

Epiphany Trek

LOGS: USS KONGO



THE EAGLE'S SPAWN

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The Eagle's Spawn

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--Dedicated to the Veterans of the United States Armed Forces.--

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"Archie!"

"Edith, how many times have I told you don't bother me when I'm watching the Tri-Dee."

"But Archie, we won!"

"We won what?"

"We won the contest."

"What contest Edith? I don't know about no contest."

"It was half a year ago Archie, remember, we entered that sweepstakes for an all expense paid two month starliner tour. We won!"

"What do you mean we won, no body wins those worthless contests. It's only a bald-face ploy you get you to spend your hard-saved replicator credits at their replimat. I told you that then, and I'll say it now..."

"But Archie, we won. Look."

Archie stopped in mid rant. He looked at the letter Edith held out on her PADD. He took the PADD, and read it again.

"Well, like I said, sometimes you get lucky. I knew that contest was up front from the start. Now, your Andorian, you can fool them with a fake contest, but not Archie Breeds, oh no. I see these fakes a mile away."

"So Archie, are we going?"

"Of course we are Edith, a smart man never turns down a free starship ride. Now, wadda we have to do here?"

Captain Kirk motioned Commander Ap Owen into the club. She looked a little shy about entering, it was for Captains only after all.

"Over here." He led her to a table.

"What's the occasion?"

Kirk grinned a little. "That comes later. So, what you think?"

"James Timothy Kirk, if you dragged me in her to show off, rank not withstanding...."

"Seriously. I've heard the club has been around since the Romulan War. I don't think it has been redecorated in that time."

"Have you been appointed to the decorations committee?"

"Not yet, but I want some ideas if I am."

"You are a terrible tease. However, I see what you mean. That hat stand for example, and the hat."

"They have been here since the Romulan War. The hat is the property of one Captain Howard Nelson MIA."

"There is a story."

"Yes, his ship was seen departing the scene of a battle at high relativistic speed, no contact was made, the ship was damaged. A friend left the hat in

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memory of all Starship crews lost in space, until he comes to claim it. Well, it has been over 200 years, and the *USS Ulysses S Grant* has not been seen or heard from."

"When do you stop hoping?"

"I don't think anyone does hope, but the thought, the memory, of what it stands for, that is what matters."

"Gwenith Ap Owen looked thoughtful for a moment. "We all have those we have lost, to circumstance, time, or other factors. It's a good symbol."

"I believe that is why it has endured. In any case, I have an announcement."

"An announcement?"

Kirk pulled a standard PADD from his uniform. Stood and requested the attention of the room. When the room quieted down, he read.

"Commander Gwenith Ap Owen. As of this stardate you are promoted to the rank of Captain, and shall assume all the responsibilities and privileges of that rank. On acceptance you are further ordered to assume command of the *USS Hadrian NCC 10475*. Do you accept this promotion and these orders?"

Gwenith sat speechless for a moment. She stood up.

"Yes Captain, I accept."

The assembled Captains and Admirals applauded. A toast was offered, and drunk. And they sat once again.

"You have a sense of drama."

"It's a first for me too."

"It is?"

"I have never had a Commander under me promoted. But then again, the *Kongo* is my first space command."

"First, when I met you it seemed you had been in the center seat a thousand years."

"I would suppose I am a decent actor then. I felt like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar."

"You where that nervous?"

"I had my share of the officer of the deck days, and some times when it was hairy and the Captain wasn't there. But I was never, never the man responsible when the chips were down. As many times as you have had the *Kongo's* center seat, as confident as you might be on that deck. When the deck is yours, and there is no one else to turn to, it is the loneliest place in the Galaxy. As prepared as you are, and as much as I tell you this, I cannot prepare you for the moment, only warn you it will happen."

"I stand warned. By the way, what is the *Hadrian*?"

"Kongo class."

"Kongo class? I didn't know there was a Kongo class."

"The *Hadrian* is the second. Ambassador class hull mated with Ane warp drives and computer. Starfleet has smiled on my experiment and authorized a second ship. They also insisted on taking you from me to command her. I put up

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a brave fight, but they prevailed. Picard wants a Captain familiar with the ship and, as he put it, 'quirks' of the system."

"But I don't get Tathilan."

"Not if I can help it. You are however getting the seconds of every engineering and computer department on the *Kongo*. I have heard howls over that, believe me. Picard tried to twist Felialan out of me, but I told him that if he took my First, and my Chief Engineer, he would have a land mutiny on his hands. He got my point, having been a Captain himself. Your computer officer you have to choose yourself. Tathilan is willing to help you with selection. And Captain Ap Owen.." Kirk stood. "We are expected at a promotion party, yours. Everyone from both crews we could get, and Admiral Picard."

"How did you swing that?" She said, rising herself.

"I told him that if he was taking the best officer I had, he could at least help see her off."

"Well, let's go."

"Wow Archie, us, on a Starship, wow!"

"Edith, you are making us look like a couple of tourists"

"But Archie, we are tourists."

"Just keep cool. You're drawing attention."

Edith went back to watching the Earth rolling out the viewport of the station.

"Archie, what is that over there?"

Archie Breeds stared out the viewport.

"Why its another station Edith, what does it look like?"

A crewman looked where they were looking. "It is the Starfleet Spacedock madam."

"I wonder if we will see the *Enterprise*."

"I don't believe the *Enterprise* is in the sector Madam."

"Edith, you are making us look like tourists."

"But Archie..."

"Attention all passengers. The *Skylark* is now boarding at lock 137."

"Archie, that's our ship."

"I know that Edith. This way."

The party was boisterous, as such affairs usually are. You take a disciplined and highly trained bunch of people, give them an excuse to not be disciplined in an approved of way, and they get boisterous. Tathilan would get the tales of who was found in whose bed to him later. She always did.

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Tim found himself on the edge of the party, he always did. Loud parties were not his favorite places to be. The main difference is he had Tathilan's humanoid in his arm. It did make him look less out of place.

Why do you come then?

This is as much duty as the quarterly reports.

Duty alone?

Pretty much. Being seen with you is nice. Which reminds me, we have to visit my parents while we are at Earth.

I'll make a note of it. Why so nervous?

I don't like large crowds, never have.

So you enter a profession were you meet lots of people.

Meeting people, that's fine, meeting the entire community at once, that's a problem.

And the Sixliss first contact? You had lizards all over you when the shuttle hatch opened, and your smile was as wide as the ship. The boisterousness of that crowd makes this look like a Vulcan meditation session. They were touching everything, checking out my hair and ears, fingering clothing laughing, crying, and singing for joy all at the same time.

Kirk grinned at the memory. **Yea, it was great.**

So why is that great, and this a difficult duty? These are the same people you trust your life with daily.

Kirk stopped, and thought a minute. **You're right. I know almost everyone here. But I was more at ease being crawled by Sixliss I didn't know. I don't have an answer, but it will be something to meditate on.**

You're learning.

I imagine I'll stop about five minutes after the first clod hits the coffin.

Not any more. You're one of us now, you will *never* stop learning.

I am still considering that, thank you.

Tim scanned the party for other unoccupied persons. He found one, but was surprised by who it was. Commander Data stood by himself, looking at the celebration in progress. Tim wandered in his direction.

"Good evening Commander."

"Captain Kirk, I believe it would be good to see you."

"The question is Data, is it, or isn't it?"

Data thought a minute. "It is. But I thought the question was "To be or not to be?"

"You to?"

"Me also?"

"Tathilan finds humor in classical allusions I usually fail to understand."

"Yes, that would be a humorous thing under that circumstance. I have progressed in my understanding of humor, but Ane humor still escapes me."

"You and most of the Galaxy."

I believe I am being spoken of here.

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Data looked confused for a moment. "Tathilan, I thought you occupied an Ane form gynoid."

On occasion; yes I do.

"This is not the case tonight?"

As you can see, no.

"How do you manage that?"

**You mean switching bodies?*

"Yes."

It is a function of what I am. You are the positronic brain in your body. The pathways develop as you do. Like a biological, you are both hardware and software. I am all software. You might say that RIs are energy beings with a limited environment envelope, the guts of a computer. However, within that limit, I can change bodies as you change clothes.

"Most curious. Who owns the hardware?"

In the case of this one, I do. In the case of the *Kongo*, Starfleet does.

"That supports you alone."

Yes, I don't need externals.

"If you two are going to talk shop, I'll move along."

Don't be a spoil-sport, I thought you liked this sort of thing.

"OK, I am unmasked. Forgive me Data, but I hear this conversation every time some engineer gets near her. I think of her as a person, not a collection of hardware."

"How would you think of me Captain Kirk?"

"As a person Data, there was never a doubt. You are not Human, although you are clearly raised by Humans, but from the moment I met you, your sentence was not in doubt."

"Your certainty is unusual Captain Kirk. I usually find most people doubt my 'personess', or profess a false belief in it, but test or try it. Why do you accept so quickly?"

"To use the classical allusions myself. You wear your heart on your sleeve Data. I sense it."

"You are referring to telepathy."

"That is part of it. But not all of it. Even if I didn't know from the shape of your mind, I could infer from your posture, your manner. You act like people, not like a machine acting like people."

"And if you found a people that did not act like you thought people should act."

"An open mind is a useful tool, and I have made mistakes before."

"Mistakes are the process of learning."

"Hopefully they don't get you killed in the process. I did a little arm twisting to get Admiral Picard here. Why did you come?"

"I enjoy opportunities to practice my social skills Captain. While I have much experience, it never seems to be enough."

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"No, I don't suppose there is such a thing as too much social practice. Tathilan what is the crowd density?"

Down 26% from peak.

"OK, we can duck out now."

"Duck out?"

"You enjoy the practice Data, I don't. But I will not leave until 25% of the other attendees have left first."

"Why is this?"

"Politeness. I don't want to be the first to go even though I really want to be the first to go. I prefer small social occasions."

"Would this be classed as a form of social lying, commonly called a "grace"?"

Kirk smiled wryly. "Exactly." Kirk looked around for Ap Owen. She was amid her new senior officers. She glowed with excitement and animation.

"Tathilan, time to leave the stage to the new star."

"Good night sweet prince?"

"As you like it." He caught Gwenith Ap Owen, *Captain* Gwenith Ap Owen's eyes, bowed, and exited on Tathilan's arm.

The streets of Crom were quiet in the early afternoon. The town had changed little in four centuries. Quaint crafter's shops lined the narrow streets. While in times past the shops sold the daily necessities of life. Today all were cottage industries or artist studios. The houses, for the most part, were the heavy stone structures of the late 18th century. The occasional modern building was carefully camouflaged to look the same, even if it wasn't. The Kirk house, was one of these.

Home, Tim thought, the one place they have to take you in. He placed his hand on the door pad, and it obediently opened for him.

"Hello?" It was his Mother calling.

"I'm home!"

She swept into the room, long skirts, and afghan.

"James. Good to have you home, you're so dark, are you well?"

"I am. El Nanth will do this to you, and yourself?"

"Well, as much as can be expected."

Tathilan stood back slightly. Mrs. Kirk noticed her.

"James, is this your young Lady? You should be more forward James. We haven't even been introduced."

"Give me a chance Mother, I just got in the door. Tathilan, my Mother, Angela Elaine Grayson Kirk. Mother, Tathilan."

"Is that all the name the girl has James?"

"Different cultures, different customs Mother. As well you should know."

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"As I well do." Elaine Kirk turned to the back of the house. "Father? James and his Lady are here. Come out a while."

"Coming." Sounded faint from the back of the house.

"Father has yet another project. Works at it like a mad-man sometimes."

"He always has Mother, and you always chide him for it."

"The privileges of old marrieds. What have the two of you been up to?"

"We just finished a refit at El Nanth yards, and before that closed the second stage of the Sixliss resettlement. It's in Admiral Kowalski's hands now, good hands too."

"I don't know the man, but I'll trust your judgment of him. However, I was thinking more about the two of you, and specifically you. Just what happened James?"

"Ah, hmmm..."

"Out with it young man."

"Mother, I am hardly 'young' anymore."

"However, the moment is not passing."

"Would you believe I was assaulted by the ghost of Amanda Grayson?"

"No, you can do better."

"In a manner of speaking, I was. Psi testing is not common for Humans at birth, but it seems I should have been tested. I am, or was a latent Telepath."

"This means you are no longer latent."

"Yes."

"Should the rest of the family be tested?"

Tathilan spoke. "Yes, it is genetic in humans, so it is possible that other members of the family have the trait. The Nairobi Institute of Mental Sciences would be happy to do the testing for your family. They can also recommend treatment should anyone test positive."

"You make it sound like a disease dear."

"Bad wording, Standard does that to me. Stress can break the mental barriers, and that is bad, very bad. Tim would have been badly hurt, even killed if I had not been there."

"Tim?"

"The guy sitting next to me, your son."

"Why 'Tim' James?"

"I have written to you about the difficulties of being 'James T. Kirk' in Starfleet. My friends call me Tim."

"Yet I recall you fought like a banshee to get into Starfleet."

"Little did I know."

"Wouldn't be proper. A banshee's a female spirit a'start with, an' they keen, not fight." The latter was spoken by a tall elegant man in rumpled tweeds as he entered the room.

Tim stood up. "Tathilan, my Father, Bruce Ian Kirk. Father, Tathilan."

"How do you do."

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"And yourself."

"So, ye got into a wee bit o' trouble?"

A wee, but we got oot as quick as in."

"Well then."

"Father, I was asking James about his Lady."

"Indeed. I'd like ta hear myself." The elder Kirk sat down.

Tim continued. "Not much to tell, we more or less ran into each other and things happened. We've been a couple for, six months or so."

"Are ye plannin' ta marry? Would be good ta have it close ta home."

Tim rubbed the side of his nose. "Ai, that would be nice, however, there are some cross cultural difficulties to work out. Ane don't stand in the Church and exchange vows."

"Ane is it, I ha' seen a few Ane, and I recall they are antelope looking people. Ms. Tathilan, excuse me sayin', but ye got but two legs by my count."

"You count well. Ane is my culture set if you prefer."

"We might as well dive in Tathilan. Mother, Father, Tathilan is Ane. Ane RI."

A small silence started and threatened to become a large one. Angela Kirk saved it. "What is an Ane RI James?"

"A form of artificial life. Tathilan is the computer system on the *Kongo*, or more accurately, the person I chose to be the computer system on the *Kongo*."

"Why James?"

"She's the only person on the ship I can't order around."

"I don't think I understand."

"I do Mother. I ha' met a few of these people. An' people they be."

"Father, how can you have artificial people?"

Mrs. Kirk. Perhaps if I explain.

Angela Kirk snapped around at the telepathic contact. "Oh, my."

Did I startle you? I'm sorry, but long conversations in Standard are difficult for me, especially when the terms are complex.

"I just never felt anything that...warm...before. I do need to understand this."

The only things artificial about me are the bodies I inhabit. I was born, raised and educated just like any Ane child. My more usual appearance is four legged, I did this, indicating her body, **for Tim.**

"What about children?"

Tim broke in. "Two ways, adopt, or get an egg donor from the Ansis. Tathilan can nurture an embryo, just not create it. However, I am not having kids while I am active in Starfleet. It either means leaving them home, or putting them in danger, neither of which is acceptable."

Angela Kirk sat precisely her hands in her lap. Bruce Kirk looked more relaxed.

Angela spoke quietly. "You are determined in this James?"

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"Mother, I've never shown you Katherine's last letter. She told me not to wait, or waste a second. When I found love again, to take it in both fists, and cherish it. She told me..." Tathilan laid a hand in his lap. "She told me that as I loved her, I would find love again. That she blessed any love I found, because she trusted I would not find less than I deserved. Because she loved me, she would not hold me back. Well, here is that love. I am not holding back."

"I liked Katherine, she was a sensible young woman. And she was right. Very well James, do as you heart demands. As always, the family will support you."

Bruce Kirk said. "So what are your plans?"

We have each other, we have a place and a job. We will take it as it comes.

"I'd like to see that Ane-form. I want ta know ye when I see ye, no matter what the shape daughter."

