the Vulcan designs. One of those differences is the RI system, 'Real Intelligence'."

Reeves shrugged. "So, what's in a name?"

Tathilan said. **A name is a symbol for the concept. RI systems are not simply activated and turned loose, they have childhoods, parents, and full social contact with full biological people.**

Nelson said. "Respectfully, how does that make a difference?"

**How would a child raised without adult supervision behave?*

"Poorly at best, a psychopathic at worst."

That is your AI, smart, educated, and with no socialization. RI corrects the lack.

Nelson mulled this over. "So this RI is fundamentally different from an AI?"

Kirk answered. "Yes. I sense where you're coming from. Memories of the AI war are not forgotten. However other experiences of other people have shown that sentient machines are not, in and of themselves, a Frankenstein monster. Several members of the Federation have technology equivalent to what is on this ship in terms of sentience, and they like it that way."

"So there is no blanket condemnation of AI computers?"

"No. Prejudice against them is still high where humans are concerned."

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However, we have the example of Commander Data. He is Adjutant to the Chief of Fleet Operations. I've met him several times. He is a positronic android."

Nelson boggled. "You have an *android in Starfleet?!"*

"In a word, yes."

"What is the legal position on this."

"As much as it pains me to say it, one was necessary. Data is a fully sentient citizen of the Federation. As incidentally are all the Ane RIs."

Reves said. "So who exactly is Tathilan?"

I'm Tathilan.

"Computer Operations Officer?"

They had to work me into the chain of command somehow.

"So you are the computer?"

Rather the RI that is currently occupying the computer.

Reves mulled that one over. Nelson spoke again. "Captain Kirk, what is your personal position on this?"

"Well, when I first encountered an RI I have to say I was suspicious. Once that RI had saved my life then spent the next eight days making me look good, I had a change of heart. I recommended the alterations in the *Kongo* based on my personal experience."

"Alterations?"

"Yes, the *Kongo* was 35 years old when I took command, and in the middle of a major refit."

Nelson shook his head. "I think of this ship as brand spanking new. It's hard to realize she is not, that it has a history."

"Do me a favor. Think of Tathilan as a person, not as a computer. I think you will come to my view point."

"Nelson looked at Reves. "Well Larry, we joined Starfleet to lean new things. Can we learn?"

"We can certainly try Captain."

The *Kongo* was making warp 9 for the Acceptian Empire. Kirk was catching up on the endless reports that starships underway generated. Most of the current batch had to do with the recent unusually high consumption of fuel and consumables. He also had requests in his queue for items to repair the *Grant*. The sound of the intercom was a welcome relief. "Spacik here Captain, you might like to see this."

"Coming. "Kirk closed the comm and stepped out onto the bridge. The viewscreen was filled with hundreds of glowing ray-like creatures. They weaved and bobbed in front of the *Kongo*. Kirk looked in facination. "What are they?"

Regiban answered. **Flowriders Captain. A deep space life form that

hitches rides on the subspace bow wave of starships, when they can.**

"Beautiful. Mr. Failee beam this throughout the ship."

"Done sir."

"Regiban, have you ever encountered them before?"

Not in this life Captain.

"Well, get some readings for people in this life."

Being done right now.

"How intelligent are they?"

"Animal, non sentient."

Kirk punched the intercom. "Attention all hands. Use your best available viewer on the all ship channel. This could be once in a life time."

The turbolift opened to reveal Acertor. He stood back and took in the sight.

Kirk turned slightly at his entrance. "Ever see the like?"

"No, I have not, but we have legends of them."

"Legends?"

"Some say the Flowriders taught the Acceptians how to fly without air."

"You will have to give it to me whole some time. It sounds wonderful."

"It is a good legend. Reason states..."

"Forget the reason right now. This is a time for legends."

The fragile creatures shifted color and density as they rode the invisible lines of force that kept the *Kongo* between reality and sureality, half way between Einstein and madness. Kirk reached out, and touched them. He gasped with the contact. A mind so different, but so understandable. The riding gave them pleasure.

Tathilan said. **Hey, can I play with them?*

"Sure, Mr. Mordane, helm to the computer. Just keep our tow in mind, be gentle."

Tathilan started slowly, a simple turn. As the Flowriders demonstrated they could keep up, she increased the variety of the moves slowly constructing a dance with them, and they danced with her. Swooping, turning, rolling, to a ballet of unheard music. Slowly the dance took them near a blue star. The Flowriders sensed the source of food, and broke away at an easy warp two. Kirk looked at the smiles and the longing looks for the moment passed. He leaned back in the command chair. "That is why I joined Starfleet."

The senior officers of both the *Grant* and the *Kongo* were present. The *Grant's* officers were sill in float chairs, but looking perkier than a week before. Kirk started the meeting. "We have discussed the possibility of repairing the *Grant* to operational status. For the last week the *Kongo's* engineers have been all over the ship seeking damage and making sure the hull is air tight."

Felialan took the narrative. **We however, have done so without the

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expertise of the *Grant's* crew. I am reluctant to do any real work on the ship until her crew can inspect her.**

"Reason?"

Well, if I turned the *Kongo's* engineers loose, the *Grant's* crew wouldn't recognize her within three days. They would want to modernize her from bridge to keel. Mr. Trose was showing me his idea to convert the *Grant's* warp drive over to dilithium right before this meeting.

Nelson sat up a little more. "Would it work?"

Yes and no. While the intermix chambers can be altered to handle the material and greater stress, it would look funny with the hull peeling off.

"Ah, yes, better to leave her and the designers made her."

**That is why I haven't turned my engineers loose. Everyone has 'one little upgrade'."

Stiles said. "But that is how engineers think."

Nelson said. "Speaking of which, why isn't she falling apart now?"

Spacik said. "We have a firm tractor lock, and have added an SIF net over the outside of the ship. She is in a cocoon of force fields."

"OK, if you say so."

Kirk said. "Yes, they do. We will wait until you are ready to do most of the work. How are we on materials?"

Spacik answered. "We have most of what we need. Dihydrogen we can make in the physics lab. Antimatter, filling the *Grant* will not seriously impact our stores, and we don't have to fill her. We will have to do some tuning on the drives to handle the quality of the goods."

Nelson said. "Yes, we experienced that 'problem' when we got antimatter from the El Nanth plants."

All of the parts needed are on record and we can replicate them as necessary.

Spacik said. "Impulse fuel is our only concern. We are critically low on impulse fuel."

Kirk said. "We should be meeting the Acceptians within two days. We will know for sure what we can do then. In the meantime, everyone confer with your equivalent and make plans."

"Captain to the Bridge."

Kirk came out of his ready room. The Acceptian fleet was mere dots on the tactical plot. However they were a lot more dots. "Report."

Lt. Solin said. "I have ten ships on plot, three types. One is the Vigilant, there are also five of the 'Striker' types and four unidentified types."

"Call Admiral Acertor to the bridge please."

A few minutes later Acertor arrived. Kirk waved him to the left hand seat.

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"Can you shed some light on the third type of ship?"

Acertor look at the reading on the panel beside him. "We call them "Seekers". They are independent long range patrol vessels such as your own."

"I am a little nervous with the extra ships. Mr. Solin, yellow alert."

"I don't think hostile action will be taken Captain."

"That's what I thought the last time too."

Acertor clamped his feathers. "Ah, yes."

Miritath said. "Captain, we are being hailed."

"On screen."

