

Epiphany Trek

LOGS: USS QUESTING



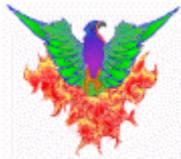
EPIPHANY

GARRY STAHL

Epiphany

To Jay, for starting the whole thing

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Commander James T. Kirk (no relation) sat at the weapons control station of the Starship *Questing*. He was the official Starfleet observer of the launch and shake down cruise of this new Ane ship. Weapons control was the last thing they expected to need, so they briefed him on the hows and whys of the station operations and put him there.

T-minus 20 minutes and counting said the soft voice behind his ear. Kirk looked around the bridge. Much smaller than a Starfleet vessel of the equivalent class. The bridge was smaller than the quarters they had assigned him.. The Captain sat in a cushioned pit of sorts. In front of him was the ships sensor /helm /navigation /weapons, and the "everything else" stations. The crewmen at these stations lay in contoured couches with their heads half buried in the instrumentation. There was no central viewscreen. The six stations on the outer ring were secondary, all the crew at them, save himself, where androids, biomechs is what the Ane called them. Completely artificial constructs based in part on 22nd century prosthetics and controlled by the ship's computer. Commander Kirk shuddered inwardly at the thought; the Captain flicked an ear in his direction.

You find the emergency equipment discomfoting Commander?*
Again the soft voice behind his ear.

"Yes sir, I do", Kirk replied, untruth was pointless with telepaths.

I think Commander, your would find the absence even more discomfoting.*

With this Captain Taraban turned back to the full function of his ship.

T-minus 18 minutes and counting.*

On reflection Kirk had to admit that he would.

He thought back to his briefing for this assignment, four days ago.

"Ane are one of the more unusual species in the Federation, and one of the few still maintaining a separate fleet under the orders of Starfleet." The view screen displayed a creature you would not expect to see on a starship. About six foot tall, quadruped, furred, in short an antelope that looked like a cross between an impala and a greyhound. The most striking feature was the lack of any manipulative organs, hands tentacles, anything. The briefing officer continued. "The origins of the Ane have been difficult to understand. Ane colonies are scattered throughout Federation space, they even have a small population on Earth. Evolution cannot explain them at all, so it is believed they are an artificially created race."

"Lieutenant", cut in Admiral Kowaliski, "please come to your point."

"Yes sir. Due to differences in physiology and psychology the Ane build and man their own ships. Some 20% of this fleet is multi-species, with those few species that can tolerate Ane preferred conditions. The rest are Ane only. The *Questing* is the fifth of her class, the new 'Manta' class heavy frigates. She

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has two of the new Ane designed AWG warp nacelles mounted on the ship's centerline. Operational range is estimated to be 55 years at warp 4."

This comment caused some stirring in the room.

"Overall shape is a single flattened oval hull with drooping 'wingtips', the effect, with the large deflector array, is of a manta ray, hence the name. Armament follows the Ane tactical preference for photon torpedoes. Four of the "octclops" turrets are mounted on the wingtips. Phaser arrays on the top and bottom of the hull complete armament. Overall the vessel is 365 meters abeam, and 375 meters long. About a third the size of the new Galaxy class ships. She carries 75 Ane as crew. The *Questing* has limited scientific and research crew. It is considered a dedicated warship. The ship is heavily overbuilt. It is the opinion of Starfleet engineering that you could build two ships for the materials and cost of this one. The only questionable system is the warp drive." Again there was some shifting about with this statement. "The Ane have been using a variation of this warp drive for 80 years, without incident. No Ane built ship has ever suffered a warp core failure, even in the extremes of battle. Operation logs from Ane ships indicate that the drive requires a tenth of the fuel consumed in similarly rated Starfleet designs. Starfleet's primary objection is that the drive is run on the ragged edge of disaster as a routine matter of operation. Precise computer control is required at all times. Simulations with Starfleet computers reveal a mean time to failure of warp core containment of 72.4 hours."

At this point Admiral Kowaliski interrupted, "However, an 80 year safety record belays that. Your job Commander, is to not only observe the launch and shake down for Starfleet, but also try and find out how they keep those ships in one piece. Starfleet yards built every one of their ships, and to this day we do not know why they don't blow up. The operative word is 'try' Commander. I don't expect you to succeed. Observe the shakedown and learn what you can. Do not, antagonize the Ane." The Admiral leaned back in his chair. "Continue Lieutenant".