Angela Kirk tiskid slightly. "That, Father, is going to take some getting used to."

"Well, we are not scheduled to ship out for a few more days. And I am making work to keep us here a little passed that. I want to see the *USS Hadrian* off if I can swing it."

Bruce Kirk said. "The *Hadrian*?"

"Gwenith Ap Owen's ship. She should be ready for space trials within the week."

"James, I thought Gwenith Ap Owen was your first officer?"

"She *was* my first officer. She was promoted to Captain yesterday and given the command."

"A feather in your cap then."

"Yes indeed. Could I invite you to dinner aboard? Anyone else in the clan that wants to come too, but I would like to give you a tour of the ship."

"I think we can manage that Father."

"Yes, we can."

The tour and dinner went well. Tim's Mother and Father, and his Sister, her Husband and their two children had dinner in the Captain's suite.

"Well Tathilan, what did you think of the Family?"

Pleasant company. Your Father treats words like precious jewels, he certainly doesn't waste a single one.

He has been called 'terse'.

Your nephew Ian is charming.

Tim continued to brush her mane. **Charming is an interesting word to describe a six year old intermix chamber.**

I wouldn't be that hard on him, most of the ship is still here.

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Yes, we managed to keep him in containment.

I see your point. He looked happy.

A six year old kid that has just had a tour of his Uncle's starship, got to sit in the center seat, and is leaving with a model not generally available should be happy. I would have been on cloud nine for at least a week.

**Never got a chance?*

Oh yes, I sat in the center seat of every ship in the Starflight Museum. However, that is hardly the same thing as an actual real working starship, and I knew it. So it was a cheap and reasonably granted thrill.

**So, how is the Starflight Museum?*

**You have never been there?*

Not in person.

We have tomorrow, we can rectify that. I did however tend to leave the Fleet personnel in pain.

**You kicked them?*

Nooo. I said things.

Stop teasing.

I'm James T Kirk.

**That's it?*

Yep, that's it. I realize now they were doing their level best not to laugh their heads off. But I was James T Kirk, in fact, still am.

That name as been a bit of an albatross, hasn't it.

At times, but it is my name.

And a very nice name is it is.

You are kind.

**So, who should I go as?*

**Yourself, who else?*

**Silly, four legs or two?*

Well, those older ships are easier to get around with two.

**Should I wear a uniform?*

You're entitled to. Up to you.

**Are you?*

Good question. I find that I don't want to, it seems rather pretentious to walk into the Museum in a uniform. On the other hand, There are fleet personnel on the station, and I would feel a little naked without one.

**You, self conscious?*

Tathilan, don't tease. You know me better than that.

She reached around and nibbled at his ear.

Stop that.

You're getting to serious.

You know me too well girl. Let's sack out.

**Two legs or four?*

I'll take you any way you come.

Tathilan and Tim waited until the last tour group cleared out, and moved onto the bridge of the *Republic*. An older Chief stood ready to field questions, his hair lightly grizzled with white. Tathilan looked around the old bridge, moving from station to station. Tim stood back and took in the general feel of the place. Trying to see if any trace of the former Captains remained. The chief spoke. "Good morning Captain, Commander. I don't get many active personnel."

"Morning Chief. Tathilan has never been here. I am giving her the guided tour."

"Been here much sir?"

"Every time the family got anywhere near Earth Chief. Other than the addition of the *Excelsior*, it hasn't changed much."

"Toured her yet sir?"

"Not if I can help it Chief. I did my time on that slave galley. I know the *Excelsior* from the bridge lights to the sump tanks."

Respectfully sir. Yours must have been one of the last classes to cruise on her."

"That's right Chief. I was in the last class to cruise on the *Excelsior*. The *Ambassador* replaced her the year after."

"What's your ship sir?"

"Oh, James Kirk, the *Kongo*."

"Well sir, A fine ship you have."

"Thank you Chief."

"Sir, I used to get a red haired kid in here that always said he was James T Kirk, and *he* was going to command a starship. It was all I could do to not laugh. James T Kirk indeed."

"That's right Chief, and I still am."

"Blimey! You're kidding me. You're that kid?"

"Yes Chief, my skin got darker, but that was me. You must like the posting."

"Well sir, I do sir, that I do."

"Let it be a lesson, smart assed kids grow up."

The Chief was gamely holding in the laughter. "Yes sir, that they do sir." Tathilan was trying out the command chair. Kirk turned to her.

"So, how does it feel?"

"Distant, and detached."

"It would for you."

"Hard to believe we used to use these ships."

"They're a far cry better than the ships a century before that Commander."

"I suppose they would be."

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Tim said. "Seen enough?"

"Sure, lets go."

Tim was working in his ready room later that afternoon. The officers taken for the newly re-commissioned *Hadrian* left him shuffling departments and replacements as best he could. Trying for a mix of old and new that would improve and speed the integration the new into a system that worked. In truth he had been dragging his feet a little with the moaning about replacements. The *Hadrian* left for space trials in two days, and he could hardly give leave to a crew that had been on leave for the last three months. His latest ploy was an Admiral's inspection that currently had the crew scuttling around and cleaning up. The refit had left things a bit on the untidy side. Admiral Picard and party were due at 0900 tomorrow.

The sound of the door chime shocked him slightly. He had been deep into his work. "Come."

The door opened and a sharply dressed Commander entered. Tim took quick stock. Human, male, brown hair, blue eyes, earnest expression. "Commander Richard Stiles reporting Sir. My orders." Stiles handed over his PADD and came to attention.

Kirk flipped through them quickly. "This is your first assignment as Executive Officer Mr. Stiles."

"Yes sir."

"You understand you are replacing a very competent officer."

"Yes sir."

"Your record is commendable. However, I see you only have two space tours."

"That is correct sir."

"Please, be seated."

Stiles sat at attention.

"Tell me about yourself."

"Sir?"

"How do you think of yourself?"

"As an officer of Starfleet Captain."

Kirk leaned back in his chair. "Mr. Stiles. The *Kongo* has a 'style', we are one of the few ships in Starfleet with Ane as a significant part of the crew. We don't always hew to the book, but we have a reputation for staying within the parameters, and getting the job done. Ane are very sensitive to someone that is not honest with himself or uncomfortable in some fashion. They home in on it, and give that person Hell. In this respect they keep the crew honest. With each other, and with themselves. We have the most under-worked ship's Counselor in the fleet. If you are not comfortable with that Mr. Stiles, I suggest you request a

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transfer right now, and I will grant it. I'll try the question again. How do you picture yourself as per your role in Starfleet?"

Stiles shifted around a bit, but didn't relax. "I am not sure I understand you Captain. I see myself as an individual willing and able to serve."

"Let me rephrase the question in terms you might better understand. Why did you join Starfleet?"

"I want to protect and preserve the way of life we have created for ourselves."

"Sounds like a quote."

"It is sir, from my entrance examination to the Academy."

"You see yourself as a protector then?"

"Yes sir."

"How would you handle, non-protector roles, say diplomacy, or exploration."

"I am fully qualified by the FCO, and have training in diplomacy and a through grounding in the sciences. My first tour was on an Ambassador class ship."

"I wouldn't depend too much on the latter, the *Kongo* might share a hull and some internal fittings with the Ambassador Class, but the resemblance ends there. This is an entirely new ship."

"In what ways sir?" He was showing some animation for the first time.

"For starters, the warp drives. The *Kongo's* warp drives are Ane designed AWF high efficiency warp units. Along with these is the dual intermix system and the G3, mk16 Crystalmind computer system. You will meet her later. We are armed with upgraded collimator phaser banks and a pair of, again Ane designed, Octoclops torpedo turrets and double the usual torpedo inventory. Those are the major differences. Minor differences abound throughout the ship. Don't try and fall back on a familiarity that is meaningless. The *Kongo* is a different ship. She is now classed as a 'Kongo' class heavy cruiser."

"I see sir, I have a good deal of work ahead of me. My assigning officer gave me the assurance that the *Kongo* was as any other Ambassador class ship. I see she was mistaken. I will get to work on familiarizing myself with the ship at once."

"Very well Mr. Stiles, welcome to the *Kongo*. Have you been to your quarters yet?"

"No sir. Most of my kit is still in the BOQ."

"Settle yourself in and Tathilan will brief you on what Captain Ap Owen left for you."

"Tathilan?"

"Computer Operations officer."

"What rank sir?"

"Oh, Commander. We have an Admiral's Inspection at 0900 tomorrow, you will be ready."

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"Yes sir."

"Dismissed."

Stiles stood, took his PADD and left the room. For a long moment Kirk stared into space. **He's tense as a fiddle string.**

**Yes?*

He has way too little experience for this posting.

Yes.

Keep an eye on him for a while.

Yes.

Stiles looked around the quarters assigned. Official First Officer suite. It was a tad on the bare side. The former occupant had departed only two days ago, and no one had taken time to return the room to standard issue. Well, that wouldn't take long. He had been dropped into a hornet's nest, so he better get started. "Computer. Where is Commander Tathilan?"

"Speaking."

"Ah, what?"

"Commander Stiles, 'Computer', and 'Commander Tathilan' are synonymous. When you speak to one, you speak to the other. I prefer to be addressed by name and without title."

"Name and without title."

"That is my preference."

Stiles scratched his head. An AI computer on a Starfleet ship? No one warned him about this. "I was instructed that you would have my duty briefing."

"That is correct." His terminal came up of its own accord. Stiles looked at it as if it was a venomous creature. "Number one on the list; Admiral's Inspection 0900 tomorrow. This will not require action from you. The ship will be ready without your intervention. You only need to stand in the right place and say the right things. Wear an ear plug, I'll coach your thorough it. Captain Kirk has posted the duty roster as he prefers it. It is designed to integrate the new crew into the existing structure, sans yourself. This would normally be the first officer's duty, however, you had not yet been assigned, and you are not yet familiar with the crew. You will need to fit yourself into the usual places. It is customary on the *Kongo* that the First Officer does not stand a duty watch. You are considered on call. Commander Ap Owen's schedule is on the screen at the right. Personal items have been removed. I have arranged for you to meet each of the department heads."

"What official duties do you hold?"

"Computer Operations officer, Captain's Yeoman, and First Officer's Yeoman. If you prefer a biological Yeoman, I can arrange it."

"Yes, please."

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"You have been assigned Petty Officer 1st class Maya Cleest. I will brief her and she will be on duty tomorrow.

"Thank you. I do have one question."

"Yes?"

"Are you considered a fully sentient being?"

"Yes Commander, I am."

"Thank you, Tathilan. I'll take the time to study the information you have given me."

"You're welcome Commander."

Stiles sat at the console, he looked around a few times. He blew out his breath. That was an experience. A computer that knows your job better than you do. Finally he shrugged his shoulders and got to work.

The Admiral's Inspection went off as planned. Picard spent four hours looking the ship over, hitting all the traditional high points of such a tour. Lunch was served in the lounge.

Stiles didn't get free until several hours later. The presence of the first officer is expected at these functions. He dashed into his cabin and striped his dress uniform, and grabbed a duty suit. After that he headed down to the gangway, and out of the ship. He had to pick up the rest of his kit, and talk to the Admiral, his Admiral.

"Sir, I don't see how what you want is going to work. How can I get anything to you passed a sentient computer system?"

"Do you think it reads every piece of mail that goes out?"

"I don't know sir, I have been stationed on the *Kongo* a little over 24 hours. Never mind that the idea of spying on my fellow crewmen leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

Admiral Necheyev paced the length of her office. "It is not spying on your crewmen. In spite of being the next to worst zoo ship in the Fleet," Necheyev made a face at the thought, "the *Kongo* has a remarkable record of not breaking any rules. Kirk manages to get the 27 disparate species on the *Kongo* to work as a nice normal team. For that I value him. He even managed his big discovery without breaking any rules. Simply amazing."

"So sir, what is the problem? Captain Kirk sounds like the idea commander."

"The exact details are classified Commander, what is discussed cannot leave this room, do you understand?"

Stiles sat a little straighter in his seat. "Yes Sir."

"Something happened during Kirk's last leave. I can't get any details. However, The Admiral of the El Nanth space dock was reassigned, supposedly

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at his own request. Admiral Picard traveled to El Nanth himself. All of this while Kirk was on leave, and no reports were generated explaining anything."

"Why is this a problem sir?"

"You have seen Captain Kirk?"

"Yes Sir."

"Anything, remarkable, about his appearance?"

"No sir, he looks fortyish, in good shape."

"Kirk's skin tone changed dramatically during his leave. He was very pale, the almost transparent look you get with redheads. Now he is about as dark as humans come."

"I don't understand sir, it's only skin tone."

"It is how you get that dark Mr. Stiles, and why. Kirk must have spent almost his entire leave on one of the Rosette worlds. The worlds the Ane call home."

"By your leave sir, but, so?"

"Mr. Stiles, you do not yet understand the danger the Ane are to the Federation at large. They move about all but unseen. They talk little, but listen much. Their government is kept a secret from the rest of the Federation. I have to wonder what loyalties they really have. Kirk spent three months on an Ane world, in the open from the look of it. After this he legally changed his world of residence from Earth to Savanna, and is now listed as an El Nanth citizen, an Ansi. I fear we may have lost Captain James Kirk to, other interests."

Stiles was starting to look exasperated. "Sir, I really don't understand what any of this means to our mission."

"Mr. Stiles, you are a straight shooter. I have watched you on your last two tours of duty. You know the rules and understand them. You take action when someone is less than forthright with their duties."

"Yes sir, I don't count that as my proudest moment."

"Doing what you should do isn't always pleasant Mr. Stiles, but I can admire a man that will do what he must. I trust you can identify anyone else that is trying to make an end run around the rules?"

Stiles looked uncomfortable. "Yes sir, I could do that."

"I want you to watch your commanding officer, and make sure we haven't lost Captain James T. Kirk to those other interests."

"Is that ethical?"

"Perfectly ethical Mr. Stiles. It is a first officer's duty to see that his Captain is working within the rules, and for the Federation, not against it."

"Yes Sir."

"Good. Now get out there and do your duty."

"Yes Sir."

Admiral Necheyev watched the younger man leave. She didn't even move when a door whisked open at the back of her office. A thin Human walked up behind her. "Do you think he will learn anything?"

"I doubt it. Too earnest, too forthright."

"Then why did you send him?"

"Because you can't get Intelligence officers passed the Ane. It's like they have garlic on their breath or something."

"Why not question Kirk directly?"

"That would tip the Ane off that we are on to them. Who knows what they'll pull out of the hat."

"Sir, are you certain the Ane are a danger?"

"Positive, they tipped their hand with that Builder nonsense, and they didn't even detour to help the *Harrier*. They have a greater agenda, and it is not Federation friendly. He did pick up his comm badge?"

"Yes sir, and didn't notice the change."

"Good, we might get somewhere."

The *Kongo* floated two clicks off the Mars Utopia space dock. Every eye was on the space dock doors. The tension mounted as the great portals rolled open and a shining ship issued forth. The *USS Hadrian* moved out on thrusters.

Kirk turned to his XO. "Mr. Stiles, make a five gun salute, by the numbers."

Stiles said. "Tactical, five gun salute, photon launchers, port and starboard. Execute."

Mr. Mriitath nodded to his junior officer at the weapons controls. "By the numbers Mr. Stiles."

He began to recite a curious little poem that Captain Kirk had given him from deep in the historical files. Mriitath didn't understand the reason for the poem, it had to be a human thing. "If I wasn't a gunner I wouldn't be here, port gun fire."

Lt. Failee tapped the torpedo control and the port turret fired a saluting shot.

"Away from my home and family dear, starboard gun fire."

Tap. Mriitath recited the ancient rhyme until five saluting shots and been fired. As the last of them died away, the *Hadrian* likewise fired five saluting shots. Kirk turned to tactical. "Very good gentlebeings. Make our compliments to the Commander *USS Hadrian*, and to all crew. Have a safe and successful space trial. Good sailing."

"Message sent sir. Reply coming in. From Commander and crew *USS Hadrian*, to Commander and crew *USS Kongo*. Good sailing, and a safe voyage."

