

Epiphany Trek

LOGS: USS KONGO



PASSAGES

GARRY STAHL

Passages

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Tim returned to the table. Tathilan was just digging into her sandwich. He looked at it, looked again. "Is that what I think it is?"

What do you think it is?

"Well, it looks like chicken."

She took a nibble. **Well it is.**

"And I thought you were the dedicated herbivore?"

I will be again once I get my Ane body back. Until then I keep the varied diet.

"We'll get your Ane body right after we eat. I called Ap Owen while I was out, caught her just before she left on leave, and the *Akiga* will be waiting for us at the dock. Seeing Savanna will be a thrill. I have been in his system what, three times and I have never been off the stations."

No one has stopped you from visiting Glade.

"Nothing wonderful about Glade, another planet with another city."

So, Savanna is just another planet with an even smaller city.

"Ah, but the allure of forbidden fruit, most people never get to see Savanna."

**And that is the attraction?*

He grinned. "Best way to get a Human to want to do something is to tell him he can't."

You would be the authority on that.

"So, why chicken?"

She blushed slightly. **I was curious.**

"Right. So whenever you finish your simulated lizard, lets get going."

The trip from Builder Station was uneventful. The *Akiga*, as promised, was at the dock. A crew to drive it was not. Ninety percent of the Kongo's crew were on extended leave with the *Kongo* herself in space dock for the next three months. Those long awaited custom inertial compensators were finally to be installed. Kirk piloted the shuttle himself. It was good to get his hands back on a ship. Ever since he had made Captain no one let him fly anything. Doing is own piloting was a pleasure.

Savanna guided him in. "*Akiga*, you are clear to land at Founder's Field. Transfer traffic control from Builder Station to Founder's Field."

"Roger Founder's Field, we have you four by four."

"We have your ETA at 15 minutes, do you concur."

"Roger that. ETA 15 minutes."

Tathilan said. **You seem to be having fun.**

"Well, I am. No one lets me play anymore. Where do we go to pick up the goods?"

The facility is right in the city. We can walk.

"Walking, can we still do that?"

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Last I checked.

"Very well, let me get the ship down."

Cutting sky went smoothly. They were shortly down on Founder's Field. Kirk was surprised. Founder's Field was just that, a grassy field with a simple beacon. A small handful of ships sat on the edges of the field. No one came out to greet them.

Kirk looked around as he adjusted the approved El Nanth outdoor wear.

"Is that it?"

Yes.

"No, 'Welcome to Savanna', customs check, anything?"

**No. Those that need to know, know you are here. I know where to go, so we don't need a guide. So why clutter your time with needless ritual?*

"I suppose, it just runs contrary to everything I am familiar with."

You will find that common here.

Kirk took a deep breath. "Nice smelling planet."

Glad you like it. What we came for is this way.

She held out a delicate hand. Kirk took it, and they walked together. City was almost a misnomer. A forest with a few buildings seemed more like it. Huge trees sheltered low structures loosely scattered around the area. No semblance of streets or roads was to be seen. Native wood and rock were the prominent building materials. If you let your eyes wander, it looked more like rock outcroppings in a wooded plain, than anything like a city. A few people, Humans and some Ane moved leisurely about the town.

Tathilan lead him to another building very like the others. **This is the place.**

"The complete Stoner Medical systems bio facility?"

Properly the Nanotech/Stoner RI facilitation center. You might say, the place I was born. The door opened for her. **Come on in.**

Tim shed his hat and glasses once they were inside. The reception area was "manned" by a young Ane female, at least Tim took her for young. She rose as they entered.

Can I be of assistance.

Tathilan and Jim Kirk. We are here to pick up an Ane-form bio.

**Jim Kirk from the *Kongo*?*

Kirk grinned. "The same."

She came round her desk. **I must thank you Captain. I am Xanalan. You and your crew rescued me from oblivion.**

"I had wondered what happened to you. Tathilan has been quite reticent with any information." Tim stepped forward took her head and touched noses. Xanalan moved closer for a more Human style hug. Tim obliged her with a firm neck hug.

"I am cheered to see you doing well. What have you been doing?"

**Manning the desk, learning how to be alive mainly. The transition has

been difficult, but has done me a world of good.**

"Any plans?"

Not yet, too many options, just laying around doesn't suit me, but I am not sure I ever want to go back to space. They are ready for you Tathilan, and thank you also.

You are most welcome. This way Tim.

Tim followed her into the complex, ramps lead them down almost at once.

"I thought you said she would never function as a computer?"

She hasn't Tim, that was not a bio.

"She is a normal biological? How?"

It's a very involved process, and it involves a number of steps the Federation Medical Association would freak over. But yes, we have examples of computer Ane that have crossed over to biological, and one example that has gone the other way.

"Some one volunteered to lose their body to become a computer?"

The one example I know of it was a choice of no choice. He had taken a massive dose of radiation and phaser coolant. In short, He was dead, and waiting to die. The transference saved him from death.

"If certain people found out about that you would have a rush of geriatric patients banging down your doors."

The sad reason we cannot let it become general knowledge. The demand would far outstrip the facilities, and not every one is suited to life as a computer. It is not a kindness to give everyone, everything they ask for. Too many lack the wit to ask wisely.

"So how do you decide?"

Better to not bring up the question than have to decide.

"Yet the genie is out of the bottle."

She smiled at him. **Not unless you let it out.**

"You mean to tell me that no Ane would ever tell?"

Tim, we kept the Builders a secret for 750,000 years. Do you think this thing greater?

"No, I suppose not. What if some great person that was not Ane could benefit from what you do, would you help?"

We would do all medical science could do for that person.

"An answer that is not an answer."

Take it as you will.

"Are you going to get all Prime Directivey on me?"

Remember the wisdom of Solomon, and why the jinn were imprisoned in the first place.

"Never heard of it."

Then maybe you should read those classics. In any case, we are here.

The two of them entered a door much like any other on the complex. It opened into a waiting room, for mixed company since both humanoid seating

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and the cushions favored by Ane were present. A tall Ansisi gentleman greeted them.

"Tathilan and Captain Kirk, good to see you. I am Doctor Huatoo NeAnsis. I have your new Ane-form ready Tathilan. How do you wish to handle the transference?"

**Well... Do you have an interim system?*

"As always."

**Okay, I want to look it over first. Coming Tim?*

"In for a pence, in for a pound, as my Father would say."

He followed the other two into the lab. The sight was a little disconcerting. "Tathilan" stood there, a blank look on "her" face. The Ane face he had grown so familiar with, and had lost two months back on Gramer 3.

Tathilan, the humanoid version, didn't hesitate. She walked around the Ane-form, examined it from every angle. Then she ran her hands over it in close examination.