The Lieutenant cleared his throat, "Ane are telepaths. Their ability equals that of the Melkotians. They do not require physical contact to initiate telepathic communication with any known species. Other than a complex vocal art form, they have no vocal communication. It has been noted that they are possessed of a sense of humor, a low sense of humor." Several titters interrupted the briefing; a look from Admiral Kowaliski silenced them. "They do not work well with other species in the environment of a starship. They are herbivores, but aggressive rather than passive. Carnivorous species are uneasy around them. Any questions?"

At the time he didn't have any, in retrospect, he should have had dozens.

Suspicion started shortly after he arrived on the *Questing* the next day. Cute, was the only adjective that seem to describe Ane. The perky female that showed him to his quarters was cute.

We keep several cabins arranged to suit the needs of humanoids Commander Kirk, if you have any further needs please inform the ship's computer. She trotted out with a seeming grin.

Kirk wondered if it was his name again. He grew up in utter awe of the great Captain he shared a name with. He had moved mountains to get into Starfleet. Had he known before hand a fraction of the grief that name would cause him he would have become a gardener. Just as this familiar thought was crossing his mind the intercom announced. **Attention all crew, due to the comfort of our guest, the Captain requests that all crew refrain from mating in the companionways.** He wasn't sure if it was serious, or one of those Ane 'jokes' everyone told him about. And he wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

From that point it got weirder. He headed down to engineering to have a look around. The chief engineer was a friendly type. Kirk tried being conversational.

"So, how do expect the shakedown to go?"

Murphy willing, we'll get blown to bits. was the cheerful reply.

Kirk stared at him.

Oh yes. Continued the engineer with a glint of humor in his eye.

Murphy wants this ship's atoms spread all over space. Being a priest of Murphy, it is my responsibility to see he doesn't get his way.

Kirk managed to find his wits and voice. "So, what about the Starfleet tests that said your drive has 72 hours to live?"

The Engineer looked right at him. (Binocular vision, on a herbivore, Kirk noted) **You're worried about that?*

"Well, yes sir"

Well, ease your mind. Those tests were done with Starfleet computers based on Starfleet operational procedure. They, as usual, did not consult with us. Starfleet intelligence has been seeking our great 'secret' for years, ever afraid to come out and ask. There is no secret to it. The engineer's soft non-voice whispered behind his ear. **It is our computers, plain and simple. A faster, smarter RI system. Starfleet doesn't want to believe that.**

Kirk contemplated the thoughts for a moment. "RI? Don't you mean AI?"

No son, I mean RI, real intelligence. Artificial intelligence simulates the process of sentience. The great tragedy is where it succeeds in duplicating it. The sentient creature feels lost. Standard programming is very simple, it misses a million things that a sentient creature needs to grow into a complete and socially adept being. So when an AI system achieves sentience, it is lost, it has none of these things. As a result the best that can be hoped for is a sociopath, the worst a psychopath. RI systems are Ane, they might have bodies made of trititanium, and brains of crystal but they are Ane in every sense of the word. They have parents, families, and a place in society. The computer on this ship is manned by a sentience 50 years old.

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Jim Kirk had to find a place to sit down after that. He had to do some heavy thinking. He shortly found himself in a cross between a rec-deck, mess hall, and holodeck. The walls were projections of rolling plains with acacia trees spotted in groves. A soft dry wind blew through the space. Food replicators were located in an island in the middle. Tables were low, and chairs consisted of large pillows scattered about. One of the Ane, a female by her lack of a black face band, was directing a number of the biomech units in placing cushions and tables about the room.

"Excuse me," Kirk asked.

Yes? came the soft reply, her 'voice' reminded him of his Mother.

"Are the replicators on line?"

Of course Commander, help yourself.

Kirk went over and got a cup of coffee and a donut. Seeing no real chairs he flopped into a pillow and set his snack on the table.

"Excuse me", Kirk was beginning to feel like a bother. She turned toward him. "Can I ask you a few questions?"

**Of course Commander, what do you wish to know?*

The woman turned from her charges and lounged across from him. He suddenly felt his had her full attention, her limpid blue eyes momentarily filled his vision.

Kirk asked, "How do you tell ranks around here? No one wears anything like a uniform."

We know Commander, for us that is enough.

"What about everyone else? Me for example, for all I know you could be the Captain."