"Send receipt. Mr. Solin, give me warp 8 to the Freisan sector."

"Laid in sir."

"Engage"

The *Kongo* pirouetted and flashed from sight as the *Hadrian* continued to the trial zone under impulse.

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"UbenFuhrer, we have a Federation ship on the Sensors."

"Type, and registration?"

"Liner, The *Skylark*, Tellar registration."

"Pigs."

"Sir?"

"Tellarites, they are pigs."

"Yes Sir."

"Naf-Fuhrer, it is well time we demonstrated who can and who cannot pass through Ekosian space. Order the ship to general quarters. It is time we took our first prize."

Men moved about the bridge and klaxons sounded thorough the ship, feet pounded, stations manned, and the ship came to order about them. "Shields at 100%." "All weapons armed and ready." "All stations report General Quarters UbenFuhrer."

The commander of the frigate *Pride of Ekos* stiffened his posture. "Close with the target. Fire a warning shot and we shall demand their surrender."

It was a sharp, deep sound, Edith woke. She listened. Another bang, different, but not the normal sounds of the ship they had been on for little over two weeks. "Archie, wake up."

Another bang. Archie came awake at once. "What?"

"Listen."

More thumps, bangs, then the klaxon sounded for abandon ship. The Breeds were out of bed in a flash. "Archie, what do we do."

Archie was grabbing some pants. "Follow the drill Edith."

"What's happening?"

"Like I have spent my life on ships. I knew this trip was a bad idea. Quick, don't stand there, get some clothes on and lets get out of here."

The Breeds bustled about, and the klaxon was suddenly silenced.

"Archie?"

"I don't know Edith, I don't know. We hang tight."

The door to their cabin opened suddenly. Two men in strange angular uniforms filled the door. Both of them armed. Archie stepped in front of Edith.

The shorter man spoke, his standard stilted. "Any one else here?"

"Who's askin'?"

The man moved to strike Archie.

"NEIN!" A commanding voice from the hall stopped him. An obvious officer stepped into the door. "Humans, our guests private. We do not harm

guests. You will return to the Hanger."

The soldier left, cowed. Archie still hovered in front of his wife. The officer turned to the two of them. "Please accept my apologies. Training is so lax in these 'latter days'."

"Who are you? What is going on?"

"I am Naf-Fuhrer Hendric, your vessel is in violation of Ekosian Space. Not your responsibility. Cooperate, and nothing harmful will befall you."

"What do you mean..."

He interrupted. "No questions now. You and the other passengers will be briefed. You will come with us."

Archie looked the soldiers over. "Come on Edith."

The soldiers led them to the hanger deck, one of the locks was open. Several passengers and crew were held apart, none of them human.

Archie looked back and said, "What's going on here?"

"No question." The soldier shoved him into the lock. Archie looked back again as the guards raised their slug-throwers. He pushed Edith around the corner as the popping sounds echoed around the cavernous deck.

The King of the Scots stared over the castle wall in disbelief of his wife's suicide, smoke drifted on the wind from the besieging army below.

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow."

"Breathes life in its petty pace from day to day."

BEEP BEEP BEEP

"Until the last syllable of recorded time!"

BEEP BEEP BEEP

"Halt program. Kirk here."

"Bridge to Captain. We have a distress signal from the *SS Skylark*."

"On my way Mr. Stiles." Kirk turned to his pillow as he put his boots on. "How bad?"

It sounds bad.

"Play it for me on the way up, Macbeth will have to wait." Kirk listened to the broken message as he rode up to the bridge. Pirates are what it sounded like. Pirates were never good. The turbo doors opened. Stiles stood. "Do you want to hear the message sir?"

"Thank you, I have, Mr. Spacik, make for the Ekosian Sector, maximum sustainable warp. Cancel yellow alert."

"Alert canceled, course laid in."

"Engage."

"Course engaged."

Kirk lingered a moment or two, then turned to Stiles. "Mr. Stiles, conference, my office."

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"Yes sir." He looked a little confused.

Thass shook his head as the door closed behind the two officers.

"Conference indeed."

Spacik arched an eyebrow that said, "none of our business."

Kirk turned and sat on the edge of his desk as he entered the room. Stiles came up short, the sudden move surprising him. "Commander, in the future, it is not necessary to ask my permission to change the ship's course when a clear case of ship in distress is indicated."

Stile came to attention. "Sir I..."

"No, this is not a reprimand"

"I didn't want to exceed my authority."

Kirk slumped a bit. Stood up and headed for the replicator. "Coffee, black." He turned to Stiles. "Want?"

"Uh yes sir, double cream, no sugar."

"Coffee, double cream." Kirk grabbed the two cups, handed Stiles one and sat in the chair, indicating the couch. "Have a seat."

Stiles sat.

"Mr. Stiles, what do your friends call you?"

"Friends sir?"

"You do have friends don't you?"

"Well yes sir, none on the *Kongo*."

"So what do they call you?"

"Dick."

"Dick, how many hours did you log as OOD before you were assigned to the *Kongo*?"

"Five sir."

"Five?"

"Yes sir."

"And command school?"

"I passed Sir."

"Dick, don't say that like it wasn't worth mentioning."

"Well sir, it wasn't, I wasn't the bottom of the class, but it was close."

"Did it occur to you that more people don't pass that school than do? It is mark of honor to be allowed to attend. Passing, at any level is an accomplishment."

"I, never thought of it that way, you're right."

Kirk sipped his coffee and let the thought sink in. "You are worried about exceeding your authority?"

"Well, yes sir."

"Dick, those pips on you collar tell me that Starfleet thinks you have what it takes to drive this ship. They mean you have what it takes to make decisions."

"Procedure says to call the Captain."

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"Yes, it does, and you did right, however, in cases of distress, the quicker, we get there, the sooner we have any chance to do some good. You can do no wrong if you aim this ship in the direction of those in need, and drive her as fast as she will go."

"So, I don't wait for orders to answer a distress call?"

"You're getting the idea. Now I have a question or two."

"I'll answer best I can."

"How did you get to be a Commander with only 5 hours as OOD?"

"I just graduated command school sir. I was in Sciences before this."

"It is highly unusual to get an XO position as your first command assignment."

"Ah, yes sir it is. I don't know why, but they assigned me. Have I performed below standard?"

"Not yet, but we haven't been pushed either. Do not take this as an indication that I don't think you can perform. However, remember what I said about being honest with ourselves."

"Yes sir."

"Be honest with yourself. If at any time, you feel out of your depth, inform Tathilan, or myself. We will bail you out."

"Why Tathilan sir?"

"Because she is the ship. She has a closer feel with the deck under your feet than anyone on this ship, the chief engineer and me included. She can make you look very good. You don't have to call, just think hard."

"Why sir?"

"Because you do need a certain cache of respect with the crew to do your job. And the *Kongo* needs an effective XO. I make it a point to never embarrass a crewman in front of his peers. If you don't know something ask. There are no stupid questions, only stupid mistakes."

"What are we going to do about the *Skylark*?"

"Good question, no answers yet. Best course of action is to get some. Tathilan."

"Yes boss."

"ETA to the *Skylark's* reported location?"

"1.7 days Captain."

"Staff meeting in two hours."

"Aye aye Captain."

"Dick, in the meantime, see what you can learn about our friends the Ekosians, and any pirates reported in this area of space."

"Yes sir."

Kirk looked around the circular conference table. Everyone was present and in plenty of time. Kirk rang the small bell that called the conference to order.

"Thank you everyone. As all are aware by now we have received a distress call

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from the *SS Skylark*. We are currently in route to do what we can. Unfortunately we are the closest ship to the *Skylark*, and at that we are more than a day and a half away."

Grim looks were exchanged around the table.

"We all know the chance of catching the pirates are slim and none, and the chance of survivors almost as bad, but we are called, we will go. Mr. Mritath, what can to tell us about the *Skylark*."

The Caitian stood and spoke. "Graphics please." The center of the table vanished and a tactical readout on the *Skylark* appeared in its place. The *SS Skylark*, Federation Registry Tel-3B5,5E,137W is a Carnival class long cruise liner operating with the Teller Standard Starlines. She was commissioned 23 standard years ago, and has served without problems in that time. She has had two major refits, the most recent 2 years ago. The *Skylark* has accommodation for 250 single class passengers and 300 crew. She has an operational range of 2.5 standard years."

Stiles said. "Big ship for such a light passenger load."

"Yes, it was considered a top luxury liner when built. It is still within that standard. The *Skylark* can cruise at Warp 8, and achieve speeds of Warp 9.2 for brief periods. The *Skylark* has shields and firepower equivalent to a light corvette. Standard for civilian ships of her classification, usually enough to discourage pirates."

Kirk said. "Not this time however. What do we have on the possibilities?"

Stiles cleared his throat. "We don't have any reported pirates in the Ekosian sector."

Doc Hanson said. "Ekosian Sector, that rings a bell, but I can't place it."

Counselor Deateli spoke. "The Ekosians are one of Federation Sociology's blacker moments. The Ekosians were interfered with by John Gill in the mid 23rd century."

Doc Hanson's face lit up. "Yea, now I remember 'John Gill and the Prime Directive'. Required lecture on how not to 'observe' a pre-warp culture."

Counselor Deateli continued. "Since the *Enterprise, NCC-1701*, reported in the cultural contamination and the resulting death of John Gill, the Federation has treated the Ekosians as a protectorate. Twenty years ago the Ekosians put their first crude warp drive ship into operation. Two days later they declared themselves one of the players, and 'kindly' told the Federation sociological office where we could put it. They have had consular status in the UFP since. There is little trade between the Federation and the Ekosians. Their one constant is to try and buy higher level technology, mainly weapons. I have never met one personally. I understand they are xenophobic."

Tathilan chimed in. "**There is one other factor to consider. Two weeks ago Ekos declared a 30 light year territorial zone. The Federation Council has objected, but no action as been taken yet.**"

Kirk said. "I read the report but we were neither assigned to the sector or

going through it. Where is the *Skylark* located?"

Five light years inside the claimed zone.

"This could be a factor."

Doc Hanson added. "It could well be a factor. Could we be looking at an Ekosian attempt to defend their claimed space?"

Mriitath said. "While a diplomatic nightmare, such an attempt would be advantageous to our purpose. It would be in the best interest of the Ekosians to keep the passengers and crew safe."

Kirk said. "Tathilan, what is the current status of the *Skylark*?"

The ship has not moved significantly, and is still broadcasting an automatic distress signal.

Mrlitath said. "That does not bode well for a military seizure"

"No it doesn't. However, we had better keep that option open. What is the state of the Ekosian starforces."

Commander Stiles made a face, and reported. "The Ekosians have turned up with ships far in advance of their known technical expertise. Intelligence reports that the ships are the equivalent of Starfleet vessels in the 2260s."

Mrlitath added. "Any one such ship is of little threat to the *Kongo*. However, in numbers we could face a serious challenge."

Kirk said. "Any indication where the ships came from?"

Stiles answered. "Preliminary reports indicate the Cardassians, however the designs are not typical of Cardassians ship construction. I would have my doubts as to the veracity of the report sir."

"What is your reasoning Mr. Stiles."

"Ahem, yes sir. I have the limited intelligence available. I ran the readings against any known ships. The results were, well interesting to say the least." He hesitated.

Kirk prodded. "Please, continue."

"Well, ahem. The Cardassians usually pawn off older equipment from their own forces, not build new for sale. When I said similar to Starfleet of 2260, it was not a metaphor. Graphic please. As you can see, the power curves for the various ships listed closely match perimeter action classes, destroyer classes and heavy cruiser classes of circa 2260. Close enough sir that I would tentatively conclude that it is not an accident."

"Tentatively?"

"I have no proof other than the correlation that you see."

"Understood. Please pursue this correlation. It might give us an advantage."

Mr. Spacik added. "Captain, it is unreasonable that intelligence should have so little information on a neighbor so close, and so openly antagonistic."

"Good point as usual Mr. Spacik. Something to look into later, but not much later. Right now we have this matter. Anything else?"

Silence from around the table.

"OK. Doctor Hanson, prepare your section to receive casualties and

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survivors. Mr. Mirlath, coordinate with Cmd. Stiles and Cmd Spacik on the possible tactical implications in the unlikely event we do face Ekosian forces. Major Yalack, I want the marines on boarding standby, we might have hostiles to deal with. All right. Lets do it." Kirk rose from the table followed by the others.

Lt. Commander Weasel strode swiftly into the Admiral's office. "Secure." He said as the door closed behind him.

Admiral Necheyev turned as he entered and waved him to a chair. She finished with her conversation. "Yes Colonel, everything that can be done is being done." ... "No I don't think such a drastic measure is called for." ... "That sounds more reasonable. Necheyev out." She turned to the slender man. "You have something?"

"Yes Sir, latest report from 'Patsy'. It looks serious."

"How so?"

"The *Kongo* is heading in to rescue the *SS Skylark*, it has reported distress in the Ekosian Sector."

"Damn. Any reasonable way to turn them back."

"No sir, they are the closest ship."

"There is more."

"Yes, our patsy has continued with his talent of finding inconvenient facts. He matched the energy curves of the Ekosian ships to Federation designs of the last century. The *Kongo* computer was instrumental in that finding."

Necheyev sat brooding for a moment. "Well the Ekosian ships do not look the same, and they haven't encountered one yet."

"Sir, is there any way we can get that computer shut down."

"No, it is a fully sentient being, as silly as that sounds. Worse it is an Ane informant in the middle of Starfleet. It has everything. We have few if any secrets because of that one computer. Now Fleet command, in all their wisdom has added another. Speaking of which, what is the progress on that project?"

"Dismal. Our operative reported that the worm was isolated and rejected inside of 2 nanoseconds. And reported as a security breach."

"What about the core programming that was placed before it was activated."

"Flushed. The AI program completely cleaned out the computer top to bottom, installed its own kernel, and set up shop. All intelligence back doors were eliminated. Same as the *Kongo*."

"So every attempt to breach a Crystalmind computer has failed."

"On all the known G3 models yes. We have been successful in breaching the G2 model we have in the lab. However, we still don't know how it ticks. You can't take one apart."

"Any luck in buying a G3 model?"

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"None, our people have been flatly told they are not for sale."

"It is impossible to know how many of these, things, the Ane have wormed into the Government and business. At least Starfleet is fairly safe. The physicals will catch them. We will keep on top of this Mr. Weasel. Our break will come, and we can corner the Ane with evidence the Federation council cannot ignore."

Richard Stiles flopped into a chair in the officer's lounge. The day had started out a doozy, and was getting better. He didn't have a week as First Officer and he was in the deep end of the pool. Not having a duty shift was starting to bother him. He didn't know if he should be on the bridge, wandering the ship, working on what ever it was that needed working on. It was too much. At least a 0200 the officer's lounge was empty.

Captain Kirk told him to ask for help if he needed it. It was time to ask.

"Uh, Tathilan?"

Yes Commander.

Stiles jumped in place. "That was sudden."

It can feel that way. I am the one person that never sleeps. However, you called me.

"Do you have a minute?"

Yes.

"I need to talk."

**Is this a ships counselor talk?*

"It could well be, but she intimidates the Hell out of me. How can I talk about issues when I am trying to get my body under control. And how do I tell the Ship's Counselor that I don't think I can do my job?"

I'll be right in. A moment later the doors opened to admit one of the Ane. She positioned herself opposite Stiles and laid down. **Now, tell me about it.**

"What can I say, I am overwhelmed. I don't know where to start, or what to do. It is like I have too much to handle. Everyone waits for me to act first. I don't know what to do first."

Well, for starters, do what has been done. Gwenith Ap Owen had a very workable schedule.

"I have been, but I feel I am following rote, I don't understand the reason."

**What part is giving you problems?*

"Bridge watches, why do I stand a watch on the bridge, but rotate that watch once a week? And at that I don't do a watch every day, why?"