While she proceeded with a very thorough examination Kirk approached the Doctor. "What keeps it standing there, is someone 'holding' it for her?"

"No, we have a metabolic program that maintains life-from bios that are not in use. They cannot be turned off like mechanical machines, but are close enough to alive to need to run all the time. The brain is active at only the lowest levels of function."

"It looks like her, but it doesn't look like her."

"The difference between a person, and a statue of them. The face and body lack expression. You will see the change once she accepts it."

"This could get weird."

Tathilan finished her inspection, and cleaned her hands. **It looks good so far Dr. Huatoo. It's me all over.**

"We do have the pattern from your first adult body."

I know, but differences can and do crop up in the growth process. I am ready to check it out on the inside.

Dr. Huatoo moved over to a console and touched a control. "The transfer system is in place."

Tathilan got that "busy look" that Tim was familiar with. Then she turned to Tim.

I am going to take my two-legs back to the shuttle. Having two of me in the room might be a bit much for you, but I'll be 'back' quickly.

Tim looked apprehensive. "This is your call. I'm trusting you on this one."

She kissed him. **Just a moment.** Then she left the room.

He watched her go, then turned back to the impassive image of her before him. The An-form twitched an ear, then took a deep breath, shook all over and whistled a little. To Tim it was like watching a manikin come to life. Suddenly, it was Tathilan, in every way it hadn't been a moment before. tentatively, as if approaching something he wasn't sure was real he reached for her. "Tathilan?"

****Yes Tim?***

The same deep blue eyes, the tilt to her head, the expression that a phaser had blown away two months before were there, real, alive. He rushed her, tackled her to the floor and laughed. Laughter turned to sobs as at last the grief of the moment he thought he had lost her came out. He cried himself out into the softness of her neck. She let him, for a while, then nuzzled him softly.

****Time enough for tears.****

He sniffled. "I am being terribly silly. I know you were never dead, I have had you in my arms almost every night since then, but somehow, this makes it all real. It felt pretend, a charade to hold off the specter of reality or something."

****I know, but it wasn't the time, or the place to force it. I knew your relief would come when you saw 'me' again. It's why you twisted arms to get the Kongo into dock, and why I twisted a few as well.****

"It isn't very professional of me."

****Right now, you're not the Captain, and no one is watching but me and thee.****

"What about..." Tim looked around for Dr. Huatoo. Suddenly remembering him.

****He left almost at once. Anansi have a 'sense' about such things.****

"Would that everyone learned such sense."

****It would be nice lover. What say we get you out of that stiff Captain suit, and into something more comfortable, in someplace more comfortable, and do some serious playing.****

"Well, I hadn't even given a thought to off ship accommodations, but with the *Kongo* in space dock, it is likely to be messy and noisy."

****Your right on both counts. However I did, and I think you will like it.****

Orios stood at the windows. The ship was bathed in light, panels and sections of Hull opened to space. It was the ship he sought. He caught its reflection in the glass, and started slightly. The deep brown of human flesh made him look like someone else. But, he smiled, that was the idea. Where was the ship, the Captain could not be far. His sources indicated that Kirk had not left the system. All that was left, was to find him.

Kirk looked around the presidential suite in the Crystal City La Toit Rouge. The best hotel in town. "So what is this setting me back?"

****What, worried about money?***

"Not really, but I am not an unlimited money-bag either."

****My treat, it isn't costing you a millicredit.****

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"So you're the unlimited money-bag?"

Miser! No money involved. I gave good reason to have it, it's mine. Ane economy.

"So your saying that the Ane economy is a communism?"

In effect. From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. In this case the words of Marx work. But it only works because an Ane do not take advantage of the system, and because the supply out-strips demand by a considerable margin. 200 years of budget surplus that no one has bothered to spend. It is easy to be a communist when your needs are green grass, water, and air, and your means are something like this. But why talk the politics of the matter. It is, and we can enjoy it, so we should.

"So what have you planned?"

I know your preferences; we avoid the dives and bars, hit the good shows and sights. We can also experiment with that little adventure you wanted.

"Ahem." he blushed deeply. "Trust a computer to remember."

A female computer if you please. If you still want to know what us girls are getting from sex, that can still be arranged.

"Well, the thought had slipped from my mind, but now that you bring it back up, yes, I would like to find out. Which body?"

Both, either, your choice.

"This could get real kinky, real fast."

She nuzzled noses. **Lover mine, you ain't seen nothing yet.**

"When do we start?"

**How about after dinner?*

"Is that to build anticipation in the condemned?"

Take it as you will lover.

Tim looked around the restaurant as they were seated.

"Fancy place."

We eat enough meals in the Federation's high tech mobile replimates. Time for some real food.

"So what is real here?"

Everything but the meat, and you can even get that for a price.

"I don't think I want to pay that price."

Imports are expensive. However, you, are not paying. My ticket. You want real meat, order it.

"I don't know, I have trouble with the idea that it was alive once."

A lot of people from the last several generations feel that way. It was one of the main driving forces behind food replication.

"Giving history lessons is a passion of yours, is it not?"

Well, I guess.

"Never mind the history, lets get some food. How is the coffee here?"

Blue Mountain stock locally grown.

"You mean real fresh coffee? Not the stuff they call fresh?"

Beans roasted and ground on premises.

"I could make dinner of that, but I won't."

Good choice.

A human waiter approached the table, placed a bowl and glass of water on the table as well as a bread basket.

"How might I serve you today?"

Kirk started a bit at live help. "Ah, yes. Tathilan, ladies first."

Calypso dinner salad, cheese side and lemonade.

"And you sir?"

"Hmm, the grilled tuna, a calypso side, and coffee."

"Excellent choices. Your meals will be right up." He departed with due ceremony.

"You didn't tell me that they had live waiters."

You didn't ask.

"This is a classy place."

Hey, you're a Captain, you should be enjoying this level of dining.

"I never considered myself part of the 'upper crust'. Frankly, never believed in an upper crust." He buttered one of the bread slices. "Want buttered bread?"

Upper or lower crust.

Tim refrained from throwing it at her. The waiter returned with the small salad, cheese, lemonade, and coffee. He made some fuss about the service and left them to enjoy.

"Hmm, good coffee. How is the lemonade?"

Good, as usual.