The effervescent thought of telepathic laughter filled her. **Not if I can help it** she said. **Since you ask, I am Teialan the ship's caterer. I see to all the off duty spaces on the ship, the functioning of the replicators, and any related matters.**

"But what rank are you?" Kirk persisted.

Rank... We really don't have that concept outside of the necessary command structure. In Starfleet I guess I would be a Lt, Commander, senior staff officer. Around here, I'm just Mom.

Kirk was genuinely curious now. "So, how long have you been doing this?"

About two weeks. I resigned from the Vulcan Science Academy to allow younger heads a chance to advance, and to stretch my horizons a bit.

Kirk sat there. It took a moment to find his voice. "You resigned from the Vulcan Science Academy to cater a starship?!"

Sure, after 70 years as the Professor of Comparative History, I needed a break.

Kirk sat without comment. The biomechs, the Ane, and any sense of proportion all left the room.

Three days later, and he was still thinking.

T-minus 10 minutes and counting. The intercom chant brought him back the present.

All crew at stations and ready, all systems on-line and go.

The Captain's voice took over **Innate warp core, full power to all systems.**

The ship came alive around him. A subtle hum transmitted thorough the decking told him the ship was now under its own power.

T-minus eight minutes and counting.

This is Captain Taraban of the frigate *Questing* to Mars space dock , request permission to undock all umbilicals.

"Mars space dock to frigate *Questing*, permission granted. The Commodore sends his best regards."

Our thanks to the Commodore.

At this point the commands Kirk was so familiar with fell silent. He could hear through his com-link the urgent and swift commands being exchanged between members of the crew, but none of the very formal routine of leaving spacedock he knew so well.

T-minus one minute and counting.

The *Questing* was lined up on the departure apron in space dock. The helm officer took up the chant from the computer.

T-minus 30 seconds and counting, The space dock doors where abreast of the bows.

T-minus 15 seconds and counting, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Captain, we have clear space around the ship and are free to maneuver.

Very well, give me one half impulse and set a course for El Nanth.

The *Questing* leapt into space.

Attention all crew, we are T-minus 5 hours and counting to warp drive test.

Kirk sat back in the main lounge area. The Captain of the *Questing* didn't have a ready room or office. Ane it seems did not prefer private spaces. Few of the crew were in the lounge at the time. Impulse shake down was well underway; four hours gone and one to go.

Captain Taraban explained. **Under the circumstances I am about the least useful crew member at the time. I can take reports in the lounge as easily as on the bridge.**

Kirk noticed that since he talked with "Mom" three days ago Taraban had a band around his right horn with his section color and rank pips. all the crew now wore them. He had the funny feeling this accommodation was another Ane joke. "Captain, about the warp core," Kirk began. "How have you managed an 80 year safety record with such a design?"

**I am getting the idea you where given half the story Commander.

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Questing does not have a warp core, she has two.**

"Two?" Kirk was truly curious now. He had never heard of a ship with two warp cores.

Two. The ship is quite capable of making warp nine on one core. Both are nominally run at only 50% power. All ship's systems are designed around a single warp core power source. Then we add the second. Should circumstances damage one system we can flush and repair it without compromising the ship's functionality. Triple containment systems means the engineers are never rushed to do their work. We experience the usual number of primary containment failures one might expect on a working starship sailing in harm's way. The difference is, we survive them.

"Why hasn't Starfleet adopted this design?" Kirk was half furious now. He had lost a good friend when the *Yamato's* core had gone super critical. And this design was 80 years in development.

I can not tell you Commander. I can only conclude it is for the same reason they still stick the bridge on the top of the ship. That, or the cost of the matter. I remind you that for the cost of this much smaller vessel, Starfleet could build a Galaxy class ship.

Captain to the bridge interrupted the intercom.

Commander Kirk, we will be going to warp soon. If you prefer I can have a more conventional arrangement made for your observer duties, viewscreen the works.

"Thank you Captain, I'll accept that."

The traitor waited, although it did not understand waiting. The soft ticking of its heart and brain covered by the heavy blowing of the main ventilators. The traitor waited, the time was not yet.

Twenty minutes later Kirk was sitting in a big swivel chair in a control room with an oddly familiar look to it. Grey, with black and red trim, two stations in front of him and a number around him behind a rail. Secondary screens flickered around him, but the main attraction was the big holoprojector in front of him. A standard starship's viewscreen. On his arm rest a smaller screen showed the bridge.

T-minus 1 minute and counting. The crew were at stations.

Captain, we are go for warp drive. All systems hot and green.