**The why. The First Officer should be in contact with as much of the crew as possible. It is something the Captain would like to do, but can't, so you get the job. Your watch rotation is designed to allow you to become familiar and stay familiar with as much of the crew, and the ship, as possible. You don't stand a

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watch every duty shift because you have other duties that need handling.**

"They didn't teach that in command school."

**Command school doesn't teach a tenth of what you need to know.

Experience teaches that. I have a question of my own if I may?*

"Ask away."

Why did you take command school. You don't feel like the command type.

Stiles slumped into his chair. "I didn't 'take' command school, it took me. I was assigned, I went."

**You didn't ask for it?*

"No, I was perfectly happy as a science officer. I was looking forward to being a Chief science officer, or even a Captain in Sciences."

So, what happened? Starfleet doesn't misplace people too often.

"It's, embarrassing, I'm not proud of it."

You can treat me like the Ship's Counselor in this matter, it will not go passed me.

"I was a junior Science's officer on the *USS Tarfarce*, one of the new Intrepid class ships. Small crew, a fourth of what we have here. I was doing a routine diagnostic of the computer system when I ran into a snag. Someone had tampered with the computer. To make a long story short I investigated further and found that most of the senior officers were engaged in funneling materials to the Orions. I couldn't bring it up to the Captain, he was hip deep in it, like wise the First Officer. I encoded the information and sent it to Starfleet Command on my own initiative A month later the Secretary General tore the ship apart. Captain, Commander and five other officers got shipped to Coventry Colony, I got a promotion Lt. Commander, and a transfer. Half the crew hated me. Captain Garat was popular. I was floating loose at Starfleet when I got orders to report to Command school. That was two years ago. My first assignment was here."

Unusual to say the least.

"I don't understand it at all. I was in the bottom third of the class. This a gravy posting and I don't deserve it."

You are troubled by more than this.

"Nothing I can talk about."

**Not my place to push. However, my place to see my guts run as they should. Are you willing to be pushed around by the Ship's Computer for a while?*

"Will it get me clear of this business, help me do my job?"

Yes, that is the entire reason.

"OK, what's the deal?"

**I'll be a little bird on your shoulder. I'll explain the how, and the why as you go. I'll give advice, but I am not, cannot, do the job for you. I'll navigate, but you are still the helm. Deal?*

"Yes ma'am, you have a deal."

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My first piece of advice is to sack out for a while. We have rough sailing ahead, you need to be fresh.

"I'll do that, and with a clear heart, thank you." Stiles left the lounge.

Tathilan lay a while longer, got up and headed for the Ane common quarters. She shifted the task of walking to a secondary function, and looked outside. Subspace coursed in a sensual flow across the warp field, all was well there. Growing nearer the automated beacon of the Skylark cried to subspace. No other ships reported within easy distance. She sensed the slight disturbance in subspace that marked the Skylark's passing.

The ship net was open, as usual, and talk was light. The Questing lay at berth, other friends explored, patrolled, or rested. It was not time for conversation now. The Hadrian was working out the kinks. Unaban had found a home. He would bear some watching for a while yet.

Tathilan flung her sensors wide. Space, cold, eternal, and anything but empty stretched around her being. Several beacons called out their location and the time signal. A quick calculation of the variations between them and her confirmed her location with her internal navigation. The Skylark was coming under the long range sensors. She reached out to begin her investigation. By the time Spacik called up the information, she would have it confirmed, tabulated, and analyzed. Weapons fire signs, that was expected. More would be revealed when she got within short range.

She finished her step and continued her walk. She turned her attention back to the inside of the ship, her body, herself. Her heart, the intermix chambers beat strong and well. She made a million adjustments to the flux a minute, and never thought about it on an aware level. She double checked that function, and found all well. All internal systems working normally. She briefly touched minds with Felialan and conveyed her sense of wellness. Life support, replication, weapons, the phaser circuits were hot, torpedoes lay in their beds, the turrets twitched at her touch, all was well. She knew these systems would shortly be tested. Shields were strong, and all was well. The crew did an excellent job of maintaining everything.

Another step took her closer to the Ane room. Lastly she listened to her people. 600 people of varying species, from worlds warm and cold, descended of primates, felines, reptiles and genus more varied and strange. She listened for the heartbeats their breathing, the muttering of their conversations. Her people, in her skin. Hers to nurture, to protect, to die for if she must. She listened long...a dozen and more muffled beats of her hooves on the carpet of the corridor, and she slowed her time to listen still. Feeling welled within her. Feeling she knew as those of a Mother to her children. Tomorrow they might fight, some of them may die. Her heart ached at the very possibility. For over eight long years she had taken them out, and brought them all back. They were her children. She was the dutiful Mother.

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She blinked her attention back to the present, and the hall, she was at the Ane room. A few more steps carried her in. She indulged in the ritual rubbing and caressing of her kind. Tim was waiting for her, she settled in beside him as the other Ane pressed closer. Quiet settled as each sought center and cleansing. As one they raised their Aspect, elevated their Icons, and entered into the chorus of the All.

Kirk walked onto the bridge. The atmosphere was tense, tight. He took his seat. "Situation?"

Spacik reported. "We are within short range sensors of the Skylark. The ship is air tight and life support is working."

"Lifesigns?"

"Yes sir, very weak."

Kirk tapped a control. "Kirk to sickbay, we need a team to the Skylark."

"Hanson here, they are on their way Tim."

"Major Yalack?"

"I have a team to meet them in the transporter room Captain."

"Good, be careful over there. Mr. Spacik?"

"I have three ships on long range sensors. No IFF at that range."

"Where are they?"

"243 mark 56, to the bearing of Ekos sir."

"Maintain yellow alert, let me know at once if they move in our direction."

"Yes Sir."

Tense moments passed as the away teams beamed over

Doc Hanson and two assistants walked into the transporter room. They were met by six marines in full battle suits. Hanson grimaced at the show of arms. "All right, let's get this done. Chief, where are the lifesigns."

The Chief consulted his board. "No major concentrations. Hanger bay, main mess and sickbay."

"OK, Kyldare, you take the hanger bay and two marines. Reeves, you take the mess hall and two Marines and I'll take the sickbay and two marines. Let's do it."

Moments later Hanson was in the Skylark's spacious and well appointed sick bay. Built on the Starfleet model it could handle everything from space sickness to major surgery. Hanson grimaced at the trail of dried blood that came in the sickbay door, but he followed it to its conclusion. A hefty male Tellerite was propped against one of the diagnostic beds. He had a first aid patch over his ample belly. Hanson quickly knelt by his side and took a quick look. "Slug wound, Janner, Simions, get him on the table." Hanson moved quickly to get

the necessary supplies.

The big Tellerite groaned as the two marines kicked in the cyber-enhancement on the battle suits to pick him up. "Wa, ohhh."

Hanson moved quickly to his side. "Take it easy, I'm doctor Hanson, Starfleet."

"Ahgh, Gornt, Ca'tian Gornt, Ekosian corvette. Ahhh."

"Save it Captain, you will live to tell it." He taped his commbadge.

"Kongo, Hanson here, two to beam, direct to sick bay."

"Roger Doc, two to beam."

Doctor Reeves and his two marine escorts moved slowly through the *Skylark's* well appointed dinning hall. The tables were cleared, no meal was to be served here any time soon. The tricorder beeped, and flashed. Reeves pointed at the kitchen doors. "It's in there."

(click) "Us first Sir." (click)

"Be my guest."

The two massively equipped marines moved cautiously. The kitchen was a total disarray. Equipment scattered everywhere. Several bodies lay in pools of blood. Nothing moved, almost nothing. A slight movement in a corner caught Gener's eye, he followed it on his scope. (click)"All clear Doctor Reeves, and we found your lifesign."(click)

Reeves rushed in, a horrible yowling was emanating from the kitchen. Private Gener was holding, as gently as a battlesuit can hold, one very frightened cat. Doctor Reeves chuckled in spite of the scene. "Quite a lifesign you found there. You can keep him, he doesn't look friendly."

(click) "Doctor, that isn't all we've found." (click.) (click) "Look here." (click)

Reeves moved to where the marine was pointing. A dead Tellerite grasped what looked like an epaulet in his hand, a blue gray color with a black swastika in a red circle marked on it. Near him was a cylindrical billed cap with similar markings. (click)"I don't think these are ship's equipment." (click)

"You're right, I don't think they are."

Doctor Kyldare and his two marines beamed into a sidebay of the hanger in case the lifesigns in the hanger proved hostile. PFC Tanarc, disabled the door with two quick snips of his heavy claw, and slid the disabled door open slightly. After a moment, he pushed the panels back and walked into the Hanger. (click) "All clear." (click)

Private Katarx walked in followed by Doctor Kyldare with is tricorder going, as he looked up, he dropped the instrument. In clattered to the floor with a beep of protest. "My God, oh my dear God."

Back on the bridge the away team reports where listened to by several

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officers. Miritath looked up from the tactical panel. "Captain, Doctor Kyldare on the channel."

"Thank you." Kirk touched the control. "Kirk here, go ahead Doctor."

"Captain, we are in the hanger, we have two survivors, and I think you need to see this personally. Sir."

"Doctor?"

"Most the passengers look to have been murdered Sir, I... I can't describe it, you have to see for yourself, Sir."

"Do you consider it that vital Doctor."

"Yes sir, I feel it vital that as many of the senior officers than can be spared see this, and full scans for the rest of the crew."

"Very well Doctor. I'll be over."

Stiles said. "Captain, I must object."

"Is this the standard protest Commander?"

"Yes and no Sir. That ship has not been reported secured. Until we have that, I will lodge a protest, not on the rules, but on my own concerns."

"Log your protest Commander, I'll take more of the Marines with me. Major, bring a squad and meet me in the transporter room."

"Yes sir."

Kirk beamed over with 12 marines in light combat gear. They quickly fanned out. Doctor Kyldare had a pair of children off to the side, behind a shuttlecraft and was looking them over. An Andorian and a Vulcan by the look of them. Kirk turned to the middle of the hanger and his breath caught in his throat. Reflexively his hands balled into fists and for a brief moment, all he saw was the red of pure rage. Scattered across the floor of the hanger were the bodies of over a hundred people. They lay like hastily discarded dolls, and the blood ran in pools around them, different colors flowing together. Kirk took deep breaths, controlled his anger. At last he touched his commbadge. "Kirk to..." He turned away from the sight.

"Captain?"

"Kirk to *Kongo*. We need a forensic team, a large one. Major Yalack, secure the ship."

"Yes Sir." The Major turned away, but was back in a moment. "Captain?"

"Yes Major?"

"Private Gantrin has something I think you need to see."

Kirk turned to the Marie still in the massive battlesuit but with the helmet removed. "Private, what do you have?"

"These Sir." He held out the epaulet and cap. "They were found in the main mess kitchen, near a dead crewman. He was clutching the epaulet."

Kirk took the two items and looked them over. "Thank you private. Good job."

"Thank you sir."

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Kirk touched his commbadge once more. "*Kongo* beam me back, I have seen enough."

A moment later he sparkled back onto the *Kongo*. Tathilan touched him. **Tim, your anger is strong.**

And justified. Before he left the transporter room he touched his comm badge. . "Commander Spacik to the conference room." By the time he reached the conference room he had relegated his hot anger to a cold resolve. Lt. Commander Spacik was waiting for him. "Mr. Spacik. You will pick a crew necessary to shepherd the *Skylark* to Starbase 140. You will further secure the bodies of the murdered passengers and crew for identification and disposal as per the wishes of the next of kin. Move as quickly as possible, I want to hunt the murdering ship down."

"Yes Sir. I should have arrangements completed within half an hour."

"Good." Kirk headed up to the bridge. "Mr. Stiles, you have the con. I want a track for that ship."

"Yes Sir."

Kirk moved into his ready room. He sat down heavy on the couch. After a moment he began to shake. Tathilan popped in and moved beside him. He grabbed her around the neck and hung on. After a few minutes he let go, smoothed his hair back, and took a deep breath. **It was awful.**

Yes, murder is, be it one or many.

It doesn't matter how many deaths I see, I never get used to it.

That is what makes you what you are.

Right now I need to be a Captain.

That strength is within you.

Tim straightened up. **Yes, it is there. But it has been sorely tried today.**

Your anger is also strength when harnessed well.

Tim felt the cold hard knot in his belly, and yes, he drew resolve from it. **Yes, a resolve that something will be done.**

**And you can do it? **

**Yes, and I can do it. Get me a patch to Starbase 140, direct to Admiral Ci'kekher, priority one. **

**good as done. **

Tim got up and took a quick peek at how he looked, then sat at his desk and waited. I a moment the contact light indicated the channel was open. The screen lit with the face of the Skoor Admiral. "Admiral, James T. Kirk of the *Kongo*. We have answered a distress call in your sector. I have a preliminary report."

"You are quick Ca'tain Kirk. "lease 'roceed."

"We have located the *Skylark*, it has minimal damage, I will be sending it to Starbase 140 with a salvage crew. We have found only three persons alive in the ship, the ship's Master, in wounded condition, and two children. A through survey of the dead is underway. I further intend to pursue the ship that murdered the company of this vessel, and bring them to justice if at all possible.

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Indications are that the ship is Ekosian."

"You have some 'roof to offer?"

"I do Sir. The ion trail of the ship comes from the Ekosian system." He placed the hat and epaulet in front of the pickup. "There items were found in conjunction with one of the murdered crew. The symbology is Ekosian. We have a clear ion trail leaving the scene, we intend to follow it."

"'orceed as you see fit Ca'tian Kirk. The Kongo is the most fit unit in the Sector. I have mainly older Excelsior class shi's and two of the smaller Intre'id class."

"Thank you Admiral, Kirk out. Mr. Stiles."

"Yes Sir."

"As soon as Mr. Spacik and his crew are clear, we will begin the hunt."

"Yes Sir."

Kirk circled around, sweat dripped from his body, his lanky form crouched into a fighter's stance. The big cat moved suddenly, he had little and no time to react. In a moment he was tumbled to the mat with Miritath on top of him.

"OOF! 'nuff."

Miritath rolled off him. Kirk got up and grabbed his towel. "You could let me think I had a chance."

"That would be dishonest, and I would not get to pounce a Captain, and get away with it."

"Oh, the true motivation for the lessons emerges."

"You will recall that you asked."

"Tathilan?"

That is correct, you did ask.

Yalack started in on his horse laugh, and all but fell off the bench he was sitting on.

"So, you want a round with him?"

"No Captain, I have learned that lesson."

Miritath's ears came up. "It was enlightening to test myself against the best the Marines can produce, in humanoids that is."

"And?"

Yalack had the laugh worked down. "For us 'pitiful' humanoids at least, the Caitians are still a bit much."

Miritath said. "However Captain, your skill at hand to hand is improving from the usual mediocre Starfleet standard."

"I'm glad the time is worth something. Hey Tathilan, you want a round with him?"

No thanks, I'm not built to the standards of my born cousins.

"Miritath, have you tussled with any of the Ane?"

"Yes, it was as you say, enlightening."

"Tough?"

"I am the better hunter for it. They out mass me to the same percentage I out mass you. Without claws, I am at a serious disadvantage." He slipped off the padded gloves and stretched his clawed hands. "However, I believe this would equalize."

I don't plan to find out, even if I am inedible.

This caused laughter all around.

Kirk got back up. "Yalack, care for a round?"

"Captain, your appetite for self abuse amazes me. There are plenty on the ship who equal you in ability, yet you insist of exercising with those much better than you are."

"Is that a yes, or a no?"

"Yes, they are your bruises."

The two men circled around, and made a few feints at each other. Yalack lunged to catch Kirk low, Kirk rolled back and planed his feet in the Andorian's belly flipping him to his back. Yalack tried to twist out, but Kirk held him fast. Yalack landed with a woosh, as the wind got knocked out of him. Kirk rolled to his feet, and sat down. Yalack lay there a minute catching his breath. "Miritath, you're right, I am getting better."

A day later the *Kongo* was still on the trail of the attacker. Kirk spent as much time as possible on the bridge. The events of two days past nagged at him.

Lt. Failee said. "Captain, incoming message from the *Skylark*."

