STRAY OFF COURSE
By J. Robert Deans

The doctor let out a long and somewhat exasperated sigh. "Captain…"

"I know, Doc. I know." The Captain sat down on the bio bed, clapping his hands on his knees in exasperation. "But, come on," the Captain gestured to the patient. "How can I say 'no' to that face?"

Porthos tilted his head upwards at the doctor, his eyes growing wider as if on Archer's command to enhance his plea. A soft whine provided punctuation.

Phlox squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the ridges around his left eye. "Then perhaps, Captain, you could be more diligent in offering your companion here one of the dairy-free options I suggested on the last time you brought him in for gastro-intestinal distress?"

Captain Archer somewhat sheepishly looked to the floor. "He didn't like them. In fact," Archer stood up in hopes of making his argument more persuasive, "it made him even pickier about what kind of cheese…" Captain Archer had turned to face Phlox as he spoke, and stopped when he caught the doctor looking at him with one eye ridge raised in bemused disapproval. Archer stopped and sighed. "Well…" Archer shrugged, his arms flopping to his sides. "What else can I try?"

Phlox pressed a hypospray against the side of Porthos' neck, and the device hissed. "Fruit, for one. If he must have a treat, Captain, try peanut butter or carob, both of which would provide dairy-free nutrition. Or, perhaps…" Phlox pointed the hypospray at Archer. "You could try the more time-honored practice of restraint." Phlox looked at Porthos and shook his head. "But, I have a feeling that won't work any time soon."

A communicator beep interrupted the doctor. It was Ensign Sato. "Bridge to Captain Archer." Archer hopped off the bio bed and walked over to one of the sickbay comm panels, pressing the activation button. "Archer here, Hoshi. What's up?"

"Sir, we've picked up something on long-range sensors. Can you come up to the Bridge?"

"I'm on my way. Archer out." Archer looked at Phlox, who nodded and called to Archer as the Captain headed out the door from sickbay, "He may stay as long as you need, Captain." The doors to sickbay closed, and Phlox turned to his canine guest, who was already staring at the doctor in anticipation. "Well, my friend. Let's see if we can't find a more palatable snack that will also prevent you from becoming a permanent guest here, shall we?"

Porthos' tail wagged faster.

Archer stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge. Lieutenant Reed was at his security station, pouring over readouts with a furrowed brow. Chief Engineer Tucker was standing behind him, peering over Reed's shoulder at the tactical readouts. "Report," Archer said as he sat down in the captain's chair.

Reed replied first. "Long range sensors picked up something off the starboard bow a few minutes ago. It's altered course to intercept us. It's a ship, but it's still too far away for positive identification. I may have been able to isolate readings that may be a possible warp signature, however."

Archer got up from the command chair and moved to the science station. "T'Pol?"

T'Pol was sitting with her back to the captain at the science station's scope, and was quiet for a few moments. "I cannot identify their vessel or its signature, Captain. At the moment, there's nothing that matches it in either database. Perhaps when they are closer and we receive stronger sensor readings."

"What about communications? Any hails coming through?"

Hoshi shook her head. "No Sir. If they're transmitting anything, it's nothing I can detect."

"How soon until they reach us?"

"Seven minutes, Sir, at current speeds."

Archer paused a moment to scratch his chin. "Alright." Archer addressed his helmsman, Ensign Mayweather. "Travis, let's slow down. Hoshi, let me know when they're in range and we can open a channel."

Sato and Mayweather replied simultaneously, "Aye, Sir."

"Hmmmm…" Phlox stared at the library computer, somewhat perplexed. There was nothing on the screen, save his reflection, and he seemed to be studying his own nose. Porthos just stared at the doctor, confused, his head cocked to the left. He pawed at the doctor's leg, a gesture Phlox ignored.

Suddenly, Phlox straightened up and clicked his teeth. "Aha!" Porthos jumped back slightly, startled.

The doctor walked over to one of the refrigerated supply cabinets and perused the shelves. "Ah. Yes. Let's try…" the doctor pulled a small container from one of the shelves and emptied its contents onto a small plate. "This!" He took a piece of food from the plate and served himself, then set the plate in front of Porthos.

While Phlox chewed and smiled at Porthos, the dog looked at the plate, then at Phlox, then back at the plate, and sneezed.

Phlox seemed mildly annoyed. "You could at least try it. I understand our former Klingon guest would have considered this a treat!"

Porthos whined, and backed away from the plate.

"I know it's not moving, but we can't get real Gagh." He sighed. "Alright." Phlox reached down, and took the plate, and went back to staring at the blank screen, his fingers absent-mindedly stirring through the replicated Klingon worms on the plate, on which he nibbled as he thought.

Porthos just looked on with as much disgust as a beagle's face could show. One of the worms fell from the plate to the floor, falling directly in front of Porthos. The dog looked at it, then at Phlox, before turning around and returning to the bio bed.

"Anything?" Archer was leaning forward in his chair, as if he could somehow will more information out of the sensors.