Tim pecked at the salad as Tathilan lightly nibbled the cheese cubes. The coffee was very good, he drank it quickly. Tathilan was trying to say something to him, but the noise level in the restaurant had gone way up, he could barely make out her words. It was like everyone was shouting at once, and saying the most ridiculous things as well. It was too much, he clutched at his ears, the noise was deafening, but that didn't even muffle it. He tried to rise, to flee the noise and the crowd, but he was dizzy, the floor rushed up to meet him. The room swam with faces, they leaned over and leered at him, the noise was unbearable, he wanted it to stop. A Vulcan in dark clothing leaned over him, Tathilan shoved in beside him, damn the noise, it was unbearable, he felt like his brain was going to explode, ****please**** he thought. ****Please be quiet, stop the noise, stop the NOISE!!****

Silence. That was the first thing he noticed was silence, but not quite. A

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soft rustling sound filtered into his ears. Light impinged on his eyelids. He opened them a crack, then all the way. He was inside some light structure. He could see a grove of trees outside the open side. The sun was bright, even searing. He reached out. His hand touched a furred softness. **Tathilan?*

I am here Tim.

Her voice was strong, clearer than normal, and a sound like distant surf behind it. He saw a second female Ane on his other side, a soft dove gray in color. **Who are you?*

I am Casalan, a healer.

The shapes of thought felt, different. Words, in all their heavy simplicity seem too great a burden to even try. **What happened, where am I?*

Tathilan answered. **On Savanna. You were drugged, you need to rest.**

Rest, it sounds good, I will rest.

Darkness again, with the sound of that distant sea to lull him to sleep.

**Admiral Brok, Captain Kirk is on leave, is there some emergency that requires his presence?*

The Admiral, a block of a Tellerite stumped about the room, looking Galaban over. Also present was Terkos, the Romulan expatriate, and Constable of High Crystal Station.

"I understand there was an 'incident' involving him at the Skyview cafe. Constable, what do you know of this."

"Admiral should I know something?"

Brok stormed to within biting distance of the taller Romulan. "You were there. You are the constable. You should know. One of my Captains is involved in an incident, and I do not know where he is. Yes, this is an emergency."

"Captain Kirk left with the Ane he entered the Skyview with. I understand he suffered a fall rising from his table."

"I understand, he was under the Influence of an illegal drug!"

"Fascinating. Since my report mentions no drugs, how is it that you think any were present?"

"I have my sources."

"Then perhaps I am over due a purge."

The Tellerite turned a remarkable shade of florid red. "Are you suggesting I have spies in the civilian police force?"

Terkos looked levelly at the Admiral. "Your words, not mine. We both know the danger of Starfleet Intelligence operations in the domestic theater."

Admiral Bork looked ready to detonate. "I will have copies of your reports."

"Please."

"What?"

"You will ask 'please' or you will get none."

"What is this 'please'?"

"You know perfectly well. It is a human politeness custom I am very fond of."

"I do not have to ask 'please' of anyone, I am in command here, and my orders are to be obeyed."

"Ah, but you are in command of Starfleet personnel, and areas. I, am a civilian employee of the All. I am not under your command, so you must ask please."

Bork turned on Galaban. "Are you going to let him talk to me like that!"

Free speech is a guaranteed right of the Articles of Federation. I cannot stop him.

Admiral Bork stood on the brink of an apocalyptic explosion, tottered, and slowly deflated. Through gritted teeth he continued. "Constable Terkos, will you please, send me a copy of your incident report."

"I would be happy to Admiral."

Bork looked brighter.

Terkos continued. "However, as there was no incident, no report was filed. Now if you will excuse us, we have a station to run."

Admiral Bork stood rooted to the floor as if frozen in place. A look of pure shock and rage enveloped him as the Romulan and the Ane departed his office.

Once outside Terkos took hold of the Ane's horn, and both Teleported back to High Crystal. In the Station manager's office Terkos continued. **Is the office safe Galaban?*

Yes, I had our people go over it this morning.

"It is still more comfortable for me to speak."

I understand.

"How long do you think the charade will hold Admiral Bork off?"

**Hopefully long enough for you to find something concrete. Do you have anything concrete?*

"His pot of coffee had enough psidroxan in it to affect the entire staff and patronage of the restaurant. The waiter knows nothing, he just picked up the pot. I have some leads. The kitchen staff at the Skyview is pretty tight. I have one question. Why the secrecy about the whereabouts of Captain Kirk?"

His companion requested it. Should Starfleet medical examine him right now, he could be medically discharged. She would not be pleased with that. She has hopes that within the period of his leave she can get him fit for duty.

Admiral Bork was not so easily deterred. Once he had recovered his composure he headed down to the one place he knew he could get answers, the

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Kongo herself. This Tathilan was Starfleet, and under direct questioning she had better answer him. The ship was a mess, circuit conduits opened all over the place, crews working on everything in sight. In spite of 20 years in Ambassador class ships he got lost twice. Finally he was at the computer core room. The door opened to a most unimpressive sight. A bank of black panels and a slab core no more than 2 meters long. The panel indicated that all was working.

"Computer, secure this room, code alpha alpha three."

A male voice replied. "The computer core is sealed as requested Admiral Bork, how can I help you?"

"You are not Tathilan."

"Observant of you Admiral Bork, no, I am not."

"Where is Tathilan!"

"Computer officer Tathilan is on leave for the next 1789.13.7 hours. I have agreed to replace her for the duration of that leave."

"So who are you?"

"I am Unaban, I am under civilian contract with Starfleet."

"Where is Captain Kirk!"

"Captain James Timothy Kirk is on leave for the next 1789.12.4 hours. His whereabouts are not on file."

"*DAMN!*"

When Tim Kirk woke again he was feeling a little better. Moving did not produce the wave of nausea that it did the first time. Hunger was making itself known.

**Tathilan?*

**Right here Tim. What do you need?*

Food, water, and a head.

Can you stand.

She stood up beside him. He made it up with her for support.

Well, kind of. Which way, relief first I think.

She walked him back to the privy that was in the camping suite, then walked back to the cot when he was finished.

How about a chair, that bed looks scuzzy.

You have been in it for over 30 hours.

**No wonder I feel like Hell, what happened?*

Eat, I'll tell you. He ate, and she explained. **Someone put psidroxan in your coffee. It could have killed you.**

**Great, lucky me, my first really good coffee in six months, and it has a Mickey in it. What is this psidroxan?*

**It is a psionic enhancer. Illegal in about 70% of the Federation, but it is one of the few drugs Ane can tolerate. It is useful in boosting a healer's abilities

for serious cases.**

A drug the doctor takes to make the patient well?

Exactly, it has a certain irony. However, the effects are unpredictable in a non-psionic. They can be anything from euphoria, to hallucination, in reality bits of intercepted thoughts from those around them, to death. In your case it was a bit...different.

**How different?*

**Tim, does your family have any indication of psionic talent?*

Not that I am aware of.

Well, you are a latent telepath, or were a latent telepath.

**Were? As in not any more?*

That's right. The attack you had was your metal barriers coming down. Right now I am holding your mental state together with my own discipline. It helps that Savanna is mentally quiet.