"On screen."

"Spacik here, Captain Kirk, I have a report for you on the ship's company."

"Go ahead Commander."

"We have located all of the bodies present. 349 dead, 1 wounded, presently on the *Kongo*, 2 physically unharmed, also on the *Kongo*. Missing are 148 of the ship's company in the passenger manifest and crew list combined."

"Any correlating factors?"

"Yes Sir, two. All of the missing persons are human, all of the dead are not."

"Noted Mr. Spacik, proceed as ordered."

"Yes Sir. *Skylark* out."

"Tathilan, Staff meeting in twenty minutes."

Acknowledged Captain.

Hendric looked over the huddled "passengers" in the hold of the *Pride of*

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Ekos. Most sat quietly, in small groups. To the last they where soft, and accepting of their fate. He wondered privately if they where worthy of life in the Reich.

"UbenFuhrer, we cannot hold this number of passengers for long."

"True Hendric, but long enough to finish our patrol arc. I have to express my disappointment. I thought the Federation Humans would show more spirit. See that plenty of film is made to demonstrate what living under the rule of aliens does to people."

"Yes UbenFuhrer."

Kirk checked around the table, all were present. "From Lt. Commander Spacik's report we can reasonably assume that the aggressor has taken the Humans on the ship as prisoners."

Stiles furrowed his brow. "This presents a problem in simply pounding them to submission."

"Definitely. We may have to board."

"Boarding has its own difficulties," added Major Yanick, "much more dangerous to both prisoners and the boarders."

Kirk turned to him. "Can we reasonable identify the passengers from the crew?"

Regiban took the question. **I don't know. Our last scan of the Ekosian humanoids was twenty years ago. Still, they are not delectably unhuman. They are considered human taxonomically. I doubt the Ekosians will come quietly, and the residue from weapons fire and damaged ships with make that kind of fine tuning on the sensors impossible. And we are not dealing with 100% Earth humans, another complication.**

Kirk fiddled with the stylus from his PADD. "I don't like the idea of boarding. It is a sure way to get people killed. Major, I want a team ready to board, but we use them as a last resort."

"Yes Captain. Do you want the full squad?"

"Yes, two boarding craft, full armor."

"Yes Sir, we'll be ready."

Kirk continued. We will use transporters with full biological only filters. Doctor, have sickbay standing by in case anyone comes up missing something they need."

"Will do."

"Felialan, can you prevent them from destroying their own ship?"

Once the shields are down I can empty their anti-matter supplies. However, we are freshly topped off, I'll have to waste it. I'll have the same problem Regiban will with finding low energy signatures such as conventional timing devices. Large amounts of explosives I can find.

"Noted, try and keep on top of it."

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Tathilan broke in. **There is one more possibility.**

"We're listening."

If I can get an open channel to the ship's computers I can shut down everything.

Regiban replied. **What about dead man switches?*

A danger true.

Kirk said. "OK, we will take the multiple approach. Prepare the transporters, boarding parties. Regiban monitor that ship like a star about to nova. We will keep the computer trojan and anti-matter dump available in case they are needed. Hopefully, we can get..." The conference room door opened to admit Master Gornt. He shuffled to the table. Kirk picked up. "Master Gornt. I trust you are feeling better."

"Hrumph. Your doctor has an interesting bedside manner. However, yes, I am more fit."

"Master Gornt, how good a look did you get at the attackers. Can you identify the ship, and of the personnel?"

"Yes, I saw the bastard that shot me, I looked him right in the eye. I would know their ship as well. Got good scans the computers before we were boarded."

"Did they hack your computers?"

"Not that I know."

"Kirk to bridge."

"Bridge, Lt. Solin here."

"Contact the *Skylark*, we need the file.."

"Screwtape, password, letters."

"File screwtape, password, letters. ASAP."

"Right on it Captain."

"Anything you can add Master Gornt, will be of assistance."

"I have a few questions."

"Yes?"

"The ship, how much damage?"

Felialan answered. **Superficial. The ship is in good operational condition.**

"Anything stolen?"

Miritath took the question. "No, that is the curious part, nothing was stolen, or damaged that we could tell."

"My crew?"

The table went suddenly silent. Kirk took it. "All the non-humans have been killed. All the humans are missing."

Master Gornt looked like he had been shot again, he deflated in such a visible manner that Doctor Hanson was on his feet and running a probe over him. Master Gornt waved the Doctor off. "All killed or missing? I do not understand this."

Kirk answered for the crew. "None of us do. However, we are all angry."

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"Bridge to Captain."

"Kirk here."

"We have the requested file."

"Thank you, Lt. Solin. Tathilan?"

The center of the table flickered out of existence and space appeared from the viewpoint of the *Skylark*. A ship that looked like a rectangular dart with a thick saucer through the middle resolved into close view. Black swastikas emblazoned the red hull. It fired on the *Skylark* and swooped past. Lettering in the Ekosian style was seen across the bow. The scene shifted suddenly to the bridge of the dart-like ship. A tall blond-headed man in what looked to be a leather jacket spoke. "This is UbenFuhrer Fredric Heinbern, you have violated Ekosian space, surrender at once."

"End." The holo ceased and the table returned. "What happened then."

"We were boarded without further comment, and they started shooting people."

"I think we have a good idea as to what we are dealing with. Miritath, dig into those scans and give me a tactical situation."

"Right away."

"Bridge to Captain."

"Go ahead."

"We have a contact on the short range sensors."

"Identity?"

"Unknown, but it lies at the end of the trail."

"Sound Red Alert, Give me warp 9 to the target, I'll be right up. Master Gorn, will you come to the bridge?"

"Certainly."

Klaxons sounded throughout the ship as the conference room cleared.

The *Pride of Ekos* cruised along her patrol arc in the Fuhrer's new territory. UbenFuhrer Heinbern paced the commander's platform above the working stations of the bridge.

"UbenFuhrer, I have a ship on the scanners."

"Where and what?"

"Heading 190 mark 5, Identity unknown, They are closing at warp 11.5!"

"Sir!" From the tactical. "Identify is the *USS Kongo*, a Federation Ambassador class cruiser."

"Well, the negotiations are about to open. Sound General Quarters, bring the ship to Battle Stations."

Commands and klaxons sounded around the UbenFuhrer as he calmly paced the bridge. All was unfolding as it should.

Naf-Fuhrer Hendric reported. "The ship is at Battle Stations UbenFuhrer."

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"The Federation ship is closing to tactical ranges."

"Hendric, hail him and see what he wants."

Kirk sat in the center seat. The rim of the bridge flashed red with the alert signs. Again the cold knot returned in memory of what he saw in the hanger deck of the *Skylark*. Resolve rose from the knot, and he hardened for what he might have to do.

Spacik reported. "The ship is the *Pride of Ekos*. They have raised shields and readied weapons."

"Acknowledged."

Miritath said. "We are being hailed. They are dropping to sublight."

"Match them and answer it."

The screen flickered and the same leather jacketed man appeared as in the *Skylark* scans. Kirk turned to Master Gornt, he simply nodded once. The image spoke. "This is UbenFuhrer of the Frigate *Pride of Ekos*, you are in violation of Ekosian space, explain yourselves.

"I am Captain James Kirk of the Federation starship *Kongo*. You and your crew are under arrest for piracy and murder. Stand down your weapons and shields."

"Captain, are we being a little hot and hasty here?"

Kirk motioned to Miritath.

"...are we being a little hasty here?" Heinbren noticed the Federation Captain's slight motion. "You are after all in..."

"UBENFUHRER!! THEY ARE FIRING ON US."

"Mein gott. Return fire, all weapons."

The *Pride of Ekos* suddenly jumped around like a child's toy as four quantum torpedoes slammed home. Sparks flew about the bridge as circuits overloaded with the effort.

"STATUS!?"

"Shields down 50%, warp drive out, Impulse damaged. INCOMING!"

Once again the ship shook. Heinbren grabbed for the command chair to steady himself. A panel to his right exploded filling the bridge with acrid smoke. Alarms shrieked, men screamed. Shouts of his men and the cries of the wounded filled the air as he tried to make sense of the chaos around him. Hendric's soot stained face was suddenly clear before him. "Ja, UbenFuhrer, the Federation always negotiates first."

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Kirk looked at the destruction his torpedoes were wrecking on the Ekosian ship. His stomach attempted to turn on him. He disciplined it back down.

"Incoming fire Captain."

The *Kongo* shuddered slightly under the ill aimed weapons.

"Status?"

"Shields 97%, no damage reported."

"What about the Ekosians."

"Shields gone, Impulse out, warp out. Life support critical, weapons systems failing. Captain, the ship seems to be systematically falling apart. We didn't hit them that hard."

"Transporters?"

Negative, interference is too high.

Kirk swallowed hard. "Boarding parties away."

UbenFuhrer Heinbren coughed in the smoked filled air.

"Status!"

"Everything is off line UbenFuhrer."

"Well, get it back on line our I'll have you hides."

"We are working in it. All the systems seem to be interconnected."

"Medical UbenFuhrer, causalities are light, mainly burns and sm..."

CLANG!

"What was that?"

CLANG!

"Hendric, find out what is going on."

Hendric fumbled for an intercom. He pushed the switch, and banged it several times. "That seems to be out as well."

"Use your communicator, go."

Hendric started to the turbolift, and all but bumped his nose on the door. He used a common and unpleasant phrase and took the hatch down into the ship. Heinbren and the others got to work on the ship proper.

BEEP BEEP.

Heinbren all but tore the communicator out of his jacket. "Yes?"

"UbenFuhrer, we have been boarded."

"Organize resistance, get the crew armed."

"At once."

Heinbren moved to the bridge weapons locker. He unlocked it and started tossing weapons to the bridge crew. "We have been boarded, sell your lives dearly go, defend the ship." Heinbren took up a sub-machine gun. Two men had passed to the deck below when the bridge shook with a muffled blast. Bits of metal flew across the space. One man went down without a sound. Framed in

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the blown turbolift door was a monster of metal, Heinbren raised his gun. There was a flash, and the lights went out.

Kirk sat, trying not to fidget. The situation was out of his hands now. It was up to Yalack and the Marines now. Eternal minutes passed. He wanted to go to the ready room, so he could pace unseen, but he couldn't leave the bridge with a action in progress. So he sat, and tried not to fidget.

Miritath broke in. "Sir, report from the boarding crew."

Kirk sat up. "Put it through."

"Lieutenant Reeves here Sir. The ship is secure."

"Lieutenant Reeves? Where is Major Yalack?"

"The Cap...Major is not in my section sir. I believe he is wounded."

"Miritath, see to the securing of all prisoners. Mr. Reeves, what about the *Skylark* people?"

"All reasonably well sir."

"Good, Kirk out."

"Mr. Stiles, I will be in sickbay." Kirk all but ran to sickbay. As he came to the doors, he saw the hulking form of one of the marine battle suits being peeled off the occupant without regard to its possible reuse. The human inside was wounded, but alive. He turned to the OR suite as Doc Hanson came through.

"Doc. Major Veswel..."

Hanson laid a hand on the taller man's shoulder. "No, he didn't make it to sickbay. He's dead Tim."

Speechless Kirk walked into the OR. Yalack lay on the table, pieces of his armor lay around the room. Blue blood pooled in the cavity that had been his chest, and stained the black unitarde he wore. Medical equipment lay about like discarded toys. Tim Kirk picked up the dead man's hand. "I'm sorry Veswel."

Kirk walked through the open door to the holding area on cargo deck 7. The entire area had been converted to a holding pen for the crew of the *Pride of Ekos*. His uniform was perfect, every seam and line in place. He had even considered wearing a dress uniform but decided it would send the wrong message. "Bring me the captain."

A door was opened in the retaining field, a marine under cover brought UbenFuhrer Heinbren forward. Kirk noted he did not look so proud without phasers to back him up. His face was soot stained, and he had a cut lip.

"UbenFuhrer Heinbren, you are under arrest for piracy and murder. Your ship, crew and yourself will be taken to Starbase 140 for trial on these charges before the Federation court."

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"You will pay for this unwarranted attack and intrusion into Ekosian space Captain Kirk."

Kirk raised a eyebrow. "The Federation does not recognize your claims UbenFuehrer Heinbren. You will be judged on your deeds."

"You can't get away with this."

"UbenFuehrer Heinbren, do you see the doors at the end of this hold? They open to space. I am pulling my men out of the hold, you will be watched by remote. If you attempt any action against this ship, or an action that my men construe as being against this ship, those doors will be opened. Do I make myself clear."

Heinbren's eyes widened.

"Good, I see I do."

"What about my wounded?"

"You will be given medical supplies, your own doctors can deal with them. If any are so seriously wounded as to require further assistance, the *Kongo's* sickbay will handle it. However, before that gives you any ideas, I know none of your men are that seriously injured. Good day UbenFuehrer." Kirk turned his back on the man and walked out.

Back in the conference room, after a change of uniform and a shower, he took reports. "Doctor?"

"Our little rescue cost three lives. Captain Yalack, Corporal Myers, and PFC Rlaeigo. We have several minor injuries among the crew and marines. The crew of the *Pride of Ekos* suffered mainly light burns, and smoke inhalation, they have five dead. The passengers are safe, a few light injuries, nothing more."

"Felialan?"

"Nothing major, a minor short or two we have fixed already."

"What about the *Pride of Ekos*?"

I will not be able to get it running under its own power. I do have the ship stabilized, and that required jumping through some interesting hoops.

"How so?"

It has fairly normal interface systems connected to black boxes. The black boxes resist any attempt to open or examine them even for repair. Ships weapons, and shields are all black boxes, some of the more vital engineering tasks are as well. I stabilized the ship's antimatter system by pulling the controls and hooking up some portable equipment from the *Kongo*.

"Let me get this straight, you couldn't fix, or stabilize the system on the Ekosian ship? You had to rip it out and install you own systems?"

Yes, exactly. The warp core is off-line and will be until we can figure out the system or rebuild it.

"Kirk to bridge."

"Bridge, Failee here sir."

"Mr. Failee, rig the ship for warp speed towing, take the Ekosian frigate in tow and make best speed for Starbase 140."

"Yes sir, bridge out."

"That seems a fine way to run a Starfleet."

"Sir."

"Yes Mr. Stiles."

"Might I add the observation that the Ekosians could not have built that ship."

"Okay., let's hear all of it."

"Yes Sir. The Ekosian's native technology is no better than late 21st century. They have bought, acquired technology equal to the perimeter action ships in the Klingon war of the 2250s, and have been building ships of that class, what we would call light cutters or corvettes. To the best of the knowledge in the Ekosian database, they could not have built that ship."

"Then the question remains, who did?"

"I believe the Ferengi."

"Evidence?"

"Yes sir, the black boxes, they are Ferengi style components, and the script on the isolar circuits is Ferengi."

Hiding engineering secrets to the point of endangering the ship would certainly be worthy of the Ferengi.

Kirk said. "Worthy or not. isolar circuits, I thought the technology was 2260s?"

It is except in the black boxes, that is modern.

Kirk stood. "We will let Intelligence and Federation Justice figure it out. Go ahead and tear into that ship as much as safely possible. Get data. We have to get moving to Starbase 140. We will hold a memorial service 0800 tomorrow. Dismissed." Kirk remained seated after the others had left. He stared at the center of the table. He keyed a few commands, and an image of the towed ship formed in the center of the table. He stared at it.

**Penny for your thoughts?*

**Always close by, eh girl?*

Always.

**Did I do the right thing?*

I am not going to start second guessing the Captain.

I cost the lives of eight people, three of them mine, one of them a good friend.

In eight years we have never fired the weapons in anger.

No, we haven't. A record I would have rather kept running.

Yes.

**So, could I have talked him into surrender?*

**Could you have?*

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He didn't impress me as a man ready to surrender, to me, or to anyone.

That was the impression.

I fired on that impression.

**And if you had let him talk?*

He would have fired on me. The ship could have taken a lot more damage.

That was the counter risk.

Never second guess the Captain. I'll keep that in mind.