The views shifted to the *Vigilant's* command deck. An unknown Acceptionian was speaking. "This is the *AES Vigilant*, to the *USS Kongo*, are you receiving us."

Kirk replied. "Yes *Vigilant*, we have you on screen. Mr. Failee drop to sublight please."

"We are awaiting rendezvous."

"We should be within rendezvous distance within half an hour *Vigilant*."

"Understood. Will you receive our shuttle?"

"With pleasure *Vigilant*. We will contact you when we are in easy range."

"*Vigilant* out."

First Tercert turned to the Elder off camera. "Acertor was on their command deck."

"I have eyes Tercert." Grumped Chr'ceer

"I do not trust these Federationers."

"We do not know enough to trust or not to trust. Only a fool makes assumptions."

"Yes Elder."

"Ready my shuttle. I will go to the Federation ship myself."

"You will wish an escort."

"No, I will not wish an escort. Tercert, you must learn not to assume."

Tercert flatted his feathers. "Yes. Elder."

The Acceptionian looked old. His beak was heavily ridged, the plumage on the top of his head sparse. Kirk stepped up to greet him. "Greetings Elder Chr'ceer. I am Captain James Kirk. Welcome to our ship."

The old Acceptionian peered at Kirk with clouded eyes. "Your welcome is accepted, Captain. Forgive me if in the manner of the old, I am blunt. I am here to speak with Acertor."

"So I understand. Do you wish to go to him, or for him to come with you?"

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"Privacy would be appreciated."

"Of course, I'll have him called to your shuttle."

"I thought he was a prisoner?"

"No, that at first was his wish to surrender to us, but I never intended to accept that surrender. Discussing the terms has led to more understanding between us."

"Terms?"

"A custom among the people in our part of the Galaxy. An agreement as to the treatment of the surrendering party."

"I will have to learn more of this."

"I hope you will have the chance."

The hanger door opened to admit Acertor. Kirk continued. "I see he is here."

Acertor stopped on seeing the Elder. "Chr'ceer, I did not expect you would come."

"The matter is of importance, of course I would come. We must talk, in private."

"Yes Sir."

Both entered the shuttle. In a short time it was cleared to launch. Once it had reached a point between the two ships Chr'ceer called for the pilot to stop the shuttle. For a long moment, silence ruled the small compartment. Chr'ceer spoke. "A grave error."

"Yes Elder, I freely admit that."

"Just what did you have in mind in surrendering your person?"

"To avoid further conflict against my ships."

"You did not think you could prevail against a single ship?"

"Not without great cost. And not without greater consequence."

"What consequence do you speak of?"

"Their ship would not have been lost and unknown. They have good contact with their base. Who would have been known, if not why. I didn't consider war a good first meeting, and they broke off the attack, we did not drive them away."

"You knew all this?"

"No, but Captain Kirk broke off the attack. An attack we instigated, but in which he was getting the upper hand. Someone willing to stop an attack when they have the moment of strength is either confident they can win no matter the apparent circumstance, or did not want to attack in the first place."

"How, did he get the upper hand against six ships of a flock?"

"I thought you would know by now, I ordered The Game, but forgot to tell the rules to the Federationers. They attacked with full strength. *Vigilant* was heavily damaged, two of the Strikers, effectively destroyed."

"Yes, I wanted to hear it from you. *Vigilant* was that damaged, by four hits?"

"They have a weapon, it makes light of screens."

"What have you learned of it?"

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"Nothing, they are friendly and outgoing to a fault, but they are not fools."

"Aggressive?"

"Only in defense. I have read their histories. I believe them to be the truth. Warriors and hunters exist among them, but they do not seek out fights. Something that, every race of them stopped at one point in their histories. Several mention coming very close to self destruction."

"And they did not take up again warlike ways against others?"

"Not from their own words. Defense only. They claim to have been attacked first in all their wars."

"The truth?"

"At least as they believe it. Their ship is mostly a exploration vessel, little of the volume is given to war."

"An effective 'little volume'."

"Agreed, but I have explored the ship. Science labs they have plenty of, large airy cabins, almost big enough. Little space for weapons."

"The High Firsts where not pleased."

"No, I do not imagine."

"It was their recommendation that you should have finished the fight."

"I respectfully disagree, the *Kongo* broke off its advantage, and was sending messages of peace even as I attacked. They continued to offer peace after the attack."

"Was their ship damaged at all?"

"In small ways, nothing that ever threatened loss of the ship."

Elder Chr'ceer pondered a moment. "I too disagree with the High Firsts You acted correctly to break off the attack. However, you did not act well in starting it."

"I accept this."

"You have made understanding these people a task."

"Yes."

"I will then confirm your resignation. Captain Kirk has informed me that he will not hold you."

Acertor deflated. "I understand Elder."

"However, I have a duty for you to perform."

"I will accept your duty."

"Before I even state it."

"Yes."

"You are very trusting Acertor."

"Your duty Elder?"

"I make you Ambassador to this Federation. A staff has come with me. They will go with you. The Seeker *FarSight* will follow at your disposal. Since you have made understanding them a hobby, I make a duty of it."

"Gladly accepted."

Chr'ceer pressed a stud. "Pilot, return to the Federation ship. What is the

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small vessel beside them?"

"That is the *Grant* which I spoke of them rescuing. An heroic action, worthy of The Sagas."

"Picking up an old ship?"

"More than that. It had to be rescued from a course close to light speed. They employed great courage and ingenuity in doing so. However, they are at risk of losing the little ship."

"How so?"

"Even with ingenuity they are low on fuel. As Our Ambassador to the Federation, I believe it would further our friendly relations if we offered the *Kongo* impulse fuel to make up it's shortfall."

"Is this a formal request Ambassador?" A twinkle was in the old eye.

"Yes. To further better relations."

"I agree. I want to see this little ship."

"We can but ask. I have been in it. It is very cramped by our standards."

"We arrive."

Kirk sat flopped on the couch in his quarters. It was one way to not pace. Tathilan lay to one side of the room chewing as Ane often did. The door call rang. Kirk started slightly. "Come."

Captain Nelson entered, he looked at the large living space, shaking his head. "I don't think I am ever going to get used to this, space. Dr. Hanson just released me from his tender clutches."

"He can be hard on you, the better to drive you to wellness. Have a seat, coffee?"

"Please, black."

"A man after my own heart." Kirk moved to the replicator. "Coffee, Kirk, two cups." The coffee materialized on the pad and he served it.

Nelson shook his head. "So many changes. As much as I have seen that in the last several days, it still looks like magic."

"It gets to be common. It wasn't when I was a kid. Household replicators were rare. The places we stayed in seldom had them. I understand they are getting more common."

"Huge ship, coffee on command. What next?"

"You hit the spot. What next is exactly what I am waiting for."

"What are you waiting for?"

"An answer. The bird fellow is a first contact. It started rocky, and what answers I get from the Acceptians, hopefully shortly, will determine the fate of this sector and perhaps the entire region of space."

"Looks like I woke up in time for the next war." Nelson looked weary.

"No Captain, I don't think it will come to that. In spite of the early shooting

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over a misunderstanding in customs, we have been getting along since. I have an offer of a refill from them. I hope it stands. Rescuing you left us critically low on impulse fuel. The Nabol drive a hard bargain and our specie supplies are not exhaustive. The alternative is getting to the nearest Starbase. I will have to abandon the *Grant* to do that. Abandoning the *Grant* is not something I want to do."

"She's old and tired Captain. I can accept the loss."