Were it possible to prove, even T'Pol seemed annoyed. "Negative, Captain. And nothing I am reading correlates to anything in the databases from the High Command." She turned to Sato. "Ensign, have you been able to determine if they are transmitting anything at all?"

Hoshi shook her head and let out an exasperated sigh. "No. Nothing. I can't even tell if they've received our greetings and are just ignoring us."

Reed interjected, "I recommend we polarize the hull plating, Sir."

Archer shook his head, but wasn't hiding his frustration with the situation, or the lack of communication. "Not yet, Malcolm. I don't want to provoke anything." He started to turn back towards the science station, but stopped, and looked back at Reed. "But…be ready with the plating, just in case."

"Aye, Captain."

"Update on their ETA?"

"At our current speed, Sir, we should intercept in just under two minutes."

"Alright, then. Travis? Bring us to a halt. Make them come to us."

"Aye Sir." Mayweather manipulated a few controls, and waited a moment. "Answering all stop, Captain."

"Hoshi, can they hear us?"

"Yes, Sir, they are well within range of our hails."

"Open a channel."

Hoshi activated the comm channel, and nodded towards Archer.

"Let's see if this fares any better, shall we?" Phlox said with some hope as he set what seemed like the tenth plate in front of Porthos. "This is something from the Vulcan database called 'tuber root,' although it seems a bit decadent for their palate."

Porthos sniffed the tuber root pieces and gave the plate a look of mild suspicion. He looked back at Phlox, and whined inquisitively.

"Ah, of course. My apologies." Phlox reached down and took a bite from the plate and tried it. "Mmm!" Phlox smiled and nodded. "That's quite delicious!" He looked at Porthos. "If you won't finish it, I certainly will."

Porthos took a small bite, and chewed it for some time. He sniffed the root again before trying another piece. He swallowed, then stared at the plate for a few moments. Phlox was certain Porthos frowned at him before pushing the plate back towards the doctor with his nose.

The doctor sighed. "I'm running out of ideas. No wonder Captain Archer defaults to a small morsel of cheddar." Porthos' eyes widened and he perked up, tail wagging swiftly. The doctor sighed once more. "I'm a doctor, not a caterer. You aren't here for me to make you feel worse. We'll have to find something else. Have you ever tried Tribble?"

Sickbay shook ever so slightly, just as a small noise erupted on the other side of the doors. Porthos and the Doctor turned to the doors simultaneously.

The Enterprise rocked with the impact of another hit from the alien ship's phase cannons.

"Hull plating down to 87 percent, Captain!" Reed exclaimed. "Their weapons are bigger and better than ours, but they're basically the same type."

Next to Reed, Tucker moved his hands frantically across his terminal until something caught his eye. "Captain…!"

"What is it, Trip?"

"I think one of the manifolds is about to go, I gotta get back to Engineering."

"Go."

Trip nodded, as if to wish his Captain good luck, and ran for the turbo lift.

Archer continued, "Malcolm, keep an eye on that plating. Are the cannons having any effect on their hull?"

Malcolm shook his head, annoyed. "No, Sir. Might as well be lobbing last night's leftover mashed potatoes at them. Torpedoes?"

"Not just yet." Archer turned to communications as another plasma beam hit and pitched the ship a couple of degrees in the opposite direction of the previous hit. "Hoshi, is anything getting through?"

"I don't think so, Sir. With the comm relays down, I can only go by sensors, and they're bad, too."

"I am not detecting any transmissions or scans from their vessel, Captain. I cannot be certain they are transmitting anything at all."

Porthos whined, and shook his head, his ears flapping wildly. He then turned to one of the walls and began barking. Phlox picked him up. "I know, Porthos, I know. The noise worries me, too. But, my canine companion, I do not believe we would be of any use to the crew by getting in their way. And the Captain certainly does not need to worry about you running free about the ship at the same time he is dealing with whatever threat we seem to have collected out there."

The doors to sickbay opened and a few crewmen, led by Phlox's occasional nursing assistant Elizabeth Cutler, were brought in for treatment. Phlox put Porthos down on the floor to begin examining his new patients. While Phlox performed triage with Crewman Cutler's assistance, Porthos simply stared up at the wall.

Phlox nodded to Cutler, "This fellow needs some time in the imaging chamber before I recommend further treatment. If you would, please, Crewman…" Phlox moved on to the next patient as Cutler helped the injured crewman to the chamber.

"Ah," Phlox pulled back the burned uniform from an Engineer's leg. "I think you will be fine for a bit. Please," he gestured to a chair, "have a seat and I will be with you shortly. And you, young man…" Phlox all but carried his next patient to a bio bed, "will be fine," Phlox pressed a hypospray into the patient's neck. "After a nap." The doctor turned back to the engineer, adjusting a couple of buttons on the hypospray.

"This should mask the pain until I can get back to you, Ensign." Phlox grabbed a plate from a nearby counter and handed it to the ensign. "Here. Have a snack while you wait." The ensign dry-heaved slightly, making a "hurk" noise. Phlox shook his head. "No, no, no…it's pronounced 'Gakh.'

