

Star Trek (#12) – “The Galactic Whirlpool”
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Back Cover:

On a routine mission in deep space, Captain James Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise discover a lost city, drifting in space, more than 20 years from the nearest human colony. Its inhabitants are human, but so isolated that they are unable to grasp the existence of other worlds besides their own. Outsiders must be demons. Earth is a place that exists only in legend, in the tales of their ancestors. But time is running out for this forgotten civilization... their world is being pulled straight towards the center of a galactic whirlpool, two orbiting black holes in space. Can Kirk convince them to trust him, before their world is destroyed for ever?

Summary:

On a routine patrol investigating possible Klingon incursions into Federation space, the Enterprise encounters an odd sensor reading. Closer investigation of the anomaly reveals something surprising: a slower-than-light alien vessel built on an enormous scale – over 24 kilometers long and 10 kilometers in diameter! Obviously taken as a self-contained world, a ship built to ferry thousands of colonists over many generations to a new star system, there is some question as to whether anyone is still aboard: its engines are off, its power output is minimal and it is far from any inhabited planets. As such, questions follow: who built it? Where did they come from? Where were they going, and how long had they been traveling?

Questions the Enterprise thought it would not get its answers to until they see a distinctly human face in one of the portal windows. This discovery sets about a flurry of activity for the Enterprise, for not only is there life aboard, it's human life! But contact with such a ship is going to be problematic, not only have they been aboard for so many years (a record of their launch and journey was not recorded), but because they may not be aware that any other civilizations exist to contact them, the sudden presence of other humans (let alone the knowledge that the universe is populated) may drive them all to madness, which would be a violation of the Prime Directive.

On the discovery, Captain Kirk orders the ship's contact crew (a team that makes first contact with an unknown entity), to gently penetrate the hull using a specialized airlock system. Kevin Riley, now a member of the ship's contact team, makes his way into the inner sanctum of the vessel. At first glance it's nothing more than a mess of corridors filled with mold, water puddles and other nastiness, but soon they run into trouble: the party is attacked by savage-like crew-members. Further in Riley and his team discover a whole different world, as he stumbles upon a make-shift farm full of Earth-based fruits, vegetables and grains. While the contact team gathers to make a report, they are encircled by that world's warrior class. A quick phaser fight ensues, causing injury to one of the natives – a female. Riley, unsure, brings her back to the Enterprise as they pull out.

“The young woman brought back aboard the Enterprise by Lieutenant Reilly's contact team is responding well to treatment: physically, there's no question she's going to be fine. I'm more worried about the culture shock, the mental strain imposed by the sudden discovery that the world she's grown up thinking of as the be-all and end-all of the universe is nothing more than a spaceship -a ship we need her help to gain control of before it and her entire world are destroyed. So far, her response has been to regard everything that's happened as a "demon trick": this could be masking some deeper strain, but we don't have the time right now for a gradual indoctrination. The captain has to convince her--and soon-- that the crew of the Enterprise is not composed of "demons" -- And he'd better do it before she gets a good look at Spock...” (McCoy, medical log)

A lecture by the Enterprise's historian, a man named “Specks”, discovers the ship in question is in fact the Wanderer, a lost colony from Earth launched almost two hundred years earlier. Wanderer had been known as L5, a specialized colony of Earth in the late twenty-first and early twenty-second centuries. After it was constructed, and through various social and political issues of the age, L5 launched itself into cometary orbit, and then later boosted itself out of the solar system, as the first manned interstellar craft. Having failed to find inhabitable planets at the first couple of stars it encountered, Wanderer used the gravitational pull of those stars to accelerate it, and it was now traveling at about one-third the speed of light (a difficult speed for the Enterprise to maintain).

Furthermore, the reaction the young woman had upon introduction to the Enterprise is proof-positive that this culture has lost much of their technology and reverted to a primitive form of living. The ship is their “world” and they are unaware of space, stars, or planets. Or, such knowledge is dismissed as legend, or worse, heresy. What's worse, the inhabitants are divided into two factions who are at war with one another, the cause of which is learned when Katholin Arven, the young lady that Riley injured, comes-round and begins to accept the situation. About 100 years ago there was a “civil war” aboard ship, a mutiny, which came about after some of the inhabitants wanted to stop and settle on a planet they discovered while others wanted to continue on their journey. The result was one group taking possession of the main control room and the farms, and lived in reasonable comfort in the “upper” levels (Arwen's people), while the other group took possession of the ship's reactor engines (turning them off) and scratched a living in the outer (“lower”) levels (the “savages” as she calls them).

As the senior staff decides whether contact should be further pressed (and obviously what to do about Arwen), the point becomes moot when Checkov discovers that L5 – Wanderer – is on a collision course for the Galactic Whirlpool: a maelstrom of two orbiting black holes, cutting a swath through space and pulling everything in its path into its immense gravity well. If the Enterprise does not interfere, the ship will be destroyed in a matter of months! Now the problem becomes one of how to intervene, rather than should they, so as to cause the least amount of panic and disruption to their lives. So, Kirk decides the two warring factions must set aside their differences and work together;

therefore, sends Kevin Riley (as Arwen has developed a relationship with him) with Arwen back to Wanderer.

But when Arwen and Riley go to see the ship's captain, a man who is more interested in doctrine than science, they are immediately captured and sentenced to death! After a bit of interrogation, in which Riley slips in and out of consciousness by design, he and Arwen are dropped into the lower levels as punishment. There they are met and captured by the lower-level "savages" and taken to their Captain, Gomez. And after a bout with a runaway cart, they come to realize the people in the lower levels are not savages, they're a group of people who have had to make due with much, much less than their more blessed counterparts. As such the peoples of the lower levels are short, stocky and somewhat hunched over due to the elevated level of simulated gravity, but they are far from savages. A point that is understood more when Riley and Arwen speak with Captain Gomez directly – he understands and is willing to take a chance.

Although touchy, Captain Kirk convinces Captain Gomez to trust him long enough to get the ship's engine plants working so the ship's course can be altered and thus saved. For his part, Gomez provides Kirk information regarding the ship's interior design so the Enterprise crew can storm the upper levels and take the control room, which will be needed to issue orders for the ship's engines.

In an effort to distract the inhabitants of the upper levels, Riley devises a plan of distraction using colorful, animated computer-generated creatures, which he sets loose about the ship. A problem ensues when one of the Wanderer's plants is activated, turning the lights on across the entire ship. This incapacitates the people in the lower levels, who are used to living without the light, but it gives Kirk an idea: to level the playing field, he'll have all the lights made much brighter, which will blind everybody and give the boarding party enough time to reach the control room. At first, this is a success, but soon they come under fire.

Kirk, through a few setbacks via locked doors and/or sealed off tunnels, finally arrives at the control center and comes face to face with Frost, the Captain of the upper levels. Frost still does not believe what Kirk is trying to tell him and captures the landing party with Riley's phaser. And now with an armed phaser pointed at his belly, Captain Kirk continues his path of diplomacy with Frost; however, the Bridge has been monitoring the situation and the moment it starts to get out of hand, beams in armed personnel and attempts to beam out Frost. Unfortunately, though, he fires the phaser in a mid-transport cycle, causing a contained explosion that incinerates him.

Dr. Hobie, the ship's science counsel leader, attempts to take Frost's place bearing arms upon him, but Kirk convinces him otherwise. He and Gomez begin working to forge a new future for the Wanderer, together. The ship ends up on a course for Malcor's Pride which has been looking for new colonists. And the Enterprise winds up at K-7 for some much-needed R&R.