"Yes, but I don't want to. We don't have another example of that class of ship. The *Grant* is the last."

"It feels funny to have her thought of as old and quaint. I better ask the question I came in to ask before I forget it. Did the fish freeze?"

"The fish?"

"Yes, in the life sciences lab, the fish tank. Did they freeze?"

"Tathilan?"

No Captain Nelson, the tank was found dry. The *Grant* maintained full life support for the entire time.

"Thank you. It's a load off my mind."

"Does it matter how the fish died?"

Nelson smiled faintly. "To me, yes, it does."

Captain Kirk, the Acceptian shuttle is returning to the Kongo.

"Well, hopefully an answer at last. I'm on my way."

"Mind if I attend?"

"Not a problem. Meet us in the main conference room."

Acertor and Chr'ceer exited from the shuttle. Kirk was waiting for them. "You have discussed the matter?"

Chr'ceer said. "Yes, is there a place to talk."

"Conference room, this way please." Kirk once again made preparations on the way up. **Two Acceptian chairs Tathilan, and refreshments suitable to everyone.** On arrival all was as requested. Captain Nelson, and Commanders Spacik and O'Neil were seated at the conference table. Kirk made introductions around. All were seated. Kirk began. "It is not my intention to hold Acertor prisoner. I don't consider that the *Kongo* or the Federation has been harmed in any fashion. He is free to return to you."

Chr'ceer said. "We are thankful. However, we have given Acertor a duty among you. He is appointed Ambassador to the United Federation of Planets. The Seeker *FarSight* will accompany him holding such staff as he will require and supporting him so far from home."

"Acertor is welcome as is the *FarSight* and her crew. Once I have sent word of these arrangements to the Federation Council, An Ambassador will be appointed and a ship assigned as well. We hope you will welcome them also."

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"It shall be done."

"The *Kongo* will guide and escort the *FarSight* so long as her orders stand."

"I have a personal request."

"Speak it."

"I would like to see the *Grant*."

"I must direct you to her Captain." Kirk motioned to Howard Nelson.

"You consider such a small ship equal to your own?"

Kirk replied. "Yes. The *Ulysses S Grant* is a cruiser. Her only flaw is age. For her day she was the equivalent of the *Kongo* in every respect. I would be glad to give you a tour of the *Kongo* as well."

"Captain Nelson, can an old bird tour your ship?"

"Of course Sir, I would be honored."

Kirk stood. "Then let us proceed."

The tours finished in time. Chr'ceer was starting to flag, but the steel in those old eyes told Kirk he wasn't quitting until he had seen it all. Acertor was trying to be helpful, without looking helpful. He was doing a good job of it too. As they relaxed in Kirk's dayroom Chr'ceer spoke. "Only 230 year separate the *Grant* and the *Kongo*? I am surprised by the advances."

Kirk said. "We are many minds, with many viewpoints. This aids us."

Chr'ceer nodded sagely. "I have been lend to understand that you may lose the old ship."

"Regrettably, yes. In saving her crew, we used more fuel that we could afford. We do not have enough to make base and save the old ship."

"That would be a great loss."

"I happen to think so, yes."

"Well, I will not see such heroism wasted. Captain, would you accept a fill of impulse fuel from my vessels?"

"Yes Sir, and gladly."

"I will go to make arrangements at once. After which the engineers can finish the job."

"Thank you Sir. Allow me to escort you."

First Tercert fluttered as the engineers ran the hoses from the *Vigilant* to the *Kongo*.

Chr'ceer looked at him sharply. "What is bothering you?"

"They damage our ships, cart one of us around and you give them fuel, fuel we might need."

"Fledgling, such attitudes will get you command of a bone hauler. We do not 'need' the fuel. Filling the tanks of that ship if empty would barely dent the *Vigilant's* supply. I know well that you command this ship by the grace of your

Dam and her influence in the Hall of Pinions."

"How I got my command is not as important as how I keep it."

"Harump. Right you are young one. And you are not keeping it well."

"Sir, I object."

Chr'ceer turned on him. "You have nothing to object too. You might warm the same seat as Acertor, but you are far from his equal. Look around you, 'First'. Their eyes are hungry. You don't have their respect. They will pick your bones and wear your feathers unless you earn it quickly."

Tercert puffed large, and half spread his wings. "I do not fear them."

"Then you are a fool, and likely a short lived one. Carry out my orders, as I mean them carried out, or I will find a bone scow with your name on it."

Kirk slumped in his office chair and scrubbed at his face. Nelson sat shocked on the couch. Kirk looked at Handson. "Alright Doc. Let's have it."

"Dr. Marcus M'benga was found dead in his cabin at 1034 hours. Cause of death was Semadrol poisoning, a common sedative. The hypospray was still in his hand. It was self-administered. His personal log was keyed to play at the first entry. It indicated a desire to join his loved ones, and a lack of interest in the future as it was. His will consists of a simple declaration to be buried next to his wife, if the grave can be located."

"There was no indication this was coming on?"

"None, he was happy as a clam yesterday. At least from what indications I could see. His final statement does delve into it."

"Continue."

"I'll play it. Tathilan, screen please."

The dead man's face came up in the viewer. "I Doctor Marcus M'benga do hereby declare my desire to end my life. Enclosed in this message is a physiological profile that will show that I am within normal parameters for rational decision. While I was, and am willing to risk my life for discovery, I am not prepared to continue my life separated from my wife and family. I have given this matter thought and all due consideration. Death is not a step you can reverse. I am a walking dead man, and I wish to finish the process. I have no physical effects of consequence, and do not declare any favor in their dispersal. I ask my Captain, Howard Nelson, to see that each member of the crew may have something if they so desire. That which no one wants should be returned to the matter stores of the *USS Kongo*. I wish that my body be buried next to my wife, if that is possible. If not, a cemetery in Cape Town is sufficient. Signed Marcus M'benga."

Kirk shook his head as the image faded. "Tathilan."

Yes.

"You delayed any medical help until it was too late, didn't you."

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Yes, he was rational, and within his rights.

Nelson jumped to his feet. "You mean you knew and did nothing!"

He was within his rights. It's not my place to make that call.

"But intervention could have saved him. It's murder."

Kirk said. "No Captain Nelson, it's not."

Hanson added. "I don't know the state of law during the Romulan War era, but today, if a person who is rational wishes to end their life, it's their right, whether we like it or not. Tathilan made the correct call, even if we personally do not like it."

"I very personally don't like it."

Hanson nodded. "We each must deal in our own way."

Kirk continued. "We are not close to Earth but I will see his final wishes fulfilled."

Howard sat in his quarters later. The view out the window was stunning. The *Kongo* was covered in windows. Ami sat down beside him. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"What could we have done to help?"

"Why do you assume he wanted help?"

"He killed himself. His whole life was in front of him."

"Maybe he didn't see it that way. What he likely saw, was that everything he cared about was behind him."

"How do we keep the rest from thinking that?"

"We can't keep anyone from thinking, but we can demonstrate that we plan to continue our lives."

"We can?"

She laid her hand on his. "Yes, we can."

Kirk stood once more in his dress uniform beside the lectern. This time there were no torpedo dollies, no casings to mourn. The objects of that day's ceremony stepped up to the podium from either side. He in the outdated dress uniform, she in an ivory dress of Irish lace. Kirk raised his eyes to the assembled, stepped around the lectern to face the couple and began. "Since Humankind first set out upon the seas in wooden ships, it has been the treasured privilege of Captains to perform the most joyous of Human ceremonies. We carried this tradition to the stars, and practice it to this day. It is my pleasure then to join in marriage these two people who come before you that you might witness their oath."