So that is why the silent talk.

Yes, we are very closely linked right now, closer than we have been before.

And my career is in the trash. I can't command a Starship in this state.

No you can't, so if you are keeping the *Kongo*, we have to make a competent telepath of you in two months.

**Can it be done?*

We will not know until we try.

OK, we try. Someone wanted me out of the center seat, I am not giving up that easy.

Terkos was once a again the hawk on the hunt. The Ane wanted this one badly, and he did not plan to disappoint. All traffic on and off the station was carefully monitored. Anyone with defenses against telepathy was questioned. Either someone had pulled the perfect poisoning, or the quarry was still at bay. In his favor psidroxan did not tolerate heat well, so the drug had to have been placed in the coffee just before it was served. He had teams throughout the station searching. So far, no luck.

"Terkos."

"Yes Dianna."

"I think I have your break."

Terkos tensed. "You have an identity?"

"I have a possible face, and a likely false identity."

"Then let us have it."

An ID card came up on his screen. "Richard Grant, Human from Farhome, age 26, profession listed as variable. He applied for work at the Skyview and was accepted three days ago. He did not show up for work the day after Captain

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Kirk's attack."

"A suspicious profile, I will give you that. It is not however a proof. It is enough to seek him. We will do so. Report to the nearest team if he should cross a security point."

"Will do, and Admiral Bork is here to see you."

"Well we could not hold that off for long. Send him in."

Bork steamed his way into the security office. Terkos put on a smile, and fixed it in place. "What can I do for you Admiral?"

"The location of James T Kirk."

"Why do you think I know Admiral?"

"Because Mr. Terkos, you know everything around here, and Kirk is part of the everything."

"Admiral, I know most things, about my charge; which is High Crystal Station. That is hardly everything."

"So, where is Kirk?"

"I can better tell you where he is not. He is not on High Crystal Station."

"You have the information."

"And if I did?"

"I know the story behind your 'Vulcan' citizenship. I know you are a Romulan, and that information can cause you a good deal of trouble. How do we know you are not a planted spy?"

Terkos stopped cold, his voice dropped into the sub-freezing range.

"Admiral Bork. My Romulan heritage is the biggest non-secret on the station. My Vulcan citizenship is, as you will find, in order, with Vulcan perfectly aware of from whence I came. Now, your threats are a matter of record, you have worn out your welcome on High Crystal Station, I dare say you will find that you have worn out your welcome period. I would expect a transfer shortly, good day Admiral."

Terkos promptly ignored the Tellerite, two station constables entered the office and provided him "escort" to his shuttle.

Once he was gone Terkos spoke. "Diana, will you prepare a report of that exchange and forward it to Falan, director Galaban, The Director of Fleet Operations Starfleet Command, and the Ane Representative to the Federation Council, whoever they are this week."

"Consider it done Terkos."

Admiral Bork fumed all the way back to his office. Temper had blown it this time. His only course of action was a full apology. They had to be hiding Kirk, but for what reason? His sources said drug use. So far he was getting nothing but flak from the Ane, and no answers, one way or the other. The only thing to do now was to report, and inform his superior. It was out of his hands.

Tim Kirk walked under the clear skies of Savanna, the grass was up to his knees. In the middle distance a small group of Ane ran for the sheer joy of motion. Tim watched with interest, he had never really seen them run full out. Beauty in motion. It was hot, but in the days he had spent here he had stopped noticing. He lived in a broad hat and loose gown and his skin was still turning a golden tan, with the aid of frequent melanin injections.

Tathilan moved beside him. ****Ready for your afternoon session.****

****Like I am ready for a beating, but lets get to it.****

****Eager to get out from under my protection? ****

****Sweet as that feels, yes dear, I am. Let's go back to camp, I want to sit down for this.****

****Sure.****

She walked a leisurely pace that had Kirk jogging to keep up. His eye caught something in the grass. A hard whiteness odd in this soft environment. He stopped to look. The object was well settled into the earth, a skull, and second not far from it. He could see no other bones.

****Tathilan.****

She came up short.

****What happened to these people? ****

****They died Tim.****

****But left in the middle of nowhere? The deaths might not be reported. From the looks of it they died some time ago. We had better tell someone.****

****Tim, it doesn't matter.****

"What?" The sound of his own voice started him.

****It doesn't matter. This is where they fell, this is where they died.****

Tathilan looked distant for a moment, the roar of that distant sea grew louder, almost intelligible, and faded back.

****They were old, and together. Now they are with the All. It is as it should be.****

****You just leave people to rot where they fall? ****

****That has been the way of nature since there was life. The body is not as important as the mind, and that remains with the All.****

****So the dead are left to the elements.****

****And the scavengers, yes.****

Tim Kirk looked at the bleached bones again, he opened his new eyes to the sight. Tentatively, an aching almost of a whisper breathed. ****Don't worry child.**** Kirk's breath caught in his throat, the tide of that distant sea came roaring in. Faces in the hundreds of billions filled his vision. Each telling him its name, its place, its history in a single thought. Awe overwhelmed him, and the vision was gone.

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Kirk knelt before the bones, tears streamed down his face. He ached to go back, to see more. The absence of that sea was a pain within him. Pain so real, yet... "Tathilan!" He croaked

I am here Tim.

**What...what did I see?*

You touched the All Tim.

The All. It was beautiful. I feel a lack now... where I never knew a need.

Never we know how empty we are, until we are filled.

He rose and turned to face her. **I want to go back.**

First you must learn what there is to learn.

He returned with her to the camp, and lessons for the afternoon.

Terkos looked the prisoner over yet again. He was sticking with his story, but so far it had been little but lies. The medical tricorder gave him, perhaps, the leverage he needed to crack his composure.

"Richard Grant. You are not all you claim to be."

"Your assumption, not mine."

"Most Orions do not possess names like 'Richard Grant'."

"Why do you think I am Orion? I am from Farhome."

"Mr. Grant, an Orion is not a Human. Even if you change the color of the skin, alter the appearance of some external body parts, you still do not have a Human. The medical tricorder does not lie. You are Orion, and a full medical examination will prove it beyond doubt."

"Is it against the law to be Orion?"

"Considering that every 'fact' you have stated is an outright lie."

"What basis do you state that on constable."

"The fact that a telepath has monitored the entire interview."

Grant rose to his feet. "But telepaths can't..." The security bios shoved him back down.

"Telepaths can not, what, read you?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

Terkos dropped a small object on the table. It spun in the light. "Because you have a psijammer, like this one? Or rather, had a psijammer. The transporter removed this as you entered security. The pattern buffer is again, sealed as evidence."