Commander Stiles called his stomach firmly in order. These people sickened him. He checked the marines on either side of him. Took a deep breath and walked into the prisoner area. All eyes turned on him. "UbenFuehrer Heinbren?"

The man came forward

"We hold a memorial for the dead tomorrow morning. The Captain has allowed that your dead will be treated in accordance with their own last wishes. Three officers will be allowed to attend from among the prisoners if you will mourn with us."

"Will there be aliens present."

Stiles smiled slightly. "No UbenFuehrer, ship's company only, and any passengers that wish to attend."

"That is," sneered Heinbren, "Will any non-humans be present?"

"That is likely."

"We will perform our own ceremonies. We will not sully our dead with the presence of inferior non-humans."

Stiles stiffened. "As you wish." He handed Heinbren a PADD. "The last requests and letters of your slain crew." He turned to go, stopped, and turned back. "I might remind you who is the prisoner of whom."

"I would see the Captain on these matters."

"The Captain is unavailable, you can reach me via the computer, if necessary." Stiles left.

Commander Weasel sat across from his boss as she listened to the latest recordings. "The jig is up it seems."

"No", replied Admiral Necheyev, "even identifying the ship as Ferengi built is not a problem. It is if they go a step further. Damn, I feel limited by what we are getting. A few scraps of information that follow our 'favorite' commander around. Why can't R&D get around those blasted Crystalmind computers."

"An old complaint Admiral. One we don't have an answer for."

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"And that bothers me. We have none of the usual surveillance on the *Kongo* or the *Hadrian* now. If this systems becomes a standard, we will have some real problems.

"Why not do an end run around it?"

"End run?"

"If the Crystalmind system is a problem, don't base intelligence on reports from the ship's computer."

"How do we do that?"

"A variation on our special commpins. See that the design becomes the Starfleet standard. Hardwire an upgrade to all ship and base communication systems. Not only that, but what Starfleet does in terms of communication, others follow. We would shortly have a ear on the conversations to hundreds of civilians comm systems and none the wiser."

"Weasel, that is brilliant. Get to work on it at once."

"Yes, sir, at once."

Kirk thought that it was a certain practical irony that placed the *Kongo's* chapel aft of the main torpedo battery. That battery had not been removed in the refit, but was updated with the transport system that fed the two turrets. However, it also had a manual loading ramp, that led into the chapel.

The chapel itself was a spartan chamber, hyperbolic arches, segmented it, and gave a generic "church" feel to an otherwise bare room. Holo-emitters created the artifacts of faith, what ever your faith as needed. Today it held a simple podium, and three cargo dollies holding torpedo casings, each draped in the honors of those it contained.

Kirk looked over the assembled, marines in full dress lined the walls, stood honor over the casings. Crew, in full dress, a few of the crew and passengers of the *Skylark* filled out the room. "Friends, we are gathered today, to perform the ceremony we least seek, honor for our comrades, our friends that have fallen in the Service of that Duty to which we have committed ourselves. A duty that each of us sought, that each of us as striven to fulfill to the best of our ability. A duty we take gladly. A duty that no being has forced upon us. A duty that because we have chosen to serve, that no being can force on anyone in the worlds we call home. We come this day to bury our honored dead.

Mourn not the fallen, for they are beyond the pale of care. Mourn instead, for ourselves, for we are the sufferers of the loss. It is the living that must carry on without those we have come to trust, to expect, and to love. It is the living that must, as all beings since the dawn of time must do, carry on the affairs of life. Mourn then for ourselves. We are deprived of our friends and comrades.

Captain Veswel Yalack, Starfleet Marines." As he spoke four marines lifted the casing and placed it on the loader. "Captain Yalack was a model of his

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profession. He stoved to be both Father, and Commanding officer to the men under him. He was also a good friend. I will miss my friend.

Corporal Yevshia Myers, Starfleet Marines. Corporal Myers was a man of humble, but biting wit. He understood, deeply, the nature and occasional frustration of the sentient existence. His well placed remarks served to keep all in his acquaintance within perspective. His viewpoint, and his smile, will be missed.

Private First Class Sharron Alderis Rlaeigo, Starfleet Marines. PFC Rlaeigo will be remembered as a lively and vibrant person. She could lift the mood of any gathering. Her zest for life was as contagious as it was complete. Our lives will be a little darker without her light. Will you share a moment in remembrance of these lives."

Silence enveloped the gathering, and for uncounted minutes they stood, each in their own way making the time and the place. A hollow thunk marked the last casing being loaded into the tubes. The ship's Boson called. "Salute!" A crewman lifted a trumpet to his lips and Taps, the ancient dirge, lingered over the gathering.

Kirk continued. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we commit to the endless stars the remains of our honored dead. Captain Veswel Yalack." He pressed the stud on the podium. A rumble and thud echoed through the chapel as the casing was fired. "Corporal Yevshia Myers." He pressed again. "Private First Class Sharron Alderis Rlaeigo." And for the last time. Kirk held on the podium as the last casing was fired, then straightened. He nodded to the Boson.

"Company, attention! Dis-missed!"

The gathering broke up as those with things to do left at once, other broke into smaller groups to talk softly among themselves. Kirk left at once. The Funeral was over, but duty was just begun.

The lights were low in his dayroom. He doffed the dress uniform jacket as he entered. He sat at his desk head in his hands. The chime for his room sounded. "Enter."

"Lieutenant Saul reporting sir."

Kirk looked at the tall woman, currently the senior marine officer.

"Lieutenant, I am giving you a field promotion to Captain as of this stardate. As a field promotion it will be subject to review by Marine Command. With that understanding do you accept?"

"Yes, sir, I understand and accept."

"Very good. You will take command of the marine detail assigned to the *USS Kongo*."

"Yes Sir."

Kirk deflated slightly. "Maggie, I am sorry you are getting this in this

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manner. I know you wanted to, well, stepping into a forced vacancy is never pleasant."

"No sir, but the troops understand, someone has to pick up the reins. This time it happens to be me. Any particular orders?"

"No, carry on as has been done. Take the effects of the slain to Counselor Deateli."

"Yes sir. What about the last letters?"

"One more duty then. Send them to me. I will handle it."

"Yes sir." With that she turned and left.

Kirk lowered the lights in the rest of the room, and made several attempts to record a letter for the families of the deceased. None seem to be right. At last he got up, and went to his dresser. Tathilan lay in the shadows of his room, watching. There buried in the middle of the drawer was a stationary set his Mother had given him when he made Captain. He took it back to his desk. The paper rustled softly as he opened it and looked through the contents. A pen, and honest ink pen fell out and rolled on the desk. Kirk picked it up and let his fingers run over the smooth wood of the barrel. Mother had always chided him to keep his penmanship up. He was starting to understand why. He placed the pen to the fresh paper, and began; *"I regret to inform you that your husband Veswel Yalack was killed in the line of duty..."*

The Ekosian Battlecruiser *John Gill* floated off the Ekosian system in formation with the Frigates *Wrath of Ekos* and *Fury of Ekos*. Commodore Henkil fiddled with the small viewscreen attached to his command position. He was trying to pull in a decent image of Ekos itself, more out of curiosity as to the limits of the sensing system than any desire to see it. All was orderly on the bridge. Castor Henkil insisted that everything be orderly. Discipline was tight, as it should be.

"Commodore, A scrambled message from Command. It is listed your eyes only."

"I will take it in my day room Lieutenant."

"Yes Sir."

Henkil moved to the desk in his day room and turned the terminal to face him. "Computer?"

"[Working.]"

"Seal the door to this chamber, code Ekos Forever."

"[Code confirmed. Door is sealed.]"

"Computer?"

"[Working.]"

"Open current communication, code seven, seven, three, Ekos one."

"[Code confirmed, your channel is open.]"

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A familiar face framed of the screen in front of him. "Good morning Admiral. Why the secrecy?"

"We have a serious incident developing."

"Incident, isn't that what the Fuhrer wanted?"

"Incident yes, but not as it has developed."

"What has happened?"

"UbenFuhrer Heinbren has taken a Federation passenger ship within our claimed zone. Apparently his zealotness has shown itself."

"How so, wasn't this what the Fuhrer wanted?"

"It gets worse my old friend. The *Pride of Ekos* was attacked and boarded by the Federation battlecruiser *Kongo*, for piracy."

"Piracy, within our own borders?"

"I said as much to the Federation Councilor. He showed me files of the *Skylark* allegedly taken by the *Kongo*. Our good UbenFuhrer Heinbren apparently shot all the non-humans aboard the vessel."

"Mein Gott."

"Yes, the last report from the *Pride of Ekos* was they were being boarded in force, after two fusillades of the Federation's new quantum torpedoes. The ship fell as the report was given."

"You have orders for me."

"Yes, take your fleet, and intercept the *Kongo* before she reaches the safety of Starbase 140."

"Admiral, we cannot outrun a Federation Battlecruiser."

"This time you can. He has the *Pride of Ekos* in tow."

"They took our ship?"

"Yes, and his prize slows him down. You have permission to talk. Get the crew of the *Pride of Ekos* back from him, promise what you must."

Henkil pulled himself more erect in his chair. "Admiral, I must insist that what ever promises I make be kept. Be careful what you agree to."

"I will trust your judgment, old friend."

"And the ship?"

"Retrieve it also."

"And if this Captain will not talk?"

"What you cannot retrieve, destroy."

"I understand. As to the crew?"

"What you cannot retrieve, destroy."

"I understand very well."

"Admiralty out."

"Computer?"

"[Working.]"

"Lower lights." As the lights dimmed Henkil sat in the dark and quiet, contemplating what he might have to do. At last, he stepped out on to the bridge. "Helm, you have the last reported location of the *Pride of Ekos*."

"I do Commodore."

"Take the fleet to that location, maximum warp."

"Aye aye, sir."

Kirk looked over the ship on the terminal. It was a elegant design. Pity it was used by a monster. Beyond the office window was the *Kongo's* main engineering section. The "pool tables" and the sealed doors to the twin intermix chambers. He turned back to the business at hand. "So, you had something worth looking at?"

Felialan answered. **Yes, something that might be of interest. We have been tearing down as much of the *Pride of Ekos* as possible, a difficult task as the system has quite a few key components that tend to self-destruct if you do not have the right keys, and we don't have them.**

"Are they on the ship?"

No, and the crew isn't lying. They have no idea what we are talking about.

"You mean the ship cannot be repaired by the crew?!"

In a word.

"What kind of crazy people go out on a ship they can't fix?"

Take a look in the hold, we have a whole bunch of them.

"Point taken. About the components?"

We also have a number that are still in the Starfleet inventory.

"Starfleet parts?"

Yes sir. Basic impulse components that are still found in the *Miranda*, the *Enterprise II*, and the *Excelsior* class ships.

"Why those three?"

We still have examples of all three in service. The impulse engines on those ships have never been upgraded, only patched into the newer control systems.

"So how close are we talking?"

I had the components scanned, they match exactly.

"Any theories as to why? It would certainly explain the power curve."

Somehow they got a hold of old Starfleet designs.

"Not the Ekosians, no one builds a ship like that deliberately."

Not for themselves at least. Mr. Stiles did indicate Ferengi design elements.

"Okay, Ferengi are selling old Starfleet designs with certain protected upgrades." Kirk paused for a moment. "Oh boy, what I just said."

**That Captain, is the crux of the matter. If the Ekosians are buying them, who else is?*

"Are we talking any secret technology?"

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Not that we have found. All the identifiable Starfleet technology is old, about 2260 old. All of it is available to anyone that wants to pay a license fee.

"Including the Ferengi."

That appears to be the case.

"Can you fix the ship?"

Outside of a Starbase, no.

"Understood. Get everyone off and seal it up. We'll just tow it dead."

That will seriously cut into our speed.

"I am aware. However, I don't want to leave the evidence behind. I'll call into Starbase 140 for a tug."

"Commodore, we have the Federation ship on the sensors."

"Anything else?"

"Sensors indicate she is of a greater mass than we understand an Ambassador class ship to be."

"That would be the *Pride of Ekos*. The reports are correct."

"We also have two other possible vessels in the area."

"Indeed, who is it?"

"Unknown Commodore. Sensors have not yet resolved identity."

"Keep an eye on everyone, and let me know when we are in easy communication distance."

"Aye aye Sir."

Stiles took a quick look around the conference room, and started his report. "Three ships, two read as identical to the *Pride of Ekos*, the third is larger, intelligence would indicate it is the '*John Gill*'. Largest ship in their fleet. We also have two other ships closing on our projected course. A Birrl patrol frigate and a Darh battleship."

Kirk rolled his eyes. "Ekosian, Birrl and Darhian. Wonderful. The League of Unaligned Worlds. Anyone else joining the party?"

"Not than sensors indicate."

"Not that we need more. What is known on the Birrl and the Darh?"

Counselor Deateli said. "The Birrl are prickly on the matter of protocol. They are exact and they are exacting. I seriously doubt they will take any action until all protocol is observed. Darh on the other hand are more likely to shoot first, and try and sort things out of the ruins."

Kirk shook his head. "Things are shaping up are they not? Well, we try and avoid shooting anyone as long as possible. We have our pirate, no one else is accused of abetting them until they open fire on us. And we will avoid that if at

all possible. We keep everyone talking just as long as possible, and maybe a little longer. Dismissed."

Most of the crew left at once. Stiles remained seated. Kirk started to rise, but sat back down. After a moment the room was otherwise clear. Kirk looked at his First Officer. "You have something more?"

"I've never been in a battle before."

"It's a first we would all like to avoid."

"And now we are looking at a second within the week."

"Well, no one is firing yet."

"They could."

"Yes, they could. They also could not."

"Would you consider me less an officer if I was nervous?"

"No Mr. Stiles, I would not. I have been in battles, bad ones. I get butterflies every time I think of firing and being fired on. Being nervous simply proves you have nerves, and they have the sense to make you fearful. I'll worry about you when you're not afraid."

"This isn't what we are out here for."

"Well, yes and no." Kirk got up for coffee. "Want?"

"Yes sir."

"We are here to protect and defend as much as to explore. Something I recall you saying you were out here for. It is part and parcel of the duty we undertake. It is hopefully the part we never have to do. It is certainly no fun when we have to do it. But it is part of the job."

"I guess I didn't realize that protecting and defending meant killing and dying. Oh, yes, I understood intellectually, but I have never seen it, until now."

"It is not fun, and should never be fun."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I'll hold on to the '*Pride*' as long as possible. But not to the point of endangering the ship. I will not fire until fired on, this time."

"How do you decide such things?"

"That is a hard one. I had positive identification of Heinbrin and his butchers. I wouldn't have taken the action I did without it. This time fighting is counter productive. I have nothing to gain by shooting first. Nothing to gain by shooting at all, except to prevent the ship being hurt or destroyed. Experience I think is the only answer. You stick to your principles. Base your actions on those principles. Do these things, you might not always win, but you'll not regret that which you do."

"I think Captain Kirk, I would regret losing, not matter how moral my stance."

"That might be a given, but never regret winning for lack of your moral stance."

"Yes sir. Sir, have you ever lost a fight?"

Kirk grew quiet, he sipped at his coffee. "Define 'lose'? I have won a few I

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considered the cost too high on."

"Such as?"

"Try the one we just fought."

"You had served a long time with Captain Yalack."

"More important than that Dick, he was my friend."

"Have you lost too many friends in battle Captain?"

"One is too many Dick, one is far too many. But to answer the meaning I think you meant, yes, yes I have. I was a Lieutenant on the Republic in the Cardassian war. I lost a lot of friends."

Stiles leaned forward in his chair. "What was the war like?"

"You mean was it exciting?"

"Well kind of."

"No, it wasn't exciting at all. I was long, and boring, and when it wasn't boring it was terrifying, and after than, it was just awful. Then, when it was over, the bureaucrats threw our principles in the trash with that so called treaty."

"You don't agree with the treaty?"

"It resolved nothing. Mark me Dick. We will end up fighting that damn pointless war all over again."

"Captain to the bridge. We have the Birrl frigate in hailing range."