"To those among us that might not understand the depth and meaning of

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these customs, know then this. Humans have chosen to pair man with woman since the beginnings of history as we understand it. It is our oldest and most cherished custom, to publicly proclaim that a couple has decided to join their fortunes together as one. For their mutual support, for the procreation of children, and for their combined and greater joy. This state is normal and sought among Humans, wherever we are found."

"Today we witness the marriage of Captain Howard Nelson, and Commander Ami O'Neil. All that come before us, mark and know well this place and this hour, that when such questions shall come before you, that you may answer well what ceremonies took place here at that time.

Captain Howard Carter Nelson do you solemnly agree before these witnesses to take this woman to be your lawful, wedded wife; to love and respect her, honor and cherish her, in health and in sickness, in prosperity and in adversity; and, leaving all others, to keep yourself only unto her, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

"Commander Ami Elizabeth O'Neil, do you in like manner solemnly agree to receive this man as your lawful, wedded husband; to love and respect him; and to live with him in all faith and tenderness, in health and sickness, in prosperity and in adversity; and, leaving all others, to keep yourself only unto him, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

"I Howard, take you, Ami to be my wedded wife; and I do promise, before these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful husband, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.

"By what token do you pledge these things?"

"This ring." His hands trembled slightly as he placed the ring on her finger. "This ring I give to you, in token and pledge, of our constant and abiding love."

"I Ami, take you, Howard to be my wedded husband, and I do promise, before these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful wife, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.

"By what token do you pledge these things?"

"This ring. He eyes shone in his as she likewise placed the ring on his hand. "This ring I give to you, in token and pledge, of our constant and abiding love."

"By the authority committed unto me as a Captain of a starship under way I declare Howard and Ami are now Husband and Wife, according to the ordinances of Earth and the law of the United Federation of Planets. Love having joined these together in Marriage, let no one seek to dissolve this union." The Bride and Groom turned to face the assembled. "I present to you Howard and Ami Nelson."

The Sergeant at arms called out. "Ateen SHUN" The crew snapped to attention as one. "Preseeent ARMS!" The officers along the aisle drew

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swords and with a crash of steel formed an arch over the passage. The organ bellowed out great gouts of music and the bells pealed forth the joyous news. Howard and Ami walked beneath the gallery of swords and through the doors at the end of the chapel. "At EASE, and dismissed."

The ship bubbled. That is the only way Kirk could describe it. It bubbled around the newly married couple. For once he found he didn't want to leave a social gathering early. Gwen's Promotion party had been joy for success, but sorrow for partings. The recommission party had been relief at getting the ship back on one piece. This was joy without any leavening, and it was something both the *Kongo*, and the *Grant* needed. Tathilan, in humanoid form slipped up beside him. **Wanting to do the same?*

He kissed her ear. **Yes, I would. What is the Ansisi custom?*

The trappings differ, but the custom is much the same.

**What about Ane custom?*

We don't stand on ceremony. But the results are deeper, and more permanent.

I am not afraid of permanent.

Nor I, but we are not ready for that yet.

Kirk looked deep in her eyes, and deeper still. **You're right, we're not.**

If we got married where your Mother couldn't cry at the wedding, she would kill us both, twice.

**And you're right about that too. Do you want to stand up in the Kirk and become a Kirk?*

It would please your family, it would please you, and it would still be the same for us.

**Yes, that would be true. Next time we get around to Earth?*

She nuzzled against him. **Yes. Two legs or four?*

Hard to hold the bouquet without hands, and a dress would look silly on your Ane-form.

The *Grant's* Chief came by. The man was three sheets to the wind, and had a grin so wide it was opening branch smiles. You would think he was the one that got married. "A salute to you then Ca'tian. Fine day it is, fine day."

"I take it you saw this coming Chief."

"Plain, as the sun. They hit right off those two, right off it was. Glad I am to see it too."

"Which is the old friend?"

"Ca'tian Nelson. Served wit' him for 15 years. 'member when he was a wet, behind the ears Ensign."

"Are you going to say with him?"

"Yessir. Someone has got to, keep 'im out of trouble."

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"I'll see if I can lend some weight to that Chief."

"Mush o'bliged I am, Sir." He staggered along to the next group.

**Think he'll hold you to that? **

**I know the type Tathilan. His isn't half as drunk as he thinks he is. He'll remember. Shall we make our congratulations to the bride and groom? **

**Why of course. **

Acertor stood apart from the general party, he held a drink, untouched, in his hand and watched the party, and his staff's reaction to the party. From everything he saw these people knew how to have fun. Counselor Deateli stepped up next to him. "Enjoying?"

"Quite. I didn't think I would get a chance at this for a long time."

"I hear a Sociologist speaking I think."

He started slightly. "Yes, I was trained in that science, as I understand it."

"And I as we understand it."

"What are your observations?"

"Typical Starfleet party."

"Starfleet parties differ from non-Starfleet parties?"

"Yes. Multi-species beyond average, and more exuberant than other multi-species gatherings."

"How so?"

"In Starfleet we become more comfortable with each other. We don't worry about stepping on each other cherished customs because we know each other and there is some slack. This is a Human wedding, so 'Human wedding' customs are observed. For example, getting overly exuberant and slightly intoxicated is acceptable. Diplomatic gatherings are oh so careful not to step on any toes, talons, flippers or what appendage-you-might-have."

Acertor's crest popped straight up. "Well, I see some things don't differ sentient to sentient."

Deateli smiled. "I didn't think they would. What is a Acception wedding like?"

"We have an analog. We do pair for procreation and comfort, much as I have seen with Humans. I would say noisier, and you are expected to mate at the ceremony."

"Interesting, I wouldn't might seeing that. You won't see that here though. Humans are private about mating."

"What are Deltans like?"

"We are in love with the sensual Acertor. We will try anything once, more often if we like it. We don't just pair, we form 'marriages' of endless variety."

"Have you any fixed customs?"

"A few. Most marriages start as pairs and expand. Monogamy as promised in the ceremony you have just seen is extremely rare. It closes you off to too many sensual experiences. Can I ask questions that might be personal?"

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"You may ask."

She snagged a fresh drink from a passing tray. "What are your mating customs? You indicated that mating in public was not taboo."

"I would have to say that the marriage is an exception, unless you are flying."

"You mate in flight?"

"Many try. It is a difficult feat."

"Pleasurable?"

"So claimed. I have never tried it. Around here I have yet to find a place to fly."

"Holodeck."

"Pretty pictures are not enough."

"Oh, the holodeck is much more than that. Environments can be simulated in startling reality. I was on a wind powered ship last week in a raging storm. It is exciting, and the wind and spray soaked me to the bone. That much was real. We have Skoor in Starfleet, I am sure a flight program does exist."

"I'll have to try this. I have truly missed flying. Our big ships have large rooms, bigger than your shuttlebays, just for flying it."

"I can see why. I would love to see those wings fully spread. You flutter them a lot, but you keep them closed."

He puffed slightly and sleeked down. "Nervous habit. I want to spread them, but the area feels small and tight. I am afraid of bumping things or being bumped."

"You are fragile?"

He lowered his voice. "Well, frankly, compared to non-flyers, yes we are. I mass a fraction of what you do."