"I never saw anything like that."

Terkos turned to Tolyban beside him.

He is lying, again.

"See, lies do not serve you. Tell the truth."

"I shall say nothing."

"Then a telepath will pry it from you."

"Ane do not engage in that behavior. They will not force themselves on a mind."

"Did I mention Ane? I said a telepath. Vulcans and Romulans are also telepaths. However, in the hands of a lightly trained person such as myself a mind mend can go poorly."

The bios held Grant to his chair as Terkos came around the table. He steepled his hands concentrating for the task ahead. Grant looked for a way out but the duralloy muscle of the bios was not going to give. His look became that of a trapped animal as Terkos crouched beside him and began to place his fingers on the pressure points of his face. Terkos began the chant of the mend.

"We are one mind..."

Orios felt the first tendrils of thought, thoughts not his own. He struggled against the inflexible bios, forcing his head back against the unyielding hands.

"I DID IT, I DRUGGED THE DAMN COFFEE, *GET OUT OF MY MIND!!!*"

Terkos broke his grip at once. He stood and walked to the other side of the table and slumped into his chair. For a moment, he said or did nothing. Orios', "Grant's" words hung accusingly over him. At last, after several minutes, Terkos spoke.

"I am glad you saw fit to tell the truth. It saves both of us a great deal of trouble. Now, for the recorder, what did you do?"

Orios looked at the constable, he was still in the grip of the bios.

"I was hired to drop the drug provided in to Kirk's coffee, that's all I know. I did the job."

"I seriously doubt that is all you know. However, I will save dredging it out of your reluctant brain for tomorrow. You may mull over how much you wish to volunteer...or have, ripped, from your brain. Take him back to his cell."

The Tolyban looked Terkos over. ****You look tired.****

"Indeed, that was the best I have done without help. I have serious doubts I will ever master the mindmend."

****If you wish to, you must banish the doubt.****

"My wishes aside, I have hopes that a night of contemplating the consequences will loosen his tongue."

****May you be right. We can, and will reinforce what ever fear he generates himself.****

"Good, keep him edgy and off guard. I must get my rumors in place to see if the Admiral's 'informant' can be flushed as well."

****What are the rumors this time?*****

"He cracked, details are being withheld lest the birds fly. I don't think it will reel in his team however. The Orion Syndicate is not the Iotan Gangs. We will try. But I fear we have caught the only bird we will get."

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Admiral Picard finished reading the report in front of him, and regarded the Tellerite on the viewscreen once again. "Admiral Bork, this is a serious matter."

"Yes Sir. I am tendering my resignation."

"Before we discuss such matters perhaps you can tell me how it came to pass?"

"I...do not mesh well with the Ane, Picard. They sense the unease in me and work on it." The Tellerite was clearly having trouble articulating his thoughts.

"Youncc, don't give up on yourself. There are other assignments you are bettered suited to."

"I am responsible for my actions Picard. I have acted poorly in the part of an Admiral of Starfleet."

"I realize this, and it will have to be taken into account. However, I do not believe it is time to resign."

"The resignation is tendered, I is for you to accept, or refuse. I will abide by your judgment."

"Until this is straightened out, I will do neither. Now, the second matter. A problem with Captain Kirk? Younc, I have met the man. He doesn't seem the type to dabble in any drugs."

"I can but present the facts. Kirk has been missing for two weeks. In a system where everything is kept in order, no one can find him. They play games to not give me any information. Witnesses reported him having some manner of seizure in a public restaurant, he has not been seen since. We found psidroxan in his quarters on the *Kongo*. That is a very dangerous drug Admiral Picard, very dangerous, and highly illegal."

"Suspicious, I will grant you that. I will look into it further. Picard out." Picard sighed. Younc Bork was a good commander, but not terribly imaginative. Assigning him to the El Nanth Starbase was an error at best. This news of Kirk was disturbing. "Data, will you come in please."

The android entered promptly. "You have need of my services Admiral Picard?"

"Based on the reports, do you think Kirk is in trouble and being hidden by the Ane?"

"Based on the report Admiral, I would say that there is a good chance that something happened. I can not conjecture as to the exact nature of the something. I have noticed that it is within the Ane nature to hold out on insistent requests for information that does not exist. That is, to make a game of getting you to chase 'wild geese'; things that you believe to exist, but do not."

"Your conclusion?"

"There is an excellent chance that Captain Kirk is enjoying an extended vacation way form the normal tourist routes, and that the Ane are 'giving Hell' to

play with Admiral Bork. This would be consistent with Captain Kirk's observed behavior, the Anes' behavior, and Admiral Bork's. However, it is possible that that I am wrong due to unknown factors."

Picard levered himself from his seat. "I was afraid you would say that. I think it is time to pay a visit to El Nanth. What do we have in terms of transportation."

"I take it sir you wish something faster than a runabout?"

"Certainly, get a diplomatic courier ship. I want as fast a passage as possible."

Orios looked at the Ane surrounding him. Sweat trickled down his face as he sat in the dirt under the hot blue sun. Each pair of blue eyes bored holes through him.

Once again, the name of your associates.

"N-no , no names. I did the drugging, you get nothing more."

Then you have associates.

"I didn't say that."

You said you would not give their names. This means you must have them, if you possess names to not give.

"I draw the veil, nothing more will I say."

He is Orion syndicate then. Only they would use such a phrase.

**Is it worth it to take what he will not give?*

No. We will take nothing. We will give according to what we are given.

The Ane were gone. He blinked, then blinked again. He was alone. Orios scrambled to his feet and looked around. Endless fields of short grass as far as his eyes could see. Nothing, no one.

A small bundle lay where one of that had been, he quickly searched it. Compass, two liters of water, knife, and a book. He opened the book.

"He who calls himself Grant. You are hereby sentenced for your acts of harm against James Kirk to walk to Crystal City. Upon arrival you will be given one ticket to the planet of your choice. This book contains instruction and guides for survival on this planet. Also enclosed is a communicator. Should you decide to reveal your associates in crime, your sentence will be reduced. This communicator can be used only to contact the Constable in Crystal City."

He tried to pop the cover, the unit was sealed in one piece. It was no use to him. He put the items back in the pack, took a sighting to Crystal City and began to walk. The communicator he left in the dust. He had drawn the Veil, he would say nothing more.

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Admiral Picard looked with apprehension at the ship they approached in the shuttle. She looked to belong to a different era. The organic nacelles did not match the curves and angles profile of the hull. The hull markings, from an earlier paint scheme said; "*Arial's Hope*". "Really Data, was this the best we could do?"

"Under the short notice available Admiral, yes. Records indicate that *Arial's Hope* has the best time from Earth to El Nanth of any ship currently unassigned."