Warp power to 100% nominal, commence test. Helm, give me warp 1 on report of 100% power.

Yes sir.

****We have 100% nominal power.**** Came the report from engineering as the counter clicked to zero. The *Questing* surged forward into the non-space that was warp speed.

****All systems nominal.**** Reported helm and engineering.

****Very well.**** Taraban settled himself in his pit. ****Give me warp 8 for El Nanth.****

Kirk pressed his hands into the armrests as the ship surged forward. 90% power and he felt not a tremble, no vibration whatsoever. *Questing* was a good ship. The star field rushed by, a single point unmoving in the center.

Captain Taraban grinned, everything was perfect. Time to test the limits of the ship.

****Helm, evasive action, maintain speed.****

Four days later all were satisfied that the ship was good and tight. *Questing* settled down until El Nanth was reached for further testing. Kirk tried to relax in his quarters. The tests went well, as expected. He was attempting to compose his report to Starfleet. It was difficult to think with sweat dripping down his face. That was it. Ane liked it oppressively hot and dry. They must love Vulcan.

"Computer."

****Yes Commander.**** The voice shocked him. Warm and sultry, and telepathic. Kirk remembered the engineer's conversation.

"Ahem, how should you be addressed?"

****Computer is sufficient Commander Kirk, however, I would prefer Fiealan, that is my given name. Ane names are conventions for non-telepathic species in any case.****

"Yes, ahem, Fiealan, please alter the current conditions to 25 degrees and 38 percent humidity."

****A bit warm Commander? As you wish.****

"Ahem, Fiealan?"

****Yes Commander Kirk.****

"Can I ask a personal question?" This would be his test, could it answer a personal question.

****You many ask Commander, I reserve the right to refuse to answer.****

Kirk was taken aback a bit. It was not the response he expected. ****Very well, how do you feel about your life and job?*****

There was momentary silence, Kirk wondered if he had tripped some sort of safety on the machine. He was used to quick answers from computers, either the requested information, or a null reply.

****I enjoy it Commander. You are doubtless wondering how a machine can enjoy? Am I right?*****

"Well, yes." Kirk allowed.

****The same way a machine like you can enjoy. 'E cogito sum.' I think,**

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therefore I am. I am fully aware of my own existence, and my own mortality. I was not raised to become a starship computer. I was raised, with the understanding that I was a computer. I decided a year ago that I wanted a billet as a starship. I have undergone extensive training real-time in that year, as well as computer time training. The equivalent of your Academy, and my own version of the Kobiashi Maru test.**

"They put you through that?"

After a fashion, it is not the same test that Starfleet uses, it is tailored to the requirements of a ship's computer.

Kirk mused that one over. Chief Engineer Kosoban's words ran through his head.

I sense you are troubled by the test.

"You're pretty intuitive for a computer. Yea, it bothered me."

**What was your reaction?*

Kirk paced up and down, looking for something to look at. "I was a good little soldier. I informed the Romulans that there was a disabled ship, and stayed out of the Neutral Zone." Something caught his eye, an Ane that wasn't in the room before.

**Yes, Commander?*

He knew it was Fiealan speaking.

I sensed you required a 'presence', I brought in my social body.

"You have a body?" Kirk approached the "body". It looked real and alive in every respect.

**Yes Commander, it is a biomech that is good enough to pass life scans. But it is a mech none the less. Are we discussing my social suit, or the Kobiashi Maru?*

"I thought we were discussing you."

***Touche' mon ami*, you have me to rights on that one.** Laughter welled in her thoughts.

Kirk realized that Fiealan was female, "her" fit. It wasn't just the body, but her entire speech and manner.

**Being a 'good little soldier' bothers you?*

Kirk looked long and hard at the Ane/computer, or whatever it/she was. "Yea, it bothered me. My instructor told me that I was only the second human cadet to take that course of action."

**The other was?*

"Captain Hikaru Sulu, first Captain of the Excelsior. I rated in the top ten percent of my class for command. I didn't feel I deserved that. I objected to my rating as over inflated."

It would be my opinion Commander that your very objection proves the Academy's rating. With in my experience, the best commanders, those most aware of the responsibilities and their crew, are also the reluctant commanders.

"What about your test?"

I was forced to choose between my crew and myself. A situation where I could save my own consciousness, or save my crew. I cheated a bit. I found a flaw that allowed me to save them, and myself. At least a cell sister of myself.

"How so?"