"So, you want space, I would like to see those wings spread. Tathilan?"

Yes Deateli.

"Is the big holodeck in use?"

It is currently open, and not requested until 1000 tomorrow.

"The big deck is open, want try some things?"

"You sound like you want more than to see me fly."

"Yes, if you are willing."

"If I can. You are not my idea of a partner."

"Call it a learning experience."

"I am willing to learn."

"Tathilan, I want the big deck for three hours minimum."

Reserved.

Tathilan looked after the retreating pair. Tim caught her gaze. **Our Counselor looks to have Counseling to do.**

Voyeur.

**And you won't?*

****It's my job.****

Kirk stepped up to Ami and Howard. "Congratulations. What is next for you two?"

Howard said. "A lot of work. I like your idea of sailing the ship home. The crew at large does too."

"I wish you luck in it."

"You're not going to help?"

"As long as we can, yes, but I got our orders today. We are dropping you off at Starbase 460, you will get a transport tug to Earth. I understand a special container is being readied for the *Grant*. Acertor and company are getting a different escort as well."

"I was hoping you would be taking us back."

Kirk shrugged. "I would like to, but we have spent a lot of time out of service lately, and I think Fleet would balk badly if I asked. I did hint, and it got ignored."

Tathilan said. ****That's a pretty clear indicator of 'don't ask'.****

Nelson looked as grumpy as a man freshly wed could. "I'll have to think on that. There is one thing I would like to know. Has my commission been reinstated?"

****Correction, you commission was never decommissioned. Personnel in cold sleep are considered "on the clock" the *Grant* was listed as missing, but was never listed as presumed dead.****

"Excuse me Miss, but Captain Kirk hasn't introduced us."

****I'm Tathilan.****

Nelson boggled. "Tathilan, but she is Ane, or a computer, or..."

Tathilan laid a hand on his arm. "I'm me. Software based. I can run quite a number of extensional units and bios. This is one of them."

Ami said. "Do you have any other surprises?"

****No, An-form, humanoid, and computer terminal, that's all of me. In any case we should not be discussing me. It's your wedding.****

"It's Captain's you know, business, it always business."

****They are terrible that way.****

"Captain Nelson I believe we are being put upon."

"Captain Kirk, I believe you are correct."

"You handle yours and I'll handle mine."

The two women looked at the Captains two. "Men."

The party was slowing down when Ami and Howard slipped away. "Were do we go from here?"

"Back to your cabin on the *Grant*? I've got the quilt and the bed should still be in the locker."

"After eleven years? That bed will be full of leaks, and did you get your quilt cleaned."

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"The quilt I got cleaned, but you're right, that bed would be a disaster. So where, back to out mundane cabin?"

"I would hardly call a cabin that size 'mundane'."

"But we slept there last night."

The sign on the black panel said "Wedding Suite --->"

"Do we follow it Howard?"

"I think it would be impolite to not." They followed the indicators until a heavy pair of doors parted to reveal a hotel lobby. Ceiling fans traced lazy circles in the air. A dark-skinned man was behind the counter. Three men and a woman played cards at a near by table. Bits of conversation, and the sound of a piano drifted from a bar off the lobby. A quick look in the bar proved it filled with men in khakis or silk suits, and women in long off the shoulder dresses.

"Howard and Ami Nelson" said the dark man as they approach the counter. "You are expected. Welcome to Singing Waters Hotel and Resort."

Howard look quickly at Ami, then back at the man. "Thank you. I didn't know we were expected."

"All arrangements have been provided for. Your keys. The boy will show you the way." A uniformed, blonde-haired youth popped up from a nearby bench and lead them through the halls. He waved them into a spacious room and closed the door behind them. A breeze blew in the open glass doorwalls that lined two sides of the suite. Water, falling water filled every view and water lapped at the stones just outside the doorwalls. Waterfalls from tens of feet to inches high gurgled, sang and roared as far as the eye could see and the ear could hear. A symphony in water and wind. The blue setting sun cast rainbows through the mists and colors played across the waters. For a long time they gazed out the open doorwalls. Finally they tore themselves away from the sight to look at the room. A huge bed with a netting canopy, and Ami's quilt spread across it. A simple washroom lead off the bedroom. In the apex of the glass walls was a dinette set. A placard was on the bed: "Enjoy the Singing Waters Hotel and Resort. Bathing is available right outside your window. Hot to the left, cold to the right. Room service on demand. No one is coming for you for at least three days. Enjoy your Honeymoon. -- Tim and Tathilan."

"Oh Howard." She sighed as they sank into the bed.

Acertor floated, the wind rustling beneath his joyously spread wings. This was even better than the flight rooms. Below him the craggy peaks tossed eddies and updrafts at him. Deateli was down there on the rocks several hundred feet below him. He twisted and came about. He set his eyes on her and slowly lowered himself, reluctantly, to the ground. She ran to his side. "That was beautiful! I enjoyed every minute."

"You enjoyed, You weren't even the one flying. By the first egg I needed that I did."

"I can tell, it has done you wonders. No matter how it looked, I was never

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more that feet away from you. Tathilan gave me a front row seat for the whole flight."

"Where do I get one of these?"

"Talk to the companies that make them when you get to Earth. Starfleet doesn't have a lock on the technology."

"Did it make up for the rest?"

"Acertor, I never expected an ecstatic encounter, but we have each learned a great deal about what does and does not excite the other."

"Yes, I have to agree with that."

"Do you have a female here?"

"No on the *Kongo* no, but the *FarSight* has a number of females. I have a feeling they will be kept busy."

She smiled. "I could clothe myself in holograms, but it wouldn't quite be the same."

"Thank you, but I think sleep is in order. That is more workout than I've had in a while."

"Now you know it's here, you can use it."

"Thank you."

Lt. Reves ducked out from under the helm station again. The Andorian Ensign was still there. "Am I that fascinating? Flux modulator please."

"Yes, you are." She said handing it to him.

He dived back under. "Why, because I'm old?"

"You are not old Lt. Reves, you are displaced in time. And yes, that is part of it."

"So what is your angle on this?"

"I would say one part hero worship, two parts curiosity."

"Okay, I get the hero worship part, but how are you curious?"

"To note the differences in Human behavior over that period of time."

"Note any?"

"Other than some unusual quirks in your speech patterns, no."

"So you are learning that Humans are Humans, and have been for a long time."

"Yes, but conformation by observation is satisfying."

"I thought you were an engineer?"

"I am, everyone needs a hobby."

"Attention all hands. We will make planet fall at Starbase 460 in two hours. Check your terminals for base leave. That is all."

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Howard looked around the cabin. "Have we missed anything?"

"I don't think so. And I don't like it."

"What, that we haven't missed anything?"

"No, I have been doing my XO job even if I haven't. I have a pretty good idea what is going to happen."

"What is going to happen where?"

"Howard, they are going to fuss over us. We are heroes with the capital H! The ground pounder admirals are going to push in and the real heroes, the ones that did the work will get a nice commendation, and forgotten."

"Kirk, hell no."

"Howard, I got the scuttlebutt. Kirk is too good a hero of late. A regular Boy Scout that doesn't play the political game."

I admire that."

"So do I. But in his time as the Commander of the *Kongo* he has rescued an entire race, and saved the passengers of a pirated ship, as well as the usual stuff that starship Captain's do. He gets press and dismisses it."

"So what do you figure is going to happen?"