Cutler tapped Phlox on the shoulder. "I think that's everyone, Doctor. What can I do next?"

Phlox scratched at the ridges over his eye, and surveyed the scene. The worst of the immediate cases were radiation burns on crewmen on the first two bio beds. "I think…the eels, Crewman Cutler. Thank you." Phlox then headed to the Imaging Chamber's readout station.

"Damn," Malcolm muttered. "Sorry, Sir. Torpedoes had a negligible effect. Their hull plating is particularly strong. If I could get a few more shots off, I might start to wear them down, but…"

A panel over Reed's left shoulder short circuited with just enough energy to shower him with bright, but relatively harmless, sparks. Archer and Reed exchanged looks.

"I'll see what I can do, Sir."

Archer nodded. "Hoshi?"

"Still waiting for the comm grid to come back online, Sir, but I'm still not getting anything over sensors that I recognize as possible communications."

"Actually, Captain," T'Pol interrupted. "I believe I found something that suggests they are transmitting. Or, were."

"Can you be more specific?"

T'Pol reacted to an exploding panel on the back wall of the situation area before returning to Archer's attention. "I went over the initial sensor logs from when they reached optimal communications range. I found this." She pointed to a wave form in the sensor readouts well above standard frequencies.

The communicator chimed, and Trip's voice started. "Cap'n?"

"Hang on, Trip." He returned his attention to T'Pol. "Is it a message?"

"Perhaps. It resembles one of our standard carrier wavelengths for vocal communications. However, it is on a frequency that our systems do not recognize as one ideal for vocal communication. I believe it was too high to be considered anything more than static."

"Did you get a recording of it? Are they still transmitting?"

"Possibly. Ensign…?"

Sato nodded. "Aye, Sub-Commander. I have the frequency now. Filtering. This may take a moment, Sir."

"Don't take your time, Hoshi."

"No, Sir." Hoshi adjusted the sensors as best she could. She shook her head. "Sorry, Sir. Because it isn't a traditional comm frequency, I can't quite pick it up. I have isolated it with sensors, but that's all I can do from here until the grid is repaired."

"T'Pol, can you modulate the bridge's internal sensors in such a way to use them to play back any message they may have sent?"

"I am attempting to do just that, Sir." A few moments passed as T'Pol adjusted the sensor pickups.

Archer stood up, and turned back towards the command chair, pressing a button on the armrest. "Trip?"

Trip was waist-deep in a conduit when an Engineer yelled out in pain from the main engine room. "Billy? That you?"

"Yes, Sir! I'm…I think I'm okay."

"What's going on?"

"One of the relays blew while I was trying to adjust it to regulate the flow to the converters. I had to bypass two busted conduits, and as I was working one of the panels blew. We may have another conduit breach, Sir."

Trip shifted in the conduit and looked at the crewman helping him. "Alex, I'm almost done here. Go give him a hand. Don't let him blow up my engine."

"No, Sir." Alex disappeared from the conduit opening.

Trip finished his repairs and crawled out from the conduit. "Alright! That does it for the port nacelle. Should be fine. How bad is that starboard coupling?"

Alex called over, "Not great, but better than expected. Give us a few moments."

Trip nodded and turned on the comm panel on the wall above the conduit opening. "Cap'n?"

"Hang on, Trip," Archer replied. The comm went silent for a minute. Tucker made a few adjustments to the regulators on the conduit interface while he waited.

Alex came up to Trip and filled him in on the starboard repairs. As he finished, the comm chimed from the bridge.

"Trip…?"

"I won't ask how you're doing up there, Captain. The engine's taking a beating, but we got the damaged conduits and regulators stabilized enough. Unless you need me…"

"No. Just keep us in one piece, Commander, but the sooner the comm grid can be repaired…"

"Already have a team working on it, Sir. Should be ready soon. I'll let you know. Engineering out." Trip turned to one of his repair teams. "Alright, boys, where are we on that comm grid?"

"Captain, I believe I have isolated the exact frequency, and I have accessed the recorded readings. I can play them back now."

"Do it." Archer turned and pointed to Reed, "But don't you stop just yet."

Reed nodded in reply, "Understood, Sir."

Over the alarms and short-circuits, a series of guttural grunts and howls filled the bridge. For a moment, the bridge crew looked at each other with confusion.

"Is that…that can't be Klingon, can it Hoshi?"

"No, Sir. It's nothing I've heard before."

"Whatever language they are speaking, Captain, it would seem they are agitated, and were growing in impatience. Perhaps frustrated that we did not reply."

"I doubt claiming we didn't know they were trying to communicate would be a reasonable excuse. Hoshi, can you…"

Hoshi interrupted Archer in a panic. "SIR!"

On the viewscreen, a torpedo was heading straight for the ship. Just as Archer turned to see it, it impacted the hull. Travis tried to adjust the Enterprise's course, but the ship could not react fast enough.