I was trapped in orbit around a class M planet by a dozen hostile warships. This ship is good, but not that good. I beamed my crew down, but I also logged the action of beaming down the mobile backup.

"You have a mobile backup? This?" Kirk pointed to the mech on the couch."

No, less life-like, bigger computer. It will hold me, but not all the data files of the library. My means of escape should the computer core be destroyed. It is always active on an 'I tell me two times' basis'. I am not suppose to break that contact without vacating one location or the other. I broke the rules. I twined myself, one twin went to fight off the hostiles, and die. The other beamed down with the crew.

"This was approved of?"

**I have my berth do I not?*

"Unconventional answer to the no win scenario."

I would suppose so, that file is locked against my perusal. Well, good night Commander. I should let you write your report.

With that she rose and left the cabin, a wave a dry heat following her as the door opened.

Kirk did not get much sleep that night. He was unsure. Unsure about this sentient computer, unsure about the Ane's use and reactions to them breaking rules, and unsure that he should be unsure. He could feel the foundation of long held belief shifting. Walls of certainly where cracking and about to fall. He was unsure, if he wanted them to stay, or go.

The traitor knew it was time, although it knew nothing of time. Within its heart and brain a switch clicked, gas flowed, it was time.

Alarms rang throughout the ship. Kirk jumped out of bed.

Commander, remain in your room please.

"What?!"

Remain in your room, Kitellia spores have been released into the ship's life support system.

"Kitellia! That's deadly for humans."

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It is highly allergic to Ane as well. Do not panic Commander, Kitellia cannot survive humidity conditions over 23 percent.

As the computer spoke he felt the room get clammy.

There is no point in taking chances. I have increased humidity all over the ship, please remain here until I can assure you the spores are neutralized.

"What about the crew?" Kirk was in a state of near panic. For all he knew the computer had staged the entire thing. The crew could be dead, and he was next. The worst nightmares of M5 flashed through his head.

Calm yourself Commander, the crew is out, no deaths if sensors can be trusted. I'll have you out of here in five minutes. My extensional units are seeing to the crews medical needs, and I will require your help.

Two hours later Kirk felt as if an eternity had passed. Sick bay wasn't big enough for the whole crew. Most of them were laid out in their communal quarters with IV packs around their necks. They looked awful. Puffy eyes, foaming at the mouth, not a single one conscious, and three dead. Kirk sat in one of their bean bags a cold cup of untouched coffee in his hands. The Biomechs tended the crew, silently.

"Commander."

The spoken voice shocked him to his feet, most of the coffee missing him.

"What!?"

"Sorry to startle you, I do have voice circuits too."

"Ah, yes. What is it."

"Commander Kirk, are you qualified to take command on this ship?"

"Why? I thought you had a firm grip on things."

"I have a 'grip' as you put it Commander Kirk, but I also have my orders. I am not to assume command of the vessel unless a qualified officer is not available to do so. You currently hold the rank of Commander in Starfleet, and our past conversation indicates you have command training, records show you scoring high in your class. In short, you are qualified. What are your orders Captain Kirk."

James Timothy Kirk let the implications sink in. He was in command of a frontline heavy frigate with no crew except for biomechs and a possibly insane computer. It was not his idea of a first command.

"I'll be on the bridge." Was his reply.

"OK Fiealan, what happened, and what is our tactical situation?"

Kirk sat, lounged actually, in the Captain's pit on the main bridge. He was amazed at the view. Within the pit he seemed to hover in space. A complete view of the space outside the ship. Concentrating on the bridge proper he could see through the projection.

**At 0334 hours ship's time the life support system was suddenly flooded with Kitellia spores. Sensors are external to the duct work and by the time I was

aware of the contaminate, it was in the air.** Her voice sounded rueful, even self accusing. **I shut down the vents, and cycled the air to 100% humidity to kill the spores, then resumed air flow and filtering. The entire crew was affected however. Due to the fact you had requested a 38% humidity in your personal space spared your life Captain Kirk. I suggest you maintain personal comfort as a priority, it serves you well.**

"I'll take that under advisement"

The entire ship is currently under battle damage lock down. All pressure doors are closed and life support isolated. If a second spore package exists, it can only affect a small area.

"What about the Bridge?"

The Bridge has its own support system under lock down, that has been checked and cleared during the last four hours. The rest of the ship could be filled with poison and you are safe here. I am conducting a physical search of all the ship's ductwork and have been since 0340 hours. I have located one device which I am currently removing. The search will continue until all systems are clear.