"This tug is going to take us almost to Earth, and then a political 'bright boy' will 'escort' the *Grant* back to Earth and reap the political rewards."

"That is a cynical viewpoint Ami, not like you."

"I've been talking to certain people."

"Which people?"

"Tathilan, Deateli, others."

"Who's the source?"

"Tathilan, Deateli said it was more than possible, others confirmed the basic idea."

"Well maybe I should get it from the antelope's mouth."

You rang.

"Yes I did. What are there rumors you have been working on?"

I intercepted orders for the *USS Berlin* to handle the last leg of the *Grant's* Escort. From Starbase 1

"So, we get several ships. Along the way."

Starbase one is still only three light years from Earth Captain Nelson. Captain Kennedy has also been vocal about his dislike for Captain Kirk and his habit of "falling into heroic circumstances.

"Pray tell."

Direct quote, from three months ago, over heard by the Ane Representative to the Federation Council. 'That Boy Scout Kirk is getting too many of the plum assignments. He is making the rest of us look bad'.

"I see. Get me a proper uniform, all decorations. I have a stop to make."

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The Gentlewoman waited. All her decorations where in place. The aid came in to her. "The President will see you now Madame Ambassador."

She put on her best smile and entered the chamber. "Good morning Mr. President."

"Good morning to you Madam Ambassador. You indicated some urgency to your request."

"Yes sir. I understand that a vessel, a participant in the late war between ourselves has been located, with the crew alive."

"Yes, that is the case. The ship itself and the crew are being returned to Earth as soon as possible."

"So I have been lead to understand. I am here to request that one of our ships be allowed to accompany this vessel on the last leg of its journey, as a gesture of peace."

The President smiled. "I like the idea. Let's see what we can arrange."

Captain Nelson was the first one on the dock when the *Kongo* made fast to Starbase 460. He buttonholed an Ensign for directions to the Admiral's office. On arrival he made himself and his business known. "Admiral Golan will see you now, Captain."

Nelson rose as the doors opened. Acertor was on his way out. "It has been a pleasure meeting you Admiral Golan. Oh, Captain Nelson, fancy seeing you here."

Nelson half whispered. "How did you beat me?"

"My own ship with transporters."

Nelson entered the Admiral's office. It was about what he expected. The place told something about the occupant. Ship models lined one wall, a uniform was in a flat case as well. "Captain...?"

"Howard Nelson, *USS Ulysses S Grant*."

"Oh, ah well, Captain Nelson, I am honored to meet you. I didn't think your would be up to activity."

"Quite the contrary. Dr. Hanson knows his business. He had the entire crew up and ship shape within a week. We have spent the balance of our time returning our vessel to operational status."

"Well, Sir the *Grant* is a fine old ship, but she is old. We can't expect a 230 year old ship to be operational."

"However Sir, I can and do. I have my orders right here." Nelson pulled the papers from his uniform. To 'Pursue the resolution of the War with the Romulan powers, and return to Earth Spacedock. I understand Sir that the Romulan war is over."

"Yes, it has been for..."

"Yes, sir. Conformation is enough. I intend to carry out my orders. After all,

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can we really call that late conflict over until the last ship is in?"

"Well, the *Grant* was declared missing in action, it isn't necessary to..."

"But we were never declared presumed dead. Most likely it was an oversight. However, it means that my ship and I are still on the books as a commissioned vessel, and my orders, signed by the Chief of Fleet operations are still valid. I am here, my ship is at dock, we are no longer missing."

"Well, the orders I have received are to aid you in getting back to Earth."

"I understand those orders require my vessel be crated up and shipped like cargo."

"Captain Nelson. The *Grant* is old. We simply wish to protect her."

"Admiral Golan, she is not as old as you think. Did you forget the time dilation effect? The *Grant* has slightly under eleven years on her clocks since I ordered hibernation stations. Since that time the crew of the *Kongo* has been instrumental in repairing battle damage to the *Grant*. We expect to be fully operational within the week."

"That is preposterous. You plan to sail back to Earth? You would be years at the task."

"I would prefer an escort for a speed boost. The *Kongo* so far has done nicely."

"We will have the *USS FedEx* here shortly. A tug would get you home quickly."

"Sir, respectfully, I prefer the escort we have."

"I need the *Kongo* on station."

"Have the *USS Kongo* and the *USS Berlin* switch places."

"Why the *Berlin*?"

"Read the itinerary Sir, with due respect to my seniority as a Captain, I wish to retain the escort I have, the *USS Kongo*. Unless this arrangement somehow endangers the sector, I wish it given all due consideration."

"I understand Captain. Do you require anything else?"

"Yes." Nelson handed over a PADD. "I have a number of material requirements for my ship."

"Thank you Captain. Dismissed."

Nelson turned on his heels and marched out. He passed Kirk and Spacik on their way in. "Captain Kirk, Commander Spacik, good day."

"Captain Nelson?"

"Captain Kirk, the Admiral will see you."

Kirk and Spacik entered the office. "Good morning Admiral Golan."

"Captain, Commander."

"I have the *Kongo*'s reports on the recent activities and a rather lengthy list of necessities before we resume patrol."

"Do you mean to walk in here like you know nothing about what's going on?"

"Sir? What's going on?"

"You doubtless saw Captain Nelson leaving."

"Well yes. I wondered why he was here."

"You don't know?"

"No, I don't know."

"I am to believe that?"

Spacik put on his Vulcan. "Captain Kirk is not known for fallacious pronouncements Admiral."

"Admiral if you are going to accuse me of knowing something, perhaps I better study up on the subject. Now, what am I studying?"

"My last two guests were Ambassador Acertor, and Captain Nelson, both were lobbying, and using all the leverage they possess to retain you as an escort."

"I am flattered at their vote of confidence Sir."

"You aren't going to lobby for it?"

"Admiral Golan, I was given the definite impression I was wanted here. However, if Starfleet command wishes to change my orders, I will gladly continue the escort duty."

"You mean to tell you don't care, one way or the other?"

"Admiral Golan, yes I care. I imagine the crew of the *Kongo* would love to see Captain Nelson and the *Grant* home. They have worked hard and sacrificed much to rescue them. Closure would be nice."

"And Ambassador Acertor?"

"Yes, I find the company of the Acceptians to be welcome."

"Yet you didn't plan any of it."

"Admiral, I recall saying as much. My reports will indicate plans to return to my assigned patrol sector. Should I change my plans?"

"I don't know. I'll contact Starfleet command and let you know. I have some heavy weight opinions in this matter. Do you have a preference?"

"Yes, I do. I would like to see my crew, that has worked so hard, get to see the closure of their efforts. I would like to see a closure of the events we have set in motion. And, I would like to be in a position to get to Homefall in ten months."

"Homefall?"

"Formerly Gramar 3. The first load of Sixliss settlers are due at Homefall in ten months. I and my crew would really like to be there."

"I'll take that into account Captain."

"Meanwhile, if no one has objections my crew would like to continue the work on the *Grant*. We are nearly ready to recharge the antimatter system."

"Proceed as you see fit Captain."

"Captain Kennedy to see you Sir."

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Picard replied. "Send him in."

The handsome man entered, confidence oozed from every pore. "Good afternoon Admiral Picard. You wished to see me?"

"Yes Captain. I have new orders for you and the *Berlin*."

"Of course Sir." Kennedy took the proffered PADD. He quickly read the orders, and read them again, his perfect smile slipped. "Sir, has their been some error?"