The explosion hit several meters off-center at the front of the saucer, to the left and just slightly below the deflector array. The blast caused the Enterprise to pitch up and away from the blast with enough force to knock it off course. On the bridge, Travis fought the controls to keep the ship balanced. Across the ship, the crew tried to do the same for their own bodies.

Porthos had stopped barking at the wall, and was now barking at the sickbay's doors. Being four-legged, he had no trouble keeping his balance as the ship rocked from the torpedo blast. Phlox and Cutler, however, had no such luck. Cutler shot out a hand to keep herself upright. Her hand hit the sickbay door control panel, and the doors hissed open.

Porthos barked and shot out of sickbay.

"Oh, no…" Cutler said quietly, and she turned to Phlox with a mild look of panic.

"Well, go after him, Cutler," Phlox instructed. "I have things well enough under control here, and I am certain the Captain would not be thrilled were anything to happen to Porthos."

Cutler nodded, and ran out of sickbay after the pet.

The Enterprise corridors were a buzz of activity, with members of the crew running from one point to another, making repairs, or heading towards their cabins or sickbay. Lost in the audible chaos were Porthos' whines of concern for his friend, and the occasional bark of frustration.

Also lost in the din were Crewman Cutler's frantic calls for Porthos to return to her, and sickbay. At one point, she regained sight of the dog as he stopped at an intersection to sniff at the air. Porthos looked both ways down either side of the junction, sniffed again, and turned right.

By the time Cutler made it to the junction Porthos was gone. Cutler threw up her hands in confusion and frustration, letting them hit her sides before she shrugged at Engineer Rostov, who was repairing a relay at the junction.

Rostov smiled, and used his coil spanner to point down the right corridor.

Cutler nodded and sighed, "Thanks!" She then ran down the corridor. "Porthos?" She yelled after the dog, "Porthos! You come back here! This is not the time…!"

Rostov turned to the engineer assisting him. "And you thought ours was the short-straw assignment."

Cutler had just found Porthos at the end of the corridor when the turbolift doors closed, separating them. Cutler ran up to the lift and slammed her hand on the call button, grunting angrily. "Gah! Next thing you know, they'll be letting children on board," she whispered to no one.

"Trip, I need that comm grid!" Archer's voice boomed over Tucker's communicator, balanced on the side rail of the Jeffries tube just next to Tucker's face.

"Almost got it, Captain! Just a few more seconds!"

Trip turned the spanner another forty degrees to the left, pressed a couple of buttons on an adjacent control panel, and then the call button on his communicator.

"That's it, Captain. Try it now!"

Trip collected the tools from the floor of the Jeffries tube, and wriggled out, back into the main corridor.

As he stood up, something brushed past his leg down the corridor. Trip looked up, confused. "Porthos?"

As he started to walk in the direction the dog had run, he was knocked into the bulkhead by Crewman Cutler, who stopped to turn around. As she helped Tucker up, she apologized and ran off down the corridor.

Tucker stood there a moment, looking either in the direction Cutler and Porthos had gone, or back towards Engineering. He finally shook his head, muttered, "uh-uh," and jogged the other way, back towards Engineering.

"Captain, we sustained heavy damage to the front of the ship, including the deflector array. Decks E and F, specifically. We have lost long-range sensors and the deflector is offline."

Archer opened the comm on his chair. "Trip?"

"Aye, Cap'n!"

"What's going on down there?"

"It's not good, Sir, but we're keepin' her together."

Reed interrupted, "Sir, they've fired another torpedo!"

"Travis?"

"Trying, Sir." Mayweather banked the ship to her starboard side, and the torpedo missed the bridge and caught the far port side of the saucer on Deck F.

The ship reacted to the explosion, banking harder into the direction Travis had steered, shaking as it moved.

"Nice work, Travis," Archer said before returning his attention to the comm. "Trip, I need that comm grid!"

Static garbled Tucker's reply, and all Archer caught was something about a few more seconds.

"I hope we have them," Archer thought.

Another panel near the tactical station blew just as Tucker's voice returned to the bridge. "Try it now!"

Porthos jumped out of the turbolift on D Deck and ran down the corridor towards the ship's center. Once again, he stopped at a junction to sniff the air, searching for the quickest way to his master.

A voice bellowed from the far end of the corridor, "Grab that dog!"

Porthos perked his head up, and ran down the corridor away from an oncoming Crewman Cutler.

"Why aren't you on a leash?!" Cutler hollered towards Porthos as she ran after the dog.

Porthos took a left at the next junction, and headed for the turbolift at the corridor's end. Before he could reach the lift, its doors opened to let out its passenger. Porthos ran into the lift, but this time, Cutler managed to board the lift before its doors closed.

"Gotcha!" Cutler reached down and picked up the dog just as the lift resumed its course. "I may tell the Captain not to give you cheese for a month, you furry little…" Cutler said while scratching behind Porthos' left ear.

Porthos began whining, as Cutler looked up at the control panel.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "The bridge…"

The lift came to a stop on A Deck, and the doors opened. Porthos jumped from Cutler's arms onto the bridge, and began barking.

Archer turned to his communications officer. "Hoshi?"