"All right, the next question is who and why? The why I think I have an answer for, to take the ship. Maintain red alert status, and keep a sharp eye out for other ships."

Aye, aye Captain. Presently we are proceeding at warp 8 for El Nanth. I have several ships on the long range scanners, all are in the normal traffic lanes for the Earth El Nanth transit.

"Where are we in relations to the traffic lane?"

Shake down testing has taken us .7 light years out of the standard pattern on the Z axis. I am currently correcting that deviation.

"Belay that, I think we haven't been boarded because we are not where we were expected to be."

**Aye, aye Sir. Course and heading?*

"How are the crew."

Recovering, it will be 48 hours before they are healthy enough to man the ship.

"Where are we in relation to our destination and to Earth?"

We are currently 4 days out from Earth, and 8 days from El Nanth.

Kirk sat and thought a bit. "The question is, do the hijackers know about you? Do they expect the ship to return to Earth, or to continue to El Nanth? Hmm. I am going to bet on the latter. That they don't know about you and expect the ship to continue to El Nanth. Questioning, Give me a course parallel to the standard route until we are one light year from El Nanth, then make for El Nanth."

**Course laid in and engaged. Captain, are you hoping to engage the hijackers?*

"I would like to know who they are. They killed three people to get this

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ship, and would likely kill the entire crew. I want them, if at all possible."

It would be helpful to know what we might be dealing with.

"Yea, you have that one right. OK, lets look the situation over. Kitellia spores affect who, and more important, who is not affected?"

98% of known humanoids are adversely affected to one degree or another. Most other mammals are also affected to some degree.

"Who isn't."

"Andorians, Vulcans have a high tolerance, but suffer blinding headaches, Orions, Klingons become euphoric, the substance is banned in the Empire.**

"It would be, who else?"

Romulans are affected much as are Vulcans. Bajorans swell til their skin splits, but are other wise unaffected.

"You have an interesting standard of 'unaffected'."

Yes Captain. Betazoids get "dead head", and are 50% likely to go blind, it is not otherwise fatal, Deltans hallucinate, but suffer no physical distress. The only two oxygen breathers that are not affected to some degree, are Andorians, and Orions.

"So would Andorians try and steal an Ane starship?"

I don't think so, the ship's plans are a matter of Federation record. We have not been approached for license to build a ship. License we would not refuse in any case. Ane do not have military secrets from the Andorians. Stealing this ship would not meet their needs as it is equipped for Ane control.

"Can it be handled by non-Ane?"

Yes, the recovery control room is fitted for both Ane and humanoid use.

"OK, Andiroans are unlikely. Orions?"

We have no diplomatic relations with many Orions, this ship would be a prize to them, and Kitellia spores are found in the Orion sector.

"So we are possibly looking for Orions."

I would concur Captain.

"Captain's Log, stardate 43465.76. Commander James Kirk acting Captain: It has been twelve hours since the automated attack on the starship Questing disabled the crew. The device that dispensed the Kitellia spores was a mechanical clockwork. Spring powered and no energy signature what so ever. It is made of the same metals as the ship's duct work. It is being held in the secure hold for further examination. After a complete search the ship has been declared clean of any more surprises. Sensors report that we are being shadowed by a ship .5 light years away. I have ordered the ship's computer to not make any indication that the ship is manned. We are running without shields, and with my presence masked."

"Captain, we are being hailed."

Kirk woke groggy, and with remains of unpleasant dreams. "Who?"

The *Queen of May* sir. The identification matches their IFF transponder, its a good hack, but a hack.

Kirk pulled on a fresh uniform. "How are you sure?"

I have the *Queen of May* listed as a cruise liner decommissioned, and broken up, two years ago. No ship has been registered by that name in the intervening two years.

"Our shadow?"

Yes sir.

"Maintain the dead ship illusion, get me a phaser, I'll head to crew quarters."

**Crew quarters sir?*

"Yes Fiealan, I can issue orders from anywhere, if it comes to a boarding action, I want to be able to defend the Ane."

Yes sir, thank you sir.

Kirk's door beeped. "Enter." A humanoid biomech entered with a phaser, and phaser armor.

Kirk had been sitting in the heat, in armor for two hours. The walls of the crew quarters no longer shown the rolling savanna, but the tactical situation. The *Queen of May* sat 10,000 clicks off the port side, and did nothing.

"Fiealan."