"Well Mr. Stiles, duty calls." Kirk drained his cup and headed for the bridge. Stiles was behind him.

"Captain on the bridge."

"Thank you Mr. Failee, have we been hailed yet?"

"No sir"

"Well." Kirk settled in his seat. "Let's confuse them and start the conversation. Hail them Mr. Failee."

"Hail open Captain, I have a conformation."

"This is Captain James Kirk of the Federation starship Kongo. Greetings to our friends the Birrl. With whom do I have the delight of meeting?"

A moment's silence passed. A birdlike face appeared on the screen, a narrow beak framed in a riot of feathers.

"I am Captain Trrreeel, of the frigate *Strongnest*. Captain Kirk, I bring you greetings of the Birrl nest to all in your nest."

"And like greetings from our homes into your homes Captain Trrreeel. I trust that all is well among the nests of the Birrl, that no disaster befalls you, and your stores are plentiful?"

"We are well Captain Kirk, our stores are plentiful. We hope also that your stores are full and your homes free of disaster."

"Alas no, that is not the case. Our stores are robbed, and our families and friends have been murdered."

Trrreeel started. Kirk was breaking the formula. Kirk maintained a expression of utter seriousness.

"What, disaster, is this that befalls you?"

"Marauders that take what is ours, and killed those that belong with us."

Trrreel looked confused, but protocol led him on. "We are disturbed for you Captain Kirk. What can the humble efforts of the Birrl do you bring you comfort? What is the nature of these marauders?"

"Perhaps if you view the records, you can judge for yourself. I would send them to you if you are willing."

"I will view your files Captain Kirk, and consult with my family. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. A ship of the Darh is coming also to this place. We wish nothing but proper discussion of this disaster, and that no fighting should disturb its resolution. However, as you well know the Darh can be...abrupt. Know that should they place aside a proper discussion and open fire we will defend ourselves. This however, we do beg of you, should not be seen as an end to our discussions in the proper manner."

"I understand you well Captain Kirk. Should the Darh forgo discussion I will not interfere."

"I thank you for your wisdom and understanding. You should be receiving the files now. I look forward to your viewpoint on them."

"I shall anticipate giving it to you."

"Kirk out."

The figure on the screen bobbed, and the signal was cut.

Kirk turned to Stiles. "Well, that bought us some time. We wait to see what the Darh and Ekosians have to say."

"Sir, what are your plans?"

"Delay Mr. Stiles. The longer I keep them talking, the closer to Starbase 140 we get."

"Report!"

"The Federation starship has the *Pride of Ekos* under her fan tail sir. A Birrl frigate is station keeping off their port side, 100,000 klicks sir. There is a Darhan ship closing. The Federation ship has readied her weapons and raised shields, the *Pride of Ekos* is inside the shields."

"Range?"

"Two diameters sir."

"Hold our range, we will see what the Darh do."

"Report." Kirk settled back into the center seat.

"Birrl are still off our port considering their next move, the Ekosians are 5

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AUs behind us and the Darh are closing. We are at Yellow Alert, cruising comfortably at Warp 4."

"Time to Starbase 140?"

"14 standard days."

"Time until the tug and the *Chr'tar* arrive?"

"Four days."

"So, let's see how the Darh react."

"We are being hailed?"

"Who, Birrl?"

"No sir, Darh."

"Really? Put it on."

A stern looking humanoid with vaguely reptilian features appeared framed by a computer generated screed. To date no Federation commander had ever seen the inside of a Darhan ship. "Federation ship Kongo, the League of Unaligned worlds demands you release your captive vessel or suffer the consequences!!!"

"Sir Birrl are breaking in."

"Let them."

"This is Captain Trreeel. You have not been authorized to speak for the Unaligned Worlds. Your demands are invalid."

"Authorization be damned, we have a Federation pirate on our hands!!!"

"That has not been even implied by Captain Kirk's actions."

"Kirk!! I should have known it, the worst Federation oppressor in history. We of the Unaligned Worlds demands the surrender of the ship and the criminal Kirk."

"You have no authorization for your charges, or your demands, and THAT Captain Kirk has been dead for a century."

"You just said he is commanding that slave ship!!!"

"A Captain Kirk is commanding the Federation ship *USS Kongo*."

"I'll take any Kirk I can get, and the illegally captured ship!!!"

Kirk cleared his throat. "If I might get a word in here."

"No you can't. Surrender your ship or be fired on!!!"

"I take that as a threat sir."

"As well you should."

"Mr. Miritath target that ship lock on the target and the millisecond he fires, you will unload the quantum torpedo tubes on him. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir, target acquired and locked."

"Do you understand Captain? I will destroy your ship if you open fire on me. Before the first weapon hits. Do we have an understanding?"

The Darhan Captain pulled herself to her full 4' 10" height. "This is typical of Federation treachery."

"Save it for the holovids. Now, I am Captain James Timothy Kirk, commanding the *USS Kongo*. And you are?"

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"I am High Captain Harra De'T'quoola of the most powerful Battleship *FoeCrusher!!*"

"Quaint. Now, if you have a problem, I suggest you speak with Captain Trrreeel before committing to an action you will not live to regret."

"Captain, Captain Trrreeel on a private channel."

"Mr. Stiles, you have the bridge, try and keep the galactic peace a few more minutes."

"Aye aye Sir, we will try."

Kirk entered his ready room. "OK comm, send it in."

The face of Captain Trrreeel appeared on the screen. "Captain Kirk, I have reviewed the files you sent me. I find the incident most disturbing."

"As do I Captain Trrreeel. You can understand my actions."

"Yet these people killed are not your nest."

"Captain Trrreeel, any people of the Federation are of my nest. It is of the oaths I so made when taking service. Even without such oaths, they are, of a matter to me. They are sentient creatures, I need no greater reason to care."

"Would you care if it was my ship drifting and dead Captain Kirk?"

"Yes Captain Trrreeel, I would take action to locate the murders, and bring them to justice."

"I am deeply disturbed, but not totally convinced. You have disposed of the murderers I take it."

"No, they are in secure quarters on my ship. They have rights until the Sector General can obtain a conviction."

"That would not take long."

"Not my call Captain Trrreeel. There is no certainty that all or even any will be convicted."

"You are certain?"

"Enough so to arrest them and take them to trial."

"Yet you have authority."

"To arrest. It is our way that others will try the matter, and reach conclusions. Really Captain Trrreeel. You well know how the Federation justice system works."

"We know what has been said. That you are very lenient on the accused."

"We believe it is better that many of the guilty go free, than one innocent be punished. So we hold very high standards of proof."

"Does this not make enforcement more difficult?"

"It can, but that is the price of the freedoms we enjoy."

"I would see these beings myself."

"That should be easy to arrange at Starbase 140."

"Why not now Captain Kirk?"

"I am unwilling to drop from warp Captain Trrreeel. I am overdue for my assigned patrol area."

"I, see. I will communicate with you later."

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"It will be a pleasure. Fresh Water and Green Grass Captain Trreeel."

Commodore Henkil sat in his darkened ready room. He watched the small screen, a graphic indicated the position of each ship in this, ballet. A knock at his door broke his reverie. "Come."

Herman his boson entered. "All is well Commodore?"

Henkil stretched and motioned to the chair across the small room. "Sit, be comfortable."

"Sir?"

Henkil reached down and took a bottle from under his desk. Likewise he produced two glasses. "Stombach?"

"Thank you sir."

He poured a measure into each glass. "Herman, what do you think of the Reich?"

"It is Sir."

"It, is. An interesting answer. Do you ever fear that ambitious politicians will lead us to disaster?"

"No Sir. I have no such reasons. We have nothing but success on success."

"Are we ready for that?" He motioned at the image of the *Kongo* hanging in space.

"A strong ship Sir, but we are many, and allies are handy."

"I would not count too strongly on the allies. The *Kongo's* Captain has made no attempt to hide his conversation with others." Henkil leaned back in his chair, and sipped the burning liquor slowly. "Are you prepared to die for a murderer and a fool?"

"I do not understand Sir, we can but do our duty."

"You are a good soldier Herman. And in the end, I am a good soldier too. I will do my duty. But, I must wonder, if the duty is worth the coin it may demand?"

"I would not know Sir."

"Herman, you are my friend. We have served, you and I for many long years. Yes, even before the warp drive ships. I become worried at the moves the Fuhrer makes. Yes, we are strong, but are we this strong?"

"Strength is not known until tested Sir."

"Yes, that is very true, but is best to start small, and work up. This may be too much to lift. If so, the price will be heavy. After all, the Captain's name is Kirk."

"Yes Sir. I do not hold with omens Sir."

"Wise man. Drink your drink Herman. It is time to see what this Kirk has to say."

Kirk was catching up on his datawork, Tathilan was doing her level best to distract him. "OK, you're the most beautiful thing on four legs. Do you want to do the monthly reports?"

The reports popped up on his screen finished. **I just did.**

"Why am I here?"

To make the decisions. Leave the grunt work to the computers.

"Captain to the Bridge"

Kirk got up from his desk heading for the bridge. "Play time is over."

He quickly moved to his seat. "Report?"

"The Ekosians fleet is moving up sir. Standard rear approach triangle."

"Damn. Sound Red Alert."

Several moments passed as the ship came to readiness.

"We are being hailed by the Birrl, and the Darh."

"Birrl first."

"Captain Kirk, you are going to battle readiness?"

"Precaution only Captain Trreel. I don't know the Ekosian intentions, but they are in battle formation. I must be brief, Captain Harra De'T'quoola is also demanding my attention."

"I understand Captain Kirk."

"Miritath? The Darh please."

"What is the meaning of your arming!! We declare war on you at once!!!"

"Captain. You are trying my patience. I have torpedoes with your name on them. Do not start hostilities, I warn you."

"You are the one arming for battle!!!"

"I would examine the state of your own readiness board before casting aspersions."

"I must protest."

"Mr. Miritath." The channel was cut.

"The Ekosians are hailing Sir."

"Put them through Mr. Miritath."

"This is Commodore Castor Henkil of the Ekosian Star Command. With whom am I speaking?"

"Captain James Kirk of the Federation Starship *Kongo*, Commodore Henkil."

"Captain Kirk, I couldn't help but notice you have one of my fleet under your lee. Would you care to explain this?"

"Most certainly Commodore Henkil. The *Pride of Ekos* was used in a pirate attack on a Federation passenger liner. We regrettably damaged her in capturing the pirates."

"What manner of pirate stole a Ekosian ship. I am most shocked."

"I regret it was not stolen Commodore. It was crewed by Ekosians."

The Eagle's Spawn

"And the nature of the crime?"

"Murder and kidnapping, several hundred counts of each."

"Most serious. I will be glad to see the miscreants taken to Ekos for trial."

"I am sure you would Commodore. That being the case you can pension with the Sector General for the prisoners at Starbase 140."

"I am quite willing to take them now Captain."

"I am sorry, but I am not able to let you have them."

"As to our ship?"

"Material evidence. I am sure you will have little problem claiming her after the trial."

"My orders are to retrieve it now Captain."

"Unfortunate. I am not free to release it."

"Captain, surly your life and the lives of your crew are not worth a handful of Ekosian sailors."

"Commodore, I have little doubt you intercepted the data transfers to the *Strongnest* I also have little doubt you have reviewed them. If you have not, I will be glad to see you get the log files intact and unaltered."

"I have these alleged files."

"Commodore, in my position, would you do differently?"

"I Captain, am not in your position. There is also the matter of the location of this alleged attack. Inside Ekosian Space."

"25 light years from Ekos is inside Ekosian space?"

"That is the case."

"Have you informed any of your allies that their worlds now lie inside your borders? I am sure some of them are listening."

"However the matter stands."

"No, the Federation Council, based on the log files of the *Skylark* incident has rejected any consideration of said claims until after the trial."

"The Darh are breaking in sir."

"We will not abide by any decision of the Federation Council. That imperialistic body cannot dictate policy to the Unaligned Worlds!!!"

"Do you recognize the Ekos 30 light year limit Captain?"

"That will be for my government to decide!!!"

"I think I can tell you what your government will say."

Commodore Henkil broke back in. "It is hardly a mater for a Federation Captain to tell a Darh Captain the decisions of her own government."

"Even if Darhthal lies ten light years inside the Ekosian border?"

"We are willing to recognize the established borders of our allies."

"You can discuss that with your allies. However, the ship and the crew will stay with me until I reach Starbase 140. Cut channel. Mr. Miritath keep and eye on them. Felialan, can you vary the warp speed?"

Yes, but not a lot with the tow.

"A little is enough to throw off their targeting."

The Eagle's Spawn

I see. Yes, I can give you a tenth of a warp factor either direction.
"Do it, random, 3.9 to 4.1."

"Commodore, the Federation ship is maneuvering wildly."

"What!"

"Yes sir, observe, they will shoot ahead, drop back, even pass behind us then shoot ahead."

Henkil chuckled under his breath. "Very clever that Captain Kirk."

"Sir?"

"Targeting Naf-Fuhrer, targeting. He is randomly varying his speed, Our chances of forcing him from warp are, slim at best. We can't match a random program."

"What is his game?"

"Delay I would guess. He is 14 days from his Starbase. He must have help coming. A tug and another cruiser I would imagine."

"What will we do?"

"Wait, a little. Give him half a day."

Kirk sat numbly shoveling dinner in his mouth. The day's events had not been pleasant and the situation was no better. Three more days until the additional ships would arrive, and he seriously doubted his "friends" would wait that long. The intercom interrupted his thoughts.

"Captain, the Birrl are on the line."

"Patch them in."

"Captain Kirk, you play games with them now?"

"Yes Captain Trreel. Games to delay hostile action. Have you considered my words?"

"Yes, Captain Kirk, I have indeed. I see a great wrong done, I see no reason to delay in punishing the guilty. I also see no reason to aid the Ekosians in this matter. I suggest you administer punishment at once."

"It is not our way Captain."

"It remains a difference between us."

"Yes, it does. But your ways work for you. We will respect them, even if we don't approve. What are your intentions?"

"I will depart the area. I wish you good hunting Captain."

"Clear Water, and Fresh Grass Captain Trreel. Kirk to bridge. What is the situation?"

"Birrl frigate is moving off sir. Commodore Henkil is on a secure channel to you Captain."

The Eagle's Spawn

"Bad with the good, send it down." Kirk shoved his plate aside. "Good evening Commodore."

"Good evening Captain Kirk. Are you still adamant on my reasonable requests?"

"I don't have the freedom to change my position Commodore."

"Captain, I am all too aware of the amount of latitude a Starfleet Captain is permitted. You could quite easily do all I asked. I assure you on my word of honor that they will get a just trial."

"By Starfleet regulations, you are correct Commodore. However, I still have to face myself in the mirror every morning. What you ask, I cannot do. I know Ekosian law since the Reich revival. Killing non-humans is not murder. They would walk. I cannot live with that."

"Yet you could die for what you propose to do."

"A risk I take."

"Are they worth more lives? Are they really worth it?"

"Justice, is worth it Commodore. Given my preferences, I would open the cargo doors, and space every single one of them. I'd toss you the wreck of your ship as well. However, it isn't going to be that way. I have my oaths, and principles."

"And you are going to shove them down my throat eh?"

"Each and every time your's attack and kill Federation citizens, yes. If you want to be left alone, I suggest you start leaving alone."

"Captain, be reasonable, let me come over than talk to the men."

"Not possible, I am not dropping from warp for anyone."

"Until your reinforcements arrive."

"As you wish to believe."

"You force my hand."

"No sir, you act of your own will."

"I must follow my orders."

"A fallacy that doomed the last Reich as well Commodore. Kirk out. Tathilan, call the ship to general quarters. I have a feeling the fight is about to start."

Henkil sat for a long moment, and went to the bridge. "Order all ships to battle stations. We will try and engage the *Kongo*."

"Captain on the Bridge."

"Mr. Miritath, are we ready?"

"As ready as we can get sir."

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"When we are fired on, drop the tow, and watch the Darh, they are the dangerous ones."

"Who do you think they will fight?"

"I haven't a clue."