Sato nodded. "On it, Sir. Transmitting general greetings on those wavelengths in all languages."

"Captain, if I may suggest," T'Pol said, "perhaps it's time to consider a message of surrender, if only to spare the ship any further damage?"

Archer looked stern. "I wish I could say that option had not occurred to me. Unfortunately…I'm seriously considering it. What do you have for me, Hoshi?"

"I can tell they've received the packet, Sir, but I can't tell yet if they're replying."

Reed huffed, "They're still firing their cannons, Sir. I'd say their reply is clear."

Archer sat down. "I'm inclined to agree, Malcolm. How are those cannons coming?"

"Almost fully online, Sir. Just another moment."

"Continue aiming at their weapons array, then their engines."

The ship rocked with another explosion. "Damn. Sir?"

Archer looked at Reed. "More good news, Malcolm?"

"Cannons are offline again. I…don't think we can take much more."

"Hoshi, start broadcasting again. This time…include a message offering our surrender."

"Aye, Sir." Sato pressed a few buttons. "Transmitting. They've received the message."

Blasts and explosions continued as the alien vessel continued to fire their phase cannons at the Enterprise. Everyone on the bridge was frantically working on their own stations, and Captain Archer sat still for a moment, pondering his next move.

"Well. I guess I have just one last thing to say to them."

As the turbolift doors opened, Porthos ran onto the bridge, and barked at the viewscreen.

Archer stood up. "Porthos?!"

Cutler peeked out from the turbolift. "Apologies, Sir. He got free of sickbay, and before I realized where he was heading…"

"Captain!"

Archer turned his attention back to T'Pol. "What is it, T'Pol?"

"They've stopped firing."

Reed confirmed the report, "Sir…they've powered down their weapons."

Porthos barked again.

Hoshi, turned to Archer. "Sir…we're being hailed. On our primary frequency."

Archer couldn't hide his confusion. "Uh…open the channel, Ensign."

The viewscreen snapped on, and Porthos whined.

The alien on the screen was bipedal, large, and furry. They possessed long ears and a long nose. Their fur was mostly dark brown, and short. The lead alien wore armor more elaborate than the others, suggesting he was their commander. The dark red glow of their bridge left many of the aliens in silhouette, but their leader was clearly visible.

He seemed a little larger than the rest of his crew, and somewhat more menacing. On either leg he wore knives, and his armor was not unlike chainmail, except that it seemed more organic, resembling the bamboo armor of ancient Japanese warriors on Earth.

There was one fact that was not in dispute, however.

"They're…" Reed whispered.

"Canine." T'Pol finished.

At that moment, everyone on the bridge seemed to look at Porthos at once.

Archer stood up, and addressed the onscreen alien. "I'm…Jonathan Archer, Captain of the Starship Enterprise. Can you understand us?" Porthos barked. Archer waved at Porthos and whispered, "Not now, Porthos."

The alien began replying, a series of low, almost guttural calls, with the occasional bark mixed in. When he stopped, Archer look to Hoshi.

"Sorry, Sir…the Universal Translator needs more to go on."

Archer nodded. "I hope that we can come to an understanding. We certainly did not intend to provoke anything, but it may be possible that you simply don't like strangers. We are willing, once we have made the necessary repairs, to leave this space. If we are in fact in your territory. Are you willing to negotiate a cease-fire?"

The alien began replying again. Every so often, Porthos would cock his head to one side and whine, or bark a reply, which would stop the alien in his tracks.

Finally, as if in an answer to a silent wish, the alien's speech was being translated into English.

"…figuration is similar to one of our enemies. When you did not reply to our attempts at communication, we assumed the worst."

Archer smiled. "We can understand you perfectly now. Our translator was damaged in the fight. Again, I am Jonathan Archer, Captain of the Enterprise."

"I am Ellsay, Commander of the flagship Rinnix. We are from the Canar system. I must ask…" Ellsay gestured towards Porthos.

"Ah. Yes. This…" Archer reached down and picked Porthos up. "Is Porthos. My…" Archer was more than a little embarrassed. "Pet."

Ellsay looked a little confused, if not slightly annoyed.

Archer sighed, hoping to find the right words to avoid triggering another battle. "On our world, Earth, canines have not evolved yet into bipeds, nor have they acquired the capability for more sophisticated speech as you or I know it." Porthos barked.

Ellsay gave Archer a bemused look. "You…can't understand him?"

Archer looked at Porthos and scratched the dog's ear. "Not as well as we should, I suppose." The Captain returned his attention to the viewscreen. "Look, Commander Ellsay, we have many repairs to make, but, I would very much like to meet with you face-to-face. I would say we could use a less tense opportunity to introduce ourselves."

Ellsay laughed. "I agree, Captain. I agree. Could you use a hand with your repairs?"

"I think we can handle it, but more hands never hurt." Archer looked at Malcolm, who nodded. "Our launch bay is fully functional, if you would like to come over in a shuttlecraft?"