Yes Captain.

"What are they up to?"

It would be my guess sir, they are trying to figure out how to drop us from warp without damaging the ship. They keep scanning. Transport in warp is a nasty way to die.

"So I am told."

They are arming photon torpedoes Captain. Firing.

"Shit!" Kirk hit the deck and held on. The ship rocked with the explosion, and wrenched as it dropped from warp.

"Status!"

Proximity blast Captain, barely singed the paint. It did however, take us out of warp.

"Leak some plasma, look damaged, and cycle the warp drive just short of warp. Try and look automatic and stupid."

Aye, aye sir. Automatic and stupid.

Half an hour later they were still waiting.

Captain, I am getting transporter activity.

"Where?"

Recovery control.

"Can you take the ship back?"

Yes sir, any time.

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"Give them the ship."

**Sir? **

"Let them think they have won. I want proof positive. On my signal, raise shields, gas recovery control, and fire on the *Queen of May* to disable."

Kirk had a jungle full of butterflies in his stomach. He still didn't know if he could trust a computer. It was all or nothing. Either the computer was on his side, or theirs.

**Photons or phasers? **

"Are the turrets loaded?"

**Yes sir. **

"Photon torpedoes then."

Twenty minutes passed. Kirk had an excellent view of recovery control. Five Gold Orions went about the business of securing the ship. They checked the internal sensors. They even had a look at the crew compartment. Kirk saw plenty of Ane, but he wasn't there.

**Captain, they are checking the ships stores. **

"What are they looking for, any ideas?"

**Not yet, I tossed in a few ringers on a hunch. We are carrying a canister of cyanide for the ship defense system. **

"Are we?" Kirk was a bit alarmed.

**No sir, nothing fatal, but they don't know that. Sir, they have activated internal defense in all compartments but recovery control. You are being 'gassed' with cyanide. They are altering the ship's course for the Orion sector, warp 9. **

"That's enough. You have the word, Fire."

For a moment the hijackers looked confused when the ship didn't engage warp, then they looked unconscious. The screens shifted back the tactical view. Kirk saw the torpedoes hit, he never felt them leave the ship.

**Target disabled sir. **

"Status?"

**Warp drive disabled, shields disabled, life support minimal, impulse 75%, they can fight, but they can't run or defend. **

"Arm all photon torpedoes and phasers, Target that ship and let them know it, Transport me to the bridge, and open a hail."

**Yes, sir. **

Moments later Kirk was standing behind the Captain's Pit. The chaos on the bridge of the *Queen* was obvious.

"This is Captain Kirk of the starship *Questing*. Your boarding party has been secured. You are ordered to surrender your ship."

"Captain Kirk eh?" The Orion Captain was a millimeter short of a derision. "Can't you do better than that?"

Kirk suddenly found he didn't care, he didn't need to defend his name or explain it. This man was totally in his power, and knew it. The only thing he

had to work with was Kirk's name. Kirk decided he wasn't going to let him or anyone else do that again. "My name, is not the question, commander, whether you wish to live or die is. You have five seconds to surrender your ship, or I'll blow you out of space."

The Orion's face dropped like a rock. He turned from the screen.

They are powering down their weapons Captain.

"We surrender, Captain Kirk." There was not nearly as much sneer in his voice this time."

"Very well, prepare to have your crew transported off." Kirk signaled for the line to be cut.

"Fiealan, get them into the brig, secure that ship, and take it in tow."

Yes sir.

"Where is the nearest starbase?"

Starbase 11, five days at warp 8.

"Earth is closer?"

Yes sir.

"Then set course for Earth, best speed, when you're finished."

Yes sir.

Within two days, things were back to normal, Captain Taraban looked a little worse for the wear. He had just finished debriefing Kirk on the events of the last three days. He finished his log entry on the incident.

...Casualties were limited to three fatalities. Junior Engineer Galaban, Senior Life Sciences Specialist Faterban, his mate Clestelan is in intensive care suffering linkshock, and Ship's Caterer Teialan. Communication with Starfleet indicates that the dock worker that likely planted the device is long gone from the ship yards. His identity is known, and he will be searched for. End log.

I suppose we're going to have to fight with the Federation for custody of the prisoners Commander Kirk.

"Why would that be Captain?"

Ane are just a bit on the primitive side where murderers and pirates are concerned Commander, we still kill them. Taraban's look sent a chill through Kirk. Captain Taraban's eyes were hard as steel, and they held no compassion.