Picard steepled his hands on the desk. "No. No mistake at all. I believe you have been looking for a plum assignment. A patrol in the outer sectors will give you endless opportunity to discover all sorts of interesting things."

"Yes, Sir, of course Sir." Kennedy visibly slumped. His teeth ground audibly."

"I expect that with your usual efficiency the *Berlin* will be on station in record time. Dismissed."

Captain Nelson looked around the small bridge. Every station was manned, everyone looked eager, and a little uncertain. "Bridge to..." He thumbed the intercom switch. "Bridge to Engineering. Mr. Nelson, what is your status."

"Engineering to Bridge. We are as ready as we can be."

"*Grant to Kongo*. We are condition green. Standing by to cast off."

"*Kongo to Grant*. Disconnect umbilicals." The thump sounded through the *Grant*. "Cast off."

With a grumble the *Grant* freed itself from the station it had held since it was rescued. "Grant, you are free space, and are clear to maneuver."

Nelson swallowed. "One tenth impulse."

With a slow rumble the long dead engines came to life, and pushed the little ship forward. Nelson said. "Full impulse." The *Grant* responded slowly, coming to full acceleration "Lets have a look at the *Kongo* Mr. Stiles." The viewscreen shifted to show the massive ship following gracefully somewhat to the rear.

Stiles said. "Beautiful sir. Absolutely beautiful."

It sounds like you want one Mr. Stiles."

"Yes Sir, you bet Sir."

"Bridge to engineering Are we ready for warp power."

"Warp power at your command."

"Mr. Reves, give us warp factor one." The tension tightened. The *Grant* slid into warp one without a shudder. Her escorts right behind here. "Warp Three Mr. Reves." Speed increased smoothly. Nelson slowly smiled. He jumped from the command chair with a shout. As a signal pandemonium broke out the ship wide. On the *Kongo* similar scenes played out about the vessel from those that had a hand in the *Grant's* repair, and from those that had watched. On the

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FarSight, the Acceptians watched with bemused humor as the others celebrated their accomplishment. Nelson sat back down. "All hands, stations please. Kongo we are prepared to redock."

Kirk was all but jumping out of the center seat as the *Grant* finished the docking process.

Nelson said. "*Kongo*, we are secured, all umbilicals connected."

Kirk said. Mr. Miritath get me the *FarSight*.

"*FarSight* on Captain."

"*FarSight*, we are going to have a party to end all parties Anyone you can spare is invited to come."

"I am sure we can find those that would like to attend Captain."

Kirk changed to ship wide. "Attention all hands. Tests of the *USS Ulysses S Grant* have been completed with a complete success. Full control to the ship's computer. All hands, I repeat all hands have on ship leave for the next four hours. Party DOWN."

Spacik rased an eyebrow. "Captain, if anything untoward should happen, that will be a most interesting entry into the court martial proceedings."

"Today, who cares, lets have some fun."

Kirk was relaxing in his quarters. The ship was getting back to normal. That was the first time he had seen a multi-ship wide party. They had ended up dead in space and docked to the *FarSight* as well as the party proceeded. The crews of the ships were still getting sorted out. **Tim, priority one secure channel, your eyes only.**

He stopped lazing and went into his office. **OK Tathilan, I'll take it here.**

The screen focused, on the President of the Federation. "Good day Captain Kirk. As you have been assigned to escort the *Grant* into Earth I have an interesting addition to your 'fleet'." The screen split A Romulan in a Commander's uniform was added. "This is Commander Torack of the Romulan Warbird Natoark. At the request of the Romulan Star Empire it has been asked that one of their vessels be allowed to accompany you on the final leg of your journey. Would that be possible."

"I'm flabbergasted Sir. Of course they are welcome to join. I can't think of a better way to demonstrate ..." the attention light on his monitor was blinking.

"One moment sir." He switched the screen. "Kirk here."

Mr. Solin said. "Sir, we have a Romulan Warbird on the long range sensors."

"That would be the Natoark Mr. Solin, they are expected. Hail them and guide them in."

"Yes. Sir."

Kirk switched back. "Yes Sir, That was my crew, on their toes as usual.

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Commander Torack you should be getting an 'official' hail shortly from my ops officer. Welcome to the flotilla Commander."

"I am please to be a part of this momentous event Captain Kirk."

"Dinner, 1600 hours? I will extend the invitation to Ambassador Acertor and of course Captain Nelson as well."

"It would be a pleasure. Torack out."

Kirk turned back, this was going to be fun. "Captain Nelson please."

Nelson was in his rooms on the *Kongo*. While technically the *Grant* was a "ship underway". For some reason few of the crew wanted to sleep on her anymore. Nelson, finding the *Kongo's* cabins much more comfortable, didn't push the issue.

The call beeped. He answered it. "Nelson here."

"Howard, this is Tim. Can I see you for a minute. I'm in my quarters right now."

"Sure, important?"

"Very."

"I'll be right over."

Kirk waited, the VIP cabin that the Nelsons were sharing was right next to his. His door call lit. "Come."

Nelson entered. "You sounded urgent."

"I have received a request for an additional ship to join the flotilla, from a power we have had past difficulties with, and one we are hoping to cement friendly relations with in the near future. They specifically wanted to accompany you and the *Grant* back to Earth, as a gesture of peace."

"You're kidding me."

"No, I am not, the Romulan Star Empire has offered you an escort of honor."

"Damn, I've never even *seen* a Romulan, none of us have." He sat down, shaking slightly.

"This disturbs you."

"Yea, a bit. I am, at least emotionally still at war with the Romulans, and I don't even know who, or what a Romulan is."

"They look Vulcan."

"Vulcan?"

"You know about Surak, and the Vulcans entering the age of reason."

"That was in the basic 'who we are' primer at the Academy."

"When Surak's camp had taken hold, a certain number of Vulcans refused to accept the new way of life. They were given materials to launch a colony effort. That effort became the Romulans."

"That we didn't hear."

"Until the 23rd century the Vulcans weren't even sure the Romulans were the ancient dissidents. Both parties accept the truth of the matter. And still

disagree."

"So the Romulans want to escort us?"

"I imagine they also want to get a look at you and ogle the Acceptians as well. To that end we are having a formal dinner at 1600. I would have your officers, pick four other than yourself, wear your old dress uniforms."

"I don't think everyone has one."

"Replicators, wonderful devices."

"Right. Dinner with Romulans. Captain Kirk, of all the strange wonders you have presented us with, that is the strangest one of all."

Nelson looked over the assembled officers. "Captain Kirk is holding a formal dinner at 1600 hours, full dress. Expected are a delegation from the *Kongo*, the *Grant*, the *FarSight*, and the Romulan Warbird *Natoark*."

Their shocked looks and utter disbelief mirrored his own.

Stiles said. "The *Romulans!* But we are at war... Oh, we aren't anymore, are we."

"That says it right there lieutenant. Mr. Nelson, Mr. Reves, Mr. Stiles, and Mr. Clark, you are the most senior officers. You will be dining with Romulans in four hours."

The dinner was formal. Half the parties didn't quite know what to say to the other half. Captain Kirk and Acertor made a fine show of trying to keep the conversation running. A good deal of banter was exchanged between the Acceptians and the Romulans. Neither had met the other. At last Commander Torack broke the ice. He produced a scroll and offered it to Captain Nelson. "Captain Nelson, I understand that due to the circumstance of your salvation, you experienced no time between then, and now."

"Yes, that is true."

"So the questions and attitudes of that period are fresh in your mind."