"We will join you shortly, Captain Archer. Rinnix out." Ellsay nodded to someone off-screen, and the view screen winked off. Archer looked at Porthos. "We'll talk about this later."

The bridge turbolift doors opened and Trip stepped onto the bridge. He pointed at Porthos. "So I wasn't imagining things." Porthos whined.

Archer shook his head and sighed. "What do you have, Trip?"

"Well, we're in bad shape, but nothing we can't handle. A few hours should do it for the primary systems. We have thrusters, but the impulse and warp engines are offline. Should have impulse in less than an hour, warp engines in three to four hours."

Cutler interrupted. "Captain, I…"

"It's okay, Cutler. We got lucky. Why don't you get back down to sickbay and give Phlox a hand. Dismissed."

Cutler nodded and headed into the lift. Once the doors shut behind her, Archer brought his chief engineer up to speed. "These aliens? They're canine." Archer pressed the lift call button.

"You mean," Trip pointed at Porthos, who barked.

"Yep. When they hailed us and we didn't respond, well…it seems the Enterprise's configuration resembles one of their enemies' ships."

"But, the Enterprise doesn't look anything like a cat."

Archer scowled at Tucker while Porthos growled softly. "Don't make me regret bringing you along, Trip." Archer then nodded to T'Pol, who joined the Captain and Tucker as they entered the turbolift. As they got on, Archer turned to Reed. "You have the bridge, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Sir."

"So…lemme get this straight. We're meeting up with a bunch of hounds?"

"An oversimplification, but essentially that is correct, Commander." T'Pol pressed the control pad in the turbolift. "They are humanoid with canine features."

Archer looked at Tucker, and dipped his head slightly, his brow furrowed. "Behave yourself, Trip." The lift doors opened and the trio stepped into the corridor near the launch bay. "Or I'll sic Porthos on you."

"You're joking."

T'Pol glanced at Tucker and shook her head slightly.

Tucker, bringing up the rear, pleaded "Come on, you're kidding, right?" Trip could not see the smirk on Archer's face.

The officers entered the launch bay control room and Archer nodded to the crewman on duty. The crewman worked the control panel and the launch bay doors opened. The alien shuttle, now grabbed by the docking arm, was gently moved into place next to the shuttlepods.

The ship looked like a smaller version of the main ship: a central dome growing out of a large metal wedge. The dome was aft, and the wedge had two wing-like protrusions emanating from its sides. While much shorter than the wings on the Rinnix, the shuttle's wings also led to a single warp nacelle attached to the end of each wing.

The nacelles appeared to be encased in a translucent material, with gills along the inner edges, allowing for the collection of stellar material. The dome was also translucent, with a transparent window at the front. Whereas on the mothership there were fore and aft weapons arrays, this shuttle had multiple sensor arrays.

Shortly, a hatch hissed open at the back of the dome, and whined softly as a ramp extended from the bottom of the shuttle. Out stepped Ellsay and four others. Ellsay smiled and stood up straight, a full foot taller than Archer. "Captain!"

Archer stepped forward, and while holding Porthos with his left arm he extended his right hand out to Ellsay. "Greetings, on behalf of Starfleet, and the crew of the Enterprise."

Ellsay looked at Archer's hand inquisitively. "Ah! A physical exchange of greeting." Ellsay extended his hand and Archer shook it. When the handshake was over, Ellsay looked at his hand a moment, before gesturing to his companions. "Captain, this is my second-in-command Da'ron. And these are some of my best engineers, Katrac, Tih'jer, La'dey, and Ta'rah." As Ellsay introduced his crew, they each nodded as their name was called.

"A pleasure. This is my second-in-command, T'Pol of Vulcan, and my Chief Engineer, Commander Tucker." T'Pol nodded, and Trip stepped forward, shaking hands with Ellsay.

"It's…uh…it's a pleasure." Trip said, trying not to stare.

"And this," Ellsay gestured to Archer's arms, "must be Porthos." Porthos jumped down, and Ellsay crouched to meet him. They looked at each other, and spoke, in a series of low whines and quiet barks.

Archer couldn't help his confusion. "So, you can understand each other?"

Ellsay scratched Porthos' head and stood up. "For the most part. He speaks a very primitive version of our language. You mentioned he was your companion, yes? Is he…normal…for his species on your world?"

"Yes, canines on our world are considered friends, family members, companions, but they have not yet evolved to the level of sophistication of your people. I would like to know more about you, but perhaps a brief tour of our ship first?"

"Captain, before we begin, allow me to offer my apologies. I acted in haste in attacking your ship. I take full responsibility for the damage to your vessel and your crew. My men are here to assist in any way possible to get you up and running and at the level at which you were before our encounter. I would greatly enjoy the opportunity to explore your ship, but my crew are ready to help now, and are at your command."

"That's very kind. Trip? Why don't you show these folks to the engine room and see if they can help get the engine back online."

"Aye, Captain." Trip gestured ahead. "If y'all will follow me?" Trip and the engineers headed off out the door and down the corridor to the lift to engineering.

Archer and Ellsay walked the other way, towards sickbay, with T'Pol and Da'ron following along behind.