"And what time would that be?"

"15.35 days Sir."

"It's not record speed, but acceptable. When was this ship built?"

"*Arial's Hope* was commissioned as a perimeter action ship, a light frigate in today's nomenclature, in 2295. It was mothballed in 2340, and refit as a diplomatic courier second class in 2367."

Picard sat back in his seat. "Thy will be done."

"Sir?"

"Nothing Data. rhetorical statement."

The small ship and her crew proved a pleasant surprise. In spite of a somewhat beat up exterior the interior was clean, new, and comfortable.

Commander Jones waited at the airlock. "Welcome aboard *Arial's Hope* Admiral Picard. I can assure you a comfortable trip."

"I must say Captain, the inside is far better than the outside would lead one to expect."

"Well, yes sir. We are long overdue for a exterior refit. Other more important projects keep us at the bottom of the list. Do you want to see us out Sir?"

"Thank you, but no. I have matters to settle before we get too far out."

"As you wish Admiral. Ensign Morgan, will you show the Admiral and his staff to their quarters."

"Aye Sir."

As soon as Picard was settled in he called Data in with him.

"We have the details of Project Prometheus taken care of?"

"Yes Sir, that is settled."

"Anything else of importance that is pending?"

"No Sir, not at the moment. However circumstances can, and have changed that."

"We will cross such bridges as we come to them. What have you learned as regards our missing Captain?"

"All I have been able to glean is that Captain Kirk is vacationing on Savanna at the invitation of Tathilan. The Ane are not forthcoming with

details."

Picard relaxed in his chair. "Data, what do you know of Ane?"

"Ane, the sixth signers of the Federation Articles. They are a...."

Picard interrupted. "Data, Data, not the hard facts, those can be had from any computer. What do you know of them?"

Data sat and thought a minute. "I can not say I possess any personal experience Admiral. While I have a wealth of information regarding Ane, I have never served with Ane, spoken with one, or had the pleasure of friendship with an Ane. I have seen them at a distance during the times I have accompanied you to diplomatic functions."

"Data, can you speak with Ane?"

"How do you mean Sir?"

"They are telepathic. They do not vocalize, and don't commonly have voders on them. Can you hear them on the telepathic level?"

"Deanna Troi was able to read my emotions once the emotion chip was installed Admiral, I would conclude that Ane would also be able to 'read' me, and I them."

"I think you will get a chance to test that theory. I find it amazing that Ane have been among us so long and we know so little about them. Are they so strange to us that we cannot connect with them? Or have we allowed shape prejudice to separate us?"

"I can not say Sir. However, I do feel you intend to rectify the lack as you see it."

"You know me well friend. Let's go over what we do know, and try to get inside those horned heads."

Leven's Gambit floated deep in the Grinder. Life support was at minimum, the small crew moved as little as possible. The Captain approached the communication station where his second listened carefully at an otherwise darkened station.

"Any word?" He whispered.

The officer shook his head. "None, five days and no contact."

"The agreed time is passed. We must leave."

Another officer on the sensors spoke. "The patrol ships are still searching. They seek us, they know we are out here."

"Yes." Said the Captain. "They know, our friend has been compromised. We will leave."

Spoke a third. "Shall I bring engines on line?"

"No! No, thrusters only, and softly. Drift us out of the system. Run, and they will be all over us. We must go softly."

Controls were tapped, and soft jets of gas changed the relative motion of

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the ship, every so slightly.

Two days later, the warning lights alerted the officer on watch at Builder's Station of an altered orbit in the Grinder.

****We have an aspect change in the Grinder.****

****Rock collision?*** Sensors and scopes trained on the spot.**

****Negative, a ship, Orion configuration.****

****Our quarry has shown itself. Alert the patrols.****

On *Leven's Gambit* the atmosphere was different.

"Captain, we have been scanned!"

The Captain hurried into the small bridge.

"All systems active, give me full warp at once."

"We have five ships on intercept course, Falcon class cutters."

"Full speed, those we can out run with our head start. Any other ships?"

"Yes Sir, the battlecruiser has engaged on an intercept course."

"Unity or manta?"

The sensorman bent to his scopes. "Unity class."

"That we can out run also. All power to the drives, we must build up as much distance as possible."

The small scout speed away at high warp.

The Captain of the *Victory* looked at the image of the retreating vessel.

****Time to intercept?*****

****Infinity Captain, the target is a fraction of a warp faster than we are.****

****Break off pursuit. Contact the patrolling cruisers on the Orion border. We can have some company waiting for them.****

"The ships and broken off pursuit."

"Acknowledged, continue course and speed, let us be sure of it."

"Are we home free Captain?"

"Do not be a fool Gatian. Ane ships patrol the Orion border, we will be watched for. However, there is much space between here and there. In that space we will become what we are not, and cease to be what we are. Never fear, we will get home."

The Captain slumped back in his chair. It would not be the first time he avoided capture by a change in ship.

Tim lay back in the grass and let the pleasant exhaustion wash over him. Tathilan lay beside him in her "two-legs" form. She snuggled close.

**So, satisfied?*

**How could I say otherwise? I do believe you have ruined me for any woman that isn't a telepath.*

**I could say that was to my advantage.*

**You could. But will you? That feedback is one hell of a kick.*

**Plenty more where I came from.*

**But not ones that I necessarily want. So teacher, did I pass?*

**Yes, you still have a lot to learn, but maintaining your own discipline during sex is a major step.*

Tim levered himself to one arm. **You mean you were not backing me up?*

**No, that was all you. You're a fast study.*

**The question that remains is, will Starfleet see it that way?*

**And if they don't?*

**I don't know. Part of me says to resign, and be done with it. I am sure a man of my experience and talents can find something that would keep me out of trouble. On the other hand, I have been Fleet a long time. Is that identity something I can lay aside? So what will you do?*

**I'm with you Tim, stay, or go.*

**How do you feel about it?*

**It was a job until I got to know you better, then it was a pleasure. You know, if Starfleet doesn't want you, the horned fleet is always looking for Captain material. Telepathy is not a handicap there, it's a requirement.*

**An option I hadn't thought of.*

**Think of it. That is if Starfleet doesn't want you.*

**Are you trying to recruit me out of the service?*

**No, showing you options. No functional Human telepath has ever commanded a Starfleet ship.*

**None?*

**None. Not that there exist many non-Ane functional telepaths to begin with. Most are not of a nature to command. You, are different.*

**So, I have a month of leave left. Can you get me fit to fly in that time?*

**

**As things are going, I would say yes, if that is a direction you want to go.*

**So far, I would have to say yes.*

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Then that is what we will aim for.

I hope you have a pleasant trip Admiral Picard.