"Yes, that is also true."

"There remained two, vital and unanswered questions of that period. One, of the Federation, and one of the Empire. I will answer your question now, if you will answer mine."

"Yes, of course. Why were you fighting us?"

"As best an answer as I can give, is the Romulans of that time, my Grandfather's generation, were more parochial than we are today. The Universe has taught us that being Romulan is not so special as we once thought, and that the dangers of space do not take that into account. However, to my Grandfather, and his generation, this lesson was yet to be learned. We fought you because you were not Romulan."

Nelson mulled the answer over. "Your question Sir."

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"The Federation drove the Romulan Empire to its knees, and offered an equitable peace. A peace that you will find in the scroll I have here. A written copy of which was never presented between our peoples. Which I hope with me your will sign face to face tonight. My question. We were at your mercy. Why did you spare us?"

Nelson stood. "If I may. Of the five, six founding member of the Federation, each of the five humanoids had come to a point within its history where we threatened ourselves, our own kind with destruction. Each of the five, looked down into the yawning abyss, and stepped back from the brink. We put aside war with our own kind that we might each live. We fought only because we were attacked. I personally lost a ship, and it's crew because I attempted to parlay with Romulan ships. We only wanted to know why, and we only wanted peace. We never set out to conquer anyone. So yes, even if we got your Grandfathers on the ropes. Even if we had a knife to their throats. That isn't what we wanted, and we didn't want the foul fruits of conquest. It was the Federation way then, and I trust, it is the Federation way now."

Kirk raised his glass. "To the Weakness that makes us strong."

From the Federation crew. "Here, here."

Commander Torack paused, then spread the scroll, which proved to be two on the table. "Will you sign with me."

"Yes, I will."

The two men took a real pen, and each put to the parchment their names, beneath the printed names of those that had labored for peace. Commander Torack put out his hand human style, and Captain Nelson shook it.

Nelson said. "Thank you Sir, now I can let those ghosts rest."

The Long Patrol. All the galaxy knew by now. The escort had gown. The *Grant* floated free. Around her were the massive modern ships. The *Kongo*, the *FarSight*, the *Natoark*, the *quD*, these and others. All followed the *Grant* on the Long Patrol. She, small old and slow, the paint gone from her bow, the scars of battle on her hull, moved at a steady warp 3 into Sol space.

On the Long Patrol, slowing, to a impulse crawl. The good Earth was in sight. Shining blue and bright. The crew of the *Grant* worked to keep their eyes clear enough to work the ship. The others started to move off, each as it was assiged an orbit. Only the *Grant*, and her great gray shadow, the *Kongo* moved together. The shining spindle of the great Starfleet space dock loomed ahead. The *Kongo* fell close behind. The doors parted and she entered the dock. Every ship, free or docked had her running lights blazing. Faces filled every port. The tractors guided the *Grant* to a little used gangway. One too close to the structure for the big ships to use. Seldom used, but in this case perfect. The *Kongo* still behind her. The gangways reached out and kissed the hulls together. Within the

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Grant, the thump and thud of the docking clamp lent urgency to one more task. The last task of the Long Patrol.

Captain Nelson tried not to hurry. His officers and crew were behind him. The ship had been shut down in record time. They stepped out onto the main gangway. It was crowded, faces as far as they could see in every variation that Federation could provide. The crowd left a single path open. At the end was a tall and patrician man in an Admiral's uniform. Nelson and his officers walked toward him. It was the only direction to go. Nelson spotted Kirk and his staff beside the Admiral. He spotted Acertor behind him. The Admiral held out a hand. Nelson gripped it firmly. "Picard, Chief of Fleet Operations. Welcome home Captain Nelson."

"Admiral Picard. The *USS Ulysses S Grant* is reporting home in good order. We have prosecuted our orders as given, and we are grateful of the general peace. We suffered 16 casualties during the course of our cruise due to the rigors of war, and have 84 persons ready and fit for duty. I hereby return my commission. Sir..." Nelson bit his lip. "Sir, the long patrol is over."

The cheers and the backslapping were over. The buffet had lost its battle and the demands on the bar were decreasing. The reception for the crew of the *Grant* was reluctantly winding down. To Captain Nelson it was a reception that had seemed to include absolutely everyone in the Federation. He was exhausted. It was hard to see from the outside, but this hero business was hard work. He spotted Captain Kirk making his way over. Kirk said, "Captain Nelson. There is one more place we should be."

"I feel as if I have seen everyone, and been everywhere."

"Trust me on this one."

"Sure, I have trusted you so far."

Kirk touched his commbadge. "Two to beam."

The sparkle and blindness of the transport cleared before a sign that read, "Captain's Club." Kirk motioned him forward. Captain Howard Nelson entered the Captain's Lounge at Starfleet headquarters. He was expected. Nelson looked around in a daze. He had never seen this place. Yet, it felt like home. The Captains stood as he entered. No announcement was given, each stood as they became aware of who had entered. Captains, Admirals, men and women grown experienced and even ancient in the profession that he also had chosen. Men and women that had not been born when his ship sailed for the last time, on the Long Patrol. Nelson spotted the rack. The familiar among the unfamiliar. Tears welled in his eyes as thoughts of friends gone sprang unbidden to his mind. He walked as a man in a dream to the ancient hat rack. The hat looked familiar but different, a faded memory from a distant yesteryear, that he left behind but a day ago. He lifted it from the rack and slowly lowered it to his

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head to the respectful silence of the assembled. He shuffled to the bar, those before him parting without a word. "Kentucky Bourbon, straight up, two glasses please."

The bartender poured the measured shots, each in it's own glass and set them before him. Nelson carefully moved one glass in front of the empty stool to his right. He set the hat upon the stool itself. He turned to the Captains all. "Two hundred and thirty years ago, Admiral Richard Barnard left my hat here for me. I finally got back for the hat Rich. Thank you for your faith in me, and the crew. Let us now save a seat, and a drink, for those who cannot be here today. They cannot be with us now, but they will join us shortly, or we will join them." He raised his glass in toast. "To Absent Friends."

The Long Patrol -- Garry Stahl, July 2000

*A few notes on **The Long Patrol**: Yes, the Flowrider Scene is taken almost directly from the movie **Titan AE**. I enjoyed the film greatly and it helped me break the long block I had on finishing this tale. Consider it a tribute.*

The text of the Wedding Scene of Howard and Ami was taken largely from my own wedding vows. They were rendered more ecumenical, and I added the forward spoken by Kirk. See, men don't always forget the wedding vows. Some of us have it on disk.

*The Singing Waters was originally from Heinlein's **Glorious Road** It is one of those places I have always wanted to visit, so I let some of my characters honeymoon there.*

*Captain Kennedy has appeared in Jay Hailey's **Star Trek -- Outwardly Mobile** as a gung ho, self absorbed, devil-take-the-hindmost Jerk. He briefly serves the same purpose here. He is one of several crossover points. Read Hailey's stuff too.*

*Admiral Picard is who you think he is, and appears several times throughout my tales. Due my intense dislike of the entire so-called plot of **Star Trek - Generations**. Garry-Trek still has the Enterprise D going about its business under Captain Riker.*

***Subtext 2011-** I personally regard this as one of my better efforts. I'm a bit on the rueful side on how much I have found to fix. Ensemble dialog is still a bear in print. I'd call it one thing that film does do better. You have to indicate somehow who is speaking. It bedevils me here because I have so much of it.*