"Commander," what do you call yourselves? We call our planet Earth, but call ourselves 'humans.' T'Pol is of Vulcan, and her people refer to themselves as Vulcans. Where are you from?"

"Well, as I said earlier, our system is called Canar, and we are from the only world in our system capable of hosting life. Our world is called Astara, but we refer to ourselves as Cana. Our belief is that the star we orbit gives us the resources to exist, and as such we honor that gift by referring to ourselves as its children. Do your people believe the same with your Earth?"

"Not exactly. Our people have a wide and varied belief system, but for the most part we believe in a singular deity, and a system of being that teaches us to live as one regardless of our differences. Not everyone on my world looks like I do, and our beliefs have taught us to embrace that difference."

"Fascinating. On our world, we all look alike, save for the occasional minor variations in hair color and the like. What of your people, T'Pol?" As he had with Porthos' name, Ellsay struggled slightly with the 'P' in T'Pol.

"Like humans, we have subtle variances in our appearances, but we have evolved into a singular belief that logic is the most pure system by which to live. We have learned to eliminate emotion from our everyday lives."

"You…choose not to feel?" Da'ron asked, poorly masking his shock.

"That is correct."

The group reached sickbay and as the doors hissed open, Archer and T'Pol entered. Being so tall, Ellsay and Da'ron had to duck low to enter. Phlox looked up from treating one of the last of the injured crewmen. "Captain?"

"Pardon the interruption, Doctor, but I thought you would like to meet our new friends."

Phlox lingered a moment longer with his patient, waiting until the dermal regenerator had finished its work. "I'll be right back, Ensign," he said to his patient before greeting the visitors.

Archer provided the introductions. "Doctor Phlox of Denobula, meet Commander Ellsay, of Astara, and his second-in-command, Da'ron."

Phlox smiled broadly. "Welcome aboard."

Ellsay nodded. "Thank you, Doctor. And, as I have done with your Captain, let me also apologize to you, for my actions."

"That's quite alright, er, Ellsay was it? There was no permanent damage. And I see, Captain, you found Porthos."

"At just the right time, it seems, yes. We'll let you finish, Doctor. I'll check in later." Archer whispered into Porthos' ear, "Stay here, boy."

Phlox bowed slightly to Ellsay and Da'ron. "A pleasure to meet you both. Until next time." Phlox returned to his patients.

Archer took the group on a tour of the remainder of the primary areas of the ship, including engineering, where Trip and his men were working well with the Cana engineers.

"Cap'n, with their help, we should be back up to speed in a couple of hours."

"That's good news, Trip. Thanks. And, thank the Cana engineers for me as well." Archer turned to Ellsay. "Well, Commander, since we seem to have a little time, can we interest you in some refreshments?"

"It would be our pleasure, Captain."

The Captain gestured towards the exit. "Please."

Archer led the group to and into the Mess Hall. "I suppose I should ask if your people have any specific dietary needs or restrictions. For example, we're omnivores, but Vulcans are vegetarians, so our chef is quite adept at meeting a variety of needs."

"We, too, are omnivores, but whatever you feel is most representative of your cuisine and habits will be fine, Captain. I am curious to see what foods a race such as yourself considers a delicacy."

"Let me speak to the chef. I'll be back in a moment. Sub-Commander, would you help them choose a drink, and take them to my Mess?"

"Of course, Captain."

Over their meal, the two captains compared their races.

"So, despite having rather sophisticated systems, and such high warp capability, you don't explore?"

Ellsay shook his head, which was more of a twisting motion than side-to-side. "No, no, we don't. It's not that we aren't curious, mind you. We just don't feel the pull of exploration. Our people have been visiting the stars for generations, and we simply found that we are happiest at home. Our world, our climate, our culture, changes at such a pace that we feel as though we can stay home and explore and learn and be just as content as we would were we to go out into the galaxy.

"Now, we do go out periodically to check on ships that come by our space, but as we have kept to our own sector, that doesn't happen nearly as much as you would think. From our explorations of the past we do have…adversaries, however, and again I apologize for my mistaking you for them."

Da'ron interjected. "T'Pol tells me, Captain, that our communications are operating at such a high frequency that your systems could not recognize them as vocal frequencies, but carrier waves."

"Yes, that's right," Archer confirmed. "And our translator sometimes takes a few moments to be able to translate, so the first few attempts must have just registered as static."

The Captain put down his fork, and took a sip of water. "I have to ask, though. When you stopped firing on us…what made you stop?"

"Well," Ellsay looked almost embarrassed. "To be honest…"

T'Pol arched an eyebrow. "Was it Porthos?"

Ellsay sighed and nodded. "Yes. You see, Captain, we don't have a similar translation matrix as you do. To be honest, if someone isn't speaking our language, we…" Ellsay scratched at his ears. "We assume they are enemies. It's not exactly a very proper way to perceive outsiders, I admit. But, in our defense, as I said, we don't get many visitors."

Archer nodded in acknowledgement, "I can understand how you would come to believe that."