Jean Luc Picard looked over the being "speaking" to him. An Ane, pure white except for the black mane and flank band. "You would be Falan. And yes, my voyage was pleasant."

Thought laughter ripped through her. **I see my reputation proceeds me.**

"It would be difficult to miss you Lady. However, this is not exactly a social call."

**I understand that. What is it you seek Admiral Picard?*

"I think by now that would be well known. I seek James Timothy Kirk."

**Starfleet has brought a great deal of trouble on themselves over this matter Admiral. It is my understanding that Captain Kirk is on leave. Am I correct?*

Yes, that is correct.

**Is there an emergency that requires his attention?*

"No, I can't say there is."

**Captain Kirk has requested privacy, he is our guest therefore we give it to him. For what reason should I disturb that privacy?*

"Can I ask that you tell Captain Kirk that I am here, and wish to speak with him. We can leave it up to him if he wishes to speak with me. However, he cannot make that choice unless he is aware that I wish to speak with him."

A logical argument Admiral Picard. I will forward the message. Do not be surprised if he elects to not see you, or anyone, that is his right.

"Falan, I have reason to believe that Captain Kirk is, in some difficulty. You have already driven one man to rash action that he now regrets over this matter. What ever the reasons. I have a report in my files that must be closed now, or dealt with at the end of his leave. Please make him aware of this."

I will pass your message along as you request.

James Timothy Kirk, sweated out the cleansing. The need to be clear of emotion, but emotional, to be aware of one's self, but above it. What was easy for the Ane was near to impossible for him. But with Tathilan as his guide he labored through the process. Each step was a climb up a mental mountain of his own making. At last, with great effort the summit was clear. Tim Kirk elevated his icon, raised his aspect, and presented himself to the All.

Said Tim Kirk to the All. **I am here, and present myself before you.**

Said the All to Tim Kirk. **We recognize you. You are a Human new of

mind sight, yet not one of the Ansisi. How is it you come before the All? **

Said Tim Kirk to the All. **I come as one in a dream, as one beholding a wonder. I am eager to believe all I see, yet fearing it cannot be so. I come as the child that takes its first steps toward the world.**

Said the All to Tim Kirk. **You come then to number yourself among us? **

Said Tim Kirk to the All. **I would be honored to be so numbered.**

Said the All to the All. **Who speaks with Tim Kirk, and is mentor to him? **

Said Tathilan to the All. **I speak with him and am mentor to him.**

Said the All to Tathilan. **Tathilan who is Our Sister, well we know you and your presence is with us. You are able as mentor and speak freely with this one.**

Said the All to Tim Kirk. **Welcome Brother, may you grow quickly.**

Said Tim Kirk to the All. **I thank you, and indeed feel welcome.**

Said the All to Tim Kirk. **Go now, we will not leave you. Your young strength wanes, and you should rest.**

Knowing wisdom, Tim Kirk took again his Aspect, and lowered his Icon. With this he slumped against his Mentor. For long minutes he shook with the ecstasy of the contact. At last, with breathing eased he spoke. **Lord above, I am exhausted. How long was I in contact? **

About 10 seconds.

Only? It felt like forever.

Tim, I told you, contact with the All is possible for a Human, but never easy as it is for an Ane. However, once done it is done. You have progressed remarkably in the past 6 weeks. If you relax you will find that contact has not been totally broken.

Tim did as he was told. **You're right, I can feel it, like a slight under current to my thoughts.**

The second contact will be easier, each progressive contact easier still, but it will never be totally natural to you.

I'll worry about other times other times.

**I'll make an Ane of your yet.*

"Ha!"

By the way, welcome to the All Tim.

Picard and Data sat in the Skyview Cafe enjoying the sights, and the fresh fruit.

"A remarkable place Admiral. I do not believe I have tasted fresh lemonade before."

"It is one of life's understated pleasures Data." Picard sipped from his own

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glass."

As they spoke a Vulcanoid in dark clothing approached their table.

"Sirs. I am Constable Terkos, I have a message for you." Picard stood and bowed slightly.

"Constable, please, be seated." As they sat Picard continued. "What is the nature of your message?"

"Your request has been forwarded to Captain Kirk. He will be glad to see you, and requests the pleasure of your company at an informal dinner."

"Where is Captain Kirk?"

"On Savanna, I don't know exactly where, but the pilot of the shuttle will."

"Constable, my Admiral's report said you were present at the incident. What happened?"

"Incident Admiral Picard? I know of many incidents. Of which do you speak?"

"Regarding Captain Kirk."

"Admiral, to my knowledge Captain Kirk has never been involved in an incident on this station. If you will excuse me, I have delivered my message. The shuttle is in Hanger 7 at your disposal." With this Terkos left. Picard and Data looked at each other.

Data looked after him leaving. "I do not believe that man was a Vulcan."

"Romulan expatriate. He knows on which side the bread is buttered. Data, let's get to the bottom of this."

"Yes, Admiral, to the matter of dress. I understand the sun is hard on Human physiology."

"I saw a camp outfitters on the first level, we'll stop there."

Guests are coming Tim.

Kirk turned the fish again, and checked the tenderness, about done. Picard couldn't have timed it better. The Shuttle landed half a mile away as to not disturb the camp. Picard and Data walked the rest of the way.

A tidy camp with two hardside tents, a 'fresher and a cheery open fire greeted them. The smell of something wonderful cooking, wafted though the breeze. A tall man, recognizable only by the shock of red curls rose to greet them. Dressed in a long robe and broad hat he was deeply tanned from head to foot.

"Admiral Picard, Data, good to see you. You're just in time for dinner."

"Captain Kirk. I didn't think this was your idea of fun?"

"Neither did I, she convinced me." He nodded to Tathilan quietly chewing her cud.

Picard looks to the west. "The sun is almost down."

"Na, hours of light left. Big world and slow rotation. Slow spectacular

sunsets. We are lucky this night, the terminator thunderstorms will miss us. Kirk indicated to the north the flicking glow of distant lightning could be seen. "Dinner is ready, I have some grilled fish, fresh fruit, and some of the best coffee man has yet discovered. Dig in, it won't last."

Silence and small talk descended over the dinner, which was every bit as good as advertised. Gradually Picard brought the subject around. "You have been incommunicado."

"That was the idea of leave was it not, to get way from the pressures of command and all that?"

"You left the Glade station under a cloud of suspicion. Admiral Bork tried vainly to reach you, only to be blocked by the Ane, he called me in."

"What is the emergency?"

"Psidroxan was found in your quarters, and in your coffee."

"And?"

"You are aware of this?"

"Yes Admiral, totally aware."

"And you haven't done anything about it?"