Stiles entered the bridge and sat down. He worked his mouth. Kirk looked over at him, smiled slightly.

Lt. Solin said. "Captain, they are closing the triangle. We will shortly be in danger of ramming one of them if we maintain the random speed jumps."

"Understood, make warp 4 steady."

"Aye aye sir. Warp 4 steady."

"Triangle closing."

"Miritath, the second they fire, drop the tow."

"We will surge forward."

"I am counting on it."

"Commodore, they have settled to warp 4.7."

"Carefully close it, but not right behind her."

"On my order John Gill only will fire photon torpedoes."

"The fleet is in formation."

"Fire."

"Ekosian ship has fired."

"Drop tow."

"The Darh have fired. Torpedoes away. Tow Away."

The *Kongo* surged forward with the sudden drop in mass. As eight Quantum torpedoes sped toward the Darhan ship. The *Pride of Ekos* popped out of the *Kongo's* warp field and into normal space.

"Torpedoes away. The Darh have fired on the *Kongo*. SIR the *Kongo* has dropped the *Pride*!!!"

Henkil stood. "ALL SHIPS EVASIVE ACTION!"

In a split second the torpedoes impacted on the *Pride of Ekos* blowing her to kingdom come. The Ekosian fleet split off, barely avoiding collision. Half the *Kongo's* torpedoes found the shields of the *FoeCrusher* and sent her reeling into normal space.

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"We are stable at warp 6 Captain."

"Continue to Starbase 140"

"They are maintaining warp 7.3 Commodore."

"And not straining. They can easily out run us. Fire again, they have nothing to block the shot now."

"Torpedoes away."

Lt. Solin said. "John Gill firing again Captain."

"Drop to tactical, we will engage the Ekosian fleet. All queues hot and ready."

Miritath said. "All weapons on line."

Lt. Solin said. "The Ekosian fleet has dropped to sublight. The Darh are no where to be seen."

"Keep an eye out for them. Full impulse. Circle around the Ekosians."

"They are trying an alpha trident."

"Very good, Miritath, you may fire at will. Hostilities have been opened."

"*Wrath of Ekos* on the starboard, and closing. Range 40,000k. She is opening fire." Solin continued to report.

Miraitah worked his broad. "Firing phasers and a torpedo spread. We have incoming." The *Kongo* rocked with the impacts. "Shields 87%, minor damage reported. That was heavy one."

The *Kongo's* weapons touched the *Wrath of Ekos*, phasers dug deep into her shields as the torpedoes slammed home.

"*Wrath* has lost power to the impulse drive, she is suffering a systemic breakdown, just like the *Pride*."

Kirk leaned forward. "We could get lucky here."

Lt. Solin continued his reports. "Captain, the Darh battleship has just dropped from warp and is closing for action."

"We just ran out of luck. Miritath, nail the Ekosians quick, we are going to need all we have for that thing."

"Red Alert, Red Alert!" Klaxons sounds as lights flashed in strips down the sides of the halls. Edith clung to Archie. Things had been strange and worse over the last few nightmare days, pirates, now a Federation starship and battles. They knew nothing of these things outside the of the tri-dee. Ship's crew moved

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purposefully around them. A new voice spoke over the intercom, soothing and authoritative. "This is Captain Kirk, all non-combatant personnel are to move to the inner compartments of the ship. The *Kongo* will engage hostile vessels, all non-combatant personnel move to the inner compartments of the ship.

"Archie, it's Captain Kirk! We'll be all right, Captain Kirk has never lost a fight."

"Right Edith, I watch the tri-dee too. Only this ain't the *Enterprise*."

"But Captain Kirk Archie."

"We can only hope for a similarity."

A woman in Starfleet uniform, bald, but somehow attractive came up on them suddenly, a gaggle of other people following her.

"Please, I am Counselor Deateli follow me."

Archie and Edith jogged to keep up with the group. Archie called after her. "Hey, what's going on?"

"Mr. Breeds, the ship is under attack by Ekosian forces and ship of the Unaligned Worlds. There is some danger." She quickly ushered them into a lounge near the center of the ship. Several other passengers were already present. They all looked frightened. Several Ane were also present, they did not.

"What's happening? I'm a citizen, I got a right to know!"

Counselor Deateli turned back to the room at large. "Gentlebeings. There is some danger that normal quarters which are on the skin of the ship might be damaged. I urge you to remain here until the all clear is sounded. The *Kongo* has a clear tactical advantage, however, it is safest if you stay out of the crew's way, and let us do our jobs. Thank you." She left the compartment.

Archie started to say something, he didn't like this at all, but he was feeling a little on the tired side. Must be the stress of the last few days. Edith was already half asleep. One of the Ane twitched an ear, and said nothing.

"...all non-combatant personnel move to the inner compartments of the ship." Kirk looked around the bridge. Everything was in place."

Miritath said. "*Fury of Ekos* targeted. *John Gill* coming up from behind."

"Fire as you see fit."

Fire lanced from all three ships as they crossed paths. The *Kongo* was caught in the cross fire from the two smaller ships. The majority of her fire bracing the *Fury of Ekos*. A few shots gracing the *John Gill*. The *Kongo* shook from the incoming fire, the lights dimmed slightly and came back up, damage reports flowed in from around the ship.

"Report."

"Shields 87% minor damage, a few casualties."

Kirk winced. "The *Fury*?"

"Out of the fight sir. Systemic failure of systems. She is ejecting life pods."

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"Lt. Solin said. "Sir, the *FoeCrusher* is coming around for a pass."

"Noted, target Mr. Miritath, throw everything we have at her. Position of the *Gill*?"

"Coming around, she is leaking plasma, but other wise in good shape."

"Well, one ship that isn't going to fall apart. Bad for us."

"Incoming Captain!"

"FIRE!"

Henkil took his ship around in a long turn. A brief brush with the Federation cruiser and he was hurting. Each of his frigates had gone down in one pass. Curse the Ferengi that built the damn things. As he watched the two giants clashed like ancient warriors at the lists. Beams and bolts of destructive energy flashed between the two ships, most found their targets. Each parted the other wounded from the encounter. "Yes" thought Henkil, "Soften him up for me my friend. Soften him up for the duty I must perform."

The lights came up on the *Kongo's* bridge. "REPORT!"

Lt. Solin spoke quickly. "Shields at 73% top starboard phaser is out, main life support is out secondary on line. We have compromised hull at deck six sections 11 through 13. Energy flow is down to the starboard turret. Casualty reports coming in."

"Is the turret working?"

Miritath looked up. "Some."

"Get it working all. Roll over and go to full automatic on the port turret. Hit him till he falls apart."

Solin again. "The *John Gill* is still coming around, out of medium range." "Will the bow cross him on our current course."

"Yes sir."

"Give him a full barrage form the forward tubes then. We don't want him feeling forgotten."

"Yes Sir."

"*FoeCrusher* coming around, we have them targeted firing on full auto."

Henkil watched the big ship roll over, her wounds obvious even at this range. "Tactical?"

"No sir, out of range."

"Keep us there, let them fight it out."

"Kongo is firing."

"Where?"

"FoeCrusher."

"Sir, its almost a stream of photon torpedoes."

Henkil watched in horror as *Kongo* continued to fire. A shot for every heartbeat. The missiles reached across the space between the two ship, a hit aft, a miss, correction, a hit aft again. The hits crawled up the side of the Darhan battleship. She reached out with her phasers, the hits, dug at the *Kongo's* shields and hull and lost their grip, and sought it again. They watched the giant's slugfest, like bird trapped in the gaze of the snake.

"INCOMING!" Henkil had a brief moment of horror as eight of the deadly missiles found his own ship, and the lights went out.

Kongo shook under the attack, Tathilan cried with pain. It hurt to be damaged. Her anger at the Darh grew with each attack. They were hurting her, hurting her people. She closed another section off, tightened the focus on the targeting computers. Jinked that starboard turret again, at last full power. The *FoeCrusher* twisted under the steady barrage. Tathilan noticed where her maneuvers had placed her, and sent a alert to the Tactical panel. No one, no one, hurt her and her people and failed to pay.

"Captain the *FoeCrusher* is pulling within 10,000 klicks of the *Fury of Ekos*, and closing."

"Status?"

"Dead in the water, pods moving off."

We can blow her warp core, catch the *FoeCrusher* in the back wash.

Kirk sat up at the suggestion. Avery Solin was down, the ops panel had blown up in her face, the *Kongo* was hurting around them. "Are the life pods out of range?"

Mrlitath shook off the pain from his burns. "No sir, they are not all out of range."

"Do it."

For a brief moment they locked eyes, each knew what the order meant. Miritath pressed the control.

Captain Harra De'T'quoola stood firm in the middle of the chaos around her. The *Kongo* was hurt, reeling. Even if her own ship was damaged the victory would be hers. "Report?"

"*Kongo* has fired a full spread."

"Brace."

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"Torpedoes missed Captain."

"They are slipping, the victory is assured."

"Torpedoes hit the *Fury of Ekos*."

"What?"

"FULL CONTAINMENT FAILURE!!!"

"Warp speed, GET US OUT OF HERE!!!"

Her XO looked at her with dead eyes. "Captain, we have no warp power."

Kirk waited the dual explosion numbly. He closed his eyes and begged forgiveness for the hundreds he had killed that day. When he opened them, the fires were dying, hot gases from the blast rocked the *Kongo* lightly. "Report."

Failee said. *FoeCrusher* destroyed, *Fury of Ekos* destroyed. We have 80% power 66% shields, starboard turret is full operational, port turret is jammed. Impulse and warp at the Captain's discretion."

"Where is the *John Gill*."

"They are drifting at 80,000 klicks. They have life support, no warp, minimal impulse, phasers at 20% estimated."

"Take us in, we are finishing this."

Commodore Henkil came to. Two of the bridge crew were standing over him. They helped him up. "Sir! Are you hurt?"

"Nothing, nothing." A pain stabbed him in the side making lie of his words. "The ship what is her condition?"

"We are moving Commodore, but not well."

"Our allies?"

"Destroyed. *Kongo* blew up the *Fury*, and the *FoeCrusher* with her."

Fenar said. "Sir we have the viewscreen restored."

"Turn it on." The screen flickered to life. The *Kongo* loomed over them huge, implacable, the fresh scars of battle streaked across her. The black maws of her torpedo turret lay locked on the *John Gill*.

"We are being hailed Commodore."

"Put it on."

The screen flickered to a scene inside the Federation ship. Blacked walls spoke of fires put out. The Captain stood tall, proud, his uniform smudged with soot and blood. Kirk spoke. "Commodore, the fight is over, you will surrender your ship and crew."

Henkil tried to straighten up pain flickered across his face. "I still have some fight left in me Captain Kirk."

"Commodore Henkil, enough have died today. Do not join them."

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"Why would I join them Captain Kirk?"

"I have eight quantum torpedoes aimed at your engineering section Commodore, and you have no shields. The power to end this is in your hands. The power to continue it is in mine."

Kirk watched the man wrestle with himself. He slumped in his seat, the pain obvious. He spoke. "Commander."

A second man stepped into the view. "Sir?"

"You will stand down all weapons, and surrender the ship."

Kirk rubbed his eyes, the day have been long and it was not over yet. 14 dead, 62 wounded, hundreds on the other side. His ship bulged with rescued survivors. Too high a price to pay for a damned bigot with a gun. The intercom chirped. "Kirk here."

Feailan's thoughts came to him. **I can give you warp six Captain, I am not sure we will get more until we see a Starbase.**

Warp six it is then. Do what you can. Too many letters to write.

Kirk lay in his bed, Tathilan's mane flowed across his body, her head rested on his chest. A hand gently stroked her ear. **How do your feel?*

I'm over the shocky feeling. I turned off the pain sensors, I know what hurts, I don't want to feel it anymore.

I never thought it would be me comforting you.

**Is that not the function of mates?*

Yes, but I never pictured you needing the comfort you so well give.

I am only, human.

Yes, that is true, and now I know that better than I ever did. I didn't know that hurting the ship hurt you.

**It's part of being the ship. How else do you covey the sense of damage?*

I would try to find a better way.

We have, as of yet, there isn't one.

I never want to hurt you.

You are the Captain, we sail in harm's way, it will happen.

**Can you do it again?*

She lifted her head, shook it gently. **Yes, I can do all that I must. I have to be worthy of you. How are you feeling?*

You of anyone should know. Strangely, detached.

**Detached?*

I did what I felt I had to, yet, so many lives.

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**Are you second guessing the Captain?*

**No, looking at how grim a task it can be.*

**Tomorrow will be time enough for sorrow. To night we have time for love.*

Commodore Henkil walked painfully into the prisoner's hold. After the Kongo's doctors had mended his broken ribs Kirk had offered him a cabin, under watch. He refused, he would stay with his men. They parted as the new arrivals came in. The hold was full of survivors from all four of the Fuhrer's best ships. All destroyed, for one reason. "UbenFuhrer Heinbern!"

The man came forward quickly. He stood proud before his Commander. "UbenFuhrer Heinbern reporting Sir."

Henkil moved swiftly. His hand flashed through the air, the leather gloves leaving a welt on the younger man's face. Heinbern staggered back, more from surprise than the force of the blow. Henkil favored him with a withering look. "You ass."

Kirk was in his ready room bright and early. The funeral was scheduled for noon. He had work to do before that duty called. His door chimed. Slightly exasperated he called. "Come."

The door opened to show a man and woman in middle age. Both on the portly and out of shape side. They looked nervously back at the bridge, and entered his ready room. "I don't believe I know you?"

"A-Archie Breeds, and my wife Edith."

"How do you do, Captain James Kirk. Do you have a problem?"

The portly man mustered his courage. "Ah, yes sir, we do. We wondered when we will get home?"

Kirk flipped through his terminal. "Ah, you're passengers from the *Skylark*."
"Yes Sir."

"I...see. The *Kongo* will put in at Starbase 140 in two days. Arrangements will be made to get you back to Earth from there."

"You're not taking us home?"

"No Mr. Breeds. The *Kongo* is headed into the repair dock at Starbase 140, and after than back to her assigned station."

"I thought you finished rescuing people you rescued?"

"Archie."

"We do Mr. Breeds, you will get home, but not on this ship."

"Fine way to run a Starfleet."

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"Archie."

"Mr. Breeds, I don't see a profession listed on your passenger record."

"I don't have a profession, I never saw the need for one."

"So, you are content to ride on the efforts of all?"

"It suits."

Kirk stood, and stared to pace the room. "Mr. Breeds, I have on my desk terminal the price of your aimless drifting. A total of 17 dead, many wounded. We have destroyed five ships and hundreds of other sentients, for the sake of you and your fellow passengers. I ask you, what have you done, to be worthy of them?" Archie started open his mouth. Kirk jumped in ahead of him. "You cannot have done enough. No life no matter how worthy is worth the price paid. Yet, we are willing pay it, day in and day out. Because that is what we choose to do, for you, and the others we rescued. And we will continue to do it, even if you never lift a finger to contribute to the society that you benefit from. Now, Mr. Breeds, I might suggest that you worry less about when you will get home, than on what you will do once you get there. By my reckoning, you have used up your free ride, if on no other basis than a moral one. What will you do for your fellow sentients, that you might be remembered? Now, if you will excuse me, I have things I have to do."

Kirk stood behind the podium. In front of him as many of the ship's company as could squeeze in. Dress uniforms filled the chapel hall. Kirk looked at the coffins before him. He drove the tears back, he had to speak clearly and proudly for those that could never speak again for themselves. "Gentlebeings, we find ourselves, once again gathered before our fellows and those things we hold sacred and true. We come in order to hold high the sacrifices that are the price of our freedom, and to honor those that have made them. To once again water the Tree of Liberty. Let us never forget the price, and never forget the gift."

The Eagle's Spawn -- Garry Stahl, May 1999

I finished this story on memorial day, it might have influenced the outcome, it did Influence the dedication.

Postscript 2011 -- *As before, a reedit and light Lucas job. In this case mostly wording and paragraph structure. I would hope my art has improved.*