"Yes. Well, as we heard you, we did not know what you were saying and assumed the worst. When we heard something resembling one of our ancient tongues, spoken by Porthos, well…that got my attention."

"If we can continue to have a relationship, one as allies and friends, perhaps I can make Porthos an ambassador."

Da'ron nodded. "That would be a fine gesture, Captain. However, it would take some getting used to on the part of my people to find that you keep creatures like our ancestors as pets. But, since they have not yet evolved as we have, I'm sure we will come around." Da'ron turned his attention to T'Pol. "Do Vulcans keep pets, Sub-Commander?"

"In a manner of speaking. Our 'pets' are twice your size and live in the wild. We call them 'sehlats.' As for smaller animals which live in our homes, no, we do not."

"Vulcans," Archer added, "live their lives by a code of logic, and the ownership of pets doesn't exactly fall into that category. While we keep these animals as pets, they do not perform a subservient role. They become members of the family, almost like children. In fact, there are several members of my crew who look after Porthos when I go off on missions."

"Are creatures like Porthos the only creatures you keep as pets?"

"No, we also have birds, cats, fish, even reptiles. There are many species we keep as pets, and you are not the first aliens to ourselves we have met that bear a genetic relationship to our pets."

"So, no matter if the species walks, swims, or flies, it could be both food and companionship?"

Archer smiled slightly and nodded. "I suppose it…doesn't make much sense when you think about it."

"Perhaps not. Although, perhaps when Porthos or his ancestors have evolved to walk on two legs and speak as we do, perhaps they will keep you as pets." Ellsay waited for Archer's reaction.

"If you could see me and Porthos interact, Commander, you might find that already to be true."

Ellsay laughed heartily. "Captain, I will be honest with you. I cannot say for sure that we will ever explore far enough to cross your path again. It simply isn't in our nature. However, should you ever find yourself in our system again, we would be honored by a visit. Especially if you bring young Porthos. He would be a welcome ambassador."

"I'd like that. And if you were to offer him any cheese, he would like that, too."

"Cheese?" Da'ron was confused.

"I'll…let Porthos explain it to you," Archer replied, smiling.

With the meal and the tour over, the quartet returned to Engineering.

"We're almost done here, Captain. Just another handful of adjustments and the warp core will be fully operational," Tucker gestured to the four Cana, "thanks to these fine folks."

"It was the very least my people could do, Engineer Tucker, I assure you. In the meantime, your Captain provided us with a remarkable introduction to your people and culture. And, some delicious food." Ellsay nodded to Archer. "Thank you once again, Captain."

"Didja try the pecan pie?" Tucker asked.

Archer chuckled. "Forgive Trip, he's a little obsessed with pecan pie. Don't worry, Trip, I packed some provisions for the Cana engineers so they wouldn't be left out, and I included a pie."

"Good. I was telling your men about it. Don't want them planning a mutiny because they didn't get any."

The four Cana engineers joined the group. One turned to Ellsay. "We have assisted the Enterprise crew in repairing their ship, Commander."

"Excellent. Thank you, La'dey. Well, Captain, it is time for us to return to our home. I wish to thank you, for your hospitality and your conversation." Ellsay led the way back to the launch bay. "And, please know that I was sincere. Should you or anyone else of your species find themselves in our system, they would be most welcome on our world."

"I appreciate that. And, someday, we may take you up on that. I have provided copies of our library databases for you to peruse, and answer any more questions you may have about us. But also to make sure you can tell us apart from your adversaries."

Ellsay chuckled, "indeed, Captain."

As they entered the launch bay, Phlox and Porthos were waiting for them. The Cana crew each knelt to Porthos and exchanged a few barks and whines each with the dog before boarding their shuttle. Ellsay walked over to Porthos and picked him up. They barked and whined for several moments before Ellsay gave him a good-bye scratch behind the ears, and handed him back to Phlox. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Captain," Ellsay extended his hand, which Archer shook. "It has been a pleasure. I hope we can meet again soon. May your trees never be too tall to climb, or too old to forget."

At dinner that night with T'Pol, Archer and Trip filled each other in on their interactions and experiences with the Cana.

"I hope for your sake, Trip, that you didn't ask any of the Cana crew to 'fetch' you any tools."

"Captain, please. Give me some credit."

T'Pol cleared her throat.

Tucker sighed and stared down at his plate. "Well…once." T'Pol's eyebrow raised in response. "Alright, twice. That's it."

Archer laughed. "You know, I wonder, given their rather jovial nature, how they would fare were they to interact with the Vulcans on a regular basis." Archer said in between bites.

"We have managed with Earthlings. I presume the same can be said for the Cana."

Trip straightened up, letting his fork hit his plate. "Captain, I'm not sure, but I think we've just been insulted."

Archer chuckled. "I'm sure."

Trip continued, "Well, I gotta be honest, Captain. I may never look at Porthos the same again after today."

"I should hope not, Commander. After all, Porthos is now an ambassador."

"Which means, Commander," T'Pol interjected, "Porthos now outranks you."