"What is there to do? No one has tried to arrest me. I am not charged with anything. I didn't put psidroxan into anything or take it willingly."

Data said. "Psidroxan is known to have severe effects on humans, and is banned in 70% of the Federation. How could you have taken a dose of this drug, and not suffered any effects?"

"Because I did. I will also point out we are in the other 30% where it is legal."

"The usual side effects are death or madness, you do not look to be either."

"Observant of you. No, I am neither dead nor insane."

Picard said. "Why tip toe around the question Captain, what did happened?"

"Call me Tim, it's informal here, and I am still on leave."

"Tim, all I am looking for is a few straight answers. Admiral Bork as already blown his career on this matter. Your Hosts are insufferably cagey. I just want the truth."

"Fair enough, the truth. I was poisoned with psidroxan in the Skyview cafe, and I have spent the last 6 weeks of my leave recovering from the side effects. If Admiral Bork used his usual bull in the china shop approach, the Ane didn't tell him anything to spite how he asked, not what he asked."

Data said. "Captain, if you took psidroxan, how is it that you escaped the usual effects?"

"Because I am the kind of person that can tolerate the stuff."

"Only telepaths can safely ingest psidroxan."

"Therefore..."

"You must be a telepath."

"Correct."

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Picard said. "There is no indication on any of your records that you possess such abilities Kirk."

Kirk sipped at his coffee. "I didn't know myself. I was totally blocked, was that is. The drug changed that. Tathilan acted swiftly, she was with me at the time. We did have a pleasant dinner in mind. She has spent the last six weeks making a trained telepath out of me. Graduation was yesterday. I tested 62 on the Kraith scale."

Picard looked worried. "No telepath has ever commanded a starship before."

"So, what about being a telepath makes one unfit for command? And your statement is not quite true. No Human telepath has commanded a starship. Telepaths have commanded, and command every day. The Horned fleet is entirely telepaths, from the cook to the Captain."

"How will your crew accept it?"

"Will they care? We have a ship load of telepaths in the form of the 20 odd Ane that travel with us. The ship's computer is telepathic. Telepathic Captain, would they even notice? I challenge you to find one real handicap that realistically would prevent me from picking up where I left off."

Picard got up and paced. "On one hand Kirk, I see your point of view, but I have to consider if your sudden ability would render you unfit for command. I have to know what is good for the service."

"Respectfully Sir. Starfleet is proud of its firsts. We beam with pride every time someone does something that was never done before by someone like them, even if millions like someone else had done it before them. I have to ask Sir, why are you stepping back now? What fear is in you mind that causes you to doubt the very principle you have espoused, and asked me to espouse, and protect, along with you."

"This is a very different matter Tim."

"Specifics Jean Luc. How is it different?"

"The power of telepathy is the question. How will you use this ability?"

"I submit Sir, that there is a danger to the principles of the Federation a-foot, and right now, right here, that danger is, you."

Picard jerked back from the finger pointed across the dying fire.

Kirk continued. "It isn't telepathy that bothers you, its a Human with telepathy. We have Vulcans, Deltians, Betazids, even Ane in the Fleet, all are telepathic to one degree or another. These people hold positions of trust and authority, why am I different?"

"They are natural telepaths. We accept them as they are."

"I didn't come by this in a bottle Jean Luc. It has been mine since birth, even if I was not aware. Do you think of telepathy as a disability, to be tolerated for tolerance sake, but the disabled one watched for any cracks?"

Picard looked at Tathilan. "Tathilan, you have been quiet as a dormouse. What is your opinion.?"

I do not consider myself disabled Admiral.

"I do not imply you are. There is the matter of security."

You trust me with an entire starship, the contents of the computer databanks, and secure data you don't have clearance to read. Not only am I a telepath and member of a practicing racial memory, but one of those dreaded 'artificial beings' too.

"Ahem, well, I don't mean to imply..."

But you do Jean Luc Picard, you have, and you did. I might forgive, I never forget.

Picard sat looking acutely embarrassed.

Data said. "Tathilan, if Captain Kirk leaves the service, what will you do?"

I follow where he goes Data.

"What about the *Kongo*?"

The *Kongo* is a machine, another can be found to serve her.

"Then you think he should not return?"

I didn't say that, but the option is open. Captain Kirk will have a command, either in Starfleet, or with the Horned Fleet. Experienced Captains are not to be wasted.

Kirk looked the two officers over. "The amazing thing, is you have not asked what I want."

Picard snapped back. "What does "want" have to do with it?"

"Answer your own question. What forces you to don that uniform every day, what need drives you to continue to serve again and again? You have faced your cusps Picard. You took many passages though the valley. You looked at the fork in the road, and chose the path you have. No, I haven't looked inside your mind. You were taken by the Borg, they changed you, made you become something you were not. You were rescued. Right then, right there, you could have bowed out, and no one would have called you less a man. However, you did not. What want, drove you on?"

The pain, the memory flickered across Picard's face. "I am an officer, I have my duty."

"What duty? You had done your duty and more. Who can ask for more of than duty that you have performed so well? No, don't give me duty. Your 'duty' was long discharged many a year ago. Why do you want to do this?"

"Why do you assume there is a want?"

"Because that is all there is. Need, as it existed, as the language means it is dead. You and I have no needs. Food? Shelter? These are taken for granted. Physical objects are easy to come by, any food, any clothing. All of this free to any man that wants it thanks to the wonders of technology. This thing that drives us is a *want*. Needs are to eat, to breath, to breed. So, why to you still want it?"

Picard looked troubled. He sat heavily in his chair. Minutes passed as the sun slowly set. "I want, to see everything there is to see Kirk. I want to do

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everything there is to do. I want, I need challenges. Sitting and receiving my allotment of energy is not enough, it never has been."

"Do I look so different from where you sit? Remembering where you came from, is essential to knowing where you're headed. Do I look cut from such different cloth than you? Would I be found in the same profession if I was?"

"But what you just went through."

"But the Borg... Am I so different?"

Jean Luc Picard sat in silence. He was given his silence. He spoke at last. "No Captain, you do not look so different. Provided you can pass a physical at the end of your leave, I will say nothing against you."

"Thank you Admiral."

"Thank you Captain."

They stood and shook hands.

On schedule the Kongo floated in space. The testing done, the refitted compensators working to specs. Kirk sat in the center seat, the familiar, and a few new faces around him.

"Mr. Spacik, set a course, warp eight for the Fresian Sector."

"Course set and locked Sir."

"Engage."

Passages -- Garry Stahl, July 1998

***Subtext 2011** -- As with other tales in the series this has gotten a serious editing pass and some light Lucasing. In this case mainly for phrasing or wording I thought wasn't appropriate. the character of the piece is untouched. I hope improved.*