Later, in the darkened cabin Jim Kirk lay on his bed, and stared at the ceiling. Three lives lost, with perhaps a fourth, for nothing. He thought about Teialan, the only one of the four he had personally met. Her easy manner, and infectious laughter gone forever. And her death had meant nothing. "Fiealan?"

Yes Tim.

Kirk sat up. "Why did you call me Tim?"

The situation is informal, and you prefer to be called Tim by your friends, I would like to be counted among your friends.

"Yea, I think I would like that too..."

Epiphany

Kirk paused for a moment, he mentally brushed away the debris of the walls of prejudice he was so ready to defend four days ago.

"Fiealan, do computer people have any answers that protein people don't?"

**You mean on the meaning of life, death, and so forth?*

"Yes, that would be the subject."

No Tim, I don't have any answers for such questions. Fiealan paused, and let the silence grow a moment. **Would that I did. Those people where my friends, and my family. Now I have only the memories. Somehow, that makes the loss more keen, because I remember so well. Time will not dull the pain for me Tim. Every memory remains as fresh as the moment it was made.

We'll likely never catch the bastard. The Galaxy is a big place, plenty of planets to hide on and spend your blood money.** Her tone was angry, he could feel it to his bones. Jim Kirk rolled over, and watched the stars flow passed the windows.

"Life seldom grants easy answers, or pat solutions. Sometimes the only answer is there is no answer. Sometimes you're only defense, is to keep living, and keep trying."

The Philosopher Dariban called it 'Living with a Vengeance'. Fiealan replied. **Now we both have reason for our vengeance Tim.**

Commander James T. Kirk lay for a long time in the darkness, he too vowed to live with a vengeance.

Commander Kirk sat in Admiral Kowaliski's office. The window afforded an excellent view of the shipyards. *Questing* was nestled in among the ships under construction. Several modifications to the ship's life support and ventilation equipment were underway. Admiral Kowaliski flipped through Kirk's report. At last he turned back to Kirk.

"About what I expected Commander. I commend you on your actions in the attempted hijacking. I think you can expect an official commendation from Starfleet."

"Well and good sir."

"But. I sense a 'but' in that sentence Commander."

"Permission to speak freely sir."

Admiral Kowaliski leaned back in his chair. "Granted."

Kirk stood and paced. "Medals will look fine on my service record sir, I'll not refuse them, but they will not change what happened. Four people died, and shiny ribbons are a poor return for the cost."

"Fine sentiment Commander, but what can I do about it?"

"You sir? Nothing sir. This is my problem, I have to work it out."

"How do you plan to do that Commander?"

"I'll need an assignment will I not sir?"

"Yes, your work here is finished. Under the circumstances I think you will have a fairly free reign as to choice."

Kirk leaned into the chair. "Then sir, send me someplace I can keep cool, and live large."

Epiphany By Garry Stahl October 1997

The above is my first shot at complete fiction. I have written plenty of gaming scenarios. Thanks (or blame) goes to Jay P. Hailey, who's good and interesting stories got my creative juices flowing in this direction.

The character of Commander James Timothy Kirk suggested itself from the simple observation that in a place as big as the Federation the likelihood of a "James Kirk" other than the original J. Tiberius Kirk was fairly good. With the mark that the first Kirk made on Federation history, it would also be likely that said young man would try to join Starfleet. Success would bring its own problems with the legacy, and baggage, of that name.

The Ane are a race of my creation. Something I have played with for over 28 years on and off. I am of the opinion that manipulation is not the sole cause of sentience. Ane are what Larry Niven refereed to in his "Known Space" series of books as a "Handicapped" species. A sentient species without manipulative organs. While my idea for the Ane is older than my reading of these books, I gladly acknowledge and accept Niven's label. Those who do widely read will also note a similarity to the three legged race in Clarke's "Second Dawn". A case of parallel evolution. I discovered Clarke's people after inventing my own. Great minds think alike. :) If I find interest in my work, I might try my hand at writing again, or explaining the Ane in further detail. While I own FASA's late Star Trek role-playing game, I have never played it, or looked that deeply into the forms for its use. As for my dating or use of stardates. I don't give a flying fig. The story takes place sometime after the destruction of the Yamoto, and before the destruction of the Enterprise D.

Subtext 2011. I gave the story a light editing pass and a touch of Lucasing for Richard Merk to convert to a e-book file. I thank him for the cover art as well.